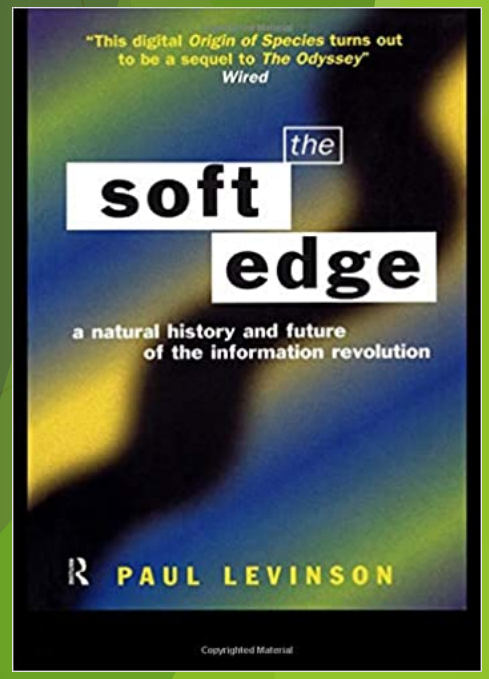
The First Digital Medium

THE SOFT EDGE

Paul Levinson



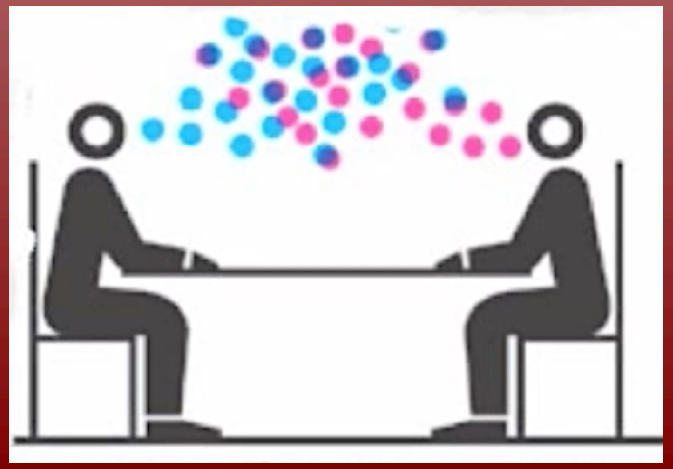
”A Natural history and Future of the Information revolution”, 1997

Oral Culture

Stories are told every generation. In ancient times people told stories to spread news, teach history, etc.

Six people can have different ideas of the same thing, but once written it expresses the same for everybody.

Oral culture is an example of **Acoustic Space**.



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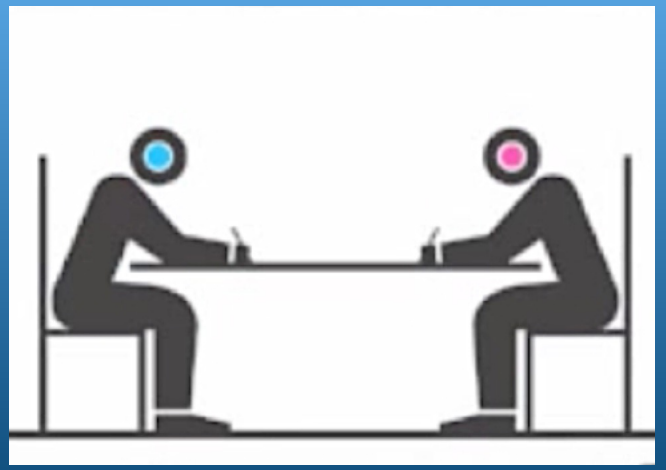
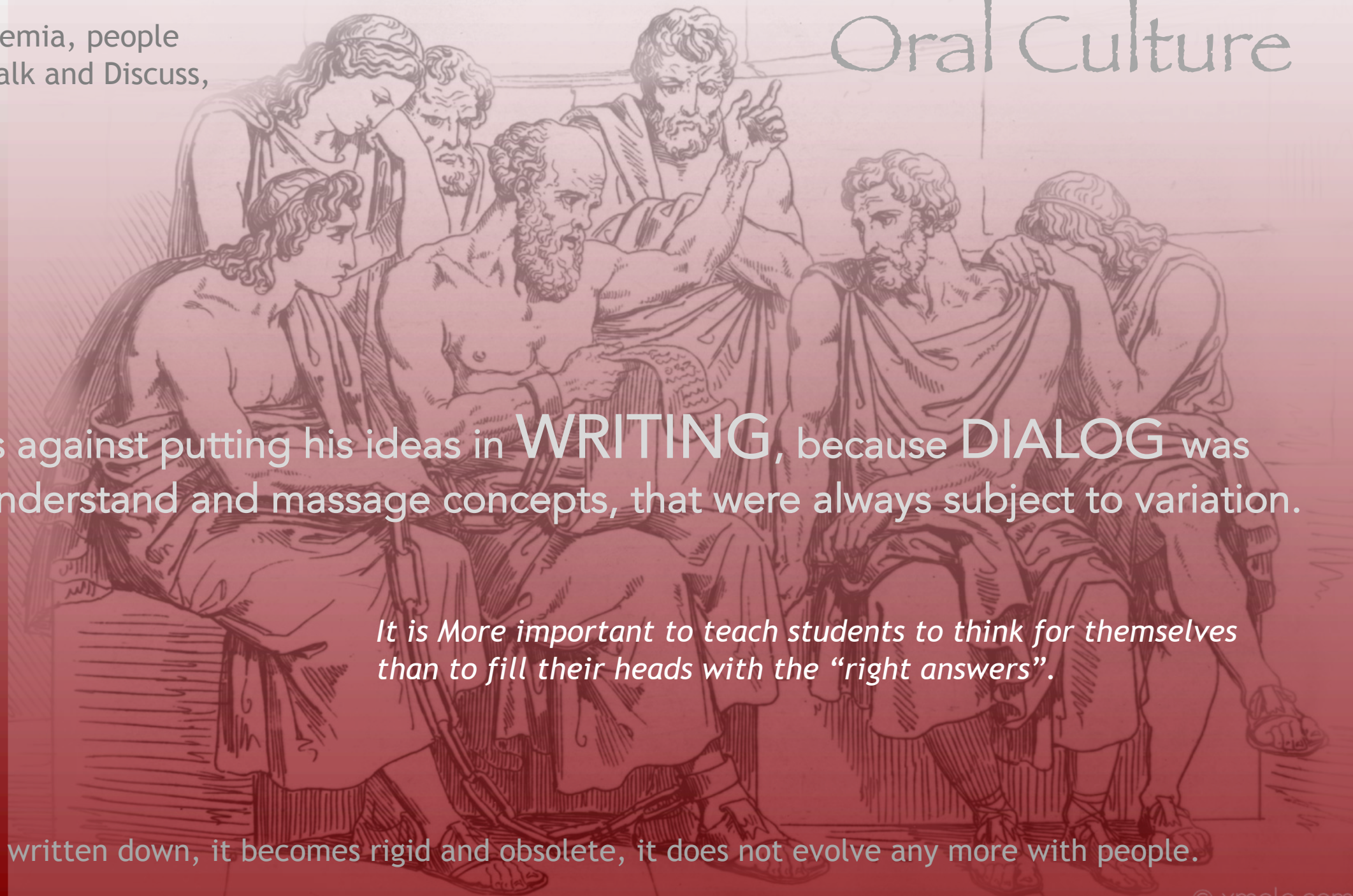
Written Culture

Written culture is logical. Everything is written today. You can pinpoint it because it is concrete, it’s set in stone. Like when taking a test with multiple choice the answer is only one.



Oral Culture

In the Greek Academia, people would gather to Talk and Discuss, not to read.



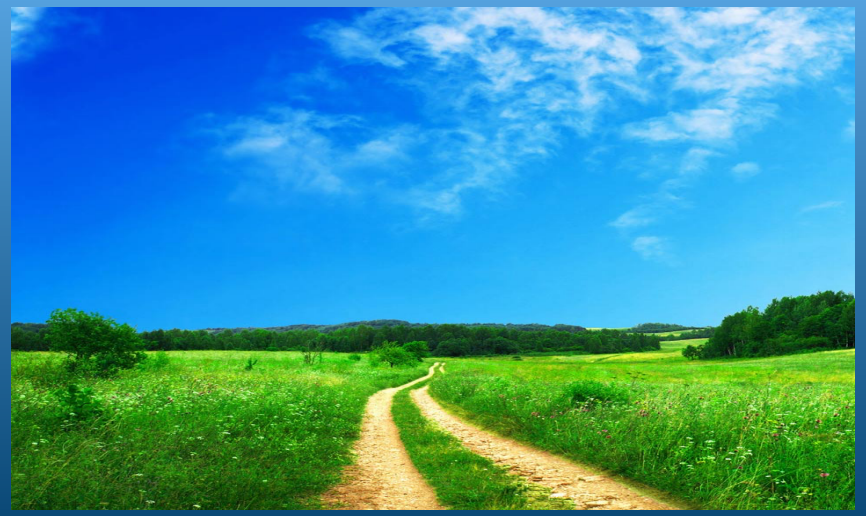
Socrates was against putting his ideas in WRITING, because DIALOG was needed to understand and massage concepts, that were always subject to variation.

It is More important to teach students to think for themselves than to fill their heads with the "right answers".

Once a though is written down, it becomes rigid and obsolete, it does not evolve any more with people.

Visual Space

Visual Space is something you can pinpoint, you can own.
It has a start and a finish, like a book.
There has to be an Specific order to the words: everything **logical** and **in sequence**.



Acoustic space

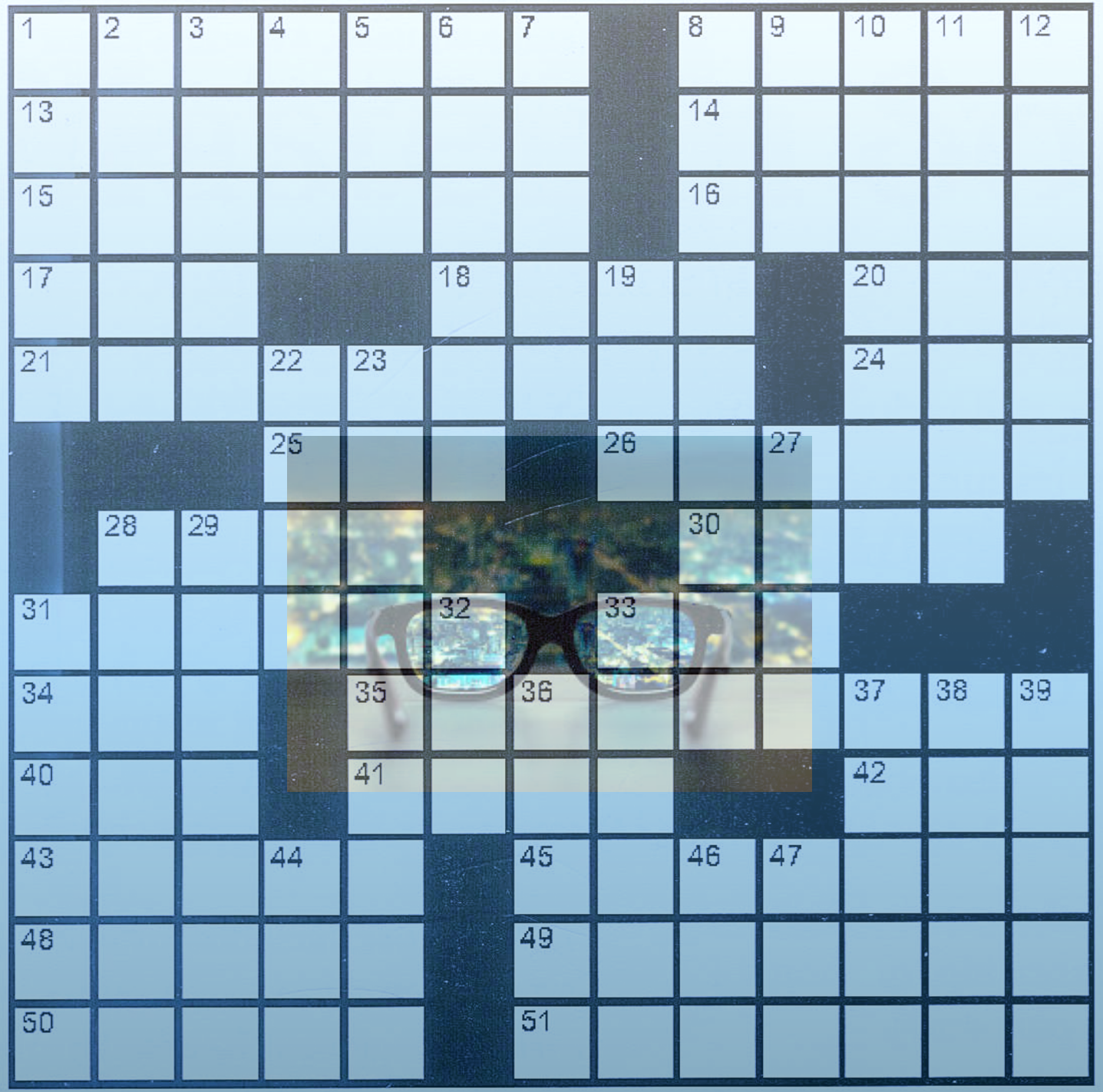
Acoustic Space is like listening to a song. When you're listening you can do other things at the same time, like imagine something in your head.

Sound comes from everywhere,
it is bigger than you:
you can receive it but you can't own it.
Acoustic has multiple senses.

© xmple.com

“The key characteristic of **acoustic space** is that it engages multiple senses at the same time… To understand acoustic space **you must perceive all of it, not focus on one part.**”

–Marshall McLuhan

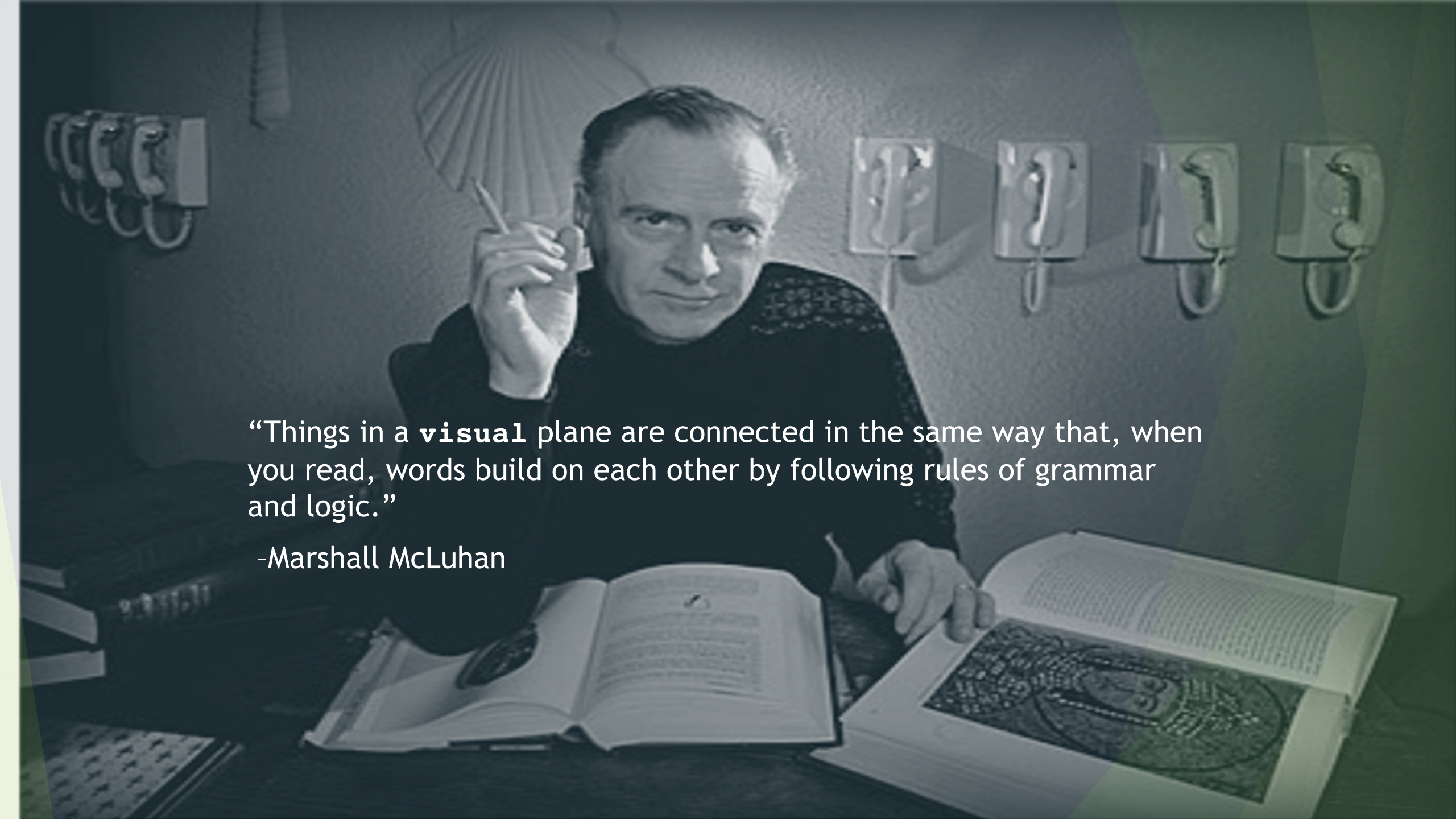


Visual Space

Text is a form of code

Different forms of writing writing symbolize concepts in different ways

Phonetic alphabets code sound


“Things in a **visual** plane are connected in the same way that, when you read, words build on each other by following rules of grammar and logic.”
–Marshall McLuhan

PHONETIC ALPHABET

The house

La casa

Le maison

Bye Bye

The authority

La autoridad

L’autorité

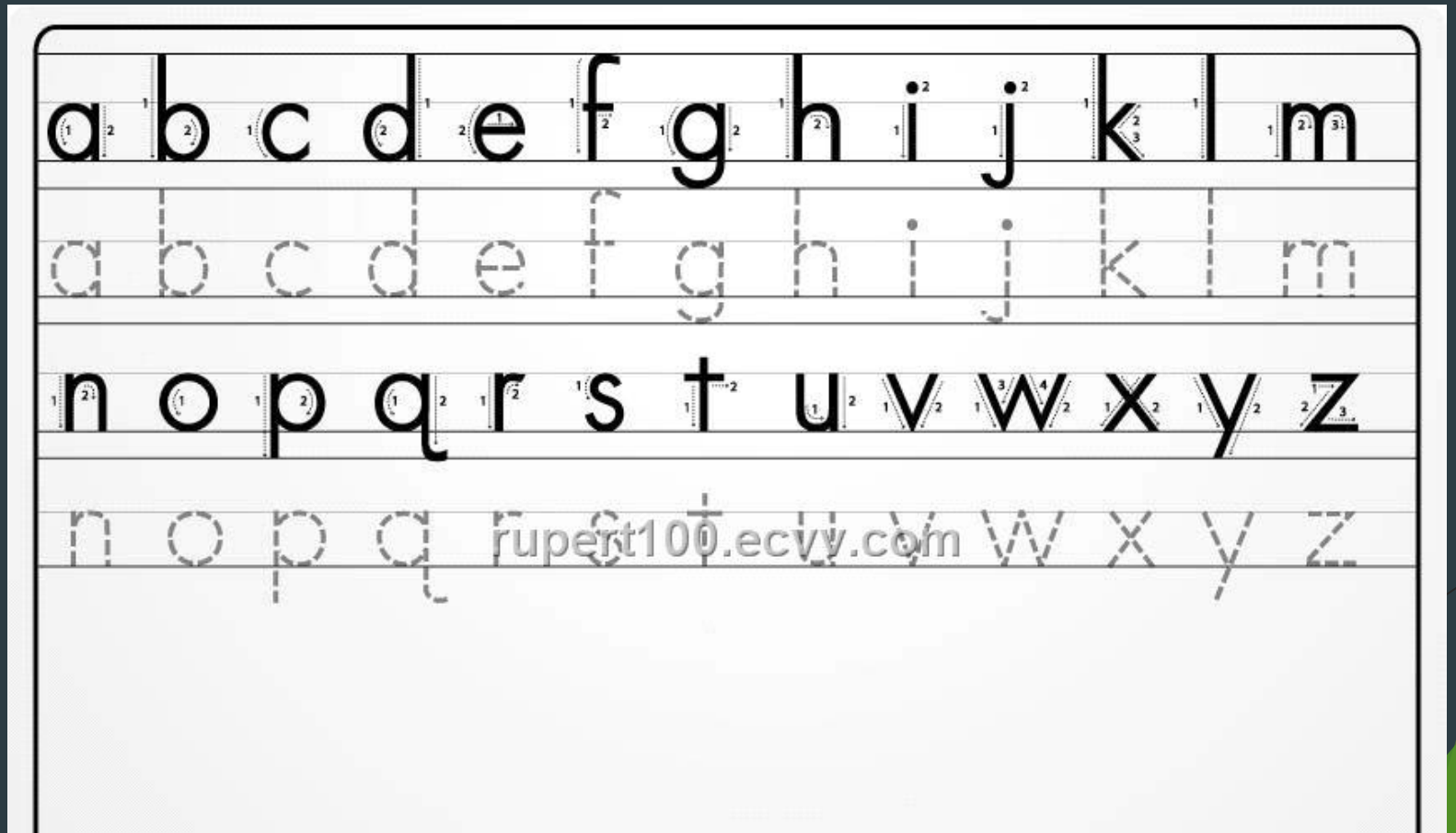
Bon jour

Hello

The spoken word continues to change the alphabet

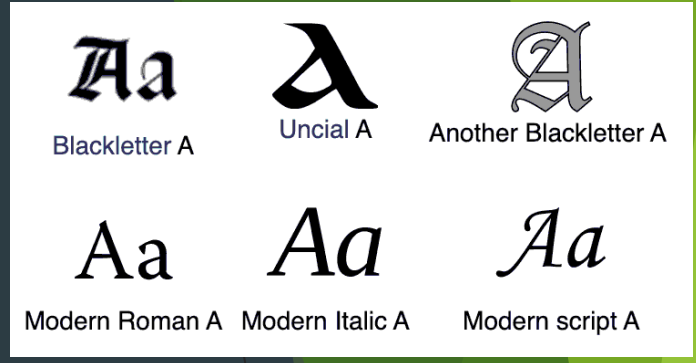
The Latin Alphabet

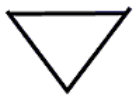
The phonetic alphabet is based on sounds rather than visual images.



The Latin Alphabet

The phonetic alphabet is based on sounds rather than visual images.

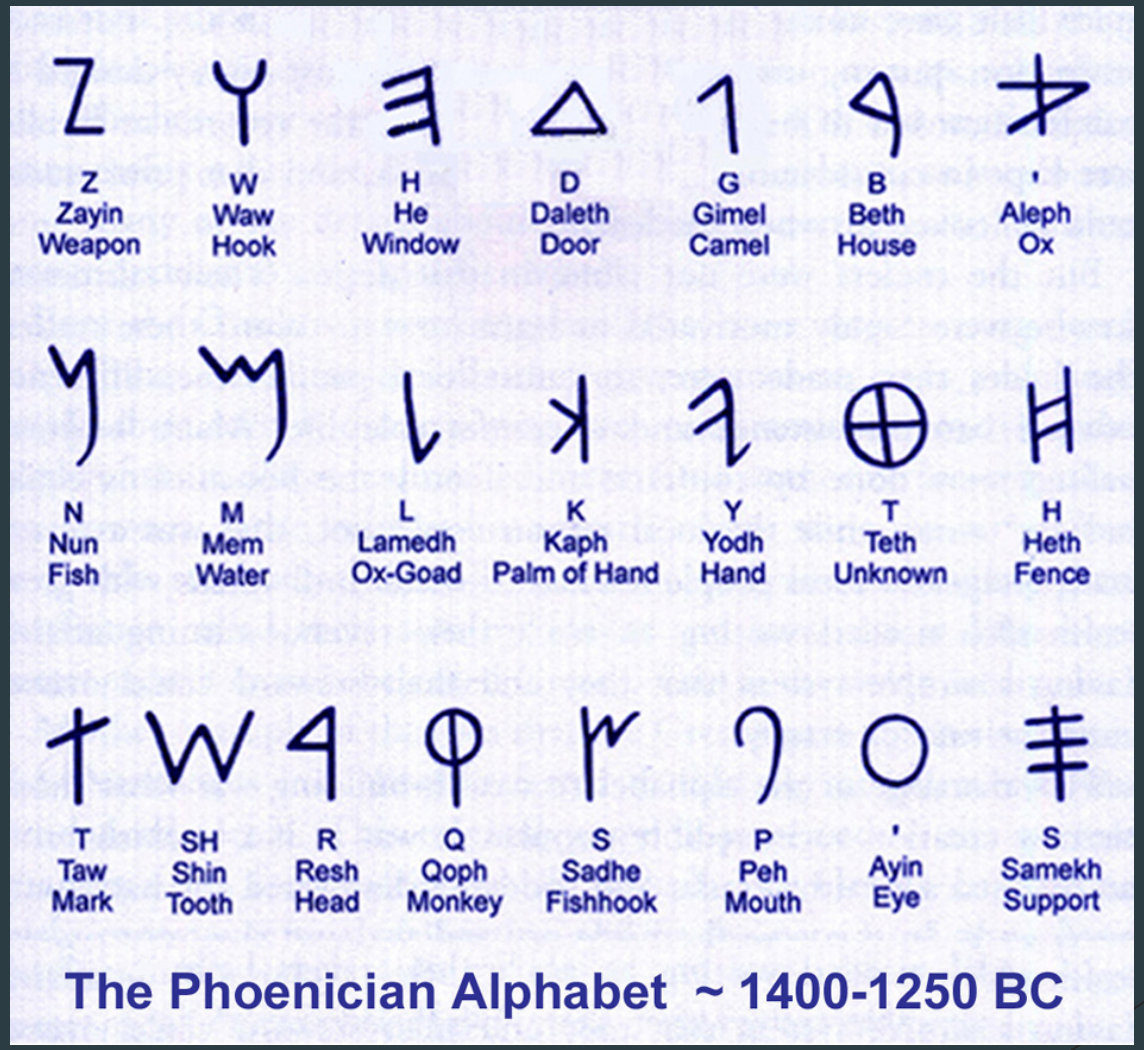


Egyptian	Phoenician *aleph*	Semitic	Greek *Alpha*	Etruscan A	Roman/Cyrillic A	Boeotian 800–700 BC	Greek Uncial	Latin 300 AD Uncial	
			Aα		A				
									

Different glyphs of the lowercase letter A.

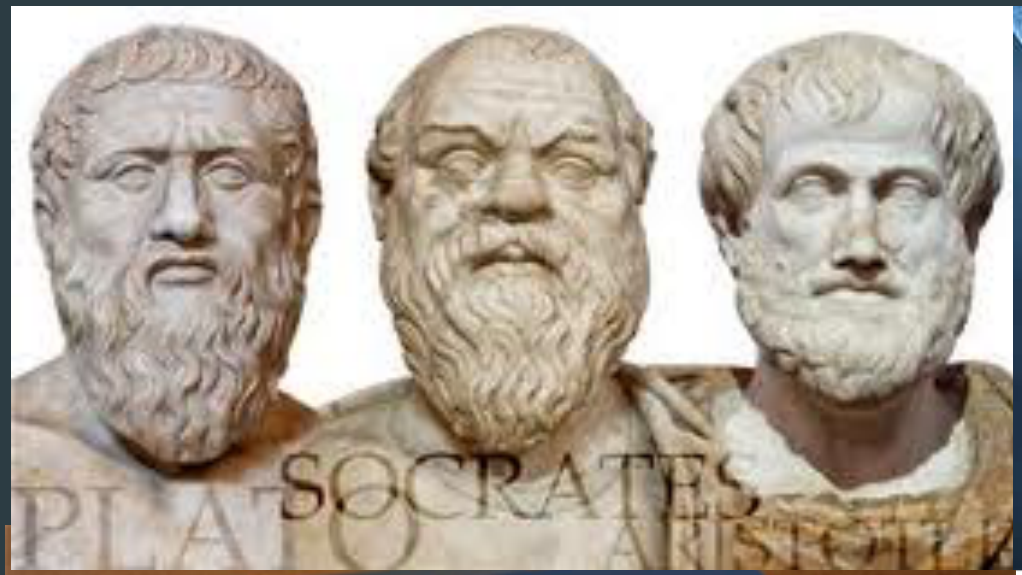
The Phoenician Alphabet

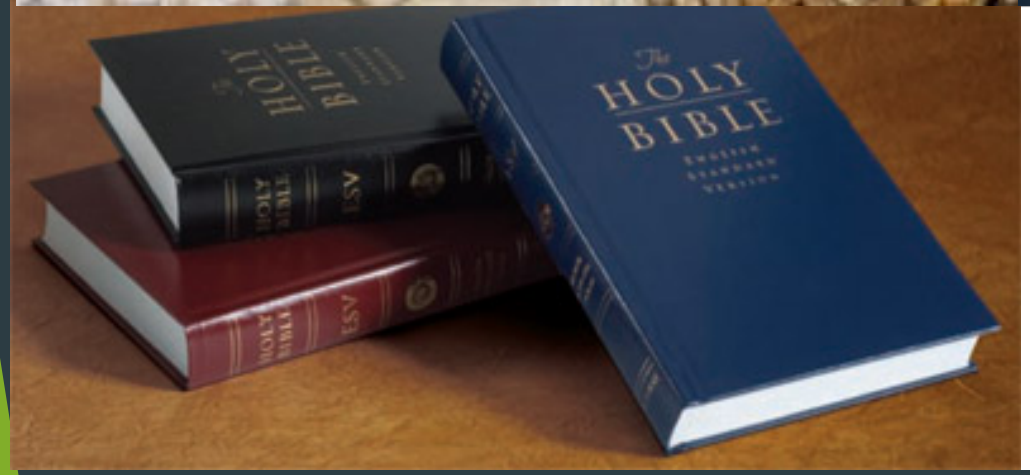
The phonetic alphabet is based on sounds rather than visual images.



The Phoenician Alphabet's Impact

The alphabet had a great impact on Greek philosophy, science and religion

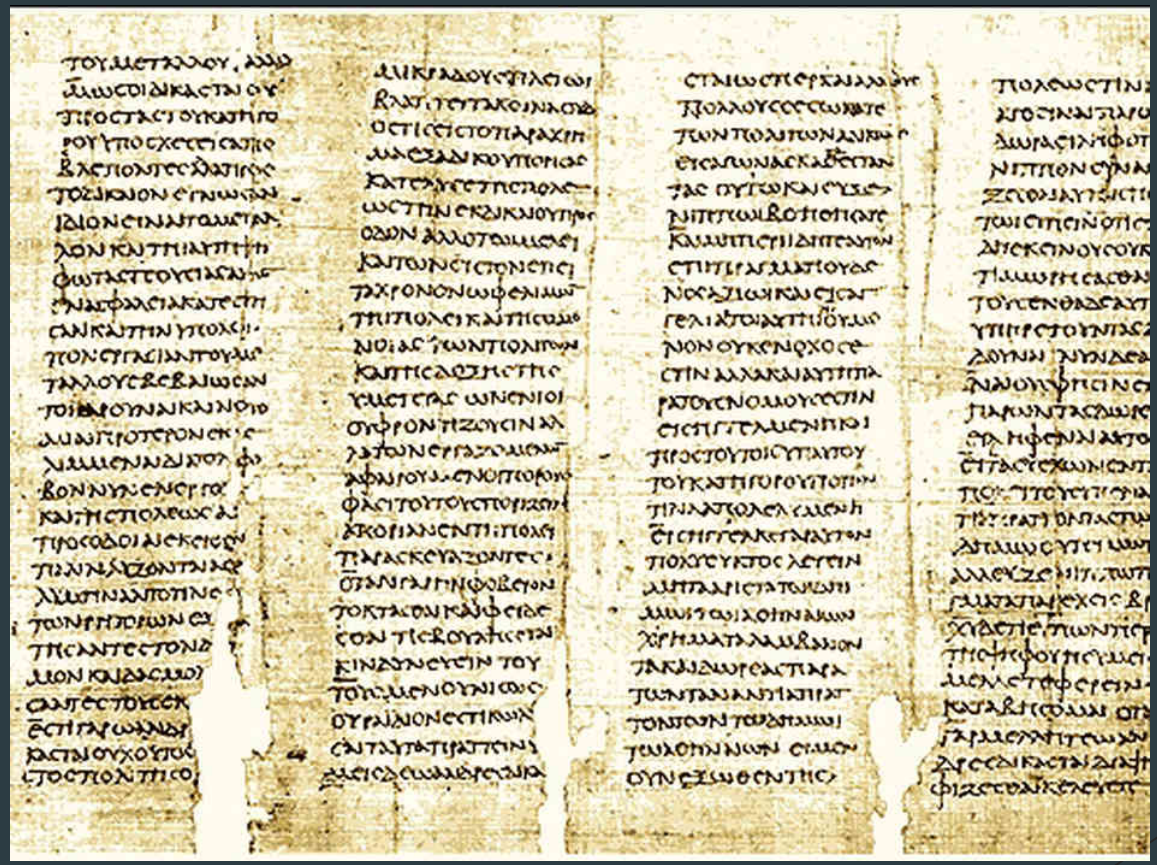




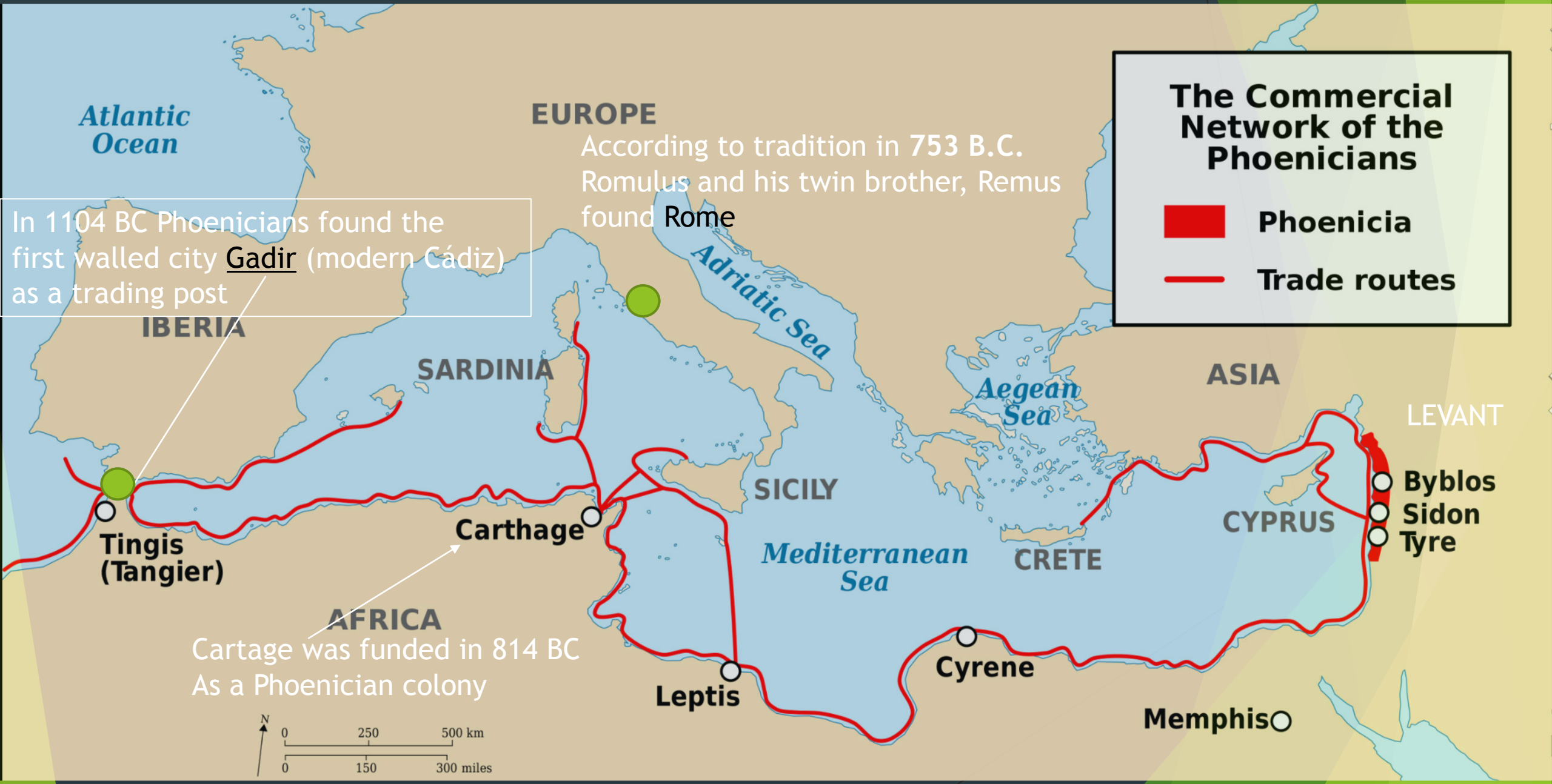
Α Β Γ Δ Ε Ζ Η Θ Ι Κ Λ Μ Ν
Ξ Ο Π Ρ Σ Τ Υ Φ Χ Ψ Ω
α β γ δ ε ζ η θ ι κ λ μ ν
ξ ο π ρ ς σ τ υ φ χ ψ ω

The Phoenician Alphabet & Greek Philosophy

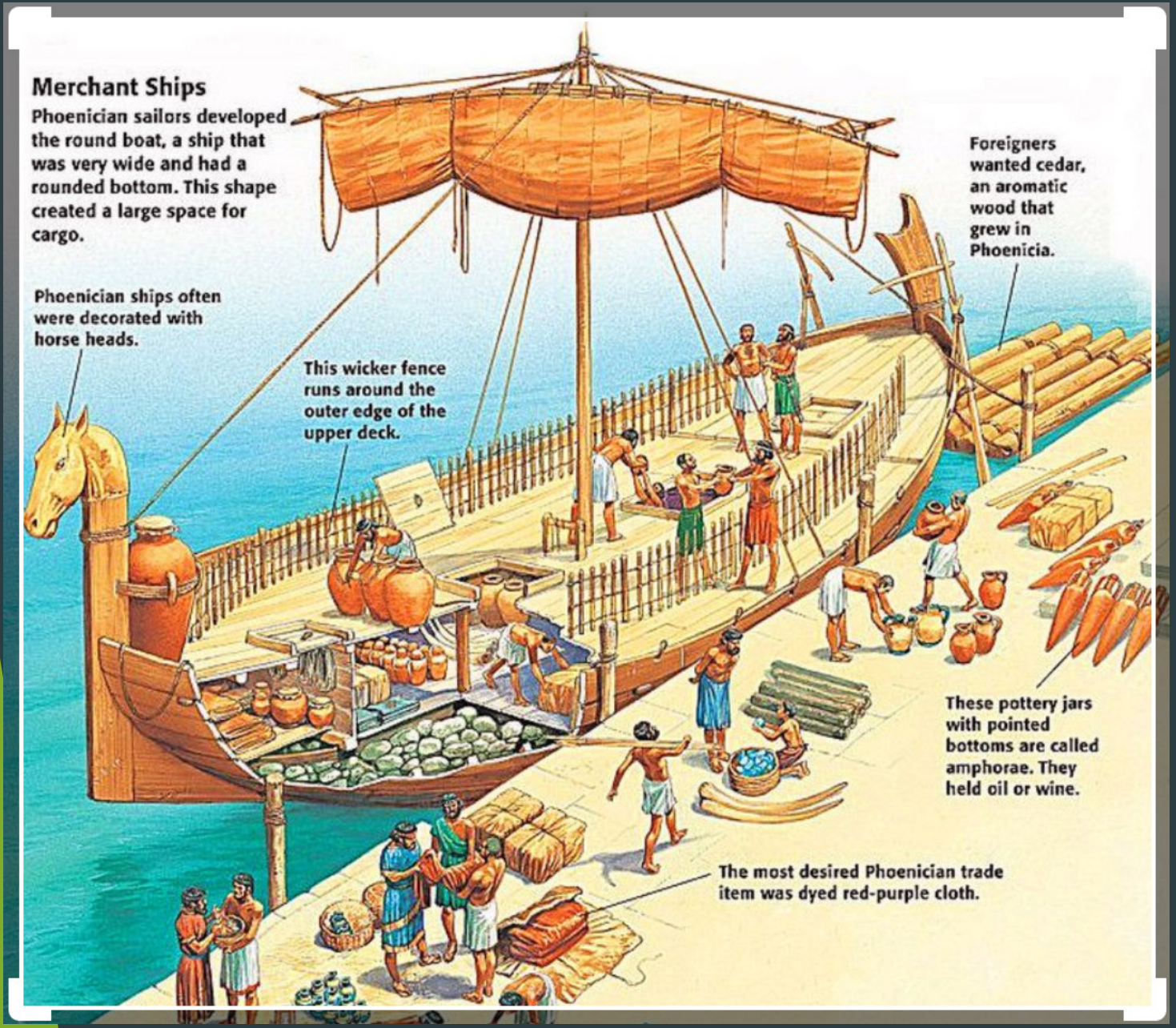
The alphabet made it easier to record some of ancient Greek's philosopher's theories. Without their written accounts, their theories might have been long forgotten in today's world.



The Phoenicians__Bronze age

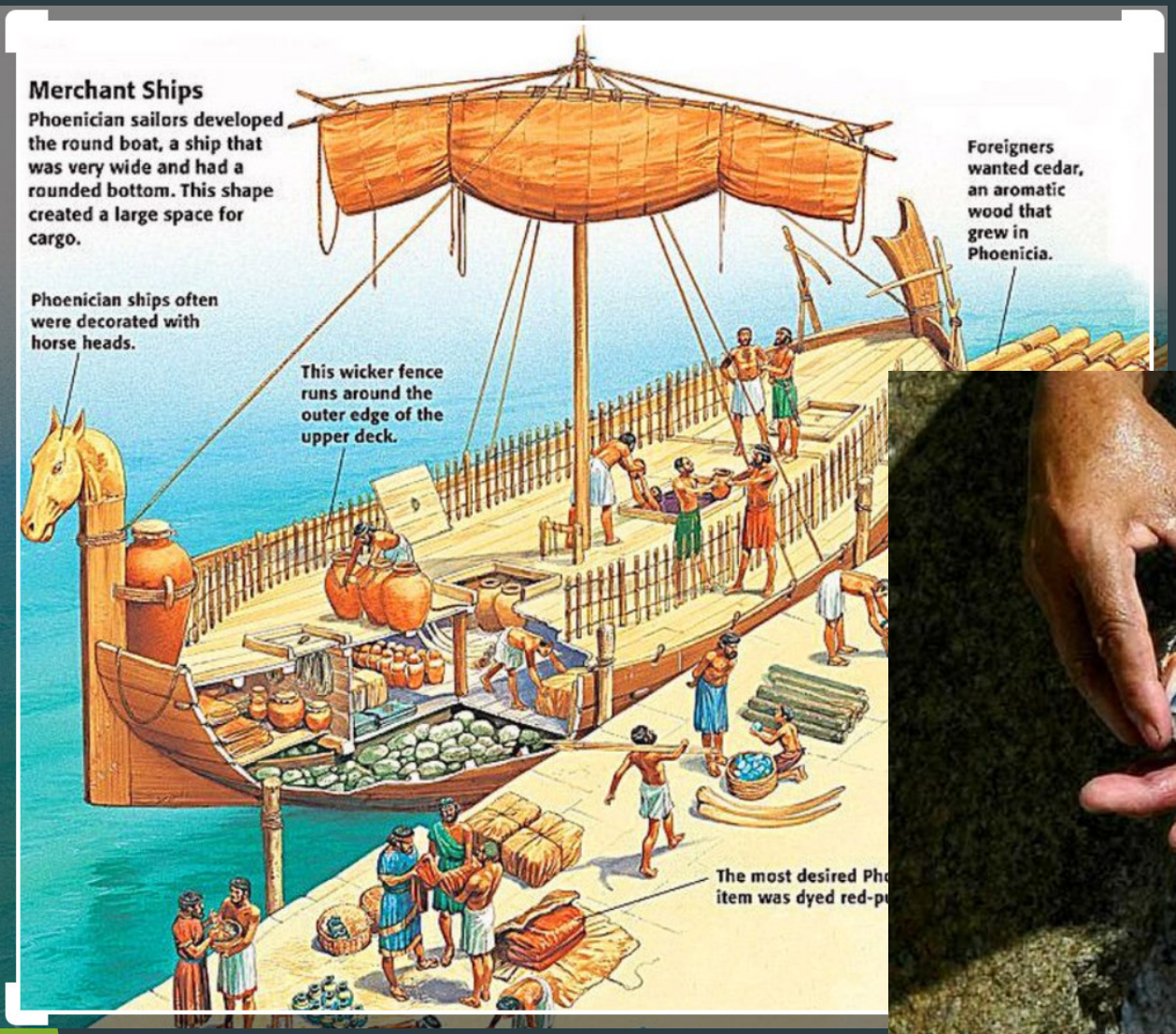


The Phoenicians, traders of Oil and Wine

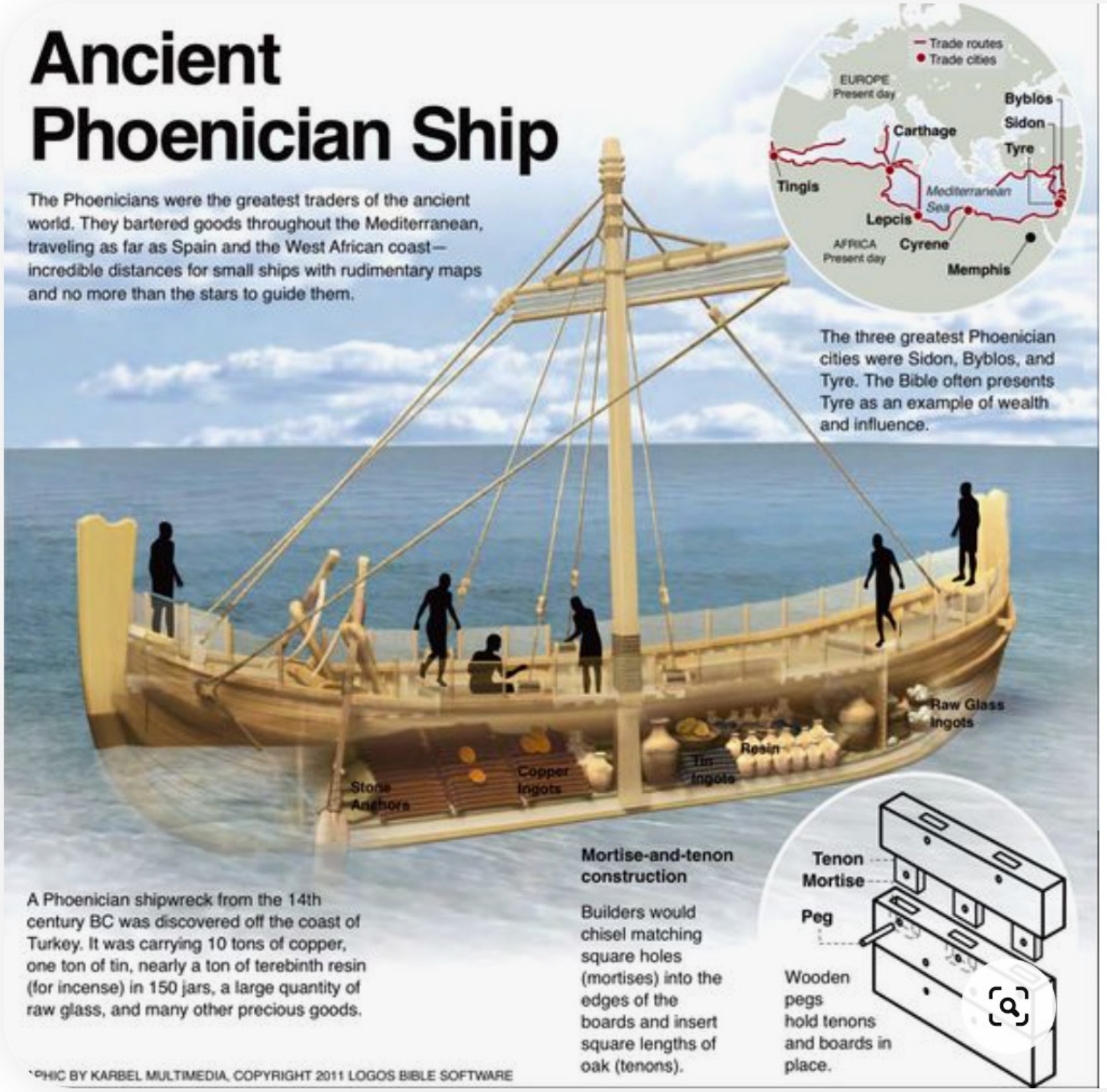


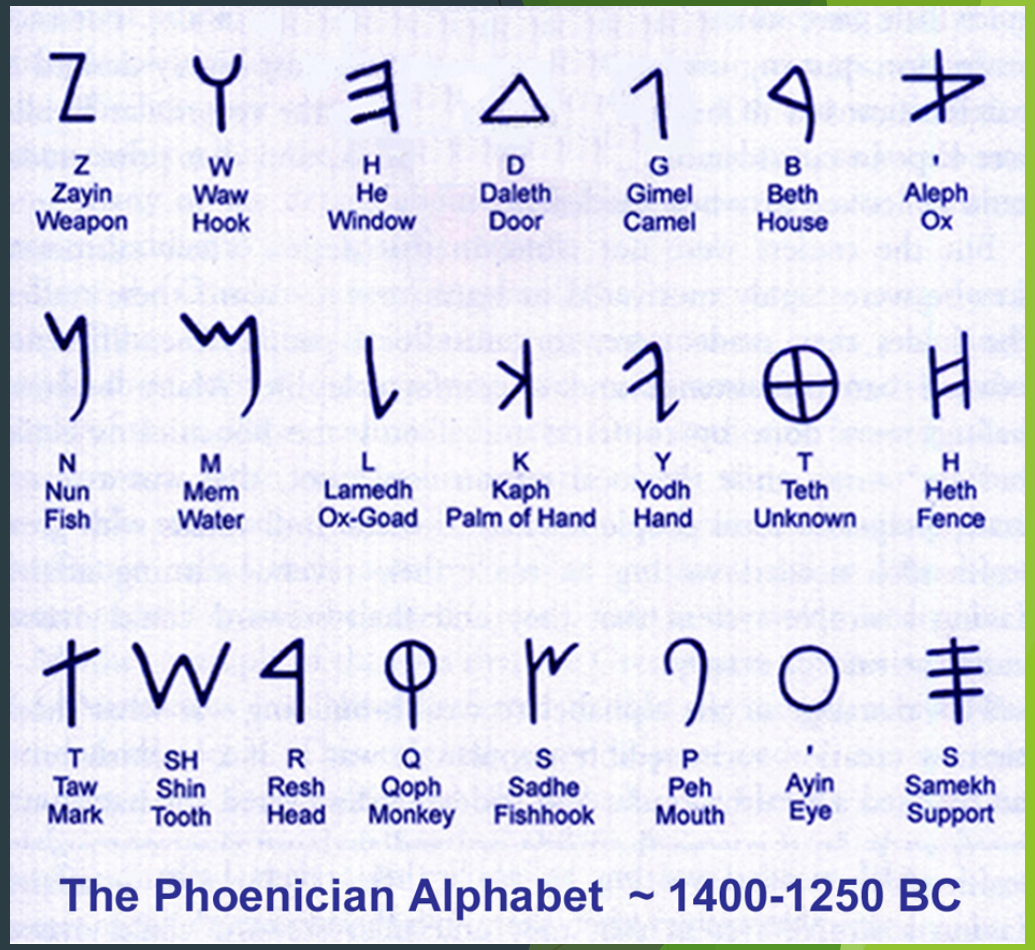
Phoenician amphorae

The Phoenicians, traders



Tyrian purple, also known as Phoenician red, later on Imperial dye

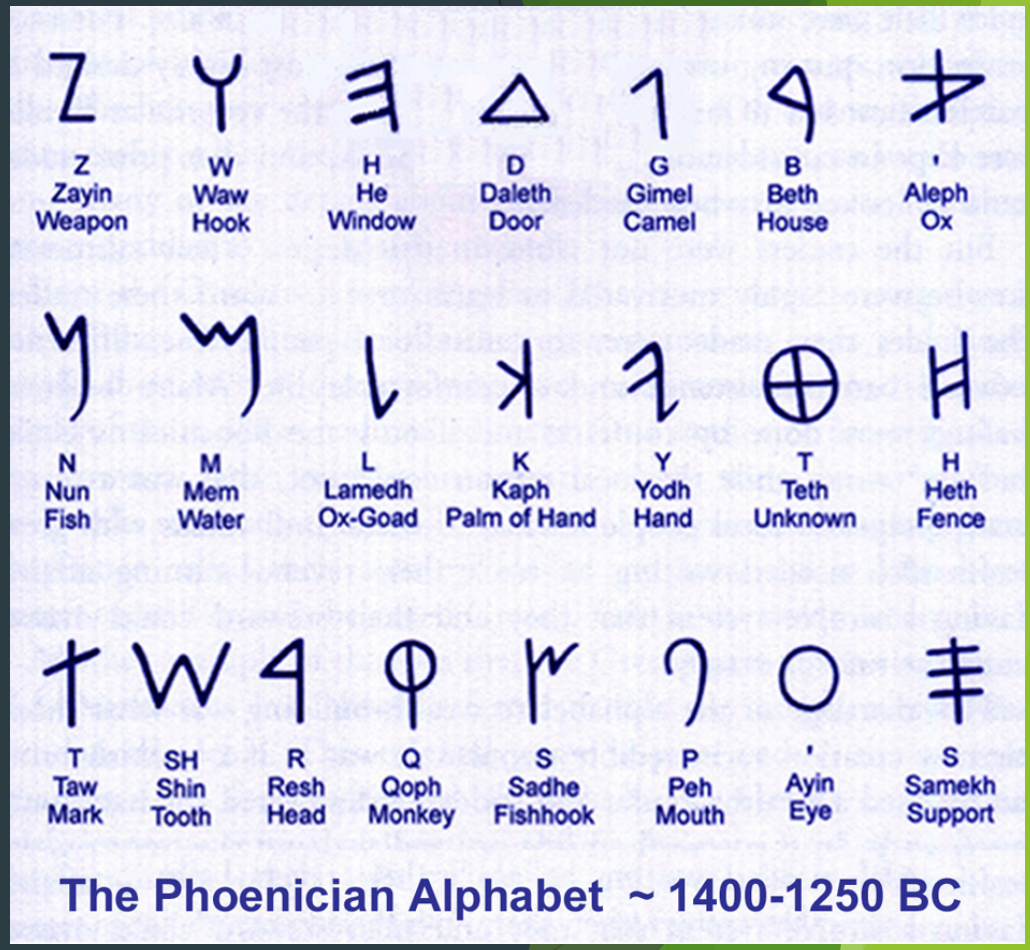




A phonetic alphabet for Mediterranean traders

Possible correspondences between Hieroglyphs, Phoenician and Latin alphabets

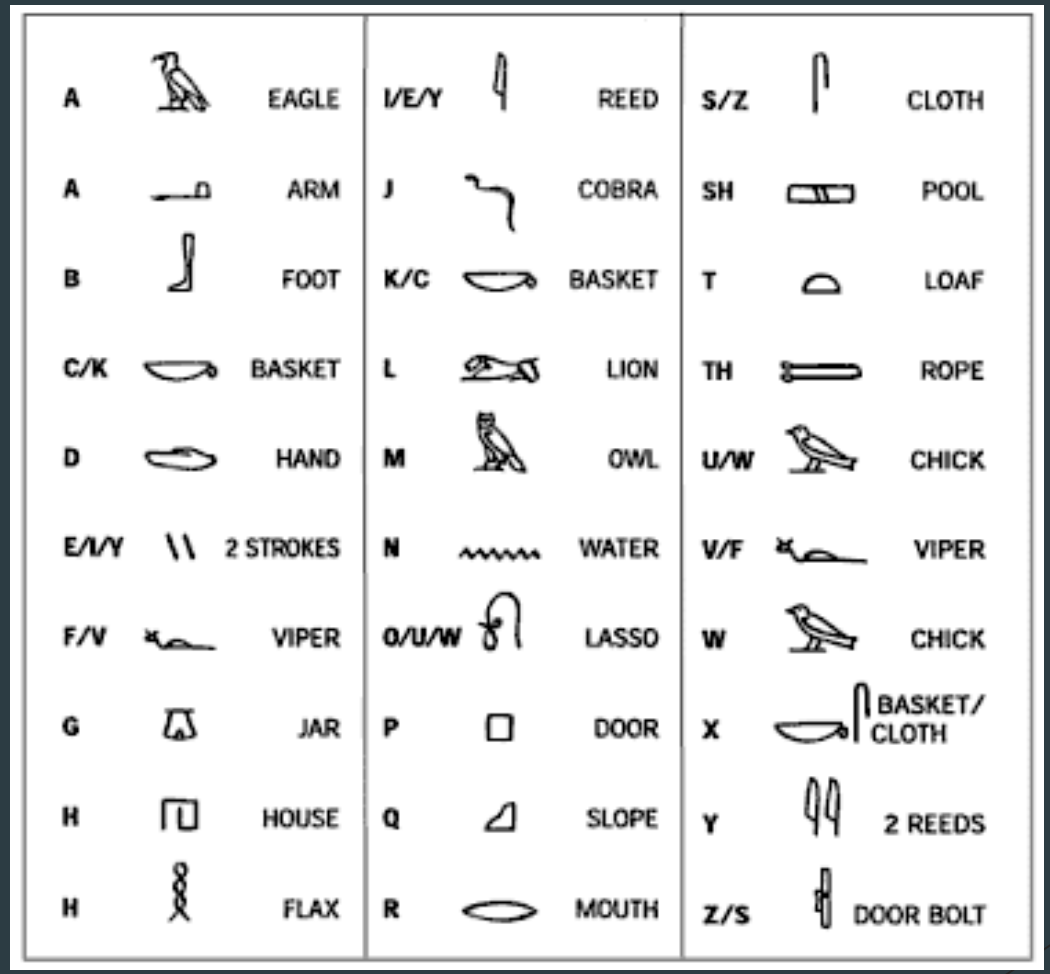
Hieroglyph	Proto-Sinaitic	IPA value	Reconstructed name	Proto-Canaanite	Phoenician	Archaic Greek	Modern Greek	Etruscan	Latin
		/ʔ/	ʾalp "ox"				A		A
		/b/	bayt "house"				B		B
		/g/	gaml "throwstick"				Γ		C G
		/d/	dag "fish"				Δ		D
		/h/	haw/hillul "praise"				E		E
		/w/	waw/uph "fowl"			F Y	F Y		F U W V Y
		/z/	zayn/zayt "sword"				Z		Z
		/ð/	ḏiqq "manacle"						
		/ħ/	ḥaṣr "courtyard"				H		H
		/x/	ḫayt "thread"						
		/tˤ/	ṭab "good"				Θ		
		/j/	yad "hand"				I		I J
		/k/	kap "palm"				K		K
		/l/	lamd "goad"				Λ		L
		/m/	maym "water"				M		M
		/n/	naḥaš "snake"				N		N
		/s/	śamk "peg"				Ξ		
		/ʕ/	ʿayn "eye"				O		O
		/ɣ/	ġabiʿ "calyx"						
		/p/	pʾit "corner"				Π		P
		/sˤ/ ~ /tθˤ/ ~ /ðˤ/	ṣaday "plant"				M		
		/kˤ/ or /q/	qoba "needle/nape/monkey"				Q		Q
		/r/	raʾš "head"				P		R
		/ʃ/	šimš "sun"				Σ		S
		/ɬ/	śadeh "field, land"						
		/θ/	ṯann "bow"				T		T
		/t/	tāw "mark"						



A phonetic alphabet for Mediterranean traders

Before the Alphabet: Pictographs

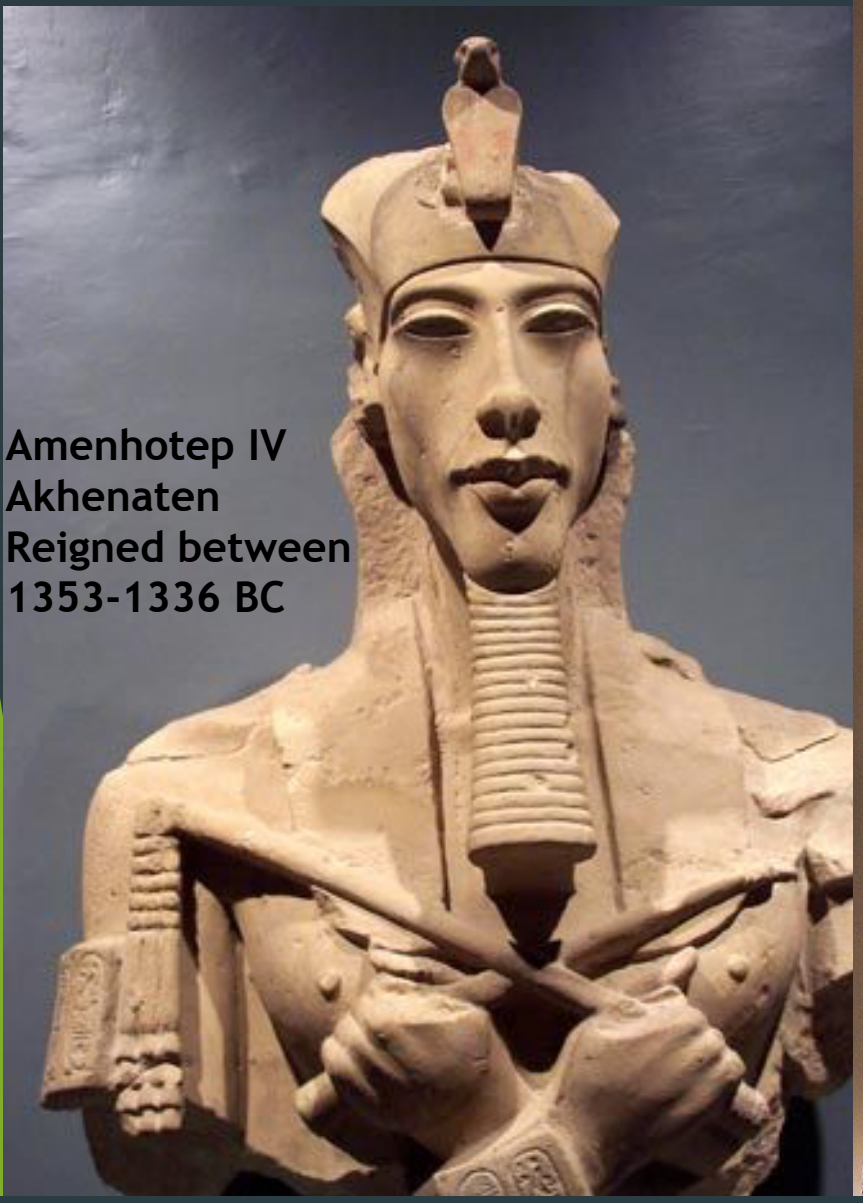
Because they relied on images instead of sounds, there were far more characters to describe specific objects and therefore was harder to learn.



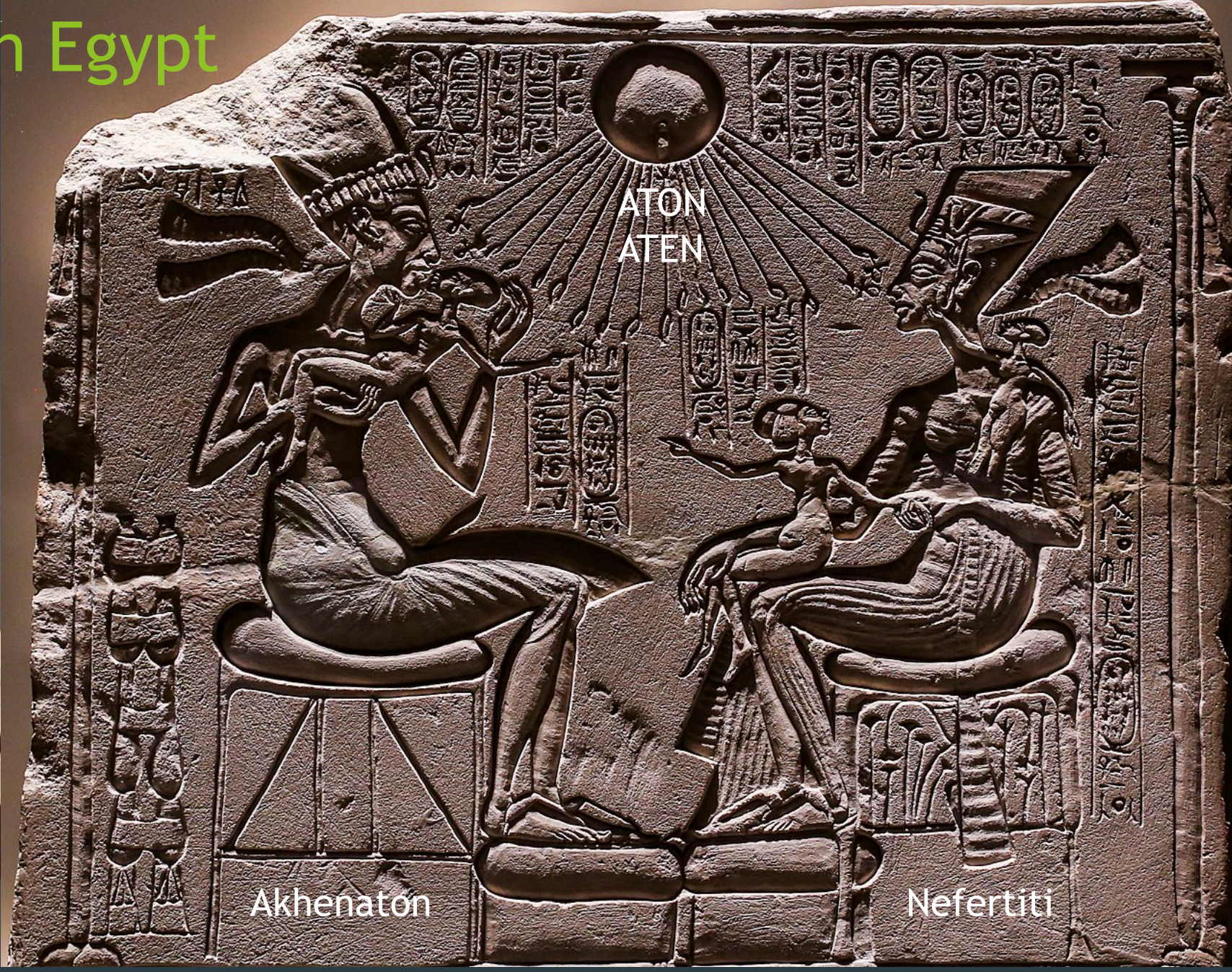
Before the Phonetic Alphabet

Before the phonetic alphabet existed, different ways of written communication existed. Hieroglyphics in Egypt preserved the spoken word

Pharaoh Akhenaton Egypt



Amenhotep IV
Akhenaten
Reigned between
1353-1336 BC



Shift away from Traditional Egyptian religion, that was Polytheistic

Monotheistic Pharaoh Akhenaton

Akhenaten is noted for abandoning Egypt's Polytheistic religion and introducing a Monotheistic Faith, centered in the worship of Aten/Aton, the back sun.

This idea was probably based on the Thebes god Amun: "the Hidden one"

https://www.ancient.eu/amun/

Jewish Tribes and the Writing of their Covenant with a monotheistic God

The Tetragrammaton in Phoenician (12th century BCE to 150 BCE), Paleo-Hebrew (10th century BCE to 135 CE), and square Hebrew (3rd century BCE to present) scripts

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YHWH: Creator god: invisible, omnipotent, omnipresent

Medieval book production in Europe
Illuminated manuscripts

An illumination depicting a scriptorium in action, from a manuscript in the Biblioteca de San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Madrid, Spain,

"The scriptorium of Fonte Avellana, a monastery in Italy, established around 980 AD

The Monopolies of Knowledge

"What the difficulty of pictographs did for the priests in ancient Egypt, the difficulty of life in general did for Christian priests for nearly a thousand years in Europe: it insured their position as guardians of a monopoly of knowledge"

- Paul Levinson

The Printing Press

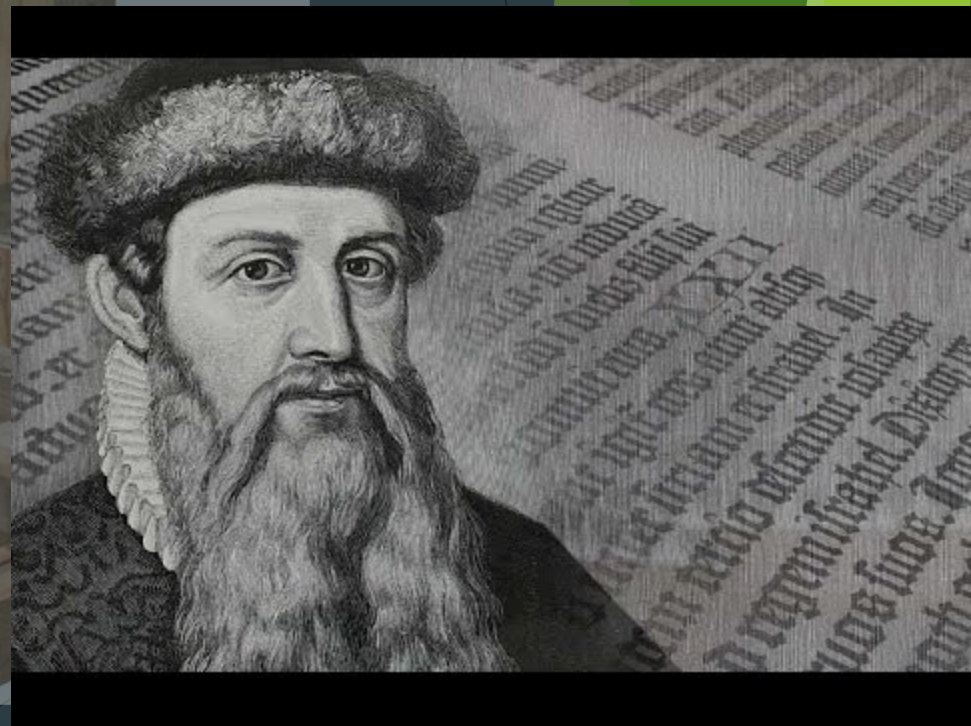
The simplicity of the phonetic alphabet made it possible to use the Gutenberg's printing press (adapted from the Chinese printing press that was impossible to use because of the 20,000 characters in the Chinese ideographic alphabet).

The Chinese Printing Press gets to Europe

A small model of the original Chinese Press probably got to Italy as a present from the Kublai Khan to the Polo family of merchant/travelers from Venice and was brought back Marco Polo, in 1295, after 24 years of adventure.

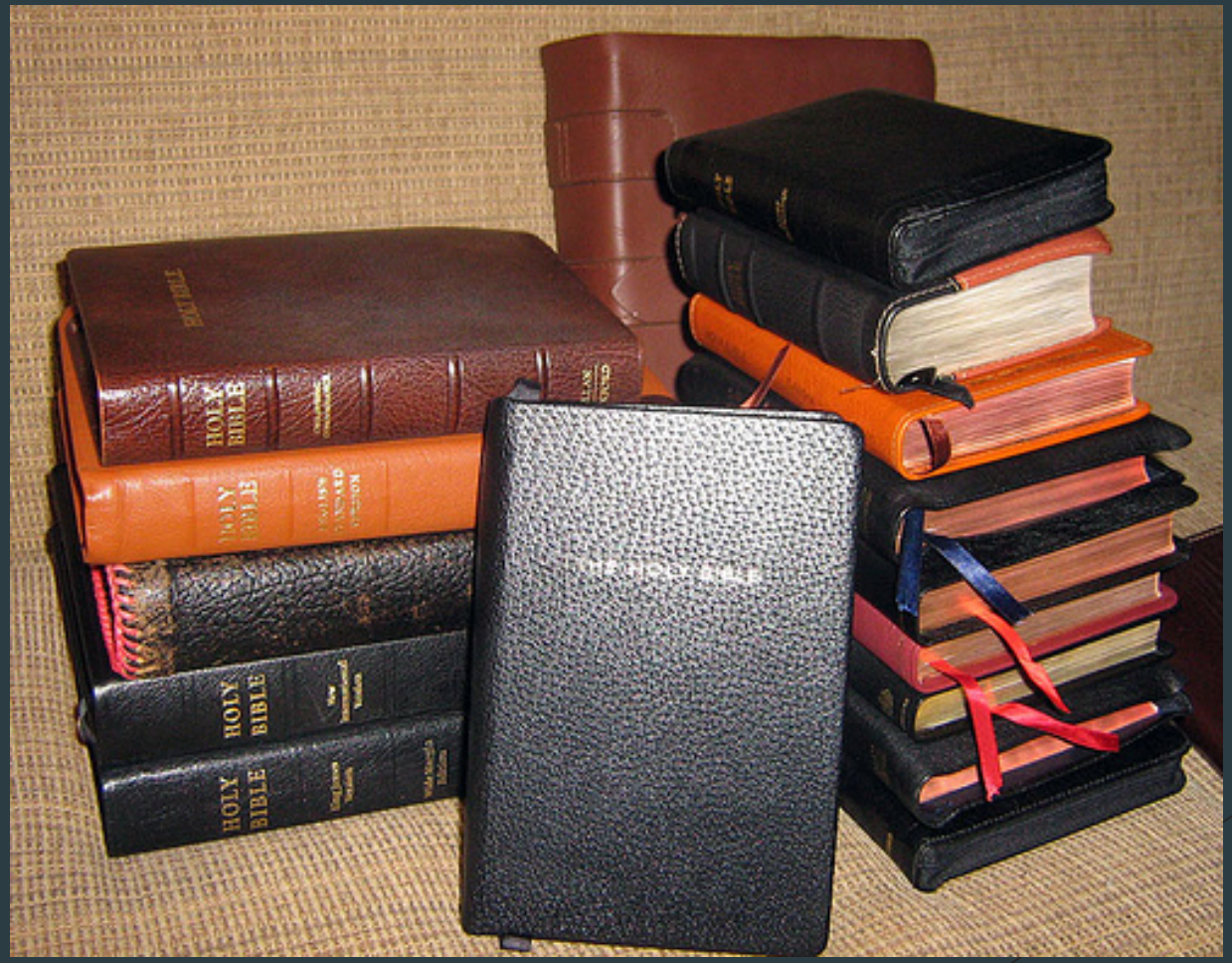
The Printing Press

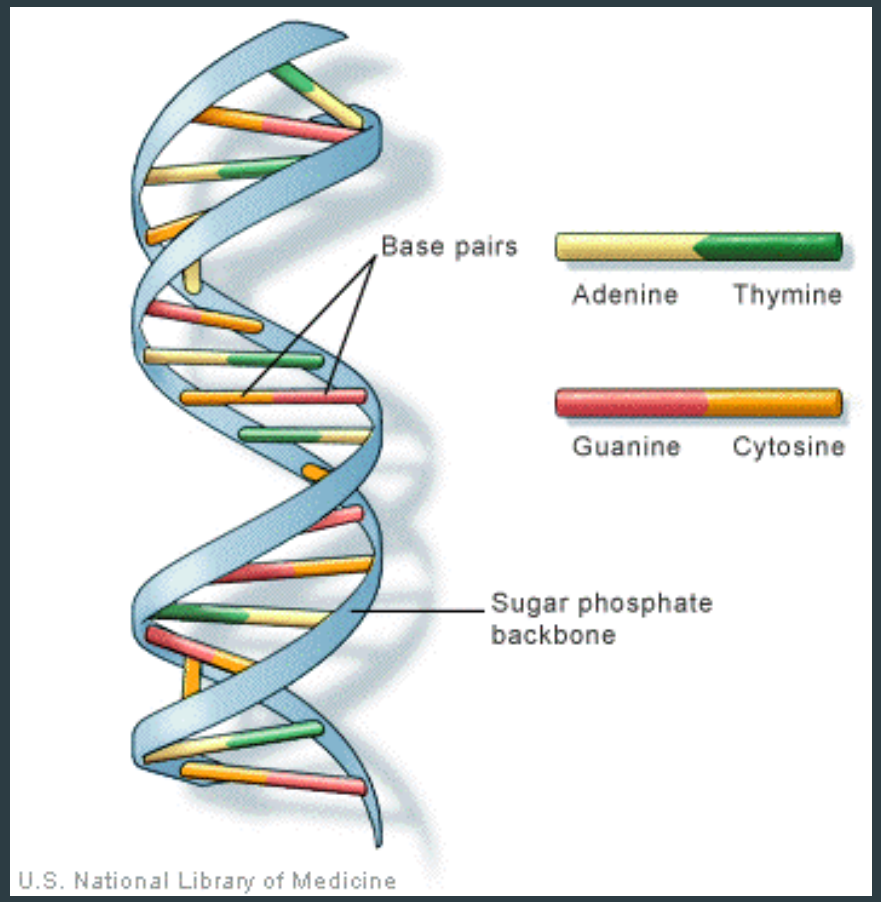
Johannes Gutenberg



The Printing Press & Religion

The printing press made it possible to mass print bibles which led to catholic followers reading the bible for themselves and starting the protestant revolution



The Printing Press & Science

Scientific findings were more easily accessible which made it easier for scientists to test each others theories, write about them, and then receive feedback