

Ancient Writing Systems

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Course Description

You have probably seen the meme — the one that compares emojis to ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and says something like, "4000 years later and we're back to the same language." This meme is evidence of a widespread misunderstanding about what ancient writing systems are and how they function.

In this course, students will examine what writing is by going back to the beginning, looking at some of the most ancient writing systems from all over the world, including Western Asia, North Africa, China, and Mesoamerica. Students will learn about how these writing systems were developed, used, and re-used. They will also explore the diverse ways in which writing can express spoken language.

No knowledge of an ancient language is required, as this course will not be an introduction into ancient languages themselves, but rather the writing systems in which they are written. That being said, this course will still be useful for anyone looking to study an ancient language, in particular one written in one of the writing systems that will be discussed in this class.

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives of this course are:

- The students will know what a writing system is and what makes a writing system different from a language or from a set of non-linguistic symbols.
- The students will become acquainted with the features of several different ancient writing systems and how they developed.
- The students will be able to classify writing systems based on distinguishing criteria.

Course Structure

The course is divided up into different modules, each dedicated to a specific writing system or broader topic. For each writing system, the basics of the writing system will be presented in an introductory lecture, but the more complicated aspects of a script will be explored by the students through in-class exercises, discussion, and supplemental readings. This course focuses on active use of a writing system in order to understand the workings of an ancient script.

Grading

Students are graded based on:

- **Participation** during each class period, including completion of in-class activities and taking part in group work and discussions
- Weekly **homework assignments** of transcription exercises through which the students will become acquainted with how ancient scripts function

- A **midterm exam** to assess the students' understanding of the concepts and writing system typologies encountered in the first half of the course
- A **final project** in which the student can pick one of these options:
 - Pick an ancient writing system that we haven't discussed in class and write-up an overview of how it functions and its features with reference to principles we have discussed in class
 - Create their own writing system (no simple alphabets allowed...) justified by principles of ancient scripts that they have learned throughout the course.

Final Grade Breakdown

- 30% Active participation in class discussions and exercises
- 30% Transcription homeworks
- 20% Midterm
- 20% Final project

Digital Tools

- Unicode Fonts for Ancient Scripts: <https://dn-works.com/ufas/>

Schedule for the Quarter

Dates	Module	Readings	Highlighted Topics	Assignments & Activities
Week 1	Introduction to Writing Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Woods 2010, "The Earliest Writing Systems" • Gelb 1963, "Writing as a System of Signs" • MacMahon 1996, "Phonetic Notation" (p.821-831) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing vs. other systems of communication (semasiography) • The rebus principle • Transcription and the International Phonetic Alphabet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Rebus Principle • IPA Transcription Exercises
Week 2	Cuneiform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooper 1996, "Sumerian and Akkadian" (p.37-57) • Woods 2010, "The Earliest Mesopotamian Writing" • Seri 2010, "The Adaptation of Cuneiform to Write Akkadian" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Polyvalent signs • Logograms • Syllabograms • Determiners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sumerian Transcription Exercises • Akkadian Transcription Exercises

Dates	Module	Readings	Highlighted Topics	Assignments & Activities
Week 3	Egyptian Hieroglyphs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gardiner 1957, Lesson I – Lesson II, §16-25 • Ritner 1996, "Egyptian Writing" • Johnson 2010, "Egyptian Hieroglyphic Writing" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consonantary script • Phonetic complements • Classifiers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Egyptian Name • Egyptian Transcription Exercises
Week 4	Mayan Hieroglyphs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Macri 1996, "Maya and Other Mesoamerican Scripts" • Palka 2010, "The Development of Maya Writing" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disharmony and complex vowels • Sign conflation • Calendrical signs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayan Syllabic Writing Practice • Mayan Logographic Writing Practice • Mayan Text (Group Assignment)
Week 5	Chinese Oracle Bone Script	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boltz 1996, "Early Chinese Writing" • Shaughnessy 2010, "The Beginnings of Writing in China" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unit characters and compound characters • Radicals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oracle Bone Script Character Exercises • Oracle Bone Script Sentences
Week 6	Luwian Hieroglyphs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Melchert 1996, "Anatolian Hieroglyphs" • Yakubovich 2010, "Anatolian Hieroglyphic Writing" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acrophony • Boustrophedon writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Luwian Hieroglyphs Practice • Luwian Sentences Exercises
Week 7	Linear B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bennett 1996, "Aegean Scripts" • Robinson 2002, "II. The Labyrinth of Minos. Linear B (Greece)" • Gelb 1963, "IV. Syllabic Writings" (p.162-164) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syllabary • Ideograms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linear B Exercises

Dates	Module	Readings	Highlighted Topics	Assignments & Activities
Week 8	The Origins of the Alphabet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goldwasser 2016, "The Birth of the Alphabet from Egyptian Hieroglyphs in the Sinai Desert" • Lam 2010, "Invention and Development of the Alphabet" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alphabets • Abjads • Abugidas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proto-Sinaitic Exercises • Alphabet Sign Histories
Week 9	Undeciphered Writing Systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daniels 1996, "Methods of Decipherment" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linear A • Indus Valley Script • Isthmian Hieroglyphs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making a Sign List