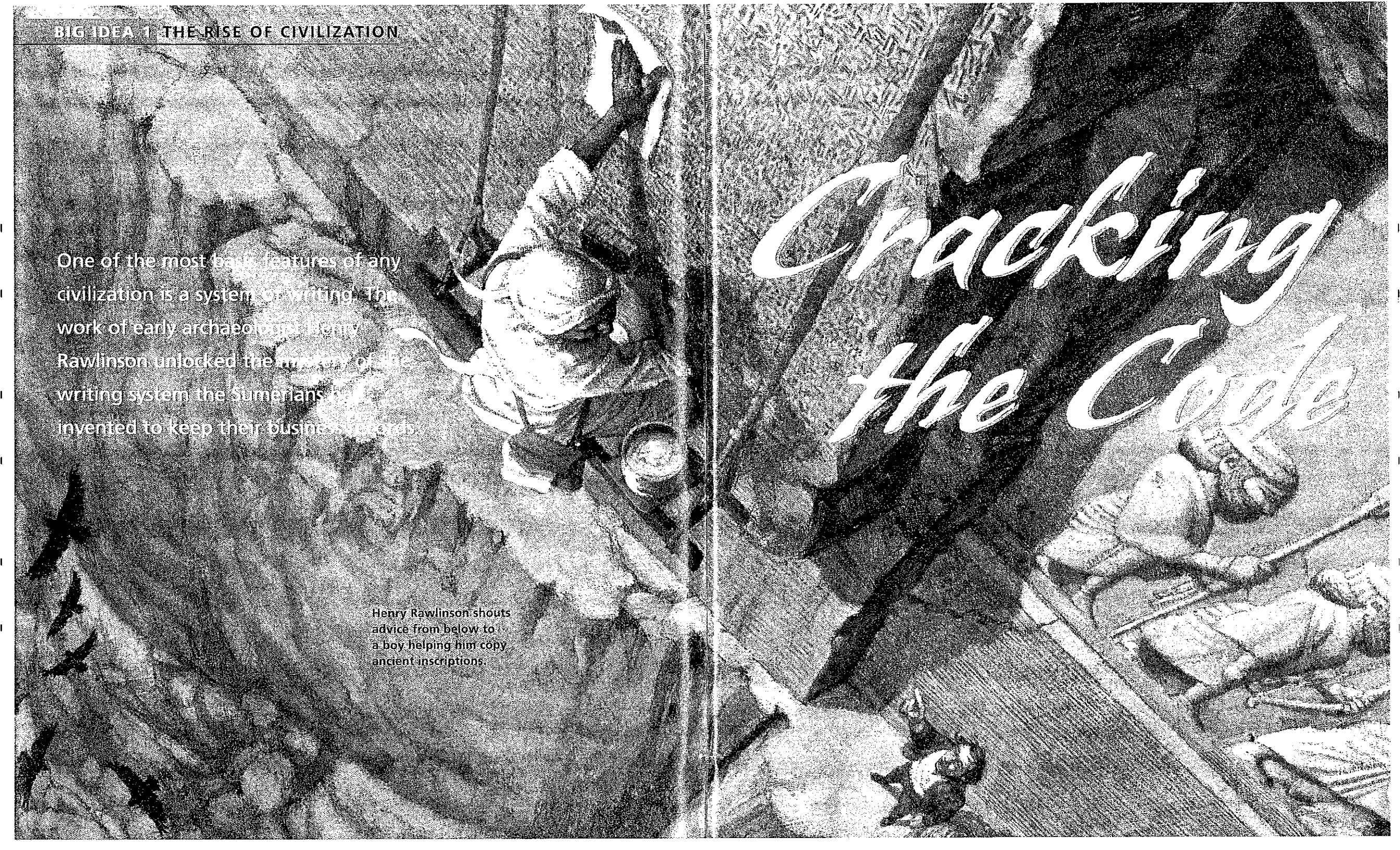
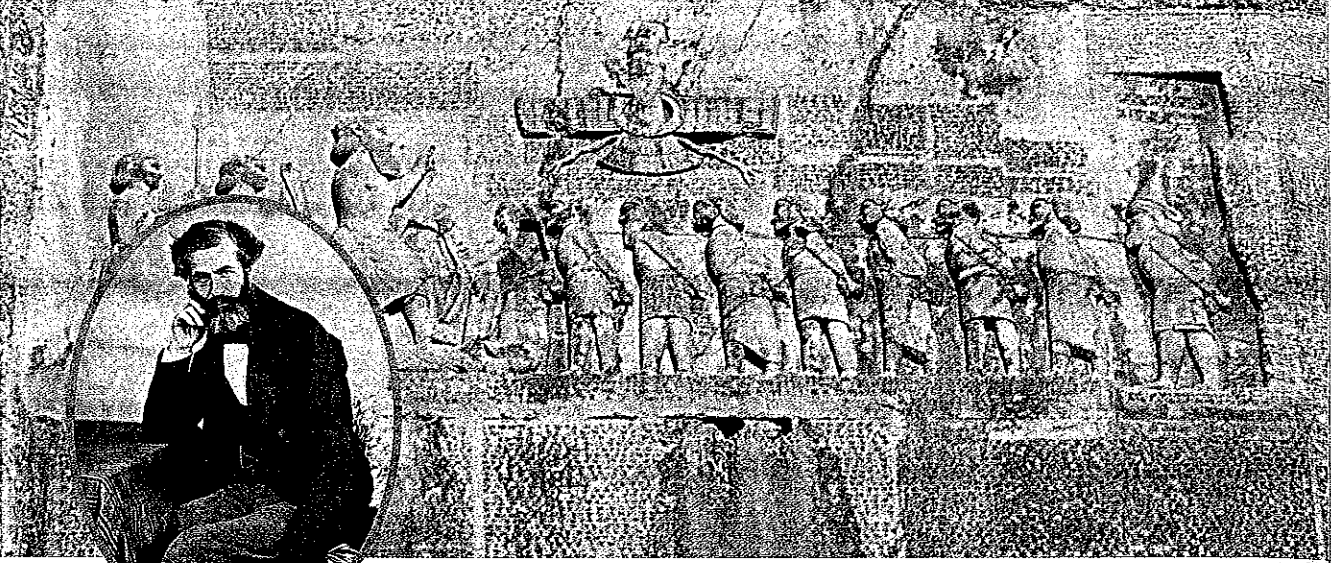


One of the most basic features of any civilization is a system of writing. The work of early archaeologist Henry Rawlinson unlocked the mystery of the writing system the Sumerians had invented to keep their business records.

Henry Rawlinson shouts advice from below to a boy helping him copy ancient inscriptions.

Cracking the Code





Henry Rawlinson

Figures and inscriptions on the Rock of Behistun

The ancient carvings are high on a cliff beside an old road in what was once the Persian Empire and is now western Iran. Three hundred feet (90 meters) above the ground, people long ago had carefully smoothed and polished an area of the cliff face 18 feet (5.5 meters) across. Then they carved the figures of a Persian king standing in triumph over his defeated enemies. Surrounding these figures on three sides are three different inscriptions.

European visitors to the region had long stopped to gaze at the carvings and wonder what the inscriptions said. One traveler wrote, "What a treasure of information doubtless was there to the happy man who could decipher this writing."

In 1835, a young Englishman named Henry Rawlinson decided to try to decipher, or decode, these ancient inscriptions. First, he had to copy them down. Just climbing the steep, slippery cliff, called the Rock of Behistun, was a dangerous adventure. Even today, for an expert climber with modern equipment, it would not be easy. Rawlinson risked his life every time he struggled up the cliff and perched on one of the narrow, rocky ledges to copy the inscriptions.

Rawlinson started with the inscription that was easiest to reach. He copied it by making what he called "squeezes." He pressed damp sheets of paper against the rock face so that they took the impression of the carved letters.

During the years that followed, he returned several times to the Rock of Behistun to copy more of the inscription. In the 1840s, Rawlinson hired a Kurdish boy to copy a part that was very hard to reach. Because the Kurds live in the mountains, Rawlinson knew the boy could handle the height. The young Kurd drove pegs into two slim clefts in the rock face and roped them to a narrow seat on which he sat—300 feet (90 meters) up—to copy the marks.

Reading Cuneiform

During the 12 years that he copied the inscriptions, Rawlinson worked patiently to decipher their meaning. All three were written in the ancient Mesopotamian script known as **cuneiform** (KYOO-nee-uh-form), meaning "wedge-shaped." The writing had hundreds of different characters made up of wedge-shaped marks. When archaeologists began digging up the ruins of Mesopotamian cities, they found thousands of clay tablets covered with cuneiform characters.

Rawlinson discovered that the three different parts of the Behistun inscription were written in three ancient languages of the Middle East. By 1838, Rawlinson had unraveled part of the oldest language.

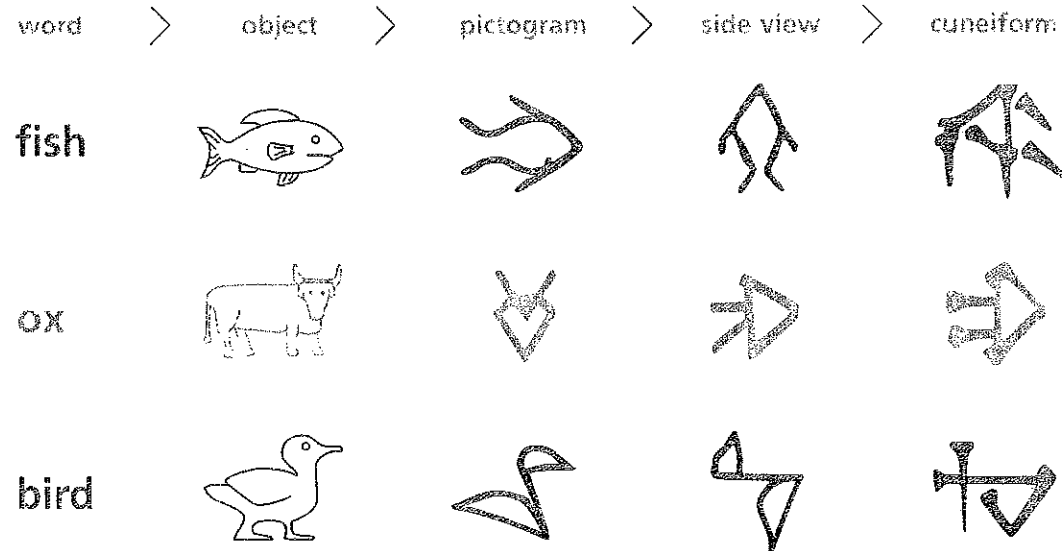
The inscription told of the military victories of an ancient Persian king, Darius I. The second part was tougher, because it was not related to any language that people still spoke. By 1844, Rawlinson and other scholars deciphered it.

The last part was the hardest of all. It included 500 different cuneiform characters. But it appeared that all three inscriptions told the same story. Rawlinson could use the first two inscriptions to help him decipher the last part. Finally, in 1857, he succeeded in reading it. Rawlinson had cracked the code of cuneiform. In the years to come, other archaeologists would mine the "treasure of information" his work had unlocked.

A cuneiform tablet with wedge-shaped marks



Development of Cuneiform



The Beginning of Writing

Cuneiform had actually begun as a method of accounting. The farmers of the ancient Middle East probably first used pebbles to keep track of how much grain or how many animals they owned. Later, they began to mold pieces of clay in different shapes, such as disks or cones. The different shapes stood for different types of goods, such as sheep or sacks of barley.

Using clay shapes or tokens worked for thousands of years, but slowly this system began to change. People started to keep records by pressing a simple picture of a thing into soft clay tablets. A picture used to represent a thing is known as a **pictogram**.

As time passed, these pictograms grew even simpler, turning into symbols.

The big step in the development of cuneiform took place when people began using symbols to stand for ideas, not just things. For example, the symbol for the idea “to eat” combined the symbol for “mouth” with the symbol for “food.” By about 3200 B.C., the Sumerians had developed simple pictograms into a writing system with hundreds of characters.

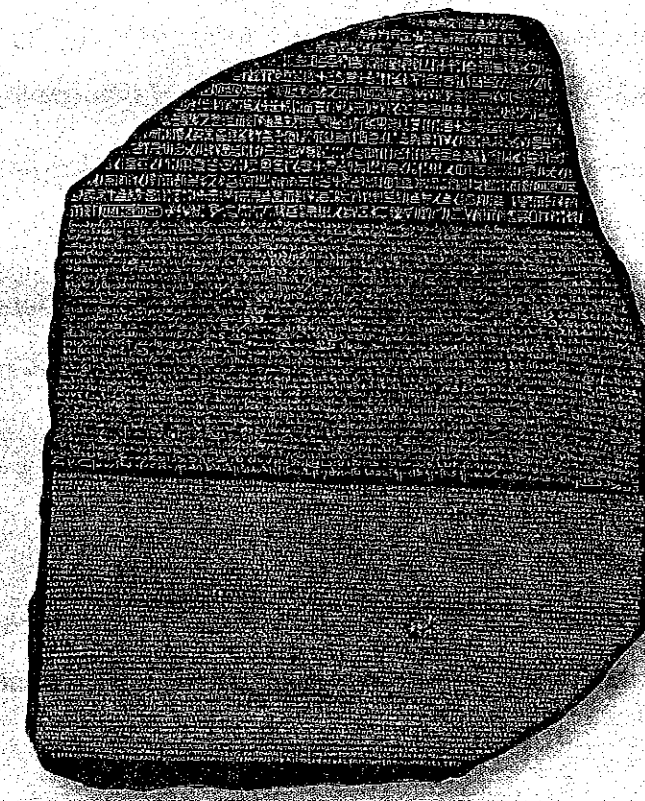
Cuneiform was a system of writing, not a spoken language, like English, Spanish, or French. Although these three languages are different, they are all written with the same alphabet.

In 1799, near the small Egyptian town of Rosetta, a French soldier discovered a large stone slate covered with strange markings. Like the Behistun inscriptions, the Rosetta Stone contained the same message written in three different scripts.

The first was the picture writing known as **hieroglyphs** (HI-uhr-uh-glihts), from Greek words meaning “sacred carving.” Ancient Egyptians used hieroglyphs for important inscriptions and documents. The second script was a rounded form used for more ordinary writing. The third script was ancient Greek.

A Frenchman named Jean-François Champollion spent years studying the Rosetta Stone. He used his knowledge of Greek to figure out what the two other types of writing meant. In 1822, he finally deciphered the inscriptions.

In the same way, the Sumerians and later peoples used the cuneiform writing system to write their own languages. Cuneiform became the most widely used writing system of the ancient Middle East. People used it to record tax payments, wages, contracts, and laws. They wrote prayers and recorded tales in cuneiform. Most importantly, they used it to write down their history.



Archaeologists were now able to read ancient Egyptian writings. The Rosetta Stone was the key to understanding the civilization of ancient Egypt.

► For more information about the Sumerians, see pages 59–60.



Once archaeologists cracked the code of cuneiform, they unlocked a treasure of information about life in one of the world's earliest civilizations. From ancient times until today, the written word tells the story of civilization.