

The Story Of... Writing

Prososki, Lisa. "The Story Of... Writing." *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. PBS, 2005. Web. 27 Oct 2013.

One of the most important inventions in human history was undoubtedly the development of writing. Life without this innovation would be unthinkable today.

Emerging independently in just a handful of places around the world, writing **comprehensively** transformed early agricultural societies. A technology which was invented primarily to record accounts rapidly exploded into a means of informing, recording and expressing all of the political, social, cultural, historical, and most intriguingly, private, thoughts and actions of all walks of society.

Writing is believed to have first evolved around 5,000 years ago, in a region of the Fertile Crescent called Sumer. An **elaborate** system of symbols known as cuneiform was developed to permanently record official accounts on clay tablets — but it didn't take long for cuneiform to be used for political and historical events as well — even legends, such as the fabled story of Gilgamesh, the oldest written story in the world.

At the same time, the native peoples of Central America were experimenting with their own unique form of symbolic representation, **culminating** in the written hieroglyphs of the Mayan civilization of Southern Mexico. And up to 4,000 years ago, the people of China had developed the third independent system of writing in history, crafting their own complex system of symbols and characters.

From these three original systems evolved all of the complex alphabets, languages and writing systems in the world. Semitic alphabets, evolved from Sumerian, dominate the so-called Indo-European language family. Chinese has shaped the languages of south-east Asia.

The one writing system that seemed to go nowhere was, tragically, the Central American language of the Maya. Why? Because geography had conspired to keep the Maya isolated from their neighbors. There were few trade networks to carry new technologies beyond the Mexican plateau — particularly south, through the impassable **isthmus** of Panama. There weren't even any load-bearing mammals to transport humans across such trade networks, had they existed. The people of the Americas communicated only **sporadically**, from shore to shore — which meant there was never the consistency of communication to **necessitate** using the written word. So Mayan symbols remained local only to central America — seized upon and largely destroyed when Europeans arrived.

In each of these three cases, writing evolved as a useful **by-product** of a complex, economically specialized, **politically stratified** society, built on agricultural surplus. While such cultures evolved all over the world, only Eurasia had the right conditions to trigger the next great evolutionary step. Because, almost as significant as the invention of writing itself, was the invention of printing.

Completely

Detailed

Resulting in

A narrow piece of land connecting two larger areas across water that otherwise separates them.

Not on a regular basis

Create the need for

Not planned result
Arranged by politics

Developed in central Europe in the mid-fifteenth century, from metal and ink technologies, which had evolved across Eurasia, movable type allowed the rapid **dissemination** of multiple copies of any written work. Printed books became bestsellers in a Europe undergoing enormous social change. Middle class artisans and landowners from independent mercantile towns were increasingly economically and politically powerful — and increasingly literate, thanks to the boom in universities. The printed word **capitalized** on this social transformation.

So what does this mean for the story of Guns, Germs, and Steel?

Writing — and printing — acted as an additional agent of conquest for the Europeans. Thanks to printed accounts, Pizarro and his conquistadors read about successful tactics employed by their predecessors elsewhere in the New World. In particular, they pored over Hernan Cortes' best-selling account of the conquest of the Aztec Empire, just 10 years before. Printing gave Europeans access to a wealth of historical, cultural and military knowledge from previous eras, which the Inca — a non-literate society — could never have had.

The Inca Emperor had never seen a book before he met Pizarro. When presented with a copy of the Bible, he tried to listen to it, smell it, shake it — the idea of reading was simply **incomprehensible** to him. In the heat of the moment, this reaction caused dreadful offense and triggered the Spaniards' brutal attack on the people of Cajamarca. But in the long term, what this cultural misunderstanding represented was the **chronic** isolation of the Inca Empire. Their geographic neighbors, the Maya, had developed crude forms of writing, but these and other inventions had never spread south to the Andes. Political, social, and military organization inside the Inca Empire was checked by the limitations of human memory.

Throughout human history, whenever literate societies clashed with non-literate societies, the victors were usually the ones capable of later recording their great achievements for **posterity**. To the victor goes the recording of history.

Spreading

Made the most of

Unexplainable,
mind-blowing

Long-lasting

For use in the
future