

The political impact on the evolution and usage of ancient scripts in Eastern Mediterranean cultures

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates that the evolution and usage of writing systems in the societies of Ancient Eastern Mediterranean, from the logographic scripts of the Late Chalcolithic Age to the Greek alphabet of the Iron Age, was not a matter of normal literate maturity of those societies but an intentional political choice of their elite classes. Relevant evidence are presented from six local societies and cultures, namely, Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia (indirectly related to Eastern Mediterranean due to its immense cultural influence on the Levantine coasts and Eastern Anatolia), Minoan Crete, Levante, Classical Greece and Cyprus.

Keywords: History of writing, ancient scripts, literacy, Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Minoan Crete, Levante, Classical Greece, Cyprus

Introduction

The mainstream view of *grammatology* (the scholarly study of writing systems^[1]) on the historical evolution of writing systems is that the transition of human script from early logographic systems (i.e., Sumerian and Ancient Egyptian) to fully phonemic *alphabetic* writing (i.e., Phoenician and Greek) in Ancient (Bronze and Early Iron Age) Mediterranean was a multi-millennial process, driven by phoneticization, graphic simplification, and cross-linguistic adaptation. Out of the four independent inventions of true writing that are most commonly recognized^[2], the two attested in the major Eastern Mediterranean world are the Mesopotamian (Sumerian) cuneiform script (c. 3400 – c. 3100 BCE) and the Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs (c. 3250 BCE)^[3]. Both were *logographic/logosyllabic* scripts, consisting of grapho-morphemic units that represented entire words or morphemes, often combining phonetic clues with semantic indicators (determinatives). The sign inventory of the former was reduced from some 1,500 pictographs initially to eventually about 600 cuneiform signs (c. 2800 BCE)^[4], while the inventory of the latter comprised 1,070 distinct ideographic, logographic, syllabic, and alphabetic characters^[5]. Both scripts become general-purpose writing systems with coherent texts appearing c. 2600 BCE^{[2], [6]}. This was also the time when the first syllabaries of Bronze Age began to appear, from the Aegean Sea to Indus Valley that shared a pronounced graphic continuity and a common scribal tradition^[7].

The syllabaries of Bronze Age, although inspired by the Pre-cuneiform Sumerian pictography^[8], consisted of a significant smaller repertoire of core syllabic signs, ranging from 55 (Cypriot-Greek Syllabary)^[9] to 120 (Cretan Protolinear Script)^[10]. These syllabaries were the basis for the creation of the first consonantal and alphabetic scripts (i.e., the Phoenician and Greek respectively)^[11], with an interesting hybrid being the Ugaritic consonantal script (abjad) of 30 letters that was written using cuneiform signs, emerged c. 1400 BCE^[12].

The earliest evidence of a proto-alphabetic (i.e., consonantal) script, inscribed on the Gezer Jars from contemporary Israel, dates to the 16th century BCE. This

Canaanite proto-alphabet, initially pictographic, coexisted two centuries later with the cuneiform script of Ugarit (present-day Ras Shamra, Syria) and other major Levantine centers. While Ugaritic scribes retained traditional cuneiform materials and techniques, they devised distinct alphabetic glyphs and phonetic values. Subsequently, around 1300 BCE, Phoenician scribes at Byblos developed a significantly streamlined syllabary based on glyphs derived from the acrophonic principle^[13]. However, the date of appearance of the first proto-alphabetic script varies, depending on the source, the earliest being c. 1900–1700 BCE. Accordingly, the Phoenician script of 22 linear consonantal letter was crystallized by 1050 BCE, while the Archaic Greek alphabet of 24 letters was firstly attested c. 800–750 BCE.

Therefore, the creation of the first proto-alphabets, 1500 years after the appearance of the first logographic scripts and 700 years after the appearance of the first linear syllabaries are conventionally considered to be rather a matter of literate maturity of their users. This evolution is typically attributed to technicalities of writing. Namely, according to S.R. Fischer^[13], vowel representation was deemed unnecessary within the Phoenician syllabary, as a consonantal writing system aligned efficiently with the structure of Semitic languages, which prioritize consonants over vowels in word formation; consequently, Phoenician scribes favored this streamlined script over the more complex logographic system of ancient Egypt. All these despite the fact that the contemporary Egyptian Hieroglyphs contained 24 consonantal signs practically a millennium before the appearance of the first proto-alphabets, while in Europe there were presumably proto-writing systems since 12 millennia before, containing from 32 to 210 core signs^[14]. In addition, on the periphery of the Greek world, the island of Cyprus preserved its archaic syllabic script (i.e., the Cypriot Greek Syllabary) until the 2nd century BCE, namely, six centuries after the introduction of the alphabet to the rest of the Greek world, probably because they were not mature enough to do so. It will be demonstrated herein that the evolution and usage of writing systems, as they are historically attested in the following six Ancient

Mediterranean cultures (Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Minoan Crete, Levante, Classical Greece and Cyprus) was an intentional political choice and not a matter of literate maturity.

Ancient Egypt

Writing in Ancient Egypt was tied directly to both the *priesthood* and *craft guilds/artisan workshops*. It was never a casual skill but an elite administrative and sacred tool. The relationship unfolds across the above two key institutional sectors. Specifically, the link between literacy and the Egyptian priesthood was so fundamental that even the word “hieroglyph” comes from the Greek *hieroglyphikos*, meaning “sacred carvings”. The Egyptians called their own formal script *Medut Netjeru* (“the Words of the Gods”), believing that the deity Thoth had invented it. The boundary between a “civil administrator” and a “priest” was extremely fluid. High-ranking scribes often held priestly titles, and priests were required to be literate to perform daily rituals, read liturgical scrolls, and execute burial rites. The “Houses of Life” (*Per Ankh*) were attached to major temples; these institutions served as scriptoria, libraries, and universities. Priests and elite scribes worked here copying sacred texts, compiling astronomical calendars, recording medical treatises, and teaching advanced literacy [15].

While Ancient Egypt did not have formal medieval “guilds” (which were independent merchant associations), skilled labor was organized into *state/temple-managed workshops and hereditary artisan communities* that functioned similarly. Writing was critical to their operations. The best example of a “craft guild” in Egypt was the village of Deir el-Medina (The Royal Tomb Builders), home to the stonecutters, painters, and sculptors who built the Valley of the Kings. Because of their work, this community had an extraordinarily high literacy rate compared to the rest of Egypt. They left behind thousands of *ostraca* (potsherds/limestone pieces used as scratchpads) documenting legal disputes, supply inventories, and personal letters. The Egyptian word for scribe (*sesh*) shares its root with drawing or painting. The specialized artisans who painted hieroglyphs onto tomb walls were known as *Sesh Kedut* (“scribes of outlines/forms”). These master craftsmen were trained in the strict canon of sacred proportion and iconography. Artisans worked under overseers who used writing to track raw materials (gold, lapis lazuli, timber), enforce standardized iconographic rules, and document finished goods for royal and temple treasuries. To ensure that literacy, sacred knowledge, and specialized crafts remained exclusive monopolies, the elite classes of Ancient Egypt (namely the royal state, the priesthood, and overseers of royal workshops) maintained a system of strict structural controls. They protected these monopolies through the four main pillars, below.

1. Educational Bottlenecks & Hereditary Transmission: Literacy was restricted and access to education was deliberately kept narrow (to roughly 1% to 2% of the population) to prevent social mobility from diluting the power of the elite. Son succeeded father in scribal, priestly, and master-artisan roles. A child raised in a scribal home learned the trade organically, while a peasant child had virtually no access to formal schooling (*hereditary professions*). Formal education took place in temple-run scriptoria like the House of

Life (*Per Ankh*) or royal administrative schools. Access required royal favor, high social standing, or patron connections. Scribes actively reinforced their social monopoly through literature. The famous Middle Kingdom text *The Satire of the Trades* taught students that every other job (blacksmith, farmer, potter, washerman) was grueling and degraded, while “the scribe alone directs the work of all”.

- 2. Technical Complexity & Secret Knowledge:** The state and priesthood made the mechanics of writing and high-level craftsmanship *deliberately difficult to master*. Scribes used different scripts depending on context and audience (*Layered Scripts*). Namely, *Hieroglyphs* were highly complex and visually dense, restricted to sacred monuments and royal display. Hieratic/Demotic were cursive scripts used for everyday administration that required separate, specialized training. In the New Kingdom and Ptolemaic periods, priests created obscure, encoded forms of hieroglyphic writing that only a tiny inner circle of high priests could decipher (Crypto-Hieroglyphs). Sacred texts like the *Book of the Dead* or tomb-decoration canons were treated as divine secrets (*Religious Secrecy*). The *Papyrus Salt 825* explicitly warns that exposing sacred temple rituals to the uninitiated brought severe spiritual and physical punishment.
- 3. Economic Dependence & State Control of Materials:** Artisans and scribes did not operate in a free market. The state and temples controlled the raw materials and tools required for these crafts, effectively making independent operation impossible. The royal and temple treasuries had exclusive access to papyrus, gold, lapis lazuli and copper. Papyrus production was a royal monopoly. Blank papyrus scrolls were expensive state assets, not cheap commodities and so was ink. The master craftsmen building the royal tombs lived in a walled, state-controlled community (Deir el-Medina). They received all their food, water, and tools directly from the royal treasury. They could not sell their specialized tomb-crafting services on an open market.
- 4. Canonical Rules & Grid Systems:** To prevent unauthorized innovation and keep production standardized within approved institutional bounds, the Egyptian state enforced strict artistic and scribal canons. Artisans were trained to use an 18-square grid (later 21 squares) to draft human figures. Deviation from these divine proportions was not considered creative, it was considered defective or sacrilegious (The Canon of Proportions). Scribal work and workshop production were constantly audited by overseers (*Iry-Paret*). Every slab of stone, ounce of gold leaf, or sheet of papyrus used had to be accounted for in detailed administrative ledgers.

Thereby, in Ancient Egyptian society, the Scribe (*Sesh*) was the common denominator connecting state governance, temple priesthood, and artisan production. Because literacy was restricted to roughly 1% to 2% of the total population, controlling the written word meant controlling administrative power, sacred knowledge, and industrial

manufacturing. A trained scribe could advance to become a temple high priest, a royal treasurer, or a chief architect, overseeing thousands of artisans; so, they would do whatever necessary to protect their monopoly, privileges and, thus, well-being.

Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia is indirectly related to Eastern Mediterranean, due to its immense cultural influence on the Levantine coasts and Eastern Anatolia. In Mesopotamia (Sumer/Akkad), scribes and temple/palace institutions maintained a practical monopoly on writing, but it was not structured like a formal guild (in the medieval European sense) until much later in Mesopotamian history. Instead, this “monopoly” was an institutional and technical bottleneck, enforced by the extreme difficulty of cuneiform script and the centralized control of the state economy^[16].

In early Sumerian and Akkadian times (3rd millennium BCE), there were no formal “guilds” with independent legal status. Instead, scribes were organized through three manners. *Institutional Frameworks* where scribes (Sumerian: dub-sar; Akkadian: *ṭupšarru*) belonged directly to the administrative apparatus of the Temple (*É*) or the Palace (*É-gal*). Scribal education took place in specialized schools (The *É-dub-ba-a*, “Tablet House”). A famous collection of Sumerian literary compositions describes the rigorous life, curriculum, corporal punishment, and elite status of scribal students in the Old Babylonian period^[17]. Education was expensive, highly disciplined, and restricted largely to children of elite administrative families, royalty, or high priests. Scribal knowledge was frequently passed down from father to son (and occasionally daughter, e.g., Enheduanna), in family and dynastic lines. By the 1st millennium BCE, scribes explicitly traced their ancestry back to famous ancestral scholars (e.g., the ancestral house of *Sîn-leqi-unninni*, editor of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*). The monopoly of literacy was maintained through the three key mechanisms, below.

1. **Complexity of Cuneiform:** Mastering hundreds of logograms, syllabic signs, and dead languages (scribes in the Akkadian Empire still had to master non-Semitic Sumerian) required a decade or more of intensive study. Late Babylonian/Assyrian texts detailing what a master scribe (*ummiā*) was expected to know, including Sumerian grammar, musical terms, priestly rituals, and field measurements^[18].
2. **Economic Centralization:** In Sumer and Akkad, the vast majority of economic life flowed through temple storehouses or royal estates^[19]. Since ordinary citizens didn’t independently manage large-scale international trade or state tax ledgers, everyday people had little economic incentive (or resources) to acquire literacy.
3. **Legal & Ritual Validation:** Contracts, land sales, and court cases were not considered legally valid unless drawn up and sealed (*kunkukku*) by an authorized, certified scribe. There was a minor exception (“functional literacy”) where some merchants could write basic numbers, names, and loan agreements, particularly seen later in Old Assyrian trading colonies like Kanesh, but formal scribes maintained a monopoly over complex legal, administrative, and religious texts^[20].

The line between “scribe” and “priest” was extremely fluid. The highest administrative roles in Sumerian city-states, such as the *Sanga* (temple administrator) or *En* (high priest/priestess), required scribal literacy. Diviners (*bārū*), incantation priests (*āšipu*), and lamentation singers (*kalū*) were all fully trained scribes. They viewed cuneiform not just as a tool for bookkeeping, but as a divine code revealed by Nisaba (goddess of writing) or Nabu (god of wisdom and scribes), exerting so a *sacred monopoly*. Late texts explicitly carried warnings to protect this monopoly: “*He who knows may show it to another who knows; he who does not know shall not read it*”. Thereby, literacy was estimated at under 1% of the population.

Minoan Crete

The political structure of Bronze Age Minoan Crete (c. 3000–1450 BCE) remains one of Aegean archaeology’s most debated topics. Because Linear A (the primary Minoan administrative script) remains undeciphered, our understanding relies on architectural spatial analysis, archaeological site hierarchies, iconography, seals, and comparisons with contemporary Bronze Age polities. Rather than a unified nation-state under a single monarch, Minoan Crete was long governed through regionally network-based, court-centered administrative institutions^{[21],[23]}.

During the *Protopalatial period* (c. 1900–1700 BCE), Crete was likely divided into semi-autonomous regional *polities* (Peer-Polity Interaction), each anchored by a major court complex, such as Knossos, Phaistos, Malia, and Petras. These polities engaged in trade, ritual competition, and shared administrative practices without a central capital. Modern scholars (e.g.,^[24]) challenge the nineteenth-century view of a monolithic “King Minos” top-down monarchy. Instead, evidence suggests a heterarchical structure, where power was distributed horizontally among competing elite factions, lineages, or corporate groups operating out of different quarters of the palace and suburban elite villas (e.g., Quartier Mu at Malia). By the *Neopalatial period* (c. 1700–1450 BCE), Knossos grew vastly in size and visual influence. Scholars debate whether Knossos exerted direct imperial control over the entire island or maintained a prestige-based cultural and religious hegemony over confederated regional centers like Gournia, Ayia Triada, and Zakros.

Archaeologists broadly group the organization of Minoan key administrative and political institutions into the next primary frameworks across different eras, before the Mycenaean Greek hegemony and administration (c. 1450–1100 BCE).

1. **The Palatial Complex (Court-Centred Buildings):** The “palace” was not primarily a royal residence; it served as a civic-ceremonial, economic, and administrative node. The central courtyards acted as public institutional arenas for gathering, ritual performances, and political integration. The storage magazines (*pithoi*) functioned as civic treasuries, managing surplus agricultural yield (oil, grain, wine) used for redistributive feasts and trade.
2. **Bureaucratic & Administrative Archives:** Administration was maintained using a dual system of record-keeping. Namely, seals & clay sealings were used by officials to verify authority, lock storerooms, and authorize shipment of goods; documents tracking

tax obligations, agricultural disbursements, and labor allocations were written on Linear A and Cretan Hieroglyphic tablets.

3. **Theocratic Governance & Ritual Control:** Minoan political authority was inextricably bound to religious ideology. Unlike Contemporary Near Eastern societies, Minoan art features no depictions of military kings or deified rulers. Public power was projected through ritual roles, sacred symbols (e.g., double axes/labrys), and priestess elite imagery. Peak sanctuaries and mountain-top shrines (e.g., Mount Juktas) were co-opted by palatial elites during the Neopalatial period to solidify ideological control over rural populations.
4. 3d) *Suburban Villas & Country Houses:* An intricate network of secondary administrative sub-centers (“Minoan Villas”, e.g., Tyliossos, Vathypetro, Nirou Khani) collected regional produce, enforced local authority, and funneled surplus upward to the regional central palaces.

Although the broader cultural context of Minoan Crete originated from Mesopotamia^[25],^[26], it developed locally a more liberal form, facilitated there by the decentralized system of power in a multi-ethnic environment^[27]. This liberalization also had an impact on writing. The Cretan Protoliner Script, the first linear syllabary developed in Eastern Mediterranean, consisted of 120 syllabograms^[10] that rendered the phonetic values of culturally important objects or notions, abstractly depicted by easily recognizable signs. Although there was a scribal guild, at least in the times of Mycenaean Greek hegemony (c. 1450–1100 BCE)^[28], the close resemblance between the common important object/notion and its pictorial representation (syllabogram) indicates the possibility of a general reading ability without schooling^[29], at least for the culturally predominant ethnic group (i.e., the Eteocretans^[27]).

Levante

During the 2nd millennium BCE (the Middle and Late Bronze Ages), the coastal Levantine city-states, most notably Ugarit, Byblos, Sidon, and Tyre, developed sophisticated sociopolitical and economic structures. Rather than functioning as territorial empires, these polities operated as highly urbanized, maritime-oriented city-states, integrated into the broader geopolitical web of the Ancient Near East. They navigated a delicate balance between regional superpowers: Pharaonic Egypt, the Hittite Empire, Mitanni, and later Assyria. Cities like Byblos operated with significant autonomy while maintaining strong diplomatic, cultural, and tributary relations with Egypt’s Middle Kingdom (c. 2000–1550 BCE), while later (c. 1550–1200 BCE) they became formal *vassal kingdoms*. Byblos was sworn to Egyptian allegiance (frequently documented in the *Amarna Letters*^[30]), while Ugarit shifted from Egyptian influence to become a client state of the Hittite Empire, following Suppiluliuma I’s campaigns (c. 14th century BCE). As vassals, Levantine kings retained internal autonomy and dynastic rule, but were required to pay annual tribute, provide harbor rights, supply troops/provisions, and align their foreign policy with their imperial overlord^[31]. The political regime of the city-states was characterized by dynastic monarchy and imperial vassalage. The cities were

governed by dynastic hereditary kings who served as the political, administrative, military, and supreme judicial authorities. Power was centralized in the Palace (*ēkallu*), which managed royal lands, tax collection, and diplomatic administrative archives. Below the king was an elite warrior-aristocracy known as the *Maryannu* (chariot warriors), alongside a bureaucratic network of royal scribes and prefects. Yet, governance was not absolute. A *council of elders* (*šībūtu*) and civic assemblies exercised significant municipal authority, managing local judicial disputes, civic property, and district administration.

The economy was a *palatial redistribution system* combined with an active *merchant-capitalist market network*. The *institutional dual economy* was characterized by a *Palace/Temple sector* that controlled large agricultural estates, royal workshops, shipping fleets, and long-distance trade monopolies, as well as a *Free/Private sector* (*bnš mlk* vs. Free Citizens) of merchant guilds (*tamkāru*) that operated both as state agents trading for the king and as private entrepreneurs trading on personal commission. Especially Ugarit (Ras Shamra) functioned as the international clearinghouse of the Near East. Its twin ports (such as Minet el-Beida) connected trade routes between Egypt, Cyprus (*Alashiya*), Mycenaean Greece, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia^[32],^[33].

In the Levantine cities, the overall literacy rate was extremely low, estimated by historians and epigraphers to be between 1% and 5% of the general population. However, “literacy” in the Bronze Age Levant was not a simple binary of literate vs. illiterate. It existed in tiers, shaped heavily by the coexistence of two radically different writing systems: complex logosyllabic and revolutionary alphabetic scripts^[34].

1. **Full (Institutional) Literacy:** The scribes constituted 1–2% of the population, organized in *scribal guilds* (*šāpirū*) of highly trained professional that underwent rigorous apprenticeship in palatial and temple academies (*bit ṭuppi*). They had to master logosyllabic cuneiform (writing in Akkadian or Sumerian), which required memorizing hundreds of complex signs, sumerograms, and determinatives. Scribes were multilingual, often reading Ugaritic, Akkadian, Hurrian, and Egyptian. Scribes held elite social status, managing international state correspondence (e.g., the *Amarna Letters*), imperial treaties, and administrative tax tallies^[35].
2. **Functional (“Oligoptique”) Literacy:** During the *alphabetic revolution*, around the 14th century BCE, Ugarit developed a consonantal cuneiform script (abjad) consisting of just 30 signs. Simultaneously, Byblos and the Southern Levant were developing early linear abjads (Proto-Canaanite/Phoenician)^[36]. Because an abjad required learning only about 30 signs instead of hundreds, writing spread outside palace walls into private residences^[37]. Private archives found in Ugarit (e.g., the Houses of Urtenu, Rapanu, and Rashap’abu) show that elite merchants, estate managers, and military commanders could read and write simple economic transactions, inventory lists, and letters. Short inscriptions on pottery (incised ownership marks, capacity stamps) and votive objects suggest that non-scribes (3–4% of the population) possessed basic reading/signing abilities for commercial survival^[38].

Furthermore, cities like Ugarit were cosmopolitan trading centers, where multiple writing systems functioned simultaneously, to meet the needs of international trade.

Classical Greece

In Classical Greece, the people responsible for drafting, recording, and safeguarding laws held a fundamentally different status than the elite scribes of ancient Mesopotamia or Egypt. Classical Greek *poleis* (city-states) intentionally subordinated the role of the scribe to prevent any small administrative class from monopolizing legal or political power. Instead of an elite caste, Greek legal scribing was split between *elected/lotted citizen-magistrates* (who made or managed the laws) and *publicly owned slaves or low-status assistants* (who physically wrote and copied them). Unlike Mesopotamian scribes, who functioned as an elite priesthood, Greek city-states actively distrusted professional scribes. To prevent scribes from manipulating laws, Athenian law banned any citizen from serving as an under-scribe (*hypogrammateus*) twice for the same magistrate. The primary authority was the publicly inscribed stone slab (*stele*) erected in open air. If a written papyrus document contradicted the stone inscription displayed in the Agora, the public stone inscription was legally binding ^[39].

In Classical Athens (5th–4th century BCE), several specific figures and officials handled the writing of laws (*nomoi*) and decrees (*psephismata*).

1. **Grammateis (Secretaries / Public Scribes):** The general Greek term for a scribe or secretary was *grammateus* (γραμματεὺς). In the Athenian democracy, citizens filled secretarial posts by lot or election for short terms (usually one year or even a single *prytany* of 35 days). In particular, the Secretary of the Council/Parliament (*Grammateus tes Boules*) drafted resolutions, recorded state decrees, and prepared texts to be passed to the Assembly (*Ekklesia*). The *Grammateus kata Prytaneian* was responsible for supervising the inscribing of public decrees onto stone slabs (*stelai*) set up in the Agora or on the Acropolis ^[40]. Aristotle, in his work “*Constitution of the Athenians*” (*Athenaion Politeia*, 54.3–5), details the roles, election processes, and duties of the various secretaries (*grammateis*) of the Athenian council and assembly.
2. **Anagrapheis and Syngrapheis (Law Codifiers and Drafters):** When Athens needed to overhaul, collect, or draft complex sets of laws, the assembly appointed special commissions. Specifically, Drafters or commissioners (*Syngrapheis*) appointed to write specific legal proposals or constitutional revisions, and *Anagrapheis ton Nomon* (“Re-scribers of the Laws”), namely, at the end of the 5th century BCE (410–399 BCE), Athens appointed a famous board of *anagrapheis* to collect, edit, and transcribe the ancient laws of Solon and Draco onto new stone displays. A most notorious *anagrapheus*, Nicomachus, was legally prosecuted (*Lysias, Against Nicomachus*: Speech 30), accused of taking bribes, delaying the publication of laws, and fabricating legal regulations during the recodification of Athenian law.
3. **Hypogrammateis and Demosioi (Under-Scribes and Public Slaves):** Namely, because citizen-secretaries rotated frequently, the permanent, day-to-day work of

copying, maintaining archives, and retrieving documents was handled by publicly owned slaves (*demosioi*) or hired low-status citizens called *hypogrammateis* (under-secretaries). These assistants kept paper copies on papyrus rolls or wooden tablets (*sanides*) in the Metroon (the central state archive in the Agora) ^[41]. Democratic Athens intentionally kept these permanent record-keepers low in status so that technical legal knowledge would never translate into political authority.

Outside Athens, other Greek states created specialized roles for those who recorded legal traditions. One of the most famous early epigraphic discoveries on a bronze inscription is the “Spensithios Decree” (*SEG 27:631 / IC IV 80*) from Crete (c. 500 BCE). A man named Spensithios was hired by a Cretan city-state to be their official public scribe (*poinikastas*) and “rememberer” (*mnamon*) of sacred and secular law. He was granted tax exemptions and meat portions from sacrifices in exchange for maintaining the city’s written laws. In many archaic and classical poleis (like Sparta, Argos, and Crete), *mnamones* or *mnemones* (“Rememberers”) were officials who originally memorized unwritten customs ^[42]. As writing spread, they evolved into official legal secretaries who maintained records of court decisions, land titles, and public statutes.

A substantial body of historical, classical, and sociological scholarship investigates the relationship between the adoption of the Greek alphabet (c. 8th century BCE) and the development and practice of ancient democracy (particularly in Classical Athens). Scholarly consensus has evolved from early “technological determinism” (the idea that the alphabet inherently generated democratic thinking) to a more institutional and contextual view (where writing served as an instrument that supported - and was shaped by - democratic institutions). The key academic perspectives are presented below.

1. **The “Literacy Hypothesis” (Alphabetic Egalitarianism):** In the mid-20th century, media theorists and classicists proposed that the phonetic Greek alphabet, unlike earlier complex syllabaries (such as Linear B) or logographic scripts that required specialized scribal elites, was exceptionally easy to learn. They argued that this accessibility democratized knowledge, fostered abstract logic, and made civic equality possible. Jack Goody & Ian Watt ^[43] argued that a fully phonetic script allowed wide public participation in record-keeping and law, facilitating a shift from mythic tradition to empirical historical critique and democratic governance. Eric A. Havelock ^[44] asserted that the efficiency of the Greek vocalized alphabet freed cognitive capacity from rote memorization, enabling the rise of abstract political philosophy, individual civic consciousness, and open public debate.
2. **Public Inscriptions, Written Law, and Accountability:** Later historians focused on how writing was used in practice rather than just its cognitive effects. They emphasized the “epigraphical habit”, i.e., the practice of inscribing laws, decrees, and financial accounts on stone or bronze monuments set up in public spaces (like the Athenian Agora). F.D. Harvey ^[45] systematically examined how democratic procedures

relied on written media, such as published agendas for the Assembly (*Eklesia*), posted court notices, and inscribed laws, to ensure transparency and limit aristocratic overreach. Charles W. Hedrick Jr. ^[46] argued that public inscriptions were explicit democratic symbols meant to enforce the principle of *isonomia* (equality under the law) by giving every citizen access to the text of the law.

3. Practical Civic Literacy & Institutional Mechanisms: Democratic mechanisms in Athens explicitly required basic functional literacy from the general citizen body. In *Ostracism*, citizens wrote the names of politicians they wished to exile onto broken pottery sherds (*ostraka*). While voters could ask others to write for them, the process presumed a widespread rudimentary literacy. Public Audits (*Euthynai*) were outgoing magistrate financial reports, inscribed on stone so that any citizen could inspect them for corruption. Paul Cartledge ^[47] highlights how the extent and political role of literacy in democratic Athens contrasted sharply with military oligarchies like Sparta, where writing was tightly restricted to official state functions.

4. The Revisionist View (Orality and Low Mass Literacy): From the late 1980s onward, scholars challenged the idea that the alphabet automatically created mass literacy or democratic mindsets, proving that classical Greece remained a heavily oral society. William V. Harris ^[48] argued that even at the height of 4th-century Athenian democracy, overall literacy rates likely did not exceed 10% to 15%. He demonstrated that democratic institutions relied on oral communication (oratory, public readings, spoken testimony) rather than widespread reading. Rosalind Thomas ^[49] showed that literacy and oral tradition coexisted dynamically. She argued that democracy drove the demand for written civic records, rather than the alphabet spontaneously creating democracy.

To summarize the relationship between Democracy and alphabet, Democracy generated a massive functional need and use for writing, facilitated by the phonetic alphabet that enabled widespread literacy. Written law on public stone (*epigraphy*) prevented the formation of elite monopolies and fostered political equality.

Cyprus

The political organization of Iron Age and Classical Cyprus (c. 1050–310 BCE) was radically different from mainland Classical Greece. While continental Greece developed participatory democracies and oligarchic *poleis* (city-states), Cyprus was ruled by a network of hereditary monarchies known as city-kingdoms. This political landscape blended Aegean Greek linguistic and cultural roots with Near Eastern palace-economy structures, maintaining remarkable continuity for over seven centuries ^{[50],[53]}.

6a) *The Political Architecture of City-Kingdoms (Politeiai):* Unlike unified empires or federal leagues, Cyprus was divided into 7 to 12 independent, autonomous city-kingdoms depending on the century (e.g., Salamis, Soloi, Marion, Paphos, Kourion, Chytroi, Tamassos, Amathus, and the Phoenician-ruled Kition). Each city-kingdom operated

as a sovereign micro-state. Via *territorial division*, each kingdom controlled an urban coastal or inland center (where the palace and primary sanctuaries were located) alongside an agrarian and industrial hinterland (vital for copper extraction and timber). Via *sovereign rights*, each *basileus* (king) minted their own regional coinage (from the 6th century BCE onwards), levied taxes, constructed defensive fortifications, maintained standing forces, and conducted independent foreign policy.

6b) *Structure of the Monarchy (Basileia):* The ruler bore the title *basileus* (written in the local Cypriot-syllabic script as *pa-si-le-wo-se*), exhibiting dynastic autocracy and divine authority. Via a *hereditary transmission*, power passed dynastically, typically from father to son; royal families claimed legendary founding ancestors from the Homeric *Nostoi* (e.g., Teucer founding Salamis, Agapenor founding Paphos) to legitimize their rule. The Cypriot *basileus* combined political, military, and supreme religious power (King-Priest); for example, the King of Paphos was simultaneously the hereditary High Priest of the sanctuary of Aphrodite (the *Anassa*). Via an *administrative hierarchy*, the king was supported by a royal court, including royal relatives (*anaktēs* and *anassai*), military commanders, tax collectors, and state scribes; while there were administrative magistrates and councils, no democratic legislative assemblies existed to limit royal decree.

6c) *Vassalage under Imperial Suzerains:* For most of the Archaic and Classical periods, Cypriot kings maintained internal autonomy by paying tribute and submitting to distant empires. In the Neo-Assyrian Empire (709–c. 663 BCE), the *Stele of Sargon II* (found at Kition) records seven (and later ten) Cypriot kings submitting as tribute-paying vassals, while retaining complete local sovereignty. In the Achaemenid Persian Empire (c. 545–332 BCE), Cyprus was incorporated into the 5th Satrapy of the Persian Empire. The Persian Kings of Kings allowed Cypriot *basileis* to rule their own cities without a permanent Persian satrap residing on the island. In exchange, Cypriot kingdoms provided annual monetary tribute and naval fleets for Persian military campaigns (such as Xerxes' invasion of Greece).

6d) *Geopolitics & Ideological Polarization in the Classical Period:* During the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, the internal politics of the Cypriot states were defined by a struggle between pro-Persian and pro-Hellenic factions. Evagoras I of Salamis (411–374 BCE) is the most famous Cypriot *basileus*, who united several city-kingdoms under Salaminian hegemony, aggressively promoted Pan-Hellenic cultural ties with Athens, introduced the Greek alphabet alongside the Cypriot syllabary, and fought a ten-year war against Persia. When Alexander the Great invaded Persia, Cypriot kings sent their fleets to assist him at the Siege of Tyre (332 BCE). However, during the Wars of the Successors (*Diadochoi*), Ptolemy I Soter systematically executed or deposed the local Cypriot kings by c. 310 BCE, abolishing the centuries-old monarchical system in favor of a centralized Ptolemaic military governorship (*strategos*) ^[54].

Conclusion

One of the oldest so far inscription discovered (dated c. 14,000 BCE), exhibiting intentional multi-symbol message composition, if not presumably language-based writing (i.e., distinct geometric symbols painted in a deliberate left-to-right linear sequence), is the “La Pasiega Inscription” in

northern Spain. Since the Upper Paleolithic Age in Europe, there were presumably proto-writing systems, containing from 32 to 210 core signs ^[14]. Remnants of these “Old European” signs (with linear alphabetic symbols like A, M, N, O, II, T, and X) survived until the emergence of the first syllabic scripts (e.g., Linear A), as discovered by the excavations on Milos Island (Cyclades, Greece) ^[55]. Repeated representation of the “bull” sign, as appeared later in Linear B, is found on Halaf pottery (c. 6000 BC–5300 BCE) ^[56], and so are many other early token symbols (e.g., “sheep”). Evidently, humanity had developed proto-writing systems of abstract linear signs with semantic and potentially phonetic content, similar to the Bronze Age syllabaries ^[7], i.e., had passed beyond the evolutionary stage of writing from the depiction/painting of an object to its abstract symbol, many centuries before the “commonly recognized inventions” of writing ^[2]. It should be noted here regarding the debate on whether those early signaries were proto-writing or true-writing ones that neither the proponents nor the adversaries can prove their claims ^[14]. In this respect, neither the commonly recognized as first true-writing logosyllabaries (Mesopotamian and Egyptian) can be proved to be the very first true-writing systems.

Then, it is the impression of the author herein that the first logographic scripts of Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia are presented by the mainstream grammatology as milestones of human mind towards the progress of writing, while in fact it was an evolutionary regression compared to the earliest Chalcolithic scripts. The dynastic monarchies of the time created a hyper-centralized system of power, supported by the priestly and scribal castes. The monopoly of power was based on common methods in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia:

- The educational bottlenecks and hereditary transmission of literacy that included only 1-2% of the population (see 1a, 1d, 2c);
- The overly centralized and controlled economy around temples (see 1c, 2b);
- The extremely complex scripts that intentionally required years of devotion and hard study to master (see 1b, 2a).

Thereby, the privileges and prosperity of the dominant castes were ensured, through the imposed illiteracy of the vast majority of the population.

The historically subsequent decentralization of power evidently changed the nature of the scripts, as well, through the smaller linear syllabaries. Specifically, in Minoan Crete, Cyprus and the Levantine coast (seemingly in Indus Valley, as well), the political regime comprised semi-/fully-autonomous regional city-states, using linear syllabaries. Particularly the geopolitical position of the Levantine city-states, as intermediaries of the transit trading, forced them to use many different scripts in order to cope with their international role. Eventually, their gradual privatization and liberalization of commerce led to the invention of simple consonantal scripts (abjads), being more functional and extremely easy to master, even in a couple of days.

Finally, the Democracy of Classical Greece arose, with the Athenian regime still being its exemplary and unsurpassed (although not flawless) model. The intentional political pursuit to avoid the monopolizing of legal or political power by any small administrative class, the consequent need to have any free citizen (and even specialized slaves) being

able to occasionally assume administrative and scribal duties, and the necessity to be everyone aware of the state’s legislation (openly available on the stone slabs of Agora) inevitably led to the usage of the alphabet, eventually by the entire Greek world. Even the delayed adoption of the alphabet by the Cypriot-Greek city-states (c. 3rd century BCE), being kingdoms, can be attributed to the lack of democracy locally, since there wasn’t any need for the people to participate in public administration. Democracy changed the history of literacy forever.

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