

WRITING SYSTEMS

We are going to talk about writing systems, which can be also defined as "a set of visible or tactile signs used to represent units of language in a systematic way". This simple explanation encompasses a huge spectrum of writing systems with vastly different stylistic and structural characteristics spanning across many regions of this planet.

Writing provides a way of extending human memory by imprinting into media less fickle than the human brain. However, many early philosophers, such as Plato, have branded writing as a detriment to the human intellect. They argued that it makes the brain lazy and decreases the capacity of memory. It is true that many non-writing cultures often pass long poems and prose from generation to generation without any change, and writing cultures cannot seem to do that. But writing was a very useful invention for complex and high-population cultures. Writing was used for record keeping to correctly counting agricultural products, for keeping the calendar to plant crops at the correct time. And writing was used for religious purpose (divination and communicating with the supernatural world) and socio-political functions (reinforcing the kingship).

However, writing is not an absolute requirement of urban culture. In past centuries, scientists had used writing as one of the "signs" of civilization, which is an incorrect assumption. The Incas and earlier Andean civilizations never developed a writing system. They, in turn, came up with interesting solutions: they used the quipu (a series of ropes with knots indicating amounts) for record keeping, and complex tapestries as calendars. The Mississippians who built Cahokia didn't seem to have used any kind of record keeping at all, but they built very impressive cities in the American Midwest.

Because writing is so intricate there has been many theories concerning the origins of writing.

Writing systems differ structure, stylistically, familiarly, geographically, and so on. Here are several ways we can categorize them:

- ✚ Types: Classification according to how the system works.
- ✚ Families: Classification according to "genetic" relations.
- ✚ Regions: Classification according to geographical regions.
- ✚ A to Z: Alphabetical listing of scripts (just for your convenience).

Mythological Origins of writings

Among many ancient societies, writing held an extremely special and important roll. Often writing is so revered that myths and deities were drawn up to explain its divine origin.

In ancient Egypt, for example, the invention of writing is attributed to the god Thoth or Tehuti (Dhwti in Egyptian), who was not only the scribe and historian of the gods but also kept the calendar and invented art and science. In some Egyptian myths, Thoth is also portrayed as the creator of speech and possessing the power to transform speech into material objects. This ties in closely with the Egyptian belief that in order for a person to achieve immortality his or her name must be spoken or inscribed somewhere forever.

In Mesopotamia, among the Sumerians the god Enlil was the creator of writing. Later during Assyrian, and Babylonian periods, the god Nabu was credited as the inventor of writing and scribe of the gods. And similar to Thoth, Mesopotamian scribal gods also exhibit the power of creation via divine speech.

Among the Maya, the supreme deity Itzamna was a shaman and sorcerer as well as the creator of the world. (In fact, the root of his name, "itz", can be roughly translated as "magical substance, usually secreted by some object, that sustains the gods"). Itzamna was also responsible for the creation of writing and time keeping. Strangely enough, though, Itzamna isn't a scribal god. This duty falls on usually a pair of monkey gods as depicted on many Maya pots and is also preserved in the highland Maya epic "Popol Vuh". Still, in one rare case, the scribe is a rabbit.

In China, the invention of writing was not attributed to a deity but instead to a legendary ancient sage named Fu Hsi, who also invented divination of the future by using turtle shells (hence the oracle bones). He's also an amazing marketing guru too. Next time you visit a Chinese household, look up when you're at the front door, and you might see a little circular mirror surrounded by eight multi-line symbols. These symbols (trigrams) are used to communicate with spirits, and together with the mirror they serve as evil repellent too. Just imagine how many of these have been sold in the past 4,000 years! Move over Bill Gates! If Fu Hsi had filed for patents he would have owned the whole world by now!

Anyway, in these ancient cultures, the creation and use of writing was closely tied to divine creative powers. By uttering or writing down a word, objects get created or people get immortal. They reinforced the notion of writing as supernatural and therefore enforced the exclusivity of the "scribe" class.

The Alphabet

The major alphabets are:

Proto-Canaanite, a family of writing systems and its descendants:

- + **South Arabian Family**
- + **Ugaritic and Letter Order**
- + **Phoenician**
- + **Aramaic**

- + **Greek and Latin branch**, which is important to us, and that, is why we are (I am) going to tell you some more details about them.

Traditionally the Greeks held that their alphabet was derived from the Phoenician alphabet, and many scholars agree with this as well. A quick look at the signs shows the similarity between the two systems. However, the Greeks modified the set of signs they had received to suit the sounds in their language. They also changed some letters to systematically represent vowels. Many scholars place that time of Greek taking the alphabet from the Phoenicians sometimes between 1200 BC and 900 BC.

It was the Euboean variant of the Greek alphabet that was transmitted to the Etruscans, and so on to Latin and most of the Western world. (The Euboean script has, among its letters, the letter F, which actually stood for a [w] sound, and X which sounded like [ks], not an aspirated velar [kʰ] like in Ionian.)

Futhark and Ogham are both alphabetic systems used in Northern Europe before replaced by the Latin alphabet. Their relations to the rest of alphabetical systems and to each other are still cloudy. Futhark might have come from some Northern Italic script such as Venetic. Ogham is even a bigger mystery. Some say it is a cryptic form of Futhark, while others hold that it is native to Ireland and Wales. As for Greek itself, all, but one of the variant scripts were replaced by the Ionian. The Greek system also gave rise to two scripts used by Slavic speaking people, namely Cyrillic and Glagolitic alphabets.

(Here, on this poster, are some scripts, such as Futhark (Runes), Glagolitic, Cyrillic and Proto–Canaanite)

Modern Day Views

Nowadays there is more-or-less consensus on these points:

- ✚ Writing was invented in parallel in at least three, or four, places: Mesopotamia, China, Mesoamerica, and possibly Indus.
- ✚ No type of writing system is superior or inferior to another, as the type is often dependent on the language they represent (unless it's English).
- ✚ Writing system is not a marker of civilization, as many major urban cultures did not employ (full evolved) writing such as the Incas.

This is all we are going to say for today. 😊