



IDEOGRAPHIC WRITING II. IDEOGRAPHIC WRITING IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

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The cuneiform writing system, developed by the Sumerians and adopted first by the Akkadians and subsequently by cultures throughout the Near East, was capable of recording language along the dimension of either meaning or sound. Since most signs were potentially able to serve either function, and since many had multiple semantic and phonological values, there was considerable ambiguity inherent in the system. As ideograms, the characters could indicate either the object which they depicted or an associated object or situation. Although much of the transparency of the original depictions became lost during the course of the characters' evolution, it is clear, for example, that an image of a human foot lay at the root of the character conveying the notions "to go" (Sum. *du*) and "to place" (Sum. *gub*). From such iconically rooted values, the functions of the characters expanded by the rebus principle to encompass homophones and near-homophones; e.g., a character which originated as the depiction of a reed (Sum. *gi*) was used to convey both "reed" and "render," the Sumerian word for the latter being a homophonous *gi*. Such extensions were the starting point for the elaboration of the phonological aspect of the system, whereby a large subset of the characters came to function phonologically as markers for specific sequences of sounds; thus the "reed" character (GI) was used as a general marker of the sound



sequence –gi-.

Ideograms could be either simple or complex. The latter type consisted either of a simple character to which an augmentation was added—e.g., the sign for “mouth” (KA) was secondarily derived from the “head” character (SAG) by superimposing a series of marks over the lower face area—or of a set of linked or nested characters, as in such cases as the signs GU₇ “eat” (which originated as a compound linking the signs SAG and NINDA “food”) and EME “tongue” (formed by inserting the sign with the phonological value *me* into the KA-sign).

Since a given sign in a text might in principle be read either semantically or phonologically, various clarifying conventions were developed to aid the reader in interpreting the sign sequences. Certain signs (“semantic determinatives”), when added to a word, provided a general semantic key to the intended reading. For example, the character GIŠ (the ideographic value of which was “tree”) could be used as a determinative to identify terms for wooden objects. By adding GIŠ before the sign IG (^{giš}IG), for example, the scribe was able to indicate that the IG was to be read as the ideogram for “door” rather than as the phonological sequence *ik/g/q*. The phonological side of the writing system could also be used for clarification. The scribe had the option of incorporating one or more extra accompanying signs (“phonetic determinatives”) to provide a partial indication of the sound of the word represented by the ideogram. A modern English analogue to the cuneiform phonetic determinatives (albeit of much more limited scope) may be seen in spellings such as *1st* “first” and *2nd* “second.” Using the determinatives, the scribe thus often had several options for rendering words: “door” (Akkadian *daltum*) could in principle be written by means of an ideogram with a semantic determinative (^{giš}IG), by an ideogram with a phonetic determinative (^{giš}IG-*tum*), or finally by any of several purely phonological renderings (*da-al-tum*, *da-al-tu-um*, etc.).

As the use of cuneiform expanded beyond Mesopotamia, the use of ideograms expanded with it. Scribes writing such languages as Elamite, Hurrian, and Hittite adopted Sumerian characters as graphic conventions for rendering words in their own languages. A second stratum of ideograms arose in Anatolia, where Hittite scribes began to use Akkadian words as ideograms. Thus the sign-sequence *I-NA* became a conventional means of rendering the Hittite preposition *anda* “in” (Akk. *ina*), while Hittite *keššar* “hand” acquired an ideographic spelling ŠU-*TI*, borrowed from a graphic rendering of Akkadian *qàti* “hand,” which in turn was composed of the Sumerian ideogram ŠU “hand”



and the Akkadian phonetic determinative *-ti*.

Cuneiform was not the only early Near Eastern script to make use of ideograms. Egyptian hieroglyphs displayed the same dual nature as the Mesopotamian signs, and made similar use of semantic and phonological determinatives. For example, the schematic drawing representing the word “house” (Egyptian *pr*) was also used to express the consonant-sequence *pr*. It was thus necessary to distinguish *pr* “house” from the homographic *pr* “ascend” by adding to the latter a graphic determinative (based on the drawing of a pair of legs) used as a general marker of motion words.

Although the Old Persian inscriptions were for the most part written phonologically, they also employed a small set of ideograms as an option through which key substantives could be expressed (see table in Kent, *Old Persian*, p. 12). Like the great majority of the phonological signs of Old Persian, the OPers. ideograms are not formally related to the characters of Mesopotamian cuneiform. The use of ideograms rather than phonological spellings for the words in question became more extensive in later texts. Through the addition of phonological determinatives the scribes were able to express the inflectional endings of words rendered by ideograms. Thus the formula “king of kings” (*xšāyaθiya xšāyaθiyānām*), which is written out in full in the Bisotun (q.v.) monument, is found abbreviated as XŠ XŠ-*y-a-n-a-m* in Darius’s Susa A inscription.

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