

# 1492

## THE SPREAD OF THE WORLD'S MAJOR WRITING SYSTEMS TO 1492

The adoption of writing marks the end of a society's prehistory. Writing has been invented independently many times during world history and is a natural expression of the human capacity for abstract and symbolic thought. Writing was a response to growing social and economic complexity and as such it is often considered one of the defining characteristics of civilization.

The earliest known writing system was the Sumerian pictographic script which developed c. 3400 BC. In the 3rd millennium the pictographs were gradually refined and simplified, developing into the cuneiform script. The Sumerian scripts were adopted widely. Sumerian pictographic was adopted by the Elamites and perhaps inspired the Indus valley pictographic script. Cuneiform was adopted by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Elamites Hittites and Persians among others.

Despite its superficial similarity, the Egyptian hieroglyphic script, which developed c. 3100 BC, was probably invented independently of Sumerian pictographic. Its influence was limited to Nubia, Minoan Crete and the Hittite empire. Mesoamerican writing was also based on hieroglyphs, though only the Maya script could represent all aspects of spoken language. The earliest Chinese writing, which appeared c. 1200 BC was a pictographic script. Continually refined, this developed in the first millennium BC into a logographic script which is directly ancestral to the modern Chinese script. The only script to develop in the Pacific region, the undeciphered 18th-century Rongorongo script of Easter Island, was also based on pictographs.

The hieroglyphic and cuneiform scripts have thousands of characters and are difficult to learn. This limited literacy to a small elite of professional scribes. In the 16th century BC, the Canaanites invented the much simpler alphabet with only 22 characters representing consonants. All modern alphabets, except possibly the Korean, ultimately derive from the Canaanite alphabet. Western alphabets include characters for vowels as well as consonants, a refinement introduced by the ancient Greeks.

Of major civilizations, only the Andean did not develop a system of writing. In this region information was encoded in knots on devices made from coloured strings known as quipus. The earliest evidence for the use of quipus, from Caral in Peru, dates to around 3000 BC.

