



Article

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Abstract

This paper proposes an analysis of writing as a system for communication, since its origins, in terms of its uses and socio-cultural context. We shall also look to review and comment on the way in which it has evolved in time and space and its primordial domains for expression. Likewise, we shall look at the current state of affairs with respect to graphic communication, which includes the alphabet, logographic systems and symbols. From a more global point of view, the relationship between the concept of writing and the concept of civilisation is studied and two dimensions are set out: the oral culture and the written culture.

Keywords

writing, oral culture, written culture, Antiquity

Introduction

The art of writing was invented separately in different places and at different times. It is necessary, thus, to describe it as polygenesis, although it was adopted in some areas thanks to cultural spread and influence. It is often associated with the birth of civilisation, the start of history, given that with it there also comes the desire to perpetuate facts about people beyond the moment when they occur; a desire, thus, to create a testimony of human behaviour and endeavour, whilst setting the identity of towns and people. It is attempt to transcend time and space, as the messages can also move away from their point of origin. As Coulmas says, communication in oral societies is face-to-face, and this means that the difference between literate and illiterate societies is, amongst others, a difference of dimensions.

Likewise, according to opinions expressed by a range of experts,¹ writing has made history possible, and, in whatever form, ancient scriptures are not dead writings, given that the current form of writing implicitly derives from them.

1. For example, Robinson (1996, p. 9).

Some definitions of writing

Here we review some of the most renowned definitions of the concept of *writing*.

- Writing systems are, according to Robinson (1996, p. 13), systems of graphic symbols that can be used to transmit all kinds of thoughts and ideas and which are based on a basic principle.
- For Bottéro (1995, p. 9), writing is a system of signs that can codify and capture *all messages, everything* that passes through one's mind.
- For Gelb (1987, p. 33), it is a system for human intercommunication that uses conventional visible signs.
- Coulmas (1991, p. 17) proposes three fundamental characteristics in the definition of writing:
 - It consists of artificial graphic marks on a lasting surface.
 - Its aim is to communicate something.



- Its aim is achieved with the help of the relation between the conventional marks and the language.
- In relation to Coulmas's third characteristic, Bloomfield considers writing to be an instrument for recording speech, in a way that all the stages in writing that do not serve this purpose are mere attempts at writing, but not authentic writing.
- Likewise, Mosterin believes that writing is not an independent system, but dependent on the language it transcribes. The messages are represented as they would be articulated through the language. Writing can represent, thus, all that can be spoken (1993, p. 30). It is thus, for him, a cultural technology that makes rational optimisation possible and which allows for the administration of complex social structures and the accumulation of great amounts of information.

In short, we could say that writing is, simply, a *written language*, and put more poetically, we have Voltaire's definition, according to which writing is the painting of the voice; or Brébeuf's, which defines it as an ingenious art to paint words and speech for the eyes. Even Aristotle dealt with the subject, saying «spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words».²

The «prehistory» of writing

As Senner points out (1992, p. 17), in the geography of cro-magnon man, although there were measurements and pictography (as prerequisites to writing), the social and economic conditions necessary to require the complicated administrative register of the first writing systems were not yet in place.

It seems clear, however, that when humans started using figurative and symbolic representations using pictorial techniques to engrave on rocky surfaces they had produced the first graphic communication. They were drawings of specific facts and objects from the world that surrounded them. Regardless of the aim or meaning of these representations (we do not know if they were a response to an artistic impulse or if they represent simple testimonies to past events), the images captured are the first examples of ideography, at a stage known as *pre-writing* for some and *proto-writing* for others. These examples, especially those that used engraving and which have in reality survived beyond prehistory and into the middle and modern ages, represent a veritable corpus of what Abelanet calls «*signes sans paroles*».

For Gelb, prehistoric painting offered, imperfectly, the functions that writing offers us today. In terms of expression, painting developed initially in two directions: pictorial art and writing. In the former, the aim was to reproduce, with relative fidelity, objects and events from the surrounding world without recourse to language. In the latter, the signs, with more or less pictorial forms, were converted

into secondary symbols aimed at communicating notions of linguistic value (1987, p. 25). At heart, the two aforementioned directions have the same aim: to communicate ideas and thoughts, whether literally transcribing the spoken code or not. Likewise, in both cases, we can see the schematic process in the representation, where the image merely preserves the most important traits to ensure identification, (which at times proves impossible). The trend to economise and produce efficient communication is another characteristic trait. The formal development of consolidated writings thus led to a cursive and linear form being produced, in which the link to any similarity with the original image is all but lost.

If we return, however, to the first stage of the practice of writing, we can see that pictographic signs with logographic values that had very vague links to the language were used, where the written message did not correspond to exact forms of the spoken language,³ rather to concepts that were understood in relation to the context of use. In this way, the exact correspondence between writing and speech was not seen until the phonetisation of written signs. This is the reference that Bloomfield takes as a basis for defining the true beginning of writing. The previous pictographic experiences used to communicate meanings were to be enveloped, thus, in what Gelb calls *semasiography*.

Examples found in the more recent past of a representative and descriptive graphic system also to fall within the semasiographic bracket and, thus, outside the true writing category, whilst still representing the middle ground between pictorial representations and writing. These are the pictographic messages used by Native Americans, which took the form of letters or stories expressed using a sequence of schematic drawings.⁴

Finally, we should also mention the other forms of, non-verbal, communication which were, no doubt, in use from the Palaeolithic period, such as visual signals (with smoke or mirrors) and acoustic signals (with sirens, percussion instruments, etc.).

The origin and primitive evolution of writing

A number of authors, among them Senner (1992, p. 12), look at the question of the singular or multiple origin of writing. The adoption of writing took place in different places and at different times. The Mayan system is a clear example of the independent adoption of writing. In any case, it should be noted that cultural spread was undoubtedly the way in which the idea of writing travelled to many different regions in which it took root. This was probably the case in the Orient, Egypt and the western Mediterranean. However, the writing systems differed depending on the time at which they were created, the cultural surroundings and the language to be expressed. In this way, it can be seen how there was no one single line of development and that the different writing

2. «Logic», prologue to *De interpretatione*.

3. See Gelb (1987, p. 31).

4. *Op. cit.*, pp. 53-75.



systems created in Antiquity did not necessarily conform to the same evolutionary template (apart from the variations thereon).

Figure 1 shows the evolutionary scheme for writing, bringing together all its origins up to the present day, omitting the Chinese system, which remains to a great degree a logossyllabic system.

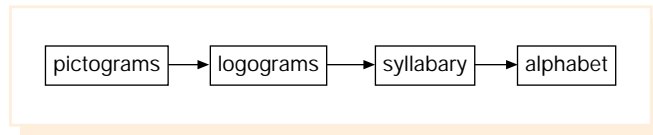


Figure 1

However, the crucial fact in the origin of writing is not only the invention of a system for register, firstly with an «object» support and then with a graphic support, but, and, above all, as will be seen, the possibility of retracing the direct root of this invention to the primitive Neolithic period and the oldest nucleus of the domestication of species of animals and vegetables.⁵ In a way, it is the admission that the first writing, conceived as a system to aid memory and communication that went beyond the oral, appears with the birth of community life, often associated to the sedentary lifestyle, with the forming of guidelines for social behaviour and the control of the means for subsistence (production, storage, exchange). Subsequently, the increasing complexity of the socio-political reality, and generation of riches and taxation by the privileged social sectors led simultaneously to the definitive setting and ulterior development of the graphic system.

The fact of admitting to this genesis of writing means that we cannot speak strictly of its invention at given moment in the fourth millennium BC, as is generally accepted, but rather we have to verify whether it was the logical consequence of a long process that began long before, and which could have also undergone casual advances.

In principle, the initial use of writing was for accounting, associated to an economy undergoing expansion that required new tools for control and monitoring. This can be seen the different cultures employing writing in the Ancient World, despite the fact that the testimonies still remaining on the subject from areas such as Egypt, China or Central America are few in number.

The oldest example of writing known of to date are Sumerian logograms, which dates, at least, to 3200 BC, if not before. The first question that has to be made is whether it was the work of an individual or a group. Although, if we admit that the system was reached as a direct consequence of a previous process, the question of who invented it makes little sense. In the phase immediately preceding, there was already a way to set concepts, amounts and people using non-graphic media. This system used the well-known Sumerian accounting tokens, which acted as the model for the first written logograms.

These tokens were miniscule pieces of terracotta with different geometric shapes: sphere, cone, disc, tetrahedron, triangle, rectangle, ovoid, biconical and other less defined forms. They have been attributed an accounting use. They were first identified in the excavations of Susa, associated to writing and dated back to 3000 BC. The tokens were in spherical receptacles. Denise Schmandt-Besserat (1978) carried out investigations into the use of clay in the Near East and discovered that similar clay figurines had been used since the Neolithic period, ie, since at least 8500 BC. The oldest types came from Tepe Asiab and Ganj-i-Dareh Tepe (in the Zagros region of Iran), where there were twenty different examples, representing cones, spheres, discs, triangles and schematic forms of animals, amongst others.

In general, however, the findings of tokens were documented throughout the Near East (from Turkey to Pakistan) and during the Neolithic and Eneolithic periods. (Still today, shepherds in the area use stones from the rivers to keep account of their flocks, along with the abacus.) The token system, its name and nature remained in use without significant changes until the end of the Bronze Age.

Between 3500 and 3100 BC, the first urban society began to take shape. The birth of cities led to a series of changes in the organisation of society, such as a growth in production, large-scale commerce, the creation of the civil servant and the first governing dynasties or the institutionalisation of worship, etc. The tokens grew in number and types, they were standardised as far as possible and incorporated numbered markings engraved on them. They served to produce inventories or control salaries and commercial transactions. Some even had a hole in, which leads us to think that were stacked up.

The tokens were divided up into 15 classes and 250 sub-classes. Some may have represented numbers and others specific objects (usually merchant goods). When pictographic writing began, these same objects were represented graphically in two dimensions and very faithfully, by being engraved on to clay tablets.

Amongst the repertory of Sumerian pictographic signs that have been deciphered, Schmandt-Besserat assures us that the direct correspondence between the written symbol and token is obvious (at least in the thirty-two cases identified); for example:

- «sheep» is represented by a circle with a cross inside it; corresponding to the token in the form a disc with a cross engraved on it;
- «piece of clothing» is represented by a circle with four parallel lines inside it; corresponding to the token in the form of a disc with four parallel lines engraved on it.

Similarities have also been found between the signs that have yet to be deciphered and other tokens.

Preceding the first graphic experiences, or even coinciding with them, certain receptacles, known as *bullae*, were found at Susa

5. South-west Asia.



from the end of the fourth millennium BC, and which contained tokens. These receptacles were spherical in shape and acted as envelopes, on which the seal of the individuals taking part in a transaction were engraved. Subsequently, the symbols of the tokens they contained were represented graphically on their surface. The recipient of the goods could check whether they matched with the amount and characteristics expressed on the *bullae* once they had received and inspected them. The fact that the content of *bullae* was marked on its surface produced a simple way of checking without destroying the receptacle, which constituted in itself an exercise in writing that, despite being born spontaneously as a support for the existing system for controlling merchant goods, ultimately became the definitive practice for non-oral communication. Eventually, the *bullae* were replaced by engraved tablets, which used symbols to represent the tokens.

Everything seems to point to the fact, then, that the tokens were the most direct predecessor to the first Sumerian logograms and, thus, the first writing. The graphic representation of the tokens, together with the figurative representation of the new elements of real life, resulted in the creation of a conventional and standardised repertory of signs which, engraved in a line, were able to express people, animals, objects and actions, whether directly with an image or through the association of ideas. Each sign corresponded to a word. In other words, they were logograms.

Beyond the Sumerian logographic writing, the decisive step which led to the true creation of writing as a means of transcribing spoken language came with the invention of the phonetic graphic system. This was a revolutionary step that widened the scale of graphic communication enormously. It was based on the principle of the *rebus* or hieroglyphic. It consisted of assigning pictograms to sounds, the name of the object they represented, but reduced to a single syllable by acrophony. From here, the words of the spoken language are expressed in writing using combinations of the pictograms converted into syllabic signs or syllabograms, to which logograms are added as semantic complements to resolve problems of homophony.⁶

The phonetisation of signs arose from the need to express words and sounds that could not be adequately represented by drawings and combinations of drawings (Gelb 1987, p. 99). This step represented the overcoming of a very important barrier to communication. It meant that writing was able to come closer to expressing all thoughts and expressive capacity, which pictographic writing had been unable to represent.

It is in this logosyllabic stage, and now fully developed, that writing was to be found in other areas and at the following, approximate, dates: in Egypt from 3100 BC, in the Indus Valley from 2500 BC, in China from 1200 BC and the Americas from 600 BC.⁷

Although in some cases we can assume that the idea of writing, and its logographic structure, spread thanks to a cultural influen-

ce to Egypt, the Indus Valley and, subsequently, China. Likewise, it should be stated how the systems created in each area were original in the formal aspects (the shape of the signs, use, supports, etc.) and in terms of their internal functioning (phonetics, syntax, morphology) in accordance with the cultural reality and the needs of the language to be transcribed. The case of Mayan writing, in terms of the above, remains isolated and suggests a wholly independent genesis.

Finally, the definitive step came with the invention of the alphabet, seen by Gelb (1987, p. 217) to be a system of signs to express the individual sounds of speech. It was a system that also incorporated independent notation for vowels, unlike the previous signs whose roots came from the consonants.

The alphabet was acquired around the year 800 BC by the Greeks, following the consonantal model of the Phoenicians. Indeed, the same Greek tradition called its own writing *phoinikéia grámmata*. The Greeks adopted not only the shape of the signs, but also the names, and added new signs to express sounds that the Phoenician language did not possess.

However, as is well known, the Phoenician signs were not the prototype for the consonantal alphabet. There were others that preceded it, such as the signs created by the Proto-Canaanites from 1700 BC. It consisted of a system of 27 pictograms assigned a phoneme by acrophony. Likewise, in the centre of Ugarit, a meeting point for merchants from Mesopotamia, Anatoly, Egypt, Crete and Cyprus, a consonantal alphabet was introduced around 1500 BC made up of 30 new cuneiform characters deriving from the syllabic Akkadian cuneiform. This system was destined to be used to produce administrative texts, commercial correspondence, fiscal declarations and other governmental documents. It was also used to write religious texts (though only with 27 signs) which, according to Robinson (1996, p. 163), resemble some of the stories compiled in the Old Testament. This writing died out around 1200 BC, a century before the Phoenicians began their writing practices. They produced consonantal signs, comprising 22 characters that followed the Proto-Canaanite model. The Aramaic system derived from the Phoenician, which definitively substituted the former after a thousand years of use. The Aramaic language (not just the writing) was to become the *lingua franca* in the Near East for a long period of time.⁸

Let us return, however, to the creation of the Greek alphabet. It should be pointed out that this was a direct consequence of the transmission of the consonantal signage from the Phoenicians to the Greeks, in the context of the contact between merchants and craftsmen from each region in the free ports of the eastern Mediterranean. The circumstances of the transmission led to the use of writing which was, above all, practical and, indeed, which could be produced whilst allowing for a level of deficiency. It consisted of an alphabet made up of 22 letters taken directly from the Phoenician, with five extra letters: Y, Φ, X, Ψ and Ω.⁹ The prin-

6. The first phonetic Sumerian writing had a repertory of 150 syllabograms and 600 semantic complements.

7. See Robinson (1996, page 12).

8. See Mosterin (1993, pp. 111-113).

9. *Op. cit.*, pp. 130-131.



cial innovation with respect to the Phoenician was to establish specific characters for each vowel.

Ambits and uses of writing in Antiquity

Each system from writing is designed to respond to a wide range of objectives. In Sumer, for example, writing arose between 3300 and 3200 BC so as to express figures, products, goods and people, so that the documents could record the accounting, commercial transactions and sale of land. The scribes were employed by the temples and palaces of Uruk and other Sumerian city-states, or other regions, such as Iran (Susa and Chogha Mish) and Syria (Habuba Kabira and Jebel Aruda). To date, some four thousand documents have been found, which allow for the compiling of a repertory of up to one thousand five hundred different signs. Over time, the writing in Mesopotamia, now in the cuneiform mode, served for the production of legal texts and literature (poems, hymns, prayers, fables and other works that would previously have been perpetuated orally).

In the Indus Valley, midway through the third millennium BC, writing was produced with seals, ceramics, copper sheets, bronze tools and sticks of ivory and bone. There are a total of 3,500 short inscriptions (of less than four lines) to be found in the streets and interiors of the houses of Mohenjo-daro and other centres. Estimates put the Indian signs, which probably transcribed a Dravidic language before the arrival of Aryans, at around 400 characters. The signs were used alongside representations of animals (tigers, buffaloes, elephants, rhinos and even a unicorn) and anthropomorphic figures. The contents have yet to be understood, as the writing has not been deciphered, but there are experts who suggest that some of the writings make reference to Proto-Indian deities (specifically, those represented by the anthropomorphic figures).

In Pharaonic Egypt, on the other hand, the writing was used in a similar way as to that in Mesopotamia. The repertory of subjects was wide ranging: funerary and religious texts, recounting Pharaonic history and glory, or administrative, private and literary (poems, stories, fables) documents.

The Mycenaean documents, written in *linear B*, basically deal with administration and accounting in the palaces and temples, tasks conducted by the royal officials; to a lesser extent, there are documents which mention the names of deities. The development of this writing was cut short by the decadence of the Mycenaean world and the abandonment of the urban lifestyle. Following the Trojan War the writing in these kingdoms disappeared completely; indeed, they were to enter a period of isolation, the so-called *Dark Age*. The revival of writing in the region came four centuries later with the recently created Greek alphabet.

In China, a writing system was invented designed to formulate questions to the heavens. It had a magical character. The

answers were also expressed using writing. It was used on the shoulders of oxen or tortoise shells. This knowledge was in the hands of the priests, who were those who had the privilege of communicating with the divine world and ancestors through writing. The first examples of scapulimancy date back to the Shang dynasty (1300-1200 BC). Subsequently, from the Zhou dynasty on, this practice was abandoned and a wide range of texts began to be written on bronze, bamboo, wood and silk. It was a representative system made up of some 4,100 different signs, among which 3,900 were phonetic and 200 semantic. The characters could be simple or compound and occupied identical square blocks in the text.¹⁰ Indeed, this system, though with a high level of stylisation of the original pictograms, is that which is currently used for Chinese writing.

The Mayans also used writing. They did so, amongst other things, to express their predictions, which they combined with references to the calendar. They used tree bark decorated with colours and framed with leopard skins.

Another field of expression which spread through most of the cultures with writing was related to identity. In this way, numerous documents have been found that show markings for property or identity. These names appear on all sorts of objects: seals from Mesopotamia or the Indus Valley; Greek, Phoenician, Etruscan, or Iberian ceramics; rings and all kinds of furnishings in the tombs of the Egyptians and other civilisations from Antiquity. In funerals, the names were preserved so as to express the desire for immortality. This is also typical of many Etruscan inscriptions.

Identity, immortality and prestige, depending on the contexts for use, are three concepts that are closely related in the first texts in cultures such as the Greek, the aforementioned Etruscan, Roman, Iberian, etc.

Leaving aside the practical use of writing in ancient civilisations, the explanation for its origins and fundamental use are to be seen, as Haarmann suggests, in terms of religion, an opinion shared by Gelb (1987, p. 297) and Senner (1992, pp. 19 and on).

It is in the ancient myths that we can see that a form of divinity is usually attributed to the gift of writing. These accounts have, according to Arno Borst, the function of completing the transition that links the oral tradition to historical conscience. For example, in Egypt, writing was the fruit of the god Thot, defined as the supreme intelligence. *Scripture* meant «the language of the gods». Indeed, its being taught and its use was confined primarily to the priests. In Mesopotamia, writing was also fundamental for religion and the clergy. Likewise, in Sumer, as in Egypt and Canaan, the priests thought that the word of god (ie written down) had a creative power. Whilst the Babylonians venerated the god Nabû (the biblical Nebo) as the inventor of writing, patron of the sciences and scribe to the gods. In the same way, the Chinese believed that writing had been invented by Ta'ang Chien, a god who had the face of a dragon and four eyes. (It has to be taken into account that the ancient Chinese tradition attributed to these animals the function of transporting the sacred to the home of their

10. For more details, see Mosterín (1993, pp. 68-74).



ancestors). Finally, it is worth adding that, according to tradition in India, it was Brahma who made man aware of writing.

Other religions that were transmitted through writing are related to alphabetical writing.¹¹ For example, the Nordic people attribute Odin with having invented runes and the Irish attribute Ogmios with the invention of their system of writing. Allah is also seen to be the creator of writing. There are many other examples such as these.

In terms of the cultures of the states of Antiquity, writing was highly institutionalised in a government structure based on the influence of the priests and a strict bureaucracy in charge of controlling the taxation system and administration of wealth in the temples and palaces. This is also what was seen in the hydraulic societies, such as Sumer, Akkad or Egypt. Indeed, the texts from these civilisations belong in great part to the administration and religion. Furthermore, access to writing, and education in general, was restricted to the priests and the scribes. The latter were able to reach positions of great importance. In China, the priests were in charge of communicating, through writing, with the emperor's ancestors and making predictions. To be able to write thus meant wisdom and this was a rare privilege.

In terms of the hierarchy that determined who had access to writing in these cultures, we should add that the complexity of the graphic systems used, which required the memorisation of an enormous repertory of signs and the assimilation of the mechanisms that ruled their combination in ordered discourse. The Sumerian, Egyptian and Chinese systems were a mixture of phonograms, logograms and phonetic and semantic complements. Special training was required that the common citizen in these societies was in no condition to receive. We believe that even today Chinese writing, which has changed very little from the original graphic system, is an important obstacle to learning, due to the difficulty implicit in having to memorise such a large number of signs. More years of study are needed to achieve a basic ability in reading and writing in this system than in an alphabetic one.

Likewise, the cultures of Antiquity which had the widest spread of the practice of writing throughout society were those that used consonantal or alphabetic signage. This is the case of the Proto-Canaanites, Phoenicians, Greeks, Etruscans and Romans, among others. The simplicity of these systems allowed for a greater proportion of the population to be able to learn and use them. In the same way, the content transcribed with this writing was also more wide-ranging, and included private matters. Religious use came after the consolidation of the system's introductory phase and was seen both in public and private texts: questions to the oracle, prayers, lines of thanks to the gods, etc.

On another level we can see the relationship between writing and the calendar. Initially, the calendar was born through the need to measure time for agricultural planning, as the survival of the

members of the community depended on successful harvests. The calendar served, furthermore, to control the seasonal cycle, the cycle of life and renewal of the generational forces, whilst also allowing people to situate events over time. It was, thus, another way of ordering the elements that made up the memory of the community, collectively and for each of its members.

The Babylonians were already using calendars around 2700 BC, based on the phases of the moon and the position of the sun. The measurements were multiples of 60. The Egyptians divided the year in 12 months of 30 days, which added up to 360 days, to which they added 5 epagomenal days, dedicated to the celebration of the birth of the gods related in the myth of Osiris.

In Central America, hieroglyphic writing was combined with a numerical system, through which the dates of events could be expressed. In this way, the Mayans incorporated references to the calendar into their texts, which were made up of logograms, and syllabic and vocal phonographic signs. They had two calendars, which could be linked together. That which most resembles are own divided the year into 18 months of 20 days each, ie a year of 360 days, to which they added a month of 5 days. The other calendar had 13 months of 20 days each.

Likewise, the measures and numerical system acted as a fundamental and complementary instrument for the first urban societies with writing systems. Knowledge of a series of standard measures made it possible to carry out all sorts of calculations¹² and arithmetic functions in daily life: accounting, control of sales, measurement and distribution of land, taxation, construction, etc.

The return of the logogram?

Since the introduction of the alphabet as a writing system it has progressively spread throughout a great part of the world, and after 2800 years is still has practically the same characteristics as it had when first conceived. The history of the alphabet occupies a period of time comparable to that of pre-alphabetic writing. Can we thus deduce that another cycle in the evolution of writing has been completed? Will another code for communication arise from the transformation of the alphabet or not? Will it be a universal code?

It is worthwhile, here, to review the questions put forward by Robinson:

- Is the alphabet efficient enough?
- Why is a phonetically based writing system desirable?
- What is the relationship between sound and reading and writing?

Indeed, if writing is designed to communicate thoughts and ideas, why does it have to use a code that transcribes the sound

11. See Goody (1990, pp. 23-24).

12. The most well known apparatus for making calculations is the abacus (both in the version for engraving quantities in columns and the version with coloured beads to classify amounts). In China, a form of abacus has existed since at least 2600 BC. The abacus was also widely used in Greece and Rome, as was known to the peripheral Mediterranean cultures (the Etruscans and Iberians).



of speech? Sound is inherent in speech; it is an acoustic sensation, as is a scream, crying or music. However, communication is also possible through other media, whether gesture or tactile expression. Written music is expressed using a conventional code, as with writing. Yet, musical interpretation goes far beyond a written code, where, as well as the musician's unique and individual contribution, there are contents and sensations that can only be witnessed in the performance. Another similar difference can be seen when we compare the expressive capacity of the written and oral codes. The great advantage of codes such as music, gesture (such as sign language for the deaf) or tactile (ie mathematical or chemical) is that they are universal.

From this point of view, a return to logograms would mean, firstly, a simplification of graphic discourse and, simultaneously, an ease of understanding regardless of the language used, which would fit perfectly into our globalised world. It is obvious that we live in a society that is full of logograms or icons that are already used very effectively. We should ask ourselves, however, whether the spread of this system through all levels of expression would be viable without increasing the level of complexity. We also have to consider if it is viable to create a universal *pasigraphic* system that simultaneously maintains the levels of simplicity, efficiency and exhaustive expression required to serve all users, regardless of the language they speak.

In any case, if we wish to call this system *writing*, we fail to meet the condition seen by Saussure when he said that it was impossible to isolate the sound from the thought in language, or the thought from the sound. Writing cannot be dissociated from speech. Words depend simultaneously on both the sounds and the symbols.¹³ However, those who write in Chinese say that the signs speak directly to the mind without involving sound. It is as if the logograms had a life of their own.

Writing and civilisation

A consequence of the presence of writing in a society is literacy, which is defined as the ability to read and write messages. Literacy became a decisive factor in what Goody (1977) called «the domestication of the savage mind».

For Bottéro (1995, p. 19), the move from the oral to the written represents a radical transformation, a renewed vision of things, a change in the way people communicate and the quality of their messages. These messages, materialised through writing, acquire consistence and durability, take on their own being, and can be reproduced and made available to any number of people.

Diringer states that writing is the basis of the development of the human conscience, intellect and critical spirit. Furthermore, we could also say that the introduction of the alphabet has had a primordial effect on the collective conscience, whilst allowing for a

much wider spread of writing throughout society. It represented the start of the «democratising» of written culture.

Coulmas (1991, p. 4) believes that writing has to be seen as a result and, likewise, condition of civilisation; ie, as a product created by civilisation and a tool that gives it shape.

In reality, writing was not invented with literary ends, but it made literature possible, as it did a range of complex communicational activities that are not seen in illiterate societies. Writing belongs to urban societies, in the same way that cities are not the form of social organisation used by oral cultures.

Culture, at that point in history, was ruled by the scribes, in Sumerian known as the «tablet engravers». They were those who were at the heart of the most important advances in their culture. They were writers and thinkers, whilst also being in charge of purifying the culture for its retransmission to the uneducated population.¹⁴ A clear distinction was thus established between those who had access to knowledge and those who did not. The literate culture meant it was possible to store and transmit knowledge. The scribes were reserved this privilege and instead of allowing the ability to read and write to spread throughout society, they emphasised the divine nature of writing, which was not accessible to ordinary human beings.¹⁵

Since its invention or acquisition, the possession of writing has made the systematised, wide-ranging and precise development of knowledge and science possible, which has allowed for advances based on reflection on the written word. Writing was and is, then, the vehicle for the scientific tradition, as it is for the literary tradition, despite its, undoubtedly, having its origins in the oral tradition. It is obvious that writing is one of the most important signs of civilisation, and that which, in many cases, may even allow for a greater range of expression than speech.

Anthropologists have stated that speech distinguishes man from beasts, in the same way that writing distinguishes civilised men from barbarians. From this point of view, Gelb (1987, pp. 286-287) states the following idea: «writing exists only in a civilisation and a civilisation cannot exist without writing». The context surrounding writing has to include a notable development in government, technology, production, commerce, art, culture, etc. Likewise, the use of writing implies a reduction in the power and capacity of the memory, as well as a considerable lessening in the importance of the oral tradition, which is much richer in more popular or illiterate societies.

In short, with the substitution of the oral tradition for writing we have lost important links to our past, culture and identity. We are, nowadays, the trustees of what has become of culture since the beginning of time, a culture that has been shaped by our ancestors. We are simultaneously the past and the present. We are tradition itself. With the arrival of the written culture we have lost part of the oral tradition, part of ourselves, maybe the most barbarian part. This vacuum has been filled with that which the written culture has made us: civilised beings.

13. See Robinson (1996, p. 17).

14. See Bottéro (1995, pp. 18-19).

15. See Coulmas (1991, p. 6).

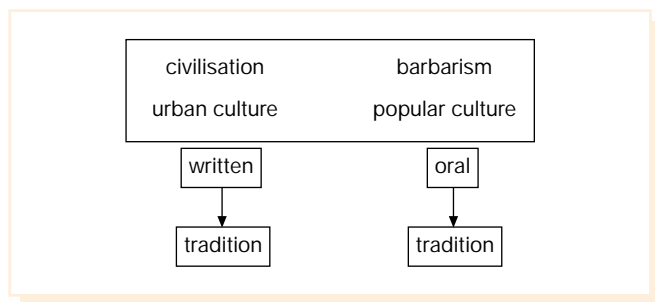


Figure 2

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