

Research Article

Forum

The Spelling Problem

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Abstract

It is generally accepted by scholars that the songs of Homer were first written in ~ 700 BCE; the text seems to spring fully formed into a still illiterate world, demonstrating in a sophisticated vocabulary the first example of the use of a new alphabet. The language used is a never-spoken construct; its construction represents the first use of an alphabet enabling words to be written. This paper aims to open a discussion on the means by which spelling emerged, either democratically or as the work of one man.

Keywords: Ancient Greek, alphabet, Homer, ancient spelling

The concise paper by Jerome Moran in the *Journal* (vol 23, pp. 33–34) is a valuable summary of one of the most fascinating movements in the development of human literacy – the means by which the Homeric epics become over many centuries available to us today. The story has been told before, of course, notably and most fully by Geoffrey Kirk (1965). That there was a transition from the recitation by rhapsodes to (eventually) a written text is now agreed. Just how that process took place is not. Recent participation in a Homer Reading Group has encouraged me to think again about the problem.

I have been thinking about the many steps which must have been inevitable for that process to be possible, and it is these steps that I want to explore here, in the hope of initiating further discussion amongst scholars and teachers who will in general have much greater knowledge than I of the stages I'm exploring. The context is stated most simply by Moran in his paragraph 3: 'Writing became available...' What a profusion of invisible stages is embraced in those simple three words.

The only work I have come across which comes close to thinking about this issue is Barry Powell's *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet* (1996). But even here the argument is about the alphabet, not about how it was put to use in creating and fostering systems of spelling. Powell's basic argument is that the Greek alphabet was the work of one person and was adopted primarily for the recording of verse in general, and the verse of Homer in particular. So far so good, even if still debatable; I address below the idea that Homer might have been an early significant 'speller'. Powell also points out that literacy is absent in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; he observes that the poems were written before any significant literacy had spread. (Does this point cover Bellerophon's 'letter' in *Iliad* vi?) We still have the massive problem that an alphabet is of no value until we

can write words with their component letters and then read them; and spelling had to precede all of that.

I need to start by outlining what I take to be the approximate timeline underlying the process. As I understand these matters:

- Phoenician script adopted by Greeks – syllabic, consonantal only, no vowels – perhaps 800 BCE at the earliest.
- The new script adapted by the Greeks by the addition of symbols for vowels and the creation of new letters for the sounds phi, chi, psi and perhaps the digamma.
- Evidence of the existence of a written text of the *Iliad* – perhaps 700 BCE at the earliest.

Incidentally I use here the convenient phrase 'The Greeks' because classical scholars use the term; but what do we mean by it? Presumably only a very small number of people began the process, little realising what they were launching. The dates are subject to errors of perhaps plus/minus 50 years, but those I have suggested might be accepted by the majority of authorities, and will suffice for the present as I explore the issues which concern me. If these dates are accepted as broadly correct, we have a period of 100 years during which a great transformation must have taken place.

'The Greeks' adopted and adapted an alphabet. This is in itself a huge leap forward – but by whom or by which group was it done? How does a society collate and promulgate a collective viewpoint – or rather those members of the society with the experience and intelligence to think about these things and articulate a need, given that then, and for a long period thereafter, ordinary folk were illiterate and had no need for an alphabet?

The new alphabet must have been accepted as a useful tool by those members of proto-Greek society who first grasped its value. These I suggest are likely to be the traders within and beyond the coastline (the Phoenicians and many others) who had been using other means, perhaps marks on clay tablets or on papyrus, to record their

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Cite this article: Bainbridge AF (2024). The Spelling Problem. *The Journal of Classics Teaching* 1–2. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631024000072>

transactions – continuing thereby the technique of the Linear B tablets. Buyer and seller would have needed their own records, and were therefore ‘literate’ to the level where such marks gave the information both required. Participants in such trades would have been quick to see the advantages of a wider range of symbols, whose usage would have spread, perhaps rapidly, through the commercial world of the day.

I assume therefore that the commercial classes would be amongst the first to make the leap to use vowel sounds and to spell the words they used. (This would lead one to speculate that the first words to be spelled as they were articulated might have been the terms used in commercial transactions.) Other groups to follow might have been teachers in the scattered communities, who (again following the lead of someone who recognised the potential of the new alphabet in schools) might have quickly adopted the new tool and begun to teach it.

Of course, the hitherto spoken language would have had no words signifying ‘consonant’ or ‘vowel’, so even the initiation of any kind of discussion on these matters would have been difficult.

But the practical difficulties in getting the new ideas widely promulgated are yet to be faced. How did this happen? Who (singular or plural), for example, first suggested the need for vowel sounds, essential if texts were eventually going to be written and read, but before either writing or reading were even hinted at? Getting agreement across a scattered society has never been easy; how was any sense of unanimity arrived at – the diverse possibilities debated, spoken words analysed into syllables and phonemes, suitable letters allocated?

The Homeric sagas contain about 9,000 words. Take a not uncommon but complex word from the *Odyssey*, often applied to Telemachus: *πεπνυμενος*, being wise, of good sense. In Attic derivation the participle derives from *πεπνυμαι*, have intelligence, be wise. It also links with the older Greek *πνεω*, breathe; which in turn may have been *πνεFω* before the digamma disappeared. Now consider the steps required to reach any kind of agreement on the spelling of the Homeric *πεπνυμενος*, let alone its predecessors or derivatives. Or take the interesting word *διαφθειρω*, to destroy, with its two adjacent central consonants, difficult to pronounce even today for a student when first exposed to it; it would have been interesting to be around when that spelling or something close to it was first debated.

To put this problem more starkly: if you had no knowledge of any Indo-European language, still less of modern English, and had only recently begun to use an alphabet of any kind, how could you begin to analyse words like *cough*, *generation*, *threat*, so as to be able to originate spelled versions and then read them? And a journey to *Loughborough* becomes very problematic.

I dream that in a coffee shop in Old Smyrna a group of enthusiastic amateur etymologists are debating the spelling of a word they have used all their lives, *λίμνη*, which to one of the group signifies (in our terms) a harbour. Another, who because he comes from a community several stades away, gives the syllables a slightly different emphasis, *λίμην*, and says, ‘Sorry, chaps, that word means lake to us.’ So they agree to try to spell out two words using the same five of the ‘new’ letters, but having different emphasis (without at that stage the use of accents) and different meanings.

A thousand stadia away, in the snug at the *Ship of Theseus* public house in downtown Athens, another group, equally enthusiastic about this new toy, are trying, after a few jugs of mead, to agree on the spelling of an unusual word applied orally to the goddess Athene, *γλαυκωπις*, grey-eyed or blue-eyed or glaring-eyed or gleaming-eyed; they cannot even agree on a precise meaning because the word is used across the land in slightly different contexts (but perhaps one of the group has a goddess of a girlfriend

with grey eyes). They don’t have a problem agreeing on the consonants *γ λ κ π ζ*, but a fight breaks out over the vowels to be used in forming the sound of the phonemes we now identify as *αυ*, *ω*, *ι*. What to do? There is no external arbiter to settle disputes; still less a national authority to unify all the contending ideas.

And all this had to have happened within a period of about a century, with spelling, writing and reading developing almost contemporarily. How were the ideas and proposals on spelling shared and propagated? This can only have been through the slow dissemination of written work, initially to the better educated – teachers, traders, lawyers and so on – in a gradual process of raising awareness and creating a wish to learn amongst others; and thus literacy can spread slowly through a society.

But perhaps I’m wrong in suggesting that, one way or another, the man in the street – or the pub – became involved. At the time when the first records of a feasible text were made this argumentative method would have led to many possible versions of the spelling of each word; unless one can believe that only one person (let’s call him Homer) felt driven to undertake the task and his massive presence gave him the leverage to lead. Perhaps, as Powell suggests, Homer invented spelling as he scratched at his clay tablet or papyrus sheet. Can we imagine that he realised, as he listened to a rhapsode, that he could match the sounds he heard with a suitable symbol from a list? Perhaps, just as children today learn the alphabet by reciting, ‘a b c d e f g...’ and go on to spell ‘cat’, so the new alphabet available in dark age Greece was learned and recited by rote in homes and schools, so that their sounds could be attached to the successive syllables by a great and imaginative thinker who, having started his learning in school, could analyse the sounds he heard in a recitation into successive syllables and words.

I admit that I find it difficult to believe that Homer, for all his genius, originated the notion and application of spelling; certainly, as the first writer of the epics he would have grasped at the new and essential capability, and he must have been a very early user; but I favour the notion that the process was more widely participative, starting perhaps in the commercial world and spreading rapidly outwards as people grasped this splendid new competence and thereby slowly became literate.

So where do we go from here. I am asserting that to move from the existence of well-established oral epics to phrases like ‘writing becomes available’ skips over what is in my view the most fascinating process of all – the learning, agreement on, and spread of spellings (however diverse), writing and reading within 100 years. And we know little or nothing about that.

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