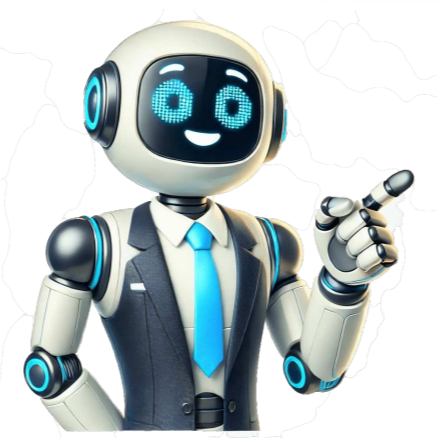


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The written word has been a cornerstone of human civilization for millennia. From clay tablets and scrolls to modern-day books, the medium for recording knowledge has evolved significantly over time. The question of the oldest surviving book is a complex one, as it depends on how we define a book and its significance. In this article, we'll delve into ten of the most ancient known surviving books in the world, each with its unique historical and cultural significance. The Voynich Manuscript, also known as the pre-Columbian Manuscript, is a rare treasure from the pre-Columbian Mayan culture, dating back to around 900–1521 AD. It was discovered in Spain in the 1600s and is currently housed in the Museo de América in Madrid. Experts debate its exact creation date, but some suggest it predates the Spanish conquest of the 16th century. Written in Yucatecan, a group of Mayan languages, this codex provides valuable insights into the Mayan civilization. The Gutenberg Bible, also called the 42-line Bible, stands as the world's oldest mechanically printed book, with the first copies produced in 1454–1455 AD by Johannes Gutenberg in Mainz, Germany. While China had earlier examples of book printing, such as the Diamond Sūtra, this Bible marked a significant advancement in Western printing technology. There are 48 known original copies, with 21 complete copies. The New York Public Library owns one of these iconic editions. Scotland's answer to the Book of Kells, the Celtic Psalter, is a pocket-sized book of Psalms. Created in the 11th century AD, it is Scotland's oldest surviving book. In 2009, it went on public display at the University of Edinburgh, allowing admirers to appreciate its historical and artistic significance. The Diamond Sūtra, a Buddhist holy text, claims the title of the world's oldest surviving dated printed book. Unearthed in China in a sealed cave, this scroll consists of Chinese characters printed on gray paper and dates back to 868 AD. What sets this text apart is an inscription at the end detailing the book's creation by Wong Jei on his parents' instructions. In 2013, a remarkable discovery was made—a Jewish prayer book, or *siddur*, dating back to around 840 AD. This parchment, still in its original binding, features Babylonian vowel pointing, reflecting the language of the Geonim during the Middle Ages. This remarkable find offers a glimpse into the religious practices of that era. Housed in the Trinity College Library in Dublin, Ireland, the Book of Kells is a masterpiece created by Celtic monks around 800 AD. This illuminated manuscript Gospel book is written in Latin and contains the four Gospels of the New Testament. Its intricate designs and vivid illustrations make it a marvel of medieval artistry. Europe's oldest known surviving intact book is the St. Cuthbert Gospel. It was acquired by the British Library in 2012 for £9 million as part of a fundraising campaign. This book was buried with St. Cuthbert, an early British Christian leader, around 998 AD. Its journey through history, surviving Viking conquests and a rediscovery in 1104 AD, adds to its historical significance. Considered among the oldest surviving bound books, the Nag Hammadi Library consists of 13 leather-bound papyrus codices discovered in 1945 in Upper Egypt. These codices contain Gnostic texts and are dated to the first half of the 4th century AD. They are currently housed in the Coptic Museum in Cairo, shedding light on early Christian thought. In 1964, three gold plates were discovered in ancient Pyrgi, Italy, dating back to 500 BC. These plates, written in Etruscan and Phoenician, comprise a dedication from King Thefarie Velianthus to the Phoenician goddess Astarte. Their display at the National Etruscan Museum in Rome offers a glimpse into the ancient Etruscan civilization. The Etruscan Gold Book, dating to about 660 BC, is thought to be the world's oldest multi-page book. Comprising six sheets of 24-carat gold bound together with rings, this remarkable artifact features Etruscan characters and depictions of a horse, a horseman, a siren, a lyre, and soldiers. It was donated to Bulgaria's National History Museum in Sofia by an anonymous donor. These ten ancient surviving books provide windows into the rich tapestry of human history, culture, and knowledge. From the Mayan civilization to the dawn of printing technology in Europe, and from religious texts to illuminated manuscripts, these books transcend time, connecting us with our ancestors and their wisdom. They are not just records of the past but treasures that continue to inspire and educate generations. Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. 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We understand the opportunity to grow engagement with new audiences of all ages and through new partnerships with Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat, along with our podcasts and on-demand SVOD services, we ensure our programming and unique stories reach audiences across the full demographic spectrum. Join our global team of talent. At Hearst Networks EMEA you'll find a team of innovative, creative and collaborative people who embrace change and want to continually try new things. With offices in London, Rome, Madrid, Warsaw, Munich and Johannesburg, we are a truly international company that celebrates difference and diversity. We offer a range of benefits such as a generous pension plan, life assurance and holiday allowance, and there are useful local perks in various offices, and summer Fridays across the whole company. But most of all, we will support you to develop and grow throughout your time with us. Learning is part of the journey at Hearst Networks EMEA and you'll be offered personal and professional development opportunities throughout your career with us. We'll do everything we can to see you thrive and grow. The Kish Tablet from Sumer with pictographic writing, c. 3500 BCE. Ashmolean Museum, Iraq (Photo: José-Manuel Benito via Wikimedia Commons). Nestled in the historical region of southern Mesopotamia, Sumer stands as the earliest known civilization. It's no surprise, then, that the oldest written text can be traced back to Kish, an ancient Sumerian city in modern Tell al-Uhaymir, Iraq. Named after the location of its discovery, the Kish Tablet dates back to the Uruk period (c. 3500–3200 BCE), and features proto-cuneiform signs. Proto-cuneiform emerged in Mesopotamia and was largely rooted within a pictographic system. These pictographs spanned simple drawings and symbols representing specific ideas and, unlike modern languages, did not directly correspond to the syntax of a spoken language. The purpose of proto-cuneiform was not to transcribe linguistic messages, but instead to maintain economic records, especially as they related to production, trade, and labor. These elements can make it difficult to decipher proto-cuneiform artifacts, including the Kish Tablet. Though it hasn't been decoded or demonstrated to correspond to spoken language, the tablet nevertheless offers an indispensable glimpse into the evolution of writing throughout ancient history. The proto-cuneiform marks on the Kish Tablet reflect a transitional stage between a purely pictographic writing system and the more sophisticated and syllabic cuneiform that developed in the region by the end of the fourth millennium BCE. Unlike its predecessor, cuneiform correlated more with spoken language, incorporating symbols that formed distinct words when read together. Cuneiform, however, demanded a creation process similar to proto-cuneiform. Symbols were impressed into soft clay tablets with a stylus, hardening quickly in Mesopotamia's hot climate. This remarkable durability not only made clay tablets an attractive option for record-keeping but has allowed us to recover such artifacts several millennia later. The Kish Tablet is an astounding reminder of how writing has advanced across time, and provides essential insights into Sumerian culture. The original tablet is currently held at the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, while a plaster cast can be found at the University of Oxford's Ashmolean Museum. The Kish Tablet is the oldest written text in the world and uses proto-cuneiform pictographs. Proto-cuneiform tablet recording the allocation of beer, c. 3100-3000 BCE. Collection of the British Museum (Photo: Jim Kuhn, via Wikimedia Commons). Proto-cuneiform did not directly correspond to the syntax of a spoken language, but was instead primarily used to maintain economic records. Proto-cuneiform tablet of an administrative account with entries concerning malt and barley groats (Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, donated to Wikimedia Commons). Cuneiform followed proto-cuneiform by the end of the fourth millennium BCE and correlated more with spoken language. A large cuneiform inscription found on the south side of the Van Castle Hill in eastern Turkey (Photo: Bjørn Christian Tørrissen, via Wikimedia Commons). Sources: Proto-Cuneiform tablet with seal impressions: administrative account of barley distribution with cylinder seal impression of a male figure, hunting dogs, and boars; Proto-Cuneiform: Earliest Form of Writing on Planet Earth; A Short History of Proto-Cuneiform; The Origins of Writing Related Articles: Listen to the World's Oldest Sheet Music, a Mesopotamian Hymn Over 3,000 Years Old What Is Ancient Assyria? Discover the Visual Culture of This Powerful Empire 17,000 Looted Ancient Artifacts Return to Iraq in Massive Repatriation Ever wonder what the oldest written text that has ever been found is? Needless to say, it's pretty old, but humans have been communicating about their experiences and reality for millennia. It just wasn't written down in ways we would recognize today - writing emerged as a process. The oldest form of visual communication can be seen in ancient caves scattered across the world. Cave paintings are a form of representation that humans used to record their experiences of specific events or things. However, they don't tend to be seen as specifically forming a linguistic message and so are more often regarded as part of the pictorial art traditions. Yet if some of the pictures come to consistently represent certain meanings, then they start to become pictograms. So a circle with lines shooting out of it might represent the sun; or a stick figure with two legs, a circle for a head, and two other sticks for arms may be a human; or a jagged line could be a lightning bolt. As long as other people are able to recognize what they indicate and can replicate them for similar purposes then they function as a form of communication. For instance, today you can use an image of a knife and fork to indicate a restaurant or a picture of an airplane can indicate an airport. These images relate to things that exist in the world or are discrete in their own nature, but if the sun representation evolves and starts encompassing concepts such as heat, warmth, light, and daytime too, then it has become an ideogram. Ideograms capture the meaning of abstract notions that are not always secure in the real world. Both pictograms and ideograms tend to be free of language constraints too. In that their point of reference is usually readily available regardless of what language you speak (within reason) - the sun symbol represents the same sun regardless of whether you speak French, Japanese, or English and we can all appreciate the concepts of heat, light, and warmth. Many ancient languages are thought to have begun with simpler pictogram or ideogram representations that stayed in use for centuries. Both Egyptian hieroglyphics and Chinese writing contain pictograms that evolved into more abstract meanings. Once a symbol becomes sufficiently removed from a physical thing it is easier to see it as a word in a language. When symbols are used to represent specific words in a language, then they become logograms. Logograms form the foundation of many of the earliest writing systems, including languages in the Near East, China, and Central America. The first writing? The earliest confirmed form of writing is recorded on a limestone tablet, known as the Kish tablet, which dates to around 3,500 BCE. The tablet was found on the site of an ancient Sumerian city called Kish, which is located in modern-day Iraq. The writing on its surface is purely pictographic and represents a mid-point between proto-writing and more sophisticated syllabic writing of the cuneiform (meaning "wedged shaped") script. This remarkable object probably pre-dates Egyptian hieroglyphs by several centuries, and so appears to be the oldest recognized and decipherable written system used by humans.Cuneiform was the most widespread and historically significant written system in the ancient Middle East and was used by numerous and different cultures - including the Assyrians, Akkadians, and the Babylonians - who had their own spoken languages. The writing was created by pushing red styluses into a moist clay to create wedge-shaped indents that, when combined in different ways, could stand for different spoken syllables that formed distinct words when put together. Later, scribes would chisel cuneiform into all sorts of stone objects too.The writing system was in use for around 3,000 years and produced hundreds of thousands of clay tablets and inscribed objects. It was only in the early 19th century, however, that archaeologists rediscovered many of them and effort turned to making deciphering and translating their meaning. The oldest known text is recorded on a limestone tablet called the Kish tablet, dating back to around 3,500 BCE. It was found in the ancient Sumerian city of Kish, located in modern-day Iraq. Which is the oldest text in the world? The oldest extant text, known as the Tablet of Kish, was found at Tell al-Uhaymir, the site of the Sumerian city of Kish, located in the Babil Governorate of Iraq. The limestone tablet is inscribed with what are called proto-cuneiform signs. Some scholars date it to the middle Uruk period, circa 3500 BC. What are the oldest writings known to man? The earliest known writing was invented around 3400 B.C. in an area called Sumer near the Persian Gulf. The development of a Sumerian script was influenced by local materials: clay for tablets and reeds for styluses (writing tools). What is the oldest written record in human history? The Sumerian archaic cuneiform script and the Egyptian hieroglyphs are generally considered the earliest writing systems, both emerging out of their ancestral proto-literate symbol systems from 3400 to 3200 BCE with earliest coherent texts from about 2600 BCE. What is the oldest literary text? The earliest surviving written literature is from ancient Mesopotamia. The Epic of Gilgamesh is often cited as the first great composition, although some shorter compositions have survived that are even earlier (notably the "Kesh Temple Hymn" and "The Instructions of Shuruppak"). Archaeologists discover oldest known sentence in first alphabet - BBC News The sentence refers to a recent discovery by archaeologists of the oldest known sentence in the first alphabet. The exact details and context can be found in the BBC News article. Is the Bible the oldest book in the world? No, the Bible is not the oldest book in the world? The Diamond Sutra, also known as the 'Diamond Cutter Sutra' or 'Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita Sutra', is a remarkable Buddhist text and is considered the world's oldest printed book. What was the first written language? The Sumerian archaic (pre-cuneiform) writing and Egyptian hieroglyphs are generally considered the earliest true writing systems, both emerging out of their ancestral proto-literate symbol systems from 3400 to 3100 BCE, with earliest coherent texts from about 2600 BCE. How much of human history is unrecorded? Modern humans (Homo sapiens) have existed on Earth for approximately 300,000 years. Human history began to be recorded approximately 5,000 years ago. Using these numbers, we can estimate that only about 1.6% of human history is recorded! What's the oldest thing ever? The oldest known material is a zircon crystal discovered in 2001 in Western Australia. Scientists estimate it to be around 4.4 billion years old. What is the oldest thing written in English? The earliest texts in English survive as very short runic inscriptions on metal objects and ceramic pots. The earliest substantial example of English is the law code of King Æthelberht of Kent, dating back to the 6th or 7th century. Which religion is the oldest? Hinduism is one of the oldest religions in the world, with its roots dating back thousands of years. It is the third-largest religion globally, with approximately 1.25 billion followers. Which is older Bible or Vedas? The Vedas, ancient sacred texts of Hinduism, are among the oldest known texts. The Bible, on the other hand, is a collection of religious texts from Judaism and Christianity that were written over many centuries. How old is the Bible in years? The Bible is a collection of texts written over a span of almost a millennium. The exact dates of the individual books vary, but the earliest texts were likely written around the 13th century BCE, while the latest were completed in the 2nd century CE. What is the oldest city in the world? Determining the oldest city in the world is challenging, but Jericho in the Middle East is often considered to be one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities, with a history dating back thousands of years. Athens is also another city that has been continuously inhabited for about 5,000 years. What is the oldest human-built structure? Göbekli Tepe, an archaeological site in Southeastern Turkey, is considered to be one of the oldest human-built structures. It dates back to around 9500-8000 BCE and is believed to have been a temple complex. What was life like 10,000 years ago? 10,000 years ago, life for the average human was vastly different from today. Most people lived as hunter-gatherers, relying on hunting and gathering for their food. They lived in small, nomadic groups, following the seasonal availability of plants and animals. What was life like 500 years ago? 500 years ago, life was very different from today. There was no central heating or air conditioning, and only the upper class had any comfort. Women did not have civil rights, and social classes were highly stratified. What did humans look like 10,000 years ago? 10,000 years ago, humans looked similar to modern humans, although there were some relatively minor genetic differences. Europeans, for example, were mostly darker-skinned than today, and some other traits had not yet spread through populations. What language did Adam and Eve speak? According to traditional Jewish exegesis, Adam and Eve spoke Hebrew because the names they give each other, Isha and Chava, make sense in Hebrew. What language did Jesus speak? Jesus is believed to have primarily spoken Aramaic, a Semitic language originating in the Middle Euphrates region. Which is the oldest alphabet? The oldest known alphabet is generally considered to be the Proto-Sinaitic script, which dates back to the Middle Bronze Age, around 1850 BCE. Which is older Quran or Bible? Versions of stories found in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament existed before the Quran. Scholars consider the similarities between these texts, but Muslims believe the Quran to be direct knowledge from the Creator. How long after Jesus died was the Bible written? The four gospels of the New Testament were written over the course of almost a century after Jesus' death. The period of forty years separates the death of Jesus from the writing of the first gospel. Who wrote Bible first? The Bible is traditionally believed to have been written by multiple authors, with Moses being attributed as the writer of the earliest portions. He is considered the Hebrew prophet who led the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt. Pratik Patil, an IT engineering graduate turned passionate writer, is known for his meticulous research and engaging storytelling at Oldest.org. Despite his technical background, his love for history, culture, and storytelling led him to explore the world's oldest records across topics like people, sports, politics, food, nature, religion, and the arts. A curious mind with a knack for uncovering hidden stories, Pratik enjoys visiting historical sites, reading biographies, and watching documentaries on ancient civilizations. He has a deep love for traditional Indian cuisine, especially home-cooked Maharashtrian dishes, and often experiments with old recipes. When he's not writing, he enjoys sketching, playing chess, and listening to retro music. His ability to blend thorough research with engaging narratives makes history come alive, making it both informative and captivating for readers. Writing things down is one of the most important innovations in human history. As well as being able to spread ideas accurately across distance and time, writing also provided the records needed for law to function. Documents have literally changed the world, and some of them have survived for hundreds or even thousands of years. Every type of document provides a unique window into our shared heritage as human beings, in ways that are both surprising and fascinating. 10Oldest International Treaty The Hittites and the Egyptians were among the earliest great civilizations. They had an uneasy relationship and both wielded a relatively large amount of military power for the time. One of their key sticking points was the city of Kadesh, located in what is now Syria. In the 13th century BC the Hittites marched on the city, which was under Egyptian control, and took it, giving them a threatening position over important trade routes. Egypt's Pharaoh Ramesses II (dater known as Ramesses the Great) marched with 20,000 of his own men to take it back. The ensuing battle was a draw. Both sides realized that neither of them was likely to gain a decisive victory, so sought another solution. The result was a peace agreement, signed around 1269 BC, which is the oldest surviving treaty in existence. A copy is on display in the United Nations, because they're really into treaties there. A translation of both the Hittite version and the Egyptian version is available. The treaty promises everlasting peace, created by the leaders "in order not to permit hostilities to arise between them, forever. There are clauses agreeing that should an Egyptian flee to the lands of the Hittites (or vice versa) they will be returned to their homeland, making it the oldest extradition treaty as well. The countries also agree to send troops to one another's aid should a third party attack. While there is a lot in the treaty we don't consider at the height of diplomatic relations, few people would nowadays be comfortable with the promise to send troops to squelch any uprisings from within a neighbor's country." If Reamasesa, king of the country of Egypt, rises in anger against his citizens after they have committed a wrong against him... the king of the country of Hatti, my brother, has to send his troops and his chariots and they have to exterminate all those against." The promise is made in the other direction as well. 9Oldest Surviving Medical Document Whilst humans have dabbled in healthcare of some sort since our earliest days, the first record we have of specific medical advice is in the form of an Egyptian papyrus. This document is 4,000 years old and is known as the Kahun Gynaecological Papyrus. It was discovered in 1899 and contains information on the diagnosis and treatment of a number of ailments. While some of the meaning may have been lost over the millennia, Egyptian women seem to have suffered from some unusual conditions, like the smell of roasting while their womb wandered. The Egyptians liked to blame the womb for a whole bunch of stuff that probably wasn't related. For example, "a woman whose eyes are aching till she cannot see, on top of aches in her neck" is diagnosed as having "discharges of the womb in her eyes." The recommended treatment is fumigation of the womb (ouch). Toothache? "It is toothache of the womb" and more scattered around the amorous couples in the pictures has been pretty standard forever, like beer and wine. Other stuff, such as the love rattle or the huge phallus supported by a team of handmaidens, fell out of favor until the Internet came along. The positions fall somewhere between impressively acrobatic and unnervingly ambitious. A man doing a handstand falls into the former category, whereas the man on the ground chasing a woman on a chariot is a definite case of the latter. 5Oldest Message In A Bottle The message in a bottle has a firm place in our cultural consciousness. The oldest one talked about on the Internet is that of Chunosuke Matsuyama, who supposedly sent out a message in 1784, asking for rescue after he became shipwrecked. The message washed up on a beach in 1935, a little too late. The Internet, however, offers up no images or indication as to where the bottle is now. It's likely this story is apocryphal—Guinness World Records certainly seems to think so, so the "oldest bottle" title lies elsewhere. The oldest confirmed message in a bottle ever found is from 1914. It had spent 35,736 days at sea when it was found by Scottish fisherman Andrew Leaper on April 12, 2012. The message had been launched as part of a scientific experiment to map sea currents for Scotland's Fishery Board. It may be less romantic than the last words of an abandoned sailor (or a lonely British pop star), but it's at least a bit more useful. 4Oldest Correspondence The oldest correspondence ever sent were diplomatic letters between the pharaohs of Egypt and neighboring statesmen. These clay tablets, known as the Amarna letters, were sent in the 14th century BC. Jerusalem's Canaanite king Abdi-Heba used one letter to ask the pharaoh Akhenaten for military assistance against other city states in the region. The letters were found in 1867 and are now housed in various museums around Europe. One example in the British Museum is from the king of Mitanni, a city state in modern-day Syria. It is addressed to pharaoh Amenhotep III and wishes him and his family well, before saying that a statue of the goddess Ishtar is on its way. The goddess herself had apparently given direct approval. 3Oldest Printed Book Bearing A Date Texts in some Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism are known as sutras. The best known of these in the West is the Kama Sutra, but it is far from the only one. The oldest complete printed and dated book is a Buddhist text known as the Diamond Sutra, a name apparently suggested by the Buddha himself, as the text is designed to "cut like a diamond blade through worldly illusion to illuminate what is real and everlasting." It was found hidden in a cave in 1907 by a British explorer, one of 40,000 documents that had been locked away for around 900 years. The cave in the desert, with its dry air, had helped to preserve the items. The text deals with identity and criticizes the idea that people have an immutable core. The book holds itself in very high regard, quoting the Buddha as saying, "If a good son or good daughter dedicates lifetimes as many as the sands in the River Ganges to charitable acts, and there were another person who memorized as much as one four-line verse of this scripture and taught it to others, the merit of the latter would be far greater." 2Oldest Marriage Certificate The Elephantine Papyri are a collection of documents dated to the 5th Century BC found on the island of Elephantine in the River Nile. At the time a Jewish settlement called Yeb was located there as an Egyptian garrison. Among the various letters and contracts were three marriage certificates, the oldest known to survive. The contracts appear to have been drawn up in unusual situations. The brides were a slave, a former slave, and a divorcee. The purpose of the documents was to record the economics of the wedding, including the dowry. If the marriage was later dissolved, the wife got to take this along with the possessions she brought with her. One lucky groom was named Ananiah ben Azariah and his bride was a handmaiden called Tamut. The certificate contains sections that have been erased or added to, suggesting last-minute negotiations. 1Oldest Surviving Set Of Laws The Codes of Ur Nammu are the oldest laws that we know of, a creation of the Sumerian king of that name. The codes were written around 2,050 BC and covered a wide array of crimes. The punishments set out include a fine of 15 shekels for perjury, compared to a fine of five shekels for raping a slave. Cutting off a man's foot falls exactly between these two crimes and will set you back 10 shekels. Ur Nammu's code also included rules about tax, courtroom procedures, and ceremonial laws. The period when the laws were written was called, "Year Ur-Nammu Made Justice In The Land." The implementation of laws seems to have worked out fairly well, as the empire prospered under Ur-Nammu's rules. The rules are imperfect: speaking insolently was punished by having one's mouth scoured with salt, a law that applied only to slave women. Nevertheless, the idea of a codified set of laws was an important step in humanity's progress. 4Oldest Newspaper The world's first newspaper was launched in Germany in the early 1600s and was snappily called Relation aller Fürnemmen und gedenckwürdigen Historien (Collection of all Distinguished and Commemorable News). There are no surviving copies for the first four years it was published; the earliest copy that exists is from 1609. The papers were published in Strasbourg, a Catholic city, so the protestant Relation published anonymously to avoid given away the printing location. The oldest surviving English language newspaper was printed in Amsterdam and dated 2 December, 1620. It opened with the line, "new tydings out of Italie are not yet com," which seems unfortunate. It had no title, as that wasn't considered particularly important. After all, if there are no other newspapers you don't need to know which yours stand out. The oldest surviving newspaper printed in England (in 1621) was snappily called, "Corante, or weeklye newes from Italy, Germany, Poland, Bohemia, France and the Low Countreys." America didn't get a home-grown newspaper till 1690. Alan is a full-time writer who you can pester on Twitter, email, or read his blog (which he promises to update more often) at skepticalnumber.com. fact checked by Jamie Frater In the history of world literature, there have been iconic writings that prove invaluable to how we see and understand the ancients. Here are some of the most famous and oldest pieces of literature (defined somewhat loosely) that have helped to shape our views of the past. 1. The Epic of Gilgamesh / Around 4000 Years OldThough it's not the oldest written text. The Epic of Gilgamesh is, by all accounts, the most ancient piece of literature in the world (yet discovered, anyway) [PDF]. Its roots are in older Sumerian stories and poetry that are associated with the reign of Gilgamesh (approximately 2500 BCE). There were many versions of The Epic of Gilgamesh written over a long period, from as early as 1700 BCE to as late as around 127 BCE—but the most famous (and important) is the Akkadian version, written in cuneiform sometime between 1300 and 1000 BCE. The tablets were part of a library destroyed by the Babylonians in 612 BCE, and were rediscovered, damaged, in modern-day Iraq in the middle of the 19th century. (The incomplete 12th tablet seems to have been added on later than the first 11 and is repetitious.) Some experts believe that The Epic of Gilgamesh may have also influenced later epic tales like The Odyssey.2. The Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor // Nearly 4000 Years OldThe Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor, written on papyrus sometime during 2000–1900 BCE, "is the oldest surviving ancient Egyptian story," James P. Allen writes in Middle Egyptian Literature. Its ultimate origins are a mystery, but it was found in a museum in the Russian city of St. Petersburg in the 19th century and is currently kept in Moscow. The supernatural tale is written in Egyptian Hieratic script and is of debated completeness, though recent research has suggested that the beginning—which to the modern reader seems to start mid-story—is a perfectly acceptable way to start an ancient Egyptian story and the text we have is more or less complete.3. The Book of Job // 2500 to 4000 Years OldThe Book of Job's date of composition is a controversial issue: Some argue that the Hebrew (with its hints of Aramaic) places its time of writing as post-Babylonian era (after around 540 BCE), though many other clues—including Job's wealth being categorized in the number of animals and servants he had rather than money—point to it being written much earlier (some argue closer to 2000 BCE). There is also some debate about who the book's author is: Some say Moses, some say Solomon—but most scholars say there's no way of knowing 4. Hammurabi's Code // 3700 years oldLionie stele inscribed with the laws of Hammurabi, 18th century BC. | Print Collector/GettyImagesWritten toward the end of the reign of Hammurabi (1792–1750 BCE), Hammurabi's Code was etched in Akkadian on several black stone steles, of which one survives nearly complete. While the code isn't the first legal document in history—the Laws of Ur-Nammu are a few centuries older and there are edicts even older than that—Hammurabi's laws "show the most coherent and elaborate engagement with questions of justice in early world history, unequalled so far as we know for more than a millennium," according to historian Marc Van De Mieroop. The code's prose is comparable to the Biblical book of Exodus [PDF] and proclaims the piety and justice of Hammurabi, while its legalism is contingent on the era's belief in "an eye for an eye." In these terms, punishment was meted out in severe forms, such as cutting off the convicted person's tongue, hands, eye, or ear; justice varied depending on whether the offender belonged to the upper, middle, or lower classes.5. The Book of the Dead // 3500 years oldAncient Egyptian Book of the Dead on papyrus showing written hieroglyphs. | Print Collector/GettyImagesThe Book of the Dead, or The Book of Coming Forth by Day, is one of the most iconic pieces of ancient Egyptian writing. The compilation of around 200 papyrus sheets of texts dates from 1500 BCE. Its text was inspired by much older writings) and was used mostly in the New Kingdom. The authors are many and the passages were tailored to whomever they were commissioned by—meaning that no copies are identical—but they were all meant to be used as a guide for the deceased on the path to the afterlife.6. The Vedas // 3500-3200 years oldThe Vedas were written in Vedic Sanskrit anywhere from 1500 to 1200 BCE, though a definite date can't be assigned to them. Also known as "books of knowledge," they consist of hymns, poems, and rituals, among other things, all of which were originally contributed and passed down in spoken form. The texts are among the most vital pieces of sacred literature in Hinduism and have great value to the culture itself. There are four Vedas total: the Rig Veda, which contains hymns; the Sama Veda, which contains songs and chants; the Yajur Veda, which contains an understanding of how to perform the religious rituals; and the Atharva Veda, which is focused on spells of protection.7. The Odyssey // Around 2700 Years OldThe Odyssey of Homer is an epic of more than 12,000 lines, written by the ancient Greek poet Homer around 725–675 BCE, that tells of Odysseus's decade-long journey home from the Trojan war. "The Poet," as Greeks called Homer, wrote The Odyssey in a slightly different style than The Iliad (a copy of which, according to Plutarch, Alexander the Great kept under his pillow when he slept—though that story likely isn't as straightforward as it might seem). But some believe the plainer expressions and reduced emphasis on the power of the gods may simply be due to different phases of Homer's life. Another theory is that the two works are by different authors and the singular genius "Homer" is a very old fiction.8. Medea // 2450 Years OldEuripides's great drama [PDF], written around 431 BCE, is an example of social and political struggles of the era. Medea was thought of as dangerous because she defended herself as a woman and challenged the power of a man at a time when work was so went against the status quo. Her name is likely taken from the word cunning, which may have originally been a device used to portray her as a witch. It's theorized that Euripides's close friend Socrates may have had an influence on his work, due to the philosophical angles of the plots in his plays—especially those relating to the effects of passions—being explored.9. The Symposium // 2400 Years OldAncient Greek symposia were lively gatherings where close male friends of high status gathered to share poetry, talk about the topics of the day, play music and sing songs in honor of the gods, or even tell jokes and gossip about the people they knew in order to escape the monotony of their daily lives. Plato's Symposium, written circa 385 BCE, was an imagined depiction of one such intellectual event that dove deep into philosophical discussion with those he had idolized in his youth; and other contemporary disciples of Socrates (Plato's teacher) wrote their own, similar discourses.10. The Tale of Genji // 1000 Years OldThough The Tale of Genji [PDF] is much younger than the other ancient writings on this list, it's commonly listed as the first novel ever written (though that is very much dependent on your definition of novel). It's also the only book on this list that was definitively written by a woman—but the real name of the author, who's known as Murasaki Shikibu, is a mystery.The story—the life of Prince Genji—is nearly 1300 pages in translation; its 54 books were written over 100 years, a time in Japan known for its poetry and fiction penned by Heian court ladies, who were daughters of privilege with an abundance of free time. Men wrote in scholarly Chinese during this era, rather than in the syllabic Japanese script that women used. In part because of the high standard of education the women enjoyed, the Chinese referred to Japan as "Queen Country" during this time.