WRITING *from* INVENTION TO DECIPHERMENT

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Introduction

Silvia Ferrara, Barbara Montecchi, and Miguel Valério

Inventing, Deciphering, and Interpreting Writing Systems

INSCRIBE is a project currently based at the University of Bologna and funded by the European Research Council. It is devoted to the investigation of the invention of writing and its beginnings from a global perspective. The acronym indeed stands for just that, the invention of writing and its beginnings. When the pandemic struck the world in 2020, the INSCRIBE team saw an opportunity to transfer all its research and outreach activities online, and, from this momentous pivot, the SCRIBO seminar series was born, with the last syllable standing for its original point of departure, Bologna.

The seminar series was a structured first attempt to offer an experience that was targeted to a wide audience, focused solely on the invention of writing. Our wish was to take the world of scripts—from its earliest records from five thousand years ago (China, Mesopotamia, Central America, Egypt, the Mediterranean), to more recent cases such as Easter Island, and other less-trodden instances of scripts, which are not the usual purview of general experts and particularly of non-experts—and open it to the public, thereby piquing curiosity and interest in a subject that has all too often been relegated to a small circle of specialists. Since much of what INSCRIBE does is work on decipherment techniques for ancient writing systems, with a focus on those from the Aegean, we also aimed to present the current trends in decipherment strategies, and the progress that has been made in better understanding undeciphered scripts.

The two aims intermingled: even scripts that we can read with confidence were discussed by our invited authors with a keen eye kept firmly on their shadow lines, their enigmatic corners, their unexplored ends. Almost nothing is 100 per cent proven in science, and this is quite evident when it comes to ancient writing of all sorts. In a way, our aim was to get into the untapped potential of these shadow lines and to bring them to the fore. To achieve all this, we invited specialists in linguistics, archaeology, epigraphy, anthropology, cognitive studies, and cultural evolution, who showed us how much creativity, originality, and imagination lie behind one of the greatest inventions in the world.

The SCRIBO seminar series was held for four editions. This volume offers a condensed outcome of this successful endeavour, corralling the first two seasons of the series. The focus is wide but targeted: it runs from invention to decipherment, passing through state-of-the-art approaches in the ways in which we can reconstruct how ancient cultures experienced and gave value to the writing they created. Ultimately, these are complex phenomena to analyse today, thousands of years apart from their first settings, from the agents behind their creation, and from the receivers who made use of them.

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. Yet, it traditionally marks the beginning of what we call history, and as such it signals what is probably one of the most important points of departure and triggers a fundamental pivot of our being modern humans. At the same time, it is an intrinsically human phenomenon, human-made and artificial, with no discernible zero point in time, arguably the result of a progressive and gradual evolution, cultural and cognitive, yet undefined in its contours. If an invention is a process, processing the invention of writing is, thus, a complicated matter.

Equally so is decipherment. The history of decoding scripts and identifying their underlying messages in a way showcases the curiosity humans have always shown in enigmas and cryptic codes, the objective difficulties that are inherent in solving them, and the prowess and ingenuity that are necessary to break into them. Much as jigsaw puzzles, crosswords, and all manners of codes retain fascination, so undeciphered scripts carry a general allure shrouded in mystique and a patina of inaccessibility. Research on undeciphered scripts is flourishing today, and rigour and scientific method are part of the equation in this field as much as intuition and a modicum of serendipity.

Re-enacting and unravelling ancient perceptions of writing is not devoid of interpretative complications, as we glance backwards from a present standpoint. This implies that the contemporary perception of past perception may be too biased and prejudiced to carry any compelling validity. Such an obstacle, while obvious, becomes even more apparent when the focus of enquiry shifts from writing *per se*, and, instead, is directed towards one of the main reasons why texts do exist—namely, *to be read*. Once we turn our gaze onto the recipients, rather than the agents, things become even blurrier. This is even more poignantly patent when we think of the broad, and stratified, concept of literacy.

All three central focuses of this book, invention, decipherment, and perception, will be treated through different case studies of script invention and script practices, from different areas of the world and different periods of our history. The themes mirror the broad division into three sections, reflected in the structure of the book.

Structure of the Book

Part I, Beginnings of Writing, focuses on invention, but not according to mainstream lines of enquiry. The authors we have invited ponder over several cases of original and derivative creation of writing, and intentionally shy away from a traditional textbook narrative, in which Mesopotamia casts a long shadow over other inventions. Mesopotamia will be presented as a case study (*Mattia Cartolano*), but with a different, less-beaten foray into what we may call 'the precursors', and the gradual evolution of graphic codes, from a cognitive and iconographic perspective. A long *durée* view is espoused but this skirts the customary explanatory schemes that see tokens as the primary springboard to the proto-cuneiform phase.

A similar approach is taken in the chapter on the Chinese invention of writing (*Paola Demattè*), where the deepest layers of code-making behaviour since Neolithic times are considered. In a framework that antecedes writing by millennia, this chapter provides a backdrop that is strongly evidence based, but not necessarily tied to discernible patterns of specific linguistic notation. This view provides, quite compellingly, a welcome argument to quell any doubt that writing in China represents an original, pristine invention.

The two chapters that follow focus largely on the invention of the alphabet, while their points of departure, and of arrival, move from and towards different directions. The first of this dyad is concerned with the origin of the earliest form of alphabetic writing, whose corpus is very meagre and problematic (*Aaron Koller*). Claims of its revolutionary impact on society are redressed with sobering epigraphic takes on an unstable and, at times less than successful, experiment with a new script. The other chapter aims to 'close the gap' with the introduction of the Greek alphabet (*Willemijn Waal*), but moves from a Near Eastern perspective on literacy harking back to the second millennium BCE Aegean area and the Greek continent onwards. The large-scale survey encompasses reconstructions, often through indirect clues, of Linear B use on non-durable materials and speculates on a very early introduction of the Greek alphabet on the same assumption. What we cannot tangibly see may inform the positive evidence to surprising degrees.

The chapter on the Caroline Island scripts is an apparent outlier, presented as a close to this part of the book (*Alex de Voogt*). The use of a writing system in the far recesses of the Pacific mirrors the final contribution in Part II, where Rongorongo is considered. The indigenous writing system of the Caroline Islands, created in the late nineteenth century CE, is a good example of a script that does not often enter handbooks and popular works. In the author's vision, this Micronesian form of writing is a counterexample to the notion that administration and script are linked, and it is sure to fuel the debate surrounding proposals that link the origins of writing with statehood or social complexity.

Part II, The Future of Undeciphered Scripts, is devoted to exploring different approaches and methods applied to the study of undeciphered scripts. The first chapter (*Ignasi-Xavier Adiego*) leads us into the world of decipherment strategies and successful codebreaking achievements, with an overview and discussion of their features and processes. While presenting the state of knowledge over a wide range of decipherments, the chapter devotes attention to a few cases that closely involved the author, especially the decipherment of Carian, an Anatolian script of the first millennium BCE.

The family of the Aegean scripts of the second millennium BCE is a case in point when it comes to unreadable scripts, as it represents the least understood script family in the world. We have focused specifically on this family, as this represents one of the core research interests of the editors. Three scripts from the island of Crete will be considered, all placed within the same approximate chronological horizon: Cretan Hieroglyphic, Linear A, and the Phaistos Disc. These chapters can be read as a synergistic compendium that addresses issues concerning the graphic relations, use, and significance of these writing systems. All three contributions take an in-depth contextual stance, considering items of iconography and iconicity (*Judith Weingarten* and *Barbara Montecchi*, respectively) and material culture (*Giorgia Baldacci*) as prompts to encourage outside-the-box discussions, moving beyond matters of strict palaeographic or epigraphic interest.

One of the most discussed signs in Cretan Hieroglyphic is the focus of the first chapter in this triad of contributions; it suggests its interpretation as an acrophonic abbreviation or emblem for wool (*Weingarten*). The following chapter looks at one of the most celebrated and, at the same time, debated inscribed objects—the Phaistos Disc—from a strict archaeological perspective (*Baldacci*). The third one investigates Linear A picture-based phonetic signs by distinguishing those that seem to originate with Cretan Hieroglyphic from the ones that do not. Comparisons with both Aegean and Egyptian scripts and material culture shed new light on the origins of phonetic signs created in Linear A and the relationship between shapes and phonetic values (*Montecchi*).

The final chapter of this section (*Miguel Valério*) focuses on the typological nature of the Rongorongo script of Rapa Nui (Easter Island), the most recent invention of a script that we still cannot read and the problems of its decipherment. The most widespread view—namely, that Rongorongo is a syllabic script—is revisited, readdressing the most famous tablet in the corpus, Tablet C (known also as Mamari). It is argued that Rongorongo may be a logo-phonetic notation that largely omitted grammatical words, and whose signs represented polysyllabic morphemes. Readings of names of nights of the month, known from oral traditions, are also proposed, as well as some related phrases.

Part III, Current Approaches to Early Writing and Reading, includes three contributions on how early writing systems have been perceived and received beyond their time: a state-of-the-art digital approach to the Maya script and new

technologies applied to its understanding (*Christian Prager et al.*), and a two-pronged perspective on the readers (*Sarah Finlayson*), and the writers as part of the script-creation process in the Aegean Bronze Age. The Linear B scribes are a specifical class of writers considered contextually (*Louis Godart*).

The chapter on Mayan writing and language shows how current technologies can contribute to a systematic and interconnected investigation of text, image, and information devices from a digital perspective. The project *IDIOM*, based in Bonn, assembles, for the first time, a comprehensive text database and dictionary for Classic Mayan, which enables meticulous, detailed study of the literary language employed in the texts.

And, while deciphering ancient scripts is still a work in progress, reconstructing acts of reading and the practices of writing can be similarly problematic. Reading and writing are sides of the same coin, broadly to be subsumed under the capacious umbrella of *literacy*, which is not universal, nor is it monolithic. Shaped by culture, and moulded by cultural and social behaviour, it can be a contingent and elusive thing. The two chapters devoted to the Aegean problematize this two-sided phenomenon, placing emphasis on, and blurring the boundaries of, the agents and the receivers of writing. These chapters show us how the variability of context changes the picture we gain: from writing not intended to be formally read, with a sheer separation between agents and receivers, to a complete interchangeability of roles, whereby writers are not separate from readers, but one and the same category, best encapsulated in the inner-looking, navel-gazing Linear B class of administrators. In this case, reading and writing appear a deposit-oriented, almost forlorn, almost accidental exercise, an image that cuts a stark contrast with the potent ways in which writing and its many inventions elsewhere, even in the most isolated, recondite places, emerged from a place of inventiveness and creativity.

New Ways to Look at Writing Systems

A few words need to be spent on the principles we espoused when we conceived this volume. Research on ancient writing has increased in recent years, with important contributions. Yet, we believe that the lines of enquiry we have chosen to adopt for this book have not been explored from a global standpoint. Equally important, we contend, is that the state-of-the-art approach of novel theories and frameworks be presented in one single publication. These points serve also as a guiding principle for the present state of research, while at the same time casting an eye to the future path the studies of writing may take.

Two premises were, in our opinion, crucial. The first is a firm stance on *polygenesis*. Not long ago, books on early writing tended to focus on its birth in Mesopotamia, with a pervasive focus on the increasingly centralized administrative control as a prompt for the invention. Our goal from the beginning of this endeavour was to

move beyond that and concentrate on the significant evidence for other original script inventions in other areas of the world, not obviously tied to bureaucracy (or not only). This is a pursuit ultimately linked to one of the big historical questions surrounding the origins of writing as hinted above—namely, whether its emergence—wherever it emerged—was tied to statehood or social complexity. The editors of this volume, as much as the scholarly community (e.g. Postgate et al. 1995; Diamond 1997; Houston ed. 2004; Wengrow 2008; Kelly 2018), have different views on this historical problem, from the notion that writing was not a centralized phenomenon to be equated with state administration or state formation to the idea that writing goes hand in hand with state structures, as the latter can take forms other than just bureaucracy and administrative devices. This is one reason that makes some of the texts in this book important contributions for the debate. The second premise is that we wanted this contribution to take a broad *global perspective*, capable of retracing a world history of writing in its idiosyncratic and less investigated features, that could be of interest to historians, archaeologists, and philologists of many areas of the world.

Two dimensions we aimed to showcase and emphasize are present in most, if not all, of the chapters gathered here, one being the interface of writing with iconography in its incipient phases. How was writing created in more than one independent sociocultural context? Building on images, do the earliest signs follow common trajectories from picture based to more schematic signs? These are crucial questions that shed light on first writing that is strongly implicated with images. Grasping the iconological principles at work and studying them systematically is still a prime *desideratum* in the field, which has the potential to offer notable insight into human cognition. This strand is an important that emerges from many pages of this book.

Another important guiding principle was to look at writing as a phenomenon embedded within, and emerging from, human cultural evolution and human cognitive behaviour. Along the traditional axis often used to explore writing in general, the role that writing played in our cultural evolution has not been probed to the extent that it should, and this book offers a few token samples of such an important line of investigation. It is just a stepping stone upon which the future scholarship of writing systems can draw inspiration for paths of research to come.

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