
History of Letter Writing and Bias of Communication

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ABSTRACT:

Medium of communication has an important role in the rise and decline of cultural traits and has important influence on the dissemination of knowledge over space and over time.

According to Harold Adams Innis, stone and clay being durable and heavy, are difficult to move, and hence are not suitable for territorial expansion. However, due to their durability, they do promote the extension of the empire for a longer time. Hence are time biased media. Time biased media facilitates the development of social hierarchy. On the other hand, paper is space biased media. It is light and portable and can be transported to over large distance and hence facilitate the expansion of the empires. However it is light but less durable.

On the basis of this distinction of time and space biased media, a study on the growth of letters, from the pictorial depictions by the Egyptian civilisation (latter known as hieroglyphic script) to the picture signs with phonetic signs on stones and clay, to the growth and use of Papyrus, development of alphabets, use of parchments etc.. Vis-a-vis the growth of various civilisations and empires could be tracked.

The credit for the invention of written letter could be attributed to Parsian Queen Atossa who, it is presumed that wrote the first letter around 500 B.C. According to the testimony of Hellanicus, an ancient historian, the honour of the invention of letter writing has been given to Atossa, a Persian Queen and the daughter of Cyrus and, Mother of Xerxes. It is believed that she wrote the first letter in around 500 B C. (R1).

William Smith, who wrote 'A Dictionary of Greek and roman Biography and Mythology' also argues in favour of what Hellanicus had written and felt that Atossa was the first to write the epistles. This statement is received by Richard Bentley, the English Classical Scholar, and is employed by him as one argument against the authenticity of the pretended epistles of Phalaris.(R2). Noteworthy here that in his 'Dissertation on the letters of Phalaris, Bentley proved that the supposedly famous 144 letters of Phalaris were written by someone else some 700 years after his death (R3) However, there was no account from Hellanicus or by Tatian and Clemens Alexandrinism - who have interpreted and recorded the former's descriptions- as to why Atossa wrote those epistles.

Meanwhile some others, from the accounts of the epic *Iliad*, thought that the credit of first letter writing (epistles) could rightfully be given to Homer. William Richards, felt that, in *Iliad*, there is a story of the folded tablet that was given by Proetus to Bellerophon to deliver Jobates, conveying the deadly instructions. And some attributed this to be the first written letter.

Though there was no correct account of the time when Homer was born, it is presumed that he might have born around 850 BC to 750 BC. With the subject matters of the epics of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* revolves around the ‘*Siege of Troy*’ and ‘*Trojan War*’, some believe that the bard was lived during that era i.e. about 1184 BC. But Richards, citing the opinion of Thoeompus and Pultarch had it that, Homer might be lived 100 years after that of Soloman¹. If this account is accepted true, then Homer was living in the 9th century BC.

Meanwhile historians (R4) date the completion of the “*Iliad*” to about 750 B.C., and the “*Odyssey*” to about 725. They have of the opinion that both began within the oral tradition, and were first transcribed decades or centuries after their composition. Many of the most familiar episodes of the war, from the abduction of Helen to the Trojan horse and the sack of Troy, come from the so-called “Epic Cycle” of narratives assembled in the sixth century B.C. from older oral traditions. This was supported by James Lloyd (R5), who was of the of the view that Homer composed & not wrote the epics, since the poems were created and transmitted orally, as there was no history of writing until much later till 700 BC. On the other hand, according to rb140.hubpages.com/hub/Homer-an-ancient-Greek-poet, “Homer” was slang for a blind man in Ancient Greece, and since Homer was blind, he did not literally write *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, but he was the author.

From all these accounts, it could be summarised that Homer might not be the first to write the letters or mentioned about the ‘letter’ in his works. However available literatures and historian arguments favours Atossa being the inventress of letter writing.

According to Harold Adams Innis, communication media played a significant role in the growth and decline of civilisations. In his book ‘*The Bias of Communication*’ he felt that the medium of communication has an important role in the rise and decline of cultural traits and has important influence on the dissemination of knowledge over space and over time. He claims that each medium embodies a bias in terms of organisation and control of information. According to him the use of media had a huge role to play in the growth and decline of civilisations and empires.

He also classified the media on the basis of their mobility and durability. According to him, stone and clay are time biased media. Being durable and heavy, they are difficult to move, and hence are not suitable for territorial expansion. However, due to their durability, they do promote the extension of the empire for a longer time. Time biased media facilitates the development of social hierarchy. On the other hand, paper is space biased media. It is light and portable and can be transported to over large

distance and hence facilitate the expansion of the empires. However it is light but less durable.

Based on this distinction, Innis studied the growth of letters, written words, use of various media for writing as civilisations grew and the impact of the time and space biased media on them.

While analysing his theory of time and space biased medias he elaborately discussed the growth of letters from the pictorial depictions by the Egyptian civilisation (latter known as hieroglyphic script) to the picture signs with phonetic signs on stones and clay, to the growth and use of Papyrus, development of alphabets, use of parchments etc.. vis-a-vis the growth of various civilisations and empires.

Innis argued that the Egyptian civilisation that prospered on the banks of Nile earlier than 4241 B.C. had a strong control over the time biased media. The monarch, with the objective to continue their hold devised the concept of Mummification and Pyramid. And the orders of the monarch were pictorially drawn on the pyramids. However with the invention of Papyrus and use of it as an efficient medium posed a great threat to the monopoly of the knowledge centred on the stones and hieroglyphics. And this began the decline of the Egyptian empires around 2540 B.C. The potential of Papyrus to democratise knowledge, brought social revolution and thereby weakened the hold of Egyptian empire over the subjects.

According to him, the increase of use of Papyrus was also hieratic character and helped in the development of a new profession of ‘scribes.’ Writing and thoughts were secularised and administration was extended. The social revolution involved a shift from the use of stones to the use of papyrus. This resulted in increased importance of priestly class which in turn put a strain on the civilisation by exposing it to the invasion of invaders (Hyksos and Shepherd kings) who invaded Egypt with effective weapons. Egypt was under their control between 1660 BC-1580 BC. Though the Egyptian rulers recaptured their land and expanded their empire, their failure in containing the hostility of the priestly class and monopolising the knowledge, brought the subjugation of Egypt by Assyrian and Persians.

Presumably by the same time, the Sumerian civilisation in the banks of Euphrates and Tigris rivers was using ‘alluvial clay’ for their communication needs. The difficulty in transportation of the clay triggered the tendency of decentralised society. On the other hand the difficulty in writing on moist clay led to the disappearance of pictographs and emergence of conventional signs or formal patterns in cuneiforms. The stylus was developed in relation to the demands of clay and the language was used to meet the demands of the economy and the necessity of uniformity to establish communication between scattered cities.

However, the decentralisation of the society which led to city state format of government strained the control of the king over the entire stretches and it ultimately resulted in the breakdown of the Sumerian empire as the Semitic invaders succeeded in capturing their empire. Innis argues that the problem of control over space in

contrast to the success with which problems of time were met, led to the ultimate breakdown of the Sumerian empire.

It is believed that the success of the Semitic people was marked by the creation of Babylon as the new capital and the reforms initiated by Hammurabi. During this period, Stone was used as the medium of writing. Though the Semitic was made the official language, the spoken word was Semitic, but the written word was in the non-Semitic forms of the Sumerians. With the empire extending widely, trade flourished and to an efficient system of writing has facilitated the flourishing trade.

Meanwhile, as the knowledge was under the monopoly of the priestly class and its spread was also prohibited by the complex scripts of cuneiforms and hieroglyphic, primitive peoples around the civilisations of Egypt and Babylon demanded and created new language to suit their needs. Semitic people in contact with Egyptian apparently invented an alphabet before 1500 B.C. and perfected in on the Phoenician coast. However the invasion of Egypt by Hyksos between 1660 B.C. -1580 B.C might have created a barrier between the North and South of Arabia and created a diverged writing script of Aramaic (*language of the Semitic people*) and Phoenician. It is further believed that while the Aramaic script was developed in relation to the demands of land trade and the use of parchment, the Phoenician script was developed in relation to the sea trade for an alphabet in relation to the use of papyrus.

A flexible alphabet and use of papyrus helped the growth of trade and development of trading cities of Phoenicians. The oral tradition was written down. The written letters replaced graven images and it facilitated the growth of knowledge expansion and democratisation. With the fall of the Assyrians, the Persians, with improved weapons and alphabets extended their control over the Assyrian empire and Cyrus became the King of Babylon in 536 B.C.

Even as the development of language and scripts happened in Egypt and Babylonian civilisation, the Greeks focussed entirely on the oral tradition. According to Innis, the Homeric poems were the works of generations of reciters and minstrels and reflected the demands of generations of audiences to whom they were recited.

William Roberts quoting the author of the “Essay on the original Genius and writings of Homer” wrote, it seems to think that writing was altogether unknown to Homer’s time. According to him, neither the ‘Iliad’ nor the ‘Odyssey’ was ever reduced to writing by the bard himself.

Tatian, the Syrian compiler of Diatessaron, a version of the four Gospels arranged in a single continuous narrative that in its Syriac form served the Bibilican theological vocabulary of the Syrian Churches for centuries. Though he converted to Christianity under the influence of *Roman Theologist Justin Martyr*, he rejected the classical literary and moral values of Greeks as corrupt. In his oration against the Greeks he also contended that “none of those institutions of which the Greeks were so boastful, had their origin with them, but were all invented by the Barbarians (R6).” In fact, it is assumed that he in conformity to his purpose, had ascribed the whole merit of inventing the communication by letters to the Persian Queen. This was confirmed by

Clemens by reference to several philosophers, who in their several books concerning inventions have asserted the same thing.

In the early ages, letters were made to deliver much in the same way as were their books- generally on rolls; and when paper and parchment came into use, a wrapper of the same materials with name or address of the person used to be written. In Cicero's time, a letter, if long, was divided into pages.

According to historians, Julius Caesar, the first Roman emperor (BCE 44-BCE 31) used to write letters to his senate in the form of book distinctly paged and folded together. On the other hand, August Caesar first adopted a sphinx as his seal both in his public acts and in his epistles. Alexander, the great used to put dates on the epistles. (R7)

The Romans sealed their letters usually with some device or symbol, to notify the writer, and identify the person written to. The wax, with the impression, kept the letter closed and it was expected that the wax was to be broken by the receiver to open the letter. It was a kind of mechanism to keep the content of the letter secret. According to historians, it was customary with the Romans to put their own names first, and after it the names of the person written to with addition of Suo, to express the regard or affections of the writer. (R8)

In ancient civilisations, letters were delivered through messengers. At that time, letters were only a tool of governments, military and kings. In the 6th century B.C., the Persian Empire developed a relay system in which the person carrying the letter could go up to 100 miles a day and when the horse got tired, treaded it with a fresh one. On the other hand the Greeks, employed athletes to run and deliver letters. As per the Greek history, Philonides, a courier for Alexander ran from Sicyon to Elis, a distance of 148 miles in a day. The Arabs also developed a new system in using pigeons for transporting letters. (R9)

Meanwhile, the credit for introducing the system of 'Posts' for conveying the letters or messages also goes to the Persians. It is believed that posts were in service in the Persian Empire from the period of Cyrus. (R10).

It is said that Cyrus with the objective to get intelligence from remote places, ordered for establishment of stables. Having considering what a horse could travel in an interval of a day, he ordered for stables to be prepared at the proper distance from each other and stationed horses in each of them with persons to take care of them and have them to keep in readiness. He placed also a person at each of these stations, who might receive the letters brought to them and hand them over to others, taking due care of the tired men and horse. In this manner, the conveyance was to be carried on successively a by day as well as by night.

The same institution of posts was existed in the time of Xerxes (son of Attossa) and was noticed by Herodotus (the great Greek traveller) who detailed the functioning of the posts.

Historians also are of the opinion that throughout the eastern states, similar arrangements were there from very early period. Quoting an account of a modern traveller, Roberts was of the opinion that in the dominion of Moghul Emperors or the areas subjugated by the Turks and Tartars, couriers, either people on foot or horses were of great importance for their communication needs in ruling the empire.

While the institution of posts was known and used in the Eastern part of the globe, it is believed that the Romans had no knowledge about it till the time of Cicero (R11). The credit for introduction of arrangements similar to that of posts is ascribed to Augustus Caesar who stationed young men at certain intervals on highways and later used chariots for transportation of written or oral intelligence. In fact the word 'post' in Roman is probably derived from 'Positus' the carrier being placed or posted at certain settled distances from each other.

The first modern postal service was put into service by the Romans in the last part of the fifteenth century. The Imperial Reichspost (kaiserliche Reichspost) was the name of the country-wide postal service of the Holy Roman Empire, founded by Jenetto de Tassis in 1494. The Bergamascan Tasso family had built up postal routes through Italy since 1290. Jenetto's brother Francisco was appointed as the captain of the postal services by the Maximilian's Philip of Burgundy in 1502 and it was due to the payment dispute between him and Philip that led Francisco to open the family's network to public correspondence in 1506 and in 1520 King Charles-V appointed Jenetto's son Giovanni Battista as Postmaster General. The Imperial Postal Service was confirmed by Emperor Rudolph II in 1595 and the service remained a monopoly of the 'Thurn und Taxis' family from 1615 till it was terminated with the end of the Empire in 1806. (R12)

This was also supported by Lewis Hornigk (R13), in his complete account of the development of Posts in Europe when he wrote that posts were established in large scale by 'Count de Taxis' at his own expenses when Emperor Matthias gave him in fief of the charge of Postmaster under him and his successor.

NOTES & REFERENCES:

- i. Hellanicus, Greek Historian, a general historian of the dynasties and catastrophes of ancient states, including that of the Persians. He lived between 480 B.C to 395 B.C. Source: www.britanica.com/.../hellancius-of-lesbos date: 24/06/2014
- ii. Cyrus, the King of Persia who became the king of Babylon in 536 B.C. source: Innis, H.A. (1964), The Bias of Communication, (p-39) University of Toronto, Canada.
- iii. Xerxes, also known as Xerxes the Great was the king of Persian Achaemenid Empire and ruled between 484-465 B.C. Herodotus was the primary source of

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- the story of his expedition to Greece. Source: www.ancient.eu.com/xerxes
date: 24/06/2014
- iv. Epistles are those letters which were inscribed on paper and were always sent in absent. Source: Roberts., W. (1843), History of Letter Writing- from the earlier period to Fifth Century, William Pickering, London.
- v. Phalaris was the tyrant king of Acragas, now in Sicily and died in 554 BC. Earlier it was believed that Phalaris' proved that the supposedly famous 144 letters of Phalaris were written by someone else some 700 years after his death. Source: www.Britannica.com/EBchecked/.../Phalaris 24/06/2014
- vi. Tatian (born in 120 AD in Syria and died in 173 AD) was the Syrian compiler of Diatessaron, a version of the four Gospels arranged in a single continuous narrative that in its Syriac form served the Biblical theological vocabulary of the Syrian Churches for centuries. Though he converted to Christianity under the influence of Roman Theologist Justin Martyr, rejected the classical literary and moral values of Greeks as corrupt. (www.britannica.com/EBchecked/.../Tatian) 24/06/2014
- vii. Clemens Alexandrinus (150 AD-215 AD) was a Christian theologian who was taught at the catechetical school of Alexandria. He was familiar with Greek Philosophy and literature. He was influenced by Hellenistic philosophy to a greater extent and in one of his work he argued that Greek philosophy had its origin among non-Greeks. (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/clement_of_alexandria) 24/06/2014
- viii. Homer (c. 750 BCE) is perhaps the greatest of all epic poets and his legendary status was well established by the time of Classical Athens. He is credited for two major works, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Homer is the earliest poet in Western culture whose works have survived intact. (<http://www.ancient.eu.com/homer>) 27/06/2014
- ix. Trojan War: the Bronze Age conflict between the kingdoms of Troy and Mycenaean Greece—straddles the history and mythology of ancient Greece and inspired the greatest writers of antiquity, from Homer, Herodotus and Sophocles to Virgil. Since the 19th-century rediscovery of the site of Troy in what is now western Turkey, archaeologists have uncovered increasing evidence of a kingdom that peaked and may have been destroyed around 1,180 B.C.—perhaps forming the basis for the tales recounted by Homer some 400 years later in the “Iliad” and the “Odyssey.” (<http://www.history.com/topics/ancient-history/trojan-war>)
- x. Soloman: Hebrew Shlomo (flourished 10th century BC), son and successor of David and traditionally regarded as the greatest king of Israel. He maintained his dominions with military strength and established Israelite colonies outside his kingdom's borders. The crowning achievement of his vast building program was the famous temple at his capital, Jerusalem. (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/553506/Solomon>)
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- xi. Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BC-43 BC) was a Roma statesman, Lawyer, orator, scholar and writer. His writings include books on rhetoric, oration, philosophical and political treaties and letters. He is remembered in modern times as the greatest Roman orator and innovator of what became known as Ciceronian rhetoric. (www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/117565/Marcus-Tullius-Cicero) (24/06/2014)

References:

R1: Roberts, W. (1843). Ancient Correspondence. *History of Letter Writing from the Earliest Period to the Fifth Century*. William Pickering, London.

R2:<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0104%3Aalphabetic+letter%3DA%3Aentry+group%3D53%3Aentry%3Datossa-bio-1>.

R3: www.Britannica.com/EBchecked/.../Phalaris (24/06/2014)

R4: <http://www.history.com/topics/ancient-history/trojan-war>

R5: Roberts, W. (1843). Ancient Correspondence. *History of Letter Writing from the Earliest Period to the Fifth Century*. P-4, William Pickering, London

R6: *ibid*, P-01

R7: *ibid*, p-35

R8: *ibid*, P-36

R9: <http://inthedeadletteroffice.wordpress.com/2010/07/24/a-short-history-of-letter-writing>. (2/11/2012)

R10: *ibid*, P-39,40

R11: *ibid*, P-45

R12: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reichpost date-24/06/2014

R13: Roberts, W. (1843). Ancient Correspondence. *History of Letter Writing from the Earliest Period to the Fifth Century*. P-47, William Pickering, London