Writing in Southeast Asia

The area referred to as Southeast Asia consists of the mainland countries of Burma, Thailand (Siam), Kampuchea (Cambodia), Laos, Vietnam, and the southern archipelago stretching from Malaysia and Indonesia to the islands of Java, Bali, Sumatra, Borneo, Celebes and the Philippines. Geographically, linguistically and anthropologically it is one of the most diverse areas in the world. Culturally however there exists a certain degree of hegemony—a hegemony not, as a look at the map might suggest, orientated towards the geographically dominant neighbour China, but towards the Indian sub-continent. The main artery, the vital line of communication which acted as common denominator, and along which, during the 1st millennium A.D., elements of cultural consistency were introduced into various parts of Southeast Asia, was the sea: a knowledge of navigation and the monsoon winds, and trade, were the spur to movement. Along this route came Indian traders, colonists, military adventurers, Hindu priests, Buddhist monks and missionaries, bringing their language, their script (a South Indian Grantha variation of Brahmi) and their religion (Hinduism/Buddhism) with them. Over the centuries these elements were assimilated by the local population: Sanskrit, the ritual language of the Hindu priests, lost its position, often after a period of co-existence, to the local vernaculars, and eventually Buddhism proved more congenial to Southeast Asian thinking than Hinduism. The original kingdoms no longer exist but two elements have survived which have essentially influenced the character of Southeast Asia: the Buddhist religion, reinforced by the import of Pali manuscripts from Sri Lanka in the 11th and 12th centuries; and the various scripts, which, despite their visual diversity, derive from a common Indian source.

As we have seen, phonetically Indian scripts seem to have been carefully designed to fit Indian languages, Indo-European as well as Dravidian. In the case of the Tibetan language difficulties arose and adaptations had to be made. In Southeast Asia the Indian system of writing had to accommodate the linguistic peculiarities of four further and entirely different language groups: Sino-Tibetan, Thai, Malayo-Polynesian and Austro-Asiatic. This called for a good deal of modification and compromise. But such compromise was in most cases limited to the usage and the number of the syllabic consonant and vowel signs, which were either enlarged, diminished or interchanged; sometimes diacritic marks were added for the representation of the tonal range. The basic internal structure of the Indian script, the arrangement and construction of the syllabic units, the way in which vowels were represented (either initial or auxiliary), and the phonetic arrangements of characters, remained largely the same, as did the direction of writing. Visually the contemporary scripts of Southeast Asia look very different from each other, and from the various styles that evolved during the course of their development; but the same can be said about the modern scripts of the Indian sub-continent.

The development of Southeast Asian scripts is closely connected with the history of Southeast Asia, with the frequent shifts in the pattern of power, population movements and interactions between political and ethnic groups. Broadly speaking, the majority of modern mainland scripts such as Burmese (fig. 72), Cambodian, or Thai (fig. 73) can be traced back directly or indirectly to scripts introduced by Hindu colonists who created the

72 Kammavaca. A set of disciplinary formulas for the regulation of Buddhist monastic life, written on gilt-edged and lacquered palm leaves in Burmese square characters, 18th century. (British Library, Oriental Collections; Or. 4949)

73 Astrological text written in Thai, 19th century. (British Library, Oriental Collections; Or. 4830)
first independent Hindu kingdoms in Funan and Champa (now southern Vietnam) early in the 1st millennium AD. In the case of Burmese, the import of manuscripts written in Pali introduced (as has already been pointed out) additional elements. In fact, at one time, Southeast Asian scripts were (wrongly) labelled as the Pali branch of Indian scripts.

Most of the scripts used at one time or another on the various islands of Southeast Asia are linked to India, indirectly, via the so-called Kavi script which prevailed in Java between the 9th and 15th centuries. It is now generally thought that Kavi is not, as has sometimes been suggested, a new invention, or introduction (directly from India), but a later development of a script used for Sanskrit inscriptions during the middle of the first Christian millennium. This script differed only slightly from the South Indian (Pallava?) Grantha and showed similarities to the Cambodian script of the time. Kavi was directly responsible for the growth of modern Javanese (fig. 74), and it also stimulated the development of the greatly simplified scripts of the Batak, Rejang and Lampongs of Sumatra. In all three scripts the number of signs is greatly reduced; to twenty-three in the case of the Lampong, and to only nineteen in the Batak (see figs. 20, 22) and Rejang (fig. 75) scripts. Apart from the left to right direction, Batak is also written in vertical columns beginning at the lower left hand side.

It seems fairly certain that the two scripts of Celebes, namely Buginese and Macassarese, were equally derived from Kavi, perhaps through the intermediary of Batak. Kavi may also have been responsible (directly or indirectly) for the creation of the ancient and by now extinct Philippine scripts (id., pp. 432–441) which first became known in 1521 when the Spanish discovered the Philippine Islands. In the early years of Spanish domination, Catholic priests used them for the printing of religious books, as for example a translation (into Ilokano) of Cardinal Roberto Bellarmine’s *Dottina Christiana* brevissima which was published in Manila in 1631. The third decisive influence on the culture of Southeast Asia was Islam, which made itself felt from around the 15th century onwards. After this date Malay manuscripts were written mainly in the Jawi script, i.e. Arabic with four additional letters designed to represent sounds essential for the representation of the Malay language. Though Malay (and Indonesian) are nowadays mainly written in the Roman alphabet, in Malaysia Jawi represents an essential element of the national Islamic identity, and excellent calligraphy is produced by modern scribes.

74 Babad Pu-Cinan. A history of the Chinese war in Javasa, written in Javanese script; 19th century. (British Library: Oriental Collections; Addl. 12301)

75 A Rejang manuscript from South Sumatra, inscribed in strips of bamboo. The language is Malay and the writing the local Rejang script known as Ka-ga-ngga, 19th century. (British Library: Oriental Collections; Or. 17966)
The Greek cycle and the European situation

For nearly 3,000 years the alphabet has been the primary form of information storage in Europe and in all the regions where European civilization extended its influence. It is a purely phonetic system of writing, though not, as we have seen, the only one: syllabic and consonantal scripts were, and are still, used to the same effect. How then do these systems differ from each other?

In a syllabic script the basic unit represented by a graphic symbol is the syllable. Such a syllable may consist of consonant, plus vowel, plus consonant (e.g. ham), or consonant plus vowel (e.g. ba), or vowel plus consonant (e.g. am), or, in certain cases a vowel on its own may have syllabic value. Graphically a syllable may be represented either by an individual sign or a sign created by the combination of a consonant and an abbreviated vowel sign. The latter usually presupposes the existence of full vowel signs for the representation of vowels whenever they appear initially or on their own. One might say that such syllabic scripts exhibit certain alphabetic tendencies, but it is important to note that these tendencies are never enlarged or developed; not perhaps, as some scholars claim, because syllabic scripts are Sackgassen (blind alleys) from which it is impossible to progress any further, but because syllabic scripts are an excellent vehicle for the representation of a large number of languages. In the case of consonantal scripts, words are represented by their consonants only; and this in turn presupposes that they are used for languages where the basic meaning of the words is carried by consonants and where vowels are of secondary importance. Vowel indication may eventually develop, but remains strictly auxiliary and optional.

In alphabetic scripts the exact opposite holds true. Vowels and consonants have equal status and, at least in theory, each phoneme (smallest sound unit) is represented by one single sign. In practice this is no longer quite true, as in most modern languages two (th) or three (sch) signs are at times needed to express some consonantal sounds, and diaeresis are used to represent modified vowel and consonantal sounds (ä, ö, etc.), but such alternations are mostly peripheral. From the point of information storage, the alphabet can be adapted more effectively and more easily to languages of different sound and grammatical structures than can consonantal and syllabic scripts; being more flexible it can be manipulated with greater ease.

As to the question whether there does in fact exist a fundamental difference between the alphabetic, syllabic and consonantal scripts, scholarly opinion is divided. Some scholars designate all three systems alphabetic, others hold the view that consonantal scripts are really syllabic, and so forth.

The Greek alphabet

Greek tradition and modern scholarship alike consider the Greek alphabet a successful mutation of the Phoenician consonant script (see fig. 53). The earliest inscriptions of an alphabetic nature so far discovered come from the 8th century BC. It can be assumed that

the Greek came into contact with the Phoenician form of writing in one or several of the many Phoenician trading posts, either in Asia Minor, in Syria, or perhaps on one of the Greek islands. The time when the transmission took place may have been around 1000 BC, earlier or later according to various scholars.

The Phoenician consonant script was neither the first nor the only script that the Greeks tried to borrow and use for their language. Two attempts had previously been made to use a syllabic form of writing — the Cypriote script (see p. 79) and the Cretan Linear B (see p. 69). Neither script had proved particularly suitable and their use was short-lived and localized. In its original form the Phoenician script was if anything even less suitable, since Greek, as an Indo-European language, places equal importance on vowels and consonants. But this time the Greeks went beyond a mere borrowing. Inspired perhaps by the model of the Cypriote script which possessed separate signs for syllabically-used vowels, they established a convention by which some Phoenician consonant signs, for which the Greek language had no corresponding sounds, were used to represent vowels (a, e, i, o). In the course of time further modifications were made (such as the use of supplementary signs for ph, kh, ks, ps, etc.) but none was quite as important and as far-reaching as the stabilization of vowel representation and its continued systematic use. To begin with, a number of local variations of the alphabet arose to fit the various dialects spoken in different parts of Greece, but in about 400 BC the Athenians passed a law that made the use of the Ionian alphabet compulsory in official documents. Eventually the Ionian alphabet superseded the other local variations, and after this the Greek alphabet underwent no further radical alterations.

At first the Greek alphabet was written in the Semitic right-to-left direction, but eventually, in the 5th century BC, after a number of attempts to write in a boustrophedon fashion, the current left-to-right direction became firmly established. This change was accompanied by a reversal of all non-symmetric letter signs; in other words, letters such as B, K, N, A, and Z acquired their present form in this process. The term 'alphabet', taken from the names of the first two letters, alpha and beta, is documented from the 3rd century BC onwards. Alpha and beta, as indeed the names of nearly all Greek letters, are variations of the original Semitic names (aleph, beth etc.). The order of the letters too remained basically unchanged.

Over the centuries various styles of writing developed, some influenced to a small extent by the material used for writing. The early monumental style (fig. 76), also referred to as stone majuscule or capital script, was a beautiful epigraphic form with simple straight
lines well-suited for chiselling in stone or, more rarely, in metal. More rounded signs were preferred for writing with brush or reed pen on Egyptian papyrus, hide or, later, parchment. These rounded characters were moulded into a proper style in the so-called uncial script (fig. 77), which remained, until the 9th century AD, the prevailing book script. Eventually this style was in turn replaced by various more cursive forms, in particular the minuscule script (fig. 78), the true parchment script of the Middle Ages.
Coptic, Armenian and Georgian

In the first millennium AD a number of alphabets—such as Phrygian, Lycian, Lydian, Carian—were used (mainly by non-Hellenic peoples) in Asia Minor, but none of them gained lasting importance. In Egypt the situation was different. Alexander’s conquest and the foundation of Alexandria as a centre of Greek learning had caused the introduction of the Greek language and the Greek alphabet. Attempts were made during the first three centuries of the Christian era to adapt the Greek alphabet to the writing of the Egyptian language, but it was not before the 4th century, when Christian Manichaean and Christian missionaries began to work among the Egyptian-speaking element of the population, that translations of the Scriptures were made, and the then contemporary form of the Egyptian language, Coptic (from koine egyptiaca—Egyptian), became a literary speech.

Coptic was written in a modified Greek alphabet consisting of thirty-two vowel and consonant signs, of which twenty-five were taken from the uncial Greek script and seven from the demotic script of Egypt (see fig. 39). The Islamic conquest in 641 AD introduced Arabic to Egypt but the Coptic script (see fig. 36) remained in use until the 9th century.

The Christian communities continued to use Coptic until the 13th century (longer in some places) as their written and spoken language, and later as the liturgical language of the Coptic Church. The Coptic alphabet was borrowed, and further modified (for example, three signs were added from the cursive Merotic script) by the Nubian Church, for the writing of liturgical books in the vernacular.

At the beginning of the 5th century, sometime between 404 and 406 AD, St Mesrob, with the active encouragement of Catholics Sahak, created a system of writing for the Armenian people. This new script, which consisted of some thirty-six letters, was largely based on the Greek alphabet. At first mainly capital letters were used, but in the 13th century a more cursive form called lustrik (fig. 79) developed.

Tradition ascribes the creation of the Georgian alphabet to the same St Mesrob—who is also supposed to have devised an alphabet for the Albanians of the Caucasus (Oxol., p. 266). The main Georgian styles of writing are m’khv’r’vdzi (lay hand), still used at present, and the old ecclesiastical script which employed thirty-eight letter signs (fig. 80).
The Slavonic scripts

The origin of the two most important Slavonic alphabets, Glagolitic and Cyrillic, is to some extent connected with the rivalry between Constantinople and Rome, which had its origin in the division of the Roman Empire by Diocletian in the 3rd century AD. In the 9th century, after the establishment of a Slav principality in Moravia, King Rasitlaw of Moravia, in an attempt to free himself from the influence of the Roman Church, asked the Byzantine Emperor Constantine for teachers who would instruct his people in the true Christian faith in their own tongue. As a result the two brothers, Constantine (or, as he was later called, Cyril — d. 869) and Methodius (d. 885) were entrusted with the Slav mission, and, against considerable opposition from the Roman Church, which recognized only Hebrew, Greek and Latin for the translation of the Bible, Canon Law and other ecclesiastical books, they had translations made in the Slav language. According to the Vita Cyrillic, Cyril, after whom the Cyrillic alphabet is named, is traditionally credited with the invention of a script. Whether this script was Glagolitic (fig. 81) or Cyrillic (fig. 82) has for long been a matter of controversy, but the question has now more or less been decided in favour of Glagolitic. The two alphabets differ considerably in appearance, but as far as the phonetic value of the letters is concerned Glagolitic and Cyrillic (with forty and forty-three letters respectively) are very nearly identical; Cyrillic may contain borrowings from Glagolitic. The majority of letters are thought to have been derived from the Greek scripts.
of that period — although other elements seem to have been active. Of the two alphabets Cyrillic is without doubt the more important one. In due course, after a number of reforms and modifications, it became the national script of the Slavonic people. The Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians and Serbs accepted it, together with the Greek Orthodox religion. With the growing importance of Russia, Cyrillic became the 'Russian alphabet', and by replacing all other scripts in the European as well as the Asian part of the Soviet Union, it became the vehicle of information storage for more than sixty different languages.

83 Bronze jug with Etruscan inscription, c. 400–200 BC; probably from Bolonia. (British Museum; Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities; 1873, 8–20, 197)

The Roman alphabet

At some time in the 8th century BC, Greek settlers seem to have taken their alphabet to Italy, where it was adopted, after some more or less minor alterations and a great many local variations, by the Etruscans. Like the Semites and the people of the Indus Valley civilization, the Etruscans retain an air of mystery. So far nearly 13,000 inscriptions have been discovered, most of them (though not all) admittedly rather brief, and, being to a large extent funerary in kind, predictable. The Etruscan script is perfectly legible to us; the close connections between the Etruscan and the origins and early history of Rome are fully documented; yet we are still unable to reconstruct or even fully classify the Etruscan language. The early Etruscan alphabet (fig. 83) consisted of twenty-six letters, and like the early Greek script it was written from right to left. In some inscriptions the words are separated by dots in a manner reminiscent of a syllabic form of writing.

Runes

Since the 17th century, when Scandinavian scholars first began to take note of Runic inscriptions (68, p. 190), several theories concerning their origin have been advanced. Some believe Runes to be an independent invention by a single individual, others relate them to the Greek, the Roman or a mixture of the Greek and Roman alphabets. There are yet other theories which look upon Runes as a primordial Germanic script, derived (acrophonically) from prehistoric pictograms, but influenced and modified by the Roman uncial script. According to what is still the majority view, the Runes arose from a North Italian, Etruscan-based alphabet probably sometime in the 1st century BC. They were however never a literary script, existing records being mainly found on memorial stones, or on objects such as weapons, rings, and clasps, and not only their name (Old Saxon rīna, Old Irish nēn — secret; Middle High German rīne — secret, whispering) but their actual documented use indicates connections with cult and secret forms of writing.

A characteristic of Runes (fig. 84) is their angularity, there being practically no curved lines. This is usually attributed to the fact that wood (in all likelihood wooden sticks) or bones are supposed to have been the original writing material. The order of the letters and their names differ from the Greek and the Roman alphabet, but just as those alphabets are named after the first placed letters, so the Runic script is referred to as futhark after the initial letters (F U T H A R K) of its alphabet.

Two main groups may be distinguished. One is the old Germanic Runic alphabet, consisting of twenty-four letters arranged in three groups of eight (oziir families), which was used between 200–750 AD. Between 450 and 600 AD the Anglo-Saxons brought this script to England, where the number of letters was increased, first to twenty-eight and later to thirty-three. In the 7th century Irish and Roman missionaries went to considerable pains to suppress this script — no doubt because of its association with heathen practices — and replace it by the Roman alphabet.

The second main group is the later Nordic Runic alphabet which, at the time of the Viking expansion between 800 and 1050 AD, spread over various parts of Europe down to the Black Sea. Whereas in England the letters had been increased to cover phonetic
demands, in the Scandinavian countries the exact opposite happened and eventually only sixteen script signs remained, providing a rather inadequate coverage for the whole range of sounds employed by the spoken language. In the 10th century an attempt was made to remedy this shortcoming by the use of dotted runes, which made it possible to distinguish between k and g, p and b, d and t, e and i, and so forth (He, pp.550–579). After the 13th century the use of the Runic script diminished.

Ogham

The Ogham script seems to have been restricted to the Celtic-speaking people of the British Isles. The 360 inscriptions so far discovered in southern Ireland, Wales and Scotland and the Isle of Man date from between the 4th and 7th centuries, and are mostly found on tombs or memorial stones; but the script was also used for letters and messages, which were written on wooden staves, shields or similar items.

The origin of the Ogham script and the principle upon which the letters were arranged are still uncertain. Legend names Oghma mac Elathan as the inventor, while modern scholarship has tried to link Oghams with Germanic Runes and, more tentatively, with a knowledge of the Greek and/or Roman alphabet. The Oghams are, like Runes, divided into ‘families’: four groups, each containing five letters. The alphabet consists of twenty letters, which are represented by straight or diagonal strokes varying in number from one to five, drawn or cut below, above or right through a horizontal or vertical line (fig. 85), or along the edges of the object on which the letters are incised. Vowels are represented by one
Invented scripts

The question has often been asked: is writing — and in this context writing is usually equated with phonetic writing — the outcome of an evolutionary process, with scripts evolving independently from each other in various places and periods whenever socioeconomic conditions created similar needs? Or, is writing the result of a series of (mostly secondary) inventions, each one made by a particular individual in one particular place, all of them going back to one single Ur-invention? Those who believe in the monogenesis of writing usually credit the Sumerians with making the first — and only — decisive step from pictography to phonetic writing. But not all phonetic scripts can be traced back to ancient Mesopotamia. Even if we were to accept that the Egyptian hieroglyphs, the ancient Mediterranean scripts and, indirectly all cuneiform, syllabic and alphabetic scripts go back to one common root, this would still leave the Chinese and the pre-Columbian American scripts outside the framework thus prescribed. Furthermore, rudimentary phonetic elements can manifest themselves quite convincingly (see p. 21) within the limits of simple memory aids.

In the preceding pages we have repeatedly come across references to invented scripts. In civilizations where writing was held in high esteem, and practised by a priestly or otherwise privileged class, this invention was usually attributed to divine or semi-divine beings, or else to a group of persons referred to as culture-heroes. Thus in ancient Egypt the four-headed god Toth (see Plate V) was considered the inventor of writing and the official scribe of the gods. The Assyrians saw Nabu as the god of wisdom and writing. In ancient Mexico the Maya saw one of their most revered deities, Itzumna, the son of the Creator god. The Babylons attributed the invention of writing not only to the inventor of writing but also to the inventor of ‘books’. The Ogham script has been called an invention of the Druids, an important priestly class among the ancient Celts. And according to at least one tradition the family of the Prophet Muhammad is supposed to have invented the Arabic script. This is to give but a few examples.

The desire to give additional authority and sanctity to writing is equally prevalent among tribal communities. The Abnaki Indians of North America, for example, believed that the Oonagamesosok, a special group of deities, presided over the making of petroglyphs, and explained the gradual disappearance of these rock engravings by asserting that the Oonagamesosok were angered by the lack of attention accorded to them since the coming of the white man (GM, p. 32).

Moving from legend and mythology into the realms of recorded history, we repeatedly find the names of kings, rulers, statesmen, writers, reformers, Buddhist monks and Christian saints associated with the invention of certain scripts. Both Cyrus the Great (558–529 BC) and Darius (521–486 BC) have been credited with the invention of the Old Persian cuneiform script; King Sejong of Korea was named as the inventor of the Korean script, in 1446 AD. The Tangut script is supposed to have been created by a Tangut prince in 1056 AD. In the same way St Msesob(4th/5th century) is thought to have created both the Armenian and the Georgian scripts; St Cyril (9th century) the Cyrillic and the Glagolitic alphabet, and Bishop Wulfila(again 4th century) to have invented the West Gothic script (from a knowledge of the Roman and Greek alphabets) for his translation of the Bible into the West Gothic tongue. Classical Greek tradition attributes the introduction of the Greek alphabet to the Phoenician King Cadmus, who brought the sixteen ‘Cadman’ letters from his homeland to Boeotia. During the time of the Trojan war, Palamedes is supposed to have added four more letters to this alphabet, and finally the lyric poet Simonides of Ceos (556–468 BC) a further four.

The list could easily be extended, and indeed the most prominent traditions have already been mentioned in the preceding pages. Some of them are well documented; others may have arisen primarily out of a desire to give added authority to a new convention. In many cases fact and legend will no doubt be closely intermingled.

A fascinating chapter in the history of writing tells of the way in which a number of phonetic scripts evolved during the 19th century, quite suddenly, among primitive societies in Africa, America and certain parts of Asia — sometimes under the influence of western missionaries, sometimes as a result of contact with, or at least a knowledge (often quite rudimentary) of the Roman alphabet, or more rarely, the Arabic consonant script. The majority of these scripts show considerable similarity in their development. In nearly every case the inventor is known by name, and the date of the invention is recorded. Most of these scripts began with pietographic signs for objects, ideas and actions. These early pictures were often not very different from those habitually used by tribal communities for communication and information storage (see Eldo Rumi, pp. 18–29). In almost every instance the direction of development followed similar lines: an idea script moved towards a word (picture) script and on to the introduction of phonetic elements, mostly on the basis of the rebus principle, to culminate finally in a syllabic script. The only script that was from the beginning alphabetic, with twenty-two consonants and five vowel signs, was invented by the son of the Somali Sultan, Yusuf Ali, who knew Arabic as well as Italian. The progress towards a syllabic structure was usually accompanied by a reduction in the number of signs and a simplification of their shape. The process of evolution was in most cases complete within two generations, and in spite of (at times considerable) local success, all scripts were soon replaced by the Roman alphabet.

In Africa the most important of these invented scripts were the Bamum, the Vai and the Mende. The Bamum script was invented by King Njoya in collaboration with some of his dignitaries between 1903 and 1918. The Vai script first became known in Europe in 1849 through publication by an American engineer. It is supposed to have been invented by Momoro Duolu Bukere between 1829 and 1839 — though subsequent research suggests that his contribution was perhaps limited to the phoneticization of a much older picture script. Finally, the Mende script of Sierra Leone, known since 1955, was invented by Kessimi Kamala, a Muslim tailor, who is said to have accomplished his task in three and a half months.

In North America the most successful examples include the Cree script, invented by the English Methodist missionary John Evans, who lived in the Hudson Bay area between 1840 and 1846; the Cherokee script (fig. 86) invented by the Cherokee Indian, Sikwahi, between 1820 and 1824; and the much-discussed Alatik script (As, pp. 15–122) invented, with a group of assistants, by the Eskimo Neck (Uvak) who lived between 1860 and 1924. A modified version of the Cree syllabary is still in use among the Eskimos on Baffin Island. There was another Arctic script, invented by the Chukchi shepherd Tenevill in 1920, but this script did not progress beyond the word picture level.

At the end of the last century Christian missionaries working in south-western China among the non-Chinese Miao, and ignorant of their indigenous script, tried at first to preach the Gospel in spoken and written Chinese, a task which soon proved too arduous. As a result Samuel Pollard and other members of the Bible Christian Mission set about
### Cherokee Alphabet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cherokee</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Da</td>
<td>R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Si</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tha</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wa</td>
<td>O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sa</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ona</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ema</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ura</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utla</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saltla</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gna</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gnaa</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sounds represented by Vowels:**
- a, as in cat or often, or short as in a in art
- e, as in let or short as in e in red
- i, as in slit or short as in i in sit
- o, as in pot or short as in o in four
- u, as in cut or short as in u in run

**Consonant Sounds:**
- a nearly as in English, but approaching to Ay.
- e nearly as in English, but approaching to Ay.
- tu is a glottal stop as in English.

Syllables beginning with a, except i, have sometimes the sound of a short a before them.

---

87 To Ha, Miao; St. Mark's Gospel translated into Miao and printed in the syllabic script invented by Samuel Pollard; printed Shanghai, 1906.

(Property of the author)
inventing a syllabic script for the Miao language, a task successfully achieved by 1904. The new script consisted of simple geometric signs (fig. 87) and was, according to the missionaries, an immediate success — so much so in fact that Pollard's system was adopted for other non-Chinese dialects. Subsequently similar syllabic scripts consisting of Roman capital letters, differently positioned and given different phonetic values, were devised by the American Baptist Mission in 1915, and the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1930.

Fragments of some ideographic scripts using purely pictorial signs have been found written on pieces of old Dutch paper or pieces of woven material during the last century in some parts of Peru, around Lake Titicaca, and in Central America in Panama. The first two of these show clear connections with Christian ideas, but the third seems to have been used mainly for magic and ritual purposes, and some scholars have speculated on possible connections with the pre-Columbian scripts of Mexico (110, p. 154).

This does not, by any means, constitute a full account of the scripts which developed in the course of the 19th century. Others exist, less well documented, and yet others may well have been completely forgotten. Much research has still to be done in this field. In nearly all cases the invention itself seems to have been stimulated by the existence of foreign models and by a knowledge of the possibility of creating a phonetic form of writing. However, none of the societies concerned had reached a stage of development where such a form of information storage was essential to its survival and they were often already under pressure to accept the alphabet. The inventions were in most cases determined by a desire to imitate, to show ability equal to that of foreign and dominant groups, and in consequence nearly all the new scripts remained experiments without lasting importance.
The scholars and their work

The 19th century witnessed a tremendous extension in the knowledge of human history and human achievements. The credit for this goes, to no small extent, to the dedicated and often greatly undervalued work of a large number of scholars who painstakingly pursued the decipherment of hitherto unknown scripts, discovering languages that had long been forgotten, bringing into focus civilizations which up to then had featured mostly in legends and semi-historical tales. Among the many discoveries made in this field the two most spectacular were, without doubt, the decipherment of the Egyptian hieroglyphs and that of the cuneiform script of Mesopotamia. Together they added another 3,000 years of recorded history to our knowledge of the past.

The Egyptian hieroglyphs

Once the Greek alphabet had begun to establish itself in the Nile Valley (see p.122) the art of reading the ancient script of Egypt was soon forgotten. Greek and Roman writers seem to have made little attempt to understand the true nature of the hieroglyphs, and from then on, right through the Middle Ages until well into the modern period, they were regarded as enigmatic symbols full of ancient and fundamental wisdom, but not a script. A change in attitude occurred towards the end of the 18th century when scholars such as the German Arabist, Carsten Niebuhr, began, tentatively at first, to reject the concept of symbolism, realizing for the first time that hieroglyphs were characters used to write an ancient language, and that hieratic and demotic (see p.63) were cursive forms of the same script. At the same time an incident occurred which dramatically increased the possibility of a full decipherment, namely the discovery of the Rosetta stone (fig. 88) in the village of Rashid (better known to Europeans under the name of Rosetta) in the Western Delta of the Nile by an officer of the Napoleonic army in 1799. The Rosetta stone, a slab of black basalt (now in the British Museum), contains inscriptions written in two languages (Egyptian and Greek) and three scripts. The Egyptian version is written in hieroglyphs and in demotic (at first wrongly identified as Syriac); the Greek version is given in capital letters of the Greek alphabet. The text is a copy of a decree passed by a council of priests at the first anniversary of the coronation of Ptolemy V in 196 BC. (The Ptolemies were descendants of a general in Alexander’s army, and most of their official documents seem to have been bilingual.)

Right from the beginning, the Rosetta stone attracted a good deal of attention; the inscriptions were copied and the Greek text was translated, first into French and later into English. In 1802, after the defeat of the Napoleonic army, the stone was brought to England, and attempts at a decipherment began in earnest. The early and promising success of the French orientalist, Silvestre de Sacy, and the Swedish diplomat, J. D. Åkerblad, who identified in the demotic version the equivalents of some proper names (and a few words) which occurred in the Greek section, did not lead any further. Since those particular names (and words) were written phonetically, or, as de Sacy and Åkerblad thought, alphabetically) they presumed that demotic itself was an alphabetic script.