

VIII.—*On the Origin and History of Written Language.* By  
JOHN CRAWFURD, Esq., F.R.S.

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IT is my intention in this paper to consider the question of the Origin and Progress of Written Language, in so far only as the subject tends to illustrate the character of the different races of man, and to indicate their capacity for advancement.

The first attempts of man towards making a visible record of ideas must have consisted of pictorial representations of natural objects, as the most obvious and easy method. Of this we have examples in its rudest form in the scratchings on trees and roots of the savages of America, and in a more improved state in the pictorial writing of the Aztecs or Mexicans.

The imperfect and intractable nature of symbolic writing must, however, have early presented itself to most nations, and accordingly two people only appear ever to have persevered in it, and reduced it to a workable system—the ancient Egyptians and the Chinese of all known ages, two wholly different races of man, far away from each other, and certainly ignorant of each other's existence when they adopted this clumsy and cumbrous form of writing. The Chinese symbolic writing—and the Egyptian must have been the same—is a language to the eye only, like the Indian numeral characters. It represents no oral tongue, but equally any oral tongue. The Chinese read by it several monosyllabic languages, and the Japanese a polysyllabic language. A lively French writer truly describes the symbolic language of China as one apparently invented for the use of the “deaf and dumb.”\*

The difficulty and transparent imperfection of pictorial writing must have early occurred to most of the races of man, and probably soon contributed to its abandonment, stimulating perhaps to the invention of phonetic or vocal writing. This discovery supposes, of course, an analysis of the sounds of which a language is composed—the appropriation of a distinct written character for each of those sounds, and their combination towards the formation of words. The difficulty of this process is thought by some parties so insuperably great, that nothing short of a miracle or subversion of the laws of nature could have achieved it. This

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\* Those who desire more detailed information on this subject, will find it in an ingenious, learned, and elaborate work, “*Researches into the Early History of Mankind*,” by Edward Burnet Tylor.

extravagant notion, however, is contradicted by the frequency with which the invention has been made by many different races of men speaking languages wholly different from one another, and by nations even now in a very rude state. Whatever the difficulty, it is surely less than that of the invention of language itself—made at many different and independent points, and in a far ruder state of society. It is not greater than the invention of the figures of notation by the Hindoos, while yet a comparatively rude people: it is not greater than the discovery of the art of converting a rough mineral, unfit even for fashioning into a stone axe, into malleable iron; and perhaps not even greater than the discovery of the art of kindling a fire by the friction of two pieces of dried wood.

Among the more precocious races of man, gifted with a fair share of intellectual capacity, vocal or phonetic writing seems to have been invented as soon as such a state of society had been reached as allowed of the existence of a class of society which had leisure for meditation. The party that would soonest enjoy such leisure would naturally be that which had the spiritual direction of a people; and if we suppose letters to have been the invention of a priesthood, the art was in all likelihood at first confined to religious purposes, and came in time only to be extended to secular ones.

There exists hardly a nation of Asia, from the Mediterranean to the western confines of China, that had not reached the ripeness of society indispensable for the invention of phonetic writing, and hence the invention among them of many different and independent alphabets.

But the imagined difficulty of framing a phonetic alphabet is most effectively refuted by the fact that such alphabets have been actually invented even within the historic period, and, indeed, in comparatively modern times. The Japanese, according to their own account, adopted the Chinese symbolic writing in the third century of our time, or from the years 285 to 290. In a *Grammar of the Japanese Language*, prepared and edited by my friend Sir Rutherford Alcock, Her Majesty's present Ambassador in China, he has the following notice on this curious subject:—"Several centuries after the adoption of the Chinese written language and the complete system of idiographic symbols, the Japanese appear to have invented, without any foreign aid, a phonetic system of writing adapted to their own use, with a syllabic alphabet of 47 characters (or 48, if the nasal *ng* be included) now in use, conveying all the sounds required, called the *Hiragana*, and more familiarly the *Ireha*, equivalent to our *A B C*." The author of this invention was *Hobodaise*, a priest or monk of the sect *Singoboao*, and the date given to the invention corresponds with

A.D. 810. That the Japanese phonetic alphabet is of later date than that of the adoption of the symbolical Chinese writing, is sufficiently proved by the fact, that some of the phonetic letters are formed on the model, or are, indeed, copies of emblematical Chinese characters.

Of one thing we may be sure, that no people ever invented phonetic writing, or even adopted that of strangers, who had not made a considerable advance in civilisation. Thus, the rude wild tribes of Hindustan, of the Indo-Chinese countries, and of the Malay and Philippine Archipelagos, have, down to the present day, neither invented letters themselves, nor adopted those of their more civilised neighbours, although the civilised and uncivilised be in all those cases of one and the same race, and live side by side. No phonetic alphabet has ever been invented in any of the numerous islands of the Pacific, and, indeed, all writing ceases just before reaching the island of Timor, still within the Malay Archipelago, from which it may be presumed that the inhabitants of these islands had never attained the requisite measure of civilisation for its accomplishment.

No native phonetic system of writing has ever been invented by any people of America; for even the most civilised of them had not, like the Egyptians and Chinese, reached to the length even of reducing picture-writing to a system. The natives of America, in fact had either not attained the necessary civilisation for the invention of phonetic writing, or they wanted the genius to accomplish it.

No mere shepherd or nomadic people seems ever to have invented the art of writing, and we can readily believe that the nomadic state of society would afford no leisure or opportunity for such an invention. After quitting that roaming life, and assuming a settled one, they have, as in the examples of the Tartar tribes that follow a nomadic life, from the Yellow Sea to the Caspian, adopted, as will afterwards be seen, the inventions of more advanced nations.

There is one remarkable instance of a race of man which seems to have reached that state of society in which other races of man have discovered either symbolic or vocalic writing, but who, yet, have never invented either the one or the other. This is the African negro, who, possessed for ages of corn and cattle, of metals and good materials for clothing, has never invented an alphabet. Egyptians, Numidians, Nubians, and Abyssinians, on their own continent, have invented written language, but never a negro people. We must come, therefore, to the inevitable conclusion that the negro is an exception, arising from a peculiar stolidity. Even in their own country, it is but rarely that negroes have adopted the letters of strangers; and beyond it they have

done so only when under some degree of constraint or compulsion.

But by far the most remarkable instance of a people who have failed to invent either symbolic or phonetic writing is afforded by the races of Europe. No race from the Euxine to the Atlantic, or from Greece to Scandinavia, has ever invented an alphabet. It may be presumed that this may have arisen from the fact that no European race had reached that point of civilisation at which written language is invented—before the time in which a foreign phonetic writing was presented to them and adopted. This, however, is a subject to which I shall have to recur in the sequel of this paper.

That written language was the separate and independent discovery of many different nations, seems sufficiently proved by the difference in the forms of the characters which represent them, the differences in the sounds which the letters represent, arising from the necessities of the languages for which they were originally framed, and often even by the disparity of their order or arrangement. As languages, however, have often superseded other languages, so have foreign alphabets superseded native ones, while people who have not invented letters themselves have frequently adopted the letters of strangers. Of these cases we have many examples. Thus, the cuneiform alphabet, sometimes literal and sometimes syllabic, must, from its singularity of form, have been the invention of a single people, yet it was the writing of Persians, Medes, and Assyrians; and Sir Henry Rawlinson tells me altogether of eight separate languages—different in words, sound, and construction.

In Hindustan, the same alphabet, after undergoing many modifications, arising, it is asserted, out of the nature of the materials on which it was written—was sometimes stone, sometimes copper, sometimes palm-leaf—assisted by time and by difference of phonetic character in the languages which it came in time to represent, from that, most probably the Sanskrit, for which it was originally framed. In this alphabet, called the Dewanagari—literally, the writing of the ‘city of the gods’—are written the Hindi, the Bengali, the Mahratta, the Gujrati, the Urya or language of Orissa, the Concani, the Sikim, the Bhoteah, and the Tibetan. It is easy to believe how such an alphabet may have come to supersede, or more probably to have been amalgamated with, previously existing local alphabets; but I can see no ground for the theory maintained by the eminent orientalists Prinsep, Norris, and my friend Edward Thomas, that the Dewanagari was the source not only of all the alphabets of India itself, but also of those of the Hindu-Chinese countries and Indian islands.

My own conviction is, that for the sweeping hypothesis of the

very learned men in question there is no standing ground. During the time of a Hindu sovereign of Northern India, named Asoka, whose era is reckoned with some certainty as having preceded the birth of Christ by about two hundred and fifty years, the people whom this prince ruled, and of whom the Sanskrit, or a derivative of it, was the language, appear to have been the most civilised and potent of the nations of India. By conquest, or propagandism, they spread their religion, and to a considerable extent also their language, over the whole Indian continent. We need not, therefore, be surprised to find that ancient Indian inscriptions should be in the characters of the language of the dominant nation, as in fact they are found to be. It is to be observed, moreover, that in India nearly all monumental inscriptions are and have at all times been written, not in the popular character of the country in which they are found, but in one modification or another of the Dewanagari or alphabet sacred to the scriptural Sanskrit. A similar practice prevails in the Hindu Chinese countries, where monumental inscriptions are with few exceptions written, not in the ordinary Burmese, Siamese, or Cambodian alphabets, but in the Pali character—a supposed derivative of the Sanskrit, and the sacred writing of all the Buddhist nations from Ceylon to Cambodia. The learned writers whose names I have above quoted have certainly, by an adroit manipulation, adding a limb here, and subtracting a limb there, from letters which they imagine to have been the original ones of the primitive alphabet, contrived to give the semblance of a common origin to all the Indian alphabets. I am, notwithstanding this exercise of philological ingenuity, satisfied that India had many original alphabets, and that at least the present ones of its southern parts, including the alphabet of Ceylon, are local and independent inventions.

In the Hindu-Chinese countries we have three separate and independent alphabets—the Burmese, the Siamese, and the Cambodian. These are utterly unlike each other in form, and equally unlike any Hindu alphabet. Side by side with them is the Pali, said to have been taken from the Dewanagari, but far more likely, in my opinion, to have been an independent alphabet of India—probably of Behar, the native country of the founder of Buddhism and imported with the Buddhist religion. The Pali character is the same in Burmah, in Siam, and in Cambodia, and seems so to have been for the many centuries since its introduction into the Hindu-Chinese countries.

If we go to the Indian islands, we shall find that Sumatra had four distinct alphabets, one of which has been superseded by the Arabic alphabet, with supplemental letters to express sounds which the Arabian language wants. Java has one current alphabet, besides an ancient one confined to stone and copper inscriptions,

and the remains of several obsolete alphabets found on inscriptions on stone in the western part of the island. The Javanese alphabet, wholly different in form, construction, and arrangement from every other writing of the Malay Archipelago, is that of two languages in Java itself, and of the languages of the two islands lying immediately to the east of it—Bali and Lombok. It certainly bears no resemblance whatever to the Dewanagari or to any other Hindu alphabet. Yet ancient inscriptions in the veritable Dewanagari itself have been found in Java, and for centuries Hindus familiar with the alphabets of Southern India have frequented the island, settled in it, built temples in it, and converted the natives to their religion, leaving patent impressions of their sacred tongue on the Javanese language.

Proceeding eastward, the next insular alphabet which we find is on the Island of Sumbawa, the third in a direct line east of Java. This peculiar alphabet has been long obsolete, having been superseded by that of Celebes. On Celebes we have one alphabet, representing at least five languages with a literature, and so wholly different in its construction from all the other alphabets of India, whether continental or insular, that it is impossible to imagine it other than an original local invention. In the great group of the Philippines, we find a single alphabet, the rudest which I have had occasion to examine, but corresponding in this respect with the rudeness of the people who used it, and, I make no doubt, who also invented it. It is now in a great measure superseded by the Roman alphabet, introduced by the Spaniards.

There is one character common to most, but not to all the alphabets of continental and insular India: this consists in the arrangement of their letters into what is called an organic classification—that is, according to the organ of speech chiefly engaged in their pronunciation, as into gutturals, labials, palatals, dentals, cerebrals, sibilants, liquids, and so forth. No doubt this grammatical refinement originated with those who spoke the Sanskrit language, of which the wide compass of sounds afforded the fullest scope for its application. What may be called the provincial alphabets of India itself borrowed this arrangement directly from the Dewanagari, and through the Pali it was imposed on all the alphabets of the Buddhist nations. It extended also to the insular alphabets, but here there are exceptions, the most remarkable of which is the Javanese—the most copious and cultivated of all the insular languages, and that which has received the largest infusion of Sanskrit, while its alphabet is incomparably more perfect than any other. I am disposed from all this to conclude that the people of Java were possessed of an independent literature before they had any intercourse with the Hindus, and that in all the cases in which the Hindu classification was adopted,

it was a mere matter of arrangement subsequent to the invention of letters.

As already stated, the nomadic people who roam from the Yellow Sea to the Caspian invented themselves no writing; but the Igours, or ancient Turks are said to have received the gift of letters from the Nestorian Christians; and if this was the case, the letters must have been Greek. From the Turks they reached the Mongols, and from the Mongols the Manchoos. If this was so, the Greek alphabet has undergone a strange change, for the letters of the Tartar alphabet bear no resemblance to the Greek letters; and the order of writing, instead of being horizontal, is like that of the Chinese, written from the top to the bottom of the page: in opposition, however, to the practice of the Chinese, the writing is from left to right.

Even the settled Arabs do not appear to have invented letters, and it was no more to be expected from the Bedouins than from wandering Tartars. What is called the Cufic alphabet is supposed to have been borrowed from a Syrian character called the Estrangheld, and when the existing letters were adopted is uncertain. A papyrus, however, not long ago discovered in Egypt, and bearing the date of the first century of the Mahomedan era, is written in nearly the same characters as that of the present day, which makes it probable that it prevailed in the time of Mahomed himself. My authority for this is the learned grammar of Silvestre de Sacy.

The Arabic alphabet, whatever may have been its origin, has superseded the writings of the Turks of Europe and of Asia; of the Persians and of the Affghans; and, through the conquests effected by these, made a considerable inroad in Hindustan, without, however, superseding any Hindu alphabet. Some six centuries ago it even reached the remote Malays, superseding their native alphabets.

As before stated, the invention of letters, which early took place at many different points among many of the precocious races of Asia, never took place among any of the races of Europe destined in time so greatly to outstrip the most civilised of the races of Asia. The Greeks, from their genius, and perhaps also from being geographically so near to, and in some points even in actual contact with, Asiatics, were the first European people to adopt letters from the latter. The Greeks themselves believed that they derived their letters from the Phœnicians, and from the early civilisation of this Asiatic people they are likely to have been among the earliest discoverers of phonetic writing, while from their commercial enterprise they are the most likely people to have disseminated a knowledge of it among the people inhabiting the European coasts and islands of the Mediterranean. The

names, the arrangement, and, to some extent, the form of the letters of the Greek alphabet, tend to corroborate the assertion of their Phœnician origin.

The Phœnicians, however, would seem in this matter to have done little more than furnishing the Greeks with a hint for the formation of a suitable alphabet. Thus the Phœnician alphabet supplied to the Greeks is asserted to have consisted of no more than thirteen letters, exclusive of the vowel points. For these last the Greeks had to substitute substantive letters, while they had to add consonants expressing sounds peculiar to their own language, thus raising the meagre Phœnician alphabet to twenty-four letters.

At what time the Greeks received their letters from the Phœnicians is unascertained. At the time of the Homeric poems, however, it appears, from no allusion to them being made, that the Greeks were still ignorant of letters, and this is reckoned to have been eight centuries before the birth of Christ. The Jews, like the Greeks, are asserted to have borrowed their letters from the Phœnicians, but at a much earlier time; for they are familiarly referred to at the time of the Exodus—an event computed to have taken place 1,500 years before the birth of Christ. But we may go still further back; for the Jews must have brought their phonetic writing with them into Egypt, and could not have acquired a knowledge of it in that country, which had nothing but hieroglyphic writing to give them, and they are thought to have been in Egypt for three centuries before their departure from it. In so far, then, as these estimates can be trusted, the Jews were in possession of the Phœnician alphabet for 1,000 years before the time of the Homeric poems.

The natives of Italy were the only European people who, besides the Greeks, possessed in early times a knowledge of letters, and their acquaintance with them was, directly or indirectly, derived from the same Phœnician source. The Umbrian, the Etruscan, the Latin, and the Oscan letters, in all of which inscriptions still exist, must have been derived from the Greeks who settled in Italy, or from the Phœnicians of Tyre and Sidon, who frequented it for trade, and who, from the nature of their employment, would naturally be familiar with letters—more for business than superstition. If this last was the manner in which the Phœnician letters were introduced among the nations of Italy, it is rather singular that the Carthaginians—a Phœnician people, who had extensive possessions in Spain—had not introduced a knowledge of letters among the Iberians. As they did not do so, we must infer that, contrary to what was the case in Italy, the ancient inhabitants of Spain must have been in a state so rude as to be unfit to receive them.



All the letters of mediæval and modern Europe, under whatever name or whatever modification of form, are derived from the Latin alphabet. They have no high antiquity to boast of. The forefathers of the Montaignes, of the Corneilles, of the Voltaires, and the Laplaces, had just begun to use the Greek alphabet in the time of Julius Cæsar; but the forefathers of the Shakespeares and Miltons, of the Bacons and Newtons, whose posterity was predestined to spread letters over the best part of America, the whole of Australia and the islands of New Zealand, were as yet as illiterate as are now the negroes of Ashantee, or as were the cannibals of New Zealand when Cook first described them.

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