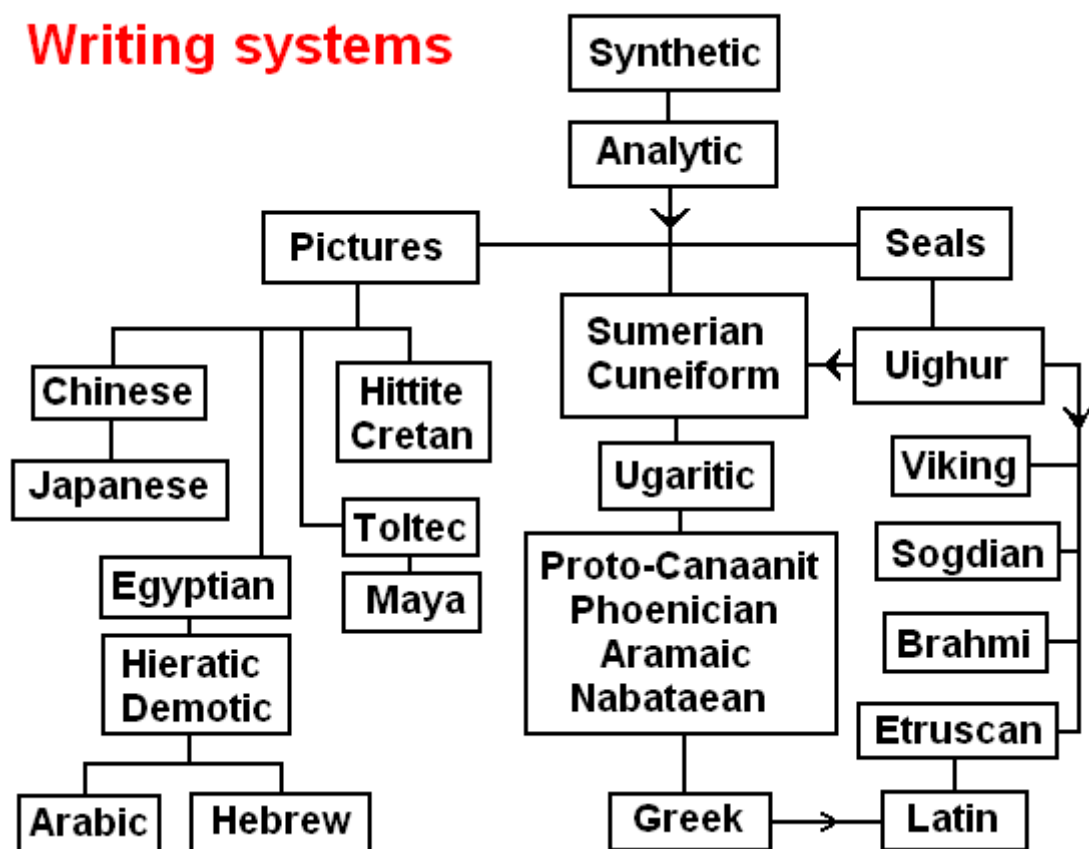


## Evolution of writing systems

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### Writing systems



There is a lot of research done on the evolution of writing systems. It is in general accepted that the Chinese and Sumerian scripts developed independently as the first writing systems. But these systems are only the end product of thousands of years of human evolution. By evolution, I do not mean the physical, Darwinian type evolution, but rather the evolution of the social life as a result of the diversification of goods and tools. Below the interrelationship of writing systems can be seen. The first synthetic writing system was the early cave paintings and petroglyphs seen all over the world. The messages in these figures can be understood only if the beliefs and expectations of these cultures are known. Several examples of petroglyphs have been given in the previous chapters.

Early writing systems were semiotic and synthetic. As time went by analytic writing started. By analytic I mean that a word or part of a word (a syllable) is represented by a well defined sign.

Synthetic writing developed into analytic writing when the pictures transformed into simplified seals. The above Table cannot be found in any standard textbook. This is because the seal-based form of expression and communication, specific to nomadic Uighur tribes, has not been considered as a writing system by linguistic scholars. The picture-based writing system is known as "Pictographic", but no name exists for the seal-based writing system. The seal-based system started in Asia, with the need to mark the herd animals of nomadic tribes. This was a way for identifying animals when two herds occupied a common pasture. The seals were stylized and simplified forms of the petroglyphs and in time started to represent monosyllabic root words. This is how the Uighur (Turkic) runic syllabary came into being.

The Sumerian people, who came to Mesopotamia from Asia, started to make marks on soft clay, which came to be known as the Cuneiform writing system. The early cuneiforms were representations of root words. Since each form was a full word the script was recognized as being "logographic. Below some examples are shown. We can see how the simple Sumerian pictographic writing system transformed into the complicated system of Assyrians and Babylonians. On the right we see an original Sumerian clay tablet.

YEARS	5200 BP	5000 BP	4400 BP	3000 BP	
HEAD					
LEG					
WATER					
BIRD					

The same transformation from simple to complicated forms happened within the Chinese script. Three examples can be seen below.

TIME									
Horse									
Fish									
Mountain									

It can happen that several different styles of writing have or even are still being used by some cultures. In the ancient times the Hittites used both the cuneiform Sumerian system and also their own pictographic (hieroglyphic) system in parallel. The cuneiform influence

came through the Ugaritic script. The pictographic script system is known as ***the Hittite hieroglyphs***. An example will be discussed in the next chapter.

Today the Japanese people write in four different scripts. These are Kanji, Hiragana, Katakana, and Romanji. Kanji is the logographic Chinese script which has more than 50,000 characters. There are 46 Hiragana and 46 Katakana characters which are phonetic in nature. They are symbols representing syllables. The Katakana script is used to write loan words that cannot be represented in Kanji. The Romanji script is what Japanese call the Latin alphabet. In modern Japanese texts one can find a mixture of all these four writing systems.

In the Table at the top we can see that the Egyptian hieroglyphic system became simplified to first Hieratic and then to Demotic writing system. These scripts had their influence on several alphabetical scripts, such as Arabic and Hebrew. The Latin alphabet is the offspring of both Greek and Etruscan but it is also influenced, through Phoenician, by the Sumerian cuneiforms. All these interrelationships will be discussed and explained in the future chapters.