

# Preface

THIS BOOK IS AN ABRIDGED version of *Before Writing*, published in 1992 by the University of Texas Press. That work was issued in two volumes—*I: From Counting to Cuneiform* and *II: A Catalog of Near Eastern Tokens*—and was addressed primarily to specialists. The purpose of the present abridgment is to offer the general reader a less detailed and more affordable book. I have made no changes in this volume except for variations in editing, minor corrections, and updating a few references.

*How Writing Came About* constitutes the first comprehensive study of Near Eastern tokens to be aimed at a general audience. Based on the analysis and interpretation of a selection of eight thousand specimens from 116 sites in Iran, Iraq, the Levant, and Turkey, it documents the immediate precursor of the cuneiform script, the world's first writing system. The material, dating from 8000 to 3000 B.C. and mostly unpublished before, was collected and studied firsthand in thirty museums in fifteen countries. Also included here is my systematic study of the 200 envelopes, used to keep tokens in archives, and the 240 impressed tablets now known. These two types of objects illustrate the major steps in the transition from tokens to writing.

The tokens from early excavations often lack a precise stratigraphy. Even so, the large assemblage presented here gives a reliable picture of the types and subtypes of the counters, their geographic and chronological distribution, their evolution over time, and the transition from tokens to writing. This book is organized into three parts, as follows.

## **PART ONE: THE EVIDENCE**

The first two chapters are devoted to the documentation of the archaeological material. Chapter 1 describes the counters, their shapes, markings, and manufacture, and their evolution from “plain” to “complex” tokens. Chapter 2 identifies the context in which the tokens were used: the type of settlements to which they belonged; their spacial distribution within those

settlements; the structures and assemblages with which they were associated. Special attention is given to the rare tokens found in tombs.

Chapter 3 describes the fourth-millennium methods for holding tokens in archives—in particular, the envelopes. The following topics are covered: discovery of the envelopes, their number, geographic distribution, chronology, and context, the assemblages of tokens they held, the markings they bore, and their role in the transmutation of tokens into writing.

Chapter 4 deals with impressed tablets. After a review of the history of their discovery, their number, geographic distribution, chronology, and context, the documents and the signs they bear are described and their contribution to writing is assessed.

## **PART TWO: THE INTERPRETATION**

The last three chapters analyze the role of tokens in the evolution of communication, social structures, and cognitive skills. These interpretations are tentative. There is no doubt that some of the conclusions will have to be revised in the future, when more and better data will be available.

In Chapter 5, tokens are interpreted as the second step in the development of record keeping, following Paleolithic tallies. The token was the first code to record economic data, providing the immediate background for the invention of writing.

Chapter 6 shows how the economy determined the token system and how, in turn, the counters had an impact on society.

Chapter 7 discusses the evolution of counting and its role in the invention of writing. Tokens are shown to reflect an archaic mode of “concrete counting,” while writing derived from abstract counting.

In the Conclusions, I summarize the wealth of information provided by tokens on communication, mathematics, economy, social structures, and cognitive skills in prehistoric Near Eastern cultures.

## **PART THREE: THE ARTIFACTS**

The charts in Part Three provide a graphic representation of the sixteen types of tokens and their subtypes. For more information, the reader is invited to consult the complete listing of tokens and the photographic documentation in *Before Writing, Volume II: A Catalog of Near Eastern Tokens*.

## HOW WRITING CAME ABOUT

