

# HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

## GREEK SCRIPT

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**Overview** A few major scripts have predominated the world's writing systems—Chinese, Greek, Latin, Hindi—and in their durability have testified at the same time to the durability of the major culture areas with which they are associated. The Greek script, which itself derives from Phoenician, is one of those lasting testimonies, both to its own intrinsic flexibility, and to the vigor of the cultures it represents. Oh, and yes, it was of course crucial to the durability of Greek writings that they created in a period of libraries, literacy, cuttlefish ink, ostraca—pieces of pottery to inscribe on, sometimes with—and above all papyrus, abundant throughout the Hellenic world and almost indestructible when well woven.

**The first steps in decoding the writing system of the early Greek alphabet.** But before even deploying itself as a version of Phoenician, which was the launching pad of the mature Greek alphabet, a version of the Greek language was written—seemingly in the 16th-12th centuries B.C.E.—in a writing system we agree to call Linear B. (The code for deciphering this marking system, of use particularly in trade and accounting—was brought to light by British linguist and code breaker, Michael Ventris, who thereby rearranged classicists' views of Greek history and of the importance of Minoan civilization. Ventris' experience in WWII decoding was his training ground for the skills he required in deciphering Linear B. ) While the documents of Linear B, with which we first came to interpret the earliest Greek language, were not in themselves in a Greek alphabet, they give us our clue to the origins of that alphabet.

**Early development of the writing system.** The Greek alphabet derived from several versions of the alphabet of the Phoenician language, which had twenty two letters and was in active use, as an eastern Mediterranean language of trade by the 9th or early 8th centuries. Luckily for the forthcoming richness of the Greek language, in deriving from Phoenician it inherited the first alphabet to distinguish consonants from vowels. This advantageous finesse was to enrich the great period of Greek literary expression which set in by the late seventh century B.C.E. Greek was to go on to serve as the direct parent of the Latin and Cyrillic scripts, and with the expansions of the Greek cultural base, during the Hellenistic period and Byzantium, Greek was to prove one of the world's dominant writing systems, which it remains to this day.

**Change and detail.** Many changes in the details of spelling and in the use of diacritical marks were evident in the development of the alphabet from the Middle Ages to our time; these changes have left their mark on the orthography of Greek, during the centuries of evolution of the pronunciation of the language. Diacritical marks, designating tonal and breathing distinctions, have been deposited in the alphabet even after needed, while the distinctive iotacism which marks post-classical Greek—and reflects the reduction of many vowel sounds to that of iota—has muscled out spellings formerly intended for a richer palette of vowels.

**The writing of Greek** Initially, Greek was written like Phoenician, from right to left, then, at alternate periods of their earliest development, during which left to right was slowly adapted, the nascent Greek alphabet began to be written in *boustrophedon* form, that is in the form adopted by oxen who plough a field one way, then at field's end reverse direction and return to the direction from which they have come. Ultimately, however, the left to right writing of Greek prevailed, and has remained such to our time. Until the high Middle Ages, Greek was written exclusively in what we call capital letters (*uncials*), but pressures of convenience, as well as the comfort of increasingly cursive script, gradually enforced a distinction between, say, first and other words in a sentence, and the advantages of the new distinction were seen to be worth the effort of the change in practice. One will notice, in any contemporary Greek text, that (for instance) the three pitch indicators (acute, grave, and circumflex) are retained, although the pronunciation of the language no longer requires them. In the broad sense, then, we need to view the Greek alphabet pictorially—as well as an exercise in meaning. Pictorial values and chirographic conveniences continue to converge with typographical practicality in the shaping of written Greek.

**The quality of the written Greek language.** We have mentioned the pictographic character of the ancient Greek script. Is it only the provincial exoticism of the Latin alphabet based eye, that leads it

jealously to follow the contours of the Greek script? As we know, from whatever excursions we have made into a Semitic language—like Hebrew or the archaic Phoenician-- the perspicuousness of the language, revealing (like Egyptian hieroglyphics) the substantives (ox,house, temple) they denote, doubles the pleasure in communication, adding to semantics a pictorial eloquence. Script cannot be viewed entirely apart from its aesthetic, which is part of what keeps a language operative. Can one imagine a system like Chinese surviving without a fascinating underpinning of designs and visual coordinates.?

### **Reading**

Cook, B.F., *Greek Inscriptions*, Berkeley, 1987.

Woodard, Roger D., in Woodward, *The Ancient Languages of Europe*, Cambridge, 2008.

### **Discussion questions**

It is clear that around the fifth century B.C.E. Greek culture underwent a great creative period. Do you think the nature and stage of development, of the ancient Greek writing system, was relevant to that rapidly developing period?

The most prolonged period of development, scholarship, and sustained thinking, in the history of the alphabet which conveys Greek, was during the Byzantine period. Was this extensive period a time during which the Greek alphabet and its script changed and grew?