Why Q Needs U

A history of our letters and how we use them

DANNY BATE

'A breathtaking adventure . . . each letter a hero with a remarkable story to tell.'

STEPHEN FRY

Introduction

Dear reader,

As you read this sentence, you are participating in 4,000 years of linguistic ingenuity and human brilliance. Now, as you read this second sentence, you are taking all of that history one small step further.

The letters that your eyes are currently scanning are so common in our modern world, be they boldly emblazoned on signs, shining out from screens, or squeezed between the paper pages of a book, that it is all too easy to forget how amazing these symbols actually are. At an early age, we successfully learn our ABCs, and then spend the rest of our lives writing, scribbling, jotting and texting those same symbols, without much thought to where they come from and why they look the way they do.

There was a time, roughly four millennia ago, before our alphabet existed. This was then followed by its very gradual transmission from person to person, region to region, society to society, all the while being altered and improved to suit the needs of its current owners. Nowadays, the alphabet has become so successful that we rarely recognise its achievement. Yet over the course of its long development, nothing is fixed, and every letter has a story to tell.

This book is an invitation to reacquaint yourself with the alphabet, to look at its letters with fresh eyes and to bask in its brilliance. *Why Q Needs U* intends to serve as your complete guide to our letters and their history – an ‘A to Z’ of the alphabet, if you will.

Where did these letters come from? Why do they have these particular shapes? Who put them in that oh-so-familiar order? Answering these mighty questions is one of the principal goals of this book. I hope you, dear reader, will finish it with a newfound feeling of admiration for the ancient and international project that is our alphabet.

These letters have been on a long journey to reach this page, and you are the latest link in a chain of countless (and mostly nameless) people in history who took the parcel and passed it on. When you read these words

and write them yourself, you connect yourself to the traders, teachers, sailors, soldiers, priests, printers, slaves and kings who handed down the alphabet to you. Some of them even left lasting effects on the shape, function, number or position of its letters. The alphabet is a piece of technology that has in turn enabled incredible feats of invention and levels of cooperation among us humans, all the more so in our very literate modern world. So, who do we have to thank for it?

Before we go any further, I should qualify that this book does not recount the full story of writing in general. Although the independent moments of writing invention in human history are surprisingly few in number, to tell that tale would need a different (and much longer) book than this one. *Why Q Needs U* instead follows one thread in the complex web of written language, from that thread's ancient emergence and up to the present day.

More specifically, it tracks the stream of the English alphabet back to its source. It has for its focus the 26 symbols generally used to write down the English language today. Mention will often be made of other languages and how they use (or do not use) the same symbols, but exploring the English edition of the alphabet will always remain our target. This book is for anyone, from native speakers to adult learners, who wants to understand the English language better. This leads us on to the second goal of this book.

The thing is, the way that English uses its alphabet does not have the best of reputations. Both native and foreign speakers may struggle to compute the system of English spelling. Why on earth, people wonder, is there a K written in the word *knee*? What is the point of the H in *ghost*? Why do we have to spell *night* with GH, yet pronounce neither letter? Why do we have to put a T in *castle* and *listen*, or an L in *salmon*?

It's claimed that English has a **phonemic** system of writing. This is to say, it aims to give each of the main sounds of the language its own dedicated letter in the medium of writing. Some languages follow this principle very successfully, with an almost one-to-one ratio of sound to symbol. Italian is often held up as a good example in Europe. It uses the same letters as English, but is much more consistent in how a letter or a combination of letters ought to be read. Once you know the rules, there are very few surprises. Children's spelling bees would basically be pointless in Italy.

If the gold standard to achieve is one letter for one sound, then English doesn't appear to be doing very well. The alphabet's prime letter, A, stands for five different sounds in the words *able*, *absent*, *arbitrary* and *about*. Inversely, a single strident sound lies behind the spellings F, FF, PH and GH in *golf, bluff, graph* and *tough*. The third and fourth words also illustrate English's consistent combination of H with another letter to spell an altogether different sound – see also the CH in *cheap* or the SH in *sheep*. Who gave H this special power?

Written English is also littered with so-called 'silent' letters, those that do not correspond to any one obvious sound. For example, we don't pronounce the P in *psychic*, the W in *write*, the H in *honour*, the L in *walk*, nor the B at the end of *limb*. Instances of silence can be found for every single letter of the alphabet, with the possible exception of V. In Modern English, a final E is especially likely to be mute – but note that 'silent' does not mean useless. We may not pronounce the E at the end of *hope, bite, fate* and *pope*, but without it, we would be left with *hop, bit, fat* and *pop*.

The frustrating mismatch between English speech and writing drove the Dutch writer Gerard Nolst Trenité (1870–1946) to pen a long, critical poem on the subject. Entitled *The Chaos*, it begins:

Dearest *creature* in *creation*
Studying English *pronunciation*,
I will teach you in my *verse*
Sounds like *corpse, corps, horse* and *worse*.

I will keep you, *Susy, busy*,
Make your *head* with *heat* grow *dizzy*;
Tear in eye, your dress you will *tear*;
Queer, fair *seer, hear* my *prayer*.

With over 800 well-chosen and well-rhymed examples of problematic words, *The Chaos* is a sobering read for those of us who have been spelling English since childhood. It confronts us with the challenges and potential pitfalls of one of the modern world's major languages, which people all over the globe now need to speak, read and write as a second language. No one likes to make mistakes in a foreign language, and English spelling constantly threatens its learners with embarrassment.

However, what English spelling is not, is simply random. While this book does not deny that there are some truly unpredictable features of written English, it also insists that they are very few in number. There are instead complex principles at work in how we write down English, which we manage to process and learn successfully, often without explicit instructions in the classroom. That is something to be proud of. Hence, this book aims to push back, very gently, against modern tendencies to mock English spelling and dismiss it as mere graphic anarchy. There are inventive and ingenious rules behind its **orthography**,[1] even when it departs from the phonemic principle of one sound for one letter. A better perspective on English spelling is that it doesn't suffer from having too few rules and principles, but rather too many rules and principles in competition. A surplus of regularities can look like irregularity.

History also shines a favourable light on English spelling today. As a general rule of thumb, the aforementioned silent letters were in fact once pronounced.[2] They have therefore earned their place in spelling, even if they no longer work for it. Letters lag behind when speech marches on, but when a letter no longer strictly represents a single sound, it may nonetheless take on a new role.

This book lifts the hood on the engine of the alphabet to examine its component parts and give the full picture of how written English got itself into this mess. Yes, it is partly a story of archaism, redundancy and passivity, but also of creativity, innovation and linguistic genius. An epilogue at the end will tie up these various threads within the story, and also conclude with some big-picture points about how, really, the current problems of English spelling are what await any language that we try to catch in the net of writing.

In the meantime, we can let English's most famous wordsmith summarise the situation and give us alphabetical adventurers a guiding principle as we set out on our journey:

Though this be madness, yet there is method in it.

William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2.2

* * *

How this book works

Taking the alphabet as its inspiration and focus, it seemed only right to divide its contents up into 26 chapters, one for each letter. Bookended by this introduction and the final epilogue, *Why Q Needs U* progresses from A right through to Z. Every letter gets its moment in the spotlight, as there really is something interesting to say about each one. Every chapter therefore functions as a standalone story about where its starring letter comes from, and why we use it the way (or ways) that we do.

However, certain chapters also offer chances to explore themes that concern the alphabet and spelling in general. Chapters J and P, for example, look at the role of specific individuals in determining spelling and speech. Chapter N addresses the issue of why written English is crammed so full of double letters. Chapter O treats its main character as a window onto the divided world of spoken English today, while Chapter V looks at the input of different dialects in spelling and the alternative 'Englishes' that could have been.

The first five chapters, from A to E, are used to tell the barebones story of the English alphabet's development. From Egypt to England, these chapters introduce the key players: Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, Phoenicians, Angles, Saxons and a fateful army of Normans in 1066. Having covered essential ground by the end of Chapter E, we will be in a good position to navigate the alphabet in more depth.

The very format of a book poses challenges. Books are silent, yet the story that this book tells necessarily involves a lot of sounds. We are so literate nowadays that we tend to think of sounds and letters as being one and the same thing. We say that A, E, I, O and U are the five vowels of English, which is a fair shorthand, but it isn't phonetically true. In Britain, people often talk about others' speech with phrases like 'dropping their Hs' (when saying words like *hat* and *ham*), 'dropping their Gs' (at the end of *thinking* and *playing*) or having a 'broad A' in southern speech. These expressions are only reasonable for a society that is so full of writing, but it muddles two things in common perception. To drop one's Hs actually has nothing necessarily to do with the letter H. It's not a comment on how someone spells, but rather how their accent avoids the sound that H stands

for. Someone who consistently says *'at, 'ave* and *'ate* will surely still spell them *hat, have* and *hate*.

The English language exists first and foremost in the medium of sound. It is the sounds of English that its native speakers hear as children, and it is those sounds, and words made from those sounds, that they are first encouraged to produce. A few years later in life, they then learn how to write it down. It would be possible for someone to know English fluently, but not its spelling. Indeed, there was a prehistoric time when this was the case for all speakers of an early form of English, followed by many centuries when it was still the case for most, as general literacy only gradually took hold. There are languages out there in the world today that have no associated system of writing. There are also languages that have more than one, and some that historically switched from one to another, as in fact happened in the case of English (see Chapter T). The relationship between speech and writing is complex. In the modern world, the two are closely intertwined, yet still fundamentally independent. It can help to think of their relationship as like the double spirals of DNA, or like two twirling dancers. As we will see, in their ancient dance, speech leads and writing tries to keep up.

For this book, it is absolutely vital then to have a means of distinguishing between discussing written letters and discussing spoken sounds. Letters, the graphic symbols, are indicated with just their capital versions: A, B, C, and so on. For sounds, I have chosen to use the official symbolism of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). This incredible project, started at the end of the 19th century, aims to give all the documented sounds used in the world's languages a single standard symbol, and to organise them into a big chart according to their specific features.[3] This avoids the aforementioned problems of English spelling and its many inconsistencies. Because the IPA has European origins, some of the symbols are very intuitive for English readers. For example, /b/ represents the sounds in *bob*, and /f/ the two consonants in *faff*. Others take some getting used to; for instance, /j/ represents the sound at the beginning of *yes* and *yolk*. Whenever you see something between /slashes/, bear in mind that it refers specifically to sounds.

This book also does not avoid technical terminology; there is nothing unmanageable about precise, academic vocabulary, so long as it's introduced and explained properly. To assist in that task, this book comes

with a quickly flip-to-able glossary towards the very end. Linguistic terms included in the glossary are introduced in **bold** throughout the book.

So, without further ado, we can set off. We begin, of course, with A.

A

Grade A, A+, A for effort, A, alpha male, Serie A*

The letter A assumes an absolute authority in our language today, occupying pole position in our lists, commanding superiority in our ranks and denoting excellence in our grades. This status of course comes from its role as the first letter of our alphabet. It fixes itself early on in our memories, as the first letter of our ABCs that we learn to sing as children. Looking up at the brightly coloured chart that adorned the wall of my primary-school classroom, I can still remember the crimson character that started the whole frieze off, informing me definitively that *A is for apple*.

This prime status of A is so strong and so widely accepted that it goes unquestioned. Yet question it we should: why does A come first? And who put it there? The answers to those simple questions are ancient and, frankly, pretty mysterious. They involve a long journey across time and space that connects my classroom to the banks of the Nile, via Greece and Italy. The characters of this story are a whole host of peoples and their languages, all linked in a chain of adopting, adapting and passing on their way of writing. The cast includes Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, Judeans, Phoenicians and of course the English.

The plot takes some surprising turns; nothing about our modern letters can be taken for granted. For example, English A is commonly and correctly considered to be a vowel, one of five vowel letters, along with E, I, O and U.[4] Yet this was not always the case. A once stood for a consonant, a very common one, for which the English alphabet today in fact has no letter.

So, who came up with our alphabet? Why is A the first letter? And how did it change from a consonant to a vowel? This chapter sets out to answer these questions. It is a speedy tour through the earliest eras of our alphabet.

It introduces three key peoples in the story: Egyptians, Phoenicians and Greeks.

Our journey begins among the Egyptians.

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It is a sunny day, and a man takes shelter from the heat in a street not far from the east bank of the river Nile. Between the houses, he can catch glimpses of that mighty river, full of ships travelling up and down. He, a humble merchant, had himself arrived by one such boat, travelling upriver to visit this city of Thebes, which is prosperous and bustling. The crowds increase as he walks towards the temple of the god Amun, where he is to meet with a potential client. The temple is a grand site with royal patronage, having been constructed on the orders of pharaoh Senusret I himself. The current ruler is Amenemhat III, and Egypt is enjoying a state of unity and stability that historians of the future will call its Middle Kingdom, 1,800 years before Christ – not that our merchant thinks of his day and age as being ‘before’ anyone or anything.

Looking up at the great temples, statues and obelisks, it is clear to the visitor that these Egyptians are a highly literate people; the buildings are covered with hieroglyphs, many painted and carved with painstaking detail. These are official inscriptions intended to impress and to endure, existing somewhere between writing and art.

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However, when he had stopped at a tavern for a drink, the visitor had also seen people writing in a more casual style, composing messages and lists with a brush, ink and papyrus.

The local language is Egyptian, which our visitor to Thebes understands and speaks pretty well, but the written language remains tricky. Having been around for over a thousand years, this system of pictures and symbols is sophisticated and complex. He knows that some hieroglyphs simply stand for a particular object or idea, the thing that they appear to represent. Others stand for a sound, or two sounds together, or even three. Others are used instead to tell you something about the type of the thing that precedes them – whether it is a man or a woman, a god, a building, a drink, a boat. To complicate matters, in principle, a given hieroglyph can be put to all three of these uses in different contexts and by different scribes. Moreover, the number of hieroglyphs that the Egyptians use seems beyond count; future experts will reckon around 700. Try as he might, Egyptian writing still makes the visitor's head spin.

He himself is not Egyptian. His origins lie far to the north-east, beyond the kingdom of the Nile, and his mother tongue is very different. What he

and his people speak is one dialect of an expanding family of languages that will one day include internationally famous members, such as Arabic and Hebrew. His people can be found throughout Egypt, though especially concentrated in Lower Egypt, where the Nile spills out into the Mediterranean, and where he has set up a business trading papyrus. Many of his people have been employed by the Egyptians as soldiers and servants. Though he lives and works among the Egyptians, the visitor is a linguistic outsider to this complex world of hieroglyphs and the Egyptian language that they write down. Their symbols and speech share an ancient association, while his own language is a newcomer on the scene. If he wants to write in his language, not theirs, he and his people must either invent their own writing system from scratch, or adapt the Egyptians' characters. They are opting for the latter. Their adaptation has already begun, and with it, the first shoot of a new tree of writing is sprouting.

With his business in Thebes concluded, our visitor begins his return journey northwards. However, this time, rather than sailing along the Nile around the Qena Bend, he chooses to cut a corner and take the Farshût road over land. It's a sensible decision; it's quicker, and the waters of the Nile can be difficult and unkind. The route takes him away though from the lush, green landscape of the Nile valley and off into wilder land. Halfway through this shortcut, the man stops in a valley that will be known in Arabic as Wadi el-Hol. There he chats to his travelling companions, eats and drinks with them and takes a break from the journey. Wadi el-Hol is a popular spot; soldiers, pilgrims and merchants are all passing through, and many people have left behind messages in the surrounding limestone rock. To pass the time, the man decides to add to the lithic literature. Rather than in the Egyptians' formal hieroglyphs, or their more casual 'hieratic' script, he carves from right to left 16 hieroglyph-like symbols that work according to a much newer system. It is something his people have been developing recently, and it is not the first example at Wadi el-Hol; he spots a previous message by a fellow compatriot, written instead from top to bottom.

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▶ Description

Compared with the complexities of hieroglyphs, the principle behind the man's system is simple: every image looks like a thing, and it stands for the first sound of the word for that thing in his language. For example, he carves an ox's head, with eyes and horns, facing to the left:

For him, an ox is a *ʾalp*. The word *ʾalp* begins with a glottal **stop**. This is a sound produced when the glottis, an opening between the vocal folds in our throats, quickly closes then opens. In doing so, it briefly stops any exiting airflow. It's a very common sound in speech, made when English speakers for example will say *uh-oh*. The traveller's revolutionary principle says that, because the word for an ox begins with a glottal stop, the symbol of an ox now stands for that sound. No more ambiguities about whether the symbol refers to a thing, an idea, a category, a sound, two sounds, three sounds – just one symbol, for one sound.

His inscription completed and his companions well rested, the man continues on his way north, and so vanishes from history and our imagination. In truth, we know nothing about the individuals who carved the two inscriptions in the new script at Wadi el-Hol, nothing certain about their origins, languages, profession, status or gender. All we have is what they left behind there, but it's enough to know that they were part of something big.

Over the course of almost 4,000 years, that head of cattle would develop beyond recognition and travel far, all the way to this very page. Its horns would become a letter's legs, and its mouth would come to point upwards. It would become our letter A.

The birth and earliest days of the alphabet are obscured by time, and we have to assemble a story that fits the few fragments of evidence that have survived until today.[5] The two inscriptions at Wadi el-Hol, dated to around 1800 BCE, at least offer us a good starting point for telling that story. Of course, the letters have a long way to go. At this very early point, they are still essentially pictures, resembling objects in the world. They may also sometimes still stand for whole things or ideas, making translating the two inscriptions difficult. In their shape, they also have none of the simplicity or abstractness of our modern-day letters.

However, a key idea is now in place: to use strings of symbols to represent strings of individual sounds. To be precise, throughout the early history of the alphabet, the system is actually one symbol for one **consonant**. Consonants are a category of sounds used in human speech that contrast with **vowels**. The line between the two groups is blurry, but roughly speaking, consonants are made when parts of our throat, mouth and nose seriously impact the airflow leaving our lungs. The glottal stop that A once represented is a consonant that very briefly stops the air in its tracks. Vowels, meanwhile, are the sounds that least constrict the airflow on its way out. Sounds like the '*ee*' and '*oo*' in *meet* and *boot* are vowels, consisting of an uninterrupted stream of air which you can hold for as long as your lungs will let you. However, letters for vowels don't make an appearance in the alphabet until many centuries later. To begin with, it was all about consonants.[6]

The particular consonant behind a letter is determined by the **acrophonic principle**,[7] the rule, mentioned above, that the first sound of the name of the thing is the sound that it stands for. If we wanted to start our own new alphabet for English, again following the acrophonic principle, we could take inspiration from everyday objects and their emojis today. We could use an image of an *apple* to stand for the English vowel /æ/, and a *bee* for the consonant /b/. In this scenario, we can think up four pictures for four sounds, and so write my first name with a dog, an apple, a needle and an email:

/d æ n i/

This break with the hieroglyphic way of doing things may have been the result of migration and greater diversity in the peoples and languages of Egypt. In our sources from the early Middle Kingdom, we find more references to people who come from lands outside Egypt to the north-east, what we refer to today as the Middle East. These ‘Asiatics’ seem to have been well integrated into Egyptian society, working as soldiers, miners and servants. Their increased presence may have peaked with the breakaway state of the city of Avaris, which for a while controlled northern Egypt around the Nile delta, and whose dynasty of kings have non-Egyptian names.

The north-eastern origins of these people, and the association between alphabetic writing and a particular **family** of languages, are crucial for our story. When we talk about the ‘family’ of a particular language, this is a helpful but maybe unfamiliar metaphor. In short, one language can over time gradually split into a family of several. This happened in the case of Latin, a historical language, out of which French, Spanish, Italian and many other new languages developed. These offspring of Latin are collectively known as the ‘**Romance**’ family.

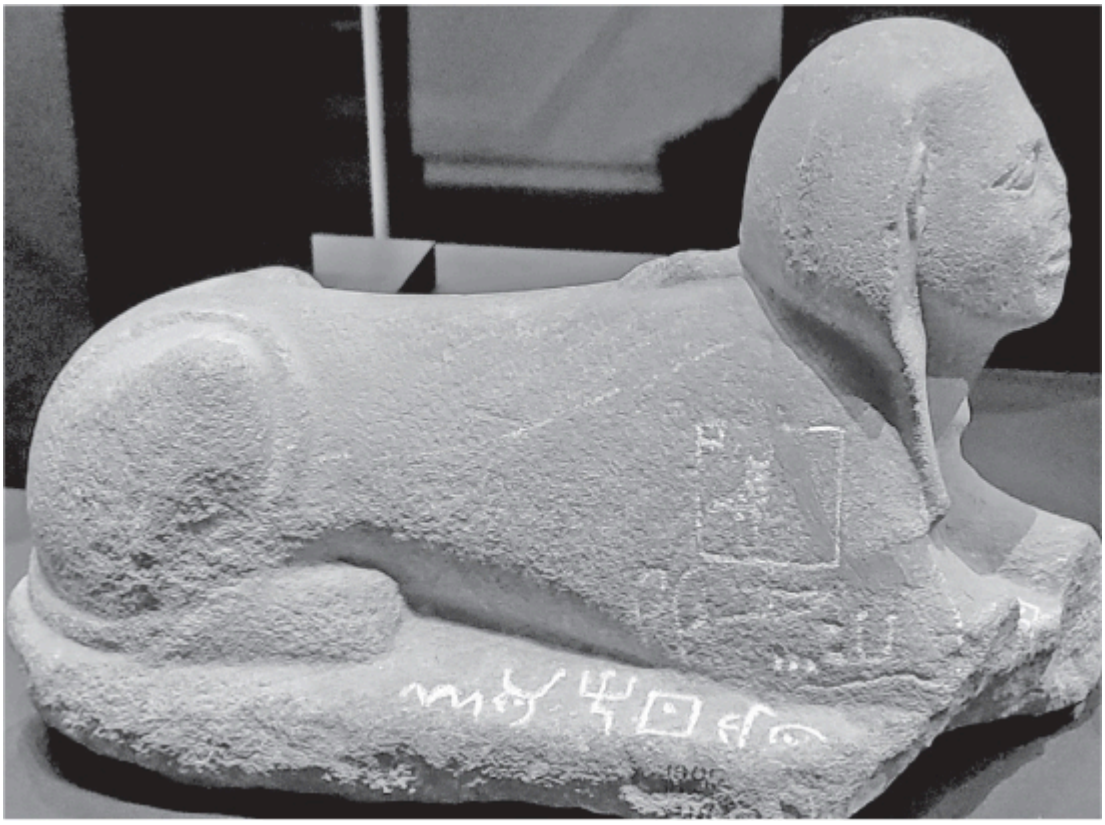
Though the evidence is meagre, we can suppose that these outsiders (from the Egyptians’ perspective) spoke a language of the **Semitic** family. This is a large group of languages and dialects that is still very much around today. To this family belong national and international languages like Arabic and Hebrew.

Importantly, these people were not members of the general Egyptian linguistic community. Their adaptation of existing hieroglyphs may have been driven by the fact that they knew well what hieroglyphs looked like, but not what sounds and words they actually stood for.[8] Under this view, the pioneers of the alphabet may have been quite humble people, like craftsmen and merchants, who needed to write things down but didn’t have the time or the money to learn hieroglyphs properly. Alternatively, they might have been extremely familiar with how hieroglyphs worked, but were also graphic visionaries who wanted to streamline all the complexities of

hieroglyphic writing into one rule. Whoever they were, their development of the acrophonic principle is a landmark in human history.

To track the slow and mysterious birth of the alphabet, our focus must turn away from the Nile and towards the north-east, first to the Sinai peninsula. This is the same Sinai that you might know from the Bible, an area believed to contain Mount Sinai where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God. To the Egyptians though, the Sinai peninsula was not where you ascended towards heaven, but where you delved into the earth.

Sinai is the most famous place associated with the very early alphabet, being where archaeologists have discovered the largest number of early examples of the new system. The writing of this area has been given the name 'Proto-Sinaitic',[9] with around 40 examples found at Serabiṭ el-Khadem. These were inscribed not long after, at the same time as, or even before the Wadi el-Hol inscriptions. Dating cannot be very precise. Serabiṭ el-Khadem was a site where the Egyptians mined for turquoise. Their workforce, who were either hired or enslaved, must have included Semitic speakers. They left behind short texts, dated by scholars to around 1800 BCE. This fine sphinx bears both a traditional hieroglyphic inscription (on its right shoulder) and the new alphabetic writing on its left shoulder and on the base below.



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While linguistically separate from their rulers, the miners offered prayers and dedicated things to the same gods, most notably Hathor, who was not only the goddess of music, love and sexuality, but also of minerals like malachite and turquoise. She was a goddess the miners wanted on their side. They referred to her with four symbols of their new system as Bʿ LT, meaning ‘lady’. Words like this are clear evidence of a Semitic language behind the script.[10]

The picture we have so far, glimpsed through the inscriptions at Wadi el-Hol, Serabiṭ el-Khadem and a couple of other locations, is of a new system of writing that was developing in the shadow of Egyptian culture. Its developers spoke a Semitic language, and were not elite in their social standing. What they pioneered would catch on among Semitic speakers; writing is very useful for doing business, running an administration and keeping records. The Sinai peninsula stands at the crossroads between Africa and Asia, and through this, the alphabet could leave the Egyptian orbit. Examples of the new script soon turn up in the Levant, the region shared by the modern-day states of Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and Syria.

Our alphabet may have been born in Egypt, but it spent its infancy in this region, known to its inhabitants then as KNʿN – that is, Canaan.

Some of our sources for early ‘Proto-Canaanite’ writing can get pretty personal. Among the very earliest from the region is a comb, found at the site of the city of Lachish, in what is now Israel, and dated to between 1700 and 1550 BCE. The comb bears not only an inscription guarding the user against lice, but even remains of the lice themselves, still caught between its teeth. The comb clearly did its job well. The tiny text, the oldest sentence in the Canaanite language, reads:

YTŠ ḤṬ Ḏ LQML Śʿ[R W]ZQT
‘May this tusk root out the lice of the hai[r and the] beard’

Like the inscriptions from the Sinai peninsula and the Nile valley, the symbols used here are still quite pictographic. In other words, they still look like the object they were inspired by. There’s also great variation in the appearances of the symbols and the direction of writing: horizontally, vertically, from right to left or from left to right.

With the widespread adoption of this system among the Canaanites, the symbols grew more familiar and so became simpler in their appearance. This was not laziness; it was efficiency. You and I usually do not write the full, shapely letters that we were first taught at school. Writing often and at speed stripped the symbols of their intricate details. The old ox lost his eyes, leaving the vague outline of his head and horns. Sticking with my name in our experimental script above, we can imagine this change:

▶ Description

The later, more abstract symbols that slowly emerged were recognisably more letter-like. They were then put to good use by the next stars of our story: the Phoenicians.

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If you haven’t heard of the Phoenicians before, you’re in for a historical treat. The picture that history and archaeology paint of them is impressive.

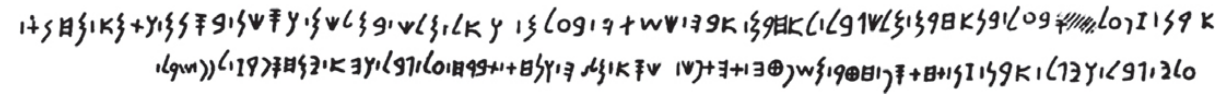
As a region, their homeland of Phoenicia roughly corresponds to the modern-day country of Lebanon and coastal areas of Syria, Israel and Turkey. From this Levantine base, where they looked out eagerly at the beckoning Mediterranean Sea, the Phoenicians launched themselves on ships to explore, trade and settle. The Uluburun shipwreck, found in 1982 and dated to the 14th century BCE, gives us a sense of the wealth of these commercial cruisers. The ship was carrying gold, olives, swords, glass, ivory, jewellery and much more.

The Phoenicians managed not only to survive, but to thrive after the doom of the so-called 'Late Bronze Age collapse'. This saw some kingdoms fragment (like Egypt) and others disintegrate entirely. The Phoenicians navigated both stormy seas and stormy history, and they spread their culture and language along the Mediterranean coastline. The most famous daughter of Phoenicia must be Carthage, a mighty city state in today's Tunisia. The Phoenicians also made landfall in Spain. If you've ever seen the sights of Seville or flown into Málaga, you were following Phoenician footsteps. Even the name of *Spain* likely has a Phoenician origin – what was *Hispania* to the Romans may have originally been the island (ʾY) of rabbit-like creatures (ŠPN) to the Phoenicians.

It should be noted that our understanding of the Phoenicians is very imbalanced. So much of our historical sources about them were written by their bitter rivals: first the Greeks, then the Romans. There is no record of the people of the Levant ever using a term like 'Phoenician', or even thinking of themselves as one people. If we time-travelled back to that region in the early Iron Age and surveyed its inhabitants, they would most likely identify themselves first by their city. Someone from that part of the world today would say 'I'm from Lebanon', but people back then would instead prefer to say 'I'm from Tyre' or 'I'm Byblos born and bred'. If asked what broader group these city states belonged to, their answer would most likely be 'Canaanite'.

In terms of language, we can consider them to have spoken a language called 'Phoenician', but Phoenician too would have started out as just one dialect within the wider Semitic speech of Canaan. They would still understand the people to the south in the biblically famous kingdoms of Israel and Judah. What those southerners were speaking would go on to become the Hebrew language.

Questions about their self-perception aside, the Phoenicians did leave us plenty of writing. We have many documents, carved in stone, that record humble lives, celebrate pompous kings and advise future readers: *do not open this coffin!* What the Phoenicians did with the old Sinaitic symbols is hugely relevant for the story of our alphabet. A kind of standardisation seems to have taken place in Phoenicia. The number of symbols was set (22 for 22 consonants), as were their shapes and the direction of writing (right to left). If we take a look at the sarcophagus of Ahiram, king of Byblos in around 1000 BCE, we see an inscription written in neat rows, made up of consistent and fairly simple symbols.



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What was once an ox's head was by now 𐤀. It consisted of three lines only, and was quick to write. It still stands for a glottal stop, as in the first word of Ahiram's inscription: 𐤀𐤓𐤍 (ʾRN) 'coffin'.

The fact that the Phoenicians were doing very well for themselves at this time is not just historical background; it is a key factor in alphabetic history. The Phoenician cities had gained a certain prestige in the region, so the number, shape and format of their letters was adopted by peoples outside Phoenicia. Consequently, their way of writing is the common ancestor of many different scripts, all branching off in an alphabetic family tree. The Phoenician letter 𐤀 is the origin not only of our A, but also of the Hebrew letter א and the Arabic letter ا. Despite appearances, these are cousins of our A.

Around this time, we also start to see the first signs of an order for the alphabet, a set pattern for when reciting the letters. We don't have that many examples of full, ordered alphabets (**abecedaries**) from those early days, but that shouldn't surprise us – after all, how often since primary school have you written out the full alphabet? What examples we do have may well have been written by students, as ancient homework set by their teachers. The earliest ordered alphabets come not from Phoenicia but from the Bronze Age city of Ugarit to the north, today in Syria, as well as a fragment of one found in Thebes in Egypt.

The scribes of Ugarit seem to have been very creative, having by the 13th century BCE combined the Canaanite symbols with the cuneiform

method of writing with a reed wedge and soft clay. We find that they typically arranged their alphabet by putting their equivalent symbol for *ʾalp* first, just as we do with A. It should be noted though that this was not the only way that people were ordering their new alphabets. If the Phoenicians had instead preferred another order that we have historical evidence for, today we would not learn our ABCs, but rather our ELHs!

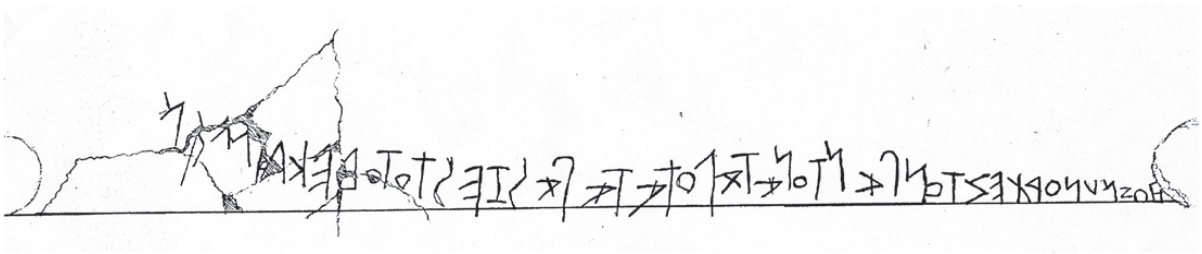
What was the reasoning behind the order? This, alas, remains a mystery. The letters were most likely given an order so that people could learn and remember them; the consonants that the letters stood for may have formed words in this particular order. So, ABC may have started out as a mnemonic, like *Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain* for the colours of the rainbow, or *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* for the musical notes of the treble clef. What exactly that mnemonic was is lost to us now. This is disappointing, but we need not despair. Further digging (both physically and intellectually) could one day identify the original idea behind the ordered alphabet that we still sing in our first English lessons.

Throughout this story so far, the starring letter has stood for a consonant sound, like all Phoenician letters, specifically a glottal stop. Clearly something has to happen to 𐤀, before we can reach the recognisable letter A. Something did indeed happen: the Greeks happened.

Somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean, Greeks and Phoenicians were encountering one another. Just as the Phoenician cities had impressed their fellow Canaanites, the Greeks would also have marvelled at the maritime, military and mercantile prowess of the people from Tyre, Sidon, Byblos and Beirut. The Greeks, who lived around the Aegean Sea, had many dealings with the peoples of Canaan, setting up trading posts among them and serving in their armies. Many Greeks would have become bilingual, learning the local Semitic language and how to write it down. It would be through these interactions that the Phoenicians passed on our alphabet.[11]

Such was the prestige of the Phoenicians and the potential of their alphabet that the Greeks adopted the new system sometime around the year 800 BCE. The date, place and people involved are not at all certain. Some scholars prefer a very early date, as early as 1100 BCE, on the basis of similar shapes of Greek and Proto-Canaanite letters. The main problem for this is that our first sources for the Greek alphabet creep into the light of history only after the year 800 BCE.

The Dipylon inscription, scratched into a large wine jug, is a product of the eighth century BCE, and is therefore one of the earliest examples of alphabetic Greek writing. The text is charmingly human, recording that the jug was a prize for the winner of a dancing competition.



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As for where the handover happened, Cyprus is a geographically plausible location, being an island within sailing distance of both Greece and the Levant. Alternatively, the transmission could have occurred in what is today the southern coast of Turkey, facilitated by invading armies from the east, or by Greek mercenaries heading home to the west.

The exact details of the alphabet's arrival in Greece are unclear, but we know at least that the Greeks fully acknowledged their alphabet's foreign origin. A bronze plate, found on the island of Crete and dated to *c*. 500 BCE, bears an inscription that mentions the profession of ποινικαστάς (*poinikastás*) – perhaps a scribe, literally a 'Phoenician-er'? Furthermore, the historian Herodotus, writing three centuries after the transmission, tells the tale of Cadmus. According to Herodotus, this Phoenician prince not only founded the Greek city of Thebes, but also gave the Greeks their letters. Most notably, they kept the old Semitic names. Rather than providing *ʾalp* with an all-new Greek name, they straightforwardly called it *alpha*.

The jump from the Levantine to the Aegean world was also a jump from one language family to another. While Phoenician was a Semitic language, Greek belonged to an entirely separate family, one that actually includes Modern English. Before the colonial expansions of the modern era, this family was already spoken from Assam in the east to Ireland in the west. Hence, this group of linguistic relatives is called the **Indo-European** languages.

This linguistic divide mattered. The alphabet could be passed pretty straightforwardly among the similar Semitic languages and dialects, but

Greek was an unrelated language with a different history and different sounds. For one thing, Greek probably had more vowels. Semitic languages, at a very early point in time, had a simple set of three vowels, which could each be either long or short in duration. This vocalic paucity is why the alphabet was originally only consonantal. With only three types of vowel to slot in between their 22 consonants, Phoenicians could easily work out the unwritten sounds.

The Greeks chose to adapt the letters to make them fit their language better. Because of these differences between the languages, the Greeks repurposed and later rotated 𐤀. They made it a vowel letter: A. Thus the old ox would come to look upwards. It would be used not for a glottal stop, but for the vowel /a/, as in English *hat*.

It's not quite clear why ʾ*alp* specifically was chosen for this role. It may be that the Greeks did not hear the glottal stop at the beginning of words like ʾ*alp*, only the sound that followed it. It is also true that the practice of using ʾ*alp* for both a consonant and a vowel independently caught on among Semitic writers.[12] Such Semitic letters with dual functions are known by the charming technical term *matres lectionis* ('mothers of reading'). The practice is certainly very old, but it is conspicuously absent from our Phoenician sources. This leaves us uncertain of whether the Greeks were inspired by others to turn 𐤀 into a vowel, or were pioneers in this regard.

Whenever, wherever, however and through whomever it happened, the transmission of the alphabet to the Greeks is how that old ox, the letter ʾ*alp*, became the Greeks' letter *alpha*. It is still there in the word *alphabet*.

Now we have successfully navigated the tricky waters of the alphabet's earliest years, having voyaged from the banks of the Nile, up the coast of the Levant and arrived in the Aegean Sea. What comes next in the history of our alphabet will be explored in subsequent chapters, and can wait. Here, beside the azure Aegean, we can pause to catch our breath and appreciate the alphabetic achievement so far. The story of A is a story of different peoples, languages and places, united by human ingenuity. It shows us how people can create and adapt writing to suit their linguistic needs, making use of both its communicative potential and its status as a marker of modernity.