Great Events from History: The Ancient World, Prehistory-476 C.E.

Greek Alphabet Is Developed

**Category** Cultural and intellectual history  
**Date** c. 1000 B.C.E.  
**Locale** Greece

The Greek alphabet became the ancestor of all modern European alphabets, including the English.

**SUMMARY OF EVENT**

An alphabet is a system of writing consisting of generally less than thirty symbols that represent all the spoken sounds of a language. The Greeks were the first to assign a single sound to a single letter; hence, they were the first to develop a completely phonetic alphabet.

Every system of writing in existence ultimately derived from pictures used to represent words. Such pictographic writing emerged independently in many places around the world. In Mesopotamia around 3000 B.C.E., Sumerians had a form of picture writing, followed by cuneiform in 2500 C.E. This was also the time of the earliest Egyptian hieroglyphs. China in 1500 C.E. developed a system in which each symbol designated a word. The Canaanites along the western shore of the Mediterranean had a pictographic writing system also, but they developed a syllabic alphabet around 1700 C.E. Syllables consisting of vowels and consonants were depicted as symbols, and peoples of the area, including a North Semitic group the Greeks came to call the Phoenicians, gradually devised alphabets consisting solely of consonants. All the several hundred alphabets that came into existence can be traced back to this area of the Middle East.

The Mycenaean peoples inhabiting the area on and around the Greek mainland also had a writing system c. 1500-1100 C.E. Designated by twentieth century translators as Linear B, it derived from Crete, an island south of Greece, where Minoans devised a system designated Linear A to record items of commerce and official records. Linear B had at least eighty-eight signs with a few vowels, but it was a clumsy syllabic method of writing used only by the elite. During the twelfth century B.C.E., Doric-speaking invaders from the northwest or possibly Doric-speaking Greeks who were already part of the Mycenaean culture overthrew the nobility. Greece was then illiterate for the four centuries around the time of Homer.

The twelfth century C.E. also saw the Phoenicians of the Canaanite region venture out to establish trade and colonies in the Mediterranean. They settled such places as Kition, Cyprus, Malta, Sicily, Sardinia, Spain, and possibly Carthage and Utica. Their alphabet was a series of consonants that is the distant ancestor of the modern Hebrew alphabet. The Phoenicians might have provided the alphabet to the Greeks as they traveled around the Mediterranean trading with various peoples, yet it is not unlikely that Greeks and Phoenicians lived together in a bilingual settlement in which the Greeks could learn the script at their leisure. Around 1000 B.C.E., the Greeks adapted the alphabet to fit the needs of their own speech.

The twenty-two-character Phoenician alphabet from aleph (Greek alpha) to taw (Greek tau) was accepted by the Greeks with few deletions. The Greeks were forced to add letters, however, for sounds that were present in their language but not used by the Phoenicians. The Greeks added psi for “ps,” chi for “kh,” and phi for “ph” around 800 C.E. Yet the most radical change that the Greeks accomplished was to create vowels as letters that stood alone for the first time in history. Phoenician sounds at the beginning of some of the letter names were hard for the Greeks to pronounce, so they emphasized a vowel sound of their own speech, which became the new sound of the letter. Alpha (“a”), epsilon (short “e”), eta (long “e”), iota (“i”), omicron (short “o”), upsilon (“u”), and omega (long “o”) formed the seven vowels in the twenty-four-character eastern Greek dialect of Ionian. The alphabet varied from region to region in the city-states of Greece. Some dialects, for example, adopted the Semitic qoph (an ancestor of the modern “q”) and digamma (an ancestor of the modern “f”). The Ionian dialect, however, was
declared the official alphabet of Greece in a decree of Athens in 403 B.C.E., and it became the classical Greek alphabet.

Another important development attributed to the Greeks is the direction the letters eventually took. Every European language that is derived from the Greek alphabet writes from left to right. Phoenician, like modern Hebrew and Arabic, ran right to left, but early Greek inscriptions were not consistent. Some have been found running right to left, left to right, vertically either top to bottom or bottom to top, and even in a hairpin fashion that flipped some letters in reverse. Also common was the Greek practice of boustrophedon, or “as the ox plows.” The letters in boustrophedon ran left to right, then right to left, so that they appear backward, then back to left to right, taking curves as they went. It must not have bothered readers of the time to read letters backward or upside-down. The practice is not as odd as it seems, for the readers would not have to automatically jerk their eyes back to the left margin in an unnatural fashion (yet one that is acceptable to readers of European alphabets). The Greeks standardized the left to right method around 600-500 B.C.E.

The orientation of symbols in the Phoenician language was important, because they were supposed to represent objects, albeit in an abstract way. The Greeks, however, were not constrained, for example, to leave aleph, the Phoenician word for “ox,” as an upside-down “A,” which represented an ox face, because the word alpha to them only meant the name of the first letter of their alphabet. With all the different directions the Greeks gave their scripts originally, letters flipped back and forth (for example, a backward “B” flipped over to become a forward “B”) before settling down to become the familiar ones of most modern European languages. Another possible reason the Greeks had to adjust the letters was to make them all taller than they were wide for uniform inscriptions into stone.

SIGNIFICANCE

The versatility of a totally phonetic alphabet led to a widespread acceptance of the Greek alphabet. The alphabet was simpler to memorize than systems of writing based on thousands of picture symbols, so more people were able to master reading and writing. The concept of an alphabet worked its way to Egypt, where the Coptic alphabet replaced hieroglyphs. The phonetic system has even been applied in the transliteration of Asian symbols so that they can be read by speakers of European languages. The Greek alphabet was sent east around the ninth century C.E. at the hands of the Greek missionary Saint Cyril, making it the direct ancestor of the Cyrillic alphabet used in Slavic countries.

The most significant Greek influence came from the speakers of the Chalcidian dialect of eastern Greece. Unlike the Ionian dialect, it was not established as Greece’s official alphabet. Nevertheless, the Chalcidian dialect traveled west from Kyme, Boeotia, and Euboia on the eastern shores of Greece to colonies on the island of Pithecusa (present-day Ischia) around 775 B.C.E., as well as near the city of Cumae on Italy itself. The peoples of the area were called the Etruscans, and they accepted this Greek alphabet that had an “f” and a “q” for use in writing their language. Etruscan symbols are the direct ancestor of the Roman alphabet, and, from there, all European alphabets.

FURTHER READING

1989. Useful appendices show early Mycenaean and **Greek** signs, while the first chapter, “Prehistoric and Ancient **Greek**,” is an easily accessible introduction to the **Greek** alphabet.


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**Article Citation**