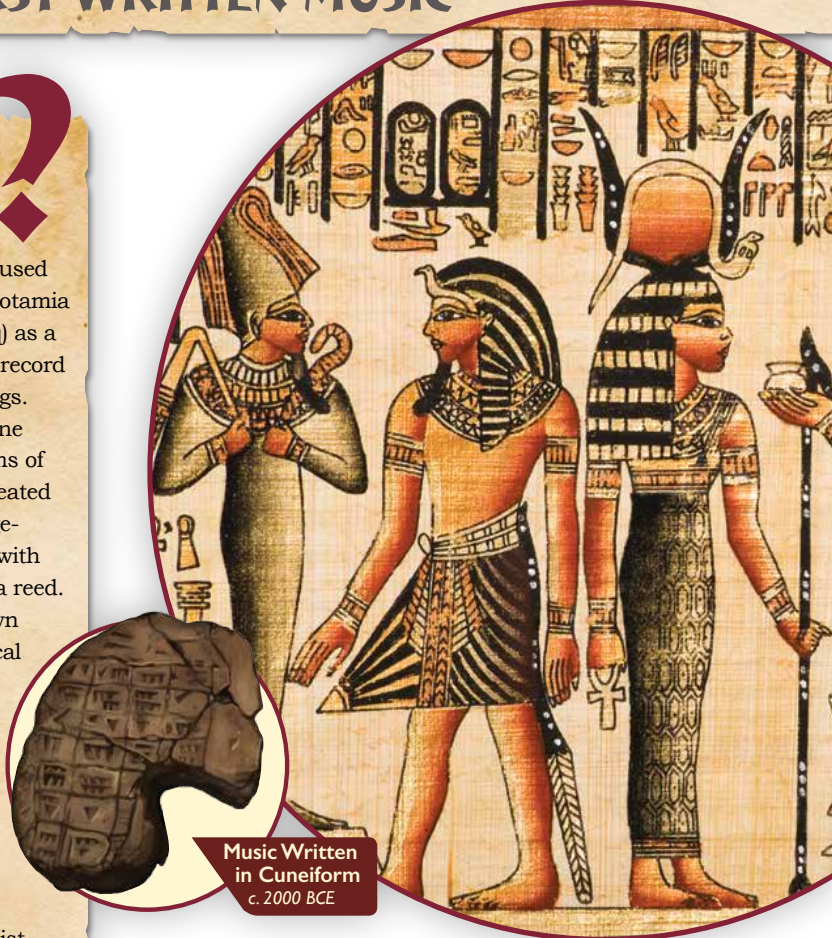


# SPECIAL FEATURE

## THE FIRST WRITTEN MUSIC

### DID YOU KNOW?

Writing was first used in ancient Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) as a way of keeping a record of important things. Cuneiform was one of the first systems of writing. It was created by pressing wedge-shapes into clay with the blunt end of a reed. The earliest known example of musical notation, written in cuneiform, showed music written for a string instrument called the lyre. Clay tablets have been found that list musical instruments and even contain a record of a music lesson.



WHEN RAGNAR WAS IN EGYPT, he noticed picture-writing known as hieroglyphs carved and painted on buildings and walls, and written on paper called papyrus. Ragnar's fellow trumpeter explained that Egyptians wrote down important things so that they could remember them later. Ragnar wondered if these symbols could be used to help him remember his music. The trumpeter agreed to show him how to write using ink, a pen made from a reed, and papyrus.

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## Summary

In this **special feature**, students will find out how, why and when music came to be written down and they will consider its importance in the ancient world. They will then devise a system of their own to write down music they have composed/improvised.

## Key Points

Clay tablets which shed light on the music and musical instruments of ancient Mesopotamia have been found in Sumer and Babylonia.<sup>1</sup> The earliest, dating from c. 2600 BCE, lists twenty-three types of musical instruments, along with household items, weapons and domesticated animals, while musical notation, written in cuneiform, first appears on a tablet from c. 2000 - 1700 BCE. This shows tunings and scales to be used on a fretted four-string Babylonian lyre, and ends with words meaning "school text," suggesting its use in an educational institution.<sup>2</sup> Tablets from c. 1300 BCE describe various tunings for seven and nine-string lyre (harp), and record melodies known as Hurrian hymns.<sup>3</sup> There is also a tablet which records a music lesson given to a boy named Hebe-Eridu by a teacher named Il-Siri. Hebe-Eridu was learning to sing and play four different instruments, and his teacher Il-Siri was paid five shekels of silver.<sup>4</sup>

## Learning Activities

After reading, or listening online to **The First Written Music**, show pictures of Egyptian hieroglyphs and Mesopotamian cuneiform (see **Supplementary Materials** online). Explain that both writing systems started as pictograms—visual representations of objects or ideas—but eventually included syllabic symbols that could be spoken/pronounced, then ask the students the following:

**Q.** Why did our ancestors start writing things down?

**A.** To remember important things

Explain that there are limits to the amount of information that human brains can store, and as civilizations developed, more and more information had to be recorded so that the information was remembered and shared with others and with future generations.

**Q.** What kinds of things do you think our ancestors needed to remember? **A.** Answers include: keeping track of rules/laws, money, property, food; to help remember stories, poetry, music or songs

Next, discuss **Key Points** and highlight the fact that by c. 2000 BCE, music was already an elaborate art form, requiring written music, instruments and records of lessons. Make students aware that learning music in school has been going on for at least 4000 years!

**SPECIAL PROJECT** Ask students to consider the elements of music which would need to be represented in order to write it down. Examples might include: duration of sounds, pitch (high or low), number or groupings of sounds, volume (loudness), and tempo (speed). Ask students to create symbols to represent some of these elements and challenge them to write music they have composed or improvised. In the following lesson, ask students to recall their music from their depictions of it.