

## History of Writing

On present archaeological evidence, full writing appeared in Mesopotamia and Egypt around the same time, in the century or so before 3000 BC. It is probable that it started slightly earlier in Mesopotamia, given the date of the earliest proto-writing on clay tablets from Uruk, circa 3300 BC, and the much longer history of urban development in Mesopotamia compared to the Nile Valley of Egypt. However we cannot be sure about the date of the earliest known Egyptian historical inscription, a monumental slate palette of King Narmer, on which his name is written in two hieroglyphs showing a fish and a chisel. Narmer's date is insecure, but probably falls in the period 3150 to 3050 BC.

In China, full writing first appears on the so-called 'oracle bones' of the Shang civilization, found about a century ago at Anyang in north China, dated to 1200 BC. Many of their signs bear an undoubted resemblance to modern Chinese characters, and it is a fairly straightforward task for scholars to read them. However, there are much older signs on the pottery of the Yangshao culture, dating from 5000 to 4000 BC, which may conceivably be precursors of an older form of full Chinese writing, still to be discovered; many areas of China have yet to be archaeologically excavated.

In Europe, the oldest full writing is the Linear A script found in Crete in 1900. Linear A dates from about 1750 BC. Although it is undeciphered, its signs closely resemble the somewhat younger, deciphered Linear B script, which is known to be full writing; Linear B was used to write an archaic form of the Greek language.

In Meso-America, the earliest script is the Olmec script, belonging to the artistically sophisticated Olmec civilization that existed in the Veracruz region on the Gulf of Mexico. The first convincing sample of this script was found in the late 1990s. It has been dated to about 900 BC, more than a millennium before the appearance of the hieroglyphic script of the Maya in the Yucatan region. Although the Olmec sample is very small, and the script is undeciphered, there is reason to believe that it may be full writing, the first in the Americas.

Thus we have the following approximate dates of origin for writing: Mesopotamia 3100 BC, Egypt 3100–3000 BC, Crete 1750 BC, China 1200 BC, Meso-America 900 BC. On the basis of this chronology, it seems logical to assume that the idea of writing diffused gradually from Mesopotamia to other cultures.

### ***Origin of the alphabet***

The origin of the alphabet is believed to have begun in Ancient Egypt, more than a millennium into the history of writing. The first alphabet found has emerged around 2000 BCE, and was derived from the alphabetic principles of the Egyptian hieroglyphs. Nearly all alphabets in the world today either descend directly from this development or were inspired by its design.

By 2700 BCE the ancient Egyptians had developed a set of 23 hieroglyphs to represent the individual consonants of their language. These glyphs were used as pronunciation guides for logograms, to write grammatical inflections, and, later, to transcribe loan words and foreign names. However, the system was not used consistently for purely alphabetic writing, presumably due to strong cultural attachment to

the complex Egyptian script.

The first purely alphabetic script is thought to have been developed around 1850 BCE for Semitic workers in the Sinai but giving mostly Egyptian glyphs Semitic values. Over the next five centuries it spread north, and all subsequent alphabets around the world have either descended from it, or been inspired by one of its descendants.

This Proto-Sinaitic script reallocated Egyptian hieroglyphs for consonantal values based on their Semitic translations. So, for example, the hieroglyph per ("house" in Egyptian) became bayt ("house" in Semitic). The script was used only sporadically, and retained its pictographic nature, for half a millennium, until adopted for governmental use in Canaan. The first Canaanite states to make extensive use of the alphabet were the Phoenician city-states and so later stages of the Canaanite script are called Phoenician. The Phoenician cities were maritime states at the center of a vast trade network and soon the Phoenician alphabet spread throughout the Mediterranean. Two variants of the Phoenician alphabet had major impacts on the history of writing: the Aramaic alphabet and the Greek alphabet.

The Phoenician and Aramaic alphabets, like their Egyptian prototype, represented only consonants. The Aramaic alphabet, which evolved from the Phoenician in the 7th century BCE as the official script of the Persian Empire, appears to be the ancestor of nearly all the modern alphabets of Asia:

- The modern Hebrew alphabet started out as a local variant of Imperial Aramaic.
- The Arabic alphabet descended from Aramaic via the Nabataean alphabet of what is now southern Jordan.
- The Syriac alphabet used after the 3rd century CE evolved into the alphabets of northern Asia, such as Mongolian, and Manchu.
- The Georgian alphabet is of uncertain provenance, but appears to be part of the Persian-Aramaic family.
- The Aramaic alphabet is also the most likely ancestor of the Brahmic alphabets of India, which spread to Tibet, Mongolia, Indochina, and the Malay archipelago along with the Hindu and Buddhist religions. (China and Japan, while absorbing Buddhism, were already literate and retained their logographic and syllabic scripts.)
- The Hangeul alphabet was invented in Korea in the 15th century. Tradition holds that it was an autonomous invention; however, it has been suggested that portions of its consonantal system may be based on half a dozen letters derived from Tibetan via the imperial Phagspa alphabet of the Yuan dynasty of China.

## ***Greek alphabet***

By at least the 8th century BCE the Greeks borrowed the Phoenician alphabet and adapted it to their own language, creating in the process the first "true" alphabet, in which vowels were accorded equal status with consonants.

All of the names of the letters of the Phoenician alphabet started with consonants, and these consonants were what the letters represented, something called the acrophonic principle.

The Greeks used for vowels some of the Phoenician letters representing consonants which weren't used in Greek speech.

For example, the Greeks had no glottal stop or h, so the Phoenician letters 'alep and he became Greek alpha and e (later renamed e psilon), and stood for the vowels /a/ and /e/ rather than the consonants /ʔ/ and /h/. As this fortunate development only provided for five or six (depending on dialect) of the twelve Greek vowels, the Greeks eventually created digraphs and other modifications, such as ei, ou, and o (which became omega).

Several varieties of the Greek alphabet developed. One, known as Western Greek or Chalcidian, was used west of Athens and in southern Italy. The other variation, known as Eastern Greek, was used in Asia Minor. The Athenians (c. 400 BC) adopted that latter variation and eventually the rest of the Greek-speaking world followed. After first writing right to left, the Greeks eventually chose to write from left to right, unlike the Phoenicians who wrote from right to left.

Greek is in turn the source for all the modern scripts of Europe. The alphabet of the early western Greek dialects, where the letter eta remained an h, gave rise to the Etruscan and Latin alphabets. In the eastern Greek dialects, which did not have an /h/, eta stood for a vowel, and remains a vowel in modern Greek and all other alphabets derived from the eastern variants: Glagolitic, Cyrillic, Armenian, and Gothic (which used both Greek and Roman letters).

## ***Latin alphabet***

It is generally held that the Etruscans adopted the western variant of the Greek alphabet in the 7th century BC from Cumae, a Greek colony in southern Italy. In about the fifth century BCE, The Latins adopted 21 of the original 26 Etruscan letters.

The Latins adapted the Etruscan letter F, pronounced 'w,' giving it the 'f' sound, and the Etruscan S, which had three zigzag lines, was curved to make the modern S. These changes produced the original Latin alphabet:

A B C D E F Z H I K L M N O P Q R S T V X

- C stood for /g/
- I stood for both /i/ and /j/.
- V stood for both /u/ and /w/.

C, K, and Q in the Latin alphabet could all be used to write both the /k/ and /g/ sounds; the Romans soon modified the letter C to make G, inserted it in seventh place, where Z had been, to maintain the gematria (the numerical sequence of the alphabet). Z was subsequently abandoned.

After the conquest of Greece in the first century BC, the Romans began to borrow Greek words, so they had to adapt their alphabet again in order to write these words. From the Eastern Greek alphabet, they borrowed Y and Z, which were added to the end of the alphabet. Now the new Latin alphabet contained the following letters:

A B C D E F G H I K L M N O P Q R S T V X Y Z

That the Latin alphabet has been adapted to write so many languages is a direct result of the

## Christianization of Western Europe.

The distribution of the Greek alphabet and its Cyrillic extension corresponds to the realm of the Orthodox Church, Cyril (827–69 CE) having been a Greek missionary who converted the Slavs. To this day, the division between catholic Rome and orthodox Constantinople runs right through the erstwhile Serbo-Croatian language area, the catholic Croats using the Latin alphabet, the orthodox Serbs the Cyrillic.

The Anglo-Saxons began using Roman letters to write Old English as they converted to Christianity, following Augustine of Canterbury's mission to Britain in the sixth century. Because the Runic *wen*, which was first used to represent the sound 'w' and looked like a p that is narrow and triangular, was easy to confuse with an actual p, the 'w' sound began to be written using a double u. Because the u at the time looked like a v, the double u looked like two v's, W was placed in the alphabet by V.

U developed when people began to use the rounded U when they meant the vowel u and the pointed V when they meant the consonant V.

J began as a variation of I, in which a long tail was added to the final I when there were several in a row. People began to use the J for the consonant and the I for the vowel by the fifteenth century, and it was fully accepted in the mid-seventeenth century.