

**THE COMPARATIVE ORIGIN AND
USAGE OF THE GE'EZ WRITING
SYSTEM OF ETHIOPIA**

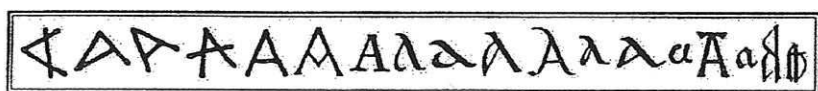
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A study of the Ge'ez writing systems is essential to understanding the history of Ethiopia and the evolution and modern usage of the Roman alphabet. This is not to say, by any means, that Ge'ez is merely a "bridging" system that serves only to connect ancient pictograms to the modern western alphabet, though that relationship may be unjustly implied in a western study concerning roman letterforms in comparisons with the ancient Ethiopic script. Since their origins are essentially the same, to say that Ge'ez is an ancient language whose evolution stopped where roman letterforms' began is a very easy trap to fall into, especially in a distinctly Eurocentric society. This implies incorrectly that Ge'ez is an outdated system that stopped being useful as Roman letterforms took the (western) world stage.

The uppercase Roman alphabet is thought to have reached a temporary standardization by the first century, paving the way for the conversion of Emperor Constantine (c. 288-337) and the beginning of the spread of Christianity. This standardization provided a consistent medium for the Vulgate, or Latin bible.



A progression of the first three Roman letters, from Proto-Sinaitic through Black Letter

By the ninth or tenth centuries ancient Ge'ez ceased to exist as a spoken language in Ethiopia, followed a century or two after, by the death of Latin in Europe. After the thirteenth century, as the remains of Latin were making the metamorphoses into the romance languages, spoken Ge'ez also split into many closely related tongues, mainly Tigrinya in the north and Amharic in the south. However, written Ge'ez was kept firmly in use purely for sacred and scholarly endeavors, from the thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries, known as the "classical period" of Ethiopian literature. For the purpose of analysis, the term "Ge'ez" will simply refer to the script and not the language, since the script is applicable to its modern counterparts, just as "Roman" does not refer to the ancient Roman spoken language but the alphabet of the same name.

In the case of Christianity in both Roman and Ge'ez systems, the philosophical and religious sacred connections of a writing system took precedence over a common spoken language. Geoffrey Sampson notes that "script follows religion" in the case of Eastern European languages.

Russians, Bulgarians, Serbs use Cyrillic, while Poles, Czechs, Croats use Roman, and the division coincides with that between the Eastern Orthodox and the Western Catholic churches. It has nothing to do with differences between languages, the nations listed all speak fairly closely related Slavic languages...²

The comparatively few evolutions that ancient Ge'ez system went through in order to progress to many of its modern counterparts, attests not to its backwardness and lack of modernization but to its adaptability and intrinsic modernity. It didn't change very much simply because it didn't have to do so. Alternately, the Roman system needed to make the difficult transition from a syllabic system to an alphabetic system, and that

subsequent alphabet needed to change to accommodate new uses and languages.

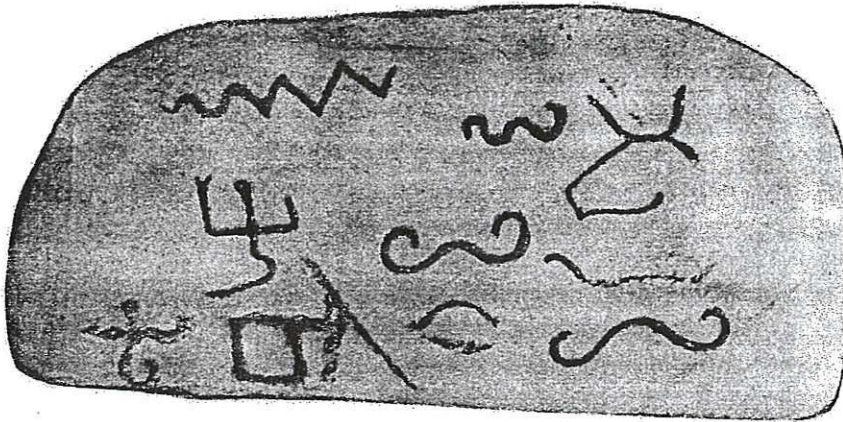
Both systems can place roots firmly in the Egyptian hieroglyphic system. At some point, probably around 1500 BCE, what is generally referred to as Proto Sinaitic "alphabets" (as compared to Ethiopic "syllabets," the term used for a syllabic system, "letters are termed "sylographs") are formed. The Proto Sinaitic system is the basis for Phoenician, which then progresses through Greek, Etruscan, and Latin alphabets to arrive at our modern European Roman system. There is some debate however, about at which

point the Ge'ez system is formed.



Examples of Egyptian hieroglyphs.³

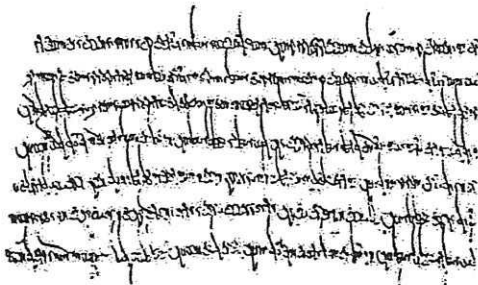
The earliest Roman system (c. 600 BCE) had 21 letters, including the five basic Greek vowel signs and was boustrophedon, the lines alternating direction from left to right and right to left, dependent on the direction of the flow of text. After five hundred years of "irregular and generally unimpressive"⁴ letterforms, the outlines and proportions of the letters were gradually improved



upon until the Roman capitals that we are familiar with emerged in the first century BCE, and the direction solidified in left to right reading. The written line of text remained unbroken until the sixth century “apparently because of a feeling that spaces at uneven intervals marred the beauty of a line.” Modifications continued in both the letterforms and writing styles, so by the seventh century, a lowercase form appeared in a clear effort to increase legibility and speed of execution.

g o z h t h o b x k s l o n l *

TICLAVDIVS·DRVSI·F·
TRIVNICIA·POTES
AQVAS·CLAVDIAM·EX·FONT
ITEM·ANIENEM·NOVAM·A



By the Middle Ages, there was neither a widely used style of Roman letters, nor many centers of scribal learning to implement them. A great number of regional variants of the Roman system developed, such as the Merovingian script of France and the Visigothic script of Spain. Complex and highly stylized with many ligatures and abbreviations, separate styles became as illegible to literati of different contemporary regions as they are to the modern reader. With the reign of Charlemagne (768 – 814 CE) came an imperial decree standardizing the alphabet. Though essentially illiterate, Charlemagne recognized the need to unify his kingdom through its writing system, thereby unifying the scholars and religious practitioners and through them, the rest of the populous. The emperor employed his councilor, Alcuin of York, with the formation of what became the Carolingian miniscule (lowercase) alphabet, utilizing various elements of different regional scripts.⁶ After some temporary script changes, namely the move towards black gothic lettering styles in the thirteenth century, the Roman alphabet stabilized in its modern form by 1500, with the gradual appearance of the additional five letters and the advent of the printing press.

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz
quis ex eis extollitur pro scientia
is suae hic talis erigatur ab ipsa
gaudium manet. Memento illius frequenter
zu einem siechen / so erkennt
mensch sterbe soll oder gene
quid defendat me hodie et pte
gat ab omnibus inimicis meis

The history of the Ge'ez writing system is not as easy to trace as the Roman, owed primarily to widely accepted but inaccurate scholarship based on Eurocentric assumptions. As Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow has written

there was a refusal to see Africans as creators of original cultures which flowered and survived over the centuries in patterns of their own making and which historians are unable to grasp unless they forego their prejudices and rethink their approach.⁷

A pervasive theme in the research of the Ge'ez system is what is known as the “external paradigm.” This is the notion that the syllographs, and indeed most Ethiopian culture, must have come from somewhere else, generally Kushtic Arabia, of the ancient Arabian Peninsula. This would place the origins of the

From top: A proto-Senaitic inscription, early Roman boustrophedon writing, standardized Roman Capitals, Merovingian script, Carolingian miniscule, and black gothic lettering.³

culture sufficiently not in "black" Africa, but in the "asian" middle east and thereby reaffirm the racist belief that a darker skinned people could not have an enduring literate, intelligent culture, while Phoenician advancements were just beginning. Even today, this Eurocentric assumption places the Ge'ez system in the linguistic category of a Semitic instead of an African language. The racism that plagues Ge'ez origin studies is evident even in recent scholarly history, as is seen in Sylvia Pankhurst's "Ethiopia: A Cultural History:"

The South Arabian immigrants into Ethiopia introduced a superior civilization; they brought with them knowledge of the use of metals, the cultivation of the soil; the sheep, the horse, the camel, manedible and other useful plants, a better type of arms, such as the large pointed head of the lance, and probably the round leather shield borne by the Ethiopian warrior until recent times. They introduced also houses built of stone, styles of architecture and methods of construction, the art of writing and a beautiful script of Ethiopia to-day, though the vowel indications may have been invented many centuries after their early settlements had been established in Africa. For the progress of civilization possession of a script was the most essential of the arts of the Arabian immigrants brought with them.⁸

It is much more likely, if established racist statues can be abandoned, that the Ge'ez system finds its origins purely in Egyptian Heiroglyphs, as does the well documented Roman system, however far remover the latter may be. It seems impractical to assume that a writing system in an area so geographically close to ancient Egypt should begin its journey by traveling first east to South Arabia, become sufficiently "caucasianized", and then return south to Ethiopia to evolve into its final forms. There is no evidence to suggest that Egyptian merchants, scribes, and consequently the hieroglyphic system did not disseminate equally in every direction from its' centers in Egypt. Contrary to what much of popular history suggests, the mysterious magnetic force by which intelligent ideas and societal progress is drawn successively towards Western Europe does not exist. In the modern study of history and societal origins (and writing systems) there is a need to move "the centre from its location in Europe towards a pluralism of centres, themselves being equally legitimate locations of human imagination."⁹

And so we will theorize that Ge'ez syllographs descend



□ 0 1 +	(Sinitic)
□ 0 1 x	(Proto-Ethiopic)
∩ 0 1 †	(Ethiopic)
U 3 Y 3	(Hebrew)
B α α 1	(Greek)
BAALT	(English)

From top: A Proto Semaitic inscription on a sphinx, proclaiming its dedication to Baalat¹⁰, a chart showing the name in six successive languages.¹¹

KEMETIC	ETHIOPIC	MEANING
HÄ 	HÄ U	THE BEGINNING
PEH 	PÄ T	THE END

The beginning and the end, in Egyptian and Ethiopic.¹²

Pictographic	Proto-Ethiopic	Ethiopic	Transcription	Base Description
			Hā	HOI Long-Horned Bull (the first Graph)
			Yā	YAMAN Fisted Right Hand
			Ā	ĀYIN An Eye
			Bā	BĒT A House or temple
			Gā	GĀMAL A Camel
			Mā	MAI Water

Some examples of the evolution of Ethiopic.¹³

fairly directly from Hieroglyphs. It is of note in this hypothesis, that the first and last syllographs of Ge'ez, Hā and Pā are relatively the same in Ancient Egypt as the first and last main Hieroglyphs. The order of the Ge'ez system has remained the same for roughly 3000 years. It is also of note that the determinative sign for the first syllograph Hā, which is "a person standing with both his arm raised towards the heavens" and the corresponding first syllograph "hoi," of Ancient Egypt, which is a pictograph of the front end of a lion, are both correlated to "the Ethiopic philosophic evocation of 68 Psalms, Verse 31 of the Bible, 'Ethiopia stretches her hands unto God.'"¹⁴

The art of writing in Egypt is believed to have begun, in its earliest stages, almost 7000 years ago. The hieroglyphic system seems to be firmly established by 3000 BCE, as suggested by the syllographic inscriptions on the Palette of Narmer. Though it is thought to have over four hundred pictographic signs, twenty four consonantal pictographs are identified, setting the stage for all western alphabets.

The common writing surface of ancient Ge'ez is "birana," a parchment made from animal skin, because of its organic nature it is subject to degradation over long periods of time. It was a fairly common practice to transfer aging text onto new birana in order to preserve the written word. It is subsequently impossible to date ancient manuscripts using common scientific methods. It is generally agreed upon, however, that the system has been stable for over 2000 years, achieving perfection by the fourth or fifth century comparable to the stabilization of Roman Letterforms in the 1500's.

Ge'ez is fairly massive in size, with its 182 syllographs, as compared to ancient Roman's 21. Though in order to make a fair comparison it must be said that there are essentially 26 main syllographs, all consonants, in Ge'ez; while the rest are essentially those with additional strokes and modifications added on to the main forms to indicate a vowel sound associated with it or to make aural adjustments in the basic consonant sound. It must be acknowledged also that there are no upper or lower case distinctions in Ge'ez as had evolved in the Roman alphabet by the seventh century. There are no ligatures or other symbol modifiers (as seen in "G" and "g") as well as very little punctuation. So to be more accurate in comparison, the uppercase (A), lowercase (a), and accented letters (â) in the roman alphabet would have to be counted as separate graphs, as well as any letters that might have certain punctuation rules associated with them ('s). Even on this curve, Ge'ez is significantly larger in size. It should be recognized though, as also being larger in scope.

	Ge'ez ā	Ka'eb u	Salis ī	Rab'e a	Hamis é	Sadis i	Sab'e o
h	ሀ	ሁ	ሂ	ሃ	ሄ	ህ	ሆ
l	ለ	ሉ	ሊ	ላ	ሌ	ል	ሎ
h	ሐ	ሑ	ሒ	ሓ	ሔ	ሕ	ሐ
m	መ	ሙ	ሚ	ማ	ሜ	ም	ሞ
s	ሠ	ሡ	ሢ	ሣ	ሤ	ሥ	ሦ
r	ረ	ሩ	ሪ	ራ	ራ	ር	ሮ
s	ሰ	ሱ	ሲ	ሳ	ሴ	ሰ	ሶ
q	ቀ	ቁ	ቂ	ቃ	ቄ	ቅ	ቆ
b	በ	ቡ	ቢ	ባ	ቤ	ብ	ቦ
t	ተ	ቱ	ቲ	ታ	ቲ	ት	ቶ
h	ኀ	ኁ	ኂ	ኃ	ኄ	ኅ	ኆ
n	ነ	ኑ	ኒ	ና	ኔ	ን	ኖ
a	አ	ኡ	ኢ	ኣ	ኤ	አ	ኦ
k	ከ	ኩ	ኪ	ካ	ኬ	ክ	ኮ
w	ወ	ዉ	ዊ	ዋ	ዌ	ው	ዎ
a	ዐ	ዑ	ዒ	ዓ	ዔ	ዕ	ዖ
z	ዘ	ዙ	ዚ	ዛ	ዜ	ዝ	ዞ
y	የ	ዩ	ዪ	ያ	ዬ	ይ	ዮ
d	ደ	ዱ	ዲ	ዳ	ዴ	ድ	ዶ
g	ገ	጑	ጒ	ጓ	ጔ	ጕ	጖
t	ጠ	ጡ	ጢ	ጣ	ጤ	ጥ	ጦ
p	ጸ	ጹ	ጺ	ጻ	ጼ	ጽ	ጾ
ts	ጸ	ጹ	ጺ	ጻ	ጼ	ጽ	ጾ
ts	ቐ	ቑ	ቒ	ቃ	ቄ	ቅ	ቆ
f	ፈ	ፋ	ፊ	ፋ	ፊ	ፋ	ፆ
p	ፐ	ፑ	ፒ	ፓ	ፔ	ፕ	ፖ

The full system, and its approximate roman counterpart.¹⁵

The Ge'ez system does not only serve as a visual representation of words and sounds as does the Roman system which has essentially one major property, grammar, and is devoid of any higher meaning. The Ge'ez system has five major properties: pictography, ideography, astrography, numerology and, syllagraphy (Though it could be argued that the Roman system also has numerology in the use of Roman numerals, it is nowhere near the numeric scope of Ge'ez).

The Ethiopic writing system also becomes a useful reference point in redefining writing. The astrographic numeric and sound properties of the system suggest that writing today is defined very narrowly... This conception of writing has limited our ability to read philosophy, theology, linguistics, or history directly or indirectly from writing systems.¹⁶

While the Roman system may have had roots in a broader view of writing it has strayed considerably, and is no longer any more than a highly compartmentalized visual classification system.

One of the main properties of Ge'ez is its pictography, meaning that the existing syllographs are derived from "images drawn or adapted from nature and the peoples' relation to it."¹⁷ A basic model of a pictographic system and indeed the beginning of both the Ge'ez and Roman systems, is Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphics. Ge'ez is a more abstracted pictographic language. An example of a pictograph in the Ge'ez system is the second graph, Bā as in Bēt (house) provides a stylized view of a door. The pictographic element is also evident in the first letter Hā (U), as the beginning of a lion, the alphabet, and the world, as mentioned earlier.

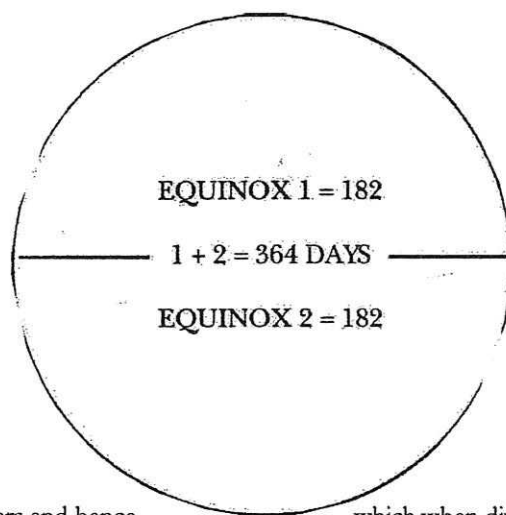
Ideography, the second property of Ge'ez, means that the syllographs symbolize different ideas, value systems, and philosophical and social orders. There are seven columns of, or variations on, each of the main symbols. A symbol's column designates a vowel sound to go with it, while the combined columns of a main character from a row, or class. A syllograph's class associates it with different ideological elements. For example, the sixth class, ረ (Rä) has the nomenclature of Re'es, head leader or chief. The words generally associated with the sixth class generally refer to some kind of secular leadership, as in the case of "Re'esa Mange'st", or Head of State.¹⁸

Egyptian	Meroitic	Sinaitic	Cretan Linear	Meroitic Linear	Proto Ethiopic	Ethiopic	
							A
							B
							G
							H
							K
							N
							N
							O
							R
							T
							S

Examples of ancient African and near African systems.¹⁹

B				House (Bät)
Y				Right Fisted Hand (Yäman)
G				Camel (Gämäl)
N				Copper Snake (Mädab)
R				Head (Re'es)
F				Mouth (Äf)
A				Eye (A'yn)
H				Glory (Hoi)
M				Water (Mai)
P				P (End)

Names and meanings of some of the syllographs.²⁰



Astrography, or the charting of the stars and hence, the calendar, is the third property of the Ge'ez system. The system, with its 26 classes and 7 variations provide its total of 182 syllographs. One hundred and eighty two, being half of 364, represents a half-year or one equinox. In the Ethiopian calendar, where the months all contain 30 days, (with the exception of an additional month that has only five or six days) each half-year begins on April 1st and October 1st. Each of the 182 syllographs represent one day in each equinox. The extra day on the western calendar can be attributed to discrepancies between solar and equinoctical measurement. The seven variations of each class represent the seven days of the week, beginning with Ge'ez (Sunday) and ending with Sabat (Saturday).²¹

Each of the syllographs have a corresponding number value from 1-5600. The number values associated with each syllograph also contains codes of the Ethiopian knowledge (mystery) system. The numerical values assigned to syllographs and words in the old testament give insights into interpretation and provide memory markers for the oral retelling of the stories. For example, the name Abraham corresponds to the numeric value of 60 (40+9+6+1+4),

which when divided by the number of syllographs (5) results in the number 12, as in the twelve houses of the Israelites.²²

As stated earlier, a syllographic system is the opposite of an alphabetic system in the way it functions with spoken language.

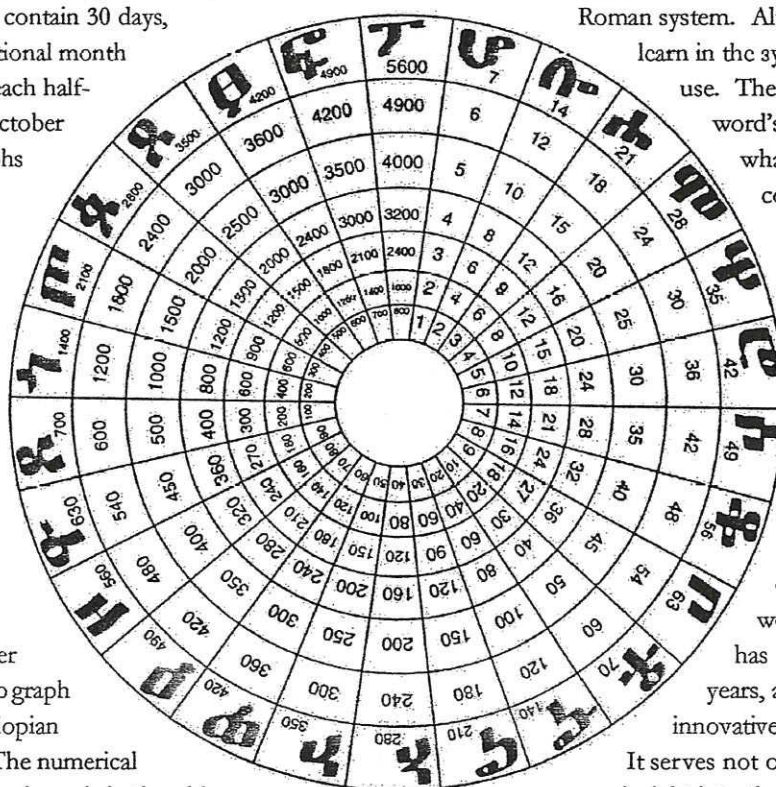
Ge'ez's syllographic nature is what sets it apart from the

Roman system. Although there are more symbols

learn in the system, in some ways it is easier to use. There is no "misspelling" because a word's sound dictates very specifically what written syllographs it will contain and vice versa, much in the way a phonetic spelling does in the western world. In essence, it is possible to "correctly" write any word, in any language in Ge'ez, once the syllographs and the sound associated with them are learned.

In conclusion, the Ge'ez writing system is one of the oldest working systems in the world. This African writing system has remained unchanged for 2000 years, attesting to its adaptability and innovative method of organizing sounds.

It serves not only as a system of grammar, but as an insight into the ancient world of Africa, its philosophies, belief systems, and exceptionally advanced early societies.



From top: An equinox chart and a Ge'ez numerology chart²³

1. Firmage, Richard A. The Alphabet Abecedarium: Some Notes on Letters. Boston: David R. Godine Publishers, 1993. p.47,56,64.
 2. Bekerie, Ayele. Ethiopic, An African Riting System: It's History and Principles. Lawrencville: RSP, 1997. p.2.
 3. Firmage, p.11.
 4. Ibid., p.13.
 5. Ouaknin, Marc-Alain. Mysteries of the Alphabet: The Origin of Writing. New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1999. p.119. and Firmage, p.18,19,24,26,27.
 6. Firmage, p.26.
 7. Bekerie, p.2.
 8. Ibid., p.45-46.
 9. Ibid., p.18.
 10. Ouaknin, p.10.
 11. Bekerie, p.71.
 12. Ibid., p.83.
 13. Ibid., p.81.
 14. Ibid., p.56.
 15. Ibid., p.78.
 16. Ibid., p.24.
 17. Ibid., p.82.
 18. Ibid., p.85.
 19. Ibid., p.6.
 20. Ibid., p.85.
 21. Ibid., p.86.
 22. Ibid., p.88.
 23. Ibid., p.78-88.
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