

Signs for Sounds: Contemporary Letter Forming

Saturday 17 September – Sunday 30 October 2011

Eric Gill¹, a man of opinion, is very clear about lettering. Letters are signs for sounds. Numbers and other signs such as \$ & £, strictly speaking, are not. Picture writing and hieroglyphics are the antecedents of letters but do not perform as letters. Letters are not pictures or representations, they are abstract forms. And that is why, says Gill, that letters have a special and peculiar attraction for us.

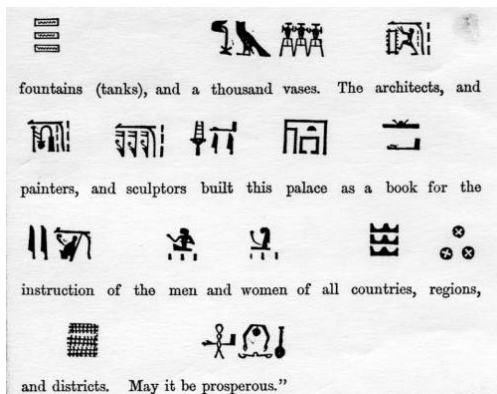
Gill also maintains that the English language alphabet, known as the Roman alphabet, is one of pre-eminent rationality and dignity. Those who admire Arabic, Chinese, Punjabi, or any other luscious writing might not agree.

ر ش ت ث خ ذ ض ظ غ ب ج د ه و ز ح ط ي ك ل م ن س ع ف ص ق

Modern Arabic

The following is a lightning dash through the history that leads to the current letters of the Roman alphabet².

There is a big difference between script³ and language. A language consists of a system of sounds but it doesn't have to be written down. Prior to alphabets, writing had lots of signs which mostly represented syllables, although sometimes whole words too. And before that, up to approximately 3000BC, writing was mostly pictographic, small pictures which stood for objects and concepts.



Pictographic script



Cuneiform script

Semitic languages, Arabic and Hebrew being the best known, evolved in the Middle and Near East. The first recorded Semitic language is Akkadian, a syllabic script (signs for syllables) and the language of Mesopotamia, used by Babylonians and Assyrians. The number of signs used in Akkadian was around six hundred, an awful lot to remember!

¹ Eric Gill (1882 – 1940) sculptor, typeface designer, stonecarver and printer. Gill designed several well known typefaces including Perpetua, Gill Sans & Joanna. His unorthodox personal life has given him some notoriety but his creative achievements remain undiminished.

² The word "alphabet" came into Middle English from the Late Latin word **Alphabetum**, which in turn originated in the Ancient Greek ἀλφάβητος (*alphabētos*), from *alpha* and *beta*, the first two letters of the Greek alphabet. *Alpha* and *beta* in turn came from the first two letters of the Phoenician alphabet, and meant *ox* and *house* respectively.

³ In this sense, a system of writing.

Akkadian is also a cuneiform⁴ script, so called because a wedge shaped reed or stick was used to make marks in clay tablets. Cuneiform had alphabetic elements but it didn't survive for long, one theory being that it was a script ideally suited to being used on soft clay – not the most portable material when papyrus was making an appearance in the world. True or not, shapes of letters, and styles of script, are surely influenced by the tools and materials available to writers.

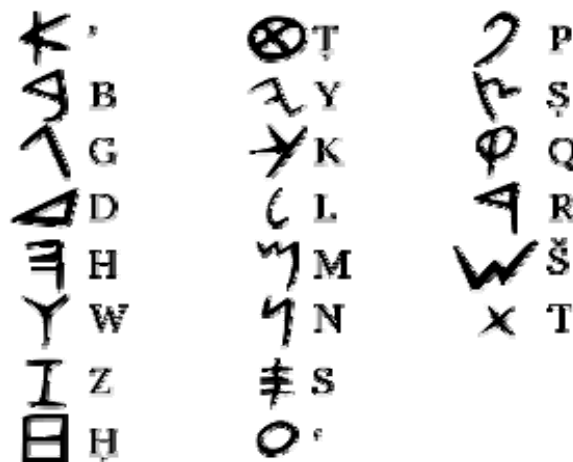
Akkadian was slowly taken over by Aramaic and by the time of the glory days of the Persian Empire (c. 550 – 325BC), Aramaic was the dominant language, the language of the empire's administration and spoken over a wide area. In its 3,000 year written history, Aramaic was the original language of large sections of the biblical books of Daniel and Ezra, the language spoken by Jesus, and the ancestor of the modern Arabic and Hebrew alphabets.

In common with most ancient languages Aramaic didn't have vowels. In theory, a language can dispense with vowels and still be understood by a reader:

Sgns fr snds s n ntrstng xhbtn. Wht's yr fvrt pc?

But you can see that the absence of vowels, particularly when the vowel is the first letter of a word, makes it more difficult to *speak* and even more difficult to *sing*.

So when, and why, did languages become alphabetic? In Sinai⁵ there are some inscriptions in turquoise mines, carved by miners, dating from c.1700BC onwards. These inscriptions use very few signs, less than thirty, so it was apparent that this script⁶ was alphabetic rather than made up of syllables. Other examples have been found in Palestine but no-one knows who 'invented' this linear alphabet, apparently it looked a bit Egyptian so, like most things, it was an evolved version of its predecessors. It was in Phoenicia (now Lebanon) that this alphabetic writing crystallized and then spread across the Mediterranean world where it was assimilated by other cultures and continued to evolve.



This is what the Phoenician alphabet looked like; still no vowels but much simpler, much easier to learn and much more versatile. The 'why' of 'why have an alphabet instead of

⁴ From the Latin *cuneus*, meaning 'wedge'.

⁵ The Sinai peninsula is part of Egypt. It has a border with Israel.

⁶ Known as Proto-Sinaitic or Proto-Canaanite

pictures or syllables, becomes clear when you appreciate that the Roman alphabet has twenty-six letters which can make over half a million words.

Some early scripts did not have a fixed direction; writing could go left-to-right, right-to-left or vertically. Some early texts are like a ploughed field, left-to-right in the first line, right-to-left in the second and so on. The Phoenician alphabet 'settled down' around 1100 – 1150BC and the right-to-left direction became fixed, the direction that the main Semitic scripts still use.

As the Phoenicians were sea-faring traders, its not surprising that, among other things, they exported their alphabet. The earliest evidence for this export is about 740 – 730BC, to Greece. It could have been earlier as, in very early Greek inscriptions, the writing direction is still not fixed. Then the Greeks made some changes, adding the first vowels and deciding to write left-to-right.

Lots of the letters in this alphabet took their names from the earlier pictograph from which they developed. B comes from *bet* in Hebrew (*Bayt* in Arabic), the name for a house; the pictograph was a picture of a house. Get the picture? And you might like to know that our A is likely-as-not an upside-down bull's head without eyes.

Now we are getting close to 'our' alphabet, an alphabet that has time travelled through pictures, languages and cultures, eventually passing from the Greeks via the Etruscans to the Romans where it becomes the Latin script.

The Romans adapted and developed the Etruscan alphabet and introduced word spacing and some more punctuation.



Roman alphabet

The Anglo-Saxons began using Roman letters to write Old English, as they converted to Christianity, in the sixth century AD.

The written word has long been a key to knowledge and knowledge is power. Egyptian priests made the hieroglyphic script *more* complicated so that secular people wouldn't be able to understand it.

A simple alphabet means that anyone can learn to read and write. When anyone can learn to read and write, literacy moves beyond the control of a scribal elite. Before sound media (radio and TV), books, posters, pamphlets and newspapers were the main disseminators of information. Ideas distributed in this way led to social change and sometimes revolution. Now, 4000 years after the occurrence of a reasonably simple *western* alphabet, we can transmit and receive ideas, through the written word, faster

than ever. With the majority of the world's population now able to read and write, the possibilities of the written word are still unfolding...

Of course the contradiction to the above is Chinese writing. It survived for 3,000 years as a mainly pictogram-based system and developed along cuneiform lines – from pictogram to ideogram⁷. But the Chinese spoken language has a vast amount of single-syllable 'short-sound' words so it follows that these sounds had to share many meanings. In their spoken language, the Chinese distinguish words that sound the same but mean different things, by pitch. If Chinese had developed as a phonetic alphabet, identically written short words might have stood for over thirty separate meanings. Chinese characters are now logographic⁸ and have both a phonetic⁹ and a semantic¹⁰ component and there are between two and three thousand separate signs for everyday writing *plus* accompanying ideograms. China's literacy rate is over 90%, as good as anywhere else, which rather blows a hole in the supposition that a simple alphabet is an aid to mass literacy.

謝 Thank	好 Good	心 Heart	夢 Dream	念 Thought	恆 Permanent
真 True	吉 Luck	新 New	富 Wealth	順 Obedient	賀 Celebrate
益 Profitable	信 Trust	善 Kind	威 Awesome	發 Prosperous	恭 Congratulate
愛 Love	強 Strong	恩 Gracious	貴 Noble	忍 Patience	望 Expectation
福 Fortune	樂 Cheerful	喜 Happiness	智 Wisdom	美 Beautiful	勤 Diligent
仁 Merciful	壽 Longevity	學 Study	康 Health	勝 Win	天 Sky

There is an old story that Socrates wrote about the Egyptian god, Thoth, the inventor of writing. Thoth went to see the king because he wanted the royal blessing for his invention. The king said, 'You like your letters because you invented them. You think you have invented an elixir of memory but really it's just opinion. You offer the reader an appearance of wisdom, but it might not be wisdom - they might be reading tosh - and they will be seen to be wise when in fact they may be ignorant.'

So, here is an array of letters for you. Writing as art, writing as homage, writing as message, writing as design, writing on the wall and off the wall, writing on the body, writing as history and writing as the future, all made up of signs for sounds.

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⁷ A character or symbol representing an idea, or a thing, without expressing the pronunciation of a particular word or words for it, as in the traffic sign commonly used for "no parking" or "parking prohibited." Also called *ideograph*.

⁸ A logograph is a picture which represents a word rather than an idea.

⁹ Representing a vocal sound.

¹⁰ Related to meaning.