



# INTRODUCTION TO GRAPHIC COMMUNICATIONS Section No. **INSCRIPTION WRITING** **216**

Inscription is writing in the form of letters, words, or other conventional symbols cut into a permanent material for the purpose of conveying and preserving information. The earliest writings probably appeared in the form of inscription, which later gave rise to the related art of calligraphy, or fine writing on perishable materials such as papyrus, parchment, and paper. The origins of writing and the evolution of alphabetic systems can be traced through epigraphy, the study of ancient inscriptions.

Ancient inscriptions appear on diverse types of hard material, including marble, crystalline limestone, and other varieties of stone; metals such as bronze, gold, and silver; and bone, ivory, clay, and wood—although few examples of wood have survived. The inscribers' tools varied, depending on the surface used; common implements included the square bladed chisel; a stylus, with one end blunt and the other pointed, for impressing inscriptions into clay before firing; and a punch or pointed hammer, when hard stone was used.

Throughout history inscriptions have been executed on temples, churches, civic buildings, monuments, tombs, statues, vases, and coins; sometimes accompanied by pictorial reliefs. Inscriptions have frequently been used for public announcements or administrative

documents recording political and religious decrees, law codes, public and private contracts, treaties and other matters of state, dedications, benefactions, and honors. As such, they serve as an invaluable source of historical information, both social and political. Modern inscriptions are most often found on building facades, cornerstones and tombstones, on which occurs the oldest continuous use of inscription.

Inscriptions generally are composed of alphabetic or phonetic symbols and/or numerals. Initials or abbreviations were not commonly used until the advent of Roman inscriptions; certain Latin styles were composed entirely of such formulas. Late Greek and Latin inscriptions sometimes include monograms. These appear frequently and in forms that are often difficult to interpret such as those in the inscriptions of the Early Christian and Byzantine periods.

Some form of punctuation is generally found within inscriptions because words are seldom separated by spaces. In Greek inscriptions a vertical line, a dot, or a series of dots marked the end of a sentence, phrase, or word. Roman inscriptions use a single dot for that distinction. In Christian inscriptions the beginning of the text is indicated by a cross whereas a leaf or other symbol signifies the end. The direction of inscriptions also var-

ies, from vertical arrangements to horizontal sequences to placements in patterns. Semitic inscriptions, including those of the Phoenicians, read from right to left, as do the earliest Greek inscriptions. The left-to-right direction was not standardized by the Greeks until the 5th century BC; it was later adopted by the Romans and consequently by all the European languages.

## ***Early Inscription***

The history of Western inscription began in Mesopotamia, where in about 4000 BC the Sumerians developed Cuneiform. This writing system consists of characters made with wedge-shaped strokes impressed into clay, brick, or stone. By the 2nd millennium BC an alphabet of 29 cuneiform signs was in use; these signs closely resemble Hebrew and some Phoenician letters. Many thousands of Sumerian tablets and fragments exist from the first half of the 2nd millennium BC.

Cuneiform was also the system used by the Hittites; Old Persian and Achaemenid script was a revised form of cuneiform writing.

The famous Behistun inscriptions of Darius I, dated c. 500 BC, exemplify Achaemenid script; with the conquest of these regions by Alexander the Great, Greek became the dominant inscribed language.

Egyptian inscriptions in the form of Hieroglyphs date from the 1st dynasty (4th millennium BC). The system of inscription established then continued in use with only minor modifications until the time of the Romans. A fine example of the Egyptian style is preserved in the form of rock inscriptions at Thebes.

Another renowned epigraphical monument is the Rosetta Stone, discovered in 1799. This basalt tablet, dated 196 BC, was inscribed in three languages: ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, demotic (an Egyptian cursive script), and Greek. By studying the royal names enclosed in cartouches (oval frames) and comparing the inscriptions, J. F. Champollion was able to assign phonetic values to some of the hieroglyphs and eventually to the entire system.

On the Aegean island of Crete an independent hieroglyphic system existed, replaced in the beginning of the Middle Minoan period (1750-1450 BC) by a linear script, read from left to right, which developed into the script known as Linear A; this in turn was followed by another script, designated Linear B. Thousands of examples of these scripts inscribed on tablets, ranging in date from c.3000 BC to the fall of Knossos (c.1400 BC), have been excavated at sites on Crete and on the Greek mainland.

Phoenician inscriptions date from c.1000 BC; the Phoenician alphabet, adapted and modified and largely adopted by the Greeks, remained in use until the 3rd century BC. The earliest

Greek inscriptions date from the 7th century BC. At first each Greek state had its own alphabet, but in 403 BC, under the archon Euclides, the Ionian alphabet—still used for Greek capital letters—was officially adopted by Athens and soon spread throughout Greece. The art of inscription flourished, evidenced by the innumerable writings found on vases, coins, statues, votive offerings, and relief panels.

Records of temple expenditures, decrees, bookkeeping accounts, ostraca (shards of pottery used for voting), lists of citizens, and annals were also inscribed, notable examples being the exquisitely carved Parian Chronicle and the Gortyna code of property laws, executed during the 5th century BC. An unusual example of early Greek inscription appears in the form of graffiti scratched (c.590 BC) by Greek mercenaries on the legs of the colossal statues of Abu Simbel in Egypt.

### ***Latin Inscription***

From the Greek alphabet were derived various local Italic alphabets, including that of the Etruscans and that of the Chalcidean colony of Cumae, on which the Roman alphabet was based. The Roman inscriptional style, in wide use from the 3rd century BC, persists in essentially the same form to the present day. The influence of Latin inscription extended throughout the Roman Empire.

In Gaul, concurrent with Latin inscriptions of the late republic, a form of Celtic inscription ap-

peared, based on Greek letters. Later, during the Christian period, Celtic inscriptions were written in ogham, one of the Irish runic languages. This writing was alphabetical and apparently an independent invention, based on arbitrary symbols much like a Morse code. The Germanic runes, much used in the same region, were derived from the Greek or Latin alphabets.

Early Christian stoneworkers adapted the old forms of Latin inscription, first in the Catacombs and later in the churches. Modern monumental inscriptions continue the tradition, modified by a series of classical revivals, especially during the Renaissance. The custom of placing Latin and Greek inscriptions on buildings and monuments endures, with these two classical languages still considered the appropriate languages for religious, public, and private epigraphical documents.

### ***Non-Western Traditions***

Important epigraphic traditions of the New World include the hieroglyphic inscriptions on stone monuments of the Aztec, Maya and Toltecs as well as the rock inscriptions of Easter Island. In China the earliest inscriptions were executed on bronze vessels and Oracle Bones of the Shang dynasty (c.1600-1027 BC). After the Chinese invention of paper in about AD 100, inscription was relegated to a lesser role. An important inscription from the early Buddhist period in India is the Prakrit of Asoka, dated 3rd century BC.