

The early history of
the alphabet and
explain its importance
flashcard



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The first evidence of writing appears at the end of the 4th. mill. BC. in Mesopotamia and in Egypt. In both areas the forms of the writing were originally pictographic, where a head meant a head, a bowl meant a bowl. Probably it was in the Sumerian part of Mesopotamia that writing was first invented. Very soon it began to develop so that some of the pictures could stand for both things, for actions (a foot could both mean a foot and to walk) and even for sounds.

At this stage, writing began to become phonetic, so one sign could mean the first sound of the word illustrated. This both meant that writing became more useful for reaching out of space and time and that writing now became closely related to a certain language. In Mesopotamia the writing system developed in connection with city-states in the Uruk-period, where there were need for proof of paid tax and other legal deeds. The fast development of writing soon made it to a syllabic writing system, where each sign represented a syllable.

When the Akkadian language (East-Semitic) took over the influence of the area, further development took place, although some problems between the Sumerian and the East-Semitic Akkadian must have occurred, caused by their differences in sounds. In Egypt they, as far as we can see, copied the idea of a pictographic writing system already at the end of the 4th. mill. BC. Soon they were using several hundred signs, either single signs used as ideograms (for full words) or shorter words with only two or three consonants. In Egypt we find that they had also about twenty 'alphabetic' signs, which were mainly used to transcribe foreign names.

Also in Anatolia, in the Hittite kingdom, and on Crete (influencing Cyprus and Greece) there were some combined pictographic and syllabic writing systems. The invention of the alphabet. As mentioned above was alphabetic writing not a totally new invention, as some sort of alphabetic sign had been in use in Egypt for centuries. The new element was the systematized use of the consonantal signs so that no other sign was needed. Now there was a system of writing with a limited number of signs (20-30) in a fixed 'alphabetic' order.

It seems that in the very beginning the signs used were pictures representing acrophonic values, which means that the principle sound of a word is isolated and understood by seeing the picture. The first evidence of alphabetic writing comes from the West-Semitic speaking area in the southern Levant from about the 17th-16th. cent. It was probably the period, where Egypt was subduing to the 15th. and 16th. Dynasty, the so-called Hyksos Dynasties. In this period Akkadian was the mainly used language of the region, but from the beginning of the second mill. BC several new ethnic groups had come onto the scene.

It was people speaking West-Semitic languages (Amorites, Canaanites), the Hittites (with their Indo-European language), and the Hurrians (with their agglutinative tongue). The cuneiform writing system was usable for most of these languages in its syllabic structure, whereas the hieroglyphic was not so easily adapted and also needed to be written on the more expensive papyrus. How the alphabet came about is still only possible to answer out of imagination, but there are several indicators for an origin in the area, where

Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, West-Semitic languages and the cuneiform writing met.

First is the direction of the script from the right to the left like the Egyptian hieratic script. Secondly are the signs from the earliest stage shaped for writing with ink and pen, again as the Egyptian art of writing. On the other hand the Egyptian writing was for the trained scribes but unfamiliar to the West-Semitic people, which is seen out of the imitations of Egyptian hieroglyphs on Hyksos scarabs. From the El-Amarna letters and the few tablets from Hazor, Gezer and Hebron it is obvious that the cuneiform writing in Akkadian was in use in Palestine in the MBA.

But in these tablets there are very clearly used a NW-Semitic syntax and morphology, which show the difference between the lingua franca and the dialects as well as the difficulties for the local people in using the East-Semitic Akkadian branch of the Semitic languages. In this situation it is quite natural to imagine someone trying to find a style of writing, which fits his own language. An outline of the history of the alphabet. Before 1000 BC. The first and most famous found was at Serabit el-Khadem, where several Egyptian inscriptions were recorded and also a group of signs different from the hieroglyphs.

In 1916 Gardiner presented them as ancestral to the Phoenician alphabet. There were only abt. 30 signs, so it was concluded not to be a syllabic script, neither a pictographic script, but an alphabet. From Egyptian sources, it is known to be people from the Levant, who was working in these mines, and it was assumed that these scratches were messages in a Semitic language.

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Gardiner worked backwards from Hebrew, Greek and other languages and proposed out of that fifteen of the characters in the text.

Then he tried to read and through this to identify some of the signs as spelling the name of the goddess, which were worshipped by the Egyptians and probably also the workers at this place. It seemed plausible, and has been sufficient to show how the alphabet was used by Semitic miners in the 15th. cent. BC. Since 1916 new attempts to decipher this alphabet has been done, and it has been showed that there are more problems than first thought. Continuing investigations have uncovered about three dozen of texts in the mines, and this lead among others W.

F. Albright to talk of an alphabet with 27 letters. We do not have to accept all his identifications and his number of letters, but must acknowledge him and later scholars for the identification of at least 2/3. of the signs and several new words. Since have also three earlier Canaanite inscriptions been found, from Sechem, Gezer, and Lachish. They have been dated to the 17. th and 16. th cent. The development is easily shown, as the Proto-Sinaitic letters are getting more schematized compared to the earlier more pictographic letters.

This is also a necessary development, as a pictographic or acrographic alphabet belongs to the group of languages, where the word, which is symbolized by the actual sign, has the same principle sound. So developing towards a linear letter system made way for an internationalization of the alphabet. From the thirteenth century onwards several ostracise and a decorated ewer have been found at both Lachish, Izbet Sartah, Beth Shemesh and Qubur el-Walaydah. These findings as well as other inscriptions

from both the 13 and the 12. cent. how a clear continuation of the development from pictures towards letters. The major collection of inscriptions from this period is a collection of arrowheads, where probably the owner has written his name. The reason why is unknown but among other ideas I both think it would be honourable to be the person, who maybe had killed an animal in a joined hunt for lions or other threatening animals, and that it could be a sort of common agreement that everyone had to 'sign' their arrowheads in case there should be any dispute over a killed sheep or cattle.

Beginning at the eleventh cent. there must have been a cultural contact between the Western Mediterranean and the Levant, as there at both Sardinia and Crete has been found fragmentary inscriptions which can be labelled as Proto-Canaanite. This goes very well together with the fact that the Phoenician traders began to develop their trade routes and about the same time opened up a colony in Cadiz, Spain. From the middle of the eleventh cent. the Proto-Canaanite script had developed so far that there were no longer any directly pictographic signs in it.

From that time it has been designated as Phoenician, which is a stabilized linear script with letters written from right-to-left in horizontal lines. It is this form of writing, which is found at the sarcophagus of Aharim. At this sarcophagus there is a text, which contains several sentences, which until now is the first complete alphabetic text excavated. Dated before that there have only been found single words or undeciphered rows of alphabetic signs, which probably has a link to the fact that longer texts probably would be

written on papyrus. These have normally disappeared in the damp conditions of the Levant.

After 1000 BC. For the two first centuries the Phoenician language and script had an international status. Both the Arameans and the inhabitants of Canaan used Phoenician, which seems to have been a language of prestige. It was used for inscriptions, also in places where the language differed from Phoenician. In that case people used their own spelling for local names and few other significanties. From the middle of the ninth century the Hebrew language began to develop its own distinctive features and from mid-eight century the Aramaic began to develop a few features.

From then of the Phoenician became the language and script of the sea-trade and of the Phoenician colonies. Soon it divided into Punic, Neo-Punic and Phoenician. In all these three languages the script was a standard script with few local and mainly chronological variations. This must have given a similar situation to our modern situation, where the language used in international postal affairs is French and in international air service is English. The written lingua franca on the sea must have been Phoenician with all the benefits, which must have followed that.

According to the old Greek traditions it was the Phoenicians, who introduced the alphabetic characters in Greece. Although the earliest known Greek inscription is from the eighth century it has been argued that the introduction should be dated to an earlier time. One of the arguments brings forward the fact that ancient (archaic) Greek was written from both right-to-left and from left-to-right or in horizontal boustrophemon.

To find a corresponding date for that in the history of the West-Semitic alphabet we have to go to the period before left-to-right writing became standard in the middle of the 10th. cent. Several other arguments have been brought forward to support a date of the introduction of the alphabet in Greece to the 10th. cent. , but none of the arguments are so definite that they can exclude a later date. When the Greeks took over the alphabet they had to introduce vowels, as it is impossible to speak, talk and write Greek without vowels. On the other hand there were some of the sounds in the Phoenician alphabet, which were aleph, he, yod, and `ayin. These were replaced with vocal-sounds, and later five others were added. Out of this old Greek both Latin and classical Greek developed.

In the Syrian heartland the Aramaic kingdoms were defeated repeatedly by the Assyrian armies. As they continued to rebel, they were forced to move into other places of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Soon the Aramaic script was in use as the official script used for communication all over Assyria, and it was in use like that until the Hellenistic period. In that way Aramaic was written by people of different ethnic and linguistic origin. This was possible because of the simplicity of the alphabet. In the times of exile the Israelites used Aramaic in Babylon and continued to use it after their return to Palestine.

This branch of Aramaic developed to the script, which later is used in the Old Testament. As it had been the case ever since the alphabet gained wider use, it was possible for an un-scolared person to write on his own. They would no longer have to learn several hundred signs to express themselves and be dependent on scribes for getting anything written. The ability of writing came into the reach of everyone (at least as long as the signs had <https://assignbuster.com/the-early-history-of-the-alphabet-and-explain-its-importance-flashcard/>

the acrophonic element) and the level of literacy must have increased dramatically.