CL/LX 205: Origins of Writing (Fall 2014)

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Lecture: Monday, Wednesday and Friday 11am–12pm (STH 625)

Office Hours: Thursday 2:00–4:00 pm, 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.

Textbook (available in the University Barnes & Noble bookstore):


  Additional readings will be assigned; they will be 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%
- 6 problem sets — 60% (10% each)
- MFA scavenger hunt — 5%
- 3 in-class quizzes (10-minutes, multiple choice) — 15% (5% each)
  (quizzes announced in advance)
- Final exam — 15%

Grading Scale:

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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>93-100</td>
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<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>87-89</td>
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<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>77-79</td>
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<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>90-92</td>
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<td>B</td>
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There will be no curving of the grades, but the lowest problem set grade will be dropped.

Course policies:

Attendance is expected at all lectures. It is your responsibility to inform me in advance about any potential time conflicts. I reserve the right to lower your final grade by up to 5% for failure to attend regularly. Come to class prepared and read the assigned chapters BEFORE we discuss the material in class.

Makeup examinations and quizzes require either (1) my approval given IN ADVANCE of absence or (2) appropriate medical documentation. Makeup quizzes are also allowed to students who were absent because of religious observance or participation in intercollegiate athletics.

Please switch your cell phone off before class. If you need to leave it on for a specific reason (a family medical emergency, for example) please notify me before class and sit near the door. Using a phone or an electronic device with similar functionality during a quiz or an examination will lead to an immediate zero grade for that quiz or exam.

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 immediately.

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

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

Week 1:

Introduction. Background concepts. Categories and features of writing. Units of language and units of writing.

Reading:
Textbook, Ch. 1

Logography and its basic principles. Egyptian hieroglyphs and their decipherment.

Readings:

Week 2:

Egyptian writing and Egyptian language. Scribes and writing in Ancient Egypt.

Readings:
Textbook, Ch. 6

Other logographic systems: Proto-Cuneiform; Mayan hieroglyphs

Readings:
Textbook, Ch. 12

Problem Set 1 due (Egyptian)

Week 3:


Readings:
Textbook, Ch. 3

Relationship of language and writing in Chinese.

Readings:

Week 4:

Borrowing a writing system: Japanese kanji. On and kun.

Readings:
Textbook, Ch. 4, 50–68.

Basic principles of syllabic scripts (syllabaries). Cherokee; Inuktitut; Early cuneiform.

Readings:
Week 5:

Mesopotamian cuneiform and its later descendants in the Ancient Near East (Akkadian, Elamite, Ugaritic).

Readings:
Textbook, Ch. 4.

Borrowing a writing system: On and kun in Akkadian and Hittite cuneiform.

Problem set 2 due (Babylonian)

Week 6:

Syllabic scripts of the Aegean: Linear B and Cypriot.

Readings:
Robinson, ch. 6.1

Undeciphered scripts of the Aegean: Cypro-Minoan; Linear A; Phaestos disk.

Week 7:

West Semitic consonantal scripts (abjads) and their origin
(Proto-Sinaitic, Canaanite, Phoenician, Aramaic).

Readings:
Textbook, Ch. 7

The structure of Semitic languages in relation to the writing system.

Problem set 3 due (Cypriote)

Week 8:

Consonantal scripts in the modern world: Hebrew, Arabic, Ge’ez

The invention of the alphabet: Greeks adopt the West Semitic script.

Readings:
Week 9:

Abjad to alphabet: structural changes. Red and Green alphabets.

Reading:
Textbook, Ch. 8

Greek alphabet outside Greece. Alphabets devised on the basis of Greek: Cyrillic; Coptic.

Problem set 4 due (Phoenician)

Week 10:

From Greece to Italy: Etruscans and their writing.

Reading:
Textbook, Ch. 9

The history of alphabet in Ancient Italy.

Reading:

Problem set 5 due (Greek epigraphy)

Week 11:

Further history of Roman alphabet.

Reading:
Textbook, Ch. 9

Three millennia of alphabet: writing materials in antiquity.

Reading:

Week 12:

English spelling: why it makes sense and why it does not.

Language change and spelling reforms

Reading:
Textbook, Ch. 10.

MFA scavenger hunt due

Week 13:

Writing in India (Brahmi, Devanagari)

Readings:
Textbook, Ch. 11.

Thanksgiving break
Week 14:

Recently developed writing systems (Mediaeval Europe): runes; Ogham script.

Readings:

Textbook, Ch. 13.
Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Recently developed writing systems (South-Eastern Asia): Hankul, Pahawh Hmong.

Readings:

Textbook, Ch. 14, 68–74.
Kim, Chin W. (1997) ‘The structure of phonological units in Han’gŭl,’ in:

**Problem set 6 due (Kharosthi)**

Week 15:

The invention of the idea of writing: tokens. Mono- vs. polygenesis. Uni- vs. multidirectionality of development.

Reading:

Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska.

Classification of writing systems.

Readings:

Textbook, Ch. 14