

## WHO ON EARTH INVENTED THE ALPHABET?

### ABSTRACT

There is neither record of nor reference to the invention of the alphabet in any known source. That in itself may say something about the invention—that it probably did not take place in the scribal community. The alphabet grew out of the syllabaries which preceded it, of which the most widespread were cuneiform and hieroglyphics. It probably emerged from the commercial communities of the ancient Near East but owed its consonantal principle to the Egyptians. A Canaanite in north Syria around 1800 B.C. is the most likely inventor, and the city of Ebla is taken as a hypothesis. The early Mesopotamian scribal tradition of which Ebla was part is outlined.

Opinions about how the alphabet was invented are considered, concluding that it was probably a single “giant leap,” and by one man. The inventor’s necessary background, creation of letter shapes, the writing medium and direction of script are reviewed. For the tricky problem of initial acceptance and diffusion, for which there is no evidence, a possibility is postulated. At the end, the whole process is encapsulated in a brief story.





## INTRODUCTION

Few of those who speculate about the origins of the alphabet consider in detail the likely process of invention. Those who do, generally present it as complex when it is basically simple, and ignore altogether the really difficult problem of initial acceptance and diffusion. For a thousand years before the alphabet, the scribal schools in Mesopotamia and Egypt had studied and taught their scripts, cuneiform and hieroglyphics, but no record of the original alphabet or any reference to it has been found among the hundreds of thousands of tablets from the scribal archives. The silence in which the origin of the alphabet is shrouded invites comment but receives none.

Much has been written about whether the inventor lived in north Syria, Sinai or south Arabia, but almost nothing about whether he should be sought within the scribal or the commercial community. Had his invention been accepted in the scribal world, their records would surely have revealed it. Their silence suggests that either the invention did not take place in a scribal context or it was dismissed as irrelevant.

Writing emerged from trade. The vast majority of the surviving early tablets are commercial or economic records, so there ought to be nothing surprising in the hypothesis that the invention and diffusion of the original alphabet took place in a commercial setting, and probably in defiance of the scribal community.

Cuneiform, hieroglyphics, and the other writing systems in existence immediately before the alphabet, were syllabaries. Was the transition from syllabary to alphabet evolution or a leap? One writer who considered this question presented his argument in the form of a story (Millard 1985), and so provided this article with a precedent.

The first part of this paper will review the geographical, historical and scribal background to the invention of the alphabet, while the second part will consider the bases on which a new hypothesis for that invention might rest. Then, following precedent, the invention and initial diffusion of the alphabet are presented in the form of a short story.

If a single lesson emerges from this discussion, it is that creativity in the development of writing technology should be sought in the marketplace rather than the schools.

#### **THE GEOGRAPHICAL, HISTORICAL AND SCRIBAL BACKGROUND**

The alphabet could have been invented in Ebla or one of its surrounding villages. Midway between modern Aleppo and Hama in north Syria, Ebla was an independent city state. Despite being destroyed twice, it survived as an important commercial and cultural center from the middle of the third millennium to about 1650 B.C. when it was invaded by the Hittites. They may have obtained the cuneiform script from captured Ebla scribes. The population of Ebla, with its outlying towns and villages, has been estimated at 260,000 people (Bermant and Weitzman 1979, 153).

Although in north Syria, Ebla was within the Mesopotamian tradition. About eighty per cent of the words on tablets found in Ebla are Sumerian words (Walker 1987, 40). Over 14,500 cuneiform tablets had been excavated from the main palace in Ebla by 1977.

Among the ancient tablets of Sumer are numerous words lists containing, for instance, the names of animals, or of plants, or legal terms, and many others. Some word lists are bilingual, giving the Sumerian words with their Akkadian or their Eblaité translations. These classified lists of words were used as reference sources in early proto-science and as teaching material in the scribal schools. Scholarly exchange between Ebla and Mesopotamia has been established, to take one example, by more than a hundred word lists in Sumerian found at Ebla that are identical with word lists from cities in Mesopotamia (Bermant and Weitzman 1979 p157).

It is relevant to the supposition that Ebla or its region may have produced the alphabet that Ebla had a large and famous scribal school which attracted foreign students. It is also relevant that during the Old Babylonian period, 2000-1600 B.C., Egyptian influence pervaded north Syria, emanating from their trading





center at Byblos (modern Beirut), which for much of the time was an Egyptian dependency.

#### THE SCRIBAL SCHOOLS

Our knowledge of the ancient schools comes from excavations in Mesopotamia. School buildings have not been positively identified, but the concentrations in which school tablets have been found suggest that some, at least, were conducted in private houses (Sjoberg 1975, 176-7). Chiera (1975, 165) says that “scribes who could be depended upon to teach were scattered everywhere, even in small towns,” but that only schools near or in the great temples could offer science or literature.

The scribe was not just a writer but a trained professional in many fields. Writing lay at the root of the school curriculum, and if it took as long to master cuneiform as it does today to acquire a good knowledge of reading and writing English (Chiera 1975, 165), a six-year curriculum could be a fair guess. By Old Babylonian times, Sumerian was no longer spoken, but it remained the language of literature and learning (except for mathematics which, in Mesopotamia, was taught in Babylonian [Walker 1987, 35]). The learning of cuneiform and of the Sumerian language went hand in hand. They would predominate during the early school years.

Other subjects included mathematics, surveying (land and quantity), music, literature, creative writing, identifying quotations from established texts, legal and other technical terms (Sjoberg 1975). Although many schools were attached to temples, the school curriculum seems to have been secular, though the gods were revered and religious literature was studied, even written, in the schools. Corporal punishment was used (Kramer 1949).

Schools catered, broadly, to what we would describe as upper middle class boys (Kramer 1981, 5). The teaching method emphasized memory training and the acquisition of knowledge through copying word lists, law codes and traditional literature, and by learning their contents (Kramer 1981, 6-7). Much of our knowledge of the ancient languages, literature, laws and mathematics comes from copies of documents made in their schools.

The law code of King Hammurabi of Babylon, 1792-1750 B.C., (Oates 1979, 200) is on a stele now in the Louvre. It is one of the few originals of an early law code to have survived and may well have been one of the law codes of which copies were studied in the school at Ebla. The code itself is undated, but the list of Hammurabi's regnal years gives year two as, "He established justice in the country" (Pritchard 1950, 269-70), and this is held to date the publication of his law code to the second year of his reign, i.e, 1790 B.C.

#### WRITING BEFORE THE ALPHABET

Pictographic records including numerals have been found widely in what are now Syria, Iraq and Iran dating from the late fourth millennium B.C., but writing able to convey the structure and grammar of a language emerged in Sumer and Egypt around or shortly after 3000 B.C. That was over a thousand years before the invention of the alphabet.

Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphics had both started as pictorial scripts, cuneiform probably first by a short margin. By 2800 B.C. cuneiform had developed standardized signs for syllables and settled into the form which lasted for nearly three thousand years.

Cuneiform was not built for speed. The medium of stylus into clay virtually precluded the development of cursive scripts such as the Egyptian hieratic and demotic which used brush or pen or papyrus. The syllable sha (pig), for example, required seventeen marks, though six would probably be a fairer average for one sign. One sign could represent several sounds, and one sound could be represented by different signs. Although easier in practice than it appears in print (Walker 1987, 17), it would still seem difficult for the writing of cuneiform to become automatic. Cuneiform had about six hundred signs in normal use. Sumerian schoolchildren had quite a lot to contend with.

In Egypt, a pictorial script came probably a little later than in Mesopotamia, but hieroglyphics appear around 3000 B.C. It was a sacred script for formal religious or monumental use, of the

greatest beauty but cumbersome to write—or read. The hieroglyphs were used as ideograms, phonograms or determinatives. Ideograms by themselves were ambiguous, so they were accompanied by a second hieroglyph used either phonetically to indicate pronunciation or as a determinative to indicate the category in which the first hieroglyph was to be understood.

When used phonetically, hieroglyphs recorded only consonants, not vowels. Vowels were, of course, important and were pronounced accurately when the script was read, “which s nnt vry dffclt” provided you know the language. There were originally 99 but later 105 phonetic indicators covering the consonantal sounds (Diringer 1962, 49).

Hieratic grew up alongside hieroglyphics or only slightly later. It was a cursive script which simplified the drawn hieroglyphs and introduced ligatures but made no change in the structure of the script. It was clearly designed for priests in a hurry.

Demotic came much later, around the seventh century B.C., and did for hieratic what hieratic had done for hieroglyphics: it opened the script to a wider public but made no change in its cumbersome structure, which continued to consist of ideograms, phonograms and determinatives. It was not an alphabet, yet it arose a thousand years after the alphabet had been invented. It is hard to believe that the alphabet was an Egyptian invention.

After 2000 B.C. new scripts, all syllabaries, appeared in the Eastern Mediterranean region: Linear A and B in Crete and a related linear script in Cyprus, Hittite and Minoan hieroglyphics, and a form of hieroglyphics in Byblos. The Phaistos disc may have been an experimental script which failed (Millard 1985, 391).

The alphabet was probably invented during the second half of the eighteenth century B.C., a period of experiment and of attempts to break away from the rigidities of the traditional syllabaries. No record of this first alphabet has survived.

Alphabetic inscriptions have been found in Syria/Palestine dated around the eighteenth or seventeenth century B.C., in Sinai around the sixteenth century B.C., and in South Arabia around

the tenth century B.C. Their similarities point toward a common but lost ancestor. These chance finds do not establish where and when the alphabet was invented. Diringier (1962, 120) and Naveh (1982, 42) consider north Syria or Palestine to be the most likely area of origin and the later eighteenth century the most likely time; Millard (1985, 394) concurs in the inventor being a Canaanite scribe but places the invention slightly later, during the second quarter of the second millennium B.C. Driver (1976, 196) gives the invention of the alphabet to the western Semites and points out that South Arabia is unlikely to be the source since the names of some of their letters are north Semitic, while Sinai is unlikely because the Phoenician script is not derived from the Sinaitic.

#### BASES FOR A NEW HYPOTHESIS

Nobody has demonstrated a necessary relationship between the shapes of letters and the sounds they represent. Some letters were derived from objects whose initial phoneme, or whose main phoneme, was the sound represented by the letter, an acrophonic association that may have made it easier to remember the original letters at the time of their invention. But an acrophonic relationship with familiar objects is neither necessary in theory nor used in practice. For example, how many people know, or ever knew, the objects from which our letter shapes may originally have been derived? Letter shapes could as well have been chosen at random, and some probably were.

In theory, an alphabet has one sign for one sound; in practice, not always. In English, one sound may be represented by more than one sign (e.g., “cage,” “king”), or one sign may represent more than one sound (e.g., “a” in “lame” and in “lamp”), or more than one sign may be needed to represent one sound (e.g., “-ng,” “th,” “ph”). But English still has an alphabet.

#### SOME VIEWS ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF THE ALPHABET

When discussing theories about how the alphabet may have arisen, we must ask whether a particular theory considers that the transition from syllabary to alphabet was a step-by-step

progression or a single leap, and whether the theory describes the process of invention in any detail.

Moore and Lambdin (1960, 21) conclude that the alphabet had its beginnings in an acrophonically-derived script under direct or indirect Egyptian influence somewhere in Syria or Palestine, and that a script in which a single sign represented a consonant plus a vowel “(even zero vowel)” was a revolutionary innovation. This does not recognize explicitly that the acrophonic element relates only to the choice of letter shape, nor does it acknowledge that a set of signs representing consonant plus vowel is a syllabary, not an alphabet (even though one sign for one monosyllable is close to an alphabet, as Millard states). A leap is implied, but the process of invention is not described.

Diringer (1962, 112ff.) does not trace a detailed progression from syllabary to alphabet. He places the various scripts so far as possible in relation to each other and leaves it open that the transition from syllabary to alphabet may have been a single leap. He adds that the leap may have been accomplished by one individual. This present article owes part of its origin to Professor Diringer’s forthright suggestion.

Driver (1976, 157ff.) considers the acrophonic principles by which particular letter shapes may have been chosen and concludes that no single system will account for all letters. On the central question of a progression or a leap, he is silent.

Naveh (1982, 42) considers that the alphabet was invented by Canaanites with a knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphics and that most of the letters had acrophonic values, but he does not tackle the process by which the invention may have been accomplished.

Millard (1985, 394) does tackle the process in an imaginative story about how a Canaanite scribe might have set about inventing the alphabet—a precedent which this article will shortly follow. Millard’s imaginary scribe lives in a mercantile center. He has been trained to write Egyptian with pen and ink on papyrus, and knows of cuneiform and other scripts. None of

these cumbersome syllabaries relates to his language, so he sets out to invent a syllabary of his own. Using the Egyptian principle of indicating consonants but not vowels, and profiting by the accident that words in west Semitic languages do not begin with vowels, he ends up with “a very economic syllabary” of signs for consonant plus vowel only. This is not an alphabet but, in practice, is virtually indistinguishable from an alphabet of consonants only. That is where the story stops. The reader assumes that at a subsequent stage the vowel element is held to have dropped off, leaving a true consonantal alphabet in place.

A step-by-step progression from syllabary to alphabet deserves some thought. First, it is conceivable from the point of view of the inventor but it is inconceivable from the point of view of its readers. Writers and readers form a single interdependent community. If the simple consonant-plus-vowel syllabary had gained acceptance, in the sense that each element performed a necessary function, the vowel element could not just have been abandoned without undermining the script.

Second, the distinction between syllabary and alphabet may be narrower than many people suppose because an alphabet is almost bound to contain at least some syllable-like elements (Harris 1986, 38-9). For instance, it is impossible to pronounce the consonants “b,” “d,” “g,” “j,” by themselves without adding a vowel-like sound. The vowel-like sound “b-,” “d-,” etc., is not specific in the way that, say, “ba” or “do” is specific. That is why “ba” and “do” are syllables whereas “b-” and “d-” are not. But “b-” and “d-” bear a family likeness to syllables which, at least in their case, would make a step-by-step progression from syllabary to alphabet rather less likely and a leap rather more likely.

A third observation is that alphabets generate rules for their use. In English, these rules include “normal” spelling and letter clusters which indicate sounds additional to those indicated by single letters (e.g., “-ng,” “sh,” etc.), and “special” spelling to reflect etymology and therefore meaning (e.g., air, heir), among many other rules. So would the inventor of the alphabet have needed to discover rules for its use as part of the invention process? From

the variety of practice before and in the early days of printing, it is clear that many of the rules governing the use of the English alphabet evolved long after its introduction and were often created by printers. The few and short surviving inscriptions in early alphabets preclude generalizations about rules, but they do not contradict the supposition that the original alphabet consisted of perhaps twenty or thirty signs but no additional rules for its use beyond the given relationship between sign and sound.

With the distinction between syllabary and alphabet narrowed and the invention of the original alphabet requiring no more than the production of one sign for one sound, the hypothesis that a bright young man might have leapt the gap between them becomes tempting. Diringer (1962) envisaged it, and this article will follow Diringer.

The bases on which our hypothetical invention of the alphabet rest are that the alphabet was invented at a single leap, that the original alphabet had no vowels, that most letter shapes were derived by acrophonic association from the names of familiar objects but that some were chosen at random, and that the first alphabet was written from right to left like hieratic (normally) whereas cuneiform was written from left to right. Finally, there is a solution to the difficult problem, which no one appears to have recognized, of what the inventor is going to do with his alphabet immediately after he has invented it.

The inventor's necessary background: Was the inventor of the alphabet an Egyptian or a Canaanite?

An Egyptian in north Syria would be no stranger at that period, but it is not obvious with whom he would be trying to communicate. It could hardly be family, friends or business colleagues in Egypt because they could not have read the alphabet until they had been taught; and they are unlikely because the ancient Egyptians never adopted an alphabet but evolved a daily cursive script, demotic, a thousand years after the alphabet's invention. The Egyptian-speaking community in north Syria would have been possible correspondents, but the same objections apply to them though with less force. Canaanite friends and colleagues in

north Syria? They, too, would be unable to read his alphabet until they had been taught, but far more important, it is hard to accept that the first alphabet could have been invented for a language foreign to the inventor. The possibility of an Egyptian inventor cannot be eliminated, but a Canaanite trained in cuneiform and acquainted with hieroglyphics is the more likely person, as suggested by Millard (1985, 394) and others.

The Canaanite inventor would have needed scribal training in cuneiform and sufficient acquaintance with hieroglyphics (or hieratic) to understand those principles peculiar to hieroglyphics which would be necessary to the alphabet he was about to invent. They are: the principle of a consonantal script, which is fundamental; and the acrophonic use of signs, which would help in the selection of letter shapes. Both principles could be absorbed in an hour by an intelligent schoolboy in contact with a proficient writer of hieroglyphics.

A consonantal script immediately provokes consideration of the different functions of vowels and consonants. Our inventor, looking for a better writing system and acquainted with the consonantal principle within hieroglyphics or hieratic, would recognize that consonants identify roots while vowels, in addition to their grammatical importance, convey meaning by intonation and expression. Consonants can easily be indicated, but the variable and subtle nuances of vowels defy codification. But he would not have to discover the consonantal principle, only recognize and then exploit it.

Our inventor must not be too learned. An elderly, experienced scribe conscious of the subtle construction of syllables will worry over detail and surely stumble. A younger man will be more likely to seize the consonantal principle and find that he has leapt into alphabet when he thought he was taking only one small step.

#### **CHOOSING THE LETTERS**

What matters about letters is that they should be distinct from each other and their association with a given sound should be easily memorable. The acrophonic principle would be attractive

initially, though it would not be used once the letter had been learned. The inventor would be likely to draw on his knowledge of existing pictorial associations when choosing letters, but a number of random shapes would creep in.

#### THE WRITING MEDIUM

It was the clay medium that prevented cuneiform from developing its own cursive variants. The alphabet set the cuneiform world free from that constraint being easy to write with pen or brush. Papyrus was scarce and expensive in north Syria, and wood inconvenient to handle; but leather was plentiful. That the first alphabet might have been written with brush on leather is a supposition for which evidence either way is unlikely to be found.

#### DIRECTION OF SCRIPT

The surviving early alphabets were usually, though not always, written from right to left, which suggests, but only suggests, that the original alphabet may have been written from right to left as well. This would have accorded with the main Egyptian tradition but have been contrary to the main cuneiform tradition in which our supposed inventor had been trained. Why the apparent anomaly? One possible reason is that the inventor of the original alphabet may have wanted to identify his new script as quick and cursive by association in direction, as well as in its consonantal principle, with hieratic (Millard 1985, 395); and he may have welcomed the contrast with cuneiform, whose supremacy was being challenged. The thought that the inventor may have been left-handed is not pursued in this article.

#### THE PROBLEM OF ACCEPTANCE

An intriguing question is how the alphabet managed to obtain initial acceptance and so enable the process of diffusion to start. For a thousand years, scribal communities, or the scribal community, had enjoyed a monopoly of the written word. Daily operating accounts, business contracts, the bureaucracy of government, historical records, literature and religion were all preserved in a writing system so complex that only a trained scribe could use it. Even if the scribes had been willing to surrender the source of their economic and social status, the weight of the archival

records would not easily have allowed them to do so. It is not surprising that cuneiform continued in (diminishing) use for some eighteen-hundred years after the invention of the alphabet, the last cuneiform document to have been found being written in 75 A.D. (Walker 1987, 17-18). It is unlikely that the scribal community would have invented an alphabet or, if a scribe had done so, have permitted its adoption.

Writing was the child of trade. It was the merchants who evolved those early trade marks and numerals which identified goods and quantities and opened the door to the written message (Schmandt-Besserat 1981). The stage at which scribal communities began to standardize a script is unknown, but the earliest formalization of pictorial signs suggests the work of a coordinating interest. Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of interaction between writing and commerce is found in the later story of Aramaic. During the eighth century B.C., the Assyrians transported large numbers of Aramaeans from their kingdoms around Damascus to Mesopotamia where they spread the Aramaic language and its alphabetic script. When the Aramaeans became the merchant class of the Near East, Aramaic, aided by its alphabet, became the lingua franca (Diringer 1962, 134 and 138).

A commercial, as opposed to a scribal, setting would seem appropriate for the invention and initial diffusion of the alphabet. Our supposed inventor is called Azi because it was an Ebla name (Bermant and Weitzman, 1979 156). Azi, of course, knows his cuneiform and invents the alphabet at a time of fury and frustration. Initial acceptance and diffusion are given to a commercially-motivated urban sub-culture of boys not attending scribal school. They quickly grasp the new alphabet, and exploit one of its immediate possibilities by running an urban postal service of their own. This pays the boys, serves the commercial interests of their parents, provides an immediate market for the spread of the alphabet and cocks a snook at the scribal establishment.

The sons of visiting merchants know a good thing when they see one. They copy the letters. Alphabetic writing is then imagined

as appearing in Ebla's neighbor and contemporary city Carchemish, about one hundred miles to the north, where the scribes are no more enthusiastic than they were in Ebla.

**THE INVENTION OF THE ALPHABET:  
THE STORY OF AZI**

*Nor should we exclude the possibility that a single man was in fact responsible for the conceptual leap involved in the creation of this unique form of writing ....*

David Diringer  
(*Writing* 1962, 121)

The school was on the ground floor of an undistinguished stone house two doors down from the crossroads. School was in the front room where the boys sat cross-legged on the packed earth floor. Their master, an elderly scribe, was thin with a firm little mouth, wispy, graying hair and a precise manner. His shabby gown suggested that little work came his way apart from teaching these dozen or so boys how to write, most of whom could hardly afford the low fees which were all he dared ask. Not like Ebla, two hours walk to the west, where the temple school was for the rich and even a teaching scribe could charge almost what he liked.

The boys came to him for about four years. To begin with it was mostly writing and learning Sumerian, then reading and copying the ancient Sumerian texts and some modern ones like the laws inscribed by Hammurabi of Babylon only sixty years before. As their writing improved they turned to arithmetic and geometry, and a few might go on to the city for vocational studies such as law, accounting or land surveying. Some would end up as temple priests, but that had little to do with the school.

"I'm fed up with all this pedantry."

"Do you, Azi, the cleverest and laziest boy in the class, who never bothers to write even one cuneiform sign accurately, dare to talk of pedantry? Who can make sense of the scribbles you produce under the pretense of writing?"

"If it is lazy to want to write quicker, then yes, I am lazy. It

takes forever to make even one of these signs on this filthy clay, and all you ever do is thrash me because a single mark may perhaps be slightly in the wrong direction. The whole thing is slow, fussy, useless, and I hate it.”

At this point teenage Azi flung his wet tablet at the scribe’s head, missed, and the clay shattered on the wall behind. The stylus followed, and also missed. The scribe reached deliberately for his strap, caught Azi by the hair and administered yet another well-deserved thrashing.

“If you know better than the scribes of a thousand years, go make you own writing. Meanwhile you, Azi, the most brilliant boy I’ve ever taught, can take your idle self out of my school and never, ever dare to come back. The rest of you boys learn from Azi’s example. Curb your temper. Understand that accuracy is another name for truth; discipline your minds to master the ancient skill of writing, and fit yourselves to serve your employers and your city.”

Azi, weeping but still rebellious, slammed the door and limped home.

At this time of the day there was no one there. He lay in a corner, stunned by what he had done. That school had meant everything to his father. He was a merchant trading as far as Mari to the east and Byblos to the south, but never big enough to own his own caravans. He would have liked to send Azi to the school in Ebla, but the local scribe was all he could manage. Azi knew that his father’s status as a village councillor owed much to his having a son training for the scribal elite. He had thrown his family away in a fit of temper, and in a few hours would have to look into his father’s eyes and cringe.

He had been impudent, yes; but he couldn’t accept that he’d been wholly wrong. This writing of a thousand years and more was slow, so picky. It took years to learn, and even then ages to inscribe the half-dozen or more strokes for each sign. Each syllable sign by itself could mean a dozen different things, so reading was nearly as hard as writing. Perhaps he was lazy.



He frowned ....

Still frowning, Azi moved to the front door and stood for a moment in the sunshine, pondering. How many sounds do we really make when speaking...? Well, how many do we...? He squatted and began to doodle in the dust. No, remember what the scribe Inena used to say when he showed me his Egyptian writing in the evenings: know your consonants and the sense will tell you the vowels. Inena never wrote his vowels. The Egyptians were right—they often were. The vowel sounds are innumerable and you could never write them all, but consonants are fixed and few. This should not be impossible.... He started again, this time tracing random signs for consonants. It's not so easy, he muttered, looking up, eyebrows puckered; we must have some way of remembering.... He traced more carefully a simple outline to suggest a house; "beth," he thought as he pronounced "b." That's more like it; now what for "g"? Then "d," quicker now as one after another he wrote signs which suggested the sounds of the consonants. If he couldn't think of any-thing, he drew a sign at random—no matter, you'd soon remember it once you got used to it.

This was easier than Inena's writing, but it was really Inena's idea. Azi was imagining ahead... he owed Inena a lot. This writing should always be associated with Inena; and it must be quite different from school writing with its fussy scribes. Why not...? This writing will go from right to left. He started yet again, this time right to left, and before the afternoon had started to cool, he had in the dust in front of his home the beginnings of his own way to write. He dashed inside to get a bit of leather and some of the color used for decorating pots, and came out to find the dog next door curled up on his pattern and slightly wagging the very tip of her tail. One kick and she slunk away, but half the patterns were gone.... What did it matter? He could remember most of them and re-invented the rest, and long before his father came home he had them safe on leather.

The next few days were grim. Turned out of his home, with only the street to sleep in, not one man in the village would give

him work. He had nothing to do. He stole to eat. Between times he looked at his leather and casually added new shapes for sounds he had not thought of before. Sadly, some days later, he packed his few clothes together with his leather and set out deep in thought for the city.

He slept on the corner of a busy street. In the morning he watched a group of smartly dressed boys on their way to a school who turned round at the taunts of some ragged urchins off to work in the fields.

It was hunger that did it. The second day he called out to a group of the poorer boys, "Hi kids, want to learn to write? Look at those wretches trailing off to years in a writer's prison for fees to beggar their fathers. I can teach you to write in four weeks flat. Like to see?"

A couple of them strode over and asked what he was up to.

"Four weeks to write, easy."

"Show us."

"Wait. Stay here for just one hour. If you can write your names in one hour, you pay for my dinner. If not, pay nothing. Is it a deal?"

They looked at each other. "It's a deal."

Azi ate well that day. The next morning there were a dozen, but he told half to come back in the evening. A couple of weeks and they were writing simple sentences, four weeks and it was whole messages.

They wrote to each other, of course, but one day the father of one of them told his son to take a message to a business partner on the other side of the city. A caravan was about to leave for Mari and his partner must go with it, taking a long list of goods. The boy grabbed a leather tab, wrote it down and ran. When the consignment was on its way, his father gave him a small piece of silver. After that, the boys would take messages from anyone who paid them, and plenty did. They carried the leather tabs across the city to read the message to the recipient, and sometimes they would

pass tabs to each other for delivery further off. Some began to teach their younger brothers, who grasped it swiftly and then joined in. The sons of visiting merchants picked up the idea. They copied the letters, and it was not long before rumors began to arrive of a similar enterprise in Carchemish.

Azi went to the school in Ebla and showed them his writing. They had heard what the boys were up to, and were very angry. "Are you trying to steal our livelihood?" asked one of them. But an older scribe said, "Well done, young Azi. Do you know that in the cellars of this building are thousands of ancient tablets with all the learning, all the history of our people? If we can no longer read them, our whole world will die when we do. Is that what you want?"

Two pairs of eyes met, one young, one old. Azi turned and walked slowly, pondering the city. It would be the same in Carchemish, he had no doubt. The scribes would only ever look backwards.

Azi was eating well but he was homesick. He returned to the village. Still, neither of his parents would talk to him so deep was the disgrace he had brought upon them. Even his friends turned their backs and walked away, ashamed to be seen with him. He told no one what he had been doing in the city. He began to drink the barley wine, slept days as well as nights in the gutters and never noticed how foul his clothes smelled. When he fell ill no one cared, and one day the dog he had kicked was seen whining and sniffing at a small heap of rags by the roadside.

Only two or three came to the burial, among them the elderly scribe, Azi's former master. Before they placed Azi's body in the grave, the scribe stepped forward.

"Azi was a young man blessed with all the talents, more brilliant than any boy I have ever taught. What a shame, a tragic shame that he was always too lazy to develop his gifts. A sad, wasted life...."

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