

# WRITING AS A REFLECTION OF THE CIVILIZATION FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE MODERN TIMES

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## Abstract

*In the paper, a short discussion on the role of writing in the history of humanity is presented. The origins of writing are analyzed and some facts of modern script inventions are found to confirm its two-fold nature, both from economical (trade) and spiritual (religious) needs. Similar development of writing in different world regions and identical internal structure of logographic scripts can be the evidence for the universality of human thinking. A correlation between the types of civilization and the “philosophy” of writing is pointed.*

**Keywords:** *writing, civilization, Antiquity, modern times.*

## Rezumat

*În articol, este abordat rolul scrisului în istoria omenirii. Originea scrisului este analizată de rând cu unele inovații contemporane în acest domeniu pentru a demonstra caracterul biaspectual al acestuia, motivat atât de necesitățile economice (comerciale), cât și de cele spirituale (religioase). Evoluția similară a sistemelor de scriere în diferite regiuni ale lumii și structura internă identică a logografurilor pot fi dovada universalității gândirii umane. Se pune accentul și pe corelația dintre tipurile de civilizație și filozofia scrisului.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *scris, civilizație, Antichitate, modernitate.*

## 1. Origins of Writing

Writing systems are generally believed to be successors of the so-called proto-writing, i. e., early ideographic or mnemonic symbols. The following world regions can be listed as independent birthplaces of writing: Mesopotamia, Egypt, Indus Valley, China, Crete and Mesoamerica.

### 1.1. Mesopotamia

Sumerian cuneiform is probably the most ancient known writing. It originated in the fourth millennium BC. Its roots are seen in the early pictographs impressed on clay tablets. The Proto-Elamite script from Iran is slightly younger; it was developed around the turn of the third millennium BC<sup>1</sup>.

### 1.2. Egypt

The origins of Egyptian hieroglyphs (also fourth millennium BC) remain obscure as all the attested inscriptions show quite developed form of writing. Recent findings in Abydos<sup>2</sup> can challenge the primogeniture of archaic Sumerian cuneiform signs borne on the clay tablets from Uruk.

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<sup>1</sup>Coulmas, 2004, p. 98–105.

<sup>2</sup>Mitchell, 1999.

Hieroglyphic writing developed through centuries into hieratic and demotic scripts. Modern alphabets can be traced back to these later forms.

### 1.3. *Indus Valley*

The inscriptions found in Harappa and Mohenjo Daro (third millennium BC) still remain undeciphered. They were used presumably to record a Dravidian language<sup>3</sup>.

### 1.4. *China*

Chinese characters are the only old writing system survived till today. First known inscriptions are the oracle bones from mid and late second millennium BC. Recently, some ritual symbols from the seventh millennium BC were discovered at Jiahu, Henan Province but they are not considered as writing<sup>4</sup>.

### 1.5. *Europe*

Minoan Cretan hieroglyphic script (second millenium BC) is often considered as an independent creation being the earliest of the group of the so-called Aegean scripts, which include in particular Linear A<sup>5</sup>. Some earlier symbols from the southeastern Europe, Vinča signs found, e.g., on the Tărtăria tablets, are rather a for of pre-writing<sup>6</sup>.

### 1.6. *Mesoamerica*

The earliest known script in Mesoamerica is Olmec and belongs to the first millennium BC<sup>7</sup>.

To a large extent, the emergence of writing in these societies is connected with economical needs, specifically those of trade. We can thus note that the economical component played an important – if not a determining – part in the origin of writing. This observation mentioned yet by Rousseau<sup>8</sup> is analyzed by Derrida<sup>9</sup>.

## 2. Writing Development Stages

The development of writing can be schematically given as follows.

In *pictography*, visible signs express meaning without being conventionally associated with fixed linguistic form<sup>10</sup>. That is, pictography is not writing itself.

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<sup>3</sup>Rogers, 2005, p. 201.

<sup>4</sup>Li *et alii*, 2003.

<sup>5</sup>Owens, 1996.

<sup>6</sup>Winn, 1981; Owens, 1999.

<sup>7</sup>Rodríguez Martínez *et alii*, 2006.

<sup>8</sup>Rousseau, 1826, p. 229.

<sup>9</sup>Derrida, 1997, p. 299–300.

<sup>10</sup>Coulmas, 2004, p. 406.

**Sentence writing** is a type of writing in which symbols correspond to linguistic units larger than words (i. e., phrases or sentences). Examples include:

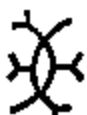
- Ewe proverbs<sup>11</sup> (West Africa), e. g.,



*World is like a baobab tree; no one can embrace it.*

In this proverb, the nut on the right symbolizes the world.

- Nsibidi script<sup>12</sup> (Nigeria):

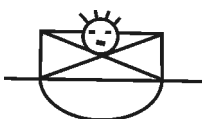


*A young man and his sweetheart*



*A man and woman in bed who are tired of one another, lying back to back, it is the usual sign of a quarrel. When a woman makes this sign for a man it means that she does not want him to come to her house again.*

- *Walam Olum*, the epic of the Delawares<sup>13</sup>, in which each symbol corresponds to a particular verse:



*On the earth, [was] an extended fog, and there the great Manito was.*

It is worth to note that now this epic is generally believed to be a hoax<sup>14</sup> but this fact does not influence the typological attribution of the writing itself.

In known developed writing systems the stage of sentence writing is not attested, that is why this form of writing is often considered as a forerunner (like pictography), but not writing properly. It could well be a deadlock branch in the evolution of some scripts.

The terms ‘ideogram’ (ideograph) and ‘logogram’ (logograph) are often mixed. However, ideograms stand for non-linguistic symbols (like numbers) and logograms are written signs representing words or morphemes<sup>15</sup>. The first stage of writing is believed to be logographic.

**Rebus principle** is “representing a word by means of the logogram of another which is phonetically similar or homophonous”<sup>16</sup>. Examples from English include *Xmas* for *Christmas* or *4U* instead of “for you”. Below,

<sup>11</sup>Friedrich, 1966, Abb. 21.

<sup>12</sup>Dayrell 1911.

<sup>13</sup>Velie, 1991, p. 94–95; The *Walam Olum*.

<sup>14</sup>Oestreicher, 1996.

<sup>15</sup>Coulmas, 2004, p. 309.

<sup>16</sup>*ibidem*, p. 433.

examples from Chinese characters and Egyptian hieroglyphic script are shown.



The grey-shaded element on the left is called ‘key’, ‘radical’ or ‘determinative’: it says that the whole sign depicts an animal saying something like *miào* (the phonetic value of the black element meaning ‘sprout’), and it is not hard to guess that the character 猫 means ‘cat’ (*māo* in Chinese)<sup>17</sup>:

<clawed beast> + miào = māo



This word is written in the following way: the left-most sign reads *nfr* and means ‘beautiful, good’. Its phonetic value is pleonastically confirmed by two upper signs in the second column, *f* and *r*. The lowest semicircle sign is the feminine suffix *t*. The meaning of the word is determined by the right sign depicting a woman, it is ‘beautiful woman’<sup>18</sup>:

*nfr* + *f* + *r* + *t* + <woman> = *nfr-t*

In other logographic systems similar features can be found as well, cf. Sumerian<sup>19</sup> or Mayan<sup>20</sup>.

In *syllabaries*, written signs denote syllables. They developed from logographic systems by means of systematic application of the rebus principle and further standardization of the sign inventory. This led to the reduction of the number of symbols used in writing (usually from several thousands in a logographic system to less than a hundred in a syllabary).

*Alphabets* consist of symbols for (roughly) individual phonemes. In the history of Semitic scripts, syllabaries evolved into so-called ‘consonant alphabets’ or ‘abjads’<sup>21</sup>, sometimes considered as a form of syllabary. The introduction of vowels is a later invention.

### 3. “Western” Civilization

This term refers to the civilization originated in the Middle East and Europe. “Western” Civilization is characterized by the development of exact science, aspiration for cognition via subjugation. The earliest example is Sumer with its highly developed mathematics and astronomy. In Ancient Greece, the scientific knowledge arose in its modern sense.

Sumerian cuneiform was a precursor of Semitic Akkadian and Assyrian cuneiform scripts, in which the number of signs gradually decreased and phonetic side was pushed onto the first place. Several cuneiform scripts are known not being direct descendants of the abovementioned ones. These are

<sup>17</sup>Zhongwen.com.

<sup>18</sup>Rogers, 2005, p. 112.

<sup>19</sup>Senner, 1989.

<sup>20</sup>Campbell, 1990; Knorozov, 1963.

<sup>21</sup>Daniels, 1990.



Aramaic script from the fifth century BC. These scripts are syllabic, each symbol denotes a consonant + inherent vowel (usually ‘a’ or ‘o’), and other vowels are written with diacritics attached to the basic sign. Such a principle resembles an alphabetic script, however, the tendency to reduce the script inventory is not held. For instance, in Devanagari there are some fifty basic symbols, but the total number, including ligatures for the consonant clusters, reaches several hundreds.

### 5. Modern parallels

In modern world, the relations between script usage and cultural, religious and other peculiarities of its users are observed.

*Latin (or Roman) script* is a descendant of the Western variety of Greek alphabet via the Etruscan script. Roman alphabet is identified with globalization and expansion of the “Western” civilization and its values.

*Arabic script* is connected with the Islamic world. That is why in particular, aiming at the secularization of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk introduced the Latin-based alphabet in 1928 instead of the Arabic orthography (see Fig. 2).

*Cyrillic script* is associated with Orthodoxy. Probably, the most striking example is the usage of the Latin-based orthography by Croats who are Catholics and Cyrillic script of their neighbors Serbs who are Orthodox. Note that in modern Serbian a considerable synchronous digraphia can be observed as both Cyrillic and Latin scripts are official, the latter not in the least because of globalization tendencies. Also it would be curiously to mention that in a largely Orthodox Romania the Latin-based orthography is quite a recent innovation as the Romanian language was written in a modification of the Cyrillic script till the 1860s<sup>24</sup>.



Figure 2: Atatürk introducing the new Turkish alphabet to the people of Sivas. September 20, 1928 (Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkish\\_alphabet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkish_alphabet))

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<sup>24</sup>Jensen, 1969, p. 491–493.

A more detailed discussion on the correlation of religion and writing can be found in the works by Coulmas<sup>25</sup> and Goody<sup>26</sup>.

## 6. Creation of Writing Systems in the Modern Times

Writing systems appeared also in the Modern Age. Representatives of colonized peoples in the North America or Africa understood that giving a script to their languages can strengthen them. New orthographies are generally Latin-based (note that in the Soviet Union and Russia the Cyrillic script was used for these purposes). However, the most interesting are the cases of the indigenous script invention.

**North America.** In 1821, Sequoyah (also known as George Gist or Guess) presented his syllabary to the Cherokee tribal elders. This script quickly gained acceptance within the Cherokee Nation. Albeit being suppressed by the surrounding Roman orthography, Sequoyah's invention is still used today<sup>27</sup>.

The writing system of Silas John is known for Apache (originated around 1904). It has a limited usage, being a writing to record solely sixty-two prayers of the cult lead by Silas John. Its special feature is that some symbols contained not only the phonetic value, but the instructions for gestures (kinesic value) as well<sup>28</sup>.

Several scripts are known in Alaska: picture-writing of Lily Savok and her mother, Kiloraq Ruth Eyak (before 1914); picture writing of Edna Kenick (1940s)<sup>29</sup>; syllabic script of Isaak (Kiatuak) and Charley Krerruertsau's script (both around 1909)<sup>30</sup>. The invention of Uyaqoq (Helper Neck) is the best known. It quickly developed form picture writing into a syllabic script<sup>31</sup>.

**Africa**, meaning Sub-Saharan Africa, is a homeland for many writing systems created in 19–20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Vai script (Liberia, 1830s, Momolu Duwalu Bukɛɛ is often credited as its inventor) is the best known example. Some evidences support the proposition that its creation was inspired by the Cherokee syllabary known from Austin Curtis, an American missionary<sup>32</sup>. Interestingly, the Vai are known as traders<sup>33</sup> and one can see here modern parallel to the economical component in the origin of writing. Other scripts of the region were probably the result of the “stimulus diffusion” from Vai,

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<sup>25</sup>Coulmas, 2004, p. 435–436.

<sup>26</sup>Goody, 1986.

<sup>27</sup>Coulmas, 2004, p. 74.

<sup>28</sup>Basso *et alii*, 1973.

<sup>29</sup>Korhonen, 2006, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup>Inuktitut.

<sup>31</sup>Friedrich, 1966; Schmitt, 1951.

<sup>32</sup>Tuchscherer *et alii*, 2002; Tuchscherer, 2005.

<sup>33</sup>Jones, 1981.

they include Mende, Kpelle, Loma, Bambara syllabaries, Bassa, Wolof, and N'ko alphabets, etc.<sup>34</sup> counting together with some recent inventions several dozens<sup>35</sup>.



**Sequoyah.**

Source:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cherokee\\_syllabary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cherokee_syllabary)



**King Ibrahim Njoya.**

Source: Mafundikwa 2004, p. 82.



**Uyaqoq (Helper Neck).**

The image was located at <http://uyaqok.com>, this site currently down<sup>36</sup>.

Figure 3: *Script inventors of the modern time*

Some scripts were created within local Christian churches for constructed languages: Yoruba 'holy' writing<sup>37</sup> (1920s, Aladura Church, Nigeria) and Oberi Okaimé script<sup>38</sup> (1930s, Calabar, Nigeria). Mandombe syllabary<sup>39</sup> (1978) is promoted by the Kimbanguist Church (Dem. Rep. Congo) for natural languages Kikongo, Lingala, Swahili, etc. While the role of missionaries both in adapting existent scripts and in creating new forms of writing is obvious, the fact that some religious organizations created new writing systems and even special languages is of yet another special interest. This can indicate that the spiritual component in the emergence of writing is very important. Note, in particular, abstract decorations of *churingas*, the worship items playing a central part in the totemic beliefs in some aboriginal Australian tribes<sup>40</sup>, which can be treated as precursors of writing (though never developed any further in this region).

The most interesting African indigenous invention is probably the Bamum script devised by King Ibrahim Njoya (Foumban, Cameroon). In its original form (1896) the script was logographic but it rapidly evolved into a syllabic one (with alphabetic elements) in some two decades<sup>41</sup>. Even more, it

<sup>34</sup>Dalby, 1967.

<sup>35</sup>Tuchscherer, 2005; Rovenchak *et alii*, 2011.

<sup>36</sup>I am grateful to Christin Engstrom for helping to rediscover the file with image.

<sup>37</sup>Dalby, 1969.

<sup>38</sup>Hau, 1961.

<sup>39</sup>Pasch, 2010.

<sup>40</sup>Durkheim *et alii*, 2001; Black, 1964.

<sup>41</sup>Coulmas, 2004, p. 37.



had a descendant script (1910) for neighboring Eghap (or Bagam) language<sup>42</sup>!

### 7. Conclusions

Several conclusions can be made regarding the development of writing and its relation to that of mankind:

1) Logographic writing systems have similar *internal* structure (while outer form might be quite different), which can be justified by the universality of human thinking.

2) Quite clear correlation exists between the way of writing and that of thinking.

3) In modern times, many writing systems appeared under the influence of external forces (conquerors or missionaries) via the “stimulus diffusion”. In some of them, a simplified and condensed form of the development of writing throughout the human history can be detected.

4) Both economical and spiritual components are important in the origin of writing<sup>43</sup>. Such a two-fold nature is also confirmed by new inventions of script.

These facts support the thesis that writing is one of the most important elements in the history of humanity reflecting various aspects of the Civilization.

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<sup>42</sup>Tuchscherer, 1999.

<sup>43</sup>cf. Gaur, 2005, p. 4; Goody, 1986.

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