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Text Jacqueline Dineen

Illustrators Susanna Addario, Stephen Conlin, Ferruccio Cucchiari,
Giuliano Fornari, Gary Hincks, Christa Hook, Steve Kirk, Lee
Montgomery, Steve Noon, Nicki Palin, Alessandro Rabatti, Eric Robson,
Claudia Saraceni, Roger Stewart, Thomas Trojer,
Martin Woodward

Cartography Olive Pearson

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WRITING AND ALPHABETS

AS LANGUAGES became more established and civilizations developed, people needed to write things down. The earliest known writing was invented about 5500 years ago by the Sumerians, who lived in Mesopotamia (now Iraq). Later, they used a reed stylus with a wedge-shaped tip to write symbols in soft clay. This style of writing is known as cuneiform, from the Greek word for “wedge-shaped”.

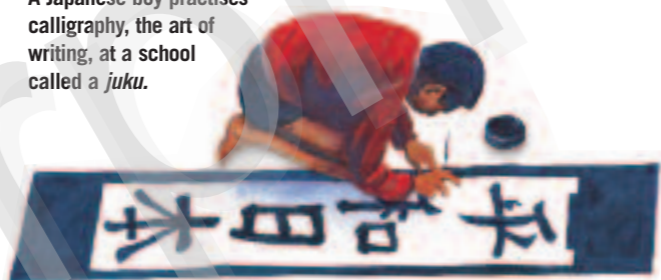
Other ancient peoples developed picture writing which was slow to use because there were so many different symbols. The ancient Egyptians used a form of picture writing known as hieroglyphs and later added a simplified form called hieratic script which was quicker to use. The Maya, who built up a civilization in Central America between AD 300 and 900, carved picture symbols in stone.

Alphabets use single letters to represent the different sounds in a word. Writing with letters is far quicker than using hundreds of different symbols. The first people to use an alphabet were the Canaanites, who lived about 3000 years ago on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Their writing had only 18 letters. Hebrew, Arabic, Hindi and Phoenician alphabets all developed from it. The ancient Greeks took up the Phoenician alphabet but added vowels. The Romans developed their alphabet from a later Greek version. All Western European languages still use the Roman alphabet today. The Cyrillic alphabet also developed from the Greek alphabet. It is used in Russia and some Eastern European countries today.

Canaanite	Modern
𐤀	A
𐤁	B
𐤂	C
𐤃	D
𐤄	E
𐤅	F
𐤆	H
𐤇	I
𐤈	K
𐤉	L
𐤊	M
𐤋	N
𐤌	O
𐤍	P
𐤎	Q
𐤏	R
𐤐	S
𐤑	T

The Chinese and Japanese still write with symbols called characters. The characters are painted with deft strokes, using a brush and ink. Chinese characters are descended from an ancient form of picture writing. They symbolize whole words or parts of words.

A Japanese boy practises calligraphy, the art of writing, at a school called a *juku*.



There are many different alphabets in use today. The Roman alphabet is probably the most widely used. The Arabic alphabet, which has 28 letters, is written from right to left. The Devangari alphabet, used for northern Indian languages, has 46 letters.

Examples of writing in different languages are shown below. All the words mean “book”. Hindi, Greek, Russian and Arabic all have their own alphabets which are quite different from the Roman version. Other languages use the Roman alphabet but have accents over letters to show that they are pronounced in a special way.

The realization that words could be put together using a set of letters or symbols was a remarkable achievement which has allowed people to record history and to write down poetry, stories and plays.

Book

English

Könyv
Hungarian

Βιβλίο
Greek

Nángsěuh
Thai

КНИГА
Russian

Kitabu
Swahili

पुस्तक
Hindi

書
Chinese

کتاب
Arabic

This boy, who belongs to the original inhabitants of southern Africa, speaks a language from the Khoisan group. It consists of clicks made with the lips and the tongue. The Kung people of the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa speak a similar language. Zulu, an unrelated language also from southern Africa, uses about 15 different click consonants.



People who are deaf have to understand a language without being able to hear it. Many of them do this by reading the shapes of words on the speaker’s lips. This is known as lip-reading. Another way is to use the special sign language for the deaf. Sign language differs from one country to another, but the names of the countries are “signed” in the same way (below).



“Japan”



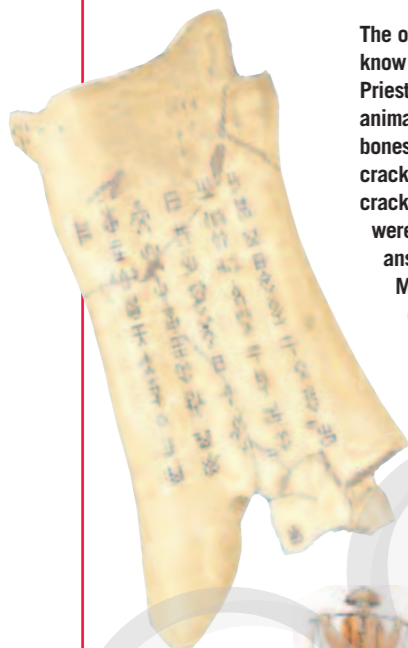
“Denmark”



“USA”

Many languages have changed and developed because of outside influences. English as we know it today, for example, has many words adapted from other cultures. It has some Latin words from the days when England was part of the Roman Empire. It has a large number of words derived from French, the language of England’s ruling classes following the Norman invasion of 1066.

Spanish, Italian, French, Portuguese and Romanian languages all have many similar words. This is because they are descended from Latin, the language of the Roman Empire, of which Spain, Italy, France, Portugal and Romania were once part.



The oldest Chinese writing we know about is on oracle bones. Priests scratched questions on animal bones and then held the bones in a fire so that they cracked. The places where the cracks crossed the pictograms were thought to give the answers from the gods.

Modern Chinese writing has developed from the earliest pictograms such as those shown below, which illustrate how the characters have changed over the centuries.

Pictogram Modern character

Man

Bird



HOUSES AROUND THE WORLD

THERE IS an enormous variety in the style of houses built in different parts of the world. Local conditions play an important part in the design of houses. In regularly-flooded areas, houses are built on stilts. Strong foundations are necessary where earthquakes are common. Houses in mountainous lands often have steep roofs, so that heavy layers of snow can slide off.

This illustration (*below*) shows one of the traditional houses which have stood in the city of Sana'a, Yemen, for hundreds of years. It is the custom in Islamic countries (*see page 22*) to keep family and visitors apart, and also for men and women to live separately, so each storey in the house has its own special purpose. The top floor is kept for visitors, for example. It has windows to catch cooling breezes.



The Bedouin people (*above*) are nomads who live in the deserts of Arabia and Africa, herding cattle, sheep and goats. They do not have permanent houses but carry tents with them as they travel around. The tents are made of woollen cloth stretched across wooden poles and held in place with ropes. Some Bedouins now work in towns and cities instead of following the nomadic life but, like the Mongolians (*see page 27*), many still choose to live in traditional tents in the desert rather than in the towns.



Mudbrick is a traditional building material that has been used for centuries. Early builders noticed that mud bakes hard in hot sun. So they shaped the bricks from wet mud and then left them to dry.

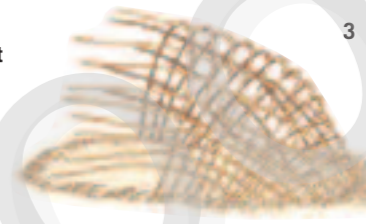
The round houses (*above*) in the Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa are made from baked mud with thatched roofs of dried reeds. Many early houses and huts were round like tents, but as time went by people began to build rectangular houses which were easier to fit along streets in villages and towns. Many mudbrick buildings in the Middle East are thousands of years old. They often have flat, rather than steeply sloping, roofs—unnecessary in these very dry regions.

In the centre of large cities there is very little room for big houses with gardens. Many people live in apartment blocks which tower into the sky. Around the outskirts of a city there will be suburbs where the houses can be more spacious. People prefer to live in the suburbs and commute (travel to work) to the city.



Hong Kong is a very crowded city and land to build on is scarce. Even though many people live in apartment blocks, there is still not room for everyone. Some families live in the large natural harbour on boats called sampans (*left*).

People live on or near the water for other reasons than overcrowding. The Bajau people from the Philippines (*below*) travel around the islands of Southeast Asia catching and selling fish. They sometimes live in their boats, which are called *lipas*, or in wooden houses on stilts in the water.



The Efe pygmies live in the rainforests of central Africa. They travel around hunting animals and collecting honey. At night they make huts to shelter in. First they mark out a circle in the ground (1) and drive branches into the ground round the circle (2). Then they weave the branches together to form a dome-shaped frame (3) which they cover with leaves (4). Traditional huts made from natural materials are still used by hunter-gatherers in other parts of the world.

Another type of traditional house is the Inuit igloo. Nowadays, Inuit people, from Canada's Arctic north and Greenland, live in modern houses on settlements, but when they go on a hunting or fishing trip they may still build an igloo for shelter.

An igloo is a dome-shaped house made of snow. First, blocks of snow are cut out and laid one on top of the other to form the dome. Each layer leans inwards slightly so that the blocks eventually meet at the top. When the dome has been completed, a lamp is lit inside to melt the snow on the inside walls. Then the lamp is removed and the cold wind freezes the melted snow into a solid, smooth sheet of ice which keeps the walls firm and windtight. Finally, skins and rugs are draped over the walls and ceiling to make the igloo warmer inside.