

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

The Ancient Greeks Writing

The development of our alphabet began over 3000 years ago. The Phoenicians, who were great navigators and traders, developed a consonant script in the 13th century BC. The Greeks, who had commercial contact with the Phoenicians, began to use their script around 1000 BC. This was not the first foreign writing system that the Greeks had tried to use; they had already tried to adapt the Cypriot and Cretan scripts but neither was entirely successful.

The look of the Phoenician script changed from region to region but the number of letters was a constant twenty-two and the phonetic value of the letters was invariable. The script ran horizontally and in nearly all cases from right to left. The Greeks adopted the order and names of Phoenician letters but made one major adaptation; they used four of the letters, which their own language sounds did not require, to represent the vowel sounds a, e, i, and o, thus making the first true alphabet (named after the first two letters *alpha* and *beta*).

Many early changes were made to the Phoenician script as adaptations were made to accommodate local Greek dialects, but in 403 BC an Athenian law made the use of the new alphabet compulsory for all official documents. Temporary notices in Athens were usually written on whitened boards which were displayed in the *agora*, the central market, but official documents were written on papyrus and stored in the Sanctuary of the Mother of the Gods, an ancient equivalent to the public records office. Notes and jottings were often made on broken pottery called *ostraka*, but writing meant to last was inscribed on stone.

At first the Greeks, following the Phoenicians, wrote from right to left but there were several variations on this theme. Some early inscriptions show a method of writing called *boustrophedon*, which means ox-turning. As when ploughing, the writing turns, each line beginning under the last letter of the previous line and running in the opposite direction; even the letters are turned to face the opposite way. Sometimes the letters were aligned vertically as well as horizontally; this was called *stoichedon*, but by the end of the 5th century BC our current left-to-right direction of writing had become firmly established.