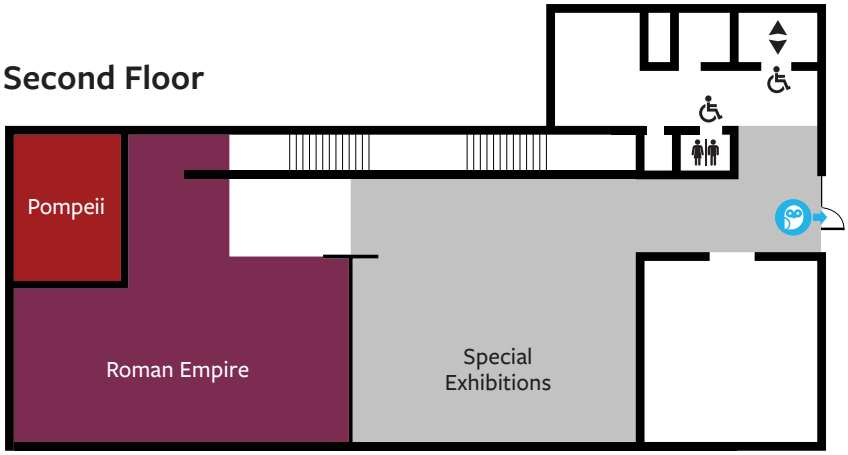
SELF-GUIDED TOUR

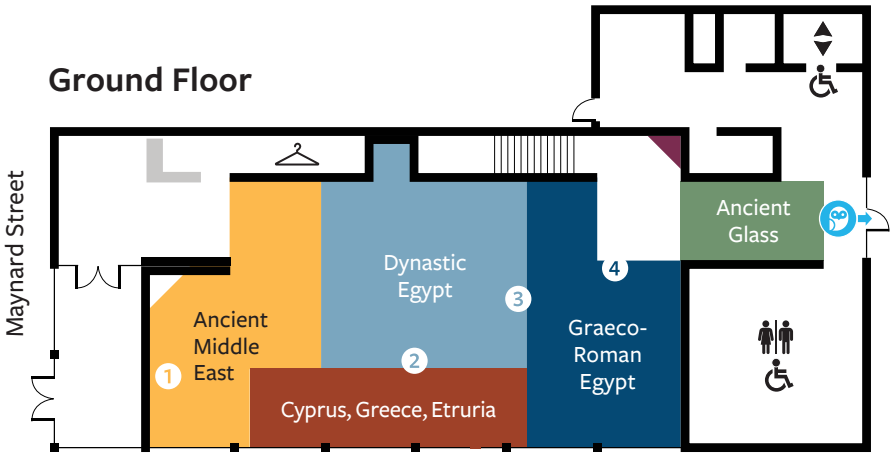
Having the Last Word

KELSEY
MUSEUM OF ARCHAEOLOGY

Second Floor



Ground Floor



Gift Shop
Restroom
Accessible
Coatroom
Elevator

SELF-GUIDED TOUR:

Having the Last Word

Two of the earliest forms of writing developed in Mesopotamia and Egypt by 3100 BCE. These and other writing systems can be found throughout the Kelsey Museum. Let's explore four of them.

We start our tour in ancient Mesopotamia, at the "Messages and Magic" case, number 1 on the map. Find the group of cuneiform tablets and look for object number 25 (KM 89475).

Cuneiform is a writing system used primarily in ancient Mesopotamia to write at least a dozen different languages, including Sumerian, Akkadian, and Babylonian. (In a similar way, the Latin alphabet is used today to write English, Italian, and Czech, to name just a few.) Cuneiform, which is Latin for "wedge-shaped," was written by pressing a stylus into soft clay, creating wedge-shaped marks. Each cluster of wedges represented either a word, a syllable, or a part of a syllable.

Cuneiform was usually written on pillow-shaped clay tablets that fit into the palm of the hand. This particular tablet (no. 25) records a letter from King Hammurabi of Babylon to one of his officials about a grant of land. Hammurabi did not write this letter himself. He would have dictated it to a scribe, who wrote it for him. Scribes held elite positions in Mesopotamian societies, where only about one percent of the population could read and write. Becoming a scribe took extensive schooling, starting around the age of four or five. Many scribes worked specifically for the king, his officials, and priests. They recorded transactions like this one and also wrote out medical texts, scientific treatises, poetry, works of literature, tax records, deeds, receipts, and legal documents, all through dictation. What do you suppose happened if the scribe misheard the king and wrote down the wrong thing? Who would know?

Let's now move to ancient Egypt, to the large, colorful relief for the official Qar, also known as Pepy-Nefer (KM 1981.4.1), number 2 on the map.

What is the first thing you notice about this large object? Does it look like writing to you? What does it make you think of? This inscription is in the Egyptian writing system called **hieroglyphs**. Egyptian hieroglyphs used images from nature and daily life to represent sounds, ideas, and words. Some of the images are so detailed they can inform us about species of animals and plants in ancient Egypt. Like in Mesopotamia, Egyptian scribes trained for at least 12 years to learn their craft. Unlike cuneiform, however, hieroglyphs were used for recording only one language: ancient Egyptian. At the time this inscription was created (ca. 2300 BCE), the hieroglyphic script was made up of about 800 different characters. By the 300s BCE, there were closer to 5,000.

This inscription is from the tomb of a man named Qar. He was an official in the court of King Pepy I, who reigned from the late 2300s to the early 2200s BCE. Qar was so important to Pepy that the king honored him with a nickname, Pepy-Nefer, which means "Pepy is Good." Would you like to learn to read this in Egyptian hieroglyphs?

Looking near the bottom of the left vertical column, do you see the tall oval with the straight line along its bottom? This is called a cartouche, and it was used to indicate a royal or divine name. Inside the cartouche are two repeating symbols. The square is the sound "P" and the reed-leaf is "y," so reading the signs left to right reveals "P-(e)-p-y," or Pepy. Just above the cartouche, do you see the stringed instrument that looks like a guitar? That is the symbol for the Egyptian word *nfr*, "good." (Vowels are not indicated in hieroglyphs, but Egyptologists have determined that *nfr* should be pronounced "nefer.") When read together, the instrument and the cartouche mean Pepy-Nefer, "Pepy is Good." Above the cartouche, we see nefer again, then the word for "name" (mouth, water), then a snake for "his," written for "his nickname." Above this is the scribe's actual name, Qar (written with the signs bird, hill, mouth, and bucket). Putting it all together, we read, "Qar who is nicknamed Pepy is Good."

Cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs are not the only writing systems represented here at the Kelsey. Let's look at two others that might be a bit more familiar. Turn around and head to the Graeco-Roman Egyptian funerary case, on your right, number 3 on the map.

On display here are many objects that come from ancient Egyptian tombs. Some of them look a lot like things we have come to think of as ancient Egyptian, but others seem a little different. Let's look at object number 13 (KM 21179). This is a tombstone from the Roman-period site of Terenouthis, in northern Egypt. If you look closely, just below the scene you can see an example of the ancient Greek writing system.

Greek is a phonetic writing system used for the ancient and modern Greek languages. It was derived from the Phoenician alphabet system, but the Greeks added symbols to represent vowels in addition to the consonants. The earliest known example of Greek writing is a line of poetry that dates to 750 BCE. This is different from Egyptian hieroglyphs and cuneiform, which were first used for recording inventories of property and for tax records.

The Greek language came to Egypt with the arrival of Alexander III of Macedon (commonly known as Alexander the Great) in 332 BCE. It did not replace ancient Egyptian but was used by the Greek-speaking rulers to administer their kingdom. Eventually, Egyptian society became bilingual, with most people speaking both Greek and Egyptian. Greek remained the language of commerce in the eastern Mediterranean, even after the Latin-speaking Romans took control of the region in the mid-1st century BCE. Latin was reserved for some writings, but Egyptian and Greek were the common languages for Egypt when this tombstone was created in the 2nd century CE.

Speaking of Latin, let's now head to our last stop, number 4 on the map.

Let's look at object number 42 (KM 21194). This is another tombstone like the one we just saw from Roman-period Egypt. It was also found at the site of Terenouthis, but it follows the traditions of Italian funerary monuments instead of Egyptian ones. Most importantly for this tour, the inscription is written using the **Latin** script, which should be familiar to you since it is the same one we use today for English. The Latin alphabet developed out of the Greek and Etruscan alphabets. By the 8th century BCE, the Greeks had established colonies throughout southern Italy that regularly traded with the Etruscans and Romans to the north. The earliest known examples of Latin writing are inscriptions that date to the 7th century BCE. The Latin alphabet evolved over time. The version we use today was fully developed by 75 BCE.

This tombstone is one of the few examples of writing that was uncovered in the U-M excavations of Terenouthis and Karanis in the 1930s. It dates to the late 2nd century CE (contemporary with the other tombstone we looked at). Greek and Egyptian were much more commonly used languages at these sites.

In recognition of our multicultural society we have chosen to use the more inclusive BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era) in our printed materials, although our galleries still employ the designations BC and AD.