

# **Performance and theatre in oral and written cultures before 1600**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The evolution of human speech and language, and the invention of writing both had a revolutionary impact on human consciousness. Each changed fundamentally the way humans interacted with each other and their environment, and how they imagined themselves and their place in the world. Part I examines cultural performance and theatre as they emerged throughout the world before 1600. It looks at performance and theatre from the evolution of human speech, through the birth of language and the development of systems of writing, to the invention of printing, first in China (seventh century) and later in Europe (fifteenth century).

Human history stretches back across five million years, yet the majority of historical accounts of our collective endeavors focus on life since the invention of writing, around 3,000 B.C.E. Given this historical focus on literate rather than non-literate cultures and peoples, 99.9 percent of human history receives little serious study. Historians of theatre and performance usually focus where evidence exists in the form of written texts or in archeological ruins of purpose-built performance structures. Chapter 1 discusses the historiographical problems of interpreting and understanding performance in pre-literate cultures. It also provides an overview of the wide range of oral, ritual, and shamanic performances that developed during pre-literate human history but which still inform and interact with literate performance practices

in many cultures today. In Chapters 2 and 3, we examine how drama and theatre developed as distinctive forms of performance practice alongside extant oral and ritual performance in some literate state societies.

In this Introduction, we consider what human consciousness might have been like before language as we know it, examining how perception, action, and imitation were central to early human existence. We trace one theory of the evolution of speech and language that explains how humans developed the unique ability for symbolic communication – an ability essential for story-telling and for writing and performing drama. We examine the ways in which the human imagination and the ability to communicate through performance are engaged in different types of social organization.

We then consider the impact of the invention of complete systems of writing, by the Sumerians in Mesopotamia (approximately 3,000 B.C.E.), and by Native American societies in Mesoamerica (probably in southern Mexico around 600 B.C.E.). The invention of writing and the concomitant act of reading produced a revolution in both human consciousness and social organization as profound as the invention of speech and language. In some cultures, this revolution produced highly reflexive modes of writing/reading/performance, such as poetry, drama, and criticism.

## **The evolution of human language and consciousness**

### ***Episodic and mimetic modes of communication***

For our earliest human ancestors, direct perception via the senses played an essential role in survival for hundreds of thousands of years. Our five senses allow us directly and immediately to perceive and respond to the environment in the here-and-now. While our senses and perception continue to be important to us today, we do not depend on them for survival to the extent we once did, except in natural disasters or violent conflict.

Early in human history, engaging in participatory, communal, bodily-based activities such as early forms of hunting, music, dance, and archaic ritual served both to heighten one's sensory perceptions and awareness, and to further orient and attune each person to others in the immediate group and to the environment. In these early practices, the human operated primarily as a perceiver/ doer/actor-in-the-world. One engaged the world directly and immediately, without the mediation of "thinking" about an activity. Archaic forms of music, dance, and ritual engaged people in voicing or moving together – a means of

attuning one's sensory awareness to others and for developing social bonds (McNeill 1995:*passim*). Success in hunting with archaic weapons depended on the ability of individual and group to move silently, quickly, and with stealth while sustaining synchronous coordination through non-verbal communication with others. Survival was no doubt enhanced for those best attuned to their senses and those who could form strong bonds with others in small communal groups fighting for life in harsh environments.

In his outline of four phases of human evolution – the episodic, the mimetic, the mythic, and the theoretic – Merlin Donald describes this earliest stage of human evolution as being part of an “episodic” culture, wherein one lives completely within the here-and-now (1991). There is no past or future, only the present.

Ethnologists' studies of animal behavior show that many animals, and especially our primate ancestors, also engaged in simple mimesis (imitation). The ability to learn by imitating behavior is essential to survival. Mimesis can also be autotelic; that is, it has its own rewards that are experienced as enjoyable and even playful. Mimetic behavior can thereby generate a sense of well-being. Merlin Donald uses the term “mimetic” to describe this second phase of human development beyond the episodic. In the mimetic phase, gesture, posture, and facial expression begin to be used as early forms of non-verbal communication.

Both the episodic mode of staying in the moment and the mimetic mode have been central to the activities of the performer and actor throughout history and across cultures. The episodic and mimetic modes are prerequisite aspects of performance, although various kinds of training have been invented to meet the needs of specific genres of performance.

### ***The evolution of human speech***

Language is a term that is now applied to the myriad forms of communication that evolved over millions of years to allow all living beings to communicate with other animates, especially those of the same species. Ethnologists study everything from the dance language of honey bees, to the chemical “language” used by ants, to various bio-acoustic modes of communication such as those of birds, frogs, blue whales, and elephants. The pitches of acoustic “languages” are often above or below the range of the human ear. Scientists studying Bermudan humpback whales have discovered that they vocalize lengthy “love songs” varying in pitch and lasting from six to 30 minutes. Such songs change over time, with a constant process of development

in which new elements are composed, repeated, and elaborated. Dolphins and especially miniature chimps, the bonobos – with whom humans share 99 percent of the same genetic makeup – can be trained to communicate spontaneously and creatively.

But humankind and our closest ancestors developed more sophisticated modes of both natural and unnatural communication. How did this happen? Although the great apes that preceded hominid development possessed the neural pathways necessary for complex modes of communicative expression to convey information, what humans in particular eventually possessed were the lips, tongue, and modes of controlled exhalation that would anatomically allow us to speak (see Figure I.1).

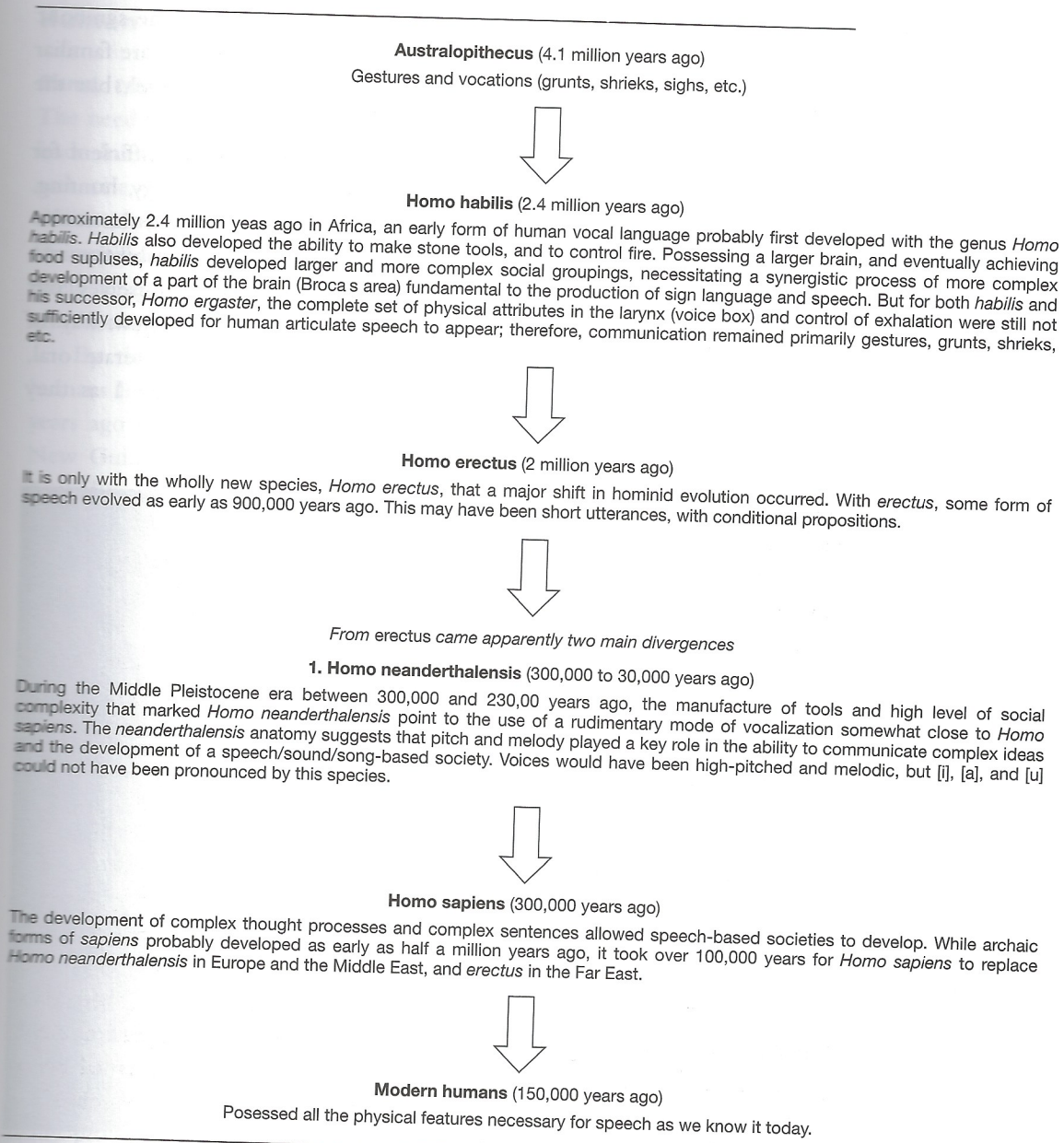
Some forms of human development, such as tool-making, do not necessarily require language. More complex social activities, for example crossing a sea mass such as the Strait of Gibraltar (between southern Spain and North Africa) in a planned migration, certainly do. Similarly, cooperative hunting requires the use of speech.

As the anatomical ability to breathe properly to support speech evolved, the brain continued to enlarge, and as more complex modes of thought processes and language use evolved, the necessary neural pathways developed. What resulted was not a single “primeval” language, but rather, the distinctive capacity to use language self-referentially, that is, the ability to use words that point to other words via syntax. This development was only complete anatomically when modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, became dominant, approximately 150,000 years ago.

#### **Mythic and theoretic modes of communication**

By 120,000 years ago a *Homo sapiens* recognizable as our identical ancestor had emerged. One particular group of “modern” *H.sapiens*, living in a cave at the mouth of the Klasies River in South Africa between 120,000 to 60,000, were settled permanently, engaged in complex domestic life, felled giant buffaloes with spears, possessed a complex knowledge of their environment, practiced music and art (using red ochre “crayons”), engaged in ritual burial of the dead, and used language much as we do today. *H.sapiens* either absorbed or replaced *H.neanderthalensis* and *H.erectus*.

The period brought a “cultural explosion.” The species could depict humans, animals, symbols, and perhaps even note the passage of time (lunar calendars) in bone and ivory, on stone and wood. They fashioned flutes, drums, and stringed instruments, and painted or etched the walls of caves (see



**Figure 1.1** One charting of the evolution of human language. Adapted from Steven Roger Fischer, *History of Language* (1999). [Source: Steven Roger Fischer, *History of Language*, Reaktion Books, 1999.]

Figure I.2). As Fischer notes, “By now articulate speech – and the symbolic reasoning it allowed – was certainly being used in all the ways we are familiar with today, and hominids were no longer merely the ‘talking ape’, but the ‘symbolic ape’” (Fischer 1999:56).

Early forms of speech allowed communication and planning sufficient for humans to cross seas, settle villages, and further develop technology, hunting, music, dance, rituals, and narratives. According to Merlin Donald, the evolution of human speech and language transformed our mimetic capabilities into the “mythic” phase of our development. Telling stories about ourselves, our communities, and our place in the world allowed an entirely new way of understanding and representing reality. It is these earliest pre-literate oral, ritual, and shamanic performances that are examined in Chapter 1 as they developed in relatively intimate, small-scale communal settings.



**Figure I.2** Artwork in Lascaux, Chauvet Cave, showing a drawing of a horse with possible spring moulting on its coat. [Source: French Ministry of Culture and Communication, Regional Director for Cultural Affairs, Rhone-Alpes Region, Regional Department Archaeology.]

## Human language, writing, and society

### ***Band, tribe, chiefdom, state***

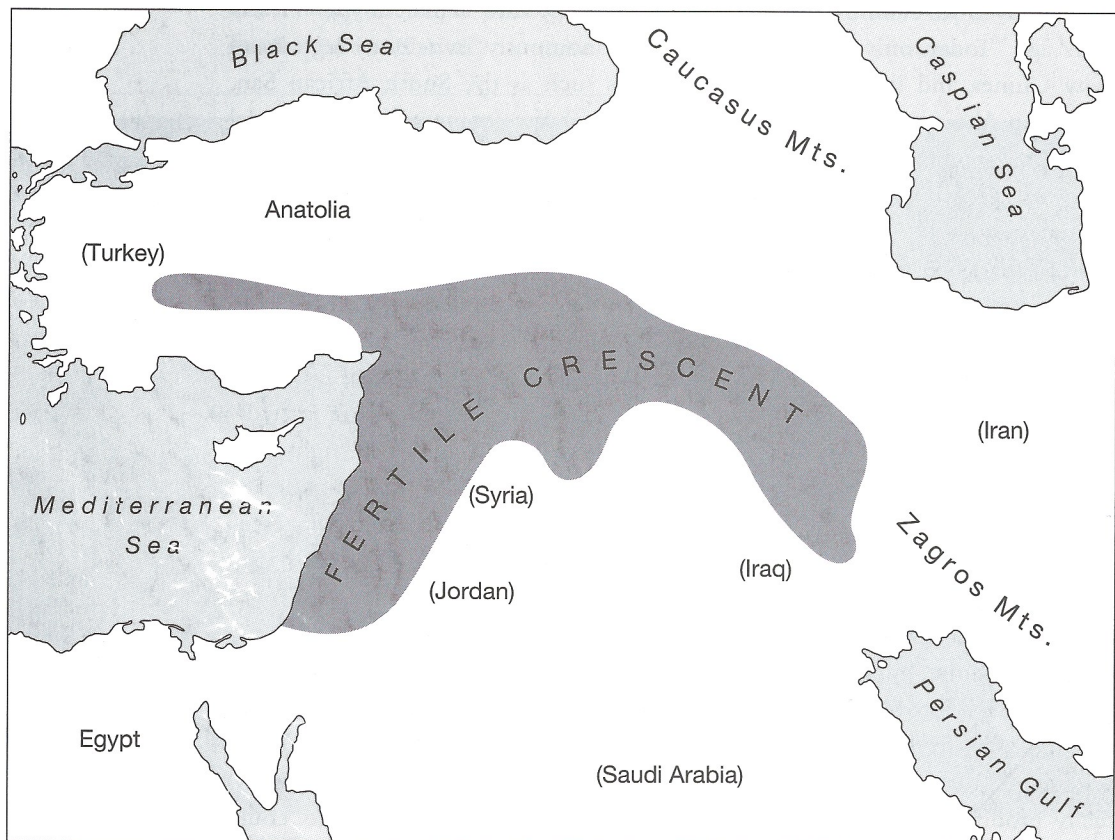
The need for survival and for a sense of belonging or connectedness to others leads human beings to organize themselves into communities. Each type and scale of social organization engages in different ways our communicative abilities, our imagining of ourselves, and our relationships to others. Jared Diamond has identified four types of societies ranging from intimate, relatively simple, nomadic bands through settlements organized as tribes and chiefdoms, to the highly complex, centralized model of the state (1997:267ff).

By the time fully articulate speech developed (35,000 years ago), all humans lived in bands. Most continued to do so until as recently as 11,000 years ago. Today only a few bands live autonomously in remote regions of New Guinea and the Amazon (other bands such as the South African San, Australian Aborigines, and North American Inuit have come under the control of states, been threatened with extinction, and/or been assimilated). Bands range in size from five to 80 people and are the smallest, most intimate forms of human society, with all or most of those in the band closely related by birth or marriage. Bands are nomadic; base their relationships on kinship; share a common language; exchange stories, words, dances, music, rituals, and goods; and make decisions in relatively egalitarian, informal ways. Within bands there is no social stratification by class, nor are there hereditary or formal modes of leadership or monopolization of decision-making. Leaders emerge informally through strength of character, intelligence, and/or the ability to fight. For people living within bands, experience is shaped primarily through ever-evolving relationships with the immediate environment and through face-to-face contact with those with whom one has daily involvement, often shaped by collective performances and rituals.

By 14,000 years ago, *Homo sapiens* was the only hominid species surviving, differentiated by hundreds of language families and thousands of languages, and organized into small bands. By 12,000 years ago, a warming climate pushed the Ice Age to the two poles. Rising ocean levels divided peoples. The warming climate allowed the growth and domestication of wild grains, eventually producing a biological revolution. Major population settlements could develop and sustain themselves in resource-rich regions of the world by growing wheat and barley, and keeping goats and sheep.

In the Fertile Crescent of the Near East (today's Iraq between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers; see Figure I.3) and perhaps a few other places in the

world, a new form of settled social organization began to emerge – tribes. Improved technology allowed the extraction and preservation of food. Permanent dwellings were built in which hundreds rather than dozens of people lived in settlements, sharing a common language and culture, including performance and rituals. Tribal organization is characterized by its pattern of settled residence, and its larger groupings consisting of more than one kinship group (clans). Particular clans possess rights to plots of land. Tribes are still small enough that all individuals are known by relationships and names. Like bands, tribes may be governed by a somewhat informal “egalitarian” system with information and decision-making being communally shared. In some



**Figure 1.3** The region of the Fertile Crescent – an area rich in natural resources and capable of sustaining a large, settled, centrally-controlled society.

[Source: Jared Diamond 1997:135.]

tribes, a “big-man” may emerge who achieves high status through the strength of his individual character. Reciprocal exchange and a participatory mode of socio-economic organization continue to characterize interaction in both tribes as well as bands. As peoples settle, particular languages become associated with specific geographical regions. Language becomes associated with land.

Chiefdoms emerged by approximately 5,500 B.C.E in the region of the Fertile Crescent and by around 1,000 B.C.E in Mesoamerica and the Andes. Chiefdoms are considerably larger than tribes, numbering from several thousand to as many as tens of thousands of people. Chiefdoms were the first societies organized around a central hereditary authority figure, who often held a monopoly over the exercise of power, centralizing information and decision-making. A chief’s decisions were usually implemented by one or two levels of bureaucrats who often played multiple roles, such as in Polynesian Hawaii where *konohiki* oversaw labor, irrigation, and collection of tribute. Some chiefs, such as those in Hawaii, were assumed to be divine, or of divine descent, and either combined in their own role the authority of being chief priest, or supported a separate group of priests who provided justification for their authority. While bands and tribes possessed supernatural beliefs and ritual practices, these beliefs and practices were not used to

justify central authority, justify transfer of wealth, or maintain peace between unrelated individuals. When supernatural beliefs gained those functions and became institutionalized, they were thereby transformed into what we term religion.

(Diamond 1997:278)

Some chiefdoms were large enough to exist as multiple villages (with the chief’s village as primary), to have specialized craftspeople producing specialized luxury goods, and to delegate some menial jobs to slaves – those captured in raids. Chiefdoms for the first time shifted from reliance on reciprocal exchange characteristic of bands and tribes, to a form of tribute in which a portion of one’s harvest was given to the chief – most of which was retained centrally while a small amount might be redistributed as part of a feast or other public occasion. Chiefs could also require commoners to undertake labor, for example the erection of public architecture such as temples, burial tombs, henges (large circular structures with a surrounding back, see Chapter 1), or irrigation systems. Luxury goods were usually reserved for chiefs, as archaeological excavations of their burial sites reveal.

The development of larger and more complex modes of social organization such as chiefdoms (and states) creates a social setting where, for the first time, individuals understand that they are connected to other people they have never seen. For example, Javanese and Indian villagers traditionally know that they are connected to people they have never met through particular nets of kinship and/or clientship. Therefore, there was no word in Javanese for the abstract concept of "society" until very recently. The identification of individuals' places within society was identified by such markers as "lord of X" or "mother of Y" or "client of Z." One's ties to others are not necessarily forged only within the immediate group and environment, but rather are "imagined." Within larger communities like chiefdoms (and states), the imagining of the larger community to which one belongs is shaped and styled differently at different times in different cultures.

As late as 1492 C.E., chiefdoms were common in productive areas of South and Central America and some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the Eastern United States, and Polynesia. But by the twentieth century they had disappeared as chiefdoms were conquered by centralized states. Today, states are the most familiar form of social, political, and economic organization; indeed, the entire land mass of the world, with the exception of Antarctica, is now ruled by modern nation-states (see Chapter 6 for a discussion of modern nation-states). Early and modern states share some characteristics. Both have a high degree of centralized control and economic specialization, which often includes mass production and the execution of public works. In both we find economic redistribution (taxes rather than tribute) and a proliferation of specialized and professional administrators, selected at least partly on the basis of training and ability. In both, internal conflicts are settled by recourse to laws. Both have a judiciary and police, and in both, modes of organization are based not on kinship but on political allegiance and territorial lines. Unlike bands, tribes, and chiefdoms, which consist of a single ethnic and linguistic group, states and especially empires (formed by the conquest of several states) are multilingual and multi-ethnic.

The earliest forms of state organization arose around 3,700 B.C.E. in Mesopotamia and 3,000 B.C.E. in Mesoamerica, some 2,000 years ago in China, Southeast Asia, and the Andes region of South America, and over 1,000 years ago in West Africa. Features of these early states were: leadership by a titled, hereditary leader – either a king considered divine or an equivalent leader; the adoption of slavery on a larger scale than chiefdoms; and the development of state religions, often with standardized temples. No chiefdom

developed writing, except those in the process of becoming states. Indeed, the first “complete” systems of writing developed about the same time as the formation of early states in Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica. Where such complete systems of writing developed, literate elites emerged in early states, creating some of the socio-cultural conditions within which drama and theatre developed, as we shall see in Chapters 2 and 3.

### **The invention of systems of writing**

For approximately 40,000–50,000 years as modern languages continued to evolve, not only were new technologies invented, but modes of oral and expressive culture developed which allowed particular societies and groups to remember, reflect upon, celebrate, and perform their evolving stories and identities through oral/verbal, bodily, and artistic modes of expression. Precursors of complete systems of writing appeared as early as 100,000 years ago when humans began to invent a wide variety of graphic symbols and mnemonics (memory tools) to store information. Graphic symbols were usually reproductions of commonplace phenomena of the physical world such as the sun, stars, fauna, flora, human-like figures, and so on. Aids to memory such as knot records, notches made on bone or a staff, or pictographs served a linguistic function. Knot records date back to the early Neolithic period and reached their peak with the South American Incas’ *quipus* – an elaborate system of counting. While knots and notches record numbers, prompt memory, and suggest categories, pictures are able to record much more information and suggest characteristics and qualities as well. Tens of thousands of years ago, pictorial communication appeared in early cave art (see Figure I.4), and, among some Native Americans, pictography was long used to convey complex



**Figure I.4** Some cave art such as this horse at Les Trois in southern France is considered a form of pictorial communication. The significance of the series of “P”s engraved over the horse is unknown.

[Source: Steven Roger Fischer, *A History of Writing*, London: Reaktion Books, 2001, p.18.]

messages with no recourse to articulate speech. Knots, notches and pictographs remain “incomplete” or “pre”-writing in that they do not use their marks or pictures to communicate articulate speech.

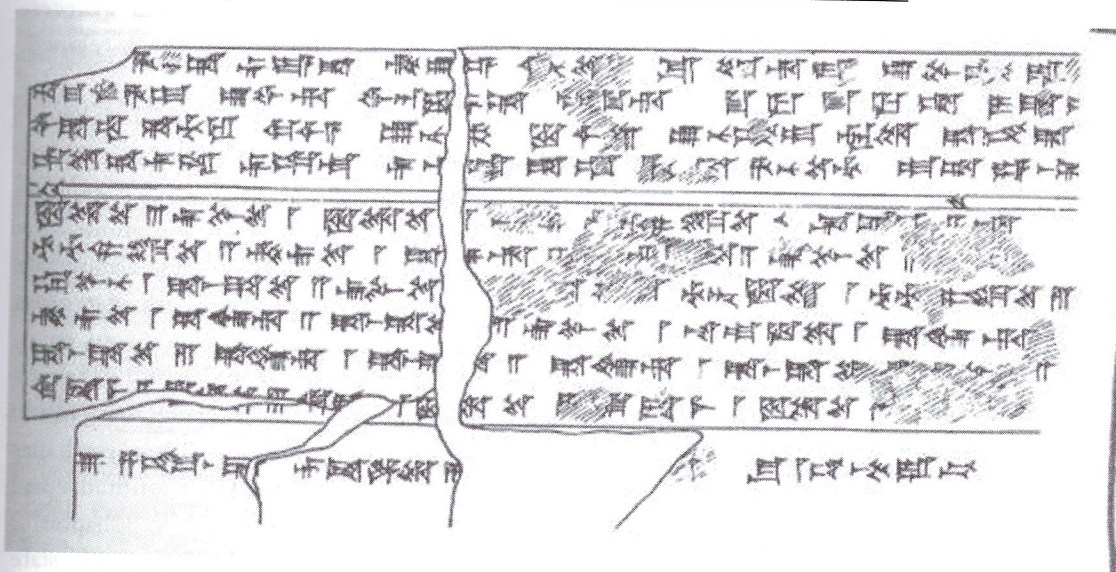
Complete systems of writing did not evolve like language, but were invented to communicate articulate speech via the use of conventional, artificial marks on a durable surface. The spoken word is transformed into a representative sign. It was in Mesopotamia that clay tokens were used as early as 8,000 B.C.E. to count grain and animals in the region’s early farming settlements. Somewhat before 3,000 B.C.E. the Sumerians in Mesopotamia managed to develop from a repertoire of pictograms and symbols the first complete system of writing – cuneiform. Cuneiform is a form of writing scratched or inscribed on clay tablets with a pointed tool (stylus). With the invention of Sumerian, individuals began to read a sign inscribed on clay as a sound with its own independent value.

By 2,500 B.C.E the Sumerians’ simple cuneiform script was capable of “conveying ‘any and all thought’ . . . adequately fulfil[ling] the needs of its society” (Fischer 2001:52). The earliest inscriptions are lists accounting for payments, goods, people, etc. Of all the cuneiform inscriptions discovered, 75 percent are administrative and book-keeping records. Among the remaining 25 percent are legal, religious, astronomical, and medical writings, and dictionaries and recipes. Also in this 25 percent – and most significant for our purposes – are the first and oldest of many literatures of the world. These include hymns, laments, descriptions of activities of the gods, and quasi-epic stories. The extant poetic works include two poems of Enmerker, two poems of Lugulbanda, and a cycle of five poems known as *Gilgamesh*. The *Gilgamesh* cycle dates approximately from 2,700 B.C.E Like the later Greek epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the epic of *Gilgamesh* was most likely a collection of disparate but related stories gathered and elaborated by tale-tellers and eventually written down after hundreds of years of oral transmission and performance. It enjoyed wide popularity throughout the Near East, and also exists in Sumerian, Hittite, and Hurrian versions.

The transition from oral communication to writing was not universal, and its development took place at different times and with different systems in different cultures and historical periods. The second documentable case of an independent development of writing is among Native American societies in Mesoamerica, most likely southern Mexico from approximately 600 B.C.E. It is possible that Chinese, Egyptian, and Easter Island modes of writing *may* have also developed independently. Whether this is the case or not, linguists

agree that all other systems of writing were inspired by if not direct descendents of either the Sumerian or Mesoamerican systems.

Most pre-literate peoples who developed writing did so by borrowing and then adapting systems of writing they encountered. For example, on Syria's northern coast, Semitic scribes of Ugarit borrowed the outer physical form of Sumerian cuneiform script to write the Hurrian language (Figure I.5). In East Asia, some scholars believe that it was in the Shang state in north central China (c.1,500–1,545 B.C.E.) that an early version of the Chinese system of character writing developed (arguably originating in Mesopotamia), later to be influential in the development of the writing systems used in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. On the Indian subcontinent where well over 200 scripts eventually developed, they all derived from one source script – Brahmi – which itself derived from a Semitic (probably Aramaic) source by c.253–250 B.C.E. The success of a particular system of writing does not entail superiority but adaptability. It is not “the efficiency of a writing system or script that determines its longevity and influence, but rather the economic power and prestige



**Figure I.5** A Hurrian cuneiform tablet composed c.1,400 B.C.E. (in today's Syria). Among the oldest “musical texts” discovered, it contains lyrics and performance information. It is one of many examples of how the outer form of Sumerian cuneiform script was borrowed to write different languages. [Source: Steven Roger Fischer, *A History of Writing*, London: Reaktion Books, 2001, p.55.]

of those using it. . . . A powerful society's writing system – the consonantal alphabet – will mark history, while a weak society's will perish" (Fischer 2001:119).

Historians of early writing systems have argued that writing emerged only when and where there was a need for a system of writing within a context that provided the social, economic, and human resources necessary to support specialists in written language, such as copyists, librarians, teachers, religious specialists, poets, and eventually in a few cases, dramatists and the companies of actors/dancers who could perform a play. All of the societies that invented writing (Sumer, Mesoamerica, China, Egypt) or were early in creating their own systems (Crete, Iran, Turkey, the Indus Valley, and Mayan cultures) "involved socially stratified societies with complex and centralized political institutions." They stored food surpluses grown by peasants sufficient to support these institutions and the specialists (Diamond 1999:236).

Writing never developed among hunter-gatherer societies organized into bands or tribes or even among more settled chiefdoms, because they did not possess the need, institutions, or agricultural resources necessary to support it. For example, among many of the Pacific islands, writing remained unnecessary for centuries. In many Pacific societies elaborate states never developed, so there was no need for a complex system of bookkeeping.

### **Performance, communication, and remembrance**

All societies, whether organized as an intimate band or a large-scale state, have a need for communication and remembrance. In Chapter 1, we examine how oral cultures do this through recitations of lengthy genealogies, elaborating epics and myths, or reciting religious/ritual texts, performances that often required remarkable feats of memorization. Rich storehouses of oral lore, epics, myths, and tales were adapted to a variety of modes of oral performance by storytellers and bards. Sometimes they informed rituals, dance, and music which served to knit people together into a community with a particular world-view. In Chapters 2 and 3 we interrogate selected forms of drama and theatre as they emerged in larger-scale literate state societies. Chapter 2 discusses the ways in which the religious/civic festivals within some early state societies produced two very different models of drama and theatre: (1) commemorative ritual/religious dramas re-enacting a mythological/historical event of the past and (2) independently authored, original "literary" dramas. We examine how each type of drama and its performance is shaped by the particular religious/ritual context of its invention; how each choreographs in

its structure and performance a particular form of state authority; and how each negotiates a particular relationship with writing and textuality. Finally, Chapter 3 examines specific models of pleasure and/or aesthetics generated by, and shaped within the context of, court or imperial-state patronage.

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