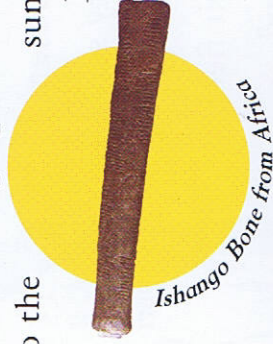


# Making a mark

For hundreds of thousands of years, people managed fine by counting with their hands. But about 5000 years ago, the world changed. In the Middle East, people figured out how to tame animals and plant crops – they became farmers.



Once farming started, people began trading in markets. They had to remember exactly how many things they owned, sold, and bought, otherwise people would cheat each other. So the farmers started keeping records. To do this, they could make notches in sticks or bones ...



Ishango Bone from Africa

... or knots in string. In Iraq, they made marks in lumps of wet clay from a river. When the clay hardened in the sun, it made a permanent record. In doing this, the farmers of Iraq invented not just written numbers but writing itself. It was the start of civilization – and it was all triggered by numbers.



Qipu South America

## BABYLONIAN numbers

About 6000 years ago, the farmers in Babylonia (Iraq) started making clay tokens as records of deals. They had different-shaped tokens for different things ...



... so an oval might stand for a sack of wheat ...

... and a circle might mean a jar of oil. For two or three jars of oil, two or three tokens were exchanged.

When a deal involved several tokens, they were wrapped together in a clay envelope. To show what was inside, the trader made symbols on the outside with a pointed stick. Then someone had the bright idea of simply marking clay with symbols and not bothering with tokens at all. And that's how writing was invented.

## 4000–2000 BC

The first symbols were circles and cones like the old tokens, but as the Babylonians got better at sharpening their wooden pens, the symbols turned into small, sharp wedges.

For a ONE they made a mark like this: 

To write numbers up to nine, they simply made more marks:



When they got to 10, they turned the symbol on its side ...  
... and when they got to 60, they turned it upright again.

So this is how the Babylonians would have written the number 99:

