

The Invention of the Alphabet

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The ancient Middle East is the birthplace of the world's oldest known writing systems, Mesopotamian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, and their derivatives. The ancient Middle East is also the home of various other writing systems, including an alphabetic form of cuneiform known from the city-state of Ugarit (see B. Literature), a poorly understood logographic script called Proto-Elamite developed at the end of the fourth millennium in southwestern Iran, as well as a hieroglyphic script used in Anatolia during the third and second millennia BCE to write Luwian, an Indo-European language. But none of these scripts had the lasting cultural impact or influence of the alphabet.

The origins of the alphabet, translations of the earliest alphabetic texts, and the transmission of the alphabet to the West remain hotly debated topics. The most likely scenario is that the alphabet was developed in the first half of the second millennium BCE by West Semitic turquoise-mine workers in the Sinai, who were inspired by Egyptian writing and used the new script to write dedicatory inscriptions in their own language. These workers, according to this theory, borrowed from the Egyptians the idea of consonantal writing (Egyptian writing did use signs with just one consonant). The signs themselves do share similarities with Egyptian hieratic writing. However, the values of the new writing system, commonly referred to as the Proto-Sinaitic or Old Canaanite script, were not Egyptian but Old Canaanite, a Semitic language. These values were assigned on what is referred to as the acrophonic principle whereby each sign, or pictograph, was given a value based on the sound that begins the word represented by the respective pictograph, for instance, 'a' for 'apple'. We know that the names of the letters in the later Phoenician and Hebrew alphabet, derived from the Phoenician language, were also based on the acrophonic principle. This new script was a consonantal alphabet, as it only indicated consonants, which in structure of Semitic languages are generally more important for establishing the basic meanings of words than vowels, which merely provide variations on those basic meanings. The early 'alphabet' spread to the Levant and eventually gave rise to the Phoenician, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic consonantal writing systems.

The Greeks borrowed this writing system from the Phoenicians and modified it by adding signs for vowels, which are more important for Indo-European languages than they are for Semitic. In devising a writing system that signified both the consonants and vowels of language, the Greeks created a true alphabet. The alphabet was transmitted to the Romans (by way of the Etruscans), who used it to write Latin. Eventually, the alphabet was used to write the languages of Western Europe, including English.