

The undeciphered Rongorongo script of Rapa Nui may be of independent invention.



**BOOKS** *et al.*

**LANGUAGE**

# Spreading the word

Scholars probe the origins and decipherment of written communication

By **Andrew Robinson**

**T**he written word raises fascinating, but still unanswered, questions. For example, how did it come into existence in ancient times, and how do our modern brains derive immensely subtle meaning from it by reading scripts ranging from the English alphabet to Chinese characters? Did writing originate in one region, Mesopotamia, ~3300 BCE, and then spread around the world by influencing other cultures—as long believed by scholars? Or did it have several independent origins, in the form of Sumerian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Chinese characters, and Mayan glyphs of Central America, as is now generally believed, and even, perhaps, Rongorongo script of isolated Rapa Nui (Easter Island)? Was writing invented before the existence of states? Or did it develop within states, as a requirement of bureaucracy and administration? Did the Greek alphabet appear suddenly, ~800 BCE, and then spread rapidly around the Mediterranean Sea? Or was it already in use in the late second millennium BCE, written on perishable materials that have long since vanished?

All these issues, plus many more, engage 22 scholars from very different research fields in *Writing from Invention to Decipherment*. This inevitably wide-ranging, copiously illustrated, often intriguing but sometimes perplexing collection is written by both postdoctoral researchers and established authorities. Its origin lies in a series of online symposia called the SCRIBO seminars based at the University of Bologna in Italy. The series was organized during the COVID-19 pandemic by one of the book's three editors, Silvia Ferrara, principal investigator of INSCRIBE (Invention of Scripts and Their Beginnings), a project funded by the European Research Council. As the editors challengingly note in their introduction, "The invention of writing is *per force* an opaque phenomenon, as are all origins, as are all things remote and detached from the present, embedded in the deepest recesses of time."



**Writing from Invention to Decipherment**  
 Edited by Silvia Ferrara,  
 Barbara Montecchi, and  
 Miguel Valério  
 Oxford University Press,  
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The collection is divided into three sections: "Beginnings of Writing," "The Future of Undeciphered Scripts," and "Current Approaches to Early Writing and Reading." Such a worldwide scope and multimillennial chronology means that a short review cannot cover the book's diversity, even in outline. I shall therefore touch on just two of the key essays.

Classicist and Hittite specialist Willemijn Waal, whose research focuses on cross-

cultural contacts, considers scripts around the Aegean Sea, including from both Greece and the Near East, neighboring Mesopotamia. She regrets a long-standing academic division of these two regions placing Greece in the "West" and regions on the other side of the Bosphorus in the "East." Historically, she argues, there was no such divide, and the Aegean benefited from many cross-cultural influences, as demonstrated by its complex collection of scripts in the second millennium BCE: the early Cretan Hieroglyphic (undeciphered), the later Linear A (partially deciphered), and finally Linear B (fully deciphered), which preceded the Greek alphabet. She proposes a continuity between these and the alphabet—thereby dismissing the long, illiterate Greek gap after the disappearance of Linear B ~1200 BCE proposed by most classicists and other scholars. "This implies that there was no long Dark Age of some four centuries without writing"—before the emergence of Homer—"but that developments with respect to writing in the Aegean were to a large extent comparable to those in the wider ancient Near East," she writes.

By contrast, in her essay, sinologist Paola Demattè argues against cross-cultural influences in China, as suggested by some scholars—mainly from outside China—who postulate links between Mesopotamia and China producing the sudden but unexplained development of the earliest Chinese script, during the Shang dynasty, as late as ~1200 BCE. Certainly, there is no firm evidence for such a long-distance influence at this time—unlike with the later Silk Roads—despite suggestive discoveries in Central Asia. But if the idea is a myth, why did China fail to develop its script independently long before 1200 BCE, as with the scripts of Mesopotamia and Egypt? According to Demattè, Chinese characters probably evolved slowly from much earlier Neolithic symbols indigenous to China, which she discusses in depth. "Archaeological remains show that in the late prehistoric period a variety of signing systems"—on ritual objects such as vessels, jade implements, and weapons in offering pits and altars—"coexisted over a wide area of China and that in time these systems may have contributed to the birth of the Shang script," she maintains. As with so many aspects of ancient writing, there is not enough certainty to resolve this important philological issue. ■

The reviewer is the author of *The Story of Writing: Alphabets, Hieroglyphs and Pictograms* (Thames & Hudson, 1995) and *Lost Languages: The Enigma of the World's Undeciphered Scripts* (McGraw-Hill, 2002).  
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