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In Our Time is hosted by Melvyn Bragg. Melvyn's guests on this podcast are:

Eleanor Robson, Historian of Ancient Iraq and Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford;

Alan Millard, Rankin Professor Emeritus of Hebrew and Ancient Semitic Languages at the University of Liverpool;

Rosalind Thomas, Professor of Greek History at Royal Holloway, University of London.

[Melvyn Bragg] Hello. At the start of the 20th century, in the depths of an ancient Egyptian turquoise mine on the Sinai Peninsula, an archaeologist called Sir Flinders Pitri made an astonishing discovery. Scratched onto rocks, pots and portable items, he found scribblings of a very unexpected but strangely familiar nature. He had expected to see the complex pictorial hieroglyphic script of the Egyptian establishment which had used it for a thousand years. But it seemed that at this very early period, 1700 BC, the mineworkers and Semitic slaves had started using a new informal system of graffiti, one which was brilliantly simple, endlessly adaptable and perfectly portable. The alphabet. This was probably the earliest example of an alphabetic script, and it bears an uncanny resemblance to our own. Did the alphabet spring into life almost fully formed? How did it manage to conquer three quarters of the globe? And despite its Cyrillic and Arabic variations and the myriad languages it has been used to write, why is there essentially only one alphabet anywhere in the world? With me to discuss the origin of the alphabet are Eleanor Robson, Historian of Ancient Iraq and Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, Rosalind Thomas, Professor of Greek History at Royal Holloway, University of London, and Alan Millard, Rankin Professor Emeritus of Hebrew and Ancient Semitic Languages at the University of Liverpool.

[Melvyn Bragg] Eleanor Robson, the alphabet developed in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. Can you give us a sense of the scripts that dominated the region before the alphabet as we know it began?

[2:07]
[Eleanor Robson] There were two very important scripts - hieroglyphics that many people know about, and cuneiform writing, or wedge-shaped writing, which was centered on ancient Iraq. Now, although they look very different, hieroglyphs are basically very pictorial - ... we think of pictures of the little birds and the men with their arms in the air and cuneiform looks like random scratches on the surface of clay - ... in fact, structurally, they're very similar. They have a central core of syllabic signs, that is, signs that represent syllables like "ma" or "of" or "pot". And there are signs that represent whole words or ideas that we can call "logograms". And they also have signs which signal what sort of word comes next. So "next word is something made of [another] word", or "the next word means a sort of person". So they're very complicated. They have several hundred different visual signs in their repertoire, and so they are very restricted to professional writers.

[Melvyn Bragg] Right, well, that's a very good summary and I'd like to go into it a little bit more detail, taking [the various points] one at a time. The cuneiform writing, how long had it been into existence? Who was using it? And can we just go through it a little bit again?

[Eleanor Robson] The earliest evidence we have for writing in the south of Iraq is from the very late fourth millennium BC, so about 3200.

[Melvyn Bragg] This is cuneiform ....this is on clay ....this is wedged...

[3:38]
[Eleanor Robson] And, well, the very first writing we have isn't yet wedge-shaped. It's just scratched onto the surface of clay. And it's used by accountants working for the temples in the big cities to write down the things that the temples needed to manage - their laborers, their land, their animals, the goods that their laborers made.

[Melvyn Bragg] Accountants are never going to get a better press as long as they live, if they have something to do with the invention of language...

[Eleanor Robson] Absolutely. Well, the invention of writing, people were speaking for many, many thousands of years before the invention of writing. So, yes, the first writing we have then is simply accountants tools. It's numbers and concrete nouns, things that can be counted. And that's it - for Mesopotamia, for southern Iraq. Similarly in Egypt, about the same time - it's difficult to date exactly when, whether Egyptian hieroglyphs or Mesopotamian cuneiform...predates the other, they're more or less the same time. The earliest writing in Egypt is similarly numbers and concrete objects, but this time they're found in the tombs of kings, and they're little ivory labels recording the grave goods that were in those tombs. And often the grave goods don't survive, but we have the labels.

[Melvyn Bragg] ...I stumbled a paragraph or so ago...[Just] so that people are absolutely clear, we're not talking about language, ...[but] ... about the signs of

language. Language had been spoken for many, many thousands, tens of thousands, of years. Here, we're talking about the writing of it down...

[Eleanor Robson] Yes, but what's even more interesting is this early writing isn't even language specific, because they're representing numbers and whole words, and you could read them almost in any language. And it's difficult because there are no indicators of the sounds of these words. So one could read them in almost any language, and it's only later that the representation of sounds come into writing, perhaps a few hundred years after that.

[Melvyn Bragg] So the Babylonian cuneiform is telling us about numbers, and it's a trading language, and the Egyptian hieroglyphic is doing more than that, isn't it?

[Eleanor Robson] It ... very quickly becomes more than that, but the very first writing is simply recording ownership. And then it becomes able to record - particularly the deeds of kings, it becomes a display language for showing off about the great deeds of royalty.

[Melvyn Bragg] Alan Millard, can you take us more deeply into the hieroglyphs? Everybody listening will have an idea of the picture language of the Egyptians...

[Alan Millard] Yes. I think what happened was that people drew the pictures, but there were various things they wanted to represent which could not be shown easily by pictures. I use a simple English example. If you draw a picture of a "thin man" and a "king", you can read "the king is a thin man", or "the thin man is king". But if you simply take the sounds, you can produce the idea "thinking", which is difficult to draw as a picture. And that's what happened both in Babylonia and in Egypt. It's what we call the Rebus Principle. You draw the thing and you make it stand for the idea.

[Melvyn Bragg] Did they draw a thin man and a king?

[Alan Millard] No. That's an example from English.

[Melvyn Bragg] I wish they had. That's a cracker!

[Alan Millard] But once they did that, they could write almost anything they wanted to, because they had a sound system, a system for representing sounds.

So they had system for representing sounds. How far could they take this in terms of ideas? I mean, it was very good for saying where the kings were going to go into the next world and the number of goods he was going to take, and slaves he was going to take, or she, whatever.

[7:16]
[Alan Millard] Both in Egypt and Babylonia from 2500 BC onwards, we find almost all the things we would think of writing down, being written down - abstract ideas, as well as concrete, philosophical ideas, religious concepts, ideas about this life and the next life, riddles, we find.

[Melvyn Bragg] And poetry, literature.

[Alan Millard] Poetry, certainly yes.

[Melvyn Bragg] How many pictures would the Egyptian hieroglyphs have? Have you got any idea? We talk about 26 letters of our alphabet, which we're coming to in a few moments. But how many pictures would you have to know as a hieroglyphic scribe?

[Alan Millard] I think to read hieroglyphs fully, you need to know about 600 signs, and to read Babylonian cuneiform, about 300. Of course, at different periods in the lives, in the histories, of those scripts, the numbers of signs would vary. In the early period, there were many more signs, but for economy's sake, the scribes reduced the number. Once they used the signs for their sound values, they didn't need so many pictures of objects because they could spell out, as it were, the sounds of the object.

[Melvyn Bragg] And you're saying that it could do everything that can be done in 2003?

[Alan Millard] Yes. Had they had a space program, they could have written the instructions for the space program.

[Melvyn Bragg] That's astonishing, isn't it? So there's no limitations on this, then, Rosalind Thomas?

[8:46]
[Rosalind Thomas] Well, some people have claimed that the alphabet could do all sorts of things which cuneiform and hieroglyphs couldn't, because of ...when the Greeks created or elaborated on the alphabet from the Phoenicians when they took it over..(this is the theory)... because there's an exact link between the sound and the letter, you can do so much more with it. I don't go along with that. But that has been suggested, that it's just a much more flexible and much more intricate and much cleverer system that can represent absolutely anything that can be said.

[Melvyn Bragg] One of the things about the Babylonian cuneiform and the Egyptian hieroglyph is they lasted for a very, very long time. Alan began by talking about in the fourth millennium, say 3200 BC, and they're still flourishing in 1000 BC. That's a very long time. Did they change much over this period? And if not, why not?

[Rosalind Thomas] As far as I know, they don't change a very great deal over that period. The hieroglyphs particularly are very, very conservative and virtually the same towards the end ... of the hieroglyphic period as at the beginning. As Eleanor said, they start off let's labels, but then they develop and it's extremely conservative script.

[Melvyn Bragg] Were the scribes especially taught? Were they socially elite? They were clearly some sort of elite, specially trained. Do we know about how they came to be, what they were?

[Rosalind Thomas] There are very, very complicated training schools, aren't there, for the cuneiform scribes and for the hieroglyphic scribes, very intense. And that's what's often said about the difference between those and the alphabet. The alphabet is much easier to learn, it's much quicker, and so more people can learn it faster, and it therefore goes further down the social scale.

[Melvyn Bragg] What do we know about these schools then...?

[Eleanor Robson] We're knowing increasingly, just in the last five years, very interesting studies done on the minutiae of scribal education and the curriculum. So we know that they started off by learning just like our children do, by making the elements of script. So for the case of Babylonian scribes the little wedges on the clay, and then to write whole syllables and then people's names, and then they move on to write lists of words grouped thematically. So the first long list of words they learned was the list of trees and wooden objects - terribly boring. And then things made of reed and then metal, and then stone, et cetera. And then after a while, they learned their numbers and their multiplication tables, et cetera. And then it's only after a long elementary period that they start to write whole sentences, model legal documents and contracts, and also proverbs, and then begin to write and copy ... much longer pieces of literature. And it's all by rote learning. It's copying and listening and memorizing and writing again and again until they got it off by heart. So we have their school exercises in hundreds and thousands of copies.

[Melvyn Bragg] And ... are we talking about a tiny proportion of people who are literate able to [write] ... can we put a percentage on it?

[Eleanor Robson] I think that it's vanishingly small. A- we're only talking about people who lived in cities, forget about all the villagers and the nomads. And if we actually look at the archaeology of schoolhouses, they're tiny, they're the size of this room.

[Melvyn Bragg] We have to explain to our listeners that this is an exceptionally small room - twice as big as the table we're sitting at.

[Eleanor Robson] ...And there's probably only physically room for the teacher and perhaps two or three children in it. And when we look also at the numbers of scribes active in the big institutions, in the temples and palaces, again, we see a very small number. We're talking about probably dozens of people who are literate in any one city.

[Melvyn Bragg] Alan Millard, do we find an intellectual elite crossing into a social or political elite?

[12:51]
[Alan Millard] Yes, the political elite would comprise many people who had learned to write. But as they moved up the ranks, they would not actually write themselves because, like some of us, they would have secretaries to do it for them. So that we find one or two kings who boast of their ability to read and write, and in Egypt, most of the pharaohs were educated and able to read and write, and we find references to them doing that. In Tutankhamun's tomb, there were found some scribal writing implements which had been used with his name on them, and we may assume that he used them as a youngster when he was learning hieroglyphs.

[Melvyn Bragg] Was there a sense that because this was so exclusive and because it was so difficult, it was important to keep it exclusive and difficult so that it was part of the sort of power pyramid?

[Alan Millard] There are some indications that the scribes were a closed shop. There are some indications that it went down in families - the scribal business was a family business. But I think if you could pay the teacher, you could learn to be a scribe. That, of course, meant that it was only fairly well-to-do people who could afford to train their children to become scribes.

[Melvyn Bragg] So we have the hieroglyphics and we have the Babylonian cuneiform, and they're going from, say, 3200 down to 1000, BC. But around 1800 BC. In your book "The Infancy of the Alphabet", you write how the invention of the alphabet may be imagined. And you picture a Canaanite writer, Canaanite scribe, working alone in the port of Byblos, and he, you say, and he alone, which I think is amazing....

[Alan Millard] I think he was a scribe who had learnt Egyptian. He may also have been familiar with Babylonian cuneiform, but neither system of writing was very convenient for representing his Canaanite language, just as in fact, our alphabet is not very convenient for representing English. If you think about the letters T and H, they stand for "th" in "that" they stand for "th" in "thank-you" and they stand for "T-H" in Anthill. So the Babylonian and Egyptian systems didn't really fit the Canaanite language and I believe this scribe saw that in Egyptian there were signs which represented simple syllables like "ba" and "da" and "ga", which were pictures. And what he did was to analyze his language, which was quite a sophisticated feat to separate out all the principal sounds - the phonemes of his language. And he drew a picture to represent each sound. What he did was what we call the principle of acrophony. He would draw a picture of a door and say, "when you see this picture, you don't read it as door, you just read it as D, with any vowel following". And by that means, he created an alphabet of perhaps 30 signs, each one representing a consonant plus any vowel. Strictly, it's a limited syllabary and not an alphabet. At this stage in his language, no word began with a vowel. So on that principle, he couldn't produce a picture to represent a vowel. And in fact, to write many of the Semitic languages, it's not essential to indicate the vowels. If you look at a modern Arabic or Hebrew newspaper, and can read them, you'll find that the vowels are not represented. But because you know the language and the patterns of the language, you know how the vowels will appear. And we see the same today in text messaging.
Yeah, I want to come back [to that]. But this is the big invention, isn't it? The alphabet, the phoneme, the idea that he got back to the lowest denominator. Let's come back to whether it was one man? How do you know it is one man? Why it was Biblos? ...Because the most important thing is we've had the pictures. We've had the pictures - [for example] a picture of "water". We've had the syllables "wa", "tu" and now we have [a "w" and a "t"] and they stand for.... Various people ...Steven Pinker ... wrote sentences with X's in the middle [of words], but you could read them because of the starting point. Now, it seems to me an extraordinary thing to arrive at. How do you think, Rosalind, he arrived at it if it was a "he" or not a "them" or a "her"?

[17:14]
[Rosalind Thomas] Well, I think, as Alan says, he was a scribe - probably, who did know Egyptian. But if he was feeling it didn't really fit the language, I mean, what does one say about a genius? What does one say about someone who has a brilliant idea? The minute you've invented a paperclip you can't manage without it.

[Melvyn Bragg] I'd like you to say as much as you can, because, I mean, how do you think he arrived at this idea that you go from a picture of water to syllables of water, to "w"?

[Rosalind Thomas] Well, to some extent, isn't it the case that there is an element in Egyptian already that has an alphabetic principle? They do have these picture signs, they have the signs for meanings, but they also have a few ... signs which represent a sound. I mean, that's how Champollion actually deciphered the hieroglyphs from the beginning, because of there were certain names like "Cleopatra", which were written out letter by letter. So that wasn't actually a gigantic leap [that] this man in Byblos had to make all at once. I mean, there was that element already in Egyptian, wasn't there?

[Alan Millard] It did exist in Egyptian, but the Egyptians never isolated it from all their other signs. So they never realized that they had an alphabet within their system.

[Eleanor Robson] Perhaps ...they used it especially for writing foreign names that couldn't cope, that didn't fit very well, in the Egyptian phonetic system. So that if you were a scribe outside the Egypt and [had] to write in Egyptian, then most of the names you were writing were non Egyptian names. So perhaps you might be using the single consonant signs rather more than a scribe in Egypt would be.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can we go back to our man in Canaan before we come back and try to prove whether he lived or not? But certainly something happened then which was remarkable and mentioned. Just so to explain to take it even further, because the connections are very close, aren't they? There's a picture of water in a Egyptian hieroglyph, which is wavy lines. ... wavy water. Now, then he finds ...a word ... and then we get M, which is actually written as a wavy water. I'm doing [it with my] finger wiggling up and down - it's an M.

[Eleanor Robson] Yes. And that's ..., Alan has just mentioned D ("duh") for "door". Well, in the Canaanite language, that's something like daltu, and that, again, is "duh". And then the ox gives us "aleph", or "alpu", which is the letter A - or, in fact, the guttural sound at the beginning of that word, which eventually turns into A. And for most of the alphabet, we can actually identify the signs, we can see visually which signs ... each sound comes from.

[Melvyn Bragg] So it's ... both an abstraction and some atomization, isn't it? He gets, somehow or other, ... to the base of it. [For example]... if you use the word like "resh", and if we print a capital "R" as a capital now, it can look like a head on a neck, which it originally was. So we go [from a] picture to a syllable to a sign. And then this sign, we'll go to this in a minute, later on...becomes fantastically adaptable all around the world. But let's go back to our man in Canaan. Now then, how do you know it was a man? And how do you know he was in Byblos and this was one person?

[Alan Millard] This is speculation.

[Melvyn Bragg] Ah well...you can have a bit of speculation...

[20:55]

[Alan Millard] Well, there were female scribes, not very many. We know very little about what was going on in Canaan at this time, but as you said at the beginning, the discovery of some graffiti in the turquoise mines in the Sinai Peninsula give us some of the early, earliest examples of the alphabet. When they were discovered by Flinders Petrie, he didn't know what they were. The Egyptologist Alan Gardiner recognized in 1915, or thereabouts, that they were probably an early form of the alphabet because he could read two or three words on this acryphonic principle that each picture stands only for the initial sound of its name, as "W" for "water" might do. Gardiner, was able to read one or two words as Semitic canaanite. Since then, a number of other examples have been found at different sites in the Holy Land, which may be a little earlier than some of these from the Sinai Peninsula and many which are later, and enable us to trace the development of these signs down to about 1000 BC, when they form what we may call a conventional script, the early alphabet, that we see at Byblos. I think Byblos is a likely place for the invention of the alphabet because it had been a very cosmopolitan port from prehistoric times. The Egyptians fetched cedarwood from the Lebanon through Byblos, and from before 3000 BC we have connections between Byblos and Egypt with Egyptian inscriptions shortly afterwards. It was also the end of a trade route from Babylonia and we know that there were connections between Babylonia and Byblos at an early date.

But, Rosalind Thomas, it was still far away from the two big power centers, the Babylonian and the Egyptian. Was that significant, the fact that it was some distance away?

[22:54]
[Rosalind Thomas]Yeah, I think it probably was. Because the big power centers have all the vested interests, all the institutions, the scribal schools and so on, which are, as it were, churning out these people very skilled in these very complicated systems, and I suppose they wouldn't have any need to move over to this much simpler system. So I don't think it would be a coincidence at all that it was in these areas to the edge of the great power centers where a much simpler system was developed, I mean, they didn't have the structures and so on, which had been working for millennia, a couple of millennia anyway, and yeah, so I think that's very, very likely.

[Melvyn Bragg] As far as, you know, having been having been discovered that it kept itself very local for hundreds of years. It stayed in that small area for until roughly about 1000 BC. Why do you think that was?

[Rosalind Thomas] Well, if we're thinking about the Greeks and their contact with the Phoenicians and the Canaanites....

[Melvyn Bragg] I'm talking about the first 800 years, because that came much later.

[Rosalind Thomas] I suppose the absence of sort of contact with the rest of the Mediterranean and the Assyrians, the earlier Babylonian systems wouldn't need to ... take it over.

[Melvyn Bragg] It began to go ... around the Middle East through trade again, through ... [sailors], who have brought so many words, including our own language and the

contribution of, just as it were, people bringing words back with the loot that they brought back.

[Eleanor Robson] And coming back to Rosalind's point, I think also that the Egyptians and the Babylonians had a huge amount invested in their very complicated scripts that went beyond the mere mechanics of how you wrote it, and that it was the language of their gods, for instance. It was the language of their culture, and there was this huge prestige associated with being literate. And that once you started to unpack that and make it more accessible, then in some senses that might be a whole undermining of the structure of authority within Egypt or Babylonia. And so, I think it is very significant that the alphabet develops on the edge of these big power structures and that it spreads, although it does spread eventually into Iraq, but through immigration, and that immigrants into the north of Iraq, into Assyria - the Aramaeans take the alphabet in. But it takes the Assyrians - well, the Assyrians never entirely give up the cuneiform writing system because it has too much prestige for them. It's the language of scholarship and tradition and religion. And the alphabet may be used for mundane things like bureaucracy, but never for the writings of power and control.

[Rosalind Thomas] Could I come in on that with a modern parallel, the Japanese writing system. The Japanese are very well aware of some of the advantages of the alphabet, and every so often there have been moves to try and make the system slightly simpler and more alphabetic. But in fact, yes, too much is vested in it and too much Japanese identity is felt to reside in this much more complicated writing system. So they don't change.

[Melvyn Bragg] And although the alphabet is already more adaptable and more flexible and liberating in many ways, we haven't got to that point, because, as Alan hinted earlier, you could learn it in the morning, where it takes you many years to learn the other things. It's held back for a very long time. Then it does begin to spread about 1000 BC. And a big factor here are the Phoenicians, who were great traders, and they begin to take the language right across the Mediterranean - and just as it also goes into the east, into the Persian Empire. But can you say a little about the Phoenicians?

[Rosalind Thomas] Yes, well, they're fascinating and they are starting to move out from the west coast of the Levantine... by about 1000 BC, driven out by the Assyrians. They get into Cyprus, then they trade with mainland Greece, crete get as far as Sicily and indeed southern Spain. And so they're spreading across the Mediterranean, and at the same time, certain areas of Greece, particularly the Euboens from the east coast of Greece, are beginning to move eastwards at the end of the so called "Dark Ages". [Note: This is the Bronze Age Collapse?] And so we hear, for instance, of Greek pirates or raiders on the Phoenician coast. Some governor writes to an Assyrian king saying there are these Greeks here again, can I deal with them? So the Greeks are moving east and the Phoenicians are moving west. And there are lots of places where we know from the archaeology that there are Phoenicians resident in areas we think of as Greek and vice versa. There are certainly Greeks resident on the west coast of Syria by about 800 BC.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can we stick with the Phoenicians for a moment? Did they develop the alphabet? How did they use it? How did they come across it? Just hold it with them, because they, as it were, took it across, let's just say, in rough figures for 100, even

200, years they were moving it around more emphatically towards the West. And then it got into the indoeuropean languages and came into Latin and eventually to our language and so on.

[Rosalind Thomas] Well, I think they're developing the Canaanite alphabet. Indeed they are, ... they are west Canaanite, basically. We call them Phoenicians, but I think they call themselves Canaanites - so they're the same people. And they as far as I know, they develop it slightly, but they still only have 22 letters and the Greeks add these extra letters. They're traders, they're city dwellers as well.

[Melvyn Bragg] Alan Millard?

[28:37]
[Alan Millard] Let's look a little at the history. What happened about 1200 BC was a breakdown of the old state system in the Near East. In Syria [and] Palestine, there were a lot of city states, many of them subject to Egypt. About 1200 BC, there were movements of people, especially from the Greek area and Crete into the Near East which caused the breakdown of the old systems. And they were replaced by what we might call tribal states: Israel, the Arameans in Damascus and others. And these new states didn't take up the old writing systems of Egypt and Babylonia, instead, they took up the alphabet for writing their own languages which were descended from Canaanite. Probably this meant that the alphabet began to spread and the dead hand of conservative scribes from Babylonia and Egypt was removed. Consequently, when the Phoenicians traveled, they took it with them. And we can imagine Phoenician merchants going to Greece, and the Greeks bringing their trading goods and the Phoenicians writing down on wax tablets or on papyrus- Archimedes, three oboles, so on and so, so many more. And the Greeks looking and saying, "what's that?"." And the Phoenician trader will say, well, that's telling me how much you owe me, and the Greeks said, "well, we want to do that too to make sure you're not cheating us". And so I think they took over the alphabet in that way. But what they did ...

[Melvyn Bragg] Wait a minute. You're all rushing to get to the Greeks and I'm not yet. We've got plenty of time... So we'll just paddle about before then. ... Is there any sense of these systems in conflict with each other? We still have, despite what Alan's told us, about the disruptions and the sort of period of ... [BC - dark ages] ...and the breakdowns. But you still have a massive hieroglyphic system in Egypt, which is very influential, a massive cuneiform system, the Babylonian, which is very influential. [These are] their state systems, [and] as Rosalind has pointed out, by analogy with the Japanese, it matters very much to keep them and hold them... Is this alphabet a sort of rather insignificant upstart around the edges - still not thought of as being particularly important? Is it still a third language?

[31:04]
[Eleanor Robson] Depends who's doing the thinking, I think. If you look at actually what is written on those early alphabetic inscriptions, in fact, some of them are strikingly like those early cuneiform and hieroglyphic inscriptions I was talking about. They're marks of property ownership... The earliest, archaeologically attested, alphabetic inscriptions are very short and the sign forms are often irregular and they haven't quite decided which direction the script ought to go in yet. Sometimes they go left right, sometimes right left, sometimes alternating. And so it's only when the Phoenicians come that

those sorts of things get standardized, and that we get writing going from right to left, the signs of the letters more or less standardized. So that's, I think, the point at which the alphabet becomes a formal state-controlled system, because what you see (perhaps not even state control, but certainly some sort of central control) because you see the standardization that you expect from a formal education system. So that that happens relatively early in the in the first millennium BC.

[Rosalind Thomas] [But it] doesn't look like a prestige, high prestige script, though.

[Eleanor Robson] Nor does cuneiform. It depends what writing is for. Hieroglyphs were for display and for showing off, cuneiform was a bureaucrat's tool, the alphabet was a merchant's tool. We're back to account as basically being literacy and numeracy, being very closely linked.

[Melvyn Bragg] That's a very good division into those three. But then we've got the alphabet transferring to Greece, to Greek, which has a far greater need for vowels. And now we have the great vowel insertion in Greece. Can you tell us about we are now in Greece ... so happiness descends.

[Alan Millard] I'm not a Greek specialist, that's my colleagues' business. But the Greek language can't be written without some marks to indicate vowels. The Greek word for no is "ou" [?], and you can't write that unless you have a sign for vowels. So what the Greeks did very quickly was to take some of the signs of the Phoenician alphabet, which marked sounds which were not used in Greek, and use them to mark the vowels that were needed for Greek. So, for example, the first letter of the alphabet, alpha, the Semitic - aleph alpu, as Eleanor has said - a picture of an ox's head indicates the noise a cockney makes when he says "bottle", a sort of push in the back of the throat. The Greeks don't have that noise, so they took that sign and used it for the sound "ah". The ox's head is our capital letter A turned upside down - if you turn the letter upside down, you'll see the two horns sticking up and that was originally the picture of the ox's head. And the Greeks did that with several sounds, several signs for sounds they didn't use from Phoenician, producing these vowels, which enabled them to produce what is really the first alphabet with a sign for each sound - not a sign for a syllable, ba, ga, du, but a sign, "a" sign, "b" and so on. So they could break the words of their language down into basic sounds and represent each one. They had to add a few new letters at the end of the alphabet for sounds which Phoenician didn't have, but basically, that was the alphabet.

[Melvyn Bragg] When does this start to come into Greek? ...When can we see this happening, Rosalind?

[34:36]
[Rosalind Thomas] The earliest evidence now is the first half of the 8th century [BC]. Various people have been hoping for it to appear earlier, but it doesn't happen. And since Greek is written on bits of pottery, broken bits of pottery, these survive forever. So the fact that we haven't found any earlier bits of Greek alphabet before the second quarter of the 8th century is making it pretty clear that that's something happened about then. And, yeah, these first graffiti, first sort-of informal bits of writing...

[Graffiti artists] are [being lauded in] this program as well as [accountants]....

[Rosalind Thomas] Yes, graffiti comes in. It's a technical term for "non-official, non-inscribed writing" - .... basically scribbles and labels and so on.

[Melvyn Bragg] But I've always thought that Homer was dictating or writing, whichever it is... in the 8th century. So it would seem that it gets going quite quickly and then it gets going as a massively, complicated, important literary language, which we in translation, or if we know Greek, can read very fluently today...

[Rosalind Thomas] Well, the indications are going both ways. Some of the earliest graffiti are labels, and sometimes they're quite funny - sometimes the pot has an inscription on it saying, "I am the cup of so and so" ("I'm the cup of Coracos") where the object actually speaks in the first person. Lots and lots of proper names are written down very early on. But as you say, I mean, Homer probably was written down pretty early on. It's hard to imagine how they could write this long epic out when they've still learning the alphabet. But one of the one of the most interesting of the early graffiti is actually a piece of writing on a pot found in the island of Pithekoussai, which is modern, Ischia in the Bay of Naples, probably about 740 BC, which says, "I am the pot of Nestor. I'm the lovely pot of Nestor. And whoever drinks from this will feel the desires of sweet Aphrodite". And that's incredibly early, and already you've got a reference to Homer, because the cup of Nestor comes in Homer - it's in hexameter. So you've got the use of writing for verse, and it also seems to be a sort of parody or a joke of the common curse form - "whoever does this shall be damned forever". This instead reverts them says, "whoever drinks from this shall feel the desire of love". So it is extraordinary that it's one of the earliest pieces of graffiti, it has all this going on just in it, and it's writing out poetry.

[Melvyn Bragg] How do you account for this great surge of energy into literature that we read still - mostly in translation - but that we read still now, Eleanor? I don't know. Was it the flexibility? Was it the insertion of the vowels? Was it the final falling away? I mean, there'll obviously be trade movements and economic undertones, but the alphabet itself, it's coming to us now. It's in Greek, it's got the vowels, it's going to fit language after language after language after language. It was just the excitement of it.

[37:51]
[Eleanor Robson] Well, gosh, that's difficult to say. I mean, literature isn't exclusive to the alphabet. We have the most extensive and beautiful and powerful literatures in hieroglyphs and in cuneiform. So one can't attribute poetic flowering simply to the discovery of the alphabet, but certainly the discovery of literacy.

[Rosalind Thomas] I mean, I think it could be said here that the oral poet, the oral epic poet, ... the many oral poets who lay behind Homer (Homer is the last of them) - they saw no need to write (anything) down. And maybe you start writing down literature when you feel it's under threat, or you're going to forget it, or a great poet is about to die and therefore his or a poetry will die with him. I think it's not inevitable that you start writing literature once you have the alphabet.

[Melvyn Bragg] I do think that we're denying a sort of massive change that did happen, but I don't know as much as you three do, but I would reckon that people listening to this program know a lot more about literature post 8700 BC than they do about

Egyptian literature and literature written cuneiform. I think we're kind-of setting out as a politically-correct denial here, and as for the oral thing, I mean, we know [there was] a transition. Socrates spoke and asked questions, Plato wrote it down, but he wrote dialogues and said writing was bad for you - it hurt your brain, and his pupil, Aristotle, was a writer and got on with it. And I think then it's been got on with at a completely different level ever since.

[39:15]
[Eleanor Robson] But we've known about Greek literature for many, many hundreds of years. Sumerian literature has only been deciphered in the last 50. So it's a matter of the Western modern world's ignorance of these ancient literatures, not a question of intrinsic value or otherwise, I would argue.

[Rosalind Thomas] It's prestige of Greek literature, isn't it? ...

[Melvyn Bragg] ...But don't some things deserve prestige?

[Alan Millard] Yes, certainly some of the Egyptian, Babylonian and Sumerian compositions have that prestige, but our education system doesn't introduce them to children. So we only come ...

Do you think we've got the sort of same possibilities? That would be wonderful if it's of the poets, playwrights, thinkers in Sumerian and they're just waiting there to be found.

[Eleanor Robson] Absolutely. Well, some of us know them already and are gradually introducing them to the rest of the world...

[Melvyn Bragg] Other programs beckon...

[Eleanor Robson] I hope so.

[Melvyn Bragg] Well, can you give us an example then.

[Eleanor Robson] Perhaps listeners will have heard of the hero Gilgamesh, and the Epic of Gilgamesh is one of the most beautiful and powerful epics describing the search for immortality. And it's about love, friendship, loss, death and memory, and is known in various varieties of cuneiform from the early second millennium BC right through to the end of cuneiform writing at the turn of the first millennium of the Common Era, and then is transformed in other ways into other literatures as well.

[Melvyn Bragg] Alan, finally, can I ask you, it seems as if the alphabet's only been invented once, but like the wheel, why do you think that is?

[Alan Millard] Yes, I think that's true. As we've already said, it was a stroke of genius and once it was invented, there was really no need to reinvent it. It spread across the world. It went with the Phoenicians westwards to Greece. It went with the Arameans, as Eleanor said, to Iraq and further east still, so that some of the Indian scripts are based on the Aramaic alphabet, which is a descendant of the original alphabet. Every alphabet in the world is actually descended from that one original or is an imitation of it. We find a very early imitation at a place in Syria called Ugurit, about 1300 BC, where

scribes trained in Babylonian cuneiform took up the idea of the alphabet and made a cuneiform alphabet.

[Melvyn Bragg] And now we have two thirds of the world's languages in that alphabet. Do you see anything preventing the rest of the world joining in now? You were talking about elitists in Japan?

[Rosalind Thomas] I think it helps that the Romans conquered a very great deal of the remains of the illiterate west of Europe, and then that alphabet was taken over by the colonial powers who then developed their rule in other parts of the world, I mean, that surely got to be added in as a big political reason why the alphabets covered a large part of the world.

[Melvyn Bragg] But ... we're back on the old colonialism, we failed to mention its intrinsic values of being atomized and this brilliant invention of the phonemes and so on.

[Rosalind Thomas] It's learned very fast....

[We have] got to go now. Very sorry. We'll have to come back to it, particularly to the Sumerian stuff. Thank you very much for listening. [laughter]

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