Colon. Closed parentheses. Just two pieces of punctuation, right? Yet how often have you – or someone you know – used that combination of symbols in a text message, or an email, to depict a smiley face. Instead of writing the sentence, “This makes me happy,” we insert an image into our writing to convey a meaningful message. We use symbols to supplement, and often entirely replace, the words we communicate with in ways reminiscent of hieroglyphics and cuneiform script.

The Mesopotamian Cuneiform script originated in Sumeria, in what is now modern-day Iran. It’s ten-thousand-year evolution can be divided into four periods coinciding with the symbols they embraced: tokens, pictographs, phonetic signs, and alphabets.

Tokens were precursors to written language; they were predominantly three-dimensional geometric forms like disks, spheres, and cylinders that represented unique items.

Around 3500 BCE, these tokens began to be stored in clay envelopes. Pressed onto the surface of the envelope would be an impression of the tokens stored therein. These symbols were the first rudimentary writing. Although they lacked a syntax, or phonetic relation to the spoken word, they represented concepts.

Pictographs – stylus renderings of tokens on clay tablets – appeared in the area around 3100 BCE. Cuneiform, from the Latin cuneus, meaning “wedge,” is the term applied to a mode of writing which used a wedge-shaped stylus to make impressions on a clay surface, and also on stone, metal, and wax. Using cuneiform script, your three urns of grain were no longer represented by three actual tokens or even impressions of tokens. Now they were represented with a numeric designation for the number three and a pictograph of the urn, all drawn with a stylus on a clay tablet.
During this period, Egyptians were introducing their own pictorial representations. These hieroglyphics – images depicting animals and other aspects of the Egyptian environment – were engraved on walls and written on papyrus (paper made from reeds).

These art forms, in turn, were the foundation for phonetic signs, based on sound, created by the Phoenicians around 3100 BCE. Beginning in approximately 1500 BCE and extending for the next several centuries, the invention, revision and development of alphabets extended written communication in the Near East.

Developing independently of the Mesopotamian cuneiform script were stable early writing systems in China and Mesoamerica.

Think for a moment, as you look at social media, about this history of writing systems, from tokens representing jars of oil, we now have the tools used by playwrights, authors, activists and Facebook junkies.

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