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### The Origins of Writing

The recording of thoughts and ideas through the use of visual symbols has been around for nearly five thousand years. “The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Writing Systems defines a writing system as ‘a set of visible or tactile signs used to represent units of language in a systematic way’” (ancientscripts.com). Though the origins of correspondence were crude, they eventually branched off into a myriad of exquisite forms that far surpassed their humble beginnings. We are made privy to the secrets of early writings thanks to historians, dead and alive, who recognized the need for translations, and continued searching for them when they appeared to lay hidden within the recesses of ages gone by. Today, writing is not only a most precious part of many cultures, it is an extremely advantageous and, ultimately, most indispensable way of passing along information from the past as well as the knowledge that will build the future.

The views on exactly how and why writing was created is, at times, dependent on the culture. For literate cultures during ancient times, the creation of writing was usually attributed to the supernatural. In Egypt, it was believed to be invented by Thoth, the historian of the gods who was also attributed with the creation of language, art, and the sciences. Sumerians believed that the god Enlil was responsible, while Nabu was known as the god and creator of writing to the Assyrians and Babylonians. Itzamna was believed by the Maya to be the supreme god who was not only responsible for writing, but also for the keeping of time. A sage for the legendary Emperor Huang Ti, known as Ts’ang Chieh, was believed to have created writing as a means of communication with the various Chinese gods. Regardless as to whether it was “a medium to communicate with the gods, or [a] magical or supernatural power, writing [had clearly] possessed a divine nature in these ancient cultures. Hence, writing became not only a way to extend memory but also a tool for the elite to justify their rule upon the common, illiterate people” (ancient scripts.com).

In more recent times, other theories were developed. During the early 1800s, Eurocentric social scientists began to push monogenesis, the belief that all written language developed from one single Mesopotamian script which evolved into its ultimate form as the modern alphabet. The labels of “primitive” and “unevolved” were placed upon all other types of writing including Mayan which was believed to be nothing more than a calendar dating system. This particular belief, which promoted Europeans and their empires as the most “evolved” civilizations, was unraveled as Chinese, Mayan, and Egyptian writing were proved to be independently developed apart from Mesopotamian styles. Presently, it is believed that writing originated in several places including: Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and Mesoamerica. It has also been proven that “No type of writing system is superior or inferior to another, as the type is often dependent on the language [that it] represent[s]” (ancient scripts.com).

Writing did not begin as a fully developed system of communication. Rather, it developed gradually since “All the writing systems ever devised have evolved from pictures - initially simple linear drawings that represented familiar objects. Scholars call these first elements of graphic communication ‘protowriting’” (Claiborne 12). Protowriting conveyed nonverbal messages through the use of simple drawings nearly 20,000 years ago, and is still used by certain Native American, African, and Australian tribes today. For counting, a previously devised method was used to aid the drawings. Notches inscribed on sticks and bones are believed to be the first way of recording numerical data. Purposefully notched sticks and scratched bones have been found in numerous and diverse places; the markings that have been found are believed by scientists to date as far back as c.300,000 - c.200,000 B.C. Besides marking objects, knots were also used to tally quantities long before the beginning of what would be considered as actual writing.

Another of the known “first attempts” at writing involved the use of clay tokens. Tokens began as more of a counting system than a writing system, but were adapted over time to express more than numbers. Initially, they represented a form of record keeping that served users by registering the amount of goods that were bought and sold. There existed two types of these tokens; the first, composed of simple

three dimensional clay objects such as cones, rods, and spheres, are known as plain tokens and “have been used since as early as 8000 BC” in such places as “Turkey, Syria, Israel, Jordan, Iraq, and Iran” (ancient scripts). The second type of token, known as the complex token, involved marking on flattened pieces of clay, and are believed to have only been used “during the 4<sup>th</sup> millenium [BC] in large settlements in southern Mesopotamia” and, interestingly enough, “in the temple of Inanna, the Sumerian goddess of love and fertility, in the city of Uruk” (ancient scripts.com). The symbols found on complex tokens were written with a stylus and eventually abstracted into cuneiform, believed to be the very first writing system.

Whether it’s a cuneiform wedge or a letter from the American alphabet, a character is unable to signify anything unless it holds a meaning that someone understands. Decoding ancient and forgotten texts has been the life’s work of dedicated linguists, historians, and even some professional hobbyists around the world. The more famous discoveries involve the decoding of Egyptian hieroglyphics and Mesopotamian cuneiform. Most important for the study of hieroglyphics were discoveries made by Napoleon Bonaparte and Jean-Francois Champollion.

During the period of 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialism, Napoleon, while being attacked by the Turkish army and the British fleet, ordered trenches to be dug in the surrounding area.

“The French dug in at a number of sites, one of them near the town of Rosetta. There, in the summer of 1799, an unknown French soldier or Egyptian laborer, at work digging a trench, unearthed a slab of polished basalt covered entirely with carved writing - of three different kinds. One was hieroglyphic; one was a cursive script later labeled demotic; and, crucially, one was Greek. Here was a discovery indeed, for Greek was known to many of Napoleon’s civilian experts- even to some of his generals” (Claiborne 38).

The slab became known as the Rosetta stone, and revealed that it was written in 196 B.C. by priests from Memphis who had sent it to King Ptolemy V of Egypt for the gifts he had donated to their temples. Copies were sent back to Europe where multiple attempts were made to decipher the hieroglyphics, ultimately all of them failed. Some scholars who had given it a try, such as David Akerblad and Thomas Young, left behind vital clues for the man who would eventually solve the puzzle. The “French genius” Jean Francois Champollion had been a child prodigy who had taught himself several European and Asian languages including Arabic, Syrian, Aramaic, and Coptic by the time he was 18 when he became a professor of history. By January of 1822, Champollion had discovered that Egyptian was written in three different kinds of scripts, and had decoded an exceeding amount of the hieroglyphics that were inscribed upon the Rosetta stone; some he had found to be phonetic. After his death at age forty-two, Champollion’s work was dismissed for some twenty years, but today he is credited as the man responsible for making the Rosetta stone and Egyptian hieroglyphics decipherable.

Groundbreaking discoveries in cuneiform style writings were born in the minds of people such as Georg Grotefend, Henry Rawlinson, and Reverend Edward Hincks. Cuneiform’s translations were first made by Georg Friedrich Grotefend who is as significant as Champollion in the history of deciphering ancient scripts. Grotefend was a German high school teacher who began researching cuneiform writings from Persepolis on a dare. With his knack for puzzles, he soon made headway on an inscription describing the lineage of King Darius and his son, King Xerxes. Just a few short months after the dare was made, he had decoded the phrases of the inscription and won the dare. Like Champollion, Grotefend’s work went unrecognized for some time. University professors of his day dismissed his work because of his lack of rank in the world of academics.

Henry Creswicke Rawlinson began work on translating cuneiform by studying Grotefend’s findings. He used his natural sense of linguistics and previous knowledge of other languages he’d studied to decode cuneiform texts that he had risked his life to transcribe from the side of a towering cliff wall located in a town called Behistun in Persia. Rawlinson made headway, but after being stymied for years he eventually decided to capitulate to its headache inducing complexity. Around the same time of Rawlinson’s studies, another who would make breakthroughs began to look over cuneiform. Reverend Edward Hinks was an Irish theologian whose work proved to show that cuneiform signs were syllabic as opposed to alphabetic, and that they would sometimes stand for sounds or words depending on the writings. He also pointed out that for the extensive time in which cuneiform existed, it would have developed and changed drastically. After this was made known, Rawlinson’s interest in cuneiform renewed. Both men

were fatefully rewarded when ancient dictionaries were dug up and found to translate Sumerian cuneiform into the Akkadian language.

Cuneiform is said to be the first complete writing system. Named by the scholar Englebert Kampfer from the Latin word for wedge, cuneiform denotes any type of writing system where the symbols are composed of wedges. Its invention was for simple reasons, but over several thousand years it became a tool of expression for the mind.

“Cuneiform’s invention occurred within the framework of a rapidly expanding urban environment, social stratification, technological specialization, the emergence of a politically powerful nobility, large-scale community labor projects and commodity distribution, and intercity and international exchange networks. Writing in Mesopotamia first served to document the affairs of an extensive bureaucratic network controlling labor, materials, and subsistence resources. The invention of cuneiform was a technological innovation for clerical function. Its early evolution was utilitarian, directed toward streamlining the graphic form and the sign repertoire, extending the vocabulary range, and providing scribal training. New applications and writing practices were often compromises between limiting the complexity of the writing system and expanding its capacity to convey information. As the script became more flexible and more powerful in transcribing messages, its scope branched out from the documentary into the narrative and creative literary spheres. From simple itemizations, texts expanded to poetry and prose, chronicles and epics, and magico-religious and scientific recipes; out of flattened lumps of clay evolved multivolume bilingual dictionaries, archives, antiquarian libraries, and monumental stone stelae and wall reliefs” (Senner 43).

Cuneiform is said to have developed into countless other systems, but also inspired other cultures to develop their own, they inspired the Egyptians directly.

The hieroglyphics found in the African country of Egypt were contemporary to Sumerian cuneiform. This particular system is original in nature and thought to have been created first for religious, historical, and economic use. Hieroglyphics are divided into three categories: hieroglyphs, hieratic script and demotic script, according to what they look like. Hieroglyphs appear as pictures and have three subcategories. The three subcategories of hieroglyphs include: logograms which represent words, phonograms that represent sounds, and determinatives that help to clarify whatever comes before them. Hieratic is a type of script that derived from the hieroglyphs and was used by priests. Demotic was later used more often than hieratic and though similar to hieratic, it was far beyond comparable to the hieroglyphs from which it derived.

There are no vowels in the Egyptian system, which causes anyone trying to read aloud some difficulty. Over time and basically for the sake of convenience

“archaeologists made up a protocol of artificially putting vowels in hieroglyphs. A /e/ is placed between consonants, /y/ is transcribed as /i/, /w/ became /u/, and /3/ and /‘/ are substituted as /a/. For some reason this system had taken a life of its own, and often now people actually think it is how Egyptian words were pronounced. For example, the 19th Dynasty king R‘-mss is known as Ramses or Rameses in modern day. However, the correct rendition of his name was probably Riamesesa, which was discovered from cuneiform documents composed for diplomatic exchange between Mesopotamia and Egypt” (ancientscripts.com).

As the use of hieroglyphics in Egypt subsided, the Coptic alphabet, which used a few demotic symbols, became the dominant system of Egypt. Before they became defunct, Egyptians glyphs inspired the Proto-Sinaitic (sometimes known as Canaanite) system that was based on Egyptian symbols. “Proto-Sinaitic, was the first consonantal alphabet. Even a quick and cursory glance at its inventory of signs makes it very apparent of this script’s Egyptian origin” (ancientscripts.com). From Proto-Sinaitic came early Phoenician and South Arabian writing. From early Phoenician came the Punic, Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew systems. From Greek came Latin. From Latin came the modern European languages that we know today. Few other writing systems emerged from Africa due to the popular tradition of recounting important events and information orally; it also led to Africa’s being labeled as the dark continent with little recorded history.

In other areas of the world, different types of writing found their way into society. In Asia, a writing system originated in China around 1500 BC. Most likely, writing developed in China as a result of the need for recording information brought about by production and social organization. The logographic Chinese characters that make up the system have undergone very little change from their first form up to the current form used today. Jia-gu wen (Oracle Bone) is the absolute first form of writing in China. It was used until nearly 1000 B.C. and was carefully scratched into bones and shells. From nearly 1100-700 B.C. a style known as Da zhuan (Greater Seal) was used and after that came the style known as Xiao zhuan (Lesser Seal). Today, the Chinese characters are known as Li shu (Clerkly Script). Since the system is highly prone to phoneticism (imagine a picture of an egg next to a spark to represent the word ecstatic), signs are clarified with even more signs known as “radicals.” Other signs are composited of two or more symbols in order to create new words and ideas. For example, the symbol for sun, and the symbol for evaporating water are combined to express the idea of warmth, moisture or humidity. As the Chinese language began to change and develop into new languages, much of the writing system’s phoneticism was lost, making it one of the more difficult systems to memorize.

From the Chinese writing system came the Japanese writing system. It is, in essence, almost completely borrowed from the Chinese. The difference being that certain radicals were changed to enable the expression of conjugated verb endings and that a sort of alphabet called kana is used with it. The two types of kana are called katakana and hiragana. Hiragana was used by Lady Murasaki Shikibu to write one of the world’s first novels, The Tale of the Genji, because it was the only script that women were allowed to write in. Japanese style kanji, katakana, and hiragana are all used on an everyday basis in modern Japan.

Half a world away from Europe, writing was also developed by Mesoamerican civilizations. The Mayan and Aztecs both used glyphs in their system, but the Mayan glyphs were originally developed, while the Aztecs more or less borrowed from neighboring peoples they had conquered.

Mayan hieroglyphs are composed of logograms that commonly appear as “squarish” glyphs containing heads of people, animals, and Mayan gods. Some represent sounds and others represent words. The earliest Mayan writings found date back to 400 B.C. The first deciphering work was done, ironically, by Bishop Diego de Landa who avidly engaged in incinerating any Mayan text he could find. While trying to record the Mayan alphabet “he asked his native informants on how to write “a”, “b”, “c”, and so forth, in Maya. The Mayas... heard the syllables “ah”, “beh”, “seh” (as “a”, “b” and “c” would be pronounced in Spanish), and so forth, and naturally gave the glyphs with these phonetic values. So, in a sense, Landa recorded a very small section of the Maya syllabary, and the [Mayan] equivalent of the Rosetta Stone” (ancientscripts.com). Probably most central to the understanding of Mayan glyphs was Sir Eric Thompson. Thompson organized and systematically catalogued all of the known Mayan hieroglyphs.

The Aztecs (or Mexica) kept most of their records through the use of knots, but also used a few glyphs to represent certain numbers. For example a flag represented the number 20, a feather represented the number 400, and a bag (probably of incense) represented the number 8000. When glyphs were used, they were written on materials such as deer skin. One curiosity about the writing system was the fact that there was “no consistent direction for reading the glyphs” (ancientscripts.com).

It is sort of odd though, that the incongruous nature of Aztec glyphs makes it appear as an underdeveloped system, because the development of languages comes about through its incongruent use. As this paper was developed, this writer found herself uncovering interesting facts that seemed unable to find their place in the outline. A few of the more amusing among them included that: the Slavic word for brother is brat (...how true), there really was a man known as the Scorpion King, and the first recorded music ever found was written in Sumerian cuneiform (it denoted everything but tempo). What more can be said about the study of the origins of writing, besides that they open one’s soul to the power contained within the pen and a mere sheet of paper, and the profound impact that one can make with them today.

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