

THE HISTORY OF THE GREEK LANGUAGE AND WRITING

THE PROTOHELLENIC LANGUAGE IN PREHISTORIC TIMES

The Indo-European lived in the area concluded between the Ural Mountains and the Caspian Sea. They had already created a high level of civilization during the 6th millennium. However, in the early 5th millennium, movements, due to the spread of the agricultural productive way, led to the dispersion of Indo-European races and to the configuration of their individual languages. A branch of the Indo-Europeans, after centuries of wandering in Central Europe, was partially installed at the southern end of the Balkan Peninsula around 2000 BC. It was the Ionians who came first, later the Aeolians and last, around 1200 BC, the Dorians. The Protohellenic language, spoken by those newly arrived tribes, remained fairly archaic. At the same time, they adopted many elements of the indigenous populations' language. By the mixture of the new populations with the indigenous and the linguistic interaction between them, the ancient Greek language was born.

The first populations reached the Peloponnese and created the Mycenaean civilization, the second wave was mainly settled in northwestern Greece. So, gradually two dialectical groups, the eastern (Ionic, Attic, Arcadocypriot, Aeolic dialect) and the western (Doric, Northwest, Macedonian dialect) were formed. Although this dialectical fragmentation was maintained for several centuries, it did not create insurmountable communicative problems to their users, because, despite several differences (relating mainly to the typology and less to the vocabulary and syntax) consciousness of linguistic unity existed among them.



THE ANCIENT GREEK LANGUAGE DURING THE HISTORICAL ERA

For everyday communicative needs people used their local dialects. But, the written genres (poetic, philosophical, scientific) were reflected in the dialects of their homeland. However, since the classical period (5th century BC), a dialect had already started to distinguish: the Attic, which was spoken in the city-state of Athens and soon, due to the political and economic hegemony of Athens, had been spread beyond its initial limits. The Attic dialect, as well, was the basis of the first nationwide language, Common Hellenistic, was established by Alexander the Great in the 3rd century. The Common Hellenistic became the lingua franca of the Hellenistic Empire and its citizens, stretching to the depths of Asia, became either bilingual or gradually abandoned their native language or dialect and adopted the common Hellenistic. By the 1st BC century, the beginning of the Roman domination, a movement of language "cleaning" had been created, the Atticism, which used to consider the spoken language as a product of decadence, and dreamt of bringing back the "linguistic purity" of ancient Attic dialect (linguistic issue). As a result, during the subsequent Byzantine period, Classicism dominated in all written species. So, up to the 11th century AD there is no data for the spoken language, which was probably diversified again into a number of dialects. The first samples of literature, using the spoken language of that time (spoken), appeared during the 12th century.

THE OFFICIAL ESTABLISHMENT OF MODERN LANGUAGE

After the establishment of the Modern Greek State (1830) an intense controversy takes place (language issue) concerning the official language, as there was difficulty to choose among the ancient Greek, the intermediate <<purist>>, or the spoken, the language used by its people in everyday life. While in the field of literature, the spoken language had gradually dominated, in administration and education the classicizing "purist" dominated until 1976, when the spoken was officially recognized as the principal language form. Hopefully, this was the end of the linguistic issue. Nowadays, the Greek language is being spoken in the Greek Republic, in the Republic of Cyprus and in the Greek Diaspora communities around the world. Dialects are now in danger of extinction, with the exception of the Greek Cypriot. Some Greek dialects also survive in the Black Sea regions of Turkey, in the former USSR and in South Italy (Apulia, Calabria).

EPILOGUE

Greek language, as opposed to Latin, was not split in separate languages, during the course of history, although it had suffered numerous changes. As well as every other language, it has borrowed, but has also lent several words to many other languages (Semitic, Roman, Slavic, Latin, Turkish, English, French, Italian, etc) throughout its history.

THE HISTORY OF THE GREEK LANGUAGE AND WRITING

PREHISTORIC TIMES – THE FIRST WRITING SYSTEMS

In Greek era writing has its origins in Crete. It was the Cretan hieroglyphic scripture, with a large number of pictograms and about 90 syllabic characters. Later, around 1800 BC the Linear A appeared, whose decryption has not yet been completed. The oldest samples come from the palace of Phaistos, while findings from all centers of Minoan civilization show that writing was until 1400 BC.

Earlier, around 2000 BC, the first Greek – speaking tribes from the north reached the southern end of the Balkan Peninsula. Even so, the Greek language was recorded for the first time around the middle of the second millennium BC, with a system of syllabic script, Linear B, which was based in Minoan Linear A. This writing system was deciphered in 1952 by the English architect M. Ventris and the eminent linguistic J. Chadwick. We speculate that very few people knew how to read this system and that even fewer knew how to write it.



THE CONFIGURATION OF THE GREEK ALPHABET

For many centuries after the destruction of the Mycenaean palaces, around 1200 BC, written monuments did not appear in Greece. In the Homeric epics, which are vital sources of the 12th – 9th century BC, heroes are presented as if they live in a society without written language. Later, the Greeks adopted the written symbols and their names from the north Semitic writing system. The full Greek alphabet had originally 26 or 27 letters. Only five of these were devised entirely by the Greeks: the two vowels υ and ω and the consonants φ (f), χ (h), and ψ (ps). The rest 22 derive from the north Semitic writing system. The first inscriptions date back to 700 BC, the oldest is an inscription on the Late Geometric jug from Dipyllo of Athens and the inscription on the Nestor's acetabulum from Pithikousses in South Italy.

Although the rich literary production of ancient Greeks was recited orally and not read, it survived thanks to the scripture. In the 6th century, during the reign of the tyrant Pisistratus, in Athens the Homeric epics were recorded. In classical times, poets, philosophers and historians recorded their works probably on papyrus. The Greeks used to write without spaces between words and sentences (inscription continua, continuous writing). Throughout antiquity the alphabet included only uppercase. It is the so-called capital printed scripture. Apart from the continuous writing, the ancient Greek alphabet was based on the etymological spelling. In 403 BC in Athens, Archinos formed the "Euclidean alphabet". Later, during the 3rd BC century, Aristophanes from Byzantium introduced the points of punctuation, the spirits and the accents.

As for the writing materials, besides the expensive ones, such as papyrus and diphthere-Hellenistic parchment-there were also worthless materials, such as fragments of pottery (potsherds), wooden signs, coated by a layer of wax or plaster and afterwards used as writing tablets. On waxed tablets they used to scribe letters with a special tool (grafis, post) made of bone, iron, bronze or copper, which had a sharp edge to carve letters and the other side to erase by smoothing wax. On the waxed writing boards they were writing as on papyrus either with a reed or ink and although the context could be altered they continued to do so throughout the whole antiquity, since etching on marble or bronze column, which did not allow easy interventions on text, was an expensive and time consuming process as well.

Since the early Christian centuries, the lowercase began to be formed, a process that had already been completed by the 9th century. From this process derives the Modern Greek alphabet consisting of 24 letters. From the Byzantine lowercase' alphabet other subsequent alphabets (the Russian, the Armanian) also derived. The oldest text in Byzantine writing is tetravangelo Uspensky, in St. Petersburg from 835 AD the original one comes from Stoudiou monastery in Constantinople.