

Cuneiform Inscriptions

Visitors can see carefully carved rows of symbols across each relief. These are an early writing system known as **cuneiform**, which was used by all of the **Mesopotamian** civilizations (including the Assyrians) until it was abandoned in favor of the alphabetic script after 100 BCE.

The chart on the right shows how the cuneiform alphabet may have evolved from simpler symbols to the more complex language used by the Assyrians.

	3200 BCE	3000 BCE	2400 BCE	1000 BCE
sag 'head'				
gin 'to walk'				
šu 'hand'				
še 'barley'				
ninda 'bread'				
a 'water'				
ud 'day'				
mušen 'bird'				



Assyrian Relief: Winged Spirit of Apkallu from Kalhu (Nimrud), Iraq, ca. 875–860. Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

Scholars have translated much of what is written on the reliefs. The script describes the history of the Assyrian Empire and the city of Kalhu, and goes into great detail about the mighty power of King Ashurnasirpal II. Below is a cuneiform text originally carved into a relief similar to those at Bowdoin. This is an excerpt from a line that describes the king as the “wonderful shepherd, fearless in battle.” Try to copy the cuneiform figures in the box below!

