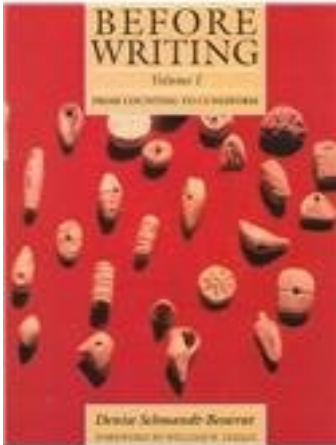


# Before Writing



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著者:Denise Schmandt-Besserat

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Before Writing gives a new perspective on the evolution of communication. It points out that when writing began in Mesopotamia it was not, as previously thought, a sudden and spontaneous invention. Instead, it was the outgrowth of many thousands of years' worth of experience at manipulating symbols. Denise Schmandt-Besserat presents a system of counters (tokens) that appeared in the Near East following the invention of agriculture (about 8000 B.C.) as the immediate precursor of Sumerian writing. Tokens were small objects modeled in clay in various geometric forms used for counting and accounting for goods. They remained in use during 5,000 years with little change, except at the rise of cities, when the types multiplied. The tokens represented a breakthrough in communication. They constituted the first code, the first system of signs for communication. They made it possible to deal concurrently with multiple kinds of data, thus allowing the processing of a volume and complexity of information never reached previously. Tokens functioned as an extension of the human brain to collect, manipulate, store, and retrieve data. In turn, processing an increasing volume

of data brought people to think in greater abstraction. Before Writing discusses how the tokens reflect an archaic way of "concrete counting" that paved the way to abstract counting. The evolution of the token system was also tied to the development of political power, since accounting was key to the control of real goods. Before Writing documents how numeracy was the privilege of an elite and shows how the more complex the token system became the more power it wielded. Written in an engaging and lively style, Before Writing, Volume I: From Counting to Cuneiform has significance far beyond a single field. It will be of interest to scholars and general readers interested in the origin of civilization, communication, and mathematics. A companion volume, Before Writing, Volume II: A Catalog of Near Eastern To

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