

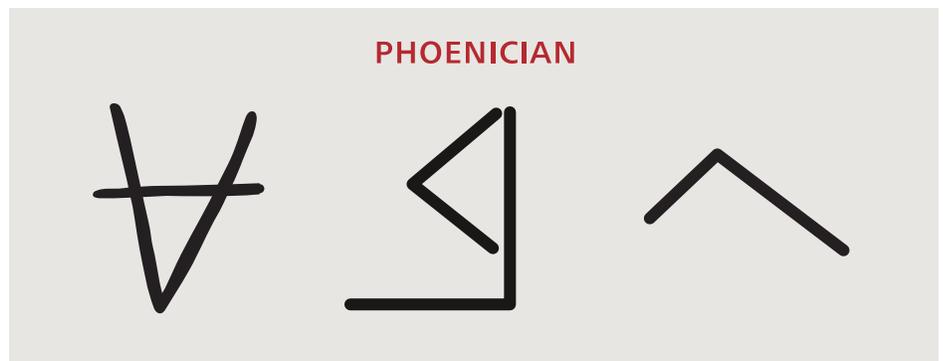


Capital Letters

by Allan Haley

THE FIRST “WRITING” WAS PROBABLY ACTUAL OBJECTS. A flower left outside someone’s hut sent a tender message, a pile of rocks along a trail foretold danger. Very gradually, these tokens and signs evolved into marks. The marks, which began writing as we think of it, had to be simple and well formed. They needed to be recognizable symbols of the same meaning over and over again. From its earliest beginnings, writing was an art.

The first writing was graphic images that represented something. These simple shapes stood for a rather simple vocabulary: man, woman, fire, food, tree, etc. Over time, however, people realized that they needed more symbols to express more words. So multiple tree symbols were combined to make a “forest,” and the symbols representing man, woman, and child were consolidated into a single “family” symbol.



The main difficulty of writing with symbols is plain: it takes many symbols to express complicated and sophisticated actions or ideas. As human culture and society became increasingly complex - propelled by the mechanisms of agriculture, religion, and politics - graphic forms of expression were developed to respond to their demands. Earlier symbol writing referred to specific things and even emotions, but they were inadequate for expressing abstractions, keeping records or creating documents. To resolve this shortcoming, new writing systems allowed for a reduction in form, and an expansion of meaning.

The Egyptians were among the first to break with the tradition of simple symbol writing. They began by using pictures to represent syllables and even entire words with the same or similar sound. Then, over thousands of years, they developed “phonograms” (sound pictures) to represent individual syllables. These were strung together to create a word. Eventually, this form of writing evolved into the Hieratic and then the Demotic scripts, setting the stage for the creation of alphabets in the various nation-states encircling the Mediterranean Ocean.

The Phoenicians brought about the next evolutionary step. They were businessmen-traders, the forerunners of modern entrepreneurs. The Phoenicians clearly had need for an alphabet, but their primary concern was record keeping. As a result, the Phoenician system of writing was free of frills and quick to write. The Phoenician system was also purely alphabetic in that one character equalled one sound.

In the course of doing business in Greece, the Phoenicians also passed on their alphabet. Once again, the Western

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alphabet began to change. The Greeks added vowels, new characters, and attractive curves.

The Roman alphabet was derived from Greek letterforms by way of the Etruscans, a people indigenous to the Italian peninsula. The Romans adopted and adjusted the Greek alphabet in the same confident manner they included the Greek gods to their mythology.

The Roman capital letters still widely used today in printing, started as monumental signage. These formal letterforms were carved into monuments and buildings, and used for important manuscripts. The stone-cutters painted the letters first, using a wide, flat writing tool that enabled them to create curves and graduations to stroke thickness.

The Roman capitals have been, and continue to be, the greatest influence on the design and use of capital letters. They have remained the classic standard for shape and proportion for almost 2,000 years. ■

