

A STUDY OF WRITING

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Discussion of the general principles governing the use and evolution of writing

I. J. GELB

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A STUDY OF
WRITING

REVISED EDITION

I. J. GELB



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PREFACE

THE book contains twelve chapters, but it can be broken up structurally into five parts. First, the place of writing among the various systems of human inter-communication is discussed. This is followed by four chapters devoted to the descriptive and comparative treatment of the various types of writing in the world. The sixth chapter deals with the evolution of writing from the earliest stages of picture writing to a full alphabet. The next four chapters deal with general problems, such as the future of writing and the relationship of writing to speech, art, and religion. Of the two final chapters, one contains the first attempt to establish a full terminology of writing, the other an extensive bibliography.

The aim of this study is to lay a foundation for a new science of writing which might be called *grammatology*. While the general histories of writing treat individual writings mainly from a descriptive-historical point of view, the new science attempts to establish general principles governing the use and evolution of writing on a comparative-typological basis. The importance of this study lies in its being the first systematic presentation of the history and evolution of writing as based on these principles. Some specific results of the new reconstruction are: Elimination of the so-called 'word writings' and their replacement by the word-syllabic type; assignment of the so-called 'Semitic alphabet' to the syllabic type; placing the so-called 'Maya and Aztec writings' not under writings proper but under forerunners of writing; conclusion that the mysterious 'Easter Island inscriptions' do not represent writing but formal designs for magical purposes.

Let it be clearly understood from the start that the work here presented is not a comprehensive history of writing. This work is concerned only with those writings that are representative of certain types or are crucial for the understanding of certain developments. One would look in vain, therefore, in this study for a discussion of Latin writing through ancient, medieval, and modern times, because that system represents nothing new and important for the theory of writing. Generally speaking, we

write to-day the way the ancient Romans did, and the ancient Latin writing is identical in principle with that of the Greeks, from whom it was borrowed.

Much of the theoretical reconstruction of writing as presented in this study may sound heretical to some scholars, especially to those philologists who, being imbued with sacred traditions in their narrow fields of specialization, feel reticent about accepting conclusions drawn from a comprehensive view of writing. Indicative of this attitude is the request of one of my colleagues not to quote his name in acknowledgement for help I had received from him in matters pertaining to Chinese. It is with a certain degree of self-assurance that I refer to that scholar's reluctance to be associated with 'heretics', since I hope to see him go to Canossa when he sees the light.

The study relies chiefly on internal structural evidence, placing in secondary position arguments that can be drawn from external formal evidence. Thus there is plenty of room in a future study of similar nature to work out thoroughly the formal aspects of the typology and evolution of writing. Subjects which might receive more adequate treatment in the future pertain to writing materials, numbers, order of signaries, names of signs, and auxiliary marks, such as prosodic features, word division, etc.

This study has been in the making for slightly over twenty years. It includes parts in the chapter 'Writing and Civilization' which were taken over from a paper written in my college days as well as a chapter entitled 'Future of Writing' which was written only about two years ago. The major part of the study was composed in the few years immediately preceding the American entry into the Second World War. The long period of gestation, coupled with the heavy burden of scholastic and administrative duties that have fallen to me in the last few years, is mainly responsible for whatever unevenness in style and composition may appear in the final product. It is for the latter reason that I have been unable to utilize fully the scientific literature of the last two or three years. From among the important works on writing which have not received full justice in this study I should like to single out James G. Février, *Histoire de l'écriture* (Paris, 1948) and G. R. Driver, *Semitic Writing from Pictograph to Alphabet* (London, 1948).

In order to prevent misunderstanding on the part of some

linguists it should be pointed out that the term 'syllabic sign' is used here to denote a unit of writing which must contain a vowel (either by itself or flanked by consonants in front or in back of it) and which may or may not contain prosodic features (such as stress, tone, quantity, etc.); this definition in the field of writing differs, therefore, from that of a syllable, taken by some linguists to denote a speech unit which is characterized in the first place by prosodic features and which may or may not contain a vowel.

One of the most vexing problems in a study of such a wide range as this one is that of transliteration and transcription. Nobody realizes better than myself that (while striving to achieve uniformity) I have not succeeded in avoiding a number of inconsistencies. Especially unfortunate is, in my opinion, the use of *i*, *j* and *y* (for *y* in English 'yes'); the force of existing conventions in different languages and writings presented a problem for which no satisfactory solution could be found.

This study owes much directly and indirectly to many friends and colleagues both in this country and abroad. The whole manuscript was read and constructively criticized by my former teacher at the University of Rome, Professor Giorgio Levi Della Vida (when he was at the University of Pennsylvania), Professor Giuliano Bonfante of Princeton, Professor John Lotz of Columbia, Professor Thomas Sebeok of the Indiana University, Professor Ralph Marcus, Dr. Richard T. Hallock, Mrs. Erna S. Hallock, and my former student Mr. Byron E. Farwell, all of Chicago. Parts of Chapters I and IX were read by Professor Thorkild Jacobsen of Chicago, Professor Henri Frankfort and Mrs. Frankfort formerly of Chicago, now of London. Much help was received in the field of Sumerian from Professor Jacobsen, in the field of Egyptian from Professors William F. Edgerton, Keith C. Seele, and John A. Wilson of Chicago, and in the field of Chinese from Professors Ch'ên Mêng-chia and Têng Ssü-yü (when they were at the University of Chicago). Mr. Jørgen Laessøe of Chicago was kind enough to help me with many hand drawings in this study. To all these scholars and friends may I offer in this place my warmest thanks and appreciation.

I. J. G.

Chicago, Illinois.

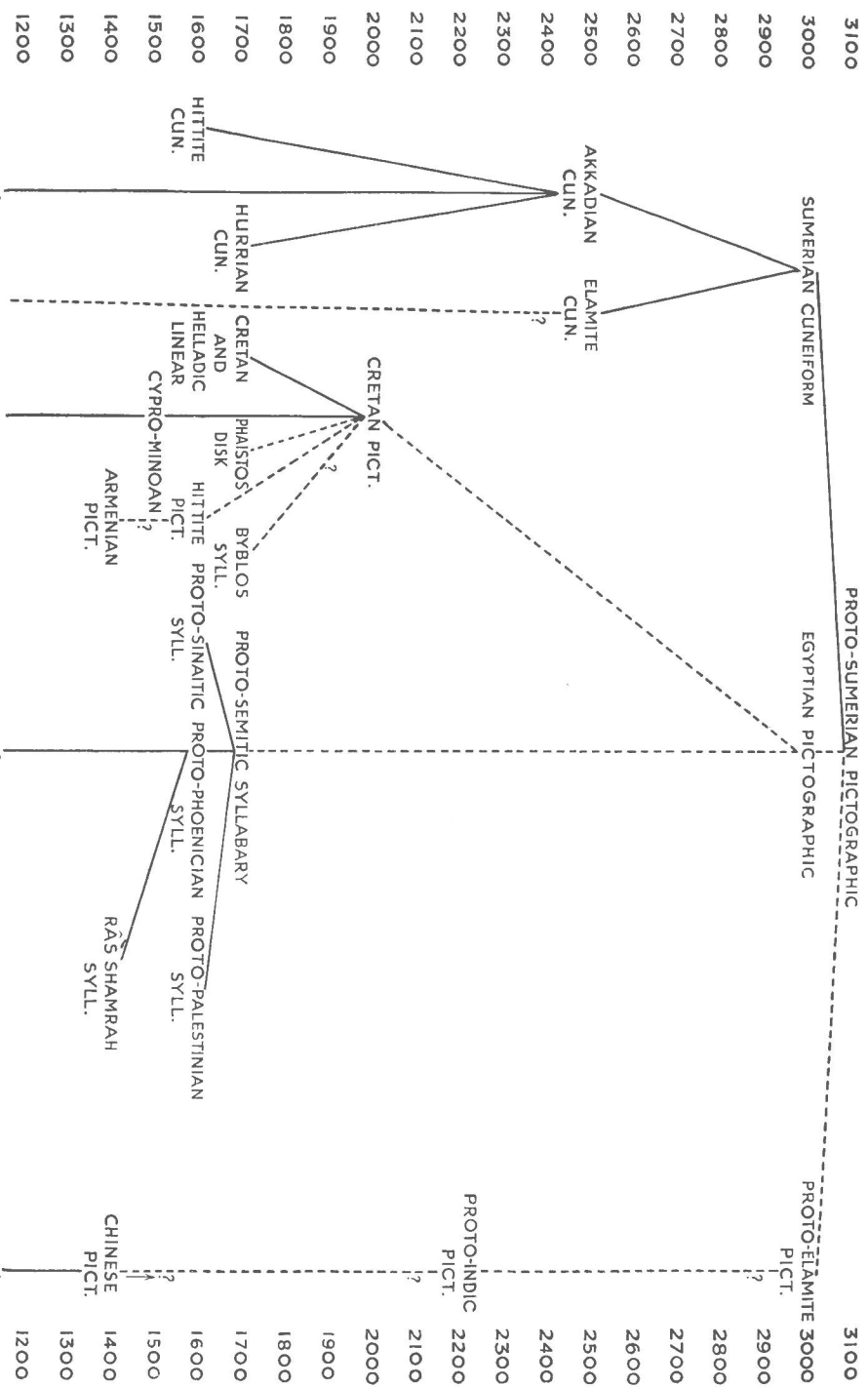
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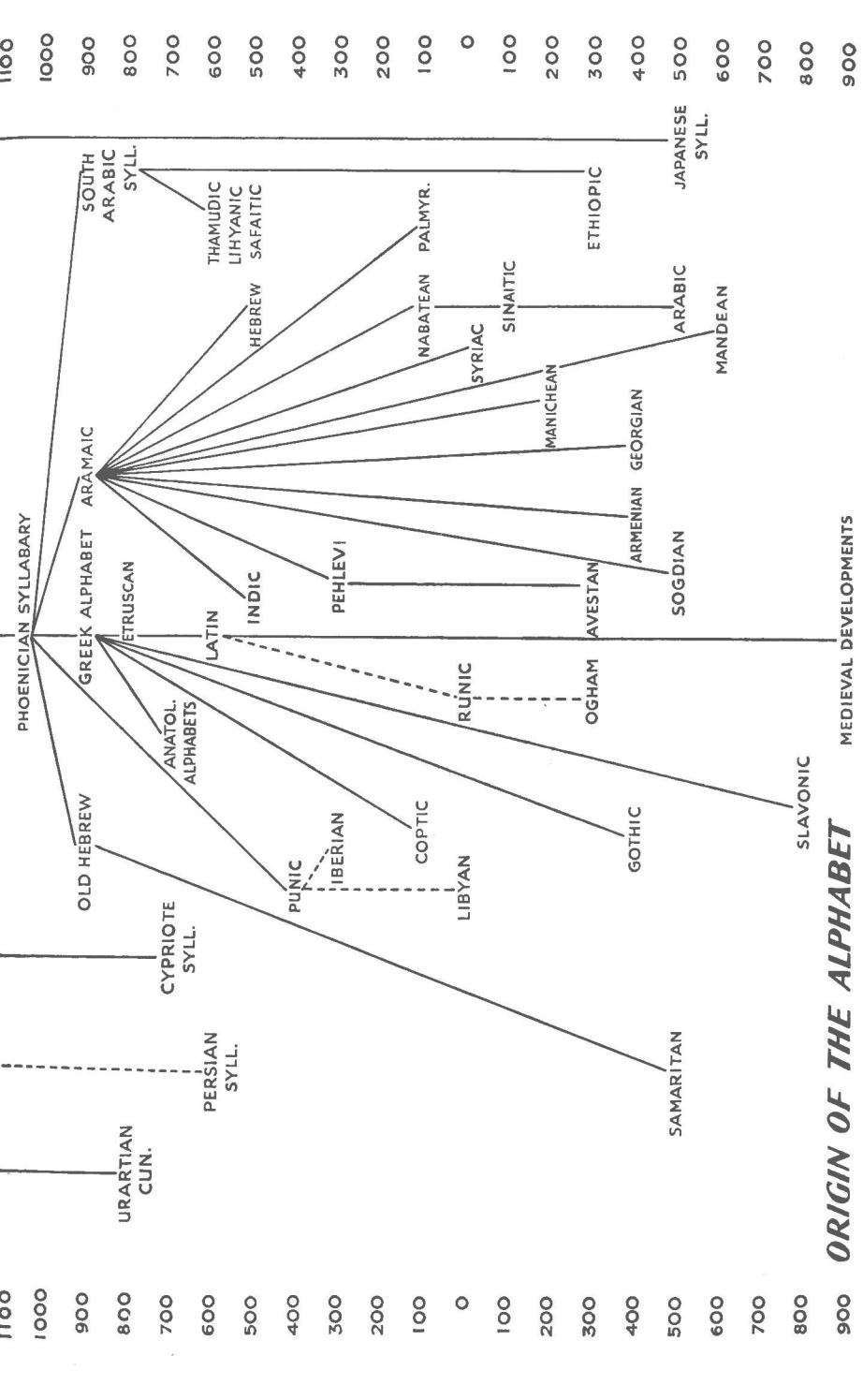
PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

THE present edition of *A Study of Writing* is being issued to bring up to date the older editions, both American and British, which have completely disappeared from the market. In order not to disturb the format of the older edition unduly, only short revisions and those easy to incorporate without changing the pagination were made in the main body of the volume, while all the larger revisions, corrections, and additions were relegated to the Notes near the end of the book. Because of the numerous additions in that section, the Notes, Bibliography, and Index were completely reset and repaged. The present edition contains the same illustrations as the older editions with the exception of Figures 50, 51, and 69, which were replaced by more adequate illustrations.

I. J. G.

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
November 1962





ORIGIN OF THE ALPHABET

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I

WRITING AS A SYSTEM OF SIGNS

WAYS OF COMMUNICATING IDEAS

THE two most important external characteristics of human behaviour are expression and communication. The first affects what we may call personal behaviour, the second social behaviour. Man has many ways, natural and artificial, of expressing his thoughts and his feelings. He can give expression in a natural way to his joy by laughing or humming and to his sorrow by weeping or moaning. He can express himself with the help of artificial means in a written poem, a painting, or any other piece of art. Man can try to communicate his feelings, thoughts, and ideas by means of conventional and generally understandable forms. What is the relation of expression to communication? Is there such a thing as pure expression or pure communication? Is it not rather that man, as a social being, the *zoon politikon* of Aristotle, finds himself or visualizes himself to be at all times in conditions in which he can express himself only by communicating? And, vice versa, are not all the great masterpieces of art or poetry forms of communication achieved through the personal expression of individuals? It seems to me that the aims of expression and communication are so closely intertwined with each other in all forms of human behaviour that normally it is impossible to speak about one without being forced at the same time to consider the other.

In order to communicate thoughts and feelings there must be a conventional system of signs or symbols which, when used by some persons, are understood by other persons receiving them. Communication under normal circumstances requires the presence of two (or more) persons, the one(s) who emit(s) and the one(s) who receive(s) the communication.