In his Introduction to *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the World’s Ancient Languages*, Classics professor Roger D. Woodard posits that “an ancient language is a thing of wonder ... conveying thoughts and ideas across time and space.” Artifacts in the De Gregorio Study-Collection of Antiquities do, indeed, inspire a sense of wonder. Spanning hundreds of thousands of years, sweeping across a multitude of tribal alliances, empires, and continents, the artifacts represent one of the greatest achievements of humankind, the creation of written languages.

The truly extraordinary collection, donated to Bucknell University by Dr. and Mrs. Bart De Gregorio, encompasses languages of contracts, sacred ceremonies, and liturgical texts, artistic masterpieces with both hieroglyphic and calligraphic forms, including the wedge-shaped script of Babylonian cuneiform clay tablets, Egyptian hieroglyphs on papyrus, a Mesoamerican ceremonial carving on bone, and an Armenian illuminated manuscript scroll.

Scholars theorize that humans have been speaking and understanding language for at least 100,000 years. Sumerian writing appeared in West Asia about 3025 BCE; in Africa, Egyptian glyphs date to approximately 3040 BCE. Many alphabets were sub-divisions of parent language families, or were derived from local dialects; some were distinct, independent forms. Nearly all contained loan-words from other linguistic systems through clear cultural transmissions.

The languages of business and legal contracts, Islamic literature, Italian choir music, and Yemenite Hebrew prayers that developed along the Silk Road from the Hindu Kush, to Asia, to the Mediterranean, on the Horn of Africa, and in the Balkans, are artistic masterpieces of clay pictograms, and calligraphy. Many incorporate brilliant patterns of blue fish, red flowers, and golden-haired angels. There is a wide range of intriguing historical connections: to the mathematician, astronomer, and geographer Ptolemy, who is known to have utilized Babylonian astronomical data; to Siddhārtha Gautama, founder of Buddhism; to Martin Luther; and to the Nazis of World War II Germany. There is even a direct connection to the 20th-century Taliban.

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2Ibid., 2.
Through multiple dimensions of space and time, these ancient words, passed down through thousands of years, bring clear images of the earliest civilizations to the modern world.

CUNEIFORM TABLETS

Named for the Babylonian city Akkad, Akkadian, the oldest known Semitic language, was one of the greatest writing systems of the ancient world. Akkadian was based on one of the earliest writing systems, Sumerian cuneiform, invented over 5,000 years ago by the people living in what is now southern Iraq. Cuneiform is comprised of wedge-shaped pictograms incised in clay tablets, symbols representing both objects/ideas, and sounds. By 1595 BCE, Akkadian spread throughout the Near East, from Anatolia to Egypt. These transmissions led to the use of Sumerian script forms until the first Century CE. Sumerian, then, is one of the most enduring writing systems in history.

Babylon, capital of Babylonia, in southern Mesopotamia, was bordered by Assyria to the North, Sumeria to the South, and the Syrian Desert to the West. Located on the Euphrates River about fifty miles south of modern Baghdad, the name of the city is the Greek form of the Hebrew word Babel. It is thought that humankind populated this area of Mesopotamia from the very beginning of civilization. Records indicate that the city of Babylon was established about the 23rd Century BCE.

The earliest inhabitants of Mesopotamia were the Sumerians, the culture upon which Babylonia was modeled. The city of Babylon had a major impact throughout far-flung regions as the center of enormous wealth and power. The Greeks considered the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon, symbol of the highest levels of architectural and technological achievement, as one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

ARTIFACTS

Babylonian legal contract in Akkadian, circa 1900 BCE; cuneiform incised on clay envelope; with enclosed incised tablet

Old Babylonian literature; cuneiform clay tablet, Babylon, circa 1900-1600 BCE; with extremely rare Old Sumerian literary excerpts

Late Babylonian administrative/business document, circa 1276-1275 BCE; with indication of date during the reign of the 24th king of the Cassite dynasty of Babylon; 13 lines of Babylonian cuneiform; script on each side records deliveries of barley to three different locations over a two-year period
Late or Neo-Babylonian cuneiform clay tablet, 459-353 BCE; legal document recording dispute or arrangement between a man, Amurru-iddin, and a woman, Ramâ; on reverse side is list of witnesses, and name of scribe; dated the 21st day, in the last month of the Babylonian year, during the reign of one of the rulers named Artaxerxes; total of 30 lines of Babylonian cuneiform script; with 5 additional lines on left edge

EGYPTIAN BOOK OF THE DEAD, AND CARTONNAGE

In ancient Egypt, the inventor of writing was believed to be the moon god Thoth, scribe and historian of the gods. The earliest hieroglyphic Egyptian writing, translated from pyramid texts, is dated from 3000–1300 BCE. Three later stages of writing include Old and Middle Egyptian, and Coptic, used in Christian Egypt from the 4th through the 14th Centuries CE. Hieratic, the sacred or priestly, script, is a cursive style of writing composed from abridged forms of hieroglyphics.

The Book begins with the "Hymn to Osiris," the Great God of the Dead. The story of Osiris is one of the earliest Egyptian myths. Powerful pharaohs and humble peasants alike all hoped to join Osiris in the Afterlife. The myth incorporates accounts of many deities in the family of Osiris, including Nut, the sky goddess, his mother; Geb, the earth god, his father; Isis, his wife; Seth, his evil brother; and Horus, son of Osiris and Isis.

Egyptians commissioned a copy of The Book before they died to serve as a guide. The text was carved on the exterior of the sarcophagus or, in later periods, placed inside the mummy case, to be read on the journey to the Underworld. The instructions contained a collection of spells, charms, and magic formulae. Knowledge of the appropriate spells was critical to pass successfully through various trials. There were passwords, clues and routes to direct the traveler. The Book also served as identification for the gods who could extend assistance and protection. The dead had to reach the Underworld if they were to achieve a happy, prosperous Afterlife.

Judgment was performed in The Hall of Maat where the heart, or conscience, of the deceased was placed on the scales, then compared to the weight of the feather of truth and justice. In some interpretations, Thoth, the moon god, recorded the judgment; in others, he weighed the hearts in The Hall of the Two Truths.

Cartonnage refers to funerary items made of layers of linen or papyrus soaked in gesso plaster, much like paper maché, then decorated with gilt or paint, and placed in the mummy case.
ARTIFACTS

*Book of the Dead*, circa 800 BCE; fragment on linen; 2 lines of Hieratic script; produced in the Twenty-Second Dynasty, 945-712 BCE, during the reign of Shoshenq III

*Book of the Dead*, circa 650 BCE; fragment on linen; 1 small excerpt executed in unusually fine, large Hieratic script; this second fragment, from a much later Dynasty, is far larger than the fragment of earlier date; written for Harpakehem, son of a woman called Taaman

Cartonnage, circa 600 BCE; fragment with 3 lines of Hieratic script on one side, 2 lines on the other side; in black ink

**MESOAMERICAN CARVED SACRED IMPLEMENT**

Writing is believed to have been created independently in only three places, China, Mesopotamia, and Mesoamerica. Discoveries of very early Maya texts in the Americas, and the intricacy of the hieroglyphs, clearly demonstrate the cultural sophistication of Pre-Columbian Latin American societies. The writing systems they created equaled those of Sumeria, Babylon, and Egypt in complexity.

The Indians of Mexico, and Central and South America, lived in these regions for over 5,000 years. The Zapotec may have developed as early as 500 BCE. There were fifty-one tribes that spoke over 30 different languages. Industrious, artistic people with strong ties to each other and their gods, Latin American Indians possessed advanced knowledge of mathematics and astrology. At the two tallest Mesoamerican pyramids, built by the Maya for worship of the sun and moon, magnificent frescoes have been uncovered. According to Latin American Indian religious beliefs, spirits, souls, ghosts and witches must be appeased with sacred rituals.

**ARTIFACT**

South American sacred carved bone ceremonial implement, circa 600 BCE; decorated with ornate incised glyphs similar to those on pottery vessels, and works in stone; with bright yellow glaze or paint

**GREEK CORRESPONDENCE, GREEK MAGICAL SCRIPT**

The Greeks, famous for advancements in science, technology, art, architecture, and literature, were the first Europeans to develop an
alphabet, upon which all modern European written languages are based. Dorian was the earliest Greek dialect; Corinthian, a Doric off-shoot dialect, was the language of the Balkans.

About 150 BCE, the scholar Claudius Ptolemy, who lived in Alexandria, wrote his mathematical/astronomical treatise, *Almagest*, in Greek. Later, the treatise was copied and preserved in Arabic manuscripts. During the 8th Century BCE, the works of Homer were written in Archaic Greek. By the beginning of the 3rd Century BCE, the Greeks adopted Attic-Ionian, from Athens and Attica. Attic Greek, a sub-group of Indo-European, was the writing system of Classical Greek literature.

Philip of Macedonia, and his son Alexander the Great, spread Greek culture, and the Attic dialect, throughout the Mediterranean regions and Near East in the mid-4th Century CE. The Greek alphabet became the basis of Egyptian Coptic [Christian], and European Gothic [Blackletter].

**ARTIFACTS**

*Letter/piece of correspondence, circa 400 CE; 2 complete lines written in Greek cursive script; on papyrus; fragment may have originated in, or been found in, Egypt. When folded, the address is visible; when unfolded, the message is visible*

*Fragment, Magical or Regionist script, circa 6th Century CE [?]; 2 lines in dark black ink; with later additional text in Greek; on papyrus; written in a language known only to cult members of a secret radical religious sect*

**BACTRIAN CONTRACT**

Unique among Iranian languages, from 1-900 CE, Bactrian, a Middle Iranian form of speech, was one of the most important languages in the world. At the crossroads of Eastern and Western trade routes, Bactria was situated on the Silk Road in what are now Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Bactrian represents a wide transmission of cultures, most pronounced in 9th-century inscriptions located in Pakistan, and manuscript fragments found in Western China.

The artifact is among a small number of recently discovered documents dating from a period of this culture for which there was previously no direct evidence. Prior to these recent discoveries, the only known examples of Bactrian were inscriptions on rock, coins, and seals. At present, there are two prize-winning scholars who are attempting to decipher the Bactrian language, one from the University of London, the other from the British Museum.
**ARTIFACT**

Bactrian contract, circa 467 CE; fragment on vellum [animal skin scraped repeatedly until white]; excerpt from text: "And whosoever may dissent from this Statement and (commit) deceit [shall pay a fine to the royal treasury] Of a hundred dinars of struck gold ... the same to the opposite parties ..."

**"BUDDHIST DEAD SEA SCROLLS"**

Kharoshti script, the written form of India and sites along the Silk Road, for both the Gandhari and Sanskrit languages, was derived from Iranian Aramaic, which developed from Phoenician. Used between the first part of the 5th Century BCE, to about 300-350 CE, Kharoshti was replaced by Brāhmī, the first Indic letterform used to write Sanskrit. Kharoshti was the script of commonly spoken dialects; Sanskrit was the liturgical language.

The "Dead Sea Scrolls of Buddhism," manuscripts found in the caves of Afghanistan, West of the Khyber Pass, and sent out of the country during the last ten years, are priceless Buddhist texts revealing much that was previously unknown about the foundations of the religion, and the cultural history of India. Ironically, war, plunder, and the subsequent regime of the Taliban, who reject all non-Islamic traditions, resulted in this phenomenal archeological discovery.

Scholars involved in the translation project believe the scrolls were produced between the 1st and 8th Centuries CE. Dating is particularly difficult, however, because new processes had to be developed to test the thin, extremely fragile birch-bark upon which the text is written. After the bark was peeled off the tree, the inner layers were dried, oiled, polished, then joined together in strips with a natural gum, and kept between much thicker protective wooden covers. The "Indian Black" ink was prepared by burning almond shells.

Key figure in Buddhism, Siddhārtha Gautama, founder of the faith, is believed to have been born in India, in the region that is now modern day Nepal, circa 563 BCE. A number of scholars believe Siddhārtha Gautama died about 400 BCE. Although Buddhism nearly disappeared in India, Central Asia, and Indonesia, today, the religion flourishes in the areas of origin, as well as in Indochina, Russia, Poland, Denmark, and Greece. Nearly 400 million people practice the faith that has greatly impacted theology, philosophy, and science.
Excerpt, "Buddhist Dead Sea Scrolls," circa 4th-5th Century CE; fragment on birch-bark; with dark, black "Indian" ink; 4 lines of script, recto and verso, in the Kharoshti language; part of the earliest known writings upon which the Buddhist religion is based.

**INCANTATION BOWLS FROM THE HOLY LAND**

Aramaic, of the Semitic language family, was derived from Phoenician, and has been spoken for 3,500 years, from circa 1500 BCE to the present. The oral language of tribes in modern Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, Aramaic was the international trade language of the ancient Middle East. Many variants developed, including the Jewish writing system that evolved into the square Hebrew form which, by the 6th Century BCE, replaced Old Hebrew script.

Incantation bowls were used to hold written ritual spells, mystical phrases formulated to trap demons who tried to steal children at night. Before parents retired for the evening, they put messages inside, then placed the bowls upside down, either under the floor, in the corners, or near the door of their dwelling to lure unwelcome visitors, hoping to ensure the safety of the family.

**ARTIFACTS**

Incantation bowl, circa 5th–6th Century CE; The Holy Land; circular, geometric/abstract design on inner base; approximately 10 lines of Aramaic script in black ink; with division containing additional Aramaic text.

Incantation bowl, circa 5th–6th Century CE; The Holy Land; with approximately 3 lines of Aramaic script in black ink; abstract design on inner base.

**EUROPEAN TEXTS IN BLACKLETTER/GOTHIC SCRIPT**

Sacred illuminated manuscripts were produced by Muslims, Christians, and Jews to glorify their respective deities. Illuminated means "lit up" with colors, and the gleam of burnished gold [melted particles applied, dried, and polished]. Early manuscripts demonstrate collaboration among the Scribe, who wrote the text in precise, hand-formed script; the Illuminator, who created the tiny, intricate designs; and the Rubricator, who completed page headings and section markers in red. The first Christian evangelists
produced the codex, the modern form of the book, which was far easier to carry than heavy scrolls when traveling to spread the word of their faith.

The pointed letterform of these texts is Blackletter or Gothic, first used throughout Western Europe from about 1150-1500 CE. Blackletter script required little effort to copy and, therefore, was the alphabetic system used by universities to produce required academic works very quickly for law, business, grammar, and history, among other topics of study.

The towering pillars and elegant stained-glass windows of the great Gothic cathedrals are strikingly similar to illuminated manuscripts of the period. Pointed Blackletter/Gothic was the moveable typeface invented by Johannes Gutenberg, about 1450 CE, to print his beautiful 42-line Bible. Blackletter was also used to print the works of Martin Luther. Often highly calligraphic in style, Blackletter/Gothic script is formed with tall, narrow letterforms, similar to the angular architectural features of Medieval cathedrals. Sample of the Blackletter/Gothic font:

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ABCDEF
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There were a number of forms of Blackletter, including Textualis [Gothic Bookhand]; one of the French versions, Pearl script [extremely small lettering for miniature Bibles]; and the German Fraktur, a heavy, dark writing style for legal documents, religious works, and colorful, highly decorative wall hangings to commemorate important family events. French Blackletter developed first, with the German version, quite easily copied, extending through the middle of the 20th Century CE. It is quite ironic that the Blackletter/Gothic script, used longest in Germany, was utilized by the Allies to forge documents in Blackletter, thereby confusing and misdirecting Axis communications.

ARTIFACTS

Illuminated leaf from Bible, circa 13th Century; Book of Judges, Judges, Chapter I; Paris, France; in Latin; Blackletter/Gothic letterform in Pearl script [nearly microscopic]; with essay by Bruce Ferrini

Large, extremely fine leaf from Psalter [passages from the Old Testament Book of Psalms], circa 1200 CE; France; in Latin; with exquisite illumination; Blackletter/Gothic script; from personal book of devotion commissioned by a member of the French court during the reign of King Philip; superlative example of the finest
decoration of sacred texts; illumination rendered in resplendent colors of gold, blue, and red

Leaf from Missal [Book of Prayers to celebrate Mass], circa 1300 CE; Germany; Latin, on vellum; 18 lines of early Blackletter/Gothic script; in black and red ink; litany of saints and prayers; with annotations and textual markings

Leaf from choir book, with date, 1766 CE; Italian; Latin, on vellum; in angular Blackletter/Gothic script; leaf is highly unusual in that the scribe provides the date, and details production of the work, in the colophon; with 5-line staves [stanzas] and square neumes [set of signs indicating melody, performance directions, breathing spaces]

KOREAN SCRIPT

China is one of the three regions of the world where the first independent writing systems developed. According to mythical stories, an ancient sage created writing as a way for those on earth to communicate with the gods and the ancestors. The earliest form of Chinese script, symbols or characters incised on turtle shells and animal bones, appeared about 1500-1000 BCE. A complex system capturing both meaning and sound, by about 500 BCE, drawn symbols evolved into a clerkly script that could be written quickly, a necessity for government documents.

The Korean Peninsula, inhabited for at least 700,000 years, has been under Chinese, Japanese and Russian influences throughout much of its history. War-torn Korea, invaded first by China, the Mongols, then Japan, has been pushed and pulled among the teachings of Confucius, those of the Supreme Buddha, and the principles of Shinto, the Japanese worship of heroes and ancestors.

Finally divided at the 38th parallel in 1948, Korea based its first writing system on Classical Chinese. However, Ido was not suited to the Korean language. In the mid-15th century CE, Koreans created the Hangui script, a much simpler system of syllables formed into squares.

ARTIFACT

Early Korean script, circa 1600 CE; fragment on paper; with embossed government seals establishing date; 7 columns of Korean text; written approximately 160 years after the development of an independent Korean writing system; text on fragment close to original script first developed in Korea

ISLAMIC ANIMAL OCCULT POEM
The Maghrebi script, a cursive form of the Arabic alphabet, is closely related to the angular Kufic lettering developed in Maghreb [Morocco] and Spain [Andalusia]. Kufic, oldest calligraphic form of various Arabic scripts, was named for the city of Kufa, located in what is now modern-day Iraq. The first copies of *The Qur’an*, Holy Book of Islam, were written in the Kufic script. Islam, the religious faith based upon the teachings of Muhammad, began in Arabia in the 7th Century CE. Of all world religions, Islam now has the second greatest number of followers.

Muslims believe that Muhammad ibn Abudullah received the final message from God through the angel Gabriel, that Muhammad was the last prophet, following Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, whose message is part of those given to the others by the Divine Being. *The Qur’an*, understood to be the direct words of God, is a recitation [the meaning of the word Qur’an] of the final revelation.

**ARTIFACT**

Islamic animal occult poem in the Arabic language, circa mid-1600s CE; poem by Mohammad ibn Ahmad ibn Abdullah, known as Ibn Al-Hajal Kabir; in Maghrebi script; 38 complete folios, with lettering in red and black ink, on paper; contains ancient secrets, mysteries with talismans, and arcane knowledge, including numerology, birds, and the wind

**ARMENIAN ILLUMINATED SCROLL**

An independent branch of the Indo-European linguistic family, Armenian, which contains many loan-words from Iranian languages, developed in the 5th Century CE, and is believed to have been based on the Greek alphabet. From the early 18th to mid-20th Centuries CE, the Armenian alphabet was used to print more than 2,000 books in the Turkish language.

Extending from the Black Sea to the Capian Sea [Caspian Sea], the first Armenian Empire rose to prominence approximately 800 BCE. In 66 BCE, the main kingdom, Greater Armenia, which included regions of the Caucasus, and areas of modern-day Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon, was conquered by the Roman Empire. At that time, the Armenians then adopted Western religion and culture. The sacred mountain, Ararat, is the highest peak of the Armenian Highlands.

Armenian art, a blend of Western and Eastern graphic patterns, originated in the ancient East, especially in Persia and Mesopotamia, and later absorbed influences from European centers.
Intertwined decorative motifs are from both Mediterranean and Near East regions.

ARTIFACT

Armenian illuminated manuscript, late 17th-early 18th Century CE; Armenia; five complete prayers on paper; scroll format; Armenian script with capital letters in black ink; highly decorative, miniature designs; animal shapes in brown ink; grouping of ovals with interior script; several charts between sections of text at end

4 Large Illuminations:

1. 2 illustrations of male saint on white horse; with black background
2. Man standing with staff
3. Seated saint, writing a book

YEMENITE PRAYERS FOR HEBREW SHABBAT

Hebrew, one of the earliest languages still in use today, is based on Phoenician. The language of ancient Israel, Hebrew is classified as a Canaanite linguistic sub-grouping. The Old Hebrew alphabet, which developed by about the 8th Century BCE, was used until the 1st Century CE.

Yemen, one of the oldest and most prosperous civilizations of the Near East, was known for the cultivation and trading of spices and fragrances, especially the highly prized aromatic gum resins, frankincense and myrrh. Yemen traded throughout the Mediterranean regions, India, and Abyssinia. Later, around 630 CE, Yemen became part of the Arab-Islamic Empire.

According to Jewish law, Shabbat is the traditional time of rest, a cession of work. This joyous holy day, celebrated with the symbolic lighting of two candles by eighteen minutes before sunset on Friday afternoon, is characterized by the recitation of prayers, and the sharing of special meals.

ARTIFACT

Yemenite manuscript, circa 1700s CE; 17 lines of Hebrew text on paper, in black ink; 42 complete folio gatherings, with some titles executed in red; 6 additional folios in blue ink, written in a later hand; Kabalistic [also spelled Cabalistic, referring to secret, mystical interpretations of the scriptures], and other special prayers for Shabbat; with commentaries in very small script
throughout; the prayers are “Tikkun Hanefesh,” or “Repair of the Soul,” and “Tikkun Chazot,” or “Midnight Lament,” referring to meditation, prayers and study to be performed in the middle of the night.

ETHIOPIAN MINIATURE PORTRAITS

Ethiopic, the elegant script derived from the South Arabian written form, was based on transmissions across the Red Sea. The script evolved into Ge’ez, not spoken after the 10th Century CE, and modern-day Amharic. Ge’ez, the liturgical language, was the only official written language of Ethiopia through the end of the 19th Century CE. It is still the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

Situated on the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia, also called Abyssinia, the Arabic form of the name, was the cross-over point for the peoples of North Africa and the Middle East. One of the first civilizations in the world, known to the Egyptians as The Land of the Gods, and often called “the Cradle of Civilization” by modern scholars, Ethiopia is the oldest official Christian nation.

ARTIFACTS

TWO GROUPINGS OF ETHIOPIAN MINIATURE PORTRAITS ON VELLUM; FROM ETHIOPIAN MANUSCRIPT; BIBLICAL SCENES, WITH TEXT ON SOME VERSO SIDES

6 painted miniatures on 6 sheets, late-19th Century; many figures with 2 fingers pointing in various directions, calling attention to specific details; includes chart with alphabet:

1. Christ with staff
2. A Baptism [possible the Baptism of Christ]
3. Three standing saints
4. The Virgin before 4 men
5. Angel with book; saint
6. 4 standing saints

5 painted miniatures on 4 sheets, early 19th Century:

1. Christ with 2 saints [text on verso]
2. The Nativity of Christ [text on verso]
3. The Virgin and Child [on recto]
4. Saint with sword [on verso]
5. Saint reading a book, The Bible[?], [text on verso]

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