

Week I

Formats: from stone tablets to modernity:

Part 1 “Times Past”

Today we are exploring the origins of writing. How many books do you have at your place? Is paper taking over your living space?

I have a friend who, being of marriageable age was considering a proposal from a very nice man. “He is perfect” she confided in me “in all but one respect. He has only read two books in his life and one is a cook book”. My friend was concerned because she is rather bookish. She always has her nose in a book but she need not have worried. The man comes from an island made of marble where all men learn to be stonemasons. She now has a marble fireplace, an ornate marble mantelpiece and a marble doorstep. In other words their marriage is rock solid.

I have books flowing throughout the house and I have given up trying to contain the flood. I have a box containing documents pertaining to a delicatessen that my father once owned. He always maintained that these were the remains of books that were cooked by the previous owner.

Writing as a response to need can be found anywhere, in any place... Hansel led Gretel out of the woods using stones as signs. I guess that’s a form of writing. While he was interested in the enduring quality of the stones, in their power to stay put, Roger Callois a French philosopher of the psychedelic period, looked deep into the interiors of rocks and wrote a book about them.

In “The Writing of Stones” he devoted each chapter to a species of rock. “An agate may draw forth a tree, a forest, a whole landscape... clouds, lightning, a great sea full of fleeing galleons.

Unfortunately Callois was interested in the grey area between the magical and the natural order of life, but became more and more moved to describe lunacy, without law or limit. He was a French intellectual whose idiosyncratic work brought together literary criticism, sociology and philosophy by focusing on diverse subjects. He was elected to the

Academie Francaise at around the time that Jack Kerouac described the feeling of being knocked down by a rock in these immortal words:

“I stood completely stoned on the sidewalk in unbelievable heaven”. It was said to be the first use of the term “stoned” in this sense.

What do you understand by the word *writing*?

Jack Kerouac made his state of consciousness known to readers for all time through writing.

Writing is a medium that represents language and emotion through recording signs and symbols. It is a form of technology that develops as tools continue to improve. It relies on the same structures as speech with the addition of signs and symbols. The result of writing is called text.

The topic of today is not so much, what is in the rocks that Callois wrote about, as the writing on other rocks, throughout the world. Let's see what we can discover about civilisations and about writing.

When discussing writing, it is necessary to discuss implements or tools. Many kinds have been recorded throughout history. A list may include stone tablets, clay tablets, bamboo slats, wax tablets, vellum, parchment, styluses, quills, pens, pencils and ink brushes. It is speculated that the Incas might have used knotted cords as a recording system.

But now I want to talk about the Finger of God and the writing on the wall. In the Book of Daniel, we are told a story. King Belshazzar holds a great feast for a thousand lords and he orders that the Temple vessels from Jerusalem be brought for his use. As the Babylonians drink from the Holy goblets, a hand appears and writes on the wall. Nobody can interpret or even read it. The king sends for Daniel the Wise who can read these words:

MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN.

Which is the shortened form of:

“God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end. You have been weighed and found wanting. The kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and the Persians.”

That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was killed and Darius the Mede received the Kingdom.



The Finger of God is supposed to have written the Decalogue, otherwise known as the Ten Commandments.

According to some biblical readings, it is said that they were made of sapphire, blue of the sky, but scholars believe that it is more likely to have been lapis lazuli. Their precise measurements are given but there is great variation in representations.

So revered is the writing itself, that in the Old Testament it is written that:

“The Ark of the Covenant is a gold covered wooden chest containing the Ten Commandments, Aaron’s Rod and a pot of manna.” When moving during military marches there are specific instructions on carrying the Ark hidden by a veil of skins and blue cloth and always held off the ground.

In the East, this reverence of the Book itself is still displayed by ornate decoration, careful treatment and the wrath of the law for misuse and carelessness.

Possession and use of the Bible is considered to be a sign of faith. Bibles may be used for legal oaths and other deep, important matters. The idea of a Gideon’s Bible lying in any motel room drawer is very Western.

But, more important than the book, is the fact that the Ten Commandments are central to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They consist of a set of fundamental principles relating to ethics and worship. Different religious groups follow their traditions for interpreting and following them.

The essential ideas in these books, which were set down so long ago and should bind us whoever we are, do not because there is that small matter of interpretation and judgement.

[Dead Sea Scrolls](#)

Hindus do not have one central text. Their literature relates to diverse traditions and Gods. They have ancient beginnings and are complex. They include the Vedas and the Upanishads, which are not single items but collections of books. The Vedas, otherwise called *scruti* or “what is heard”, are distinguished from other religious texts that are called *smrti* or “what must be remembered”. The Veda is considered the work of the Deity, not of man.

Vedic literature focuses on ideas and its authors are unknown. It was first imparted orally and the oldest text is the Rig Veda, which means: “accumulated knowledge”. The collection may be seven thousand years old.

When considering Buddhism the name of the holy book is the Tripitaka. It commenced as oral teaching but was written down in manuscript form by

the third century BCE. Just as the Christian Bible is formed of the Old and New Testaments, the Tripikaka is formed of “Three Baskets”:

- Vinaya Pitaka, Basket of morality and also the regulations of monastic life
- Sutra Pitaka, Buddha’s teachings, basket of discourse
- Abhidharma Pitaka, basket of special doctrine.

The religious literature that I have been discussing so far is held in the highest esteem by much of the world’s population and many people have made it their life’s work to copy it, print it and illustrate it.

[making manuscripts](#)

Visit the Asian section of our own art gallery for greater appreciation of examples of religious and cultural artefacts and be blown away by the intricacy, complexity of ideas and passion for human beauty that have been made so many years ago.

Now let us turn to Egyptian hieroglyphics, the subject of many books, films and exhibitions. They have captured our imaginations and made us curious about the ancient Egyptian civilisation.

The word *hieroglyph* comes from Greek and means sacred engraved letters. The Ancient Egyptian period is usually said to have begun around 3000 B.C. when the Lower Nile Valley became unified and ruled by one ruler. When we think about “Ancient Egypt” we are imagining the dynastic period, the time of the pharaohs. The first was possibly King Narmer in 3100 BCE. The period ended with the death of Queen Cleopatra VII in 30 BCE so it can be seen that Egypt remained one continuous nation for a very long time. Before unification, Egypt had been a series of sophisticated city-states linked by trade and after Cleopatra’s death, Egypt was absorbed by Rome but many of the old traditions continued.

[Cleopatra's banquet](#)

Ancient Greeks labelled as hieroglyphic, the script that they found on temple walls and public monuments, in which pictures were sculpted in stone. This writing was used for monumental inscription in the classical language of the Middle Kingdom period. The monuments are generally labelled as hieratic or priestly.

There were other forms of writing in Egyptian society. Hieroglyphs, beautiful but time consuming to make, led to invention of a cursive or joined form. It was produced using reed brushes and later pens. It was written on papyrus or ostraca, fragments of pottery or stone.

An even more cursive form known as demotic was used in the 26th dynasty (664-525 BC). At first it was used for administrative documents, letters and tax records but later became used more widely.

demotic script

For many years hieroglyphics could not be read. At first they were believed to have been pictograms but they are far more complex. They use a combination of systems.

- Ideograms convey familiar objects and ideas. Phonograms, used in the alphabet convey specific sounds.
- Determinatives were added to the word to add extra meaning, as there were no vowels. They clarified what the word was about, fine tuning the meaning where two meanings may have been possible, for example the sign for books could also mean ideas.

Hieroglyphs could be used in several ways and reading them can be in different directions. Until the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, in 1799, Egyptian life remained a mystery to us.

The stone itself is a stele probably from a temple, inscribed with a multilingual decree issued at Memphis, Egypt in 196 BC on behalf of King Ptolemy V. It provides the key to modern understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

It was discovered by a French soldier, Pierre-Francois Bouchard at Rosetta during a Napoleonic War expedition, but later was taken into

British possession and now is in the London Museum, where public interest has been continual. It is the most visited object there.

Rosetta Stone

Visiting a town in France, I was surprised to find a museum created to pay tribute to Jean-Francois Champollion. I knew that Figeac is on a major medieval pilgrimage route but I was unaware that it is also the birthplace of the most famous decipherer of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Champollion came from an impoverished background but was obsessed with learning languages from an early age. He became passionate about Egyptology and new discoveries spurred him on in the race to decipher the unknown parts of the Rosetta Stone.

In 1822 he made his breakthrough and isolated the demotic cartouche with the name of Ptolemy and was able to transpose it to the hieratic and the hieroglyphic forms. While still in his forties, he devoted the last months of his life to the completion of his dictionary and Egyptian grammar books.

The significance of the Rosetta stone and the developing understanding of other Egyptian discoveries is enormous.

The idea of expressing words of a language in writing, is Egyptian, is a topic that is still being debated but many other inventions and ideas have not been surpassed. Egyptian measurement of time is almost as accurate as it is today. How they achieved some elements of architecture is still not understood.

Their complex and mysterious society has intrigued Europeans and inspires them to use Egyptian motifs in the areas of art, music, architecture and literature to this day. From Verdi's Aida to video games called "The Sphinx and the Accursed Mummy", from Cleopatra's Needle, the London landmark, to personal tattoos, Ancient Egypt is the name of the game.

But the Egyptians were not the only ancients to write.

Writing has been found in many parts of the world but not always appreciated or understood by modern man:

The Indus:

Mohenjo-daro is a Bronze Aged archaeological site in the province of Sindh, Pakistan. It was built around 2500 BCE and is one of one of the largest settlements of the ancient Indus civilisation, contemporary with Egypt, Mesopotamia, Minoan Crete and North Chico. Despite being designated a UNESCO heritage site, it is threatened by erosion and improper restoration.

At its height, the Indus civilisation spanned what is now much of Pakistan and North India. Mohenjo-Daro was the most advanced city of its time, with sophisticated civil engineering and urban planning. The Indus went into sudden decline around 1900 BCE and the city was abandoned for about three thousand and seven hundred years. Now there is limited restoration of the site and palaeographers are experiencing difficulty in deciphering the inscribed objects of their study. The ancient Indus language is not related to any others and there is no helpful Rosetta Stone.



The Olmecs:

The Olmecs were one of the most fascinating civilisations in the Pre-Columbian Americas. Olmec is the name given to them by the Aztecs. Their soulful artwork is well known although their own language is now lost to us so we do not know what they called themselves. Their civilisation predated that of the Aztecs, Incas and the Maya. They existed in Mesoamerica, possibly since 2,500 BC but they didn't become dominant until about a thousand years later.

The original centre San Lorenzo was abandoned and at that time there was wholesale destruction of many monuments. La Venta later took its place as the capital of the Olmec civilisation, with spectacular displays of power and wealth.

The Great Pyramid was the largest Mesoamerican structure and beneath the city, there were a thousand opulent labour intensive offerings, large mosaic pavements and many separate deposits of polished jade, figurines and hematite mirrors.

There have been several discoveries of glyphs from sites there too. There is no doubt that the Olmecs were the first Mesoamerican people to develop a writing system. The ancient Cascajal Block is the oldest example of writing in the New World. We know that the Olmecs were using glyphs to denote names or places on small pottery and monuments since around a thousand years BC and recent discoveries suggest that they could use their text to record information important for their society.

Although deep knowledge of their society is still sketchy scientists are beginning to piece together important features of the religion and their imaginative view of the world through the archaeological findings. Olmec influence can be seen when studying civilisations that came after them. For instance their snake god was transformed into the major gods, Kukulan for the Maya and Quetzalcoatl for the Aztecs.



Olmec Glyphs

Now I'd like to tell you a tragic tale, the story of the Moai. Easter Island or Rapa Nui, to use the Polynesian name, is the home of huge monolithic figures of humans. They appear to be symbols of authority and power, both political and religious and also believed to be the actual repositories of sacred spirit charged with magical essence.

Each one represented a status in the society, shown by the height of its base. These statues were carved by ancient Polynesian colonisers of the island but scientists have relied on legend for information. They were made, then placed on ahus or stone platforms, moved mostly to the coast and erected looking out to sea, but it is not known how they were moved.

Originally Easter Islanders had a single leader but through time, power veered from a sole warrior to a warrior class called the Matatoa, represented by the image of a figure of half bird, half man. Oronga is the site of hundreds of petroglyphs with images of this figure.

There are many unanswered questions about this ancient civilisation but at some time in history all the Moai standing on ahus toppled, possibly, it is inferred from legend, by earthquakes.

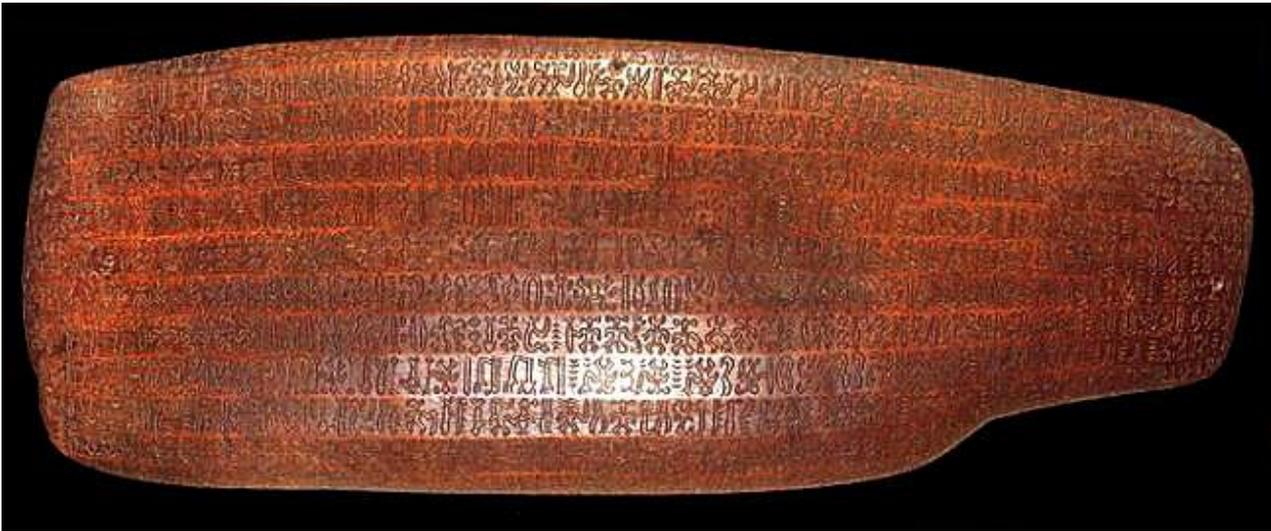
The Moai are fascinating for their unknown purpose and mysterious craftsmanship but the island's lost language, Rongorongo is equally puzzling. The writing is a system of pictographs. It has been found carved into oblong wooden tablets and other artefacts.

Writing was not known in any nearby islands so its existence confounds anthropologists and nobody has been successful in the attempt to decipher it.

In 1862 the slave trade began on the island and within a year, all the remaining inhabitants were sick, injured and lacking leadership.

Following the arrival of the missionaries, native Easter Island inhabitants were forbidden to maintain their customs and so lost their identity. They were eventually removed from their traditional land, as the majority of the island was taken for farms. Today there are only a few individuals left with ties to the original population.

Since 1955 archaeologists have attempted to investigate and conserve these relics and the Rapa Nui National Park has been a heritage site since the seventies and is now included on the 1994 list of UNESCO world sites.



Rongorongo writing

[rongrongo clip](#)

So what have we learnt so far in this brief examination of religions and ancient civilisations?

For me there is so much more to learn. I can readily see how people long ago believed that writing came from mythical times, through gods or sages.

The magic of writing still moves me:

“Whatever comes
Comes from a need
A sore distress
A hurting want”

Runi (an ancient Persian village in Iran)
Written between 1207-1273

Poetry isn't new. It may have been recited or sung as a way of remembering oral history. At any rate many of the old surviving poems are religious, but there are also historical accounts, love poems and fiction.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, written in cuneiform, is often regarded as the earliest surviving great work of literature. It describes a Sumerian king,

part god and part man and through writing we can review the magnificence of his city and the weakness of man.

In fact nothing is new, when I consider the depiction of every day life from ancient places so long ago.

I feel a sense of great loss when I learn of writing that has become impotent because we can no longer understand it. Writing offers threads of past knowledge and was painstakingly committed to long lasting material with intention and patient labour.

Study shows that thousands of years ago complex societies existed and that through their writing they maintained their culture, communicated with each other, exchanged information and formed the rules of their society. Luckily for us they provided a starting point for trying to understand their history

Fortunately also, developing technology is making it possible for investigative research to be respectful and non invasive. There is a movement that sees archaeological treasures as belonging to the World.

Earlier I advised you to visit one of our galleries to see examples of prized artefacts. I am grateful to have such rich opportunities at my doorstep. However there is an ethical dilemma presented by the preservation of National and private museums.

Those arguing against them, point to illicit trading of looted pieces. For example, Cleveland Museum recently returned the Hindu god Hunanan to Cambodia but it had first been hacked from the Prasat Chen temple and arrived in America via many dealers. Looting and trading is a vast international problem.

Curators argue about the repatriation model versus colonialism. Leaders in the fields still justify retaining plunder in order to fill “universal” museums, where patrons can view encyclopaedic collections from all over the world. Is this a Western luxury?

On the other hand, collections do exist and nobody wants to lose “their” belongings. The only solution seems to be that well resourced Western museums must continue to support research, overseas loans and

exchanges. Many of us in the Western world watch in horror as ancient cities are destroyed deliberately in warfare such as in Syria.

[return home](#)

As some scientists and scholars in our modern world are seeking to understand and remake that which has been taken and destroyed, in general, there is a feeling of entitlement and superiority, allowing trivialisation of relics and articles sacred to others.

Since Vincent Price performed in “The Mummy” popular culture, now using modern platforms exploits and distorts sacred symbols from all around the world. I feel as deliciously thrilled and intrigued by a good horror film as the next chap, but I’m beginning to question my moral values.

All this learning and thinking about the past should serve as a basis for part two of our exploration of writing. We will delve into the inky more immediate past and continue by thinking about future trends.