

How the Alphabet Came to Be

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Why is the alphabet so important?



The alphabet may be the most important invention in history. It has allowed people to record and share knowledge across geographic distances and time. The alphabet is so easy that small children can easily learn it, yet its letters can express the most complex ideas.

What is an alphabet?

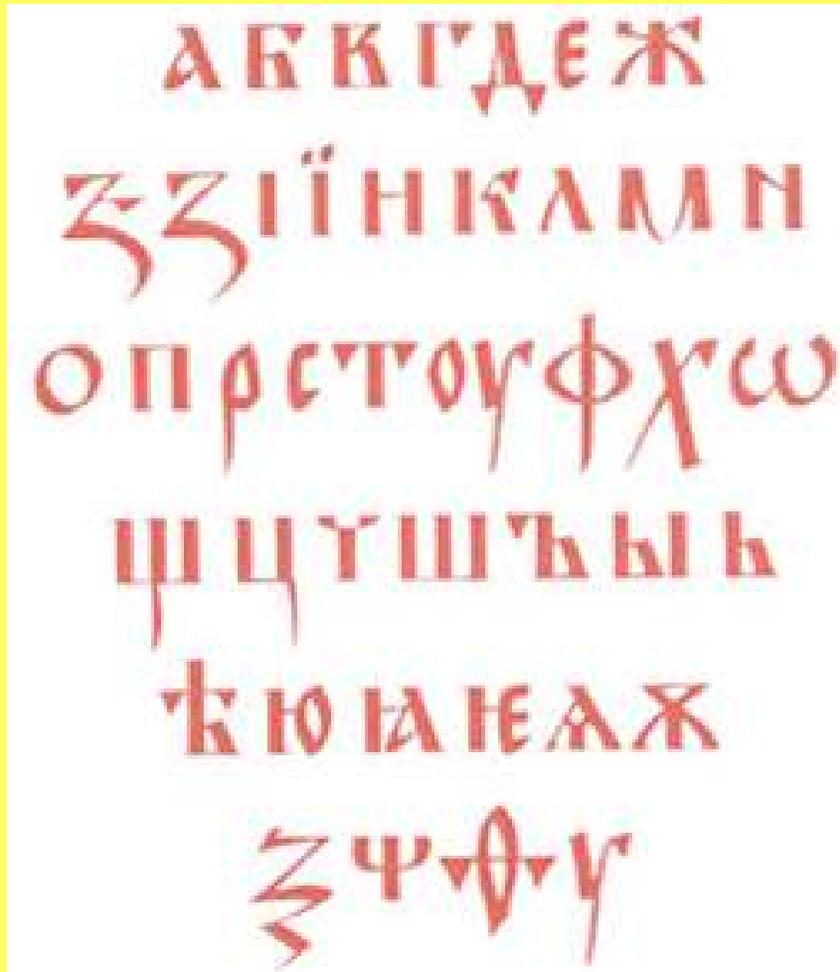
An alphabet is a list of symbols that represent sounds, also known as phonemes, the smallest component of language (Sacks 4). The symbols can be used together in different combinations to represent the spoken word. Following are some well known examples of alphabets.

An example of an alphabet

The Greek alphabet
used for ancient and
modern Greek



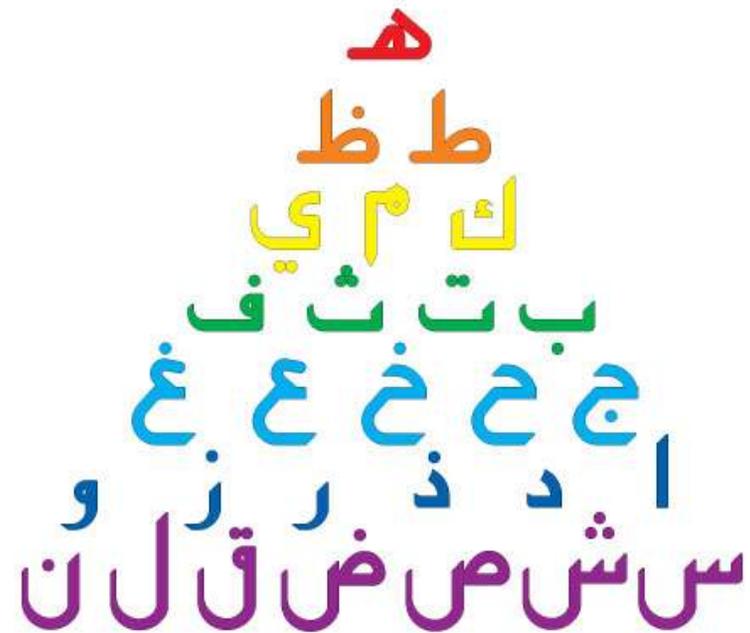
Another alphabet:



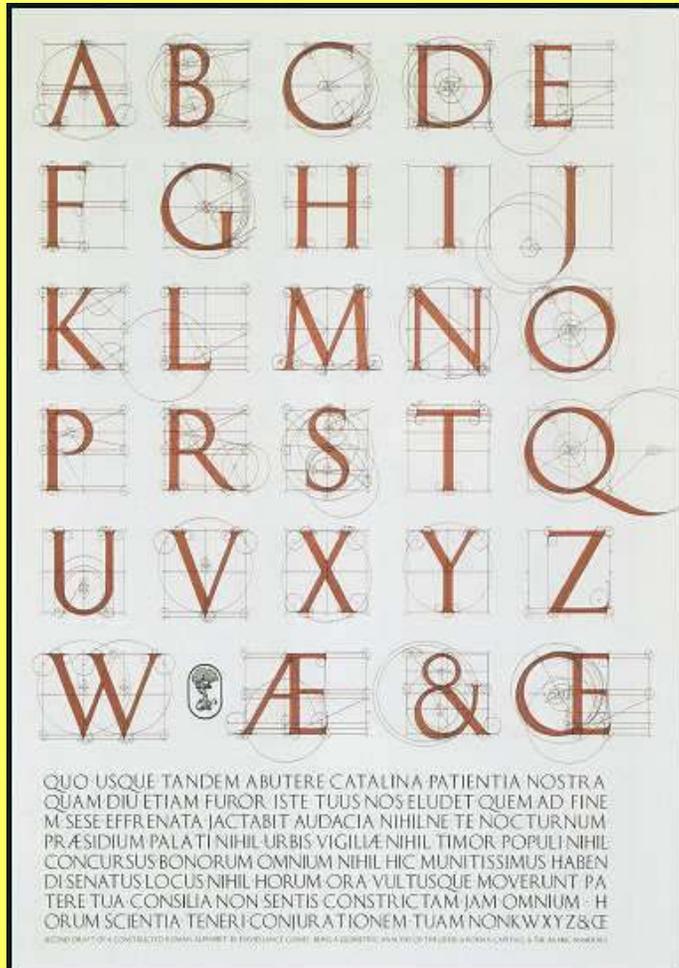
The Cyrillic alphabet
used for Slavic
languages like Russian
and Bulgarian

Another alphabet:

The Arabic alphabet
used the Middle
East and North Africa



And finally:



The Roman alphabet
that Western Europeans
and Americans use

Non-alphabets

Not all written language is in alphabet form. There are two types of written script that are not alphabets (Man 12).



Ideographic

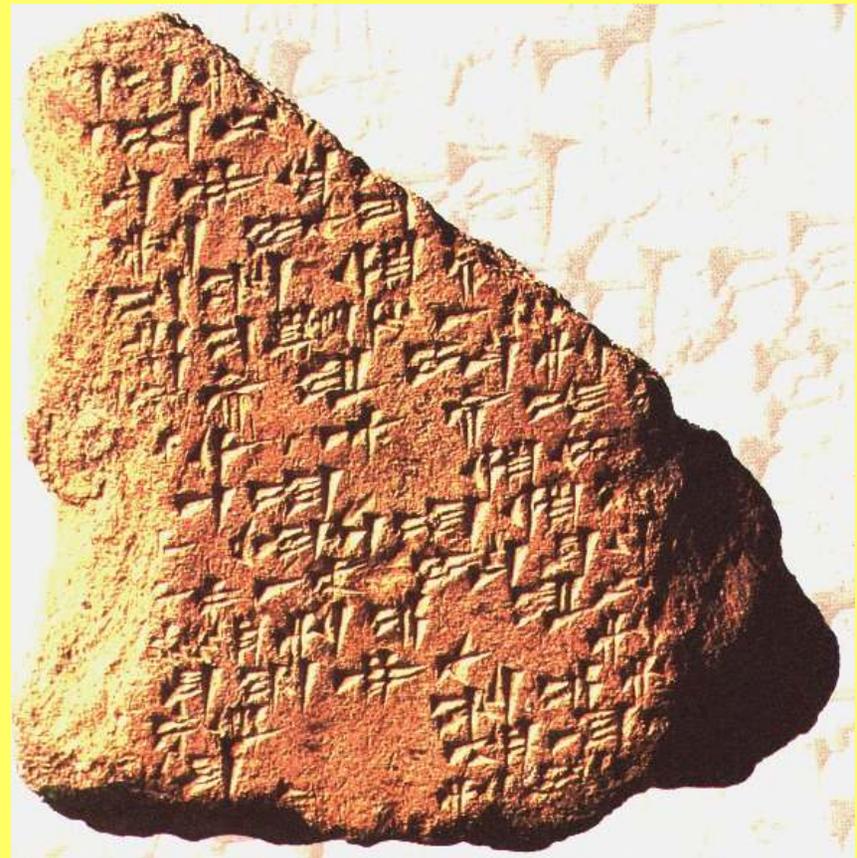


Ideographic writing uses symbols to express Ideas. For example, using → to represent airplane is ideographic.

Chinese, Japanese Kanji and Egyptian hieroglyphics have ideographic elements.

Syllabary

Syllabary writing uses symbols to represent whole syllables (Sacks 7). Most cuneiform writing from ancient Mesopotamia and Japanese Katakana and Hiragana are examples of syllabary scripts.

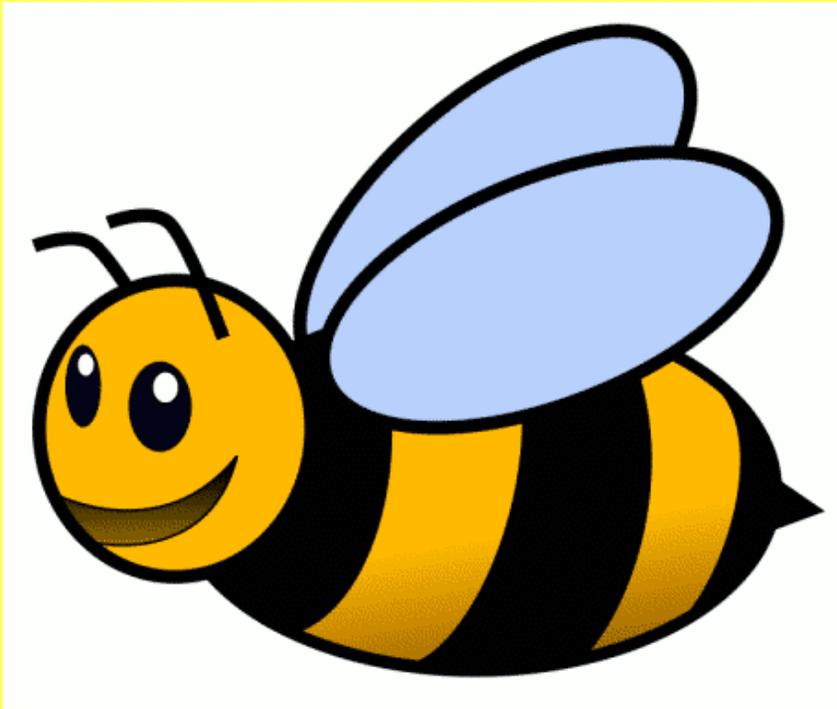


Why the alphabet?



The alphabet has some distinct advantages over ideographic and syllabary systems. Ideographic symbols often rely on a visual pun, also known as a rebus, for meaning, so they do not translate well into other languages (Sacks 6). It is also difficult in ideographic scripts to convey abstract ideas, such as “thought” and “spirit.”

For example:



In English “bee” and “be” have the same sound, so we could use a picture of a bee to represent “be.” In French or any other language this pun would be nonsensical.

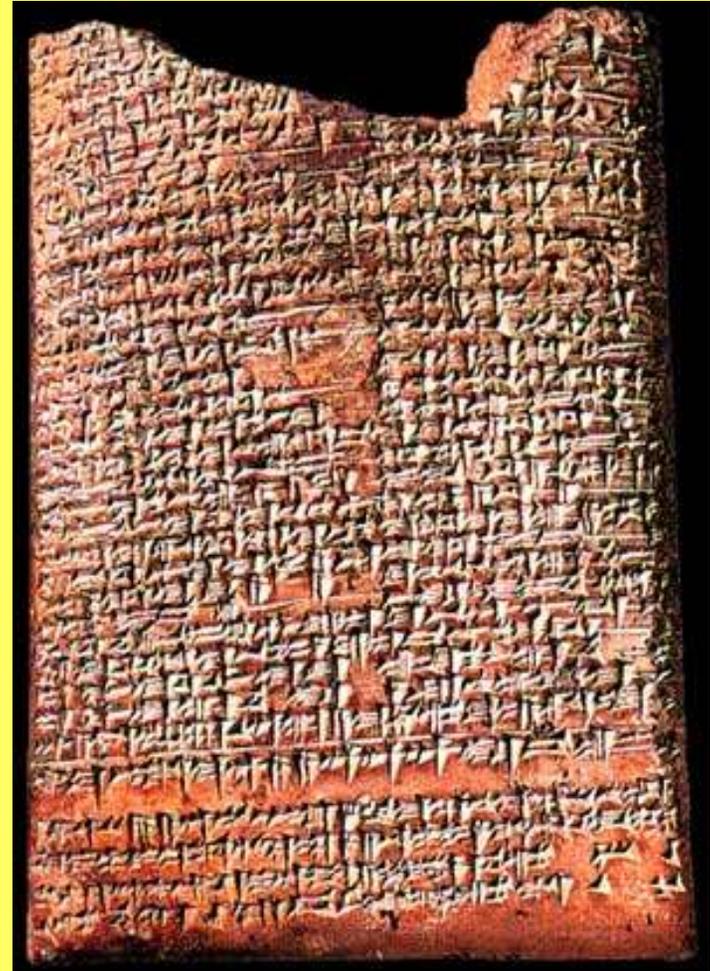
Too many symbols

Another problem non alphabetic systems have is that there are so many symbols to memorize. The alphabet we use in English has 26 symbols, whereas Chinese contains 60,000 symbols, 2,000 of which a literate person needs to know (Sacks 7). It takes many years to master Chinese.

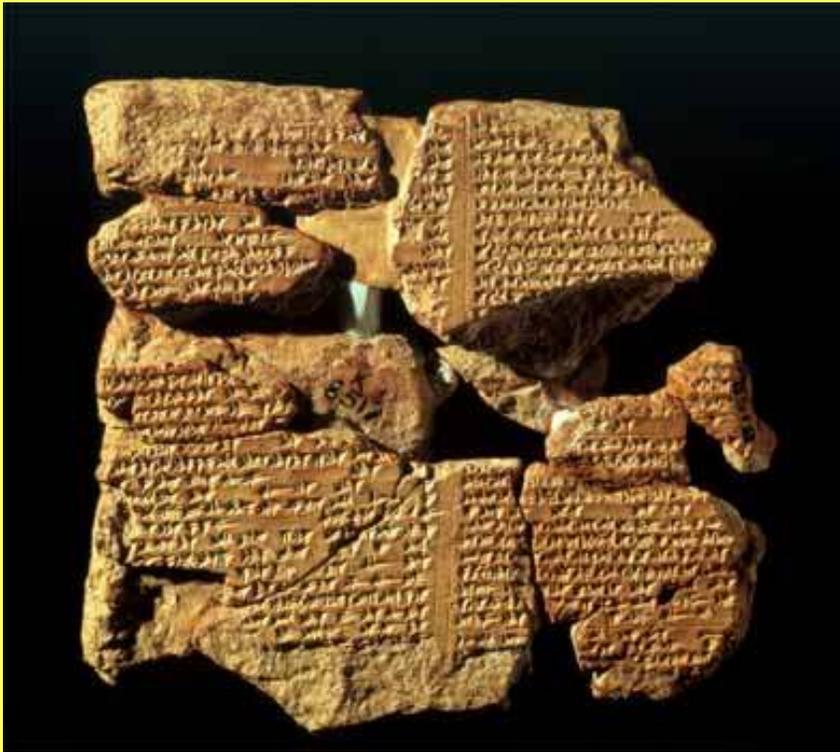


Cuneiform

At around the same time Egyptians began using hieroglyphics, people in the near east developed a stylized type of writing using clay tablets with wedge shaped marks pressed into them (Robinson 71).



Cuneiform



Cuneiform is mainly syllabary, but like Egyptian hieroglyphics, it later began to develop some alphabetic traits, probably to accommodate foreign tongues (Robinson 78).

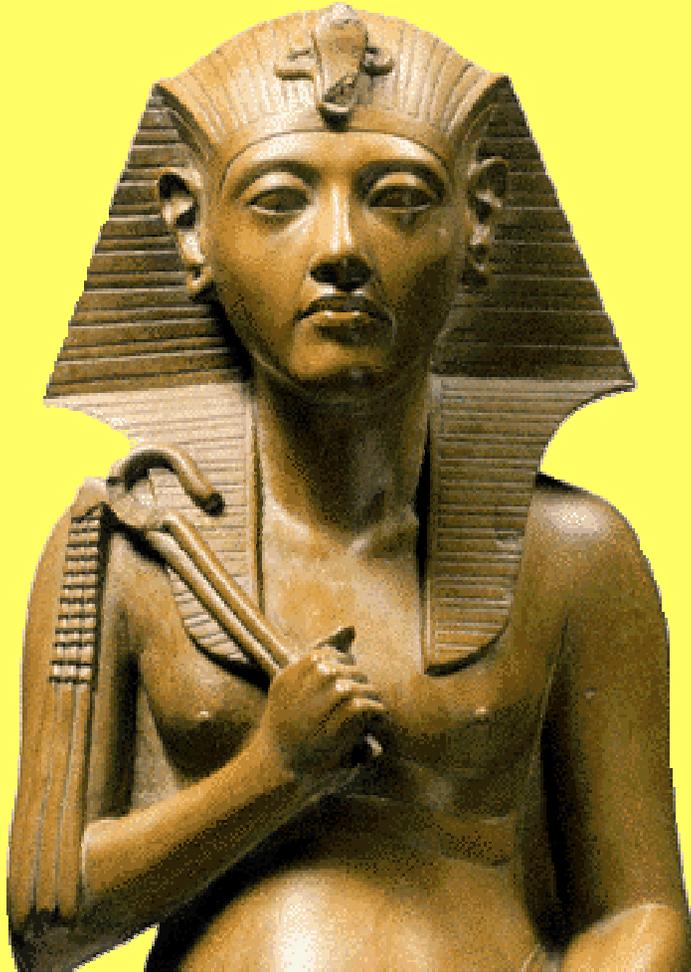
The first true alphabet

For many years it has been a mystery as to where the first “true alphabet” developed and who developed it.

Even back in Ancient Greece scholars credited the spread of the alphabet to the Phoenicians (Man 197), traders from ancient Canaan, but where did they get the alphabet?



A discovery in Egypt



In 1990 John and Deborah Darnell discovered a site in the Egyptian desert with alphabetic inscriptions. The alphabet used was based on alphabetic elements in hieroglyphics. These inscriptions date to 2000 BC, eight centuries before Phoenician appeared (Man 69-78).

Who wrote it?

Archeological evidence suggest that the authors of these alphabetic inscriptions were probably Asiatic foreigners living and working in Egypt. They used elements of hieroglyphics to suit their own language (Man 81).



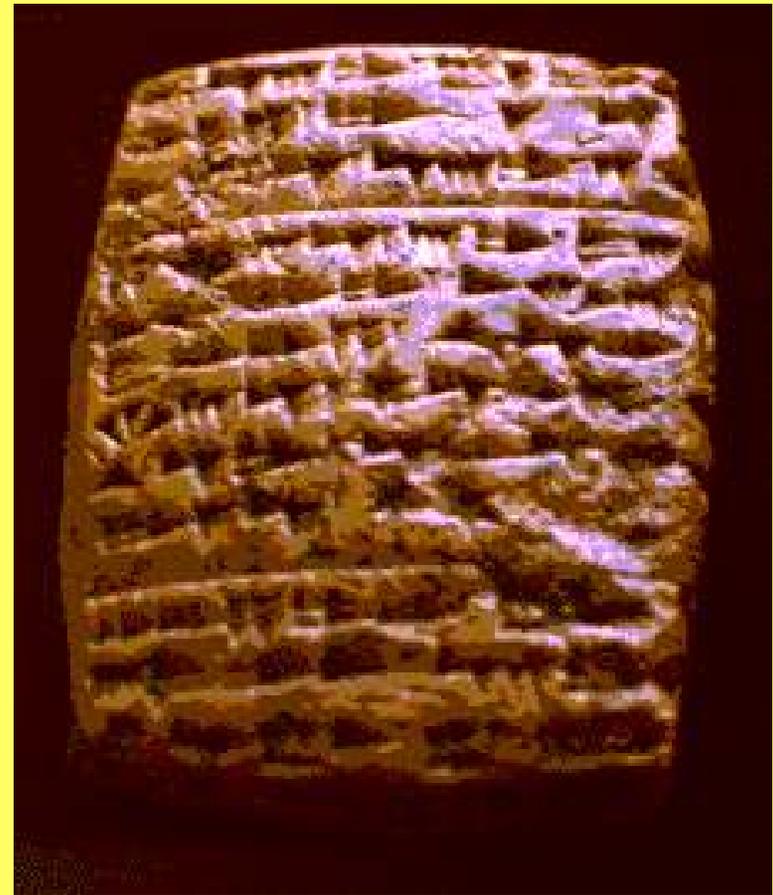
Later on the Sinai...



At about 1900 BC several inscriptions were made at a turquoise mine on the Sinai peninsula just outside of Egypt. The carvings are in what archaeologists call Proto-Sinaitic, an alphabet which also uses elements of hieroglyphics to record Asian languages (Man 127).

Another early alphabet

In the Near East, another early alphabet has been discovered in a place called Ugarit. This alphabet is in cuneiform script. Ugaritic dates from about the 14th century BC (Robinson 162). Ugaritic may also have been developed by people trying to use a foreign script to express their own language.



To the Phoenicians



The Phoenicians certainly had access to Ugaritic, but they wrote on papyrus, not clay tablets. They adapted the Ugaritic alphabet to non-cuneiform symbols, perhaps even influenced by Proto-Sinaitic script around 1200 BC (Man 181).

What was Phoenician like?

- The characters were symbols, not pictographs (Ogg 79)
- There were no symbols for vowels, vowel symbols were probably considered obvious and unnecessary (Man 202).



To the Greeks



The Phoenicians were a Seafaring and trading culture and had much contact with the Greeks. By about 900 BC the Phoenician alphabet had spread to the Greeks (Man 195).

How did it change?

The Greeks used vowels more heavily than the Phoenicians, so they used characters in the Phoenician alphabet that they did not need and adapted them to represent vowel sounds (Man 203).



Finally... an alphabet!

Α Alpha (al-fah)	Β Beta (bay-tah)	Γ Gamma (gam-ah)	Δ Delta (del-ta)	Ε Epsilon (ep-si-lon)	Ζ Zeta (zay-tah)
Η Eta (ay-tah)	Θ Theta (thay-tah)	Ι Iota (eye-o-tah)	Κ Kappa (cap-pah)	Λ Lambda (lamb-dah)	Μ Mu (mew)
Ν Nu (new)	Ξ Xi (zie)	Ο Omicron (om-e-cron)	Π Pi (pie)	Ρ Rho (roe)	Σ Sigma (sig-mah)
Τ Tau (taw)	Υ Upsilon (up-si-lon)	Φ Phi (fie)	Χ Chi (kie)	Ψ Psi (sigh)	Ω Omega (oh-may-gah)

The Greek alphabet is the first alphabet that represents consonant and vowel sounds. It is the alphabet upon which all modern Western alphabets are based (Man 205).

How the Romans got it

Rome is situated on the Italian peninsula. In the beginning, Rome was a tiny city-state surrounded by the Etruscans to the north and Greek colonies to the south. Both cultures used the Greek alphabet (Ogg 104).



Adaptations

C · CAESAR · DIVI · AVG · F ·
AVGVSTVS · PRONEPOS ·
GERMANICVS · IMP ·
TRIBVNICIA · POTESTAS ·
PATER · PATRIAE · CAESAR
FILIVS · ANTONIANVS ·
COS III · PONTIFEX ·
MAXIMVS · ROM · ET ·
AVG · CLAVDIVS · DRVSVS ·
QVINQ · CVINC ·

Like the Greeks, the Latin-speaking Romans adapted the alphabet to suit their language, discarding some symbols and adding new ones. They also refined letter shapes to suit their own uses (Ogg 106).

Up to the present

With very few changes, the alphabet you are reading right now is the same alphabet the Romans were using thousands of years ago (Ogg 145).

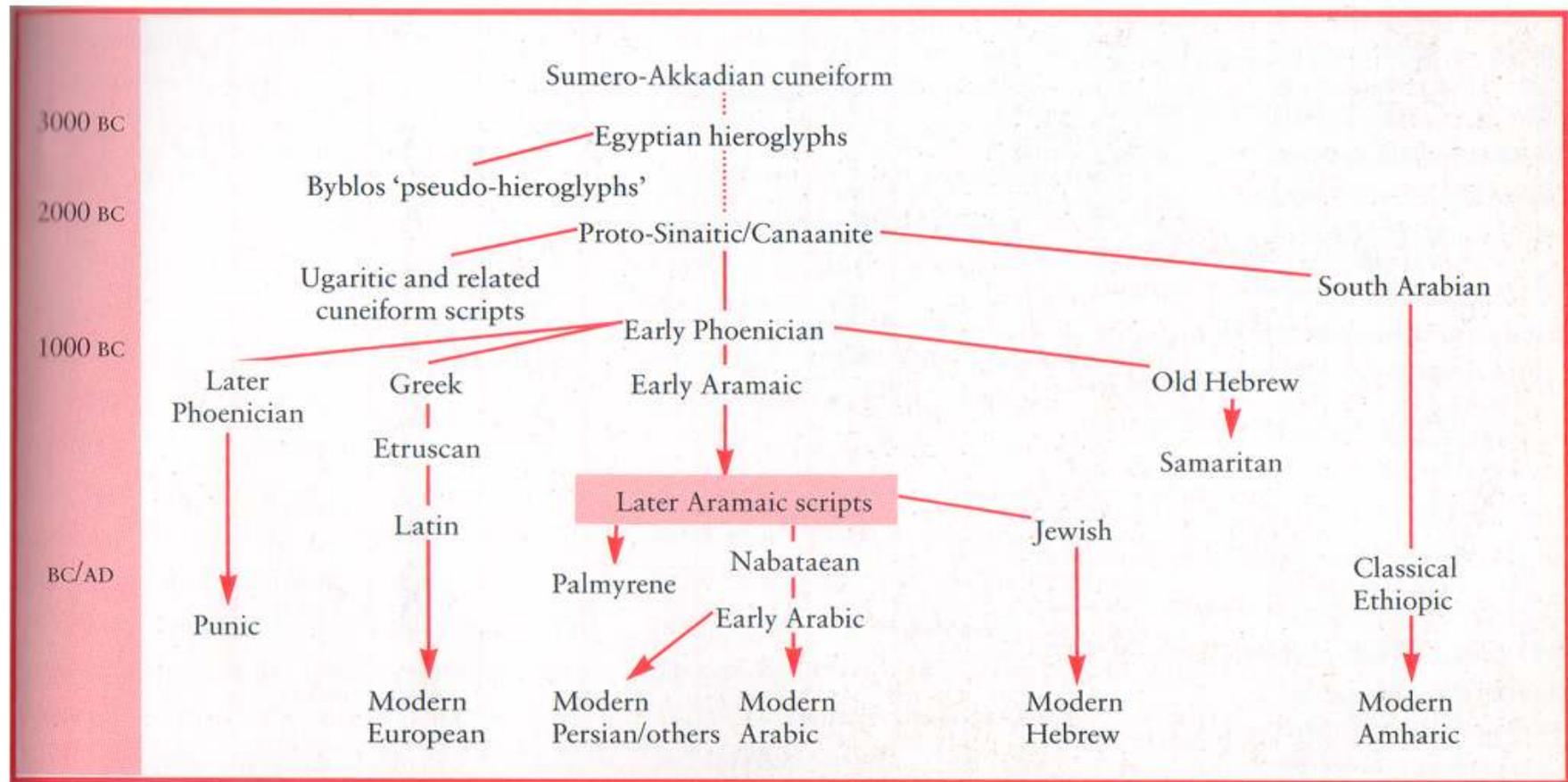


An amazing journey



From the earliest ideographic and syllabary writing systems our alphabet has emerged. It took thousands of years but today we have an incredibly simple and versatile means of conveying our thoughts.

This chart from “The Story of Writing” by Andrew Robinson (169) illustrates the development of modern alphabets from the very first writing:



Bibliography

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Ogg, O. (1971). *26 letters*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company.

Robinson, A. (1995). *Story of writing: Alphabets, hieroglyphics and pictograms*. London: Thames & Hudson.

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