[“The Cradle of Cash” by Heather Pringle](http://discovermagazine.com/1998/oct/thecradleofcash1518)

The scene in the small stifling room is hard to imagine: the scribe frowning, shifting in his seat as he tries to concentrate on the words of the woman in front of him. A member of one of the wealthiest families in Sippar, the youngest priestess has summoned him to her room to record a business matter. When she entered the temple, she explains, her parents gave her a valuable inheritance, a huge piece of silver in the shape of a ring, worth the equivalent of 60 months’ wages for an estate worker. She has decided to buy land with this silver. Now she needs someone to take down a few details. Obediently, the scribe smooths a wet clay tablet and gets out his stylus. Finally, his work done, he takes the tablet down to the archive.

For more than 3,700 years, the tablet languished in obscurity, until late nineteenth-century collectors unearthed it from Sippar’s ruins along the Euphrates River in what is now Iraq. Like similar tablets, it hinted at an ancient and mysterious Near Eastern currency, in the form of silver rings, which started circulating two millennia before the world’s first coins were struck. By the time that tablet was inscribed, such rings may have been used for thousands of years.

When did humans first arrive at the concept of money? What conditions spawned it? How did it effect the ancient societies that created it? Until recently, researchers thought that they had the answers. They believed money was born, as coins, along the coasts of the Mediterranean in the seventh or sixth century B.C., a product of the civilization that later gave the world the Parthenon, Plato and Aristotle. But few see the matter so simply now. With evidence gleaned from such disparate sources as ancient temple paintings, clay tablets, and buried hordes of uncoined metals, researchers have revealed far more ancient money: silver scraps and bits of gold, massive rings and gleaming ingots. In the process, they have pushed the origins of cash far beyond the sunny coasts of the Mediterranean, back to the world’s oldest cities in Mesopotamia, the fertile plain created by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. There, they suggest, wealthy citizens were flaunting money at least as early as 2500 B.C. and perhaps a few hundred years before that. “There’s just no way to get around it,” says Marvin Powell, a historian at Northern Illinois University in De Kalb. “Silver in Mesopotamia functions like our money today. It’s a means of exchange. People use it for storage of wealth, and they use it for defining value”.

Many scholars believe money began even earlier. Just why researchers have had such difficulties in uncovering these ancient moneys has much to do with the practice of archeology and the nature of money itself. Archeologists, after all, are the ultimate dumpster-divers: they spend their careers sifting through the trash of the past, ingeniously reconstructing vanished lives from broken pots and dented knives. But like us, ancient Mesopotamians seldom made the error tossing out cash, and only rarely did they bury their most precious liquid assets in the ground. Even when archeologists have found buried cash, though, they’ve had trouble recognizing it for what it was. Money doesn’t always have to come in the form of dimes. As a means of payment and a way of storing wealth, it assumes many forms, from debit cards and checks to credit cards and mutual funds. The forms it took have been, to say the least, elusive.

From the beginning, money has shaped human society. It greased the wheels of Mesopotamian commerce, spurred the development of mathematics, and helped officials and kings rake in taxes and impose fines. As it evolved in Bronze Age civilizations along the Mediterranean coast, it fostered sea trade, built lucrative cottage industries, and underlay an accumulation of wealth that might have impressed Donald Trump. “If there were never any money, there would never have been prosperity,” says Thomas Wyrich, an economist in Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield, who is studying the origins of money and banking. “Money is making all this stuff happen”.

Ancient texts show that from its first recorded appearance in the ancient Near East, money preoccupied estate owners and scribes, water carriers and slaves. In Mesopotamia, as early as 3000 B.C., scribes devised pictographs suitable recording simple lists of concrete objects, such as grain consignments. Five hundred years later, the pictographs had evolved into a more supple system of writing, a partially syllabic script known as cuneiform that was capable of recording the vernacular. Scribes write down everything from kingly edicts to proverbs, epics to hymns, private families letters to merchants contracts. In these ancient texts, “they talk about wealth, gold and silver all of the time”.

In all likelihood, says Wyrich, human beings first began contemplating cash just about the time Mesopotamians were slathering mortar on mud bricks to build the world’s first cities. Until then, people across the Near East had worked primarily on small farms, cultivating barley, dates and wheat, hunting gazelles and other wild game, and bartering among themselves for things they could not produce. But around 3500 B.C., work parties started hauling stones across the plains and raising huge flat-topped platforms, known as ziggurats, on which to found their temples. Around their bases, they built street upon twisted street of small mud-brick houses. And within a few centuries, says Wyrich, the cities became much greater than the sum of their parts. Economic life flourished and grew increasingly complex.

Just how complex life grew in these early metropolises can be glimpsed in the world’s oldest accounting records: 8,162 tiny clay tokens excavated from the floors of village houses and temples across the Near East and studied in detail by Denise Schmandt-Besserat, an Archeologist at the University of Texas in Austin. The tokens served as first counters and perhaps later as promissory notes given to temple tax collectors before the first writing appeared.

By classifying the disparate shapes and markings on the tokens into types and comparing these with the earliest known written symbols, Schmandt-Besserat discovered that each token represented a specified quantity of a particular commodity. And she noted an intriguing difference between village tokens and city tokens. In the small communities dating from before the rise of cities, Mesopotamians regularly employed just five token types, representing different amounts of three main goods: human labour, grain, and livestock like goats and sheep. But in the cities, they began churning out a multitude of new types, regularly employing 16 in all, with dozens of subcategories representing everything from honey, sheep’s milk, and trussed ducks, to wool, cloth, rope, garments, mats, beds, perfume, and metals. “It’s no longer just farm goods,” says Schmandt-Besserat. “There are also finished products, manufactured goods, furniture, breads, and textiles”.

Indeed, says Wyrich, the small change in our pockets literally made the Western World what it is today. “I tell my students that if money had never been developed, we would all still be bartering. We would have been stuck with that. Money opened the door to trade, which opened the door for specialization. And that made possible a modern society”.

*Answer the following questions to assist inquiry thinking using complete sentences.*

1. Why are the silver rings notable in the overall study of currency?

2. What purpose did silver rings serve in Mesopotamian society?

3. What obstacles do archaeologists encounter when trying to study ancient moneys?

4. Explain the references being made in the quotation “money [makes] all this stuff happen”.

5. What inferences have been made from “the world’s oldest accounting records”?