

HISTORY SECTION

HOW WE GOT OUR ALPHABET

OF course you know your ABC's or you would not be reading this. But do you know their wonderful history? Do you know that A was once the picture of an eagle, and B of a crane? That N was the water's waves and D a hand? That R was a man's mouth and O his eye?

Do you know why it is that so many people can read in lands where English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Hungarian, Polish, Dutch, or German is spoken, and why so few can read in China? It is not because European peoples prize education more highly than do the Chinese, for nowhere in the world is a scholar more honored than in the mysterious land of China. The reason is that a Chinaman must know about 3,000 different signs to read even an ordinary Chinese book, and a really learned Chinese must know over 40,000 different word signs. Every *thing* or *idea* in Chinese writing has its separate sign. In Europe, America, and the Philippines, on the other hand, we need to learn only the 26 letters or so that make up an alphabet. This great advantage of the alphabet arises from the fact that its letters now represent certain *sounds*, instead of things, by combining which we form syllables and words.

The term "alphabet" comes from the two words *alpha* and *beta* which are the names of the first two letters of the Greek alphabet.

Alphabetic writing was developed from syllabic writing, which in turn grew out of picture writing such as the Chinese still use. The Egyptians apparently were the first to invent the al-

phabet about the year 3,000 B.C., although it never displaced their hieroglyphic (picture) writing.

The ancient people of the island of Crete, in the Mediterranean Sea, also possessed an alphabet at an early date. But it was the Phoenician traders first of the cities of Tyre and Sidon (cities in Asia Minor), and the merchants of the city of Damascus later, who spread the knowledge of alphabetic writing in general throughout the whole world outside of China and Japan.

All the alphabets of Europe were derived, either directly or through the Latin (Roman) from the Greek, which in turn had its source in the Phoenician system derived from the Egyptian picture writing (hieroglyphics).

The Latin or Roman alphabet, which came into use in Italy about six centuries B.C., became the medium for the classical literature of Rome. The oldest Roman inscriptions show the original Greek letters in simplified forms.

The Roman alphabet is used for English. The German alphabet also comes from the Latin (Roman), but the letters retain the queer Gothic shapes of the middle ages. The Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and French alphabets were, of course, derived from the Latin. The Russian alphabet was derived indirectly from the Greek. Of course, each nation has introduced such modifications or additions as are necessary to express the sound of the language peculiar to it.

As trade and travel bring the different nations closer together, there is a general tendency to adopt the Roman alphabet.

The Japanese have begun to use it for commercial purposes, although their literature is still written in Chinese characters. Even China has taken some steps to do away with its old system and to develop alphabetical writing. In 1928 Turkey abandoned the Arabic alphabet, in which the Koran is written, and adopted the Latin form.

A good reason for the general adoption of the Roman alphabet is the fact that much of the writing of the world is done by means of the typewriter. This machine is possible for writing those languages which have an alphabet of 25 or 30 different letters.

Probably in the course of time all nations, including China and Japan, will adopt the alphabet which we use, the Latin or Roman, which came from

the ancient Egyptian picture-writing through the Phoenician and the Greek systems.

Study the table on this page and see how our modern ABC's go back to the Egyptian hieroglyphics.—*Adapted from Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia.*

EGYPTIAN HIEROGLYPHICS	Phoenician	Greek	Roman
eagle	𐤀	Α	A
crane	𐤁	Β	B
throne	𐤂	Γ	C
hand	𐤃	Δ	D
moeander	𐤄	Ε	E
cerastes	𐤅	Υ	Y
duck	𐤆	Ζ	Z
sieve	𐤇	Η	H
tongs	𐤈	Θ	...
parallels	𐤉	Ι	I
bowl	𐤊	Κ	K
lioness	𐤋	Λ	L
owl	𐤌	Μ	M
water	𐤍	Ν	N
chairback	𐤎	Ξ	X
.....	𐤏	Ο	O
shutter	𐤐	Π	P
snake	𐤑
angle	𐤒	...	Q
mouth	𐤓	Ρ	R
inundated garden	𐤔	Σ	S
lasso	𐤕	+	T

The Development of Our Alphabet.

REVIEW

1. Name as many modern alphabets as you can which came directly from Latin.
2. From what alphabet was the Latin alphabet taken?
3. What was the source of the Greek alphabet?
4. What ancient nation seems to have invented the alphabet?
5. Why is the alphabet used in the writing of European nations better than the Chinese method of writing?
6. Do you think all nations will ever use our alphabet? Why?
7. Will the use of the typewriter help to spread the general use of our alphabet? How?
8. Trace the development of five English letters from Egyptian hieroglyphics.