

Art History
Changes in Writing

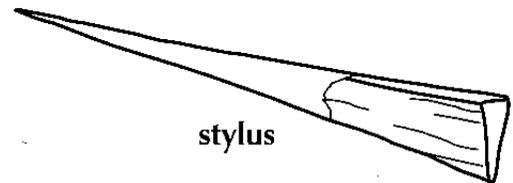
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Directions: Read the following articles about the developments of different forms of writing across ancient Mesopotamia and answer the Thought Questions at the bottom of the packet.

Cuneiform Writing (Stokstad, *Art History*, Page 71)

Sumerians developed a very early system of writing around 3100 B.C.E. apparently as an accounting system for goods traded at Uruk. The symbols were pictographs, simple pictures incised on moist clay slabs with a pointed tool. Between 2900 and 2400 B.C.E., the symbols evolved from pictures into phonograms—representations of syllable sounds—thus becoming a true writing system. During the same centuries, scribes adopted a stylus, or writing tool, with one triangular end and one pointed end. The stylus could be pressed rapidly into a wet clay tablet to create the increasingly abstract symbols, or characters, of cuneiform writing.

This illustration shows examples of the shift from pictograph to cuneiform writing. The drawing of a bowl, which means “bread” and “food” and dates from about 3100 B.C.E. was reduced by about 2400 B.C.E. to a four stroke sign, and by about 700 B.C.E. to a highly abstract vertical arrangement. By combining the pictographs and, later, cuneiform signs, writers created composite signs; for example, a composite of the signs for “head” and “food” came to mean “to eat.”



	pictograph c. 3100 BCE	early cuneiform sign c. 2400 BCE	later cuneiform sign c. 700 BCE	
bull's head				bull
bowl				bread, food
head bowl				to eat

Cuneiform writing was a difficult skill, and few people in ancient Mesopotamia mastered it. Some boys attended schools, where they learned to read and write by copying their teachers' lessons, but the small number of girls who learned to read and write were probably tutored at home.

Hieroglyphic, Hieratic, and Demotic Writing (Stokstad, *Art History*, Page 111)

Ancient Egyptians developed three types of writing that are known today by the names the Greeks gave them. The earliest system the Egyptians used for inscriptions employed a large number of symbols called hieroglyphs (from the Greek *hieros*, "sacred" and *glypherin*, "to carve") As their name suggests, the Greeks believed they had religious significance. Some of these symbols were simple pictures of creatures or objects, or pictographs, similar to those used by the Sumerians (Chapter 2). Others were phonograms, or signs representing the spoken sounds.

For record keeping, correspondence, and manuscripts of all sorts, the earliest scribes must also have used this system of signs. In time, however, they developed a simplified version of hieroglyphs that could be written more quickly in lines of script on papyrus scrolls. This type of writing is called hieratic, another term derived from the Greek word for "sacred." Even after the script was perfected inscriptions in reliefs or paintings and on ceremonial objects continues to be written in hieroglyphs.

The third type of writing came in use only in the eighth century B.C.E., as written communication ceased to be restricted to priests and scribes. It was a simplified, cursive form of hieratic writing that was less formal and easier to master; the Greeks referred to it as demotic writing (from *demos*, "the people"). From this time on, all three systems were in use, each for its own specific purpose: religious documents were written in hieratic, inscriptions on monuments in hieroglyphics, and all other texts in Demotic script.

The Egyptian language gradually died out after centuries of foreign rule, beginning with the arrival of the Greeks in 332 B.C.E. Modern scholars therefore had to decipher three types of writing in a long forgotten language. The key was a fragment of a stone stele, dated 196 B.C.E., which was called the Rosetta Stone for the area of the delta where one of Napoleon's officers discovered it in 1799 C.E. On it, a decree issued by the priests at Memphis honoring Ptolemy V (ruled c. 205-180 B.C.E.) had been carved in hieroglyphics, demotic, and Greek. Even with the Greek translation, the two Egyptian texts were incomprehensible until 1818, when Thomas Young, an English physician interested in ancient Egypt, linked some of the hieroglyphs to specific names in the Greek version. A short time later, French scholar Jean-Francois Champollion located the names Ptolemy and Cleopatra in both of the Egyptian scripts. Having thereby determined the phonetic symbols for P, T, O, and L in demotic, he was able to slowly build up an "alphabet" of hieroglyphs, and by 1822 he had deciphered the two Egyptian texts. Thanks to him, Egyptologists are able to read ancient Egyptian documents and inscriptions as they come to light.



p



t



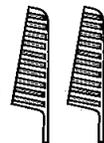
o



l



m



y



s

Hieroglyphic signs for the letters P, T, O, and L, which were Champollion's clues to deciphering the Rosetta Stone, plus M, Y, and S: Ptolmys.

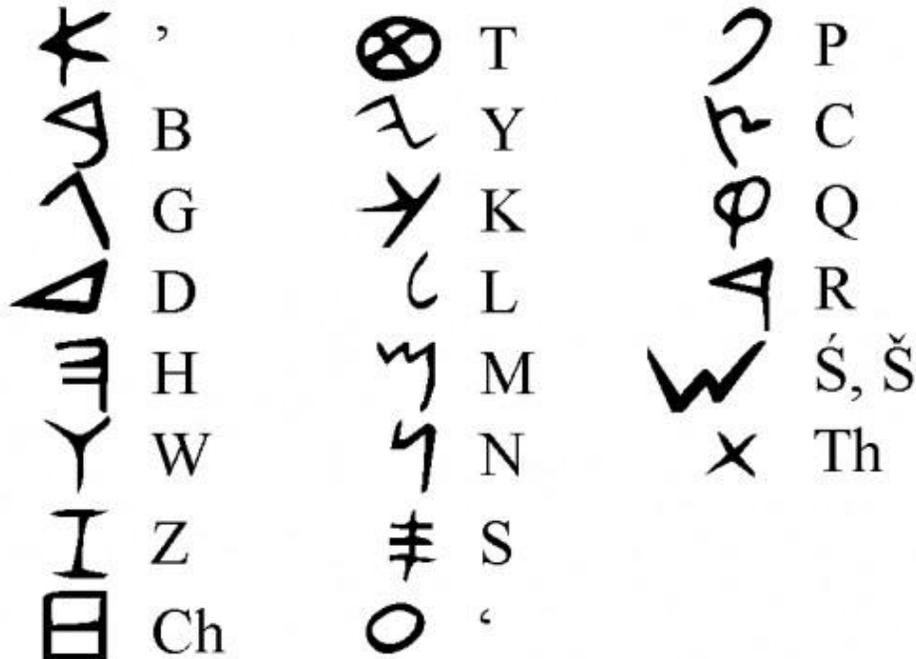
The Phoenician Alphabet and Language

Phoenician is a Canaanite language closely related to Hebrew. Very little is known about the Canaanite language, except what can be gathered from the El-Amarna letters written by Canaanite kings to Pharaohs Amenhopis III (1402-1364 BC) and Akhenaton (1364-1347 BC). It appears that Phoenician language, culture, and writing was strongly influenced by Egypt (which controlled Phoenicia for a long time), as king Rib-Adda of Byblos admits in one of his letters to the pharaoh.

Our knowledge of the Phoenician language is based on the few extant written texts in Phoenician. Before circa 1000 BC Phoenician was written using cuneiform symbols that were common across Mesopotamia. The first signs of the Phoenician alphabet found at Byblos are clearly derived from the Egyptian hieroglyphics, and not from cuneiform. The twenty-two Phoenician letters are simplifications of Egyptian hieroglyphic symbols, which took on a standardized form at the end of the 12th century BC. Like Hebrew and Arabic, Phoenician was written from right to left, and vowels were omitted (which makes deciphering Phoenician even harder).

By 1000 BC the Phoenician and Hebrew languages had become distinct from Aramaic, which was spoken in Canaan. To give a few examples, the "ha-" prefix is used in both Phoenician and Hebrew to indicate a determinate noun, while in Aramaic the "-a" suffix is used. The pronoun for the first person is "änökī" while in Aramaic it is "anā" (as it is in modern Arabic). The word for "son" is "bar" in Aramaic but "ben" is Phoenician and Hebrew. Nonetheless there are differences between Hebrew and Phoenician: The verbs for "to be" and "to do" differ and the long "a" sound in Hebrew is pronounced "o" in Phoenician, for example.

The Phoenician writing system is, by virtue of being an alphabet, simple and easy to learn, and also very adaptable to other languages, quite unlike cuneiform or hieroglyphics. In the 9th century the Aramaeans had adopted the Phoenician alphabet, added symbols for the initial "aleph" and for long vowels. This Aramaic alphabet eventually turned into modern Arabic. By the 8th century BC, texts written in the Phoenician alphabet whose authors were probably not Phoenician appeared in Cilicia in southern Asia Minor and in northern Syria. Eventually the Greeks, who were in close trading contact with the Levant, adopted the Phoenician alphabet, added vowel sounds, and thus created the Greek alphabet (upon which our modern Latin alphabet is based).



Thought Questions:

1. Of all the writing systems which one would have allowed for the most amount of people to learn it? Explain why you think this.
2. Did Sumerian cuneiform writing become more artistic or less artistic over time? Explain your reasoning.
3. What were the advantages, and reasons for the three different Egyptian writing styles.
4. Why does it make sense that the general idea of the Phoenician alphabet was the writing style adopted by other cultures, and not any of the other writing forms?
5. Explain how early writing systems can be considered art forms, and scribes as artists.