

How the Smallest Country in Europe Created the Most Influential Alphabet in History

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e13IBXxtX4k>

Transcript: <https://dontveter.com/ec/alphabet.pdf>

Look at these five scripts. Latin. Greek. Cyrillic. Arabic. Hebrew. Five completely different writing systems. Used by billions of people across every continent.

They look at nothing alike. They read in different directions. They sound different, feel different, work differently. They all came from the same place. A small coastal strip on the eastern Mediterranean, modern day Lebanon, roughly the size of Wales.

No army. No empire. No ambition to conquer anyone. A civilization of traders who needed a faster way to write receipts.

Their alphabet was influenced by Egyptian hieroglyphics thousands of symbols that took years to master and reduced them to 22 letters.

Just sounds. No pictures. No meaning built into the shape. A working person could learn the whole system far faster than older systems.

They carried it to every port in the Mediterranean. Neighbors borrowed it. Conquerors adopted it. Empires rose and fell and used it for their administration on the way down.

And then Phoenicia itself was conquered, absorbed and forgotten, its cities buried, its literature almost entirely lost.

Every empire that swallowed Phoenicia is gone. The alphabet survived all of them. And you are reading it right now.

Welcome to the Airlearn Language Show. The whole story we are about to tell is about one idea that writing doesn't have to be something only experts can do.

That you can take the most complex communication systems humans have built and make it learnable by anyone.

That democratizing language changes everything. That is still the idea. And if there is a language you have been wanting to get into, Airlearn is built around exactly that.

Making it actually learnable, not just theoretically possible. Give it a go. Link is in the description.

Here's the story of the invention that made all of it possible. To understand what the Phoenician did, you have to understand what writing looked like before them.

Egyptian hieroglyphics had been in use for over 2000 years by the time Phoenicia emerged.

They were extraordinary, sophisticated, beautiful, capable of expressing complex ideas with remarkable precision.

They were also nearly impossible to learn. A full command of hieroglyphics required knowing hundreds of symbols, each of which could function as a picture, a sound or grammatical marker, depending on context.

Professional scribes trained for years. Literacy was not a general skill, it was a specialized profession as distinct from ordinary life as surgery or architecture.

Mesopotamian cuneiform, used across ancient Iraq and Persia, had a similar problem. It began as pictographic small pictures pressed into clay tablets and evolved into hundreds of abstract wedge-shaped marks.

Learning it required formal apprenticeship. The people who could read and write were a closed guild. Knowledge passed through them, was filtered by them, and in many cases was deliberately kept from the general public.

In China, a writing system was developing that would eventually require mastering thousands of characters each one a unique combination of strokes carrying its own meaning.

The system was powerful and extraordinarily precise. It was also a years long commitment before basic literacy was possible.

Writing existed. But literacy, the ability of ordinary people to read and write for themselves, was a monopoly held by priests, scribes, and the administrative class that served rulers.

Phoenicia broke it open. The Phoenicians were traders. Their civilization occupied the eastern Mediterranean coastline.

Modern day Lebanon and their cities Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos were among the great commercial hubs of the ancient world.

They sailed across the Mediterranean and beyond, carrying cedar wood, purple dye, glass, and the goods of every civilization they connected.

They were not primarily soldiers or philosophers or builders of temples. They were merchants. And merchants need to keep records.

The system they developed around 1050 BCE was radical in its simplicity. 22 symbols. Each one representing a consonant sound, just a sound, with no pictorial meaning attached.

No vowels, which seem strange to modern readers but makes intuitive sense for Semitic languages, where the constant skeleton of a word carries the meaning and vowels adjust depending on grammatical context.

The symbols were abstract enough to learn quickly, consistent enough to be reliable, and simple enough to scratch onto clay, wood, papyrus, or stone without specialist training.

A merchant could learn the entire system in days. A sailor could learn it in a week.

For the first time in human history, writing was something a working person could acquire and use without years of formal apprenticeship.

The implications were enormous. Contracts could be written and verified by both parties. Letters could be sent without a professional scribe intermediating.

Trade records could be kept by the traders themselves. Information could travel without having to pass through literate class that controlled access to it. Literacy stopped being a profession. It started becoming a skill.

What happened next is one of the most consequential chains of transmission in human history. Phoenician traders carried their alphabet west across the Mediterranean.

Greek merchants and colonists encountered it, most likely at trading posts in the Levant and across the Aegean, and recognized immediately that it could work for their language.

Around 800 BCE, the Greeks adapted the Phoenician alphabet. But Greek presented a problem.

Greek has a rich vowel system, vowels are essential for distinguishing words in a way that Semitic languages can manage without them.

The Phoenician alphabet had no vowel symbols. So the Greeks did something brilliant.

They took several Phoenician consonant symbols that represented sounds Greeks did not use and repurposed them as vowel letters.

Alpha from the Phoenician aleph. Epsilon from the Phoenician he. Omicron. Upsilon. That addition, turning a consonant only writing system into one that represented all sounds, including vowels, created the first true alphabet in history.

The word alphabet itself is Greek. Alpha and beta, the first two Greek letters, which are direct descendants of the aleph and bet. The first Phoenician letters.

From Greek, the chain continued. The Etruscans, who lived in what is now Tuscany before Rome rose, adapted the Greek alphabet for their language. The Romans adapted an Etruscan version for Latin.

The Latin alphabet, spread with the Roman Empire across Europe, was adapted for language after language by Christian missionaries, and is now the most widely used writing system on earth. Roughly 70% of the world's countries use it.

That is one branch of the family tree. The other ran east. Phoenician also gave rise to the Aramaic, the international language of the ancient Near East, the language that Assyrian and Persian emperors used for imperial administration, the language that Jesus likely spoke in daily life.

From Aramaic came Hebrew script, Arabic script, and a chain of scripts that branched across Central and South Asia, Syriac, Nabataean and eventually ancestors of scripts used from Ethiopia to Mongolia.

Every major writing system in use today Latin, Greek, Cyrillic, Arabic, Hebrew and the South Asian scripts descended from Aramaic's eastern branches traces back to Phoenician.

The only major exception is the writing systems of East Asia. Every other script you are likely to encounter in a lifetime of reading came from those 22 consonant symbols, scratched out by traders on the Lebanese coast.

Phoenicia never built an empire. It never conquered territory, never imposed its writing on anyone, never had the military ambition that the civilizations around it Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia displayed as a matter of course.

The alphabet spread because it was useful. Traders needed it and took it with them. Neighbors saw it and borrowed it. Conquerors absorbed it and used it for their own administration.

The Assyrians conquered Phoenicia and started keeping imperial records in Aramaic, a language written in a Phoenician descendant script.

The Persians who conquered the Assyrians did the same. Alexander the Great spread Greek, which had descended from Phoenician across the known world.

Rome built its empire with the Latin alphabet, which had descended from Greek, from Phoenician.

Every power that conquered Phoenicia ended up using what Phoenicia had made.

The conquered civilizations most important invention outlasted every army that marched through its cities.

The Phoenician cities themselves, Tyre, Sidon, Byblos still exist.

Byblos gave word to the word Bible, the Greeks brought their papyrus there and named the writing material after the city, and the name transferred eventually to the book itself.

The physical place has survived. But almost nothing of Phoenician literature did. Their records were kept on perishable materials.

Their cities were built over. We know more about their alphabet than about almost anything they ever wrote with it. We have inherited the tool and lost the hand that made it.

The real revolution of the Phoenician alphabet was not that it was simpler than what came before. It was what that simplicity made possible.

When writing required years of specialized training, only certain people wrote. that meant only certain people's ideas were recorded, preserved, and passed forward.

The priests wrote about religion. The scribes wrote about administration. The court historians wrote about kings. Everyone else's lives, thoughts and words vanished.

When writing became learnable in days, ordinary people started leaving records. Letters, contracts, graffiti, satire, love poems scratched onto pottery. Personal correspondence that was never meant for anyone but the person receiving it.

The written record of human experience suddenly included people who had never appeared in it before.

The printing press is rightly celebrated for democratizing the distribution of written knowledge. But the alphabet democratized the production of it 3000 years earlier.

Without the alphabet, Gutenberg's press would have had nothing to print that most people could read.

Every book ever written in a language that uses Latin, Greek, Cyrillic, Arabic, or Hebrew script. Every email, every text, every search query typed into a browser today.

All of it runs on that infrastructure that the Phoenician traders built to count their cargo.

Phoenicia never planned to change how humanity communicates. There was no grand vision. No cultural mission. No desire to leave a mark on history.

There were ships and cargoes and ports where people spoke different languages and needed a way to keep records that everyone involved could verify.

The alphabet was a commercial solution to a commercial problem. It just happened to be the most consequential commercial solution anyone has ever found.

The civilization that made it is almost entirely gone. Its literature has not survived. Its language is extinct.

We know Phoenician largely through writing systems it generated through the alphabets that kept adapting it and kept adapting it until they became unrecognizable as descendants.

Every empire that conquered Phoenicia used its invention and then crumbled.

The invention is still here, being used right now by you. 4000 years of empires, wars, collapses and renovations.

And those 22 consonant symbols from a strip of the Lebanese coast are still underneath all of it.

Carrying words and languages Phoenicia never heard of to people and places Phoenician soldiers never reached, about ideas Phoenician traders never imagined.

That is what a good enough idea does. It outruns everything that carried it.

And if this story made you want to actually learn one of the languages that came down this chain Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, any of them Airlearn is a solid place to start.

The link is in the description. See you in the next one.