ON THE ORIGINS OF THE LATIN ALPHABET

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When you work with words all day, every day, you start to wonder about them—where they came from, how they were formed, and what they originally meant. And you think about all the books in all the libraries, and all the contracts, and manifestos, and peace treaties, and love letters, and invoices that have been written since the dawn of our civilization, all with just a handful of letters. It's an amazing story, when you think about it.

How did writing start? And why? What were people so keen to write about that they invented writing?

To answer these questions we must go back to a place called Sumer in the Fertile Crescent, the land surrounding the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Mesopotamia. There, roughly eleven thousand years ago, our nomadic ancestors discovered agriculture, which allowed them to settle in one place and become sedentary farmers. After hunting and gathering for millennia, they learned that they could sow seeds and reap the harvest—they just had to stick around. They found fertile land along the river banks, where they planted crops and vines and built up herds of livestock. Gradually, small settlements were formed. Before long, families expanded and merged with other families and soon villages were springing up and creating an entirely new way of life.

Agriculture made life easier in some ways, but it also brought new challenges. Farmers had to store their barley, their dried meat, and their wine for their own use. They also had to keep some grain for the following year's seed and for barter, and this created one of the new challenges. During their long centuries of migrations, of course, their hunter-gatherer forebears spoke to each other and told stories of their travels and trials and tribulations. Their oral histories connected one generation to the next, and their cave paintings recorded their experiences and their dreams, but there had never been any reason to write anything down. The new generations of farmers, however, found that they needed a way to keep track of what they produced.

At first they used tokens made of clay, which was readily available on the river banks. It's not hard to imagine (for example) a farmer watching someone, his child perhaps, scooping

up handfuls of wet mud and squeezing them into different shapes, like modern Plasticine, then drawing lines and squiggles on them with a sharp stick. The farmer might notice that when those chunks of clay were left in the sun they dried into hard objects, still bearing the designs scratched onto their surfaces. He might see a disc-shaped piece with a cross on it; a cylindrical one with a zigzag line; and another shaped like a cone decorated with a straight line. It might occur to him that if he used the disc with a cross on it to represent a sheep, and he had sixty of these discs on a shelf in the barn, then he would know that he had sixty sheep in his flock without having to go out and count them. And if he sold ten sheep to his neighbor he could put ten discs in a separate pile so as not to lose sight of the transaction until he was paid in full. If the cone with a line on it represented a loaf of bread, he could keep track of how many loaves were baked daily and where they went. He could make a token for barley, one for oil, one for amphorae of wine, and thus was born a primitive accounting system that was widely used for the next few thousand years.

By about five or six thousand years ago, the early Sumerian villages had expanded to form towns and then cities and then empires, and new factors had come into play. The concentration of large urban populations led to mass production which created a need for new technologies. The Bronze Age required minerals on an unprecedented scale and new caravan routes pushed farther and farther afield. The potter's wheel was invented, and metal and ceramic products were in great demand. Trade boomed, boosting new urban economies, and though more refined versions of the traditional tokens were still used—now inscribed with images (pictograms) of what they were intended to represent—new systems were needed to keep track of production, inventories, shipments, wages, and, of course, taxes. Merchants and governments and temples needed more sophisticated record-keeping methods, and clay 'envelopes' (*bullae*) emerged as the next solution in this long process. These were simply hollowed-out balls of clay. The tokens were put inside, then the envelope was sealed with clay and marked with the personal seal of the person or entity involved. These envelopes were an early sort of bill of lading; a farmer contracted with someone to deliver sheep or grain to an urban buyer, and gave that person a sealed envelope containing the appropriate tokens representing the type and quantity of merchandise in the shipment. This was a relatively simple way of keeping the delivery person honest.

But as trade became more complex, people realized that improvements were needed. The personal seals on the outer surface of the *bullae* validated the nature of the shipment, but to be effective the envelope had to arrive at its destination intact. This was not a problem in the early days, on a small scale, when there was just one seller and one buyer. But once a middleman or distributor became involved, how was he to know what tokens were inside the envelope unless he broke it open? And once he did, the integrity of the original shipper's seal was voided. So, what happened when the distributor sent the sheep or grain on to the end customer?

To get around this situation, the farmer started marking the outer surface of the envelope with images of the enclosed tokens as well as his own seal. Sometimes the face of the token was pressed into the damp clay of the envelope. In other cases, the symbols were drawn with a sharp stick. So, of course, the markings on the outer surface gradually took the place of the old token system because now people could read what was in the clay envelope without having to break it open. Bit by bit the images of the tokens replaced the tokens themselves, which was a crucial step on the journey from the old system to the new art of writing. Soon, tokens disappeared altogether. Then, the envelopes were replaced by clay tablets, and merchants and government agents and temples now had written records that could be fired in a kiln and kept. Our modern concept of a filing system was born.

In time, the sticks or reeds that had once been used to etch symbols into the surface of the envelopes were replaced with a wedge-shaped stylus that was pressed into the soft clay of the tablet. This style of writing is known as cuneiform script, a name derived from the Latin *cuneus* ("wedge") and *forma* ("shape"). Like Egyptian hieroglyphs, which were possibly also inspired by the earlier Sumerian invention, cuneiform script began as a system of pictographs, with one symbol for each item. This meant that there were literally hundreds of symbols to memorize, so scribes became very important people because—then as now—those who controlled information were powerful. The pictographic system had a number of disadvantages, however, including a high risk of error due to a scribe's poor drawing skills, the challenge of representing abstract concepts, and the vast number of symbols that limited the development of a literate society. In time, these obstacles were overcome as alternative systems emerged and early cuneiform script mutated from the basic pictograph or representation into something far more abstract. These new stylized symbols rapidly proliferated to enable more complex communication, and soon the system had evolved beyond a mere checklist to become a fluid expression of spoken language, the beginning of what we now call writing.

By about three thousand years ago, the Phoenicians, who lived along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean had learned to distinguish between vowels and consonants and had invented a rudimentary alphabet that made the previous systems obsolete. They identified 22 consonants and assigned a character to each one, which was far more manageable than the four hundred or so characters required by that time for cuneiform script. This streamlined version was understandably very popular. It was widely disseminated around the Mediterranean as a result of Phoenicia's maritime trading culture, and eventually replaced cuneiform script and hieroglyphs to become the basis for all subsequent alphabets. Being a Semitic language, Phoenician could get by with nothing but consonants. But what about the vowels?

We have the Greeks to thank for including vowels in their version of the Phoenician alphabet in about the 8th century BC. Some say that the desire to create a written record of Homer's poems was what prompted the addition of vowels to the existing 22 consonants. This new, simplified and highly versatile Greek alphabet led to an explosion of literacy in Greece which allowed the Athenians to develop new disciplines, such as history and philosophy, and to dazzle later civilizations with their literary accomplishments.

Greek colonists then took the new alphabet to Italy, where it was adopted and modified by the Etruscans. The Etruscan version was then further modified by the Latins, an Italic tribe living in the vicinity of the seven hills of Rome. These ancient Romans developed it into the Latin alphabet just in time for it to join Greek as one of the two lingua francas of the Roman Empire as it spread across Central and Western Europe, eventually giving rise to the Romance languages we know today. Much later, in the 6th century AD, when Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, began the re-Christianization of Britain he brought with him the Latin alphabet, which the Saxon kings soon adapted into what eventually became modern English.

Variants of Roman script, based on the Latin alphabet, are the most prevalent forms of writing in the world. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) arrived at a universal character code based on the Latin alphabet. ISO 8859-1, the "Latin Alphabet No. 1," is now the widely used standard replacement for ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange).

Our 26-letter writing system has come a long way since those early days on the river banks in Sumer. It has evolved with us over the centuries, allowing us to keep track of our history and our accomplishments: the human written record can be found on clay tablets and stone monuments and plaques deposited on the moon. The characters we type on our computer keyboards today are a distant descendant of the primitive symbols originally devised by mankind at a time when our current world would have been unimaginable. Those symbols eventually provided the organizational framework and the structure we needed to develop and expand the fields of knowledge that define us. As translators we work with these characters or their equivalents in all their permutations as we transfer information and meaning from one language to another. As translators we are intimately involved with a form of communication that was born out of an evolutionary need, has been nurtured for centuries by human creativity, and is inextricably intertwined with the destiny of mankind.

A partial list of sources and inspirations:

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