

For the last 5,000 years or so, the vast majority of human knowledge has been passed down through writing, from clay tablets to papyrus scrolls to today's e-readers. While all calligraphers appreciate the work of medieval scribes who copied and illuminated books by hand, there is more to the rich history of the written and printed word:

The Sumerians Started It All

The first known example of writing developed around 3500 BCE in the Persian Gulf region of Mesopotamia (now south-central Iraq). The Sumerian civilization there used pointed reeds to inscribe characters onto clay tablets, a form of writing now known as cuneiform. The Gilgamesh tablet, thought to be the oldest surviving work of human literature, was created by the Sumerians; it was looted during the first Gulf War, but is now back in Baghdad.

The Egyptians Came After

The earliest pharaonic civilization of ancient Egypt developed its own system of writing a few hundred years after the Sumerians, around 3100 BCE. Hieroglyphics (meaning "sacred carvings" in ancient Greek) combined pictographs with symbols designating sound and syllables to celebrate the lives of the gods and the deeds of Egyptian royalty, who were worshiped as gods themselves. Hieroglyphic writing was indecipherable for 1,500 years, until French scholar Jean-François Champollion deciphered the Rosetta Stone (which included hieroglyphs side by side with ancient Greek) in 1822.

The Codex Conquers the Scroll

Papyrus reeds grew plentifully (and almost exclusively) along the Nile, and the enormously profitable art of papermaking was a closely guarded Egyptian secret for centuries. Soon the preferred writing material for Egyptians spread throughout the Mediterranean. It was the Romans who popularized the switch from papyrus scrolls (which could exceed 100 feet in length and required two hands) to the codex, where sheets of papyrus or parchment were stacked and bound between two wooden covers.

Asia Printed Long Before Gutenberg

While scribes and illuminators in European monasteries were laboriously copying and decorating manuscripts by hand, the Chinese were making books via the art of woodblock printing, which was developed during the Tang Dynasty, around 700 CE. Japan's Empress Shōtoku commissioned the Hyakumanto Darani ("The One Million Pagodas and Dharani Prayers") in 764 CE. A Buddhist text called the Diamond Sutra is the earliest example of a dated, printed book (not scroll) and was printed in 868 CE. Woodblock printing was laborious, as each page was carved by hand.

Gutenberg Sped Things Up

Movable metal type wasn't his invention, but Johannes Gutenberg's improvements around 1448 commercialized the process of printing, bringing books within the reach of common people. (Prior to this, books were almost solely possessions of the very wealthy or the church.) The German goldsmith printed 180 copies of the Bible, and sparked a revolution. The popularization of the printing press made books much cheaper to produce, allowing ideas (like the Protestant Reformation) to spread quickly.

Source: [Interesting Facts](#)