World writing systems

Other European and Middle Eastern Scripts

A large number of alphabetic systems other than those of Greece and Rome evolved and flourished in Europe and the Middle East. In this Web site, we briefly present some of the ones that are of historical significance or interest.

Runic writing

Germanic tribes occupying the north of Italy developed an early offshoot of the Greek/Etruscan tradition of writing into a script known as Runic writing. This system emerged shortly after the beginning of the Christian era, and its developments were eventually found as far north as Scandinavia. Runic writing persisted until the sixteenth century in some areas before giving way to the Roman alphabet. Figure 1 illustrates some signs from one of the oldest known Runic inscriptions, which dates from about the third century A.D. The angular style of the letters arose because the alphabet was carved in wood or stone, the former especially not readily lending itself to curved lines. The script is read from right to left.

![Figure 1: Runic script](image)


Cyrillic script

Another offshoot of the Greek script was created for the Slavic peoples in the ninth century A.D. The Greek missionary brothers Constantine (Cyril) and Methodius introduced a writing system for the translation of the Bible that is now known as Glagolitic script. A later development, which combined adaptations of Glagolitic letters with Greek and Hebrew characters, has come to be known as the Cyrillic alphabet. The current Russian, Byelorussian, Ukrainian, Serbian, Macedonian, and Bulgarian alphabets, as well as those used to represent many non-Slavic languages spoken in the former Soviet Union, have evolved from this early Cyrillic script. Some examples of its
development and adaptation are given in Figure 2, followed by a short passage in contemporary Russian Cyrillic, which is transliterated for its letter values.

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<th>From Hebrew</th>
<th>Later development</th>
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(Russian text below)
Мы все учились понемногу
Чему-нибудь и как-нибудь...

‘We all pick up our education
In bits and pieces as we can...’
Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, I.5

**Figure 2** Contemporary Russian Cyrillic transliterated

**Two Semitic alphabets**

Both Arabic and Hebrew are written with alphabets that descend from or are closely related to Phoenician script. Both are essentially consonant–writing systems (vowels are indicated with diacritic dots), and both are written from right to left.

The contemporary Arabic alphabet is the most widespread of all the descendants of Middle Eastern writing except the Roman alphabet. The earliest inscription dates back to the fourth century A.D. In the latter half of the seventh century, this script was used to write the Quran, the sacred text of Islam, and its use spread rapidly along with the Islamic religion over the next centuries.

The Arabic alphabet contains twenty-eight consonants (vowels are indicated by diacritics above and below the consonants) and is written from right to left. An interesting feature of this alphabet is that twenty-two of its twenty-eight signs have different forms, depending on their position in (or outside of) a word. Figure 3 illustrates the forms of the letters *b* and *k* in initial, medial, and final position, as well as their forms when written in isolation.

![Arabic letters](image)

**Figure 3** Variation in two Arabic letters according to position
The similarities among the symbols in Figure 4 demonstrate the clear link between Phoenician script and the Hebrew and Arabic scripts.

![Table of Phoenician, Hebrew, and Arabic alphabets]

**Figure 4** The Phoenician, Hebrew, and Arabic alphabets


**Other descendants of Middle Eastern Systems**

Early Middle Eastern scripts gave rise to Aramaic, Old Hebrew, and South Arabic syllabaries, which, in turn, led to a host of further writing systems eventually stretching across the Near East and North Africa from India to Morocco. Figure 5 illustrates this widespread diffusion on a time scale.
Other American scripts

A number of major civilizations developed on the American continents. In Mesoamerica alone, more than eighteen writing systems have been discovered, including those of the Mayans of the Yucatan and the Aztecs of Mexico.

Mayan symbols are called glyphs (see Figure 6). Although some were read as word signs (logograms), they had other uses as well. The rebus principle was employed, although sometimes only partially, as in the use of the symbol for a smoking bundle of pine,  /taa3/, to represent the locative preposition /ta/ in a form of syllabic writing. Glyphs that mix syllabic writing with logographic representation are also found.
Some African scripts

In the past several centuries, societies in Central Africa have also produced syllabic scripts, which have either been invented as such or developed through stages from pictograms to refined syllabaries. Although the idea of writing appears to have been imported into these societies, the development of the various systems was indigenous.

The first sub-Saharan African writing seems to have been that of the Vai peoples in the region of Sierra Leone and Liberia. In the nineteenth century, a native of the area developed a syllabary from a system of picture communication. The new system, which grew to consist of 226 syllabic symbols plus a few logographic symbols, appears to have spawned a number of imitations throughout the area.

The writing of the Bamum people in the Cameroons was invented at the end of the nineteenth century by a native leader. The current seventy syllabic symbols show tendencies toward alphabetization.

The only sure example of alphabetic writing developed in modern times among African peoples is the Somali alphabet. The originator, acquainted with Arabic and Italian, devised an alphabet composed of nineteen consonants and ten vowels. The symbols themselves appear to have been invented, but their names are based on those used for the letters of the Arabic alphabet, and are listed and recited in the same order.

Some Indian scripts

A pictorial script appears to have had an independent origin in Northern India, where inscribed seals, pottery, and copper tablets dating back to the third millennium B.C. have been unearthed. The system seems to have consisted of about 250 symbols such as \( \mathbb{U} \), \( \mathbb{M} \), and \( \mathbb{A} \), but died away long before another writing system, seemingly derived
from Semitic (see Figure 7), was employed in the middle of the first millennium B.C. to record the ancient Sanskrit language.

The date of the first appearance of Indian Sanskrit symbols cannot be ascertained, but they resemble Aramaic and appeared as a full system of writing in the edicts of Aśoka (who ruled from 272 to 231 B.C.). They occurred in two types of writing—Kharosthi and Brahmi. The former continued in use until about the fifth century A.D. in Northern India. The Brahmi script gave rise to all later varieties of Indian writing.

One of these varieties, a cursive type called the Gupta script, was later employed to write Tocharian, Saka, and Turkish manuscripts discovered in eastern Turkestan. In India, it evolved into the Devanagari script, which became the most widespread type of writing in the subcontinent and which was used to record the voluminous literature of the Sanskrit language. Inscriptions in Devanagari are found throughout Southeast Asia, Indonesia, and as far afield as the southern Philippines.

Varieties of Indian writing were carried abroad by Buddhist missionaries and influenced writing systems in Tibet and Central and Southeast Asia. The Dravidian peoples of Southern India also developed a number of scripts under the influence of the Northern varieties. Another ancient Indian script, called Pali, gave rise to a number of Southeast Asian writing systems, including those used for Thai and Cambodian. Figure 8 illustrates Devanagari and some of the many other scripts found in India and Southeast Asia.
The examples cited in Chapter 16 only touch on the variety of writing systems past and present that scholars have investigated (the index of one standard work lists 470 scripts). Many of these systems are historically related, but the number nonetheless testifies to human ingenuity and creativity in devising writing systems.