WRITING STUDIES

Alphabetized

The origins of the world's chief writing system come to life in an illuminating historiography

By **Andrew Robinson**

Characters inscribed on the Serabit el-Khadim sphinx (1800–1500 BCE) may be a prototype of the alphabet.

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The alphabet is the chief writing system in use today. Not surprisingly, there have been many notable books about its history. In the 20th century, for example, there was David Diringer's *The Alphabet* (1948), Joseph Naveh's *The Early History of the Alphabet* (1982), and John F. Healey's *The Early Alphabet* (1990). Johanna Drucker's new book, *Inventing the Alphabet: The Origins of Letters from Antiquity to the Present*, is not another history—it is a historiography, addressing the intellectual history of this crucial topic for the first time.

Drucker presents and analyzes the work of alphabet scholars from the time of Herodotus and Socrates in the fifth century BCE; through the long-dominant biblical account, which centered on Moses and the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were mysteriously written; up to the current debates surrounding 20th-century archaeological finds of a few hundred very early alphabetic inscriptions in Egypt and Palestine. "Who knew what when about the alphabet?" she asks. "And how did the way they knew it—through texts, images, inscriptions, or artifacts—affect their conception of the identity and origin of alphabetic writing?"

Drucker is a professor of bibliographical studies and has been a designer of printed words and letters for almost half a century. Her scholarship and aesthetics make for an illuminating, if undoubtedly academic, study, illustrated with historic documents, archaeological finds, drawings of inscriptions, and copious tables of recondite letters compiled by generations of scholars. Regrettably, no maps are presented to show the usage of the alphabet, and the occasional surprising error appears, such as her description of the bilingual Rosetta stone as a "multilingual" inscription.

The reviewer is the author of *The Story of Writing: Alphabets, Hieroglyphs and Pictograms* (Thames & Hudson, 2007). Email: andrew@andrew-robinson.org

The ancient Greek historian Herodotus is a key source cited in the book. In a widely accepted translation of *The Histories*, he famously wrote of the origin of the alphabet in Greece as follows: "These Phoenicians…brought with them to [Greece], among many other kinds of learning, the alphabet, which had been unknown before this…As time went on the sound and the form of the letters were changed…In so doing, [the Greeks] gave to these characters the name of *Phoenician*."

However, in the original Greek, Herodotus writes "phoenikeia grammata," meaning "Phoenician letters," and does not use the word "alphabet." The Latin word "alphabetum"—derived from the first two Greek letters alpha and beta—is not documented until centuries after the time of Herodotus, notes Drucker.

Inventing the Alphabet
Johanna Drucker
University of Chicago Press, 2022. 384 pp.

Such uncertainty has created persistent and continuing arguments among scholars. Classicists tend to cling to the long-held view that the Greeks invented the alphabet. By way of example, Drucker quotes Roger Woodard in his *Greek Writing from Knossos to Homer* (1997): "Of the many splendid achievements of the ancient Greeks, the alphabet was perhaps the most marvelous and certainly the most influential." She comments: "In this version, instead of being an adaptation and modification, the alphabet becomes a unique invention, even if, as Woodard goes on to say, 'it stands on the shoulders of the consonantal script of the Phoenicians.'"

Drucker herself tends to the more widely held scholarly view that Greeks living in Phoenicia invented their alphabet, inspired by the Phoenician script, and that from there, it spread to the mother country during the first half of the first millennium BCE. She also presents the limited but thought-provoking evidence from Sinai and Egypt that the Phoenicians may have been inspired to create the alphabet by others.

A small sphinx discovered in 1905 in Serabit el-Khadim, Sinai, by Flinders Petrie and currently housed in the British Museum offers support for this theory. Inscribed in both Egyptian hieroglyphs and "Proto-Sinaitic" signs that resemble certain of the hieroglyphs, the signs may be a prototype of the alphabet. The even earlier Wadi el-Hol inscriptions, discovered in the 1990s by John and Deborah Darnell, support this deduction. Such findings suggest that the first alphabet was inspired by the script of the ancient Egyptians, perhaps as early as 1900 BCE. And yet, as always seems to be the case with the origins of the alphabet, this evidence is insufficient and awaits the discovery of more inscriptions, no doubt followed by more arguments among scholars. ■

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