Lecture 2: early writing and the literacy thesis

I. Before writing: records of transactions (=archives), ca. 8000BCE

II. Writing:
- Great diversity of scripts: ideographic, syllabic, alphabetical (consonantal or including vowels)
- Great diversity of media: leather, potsherds, wood boards covered with paint or plaster or wax, ivory, stone, walls, linen; clay tablet; papyrus roll

III. Writing emerges in the Four River Valleys (see back of handout)
- Clay tablets and cuneiform in Mesopotamia 3500BCE; down to 500BCE. Cheap and very durable (esp when baked); stored in special buildings (shelves, jars, boxes, baskets, with clay labels)
[In lecture 3: the papyrus roll, starting in Egypt ca 3000]

IV. Claims about impact of language/script/literacy
- Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language determines categories of thought. But roundly criticized: we can understand other cultures across language barriers and also perceive gaps between our own thoughts and how we express them.
- Do scripts shape thought? Some scripts are easier to learn, faster to read (redundancy): do they make more “room” for abstraction? [probably not]
  Goody: Writing makes possible critical thought, logical thought, categories/lists. Ong: Oral culture is formulaic, additive, redundant or copious, conservative or traditionalist, agonistical, little sense of history, little abstraction
But Halverson: logical thinking is not related to literacy, but to other developments; can think critically, logically without writing. Writing preserves knowledge, enables faster advancement of knowledge.
ARCHIVES

Tokens as complex tokens of transactions (Iran)

WRITING

ca 3500BCE: Sumer—cuneiform tablets (syllabic script)
ca 3000BCE: Egypt—hieroglyphics (ideographic, ca 700 symbols)
ca. 2800: Indus valley—undeciphered script
cia 1700: Shang China—2500 Chinese characters

[also, ca 500BCE: pre-Columbian scripts, from Olmec-Maya]

ALPHABET

Phoenicians (22 consonants)
Greek alphabet inscriptions
Homer
Plato
Phaedrus (411)