

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 13:
GREECE, PHOENICIA AND THE ALPHABET**

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This time I'm going to explore the beginning of the Greek alphabet which is the ultimately the same alphabet we use today.

But before I begin, let me mention a couple of things about the alphabet and this podcast series. Obviously, the story of the alphabet is part of the story of English. And my general approach here is to discuss the development and evolution of the alphabet as I move forward with the story of English. So it isn't my intention to tell the entire story of the alphabet in one episode or even a series of episodes because the development of the alphabet spans the entire scope of this podcast. But a few listeners have asked that I spend some time on the history of the alphabet and explore the history of all the letters the way I did with the history of the letter 'C' in an earlier episode. So I have decided to do just that. But to tell the entire story of the alphabet, it would take several episodes. So I am in the process of preparing a series of episodes related to the entire history of the alphabet and the letters which we use today. These episodes will be separate from this podcast series, and they will include some of the information which I cover in this series, as well as lots of information that is not covered here. And I am going to make these episodes available for a small fee of probably \$5 which will help to cover some of the costs associated with producing and hosting this podcast. And the alphabet series will be available at the website – historyofenglishpodcast.com. And I will also try to make it available through iTunes as well. I hope to have those episodes available very shortly and I will give you an update when they're ready.

So let's turn our attention back to this episode and look at how the Greeks came to discover the alphabet.

Last time, I looked at the arrival of the first Indo-Europeans into Greece. These were the Mycenaean Greeks with a civilization centered around the ancient Greek city of Mycenae. And we looked at the competition between the ancient Hittites and the Egyptians to the east. But around 1100 BC, the entire eastern Mediterranean fell into a state of chaos as a result of the so-called 'invasion of the sea-peoples.' And in its wake, the Greek civilization and the Hittite Empire collapsed. And the influence of ancient Egypt was severely curtailed as well as it retreated back to the Nile Valley.

In this episode, we will look at the ensuing period of Greek history which is known as the Greek Dark Age. And we will look at the emergence of the first alphabet, and with it, the emergence of Greece from the Dark Age into the literate Classical Greek period which is the ultimate basis of much of western civilization. And with the emergence of this new Greek civilization after the Dark Age, we get the wide-spread use of the brand-new alphabet, we get the spread of literacy, and we get the advent of writing, literature and many words which have found their way into Modern English.

So let's begin with the aftermath of the invasion of the sea-peoples in the 12th century BC. As I said, many of the civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean had collapsed during this period. And a general vacuum of power existed throughout the region. This included modern-day

Greece, Turkey and the eastern Mediterranean coast – including modern day Syria, Lebanon and Israel.

During the so-called Dark Age period which followed, several very important events occurred. In fact, the events of this period shaped much of the subsequent history of Europe and the Middle East. And these events have implications on our language, our culture and our politics even today.

So let's look at what happened.

And first, let's look at what was happening in Greece.

With the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization, we also lost the writing system which they had developed called Linear B. Remember that the Indo-European Mycenaean Greeks has apparently borrowed the linear script from the Minoans on Crete, and they had adapted the script to their own Greek language. But also remember that even though this script resembles an alphabet, it is not an alphabet. Like most of the writing during this period, it was based on syllables. So it was a syllabic script. And this meant that each syllable was represented by a character or symbol. This was the same general concept as hieroglyphic writing which was common in Egypt and cuneiform writing which was common throughout much of the Near East at the time.

Since all of these syllable-based writing systems were based on syllables, and since there were lots of potential syllables in any given languages, it required the memorization and use of many symbols. So these writing systems were always limited to a very small portion of the population who could actually read and write with them. And consequently, writing during this early period was generally limited to governmental and commercial functions. But literature in the sense that we would later come to know it was very rare during this period.

With the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization, the Linear B script that they had developed stopped being used with any regularity, and it eventually disappeared altogether. With the loss of writing in Greece, we also lost recorded history such that it existed. So that's why we call the following three centuries the "Dark Age." It's as if someone turned out the lights because written records tend to disappear during this period.

Of course, even though the Greeks didn't have a written language during this period, the earliest Indo-European Greek language was still being spoken, and it was constantly evolving throughout the Aegean.

And this leads us to the other significant event that occurred in Greece during this period. During the Greek Dark Age, Greece experienced an extended period of migrations and resettlements. We don't know a lot about the earlier Mycenaean civilization, but archaeological evidence suggests a certain uniformity of the culture throughout Greece during this period. But during and after the invasion of the sea peoples, these early Greeks apparently experienced a great deal of movement and migrations. This could have involved the actual invaders from the north who triggered the events which led to the Dark Age period. The invaders were likely other Indo-

European tribes who would have spoken very closely related Indo-European dialects during this very early period. But it also probably involved native Mycenaean Greeks who were displaced by the invasions – and who migrated in a general eastward direction looking for new territory in which to settle.

I mentioned this in the last episode with respect to the Dorians. As you may recall, I noted that some historians believe that the original invaders from the north were the Dorians who were a specific group of Indo-Europeans. But other historians think the Dorians were already in place before the invasions began. And other historians think they arrived after the invasions to fill the vacuum left in the aftermath. Part of the reason why there is so much debate regarding this issue among historians is because the Dorians were in place in Greece at the end of the Dark Age. And the Dorians were the linguistic ancestors of the people of Corinth and Sparta. They spoke so-called Doric dialect of Greek. The Doric dialect also spread into and came to dominate Crete as well.

Meanwhile, in other parts of Greece, other Greek dialects had emerged. The Ionic dialects were being spoken around the rim of the Aegean including eastern Greece and western Anatolia. This Ionic family of dialects included the Attic dialect which was the primary dialect of the ancient city of Athens. And this Attic dialect is actually the ancient ancestor of the modern Greek language.

The third major Greek dialect was Aeolic which was spoken in northern Greece and northern Anatolia. We don't really know what the circumstances were that led to this division of dialects since writing had disappeared during this period. But it appears that there was some distinction between these dialects even during the late Mycenaean period. But after the invasion of the tribes from the north which led to the Dark Age period, these existing dialects moved with the migration of tribes and peoples throughout the region. By the end of the Dark Age, when writing begins to re-emerge, we have a very good idea of where these various dialects were being spoken.

Now, late in the Greek Dark Age period, civilization slowly began to re-appear. And we start to see the emergence of the early Greek city-states. These were independent self-governing cities. And they included cities like Athens, Sparta, Corinth, Thebes and many others. Each city-state had a common language or dialect, and they had a common religion. And city-states which shared a common dialect usually shared other cultural connections which reflects the fact that they were probably descended from common ancestors who had a common culture and spoke a common dialect as well. And these connections typically resulted in alliances. So for example, the Dorians could usually count on other Dorian cities to come to their aid in time of war. So Corinth could call upon Sparta for help if it needed it.

And by the same token, Greeks who spoke other dialects were often viewed as rivals. So it is in this context that we see the early rise of Doric-speaking Sparta and Attic-speaking Athens as the two primary Greek rivals during the early Classical Greek period. These two cities – Athens and Sparta – eventually emerged as the most dominant and important Greek city-states.

When the city of Mycenae collapsed, the Dorians had rushed in to fill the vacuum in the region around Mycenae. And in the aftermath, regional power passed from the decaying city of Mycenae to the emerging Dorian city of Sparta.

Meanwhile, to the east, the community of Athens had avoided much of the destruction associated with the northern invasions and the subsequent Dark Age. Consequently, it had become a haven for Mycenaean refugees, and it was therefore one of the quickest city-states to emerge from the Dark Age period.

The Greeks called a city-state a *polis*. And this word had made its way into lots of Modern English words. We see in the modern city names like *Minneapolis*, *Indianapolis* and *Annapolis*. This suffix was common in Greek city names. For example, Constantinople was called *Constantinopolis* by the Greeks. And as the Greeks spread around the Mediterranean establishing colonies, they called their home city the ‘mother-city’ which in Greek was *metropolis* – which we still have in English as both *metropolis* and *metropolitan*. Of course, the Greeks had the *Acropolis* which meant ‘high city’ in Greek, and it is the location of the well-known Acropolis at the top of a hill. So *Acropolis* was the ‘high city.’ Other English words which come from the Greek word *polis* include *policy*, *politics* and *police* – all of which relate to government functions associated with cities. By the way, all of these words get to us via Latin, which is the case with most Greek words.

Now, by the late Dark Age period, the various gods and goddesses associated with the various Greek city-states had started to be combined and arranged into a hierarchy which was common to all Greeks. Zeus, for example, was a god of the Dorian Greeks. Poseidon had come from the Minoans. Apollo was associated with Delphi. But they all became combined into a common, shared hierarchy of gods and goddesses.

So even though Greece was still fractured, we can start to see the early development of a common Greek culture. They began to share the same gods, and even though the dialects were different, they could still communicate with each other in a common language. And while there would be a great deal of in-fighting between these early Greeks during the following few centuries, their similarities would eventually overcome their differences in the face of outside threats later on – especially the threat of the Persian Empire.

So that’s what was happening in Greece during the Dark Age period. But what about the rest of the area to the east where destruction had occurred in the wake of the invasion of sea peoples?

To the east, the Indo-European Hittite Empire had collapsed. And the Egyptian kingdom had been severely weakened. If you recall from the last episode, both the Hittites and the Egyptians had tried to control the narrow coastal region along the eastern Mediterranean that extended from northern Egypt up to the Hittite kingdom in Anatolia. This region is not very big, but it is very important to Near Eastern history. It’s the home to modern day Israel, Lebanon, western Syria and Jordan. And the reason this narrow strip of land was so important is because it had good arable land being right along the coast even though it is basically surrounded by desert and arid land. So it was basically a strip of good land between the desert to the east and the Mediterranean

to the west. This meant that this land was not only good for settlement and farming, but it was also where all the trade routes converged. This included the trade routes from northern Africa to the south, Anatolia to the north, and Mesopotamia to the east.

All of those trade routes passed through the narrow strip of land. So whoever controlled this little bit of land had a tremendous amount of power. As they say in the real estate business, it's all about location, location, location. So, needless to say, there was a lot of competition for this little bit of land and there still is today.

The Battle of Kadesh was fought between the Hittites and Egyptians in large part to determine who would control this territory. Egypt had once controlled this land, but the expanding Hittite Empire had resulted in Hittite control of the northern portion. As you may recall, the Battle of Kadesh ended in a stalemate, so the region remained divided after the battle with the Hittites controlling the north and the Egyptians controlling the south.

But after the invasion of the sea-peoples, the Hittite Empire collapsed, and the Egyptians retreated back to the Nile Valley, and a power vacuum resulted in this region. And not surprisingly, that vacuum was quickly filled. And the reason why what happened here is so important to our story, is because it ultimately gave us the alphabet which we still use today.

During the time of the Egyptians and the Hittites, this narrow strip of coastal land was called Canaan. And that's a name that is probably very familiar to you if you've read the Old Testament of the Bible.

As I said, in the wake of the waning power of the Egyptians and the Hittites, various tribes began to pour into the region. These people began to settle into communities which soon emerged as independent city-states. This rise of city-states here was essentially the same process that was happening at the same time over in Greece.

During this period, the region of Canaan was settled by Semitic-speaking tribes. These tribes had lived a generally nomadic lifestyle in and around the region for centuries. A few episodes back when I was discussing some of the early Indo-European migrations, I mentioned the emergence of the first civilizations in Mesopotamia. And I mentioned that the first evidence we have of the Semitic people was in the northern region of Mesopotamia up the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

We can think of the Semitic tribes by comparing them to the Indo-European tribes to the north. Initially, in this region of northern Mesopotamia, we can probably think of the Semitic tribes as both a specific ethnic and linguistic group. And over a period of several centuries, those early Semitic-speaking tribes migrated in a westward direction along the so-called 'fertile crescent' into the region of Canaan and even down into Egypt. And as they migrated, they probably mixed and combined with other groups and tribes and peoples along the way so that at some point we still have a common language or language family – the Semitic languages. But we have to be careful about assuming very much about the ethnicity of these groups at this point. We should just consider them as a linguistic group. And the same is basically true of the Indo-

European tribes as well. At some point, we have to just think of them as linguistic groups and not really as ethnic groups anymore.

Now one particular group of Semitic-speaking tribes was the Hebrews or Israelites who had made their way to Egypt and had ended up being enslaved there. But more about them in a minute.

Up in Canaan – that narrow coastal strip of land which everyone wanted – other Semitic-speaking tribes had settled in. And they were connected to the Hebrews by language, but probably not much else. The Hebrews called these Semitic people the Canaanites. But the Greeks called them the Phoenicians. And ‘Canaanites’ and ‘Phoenicians’ are essentially two different terms which refer to the same people – the Semitic-speaking people who lived in this narrow strip of coastal land.

But historians today tend to make a subtle distinction in the way they use those terms. And the distinction has to do with what happened next. At this initial stage, historians generally call this entire area Canaan and the Semitic tribes who lived there the Canaanites. But soon, two more tribal groups decided to make an appearance there.

The Hebrews arrived from Egypt after escaping enslavement. And some historians think this might have been partly a result of the fractured state of Egypt at the time after the invasion of the sea peoples. The Hebrew version of the story is told in the book of Exodus in the Old Testament. But regardless of the specifics, the Hebrew tribes arrived at the scene in Canaan at this point. And they soon took control of a large portion of southern Canaan which became the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

And around the same time, another group of people called the Philistines arrived in the same region. They came to occupy the southernmost coastline of Canaan. And I mentioned in the last episode that archaeological evidence indicates a connection of these people to the Greeks. It is very likely that they were either part of the sea peoples who were defeated and beaten back by the Egyptians, or they were Mycenaean Greek refugees who were part of the general migration of Greeks to the east in search of new homes after the collapse of Mycenae. So it is very possible that the initial Philistine language was either an Indo-European language or a language closely connected to the Indo-European languages. And those neighboring Philistines became the bitter arch-enemies of the Hebrews. And the Old Testament outlines the Hebrew version of those events.

But with the Hebrews and the Philistines in place in southern Canaan, that left the northern portion to the original Semitic-speaking tribes who continued to live there. And it is at this point that historians typically shift the term and refer those specific Semitic-tribes which remained in control in the north as the ‘Phoenicians.’ So even though there is a subtle distinction in the use of the term Canaanites and Phoenicians, we’re basically talking about the same people. They were called Canaanites before the Hebrews and Philistines settled there, and those that remained in the north afterwards were called the Phoenicians.

And since these Phoenicians gave the Greeks the alphabet, we need to take a little closer look at this region which we can now call Phoenicia.

First of all, we have to keep in mind just how small this region was. It was only about 35 miles wide a little more than 200 miles long. As I said, it occupied this northern region of ancient Canaan, so that is basically modern day Lebanon and the western coastal strip of modern Syria.

It is important to keep in mind that the Phoenicians were not a nation or any other type of unified political entity. They were a collection of independent city-states. They were also often bitter rivals with each other, but they did have a common cultural Canaanite identity and a similar language. As I've noted, the Phoenician language was a Semitic language, and thus similar in many respects to Hebrew.

The Phoenicians took advantage of their strategic position at the crossroads of the ancient world to become major traders and commercial middlemen in the ancient Near East. They also took advantage of the general power vacuum at the time and the fact that there were no regional superpowers left to dominate the region. They were able to establish trade links to Anatolia, Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece. They traded throughout the Mediterranean, and it is believed that they traveled as far north as Britain to obtain tin which could be combined with copper to make bronze. And they established trading posts throughout the Mediterranean – some of which emerged as Phoenician colonies. The most well-known and important Phoenician colony was Carthage on the North African coast in what is today Tunisia. And we'll talk a lot more about Carthage when we get to the Romans very shortly. As we'll see when we get to the Romans that Carthage and Rome fought a series of wars against each other which are known as Punic Wars and which produced the legendary military leader Hannibal. The fact that these wars are called the 'Punic' wars is a reference to Carthage's initial status as a Phoenician colony, and it reveals the fact that the Romans still thought of Carthage citizens as Phoenicians during that time. But let's go back to Phoenicia for a second.

As merchants, they traded in goods such as glass, exotic fabrics and dye. They were especially well-known for producing a purple dye from local shellfish called *Phoinix* (foy-nix) which was the basis of the name *Phoenicia* used by the Greeks.

But some of the most important Phoenician exports were the cedars and other wood of the region. In fact, the Phoenician trading networks really began with the export of cedars and lumber to Egypt. And this access to lumber is actually very important. It meant they could build ships – which they did in abundance. Some of those ships were more than 100 feet in length and that allowed them to trade throughout the Mediterranean. And in fact, it was only the Greeks who could challenge the Phoenician domination of Mediterranean trade.

The Phoenicians also had access to the papyrus plant. And around this same time, the Phoenicians began to produce and export papyrus – which was used as an early form of paper. And we actually get lots of English words from the Phoenician paper trade. Most of the papyrus they produced came from the port city of Byblos. The city-state of Byblos became so synonymous with paper production that the Greeks used the name of the city for their word for

‘book,’ which was *biblos*. A collection of books was called a *biblia*. And *biblia* found its way into Latin as *bibliotheca* which is the basis of the modern Spanish word *biblioteca* and French word *bibliothèque*.

In English, it gave us the word *Bible* which was originally used in the sense of a collection of books. Today, we think of the Bible as a single book thanks to printing technology which allows it to be printed in a single volume. But originally, the word *Bible* referred to the collection of the various individual books which make up the Bible. It was the Greeks who coined the term *Ta Biblia* for the collection of scriptures. And Latin borrowed this use of the term and like many Biblical terms, it passed into English during the period of Middle English.

As I said, the Phoenician city-state of Byblos produced papyrus which was used for paper. The Greeks used the term *papyrus*, which was later adopted into Latin as *papyrus*. And from Latin, French took the word as *papier*, which passed into English as *paper* in the Middle Ages.

The Greeks also created the word *chartēs* which meant a leaf of papyrus. And this word also came to mean paper. In Latin, the word *chartēs* became *charta* meaning either a leaf of papyrus or something written on papyrus. From this Latin word we get the English words *chart* and *charter*. That same Latin word *charta* passed through Italian into French as *cartel* meaning a letter of defiance. English borrowed that term in the 17th century to refer to a written agreement between nations. And the Germans borrowed the same word, but applied it to a commercial agreement between private companies or industries. And English later adopted this use of the term *cartel* as well.

So words like *Bible*, *paper*, *chart*, *charter* and *cartel* all come from the early Greeks and relate to the Phoenician paper trade.

Now with all of this trade, it was essential to have a good writing system for maintaining trade records. Hieroglyphic and cuneiform writing were syllable-based writing systems that were cumbersome and limited to a relatively few people who could actually read and write them. But fortunately for the Phoenicians, they had something special in their possession. It was an alphabet.

Remember from the last episode that the alphabet was different from the syllable-based writing systems that had been used up to this point – like hieroglyphics, cuneiform and the Greek Linear A and Linear B scripts. There are lots of potential syllables in any given language and that means if you’re going to write in a syllabic script, you have to memorize a separate symbol for each syllable. That’s a daunting task. But the alphabet was revolutionary in that it broke down words beyond the level syllables – all the way down to basic phonemes or sounds. And all languages only have a few basic phonemes. Usually around a couple of dozen – maybe a few more. So if you break words down to the level of their basic sounds or phonemes, you only need to memorize and learn a few basic symbols or letters, and you can spell every word in that language. In Modern English, we have 26 letters, and they do all of the work. Even small children can learn them. And with something so simple to learn and master, it means a far

greater portion of the population can read and write. In other words, the alphabet enabled the spread of literacy beyond a small handful of scribes.

And here is perhaps the most fascinating thing about the alphabet which most of the world uses today. It appears likely that all alphabetic writing systems used today – and all alphabets that have ever existed – came from one original source. The alphabet was invented once, and it has been borrowed over and over again throughout history.

Now by this point in our story, an early version of the alphabet had been used by Semitic speakers throughout Canaan and even down into the Arabian peninsula. But it appears that it was only being used by Semitic speakers. So linguists assumed that the alphabet was invented by early Semitic speakers. And up until as recently as 1999, the general thought was that this invention had occurred in Canaan itself given that most of the early archaeological evidence of the alphabet was there.

But all of that changed in the 1990s when the oldest known alphabetic writing was discovered by a gentleman named John Darnell in a remote part of Egypt. And in 1999, the inscriptions he found were confirmed to be written in an alphabet, and those inscriptions were determined to have been written around 2000 BC. This was an earlier form of the Semitic alphabet, and it probably represents an alphabet created by some of the many Semitic tribes in Egypt during this period who were either Egyptian slaves or workers. Remember that the Hebrews were part of this same storyline of early Semitic tribes providing service to the Pharaoh. And it appears that this early alphabet spread with the spread of Semitic tribes northward from Egypt into the Arabian peninsula and eventually into Canaan.

The alphabet used by the Canaanites used just 22 letters – all of them were consonants. The Semitic languages were very rich in consonants. They had very few vowels. This is apparent even in Modern Semitic languages like Hebrew and Arabic. So the Semitic scribes didn't really need vowels. The consonant letters alone were sufficient to indicate the Semitic word that was being used.

Regardless of the ultimate source of the Canaanite alphabet, the Phoenicians had inherited it from their Semitic Canaanite ancestors. As I have said, the alphabet was easy to learn, and it was easy to implement. And the Phoenicians' extensive trading activities allowed their alphabet to spread throughout the Mediterranean.

And it is at this point that we can join the discussion of the Phoenicians with the Greeks.

As I mentioned earlier, the Greeks were the only maritime power that could compete with the Phoenicians. And during the Greek Dark Age period and the following few centuries, the Greeks and the Phoenicians carved out their own spheres of influence around the Mediterranean.

The Phoenicians controlled the southern Mediterranean and the Greeks controlled the north. These were the two great sea-faring peoples of the ancient world.

And therefore, it should not be surprising that we get many nautical terms from the Greeks. The Greek word for ‘ship’ was *naus*. The Greeks coined the term *nausia* to represent the sick feeling that people sometimes experienced on ships. This word comes into English virtually unchanged as *nausea*. The Romans adopted the Greek term as *navis* in Latin, and from there it produced words like *navy*, *navigate* and *nautical* in Modern English.

With sea trade, came crime and theft on the open sea, as well as other places. The modern word for *pirate* comes from the ancient Greek word *peirate* which meant one who attacks. The word was adopted by the Romans and ultimately found its way into English via the French after the Norman Invasion in an almost unaltered form to this day.

Even the name of the Mediterranean Sea itself derives from early Greek. The ancient Greeks – as well as the ancient Romans – called the Mediterranean Sea the ‘Inland Sea’ because of its vast size and the fact that it connected all of the important trade routes including Rome, Greece, Carthage and the other surrounding areas in the Middle East and North Africa. From their perspective, it was a vast sea located in the middle of the land masses which we know today as Europe and Africa. So the word *Mediterranean* basically means ‘inland’ by combining the words *medium* and *terra*. So *medium* and *terra* = *Mediterranean*. *Medium* means ‘middle’ and *terra* means ‘land’. So *Mediterranean Sea* literally means ‘Middle-land Sea – or Inland Sea.

Now as I’ve said, the Phoenicians and Greeks were the dominant maritime and trading powers of the region. And that also meant that they engaged in a great deal of trade with each other. And it was this trading contact that apparently led to the spread of the Phoenician alphabet to the Greeks.

It appears that the Greeks encountered the Phoenician alphabet through trading contact on Crete and the surrounding port cities. Remember that the Greeks had lost the ability to write their language during the Greek Dark Age. So here was a simple and easy to learn writing system which could be quickly adopted for the commercial and record-keeping needs of the Greeks. And since it was the same system which the Phoenicians used, it ensured efficiency in the Mediterranean trading networks. The Greeks adopted this alphabet for trading and commercial purposes probably around the 10th century BC. And once adopted, the utilitarian nature of the alphabet allowed it to spread like wildfire throughout the Greek world.

Now there are a few things to keep in mind about how the Greeks adopted the Phoenician alphabet. Remember that the Phoenician language was a Semitic language which was completely different than the Indo-European Greek language. The Greek language had lots of vowels, but the Phoenician language had very few vowels. And the Phoenicians had consonant sounds which the Greeks didn’t have. So the Greeks basically took the letters which represented consonant sounds which the Greeks had. But the Greeks had to invent letters for vowels since vowels were so important to the Greek language and the Phoenician alphabet didn’t have letters for vowels. So they took the Phoenician letters for consonants which they didn’t need, and they converted those letters into vowels.

For example, the first letter of the Phoenician alphabet was “aleph,” and it represented a consonant sound which did not exist in Greek. So the Greek converted the letter into the vowel which we know today as ‘A’. They added an ‘a’ to the end of the name and the Phoenician consonant ‘aleph’ became the Greek vowel ‘alpha.’ So even though the letter now represented a completely different sound in Greek, it retained its position at the head of the line. The letter ‘A’ continued as the first letter of the new alphabet – but now it represented a vowel.

The very early Greeks also adopted the Semitic pattern of writing from right to left like the Phoenicians (and which is still found modern Hebrew). But sometimes the Greeks changed directions at the end of a sentence in a back and forth style of writing. Eventually, they shifted to the left to right style that we use today.

The ancient Greeks also did not use punctuation. There were no spaces between words so words flowed into each other. Eventually, the Greeks began to place a short mark under the first word in a line where a new thought or idea was being expressed. This line was called a *paragraphos* meaning to write beside. This came to mean ‘paragraph’ which is the part of a written text which represents new or unique idea.

The Greeks also gave us the word *asterisk* based on the Greek word *aster* which means ‘star’ in Greek. A ‘little star’ was an *asteriskos* – the term which describes the asterisk.

Over time the Greeks found it useful to actually develop a system of punctuation to make reading easier. As a result, many of the punctuation marks we use today date back to the Greeks. The hyphen (–) for example was originally a curved line that resembled a smile which linked two words together. The name comes from Greek word *hypó* meaning ‘under’ and *hen* meaning ‘one.’ And we get the word *hyphen* from that. The apostrophe was used by the Greeks to indicate that a vowel had been dropped before or after another vowel. And the comma, period and colon all come from Greek as well.

So with this new writing system in place, the Greek Dark Age period finally ended because written records started to be kept again. And this new Greek alphabet led to the renewal of writing and the recording of history. And it also led to the spread of literacy and development of literature.

As I mentioned in the last episode, the end of the Dark Age and the reappearance of writing is closely associated with the writing of Homer’s The Iliad and The Odyssey. Both of these epic poems took the form which we have come to know them around 850 to 750 BC.

Greek literature flourished during the Classical Greek period which followed. Greek drama, epics, history and philosophy emerged in a written form which could be kept for posterity. And in doing so, these writings essentially formed the basis of western thought and civilization. All that we attribute to the Classical Greek civilization would never have had the long-term impact it has had if it had not been written down and saved for posterity.

Around 600 BC, a Greek named Aesop created a set of tales and fables which come down to us as Aesop's fables. These fables typically told a story with a moral lesson. They included "The Tortoise and the Hare," "The Boy Who Cried Wolf," and "The Goose That Laid the Golden Eggs" among many others. So all of these stories were written down shortly after the adoption of the Greek alphabet during this early spread of literacy.

The spread of writing also allowed for the adoption of written laws so legal codes began to develop. It was important to instill a sense of law and order. And in Athens, a lawgiver named Draco was asked to reform the Greek criminal justice system. Around 621 BC, he issued a set of laws which set forth specific penalties for specific crimes. But Draco didn't appear to spend much time focusing on varying degrees of punishment. Almost all crimes – including some trivial offenses – were punishable by the death penalty. Needless to say, the laws were considered a bit harsh, and they were soon repealed. But their legacy lives on in Modern English. We still use the term *draconian* to describe rules or laws which are extremely harsh.

By the early 5th Century BC, literacy was spreading throughout Greece. And we get a clue as to the spread of literacy in Athens by this time in the root of the modern English word *ostracize* which comes to us from this period of Greek history. In Athens, undesirable or dangerous persons could be expelled from the city by a vote at a special meeting of adult male citizens. Their votes were cast on broken bits of pottery called *ostraca*. And the expelled persons were *ostracized*, which is the source of the modern English word. Now the fact that the Athenians could vote by writing down names suggest a degree of literacy that was previously unknown. Some handwriting analyses of artifacts indicates that a small number of scribes may have actually written the names at the verbal instruction of the citizens. But even if that was the case, it appears that most Athenians (especially male Athenians) could read and write by the end of the fifth Century BC.

By this point, the Phoenician city-states which had given Greece the alphabet were in a period of major decline. The Phoenician cities were attacked by the Babylonians, the Persian Empire, and eventually the Greeks themselves under Alexander the Great. The lack of major regional powers had helped the tiny Phoenician territory to emerge as a maritime power and maintain its independence. But with the rise of new regional powers like the Persians and the Greeks, the Phoenicians' days were numbered. But as the power of the Phoenician homeland faded, its North African colony at Carthage flourished. But more on that story when we get the Romans in a couple of more episodes.

So we now at the cusp of the Classical Greek period which we all learned about in school. So next time, I am going to do a brief overview of this period and look at the large number of words from this Classical Greek period which have made their way into English.

So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.