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THE ORIGINS OF WRITING

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Of all the great inventions in human history, writing is perhaps the most remarkable. Without the existence of writing, there would be no history, and of course no documents, books or digital media.

The origins of writing are therefore of compelling interest. But inevitably, its initial evolution — its prehistory — is not definitively recorded, whichever ancient pioneering script we consider. Although archaeologists have an approximate date of invention for ancient scripts worldwide — c. 3100 BCE for cuneiform script in Mesopotamia; c. 3000 BCE for hieroglyphic script in Egypt; c. 2500 BCE for the (undeciphered) seal script in the Indus Valley; 1900–750 BCE for scripts around the Aegean including the alphabet in Greece; c. 1200 BCE for the Shang character script in China; and c. 250 BCE for the Mayan hieroglyphic script in Central America — scholars have no

definitive evidence of how these scripts were invented.

Among the most famous stories about writing's origin is that told by the Greek philosopher Socrates, as described by Socrates's student Plato in his dialogue the *Phaedrus*, written in about 370 BCE. It describes how the ancient Egyptian god Thoth came to see King Thamus seeking his royal blessing on his invention of (hieroglyphic?) writing. However, the king did not welcome the god's concept. Thamus told Thoth:

"You, who are the father of letters, have been led by your affection to ascribe to them a power the opposite of that which they really possess ... You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant."

Socrates appears to have agreed with the king. He refused — unlike Plato — to write down any of his thoughts, preferring to keep them in oral form in his memory and conversation, which he believed was more expressive for communicating ideas than the Greek alphabet.

Socrates' doubts were echoed more than two millennia later by another wise man, physicist Albert Einstein. Despite having published revolutionary papers and books on physics and other subjects, such as war and peace, over decades, Einstein wrote in 1949 (aged 70, while settled in the United States) the following thought-provoking statement: "Knowledge exists in two forms — lifeless, stored in books, and alive in the consciousness of men. The second form of existence is after all the essential one; the first, indispensable as it may be, occupies only an inferior position."

In a 21st-century world drenched with written information and driven by information technologies of astonishing speed, convenience and power — which keep people glued to written messages on their smartphones — these two cautionary quotations, ancient and modern, have a distinctly contemporary ring. Yet, without writing, the quotations would have been lost forever; and both Socrates and Einstein would today be legendary figures, rather than acutely readable thinkers.