

# A short history of writing

Writing is not part of language; the relation between the two is accidental.

Writing is secondary in terms of

- distribution (many languages are not written);
- individual history (we learn writing after speech);
- general history (writing is relatively late);
- logic (any language can be written in any way).

# A short history of writing

Any language could be written in any writing system:

*brown* ~ μπραουν, браун, برون

# A short history of writing

Writing is not part of language; the relation between the two is accidental.

Latin script: Western Indo-European languages, Hungarian, Finnish, Estonian (Uralic), Turkish (Turkic), Vietnamese (Austro-Asian)...

Arabic script: Arabic (Semitic), Urdu (Indo-European), Turkish (Turkic), Swaheli (Bantu)...

# A short history of writing

E.g. Kazakh writing (Turkic language, Kazakhstan):

- Arabic (11<sup>th</sup> c onwards)
- Cyrillic (19<sup>th</sup> c, sporadically)
- Latin (officially 1927–40)
- Cyrillic (officially 1940–), but
  - Latin for Kazakh minority in China (1964–84)
  - Arabic for Kazakh minority in China (1984–)
- Latin (2025–, presidential decree in 2017)

# A short history of writing

E.g. Kazakh writing (source: Wikimedia Commons)

Kazakh in Cyrillic script	Kazakh in Arabic script	Kazakh in Latin script	English
<p>Барлық адамдар тумысынан азат және қадір-қасиеті мен құқықтары тең болып дүниеге келеді. Адамдарға ақыл-парасат, ар-ождан берілген, сондықтан олар бір-бірімен туыстық, бауырмалдық қарым-қатынас жасаулары тиіс.</p>	<p>بارلىق ادامدار تۆمسىنان ازات جانە قادىر-قاسيەتى مەن كۇقىقتارى تەڭ بولپ دۇنيەگە كەلەدى. ادامدارعا اقبل- پاراسات، ار-وجدان بەرلگەن، سوندىقتان ولار بىر-بىرىمەن تۇستىق، باۋىرمالدىق قارىم-قاتىناس جاساۋلارى تىيس.</p>	<p>Barlyq adamdar ty'mysynan azat ja'ne qadir-qasi'eti men quqyqtary ten' bolyp du'ni'ege keledi. Adamdarg'a aqyl- parasat, ar-ojdan berilgen, sondyqtan olar bir-birimen ty'ystyq, bay'ymaldyq qarym- qatynas jasay'lary ti'is.</p>	<p>All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.</p>

# A short history of writing

E.g. Kazakh writing

variable even within  
one system!

(source: Wikimedia Commons)

بورونقى اوتكان دامانده بىر دانشمند كىشى بغداد شەرى ننگ بىر  
اولكان قاضى سى ننگ اويونە كىلەوب قونوبتى قاضى بىرلان  
سويلاسىب قاضى نى سوزكا جىنكابروبتى صونده قاضى قورقوب بول  
مغان كىلكان بىر پله ايكان مننگ قاضى لىغومنى تارتوب آلصه كىراك  
نه ده بولسه بوغان جالنبوب صى بىروب اورنومده قلابوندىب  
خاتونينه آقيلدا سوبتى .

Бурыңғы өткөн заманда бір данышпан кісі Бағдат сәрі-  
нің бір үлкөн казысының үйүнө келіп конупту. Казы—мјнән  
сөйлөсүп, казыны сөзгө жеңә-беріпті. Сонда казы коркуп, „бул  
маған келгән бір бәлә: менің казылығымны тартыб—алса,  
керәк! не-дә болса, буған жалынып, сый беріп, орнумда кала-  
јын!“ деп, катынына ақылдасыпты.

A 1902 Kazakh text in both Arabic and Cyrillic scripts. In modern orthography: «Бұрыңғы өткен заманда, бір данышпан кісі, Бағдат шаһарының бір үлкен қазысының үйіне келіп қоныпты. Қазыменен сөйлесіп, қазыны сөзге жеңе беріпті. Сонда қазы қорқып, — „Бұл маған келген бала — менің қазылығымды тартып алса керек! Не де болса, бұған жалынып, сый беріп, орнымда қалайын!“ — деп, қатынына ақылдасыпты.» Note the differences between the older Cyrillic here and the current Cyrillic alphabet.

# A short history of writing

Earliest writing systems:

- Mesopotamia
- China
- Egypt
- Central America
- Near East (Palestine/Levant)

Some evidence of a transition from logographic to phonographic writing via the **rebus principle**.

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Fictitious examples:

≈ 'sea'

⊙ 'l'

⊓ 'toe' logograms (sign ~ word)

≈ 'sea' → 'see' homophonic transition

⊙≈ 'icy' composition based on full sound shape

≈⊙⊓ 'site' composition based on first sound

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logogram: sign ~ word

phonogram: sign ~ sound unit (segment, syllable, C, CV)

ideogram: sign is category marker (determinative)

pictogram: a logogram or an ideogram that has a  
resemblance to its referent

Earliest writing systems show mixture of these.

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## Cuneiform writing

- Mesopotamia, 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC
- wedge-shaped marks pressed into clay with reed
- gradually stylised (=simplified)
- shifts based on meaning (plough → farmer)
- shifts based on sound (*ti* 'arrow' → *ti(l)* 'life')
- later syllabic signs appear
- determinatives (<sup>WOOD</sup>X 'plough' vs. <sup>HUMAN</sup>X 'farmer')

# A short history of writing

## Cuneiform writing

Summary account of silver for the governor written in Sumerian Cuneiform on a clay tablet. From Shuruppak, Iraq, circa 2500 BC. British Museum, London.

Source:  
[omniglot/Wikimedia](https://www.wikimedia.org/)



# A short history of writing

## Cuneiform writing

Calculating beer ratios

Source: F. Coulmas  
*Writing Systems*



# A short history of writing

## Cuneiform writing → languages

- Sumerian (language isolate), ~3000 BC
- Akkadian languages (Semitic: Assyrian, Babylonian, 3<sup>rd</sup> mill BC)
- Elamite (language isolate, 3<sup>rd</sup> mill BC)
- Anatolian languages (Indo-European: Hittite, Luwian, 2<sup>nd</sup> mill BC)
- Ugaritic (Semitic, 2<sup>nd</sup> mill BC)
- Old Persian (Indo-European: 1<sup>st</sup> mill BC)
- (then replaced by Semitic scripts, e.g. Phoenician)

# **A short history of writing**

## **Cuneiform writing: decipherment**

by Georg Friedrich Grotefend in early 19<sup>th</sup> c

based on the Behistun inscriptions: ~500 BC, by  
Dareios, in Old Persian, Babylonian and Elamite

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Behistun inscriptions: (source: Wikimedia Commons)



# A short history of writing

Behistun inscriptions: (source: Wikimedia Commons)



# A short history of writing

Behistun inscriptions: (source: Dunderhead's blog)



# A short history of writing

## Chinese writing

- early 2<sup>nd</sup> mill BC
- bronze tablets and oracle bones
- pictographic, then stylised (much like cuneiform)
- logographic, in modern form a combination of phonetic markers and category markers (semantic units)

# A short history of writing

## Chinese writing

oracle bone from 2<sup>nd</sup>  
mill BC

source: omniglot



# A short history of writing

## Chinese writing

the development of symbols

Source: F. Coulmas  
*Writing Systems*









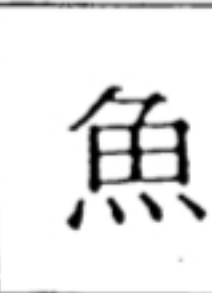
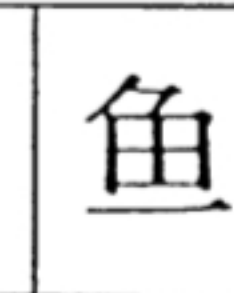
Bronze script	Oracle-bone script	Large-seal script	Small-seal script	Clerical script
				
Standard script	Running script	Cursive script	Printed character standard script	Printed character simplified script
				

Table 2 The Chinese character 魚 yú 'fish' in different scripts

# A short history of writing

## Chinese writing

combinations of  
semantic and  
phonetic markers

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力	strength	工	功	effect	gong
穴	hole	工	空	empty	kong
絲	silk	工	紅	red	kong
水	water	工	江	river	jiang
木	tree	工	杠	staff	gang
攴	strike	工	攻	attack	gong

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Source: F. Coulmas  
*Writing Systems*

# A short history of writing

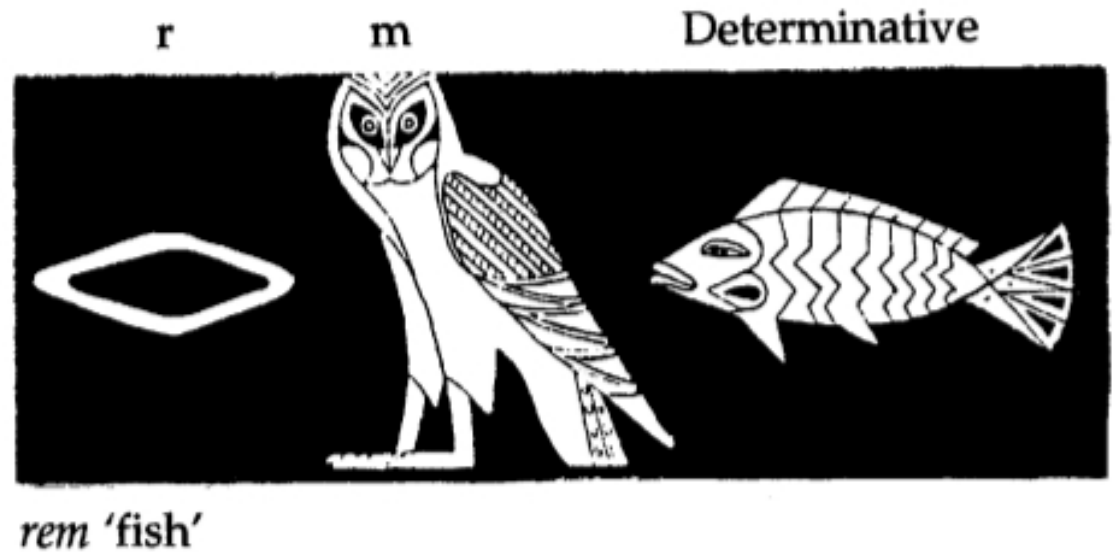
## Egyptian writing

- early 3<sup>rd</sup> mill BC
- earliest form already combine logographic, phonographic and determinative symbols
- developments of symbols towards syllable or consonants marking
- hieroglyphic, hieratic and demotic script work in the same way (they are not structurally different); they represent different stages in cursivisation
- deciphered by Jean-François Champollion in early 1800's (demotic when 16, hieroglyphic when 30)

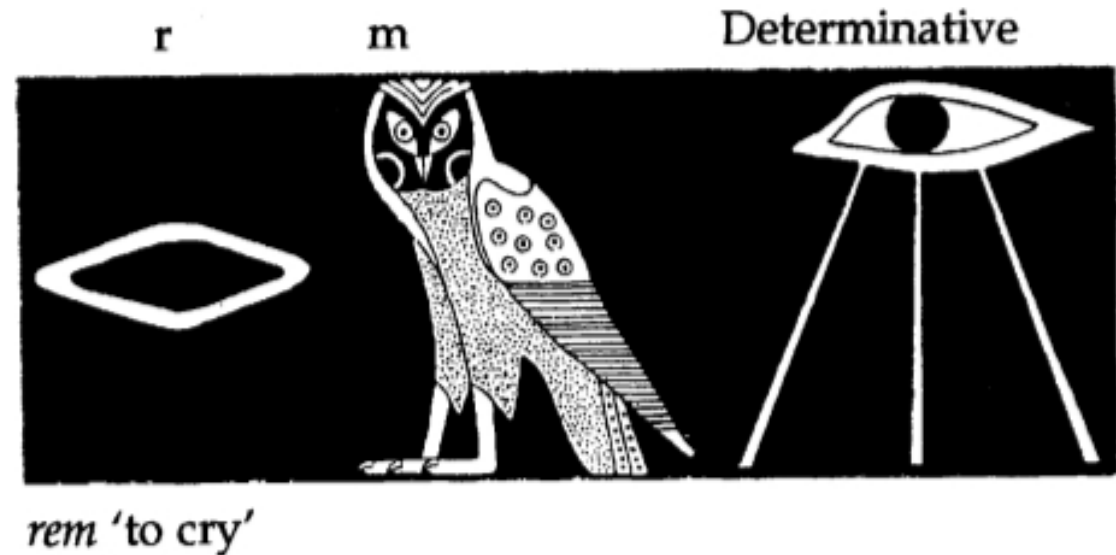
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## Egyptian writing

homophones distinguished  
by determinatives



Source: F. Coulmas *Writing  
Systems*



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## Egyptian writing

cartouche with the name  
*Ptolemy*

Source: F. Coulmas *Writing  
Systems*



□ ◯ 𐀀 𐀁 = 𐀂𐀃𐀄  
P T O L M Y S

# A short history of writing

## Egyptian writing

cartouche with  
the name  
*Caesarion*

Source: Wikimedia  
Commons



# Egyptian writing

## The Rosetta stone

Source: British Museum



# A short history of writing

Egyptian writing

The Rosetta stone



# A short history of writing

## Phoenician writing

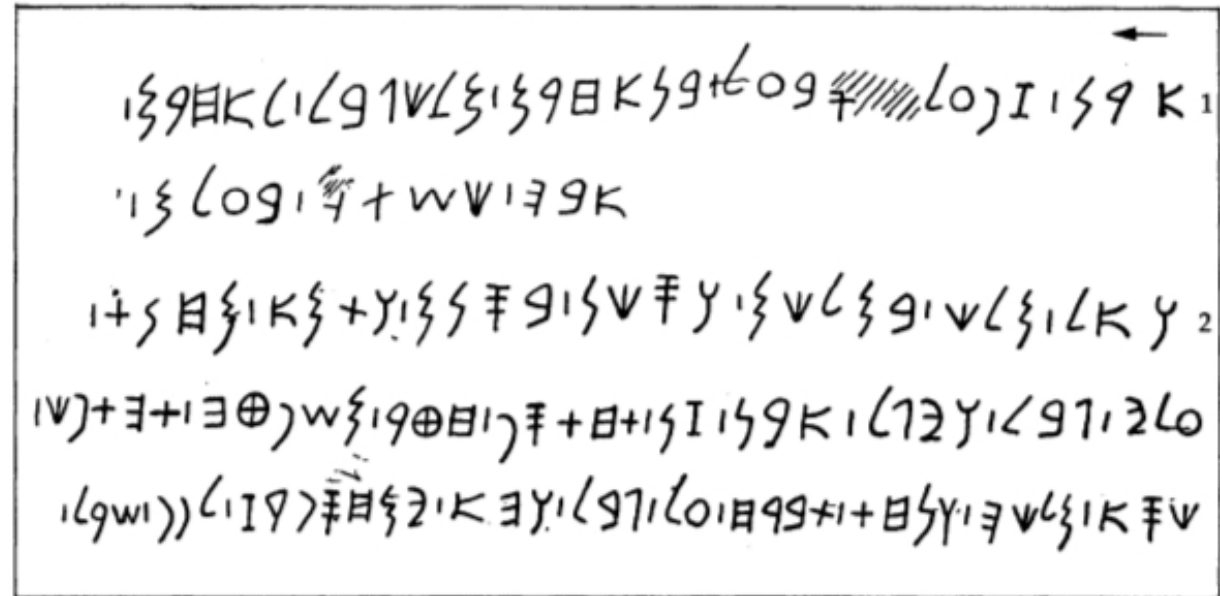
- end of 2<sup>nd</sup> mill BC
- West Semitic script
- phonographic writing, only consonants marked
- direction: right to left
- ancestor of several writing systems, e.g. Old Hebrew and Greek

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## Phoenician writing

Inscription of King Ahiiram's sarcophagus (Byblos, 11<sup>th</sup> c BC)

Source: F. Coulmas *Writing Systems*



1 'rn z p' l[. .]b' 1 bn 'h̄rm mlk Gbl l 'h̄rm 'bh k šth b ' lm

2 w-' l mlk b-mlkm w-skn b-snm w-tm' mhnt ' lj Gbl w-jgl 'rn zn thtsp htr mšpth thtpk ks'mlkh w-nht tbrh ' l Gbl w-h' jmh

1 Sarcophagus made by Ba' l, son of Ahiiram, king of Gubla, for Ahiiram, his father, when he laid him to rest in eternity

2 And when a king of the kings, a governor of the governor and the commander of the camp ascends to Gubla to uncover this coffin, shall the sceptre of his judiciary be removed, the throne of his reign be toppled over, and shall peace flee from Gubla and he be eradicated

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## Phoenician writing

The alphabet

'āleph	𐤀	,	lāmedh	𐤀	l
bēth	𐤁	b	mēm	𐤂	m
gīmel	𐤂	g	nūn	𐤃	n
dāleth	𐤃	d	sāmekh	𐤄	s
hē	𐤄	h	'ayin	𐤅	'
wāw	𐤅	w	pē	𐤆	p
zayin	𐤆	z	sādhē	𐤇	s
hēth	𐤇	ḥ	qōph	𐤈	q
tēth	𐤈	t	rēš	𐤉	r
yodh	𐤉	j	šin	𐤊	š
kaph	𐤊	k	tāw	𐤋	t

Source: F. Coulmas  
*Writing Systems*

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**Phoenician writing** The origin of the Greek vowel letters  
(Source: F. Coulmas *Writing Systems*)

Phoenician			Greek		
<u>name</u>	<u>sign</u>	<u>value</u>	<u>name</u>	<u>sign</u>	<u>value</u>
'aleph	𐤀	/ʾ/	alpha	Α	/a/
he	𐤁	/h/	epsilon	ϵ	/e/
waw	𐤂	/w/	upsilon	Υ	/u/
yod	𐤃	/y/	iota	Ι	/i/
'ayin	𐤄	/ʾ/	omicron	Ο	/o/

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## Phoenician writing

- A variant was used to write **Aramaic** (also a Semitic language)
- Widely used all over the Near East in mid-1<sup>st</sup> mill BC; lingua franca
- Historically one of the most influential scripts with lots of descendants in Asia