

# WHEN WAS THE FIRST ALPHABET?

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This is further to my comments on abstraction and symbolism. On 24th April, I wrote that this human capacity is what underpins all art and also the use of language (see “Prehistoric puzzles (2) When did art begin?”). “As we speak, we are using sound clusters to represent objects or concepts. As we write, we are using clusters of shapes that we call letters to represent sounds on paper [or some other surface].”

Of these two jumps, the second has to be much the more deliberate one. Speech seems more like a spontaneous development. Writing appears to have required a very hard conscious effort spread over time. Over some hundred thousand years, humans had developed self-awareness, and were now looking for ways to transform oral into visual communication. In his *Just So Stories*, published in 1902, Rudyard Kipling has two beautiful stories about “How the Alphabet was Made” and “How the First Letter was Written” (they are available in my SPS 101 web site). A Neolithic man called Tegumai Bopsulai and his daughter Taffy go fishing by the Wagai River, and then decide they want to send a message, written on a sooth piece of tree bark, to (Tegumai’s wife and Taffy’s mother) Techumai Tewindrow.

Wonderful though the children’s playgarden of Kipling’s imagination is, of course that is not how it happened. In history “one does not safely bet against continuity” (Thomas Bisson, retired Harvard medievalist, addressing the very French idea of the Feudal Revolution). There was, first, a long Proto-literate Period, characterised by the emergence of pictograms. In Egypt, pictograms develop into hieroglyphs. At this stage entire words are being assigned to symbols. Then we get syllabic scripts (one-shape-per-syllable), as in Mesopotamian or Hittite cuneiform writing. Eventually we get to the most brilliant because simplest scheme of all: the alphabet and alphabetical scripts, using combinations of just 25-30 “letters” for everything, which because it doesn’t require memorizing some hundreds or even thousands of signs, really comprehensively “democratises” both reading and writing.

But just when was this last step taken? At this point I am once more grateful to my colleague Enis Doko from the IHU Philosophy department for today’s Recommended Reading [0020.(The New Scientist, 16.4.2021) The alphabet may have been invented 500 years earlier than we thought]. What Glenn Schwartz and his colleagues found at the Umm el-Marra site in Syria has been interpreted as a brief excerpt of some alphabetical text by Schwartz himself, which if correct (but of course it is disputed) would take our “earliest alphabet” back from c.3800 BC to c.4300 BC. And here is an interesting sideline: Whether it was invented in 4300 or 3800 BC, “the current consensus is that the alphabet didn’t become the official writing system of any political state much before about 3200 years ago [i.e. 2200 BC]. This suggests it was passed down through many generations as an informal script that wasn’t used by royals or the powerful elite.”

This means that we have to distinguish between an invention or innovation (or a new idea), and its being actually adopted and put to social use. I hope to be returning to this notion in the near future.

