CAS CL/LX 205: Origins of Writing (Spring 2019)

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Lecture: Monday, Wednesday and Friday 2:30pm–3:20pm (CAS 116)

Office Hours: Monday, Wednesday 11:05-12:00pm; Thursday 12:00pm–1:00pm, or by appointment (arrange by email). My office is in the Department of Classical Studies, 745 Comm. Ave (STH 417). You are always welcome to drop by my office, even outside of office hours, but I recommend sending an email in advance, to make sure that I am in.

Contacting me: The best way to contact me is by email. If you would like to speak to me in person, but cannot make the office hours, send me an email and I will try to accommodate you.

Content and purpose of the course:

Writing is one of the most important technologies ever invented by mankind, if not the single most significant one. This course will survey the major types of writing systems in the world, their structure, and their historical evolution. This is an unapologetically interdisciplinary course: students of writing systems have to engage with problems and methods of history, philology, linguistics, and archaeology. You will be learning about writing systems used by a wide range of cultures, quite distant from one another in time and space.

The focus of this course is on the scripts used by the ancient Mediterranean civilizations, and much of our attention will be devoted to the history of the Greek and Roman alphabets. (The course has no prerequisites, and no knowledge of Greek or Latin is required). We will examine the development of the Roman alphabet, currently the most widely used writing system in the world: you will learn about the Etruscans and the role they have played in the process of transmitting the alphabet to the Romans from the Greeks. We will look closely at different varieties of Greek alphabet and discuss its emergence on the basis of Canaanite consonantal writing. You will also learn about other writing systems available to the Greeks prior to the invention of the alphabet, such as Linear B and Cyproite syllabic scripts; we will talk about some of the lost civilizations of the Aegean and their writing systems (Linear A, Cypro-Minoan) that still remain undeciphered. In order to better understand the origins of the consonantal script in the Near East we will study two other ancient writing systems used in the region, namely, the Sumerian-Akkadian cuneiform and the Egyptian hieroglyphs. You will thus be introduced to the prehistory of the alphabet spanning several millennia.

For two reasons, the narrative of this course will not be strictly linear. First, each writing system we encounter will be discussed not only as a step in the chain of events eventually leading to the creation of the Roman alphabet, but also in its own historical and cultural context. This includes later developments, for instance, Aramaic, Arabic, and Hebrew scripts that descended from the early West Semitic consonantal script, as well as adaptations to different languages, such as the cuneiform as used for Old Persian and Hittite or the Greek alphabet used as the basis for Coptic and Cyrillic scripts.
Secondly, in this course you will be introduced to a wide variety of parallels that will help you to get a better grasp of how writing systems work. For instance, in our discussion of Aegean syllabaries (such as the Linear B), we will draw on structurally similar writing systems devised for Cherokee and Inuktitut, while the presentation of Egyptian hieroglyphs will be supplemented by a discussion of Chinese and Mayan writing systems. One recurring question in the history of writing concerns the difficulties that arise whenever a writing system designed for one language is adapted to another language, and we will use Japanese kana and other East and South Asian scripts to illustrate this point.

While learning how different writing systems function, you will also have an opportunity to learn some basic information about the structure of various languages. In other words, we will be discussing not only basic parameters of writing, but also how these parameters reflect the relationship between the structure of a given language and its writing system. We will attempt to evaluate different scripts and try to find out whether or not there exists an ideal writing system. With this question in mind we will even look at some modern attempts to design a universal, language-independent writing system (for instance, the idea of semantic writing).

You will get hands-on experience with original texts: in fact, all assignments for this course will consist in reading small portions from such texts as an inscription in Cypriote syllabary or the Egyptian Book of the Dead (of course with the help of carefully designed glossaries and charts). You will not be able to acquire a working knowledge of any of the languages discussed in this course; but things you will learn will form a basis for pursuing your interests further in the direction of your choice.

There is no textbook for this course, but there will be readings assigned, posted on the course website as pdfs.

Optional reading:

Assessment:

- Class involvement (regular attendance, participation, showing evidence of interest and understanding, thoughtful completion of reading assignments) — 5%
- 7 problem sets — 50% (collaboration up to 3 people allowed: work jointly, but write-up on your own; individual submissions must have names of all collaborators listed on them)
- MFA scavenger hunt (with extra credit) — 5%
- 4 in-class quizzes (10-min., multiple choice, announced in advance) and a short phonetic quiz — 20%
- Final exam (take-home, due date determined by the Registrar) — 20%

Grading Scale:

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\begin{array}{cccc}
A & 93-100 & B+ & 87-89 \\
A- & 90-92 & B & 84-86 \\
& 80-83 & C- & 70-73 \\
& & C & 74-76 \\
& & D & 60-69 \\
& & F & < 60 \\
\end{array}
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There will be no curving of the grades, but there will be extra credit.

Resources:

I am arguably your most useful resource in this course. I will be happy to answer your questions in and outside of the classroom (I usually try to return emails within 24 hours during the working week). It is in your own best interest to form a habit of going to office hours. I encourage you to drop by before the first problem set is assigned, if only to introduce yourself. If you cannot make the office hours, but would like to talk to me, send me an email and I will do my best to accommodate you.

In addition to contacting me in person or by email, you have an options for submitting questions or feedback anonymously: you may log into the account cllx205isgreatbut@gmail.com (password: logogram) and send me an email from that account; I will address your question or concern in class.

Community of Learning: Class and University Policies:

Attendance is expected at all lectures. Since there is no textbook for this course, class attendance is absolutely essential. If you do not show up, then you will not do well! (I also reserve the right to lower your final grade by up to 5% for failure to attend regularly). It is your responsibility to inform me in advance about any potential time conflicts.

Please do not use electronic devices (laptops, phones, tablets) in class.

If you are a student with a documented disability on record at BU and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me as soon as you can.

You are expected to be honest in all of your academic work. For definitions, policies, and procedures regarding cheating and plagiarism please refer to the Academic Conduct Code (www.bu.edu/academics/policies/academic-conduct-code), which you are expected to know and follow. In particular, no collaboration of any kind is allowed on the tests.

If you have any questions about my expectations, please ask.