

The Development of the Phonetic Alphabet

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“In the beginning there was the word, and the word was
with God, and the word was God”

-John, i, 1 (c. A.D. 110)ⁱ

Most historians agree that some time around 1500 B.C., the phonetic alphabet emerged in ancient Phoenicia. It allotted 22 letterforms to represent the various sounds inherent in the Phoenician dialect of the day. Though there are several theories that the Phoenician alphabet was developed from Ancient Minoan pictographs or Semitic adaptations of Egyptian hieroglyphics,ⁱⁱ it is generally believed that the Phoenician alphabet was the first to truly represent the more complete dialectic possibilities of a language, and is widely believed to be the root of our modern Roman alphabet.

The introduction of the phonetic letterform into human culture may be one of the most important developments in human history. It created a new medium by which individuals could discourse. As long as the meaning of each letterform was mutually understood and a common language existed between the individuals, interpretation was no longer as much of a concern as it had been in the days of cuneiforms and hieroglyphs. It was a simpler and more effective visual language. This development marked an enormous step toward the social intellectualization of our species, and at some point required an early designer to take on issues that would be very familiar to any designer of the twenty-first

century. The challenge facing that early typographer would have been how to create a form of communication for a general audience that was aesthetically pleasing, usable (i.e. readable and reproducible) and wholly original.

The designer of these early letterforms is unknown, but the issues with which he or she was forced to grapple with are familiar. Once the need for, and concept of, a phonetic alphabet was established, it was necessary for the designer to consider the letterforms themselves in order to fully realize this new medium of communication. The designer's first step might have been to research the potential user group. The phonetics of their language would have needed to be cataloged, simplified and abbreviated. This may have been followed by researching the effectiveness of other attempts at a written language, such as the Minoan cuneiforms or Egyptian hieroglyphics. Having examined past forms of writing, the designer would then need to develop original letterforms. Representational elements needed to be made up of recognizable yet fairly innocuous shapes that could be easily remembered. This was not an easy task as a letterform could be limited by pictographic similarities due to the readers' associations with its form, while also being difficult for them to reproduce if too abstract. Each letterform needed to be distinctive from the other, yet to be successful, the group of letterforms as a whole required common elements to give them some uniformity. This would provide users with forms that were simple for them to reproduce and easy for them to distinguish from one another when set side by side in repetitious patterns. The use of familiar elements and shapes such as right angles, 45° diagonal lines, squares, triangles, and circles would have certainly aided in this. The phonetic alphabet allowed the letterform to simplify and limit the number of elements needed to

communicate the spoken word. This in turn, made the language easier to learn and the population of users soon began to grow exponentially. As time went by, design improvements of these letterforms led to greater readability, and eventually even more widespread use of the phonetic letterform in various languages around the globe.

It is curious to ponder how seriously that early typographer considered these points and how much it would influence the future of mankind. When examined closely, there is a tremendous intellectual step that resulted from the development of a phonetically based alphabet. Previous pictographs were limited to the expression of nouns and simple actions, while the phonetic allowed for much greater conceptual contentⁱⁱⁱ. In the Far East, letterforms were emerging which were representational of whole words, and as the complexity of the language was addressed, the intricacies and size of the corresponding alphabets increased. With the advent of the Phoenician alphabet, verb tense was suddenly introduced to the western reader. Imagine how limited our conceptual discussions would be if we were to communicate only in the present tense. With the advent of phonetic writing, historical records could be more precisely recorded and examined, future actions speculated upon, and current events reported. As the number of literate humans grew, the use of the new medium would increase the individual's awareness of the world around them. Local states grew to nation states, and the recording and reporting of the activities in them broadened to a point where public accounts increased public accountability.

With literacy comes the ability to gain knowledge from a larger number of sources. With this greater diversity of source material came more independent thought - the root of much of humanity's developments.

There are no historical accounts available which tell us how much he considered the impression his inventions might make upon the world, but as Johann Gutenberg was developing his printing techniques for movable type between 1438 and 1456 A.D.^{iv}, it is unlikely that the global repercussions of his inventions could have been foreseen. Gutenberg's concept of a printing press with movable interchangeable type, his precision mold for casting lead type as well as his consideration of ligature, and kerning of the letterforms that he designed, were an entirely new approach to forming language.^v One that is often referred to as an enormous technological step forward for mankind, ushering in an age of enlightenment and religious reform, as well as being a precursor to the industrial age and its assembly line developments. Gutenberg's primary concerns while developing these breakthroughs were with readability, which he achieved by making the texts look handmade (i.e. familiar), and reproducibility by assuring that the process could be repeated with minimum effort.

If we define technology as the systems developed by a society for a society as a means for further development^{vi} then Gutenberg's inventions are certainly technological breakthroughs. Yet they pale in comparison to the technological development of a written phonetic language. By 1517, just fifty years after Gutenberg's death, Luther's tract Ninety-five Theses, which condemned the Roman Catholic Church, was being clandestinely reprinted throughout Europe and the medium of print had taken hold.^{vii} Despite this tremendous

breakthrough in communication, Johann must surely have been aware that he was, as Newton said, “standing upon the shoulders of giants.” The giants being those first typographers, whose phonetic interpretations of the spoken word allowed for the mass communication that so profoundly altered the course of human history.

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End Notes

ⁱ Burton Stevenson, The Macmillan Book of Proverbs, Maxims, and Famous Phrases (New York: The Macmillan Company 1948) 2601

ⁱⁱ Kate Clair, A Typographic Workbook (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1999) 13

ⁱⁱⁱ Kate Clair, A Typographic Workbook (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1999) 14

^{iv} Friedrich Friedl, Nicholas Ott, and Bernard Stein. Typography: An Encyclopedic Survey of Type Design and Techniques Throughout History(New York: Black Dog & Leventhal, 1998)264

^v Kate Clair, A Typographic Workbook (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1999) 15

^{vi} "Technology" Webster's New World Dictionary (New York: The Macmillan Company 1998)

^{vii} William RoseBenet, The Readers Encyclopedia 2nd Edition (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1965) 607