A HISTORY OF WRITING

Some reviews of the first edition:

'Albertine Gaur's work is, in fact, much more than a history of writing; it is, rather, a history of the entire apparatus by which human speech or ideas have been rendered in visible form, pictographic, syllabic or alphabetic. The scope, in time and space, is breath-taking.'

The Book Collector

'A History of Writing is exactly what it professes to be, an encyclopedic reference book which traces chronologically and geographically all the major scripts which have contributed towards the development of writing... This is not an academic book for experts alone, but a highly readable and informative guide, beautifully produced with numerous illustrations, some in colour, and including a bibliography for those who acquire a taste for more specialized knowledge in this fascinating field.'

The Times Educational Supplement

'The volume is attractively produced and profusely illustrated with excellent photographs of manuscripts and inscriptions... The book is addressed to general readers and will certainly arouse their keen interest.'

British Book News

Albertine Gaur is Deputy Director, Oriental Collections, The British Library

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A history of writing
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Abbreviations used in the text

AB  A.L. Basham, *The wonder that was India*. London, 1954
GM  Garrick Mallory, *Picture writing of the American Indians*. Washington, 1893
JPW  Joyce Irene Whalley, *The pen's excellence: calligraphy of Western Europe and America*. 1980

Preface

Most works dealing with the history of writing look upon writing mainly as a means of reproducing language with the aid of graphic symbols. This attitude automatically imposes a hierarchical structure. If the aim of writing is the reproduction of language then the most satisfactory, and by implication the most advanced, form of writing, is the one which reproduces language most accurately, in the most economical manner — which inevitably leads to the alphabet. In the same way, if writing is based on the use of graphic symbols then the material most suited to receive and preserve such symbols is the material most suited for writing — which in turn leads to paper. Taking this attitude to its logical conclusion, writing can then be divided into three main groups: 'proper' writing, where a small number of codified graphic symbols reproduce, most accurately, the sounds of a particular language; 'forerunners of writing', where the sound element is still absent and symbols (or perhaps objects) reproduce whole ideas; and 'transitional' forms of writing where sound elements start to emerge. The alphabet thus becomes a Platonic idea towards which all forms of 'proper' writing must by necessity progress.

Until very recently such an attitude was indeed perfectly justifiable, perhaps even self-evident. But during the last thirty years, especially during the last decade, the situation has changed dramatically. As we advance further and further into the new age of information technology, the storage, preservation and, ultimately, the dissemination of knowledge, depends no longer on the actual process of writing. Computers store information in an electronic memory by means of positive and negative impulses — the way information was once (during the age of oral tradition) stored in the human brain. With everything around us changing it is perhaps time to re-examine the concept of writing and look at it, not from the point of view of how effectively it can store language, but how effectively it can store information; information essential to the economic and political survival of a given society.

An extensive and in parts highly detailed literature exists on the various aspects of writing, the different scripts, their history and possible relationship to each other, and this study in no way pretends to compete with the work done by individual specialists in their respective fields. Its aim is of a more general nature; namely, to look upon writing from the late 20th-century concept of information storage, to examine the interactions between society and writing and to introduce the subject to a wider and more general audience. The story of writing is a tale of adventure which spans some twenty thousand years and touches all aspects of human life. It is important in universal, not just in scholarly, terms. Such an overall view of a highly complex subject must by necessity omit many details and invite speculations with which individual specialists may not always wish to agree. For those interested in a more detailed and perhaps more traditional approach there is a select bibliography at the end of this book (amended for the second edition) and there are abbreviated references in the text itself; the purpose of the latter is less to reinforce a particular opinion than to lead the reader to places where he or she can find more information of a factual and/or bibliographical nature.

While the opinions expressed in this study are of course my own responsibility, I am greatly indebted to colleagues inside and outside the British Library who have generously
allowed me to share their time and expertise. I would especially like to thank my
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John Ronayne.

10 March 1987
Albertine Gaur

Preface to Revised Edition

I have taken the opportunity to make corrections and to update the bibliography. I have
also added a completely new dictionary of scripts, which I believe to be more or less
comprehensive for the most important scripts. My thanks to David Dawson for his
painstaking care in the production of the artwork for this section of the book.

January 1992
Albertine Gaur
PLATE III Kalpanika, from Gujarat, dated 1502/1445. The seers, priests and astrologers consult their scrolls to determine the meaning of Queen Trishala's fourteen dreams and write down their opinion.
(British Library; Oriental Collections; Or. 13700, f. 61)

PLATE IV Almanac written on cloth; the beginning is illustrated with signs of the zodiac; in the Rajasthani folk-style; 1844/45 AD. (British Library; Oriental Collections; Or. 13489)

PLATE V Among the Egyptian pantheon, the tri-headed Toth acts as arbiter and patron of letters. He is here shown noting down the answers given by the deceased royal wife Honefer in the course of the latter's judgment in the realm of Osiris. From Thoth, 19th Dynasty, c. 1250 BC. (British Museum; Department of Egyptian Antiquities; 10476)

PLATE VI Page from the Lindisfarne Gospels; the main text (7th century) is written in insular minuscule (a script first developed in early Christian Ireland), with decorated initials, and the Anglo-Saxon gloss (added in the mid-8th century) written in insular minuscule. (British Library; Department of Manuscripts; Cotton MS. Nero. D. iv, f.15)
I Origin and development of writing
What is writing and who needs it?

All writing is information storage. It is not the only form of information storage. Long before, and in many instances simultaneously with it, human memory served the same purpose. In most cases it was the memory of a specially trained and select group to whom society entrusted this task. Basic differences exist between these two forms of information storage which relate mainly, though not exclusively, to the transmission and the dissemination of information. Oral transmission needs personal, often (depending on the nature and complexity of the information) prolonged, contact between two or more individuals who have to be physically present at the same time and in the same place. Enough time has to be spent to satisfy (though never fully) the one who transmits the information that the other has effectively stored it in his memory, that he will be able to retain and eventually transmit it correctly. In the case of writing, the information is stored mechanically, on an independent object, and can be retrieved and used at any time, in any place (in the case of moveable objects such as books etc.) by all those who are able to consult and decode it. Here too, memory plays an important part, but only in the form of a one-time effort — that of learning the rules, however rudimentary or complex, of a particular form of script. Afterwards all information stored in this way is available to those who have mastered the rules.

Writing has other advantages, too. There are limits to the amount of data that human memory can retain. There is, in theory at least, no limit to the amount of information that can be stored in written form. In addition, being free of the often onerous task of having to assimilate completely (and perhaps permanently) some particular information, this information, consulted in written form, can be used as a basis for new speculations. Thus one can not only acquire the knowledge of previous generations but can use this knowledge to make new discoveries, and to formulate new conclusions, which can then be added to the ever-increasing corpus of available data. In other words, written information can be manipulated. Learning by heart has the disadvantage that it does not encourage critical thinking; and it has indeed always been preferred for poetry (religious and secular), history (legendary, epic, semi-fictional) or for secret knowledge not meant to go beyond the limits of a particular group.

If all writing is information storage, then all writing is of equal value. Each society stores the information essential to its survival, the information which enables it to function effectively. There is in fact no essential difference between prehistoric rock paintings, memory aids (mnemonic devices), wintercounts, tallies, knotted cords, pictographic, syllabic and consonantal scripts, or the alphabet. There are no primitive scripts, no forerunners of writing, no transitional scripts as such (terms frequently used in books dealing with the history of writing), but only societies at a particular level of economic and social development using certain forms of information storage. If a form of information storage fulfills its purpose as far as a particular society is concerned then it is (for this particular society) "proper" writing.

Basically, all forms of writing belong to either one or the other of two distinct groups — thought writing or sound writing. Thought writing transmits an idea directly; the drawing of a leg means "leg" or "to go", the drawing of a tree means "tree" (it could of course also mean "fresh", "green", "life", etc.)., the drawing of two trees can mean "forest" and so forth, in any language. Sound writing (phonetic writing) is far more complex. It is not as we, on the basis of our own experience and training might be tempted to assume, more natural, nor even necessarily always more effective. In many ways it is a tortuous and somewhat unnatural process. An idea has to be translated first into the sounds of a particular word or sentence in a particular language, then those sounds have to be made visible in the form of engraved, painted or incised signs on the surface of a definite object, signs which more often than not bear no relation to the content of the original thought. In order to consult the information (and ultimately the whole purpose of information storage is communication) these visual signs have to be translated back into the sounds of the same language, and from this the word, the sentence and the original idea have to be reconstructed in the mind of the reader. And this is in fact exactly how primitive people without any writing of their own view the process.

Though the division between the two groups is absolute and basic, it would be wrong to assume that it is also clear-cut, that all forms of writing belong, wholly and exclusively, to either the one or the other group. As we shall see later, phonetic (sound) elements evolved early and often quite rapidly in almost all ancient forms of writing. Ideographic (thought) elements indicative of a concept or word are eventually left behind in most — though by no means all — scripts (see Chinese writing, for instance, but also signs such as 2, 4, L, ¥ etc.), and phonetic elements become dominant and finally exclusive in syllabic, consonantal and alphabetic scripts.

The word "evolve" has been used on purpose. A good number of scholars have been, and still are, of the opinion that phonetic writing in the full sense is the result of a definite, unique invention which took place only once; others, with a somewhat less fundamentalistic turn of mind, see in phonetic writing the result of several sporadic and often (semi-)historically documented inventions made by a number of definite persons (see Invented Scripts, pp. 130–134). The latter opinion has been revived by recent observations of how a number of people belonging to still basically tribal communities in Africa, North America and Alaska (As, pp. 15–219) made often temporarily successful attempts at inventing indigenous forms of writing. However in all those cases one can see, if one looks more closely, that the invention was in reality more a modification, stimulated by a close contact between the inventor(s) and an established system of writing, usually the Roman alphabet or the Arabic script. The history of writing is a long process of evolution — though, as in all historical and evolutionary processes, stimulated along the way by the contribution of especially-gifted individuals.

What kind of writing a society evolves, or chooses, depends largely if not wholly on the kind of society it is. (For once the chicken comes definitely before the egg.) The mere availability of writing does not transform a society. If writing is irrelevant to the existence and survival of a particular society, this society will, on coming into contact with writing, either completely reject it or accept it in only a limited form, perhaps just for the use of a small and then often (but not always) privileged section. If a society has reached a stage of development where systematic writing becomes important for trade and administration (literature as such has always been able to manage perfectly well without it) — as happened in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Aegean — it will either evolve a script on the basis of already existing non-oral forms of information storage (such as memory aids, property marks, pictorial representations, tallies), or, often depending on the political situation, accept, adapt or modify the writing of another (not necessarily dominant) group, even if this form of writing might prove highly unsuitable for the linguistic peculiarities of its own
language (Mesopotamia and Japan are two examples). But nowhere do we find a case where a society first developed a systematic form of writing and then increased its level of social and economic efficiency. Scripts do not create civilizations or new forms of society, but societies can create a new form of information storage.

Let us here briefly recount: what exactly are the advantages and disadvantages of the two main groups? We have already discussed the advantages of the first group—the thought or ideographic form of writing. They are, as we have seen, the possibility of communicating ideas and thoughts directly between the writer and the reader without the intermediary of language. In other words, this form of writing is independent of language; it can be understood and read in any language. An example, well-known and widely used, is the Chinese script, about which more will be said later. The disadvantages are the great number of different signs which have to be used (and remembered); in the case of Chinese as many as 50,000 for literary, and some 2,000–4,000 for elementary, use (and the Chinese language is particularly well suited for this form of writing). In the case of languages with a complex grammar and a large number of purely formal words (Japanese, for example), additional aids might have to be sought to accommodate all needs.

We have discussed the disadvantages of phonetic scripts, namely their dependency on one particular language, the fact that ideas have to be translated into sounds and that these sounds must then be made visible in the form of conventionalized (mostly abstract) signs which in turn have to be retranscribed into the sounds of the (same) language and back into the original idea. Also, once a language has an established (written) form, any subsequent sound changes can only be accommodated by orthography, with the consequence that divergences between the spoken and the written form can become considerable (English is an example). The same applies if an established phonetic form of writing is used for a language, or languages, with a different sound structure (see the Indian-derived scripts of Southeast Asia). On the other hand, the advantages of a phonetic script — consonantal, syllabic or alphabetic— are considerable. In comparison to the 50,000 (or at least 2,000) Chinese characters, or the 700 or so Egyptian hieroglyphs, syllabic, consonantal and alphabetic scripts can manage with twenty to sixty signs. Information storage becomes thus more economic, less labour-intensive in relation to the time required to learn, read and write the script, and information can be stored in less space. In short, phonetic scripts are generally more cost-effective.

What kind of society can function with an ideographic form of writing (idea and thought transmission), using symbols and signs not yet fully codified or conventionalized, leaving a good deal to chance, individual imagination and an auxiliary background of commonly shared experience in both writer and reader? And what societies need for their survival and existence codified and economically usable systems which move towards and eventually reach a purely phonetic stage?

Scripts based on thought or idea transmission are perfectly adequate for societies with a pre-capitalist structure of economy. Here much depends on individual effort, or group efforts based on loose and often temporary bonding such as happens among hunters, primitive herdsmen or simple agriculturists, who may, for mutual benefit, form groups, (but not states) whenever the occasion demands it. This is the epic (some would say magic) stage where religion and society, history and legend are closely interwoven, with strong oral traditions helped perhaps by memory aids, notices or pictorial narratives.

On the other hand, societies which depend on coordinated labour efforts for irrigation, for example, which produce enough surplus to support a growing number of non-producing specialists, which assemble permanently in large and increasingly more densely populated areas (cities), need, sooner or later, some centralized form of organization; and centralized organization depends on an effectively functioning administration. One of the characteristics of this type of society is the high value it places on property, and the concept of property is by necessity interrelated with the idea of a state. Property may belong to an individual, a family or a group (as it did in the pre-capitalist societies), but ultimately all property (producer, owner, the family and the group) must in one way or the other belong to the state—the state being the sum total of all goods, lands and persons. Since property, especially the surplus of property on which the new prosperity depends, can now only be obtained by communal efforts, such a state needs laws to coordinate and control property and those who produce it, and needs to provide protection from outside as well as inside disturbances. The yearly inundations of the Nile could only have been utilized by an efficient, centrally organized administration. If property is important, then the legalized transfer of property, namely trade, needs equal safeguards. Trade and administration are transient affairs which have to be carried out with a reasonable amount of speed and a reasonable amount of unambiguous exactness. For this purpose a small number of signs which can be quickly learned, written (perhaps on perishable material in a cursive hand) and read, offer definite advantages over the ambiguity and/or complexity of a script based on idea transmission.

Most codified forms of writing (using a varying amount of) phonetic elements developed in capitalistically-orientated societies with a primitive technology: between 4000–3000 BC in the Fertile Crescent, about 2000 BC in the Far East (the very latest discoveries may add another millennium to this date), and perhaps around 1000 BC in Central America. Indeed many of the early documents written in those scripts relate to property. In Mesopotamia, Egypt and the ancient Aegean we come across lists of goods sold, transferred or received, letters, contracts, administrative accounts and records. There are also (usually on permanent material in a more monumental style) edicts of kings and references to deities — who are perceived as similar, often identical, to the temporary rulers of the land. Only gradually, and in many cases after a good deal of controversy, does the new codified form of writing replace oral traditions in the field of religious and secular literature.

How phonetic elements developed, how they were used, manipulated, differentiated, at times restrained, in their development, will be discussed later. Nowhere however was the evolution of writing truly linear; idea transmission does not lead automatically to the creation of a completely phonetic script. There are odd twists and curious retentions which may often look illogical and cumbersome, even unnecessary, but they always serve an overriding social need.