

The Origin of the Greek Alphabet

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The Greek alphabet was a radical departure from its model, West Semitic writing, because it atomized speech. Homer's floruit belongs in the eighth century BCE, near the time of the invention of the Greek alphabet, which we date ca. 800 BCE by comparing its forms with West Semitic forms and by extrapolating backward from the earliest epigraphic finds. What historical causes underlay the alphabet's invention? The earlier logosyllabic writings of Mesopotamia and Egypt never informed the reader of how the writing sounded, nor did the syllabic Linear B or Cypriote syllabary. The earliest Greek epigraphic finds are mostly hexametric, suggesting that the need to record complex rhythms inherent in the alternation of vowels inspired a single adapter's invention of the Greek alphabet. Because Homer lived at about the same time as the invention of the alphabet, he is likely himself to have inspired the invention. Texts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* carried the secret of their decipherment and established alphabetic literacy for Greece.

It is commonplace to praise the Greek alphabet, to say how it encouraged the development of philosophy, science, and democracy, and we might say this without derogating from the qualities of the admirable and ancient forms of writing that originated in China around 1200 BCE, historically a medium for high culture and deeply influential on the Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese traditions. The West Semitic family of writings that preceded the Greek in the Mediterranean Sea, including Phoenician, Hebrew, and Arabic, has also had profound influence and continues to exercise influence. But the Greek alphabet was radically different in function from its predecessors, including its West Semitic Phoenician model, in being the first writing whose signs represented what we might call the atoms of the spoken language, the smallest units of speech that