

More Humans Can Read, But What Are They Reading?  
Posted On:December 31, 1969

The \223Sky Is Falling\224 crowd says that too many Americans no longer read. I am not convinced\227nor do I believe that we read less than our grandparents did. Let\222s look at the history of writing (and reading), a history much older than we used to think.

A major invention that separated homo sapiens from our primate ancestors was writing. There is increasing evidence that our Stone Age ancestors were communicating with something akin to readable writing systems on stone and pottery, but possibly also on perishable materials (tree bark, skins), which have not survived. The oldest writings apparently dealt with \223how to\224 instructions and religious myths: how to tan animal skins for use (necessary for survival in the Ice Age); how to smoke-dry fish, and counts of how many animals hunted were pregnant and what were their varieties. The famous cave paintings used to be considered religious objects of worship only, but are now seen as examples of keen observation and counting. (I have a print of one of these paintings with dots and lines that were obviously a count.)

Another aspect of being human is the desire to teach the children, not only practical skills, but also to remember the past, the ancestors, and their stories. Some human groups without writing systems used memory, verse, and chants, to pass on the group\222s history. But others developed writing quite early.

Until recently, history considered civilization to have begun about 5,000 years ago, when we discovered the Sumerians, an amazing civilization in the Tigris-Euphrates delta (where today\222s Iraq and Iran meet). It was thought that these amazing people hatched, fully developed, out of primitive mankind, complete with writing, irrigation, the wheel, ocean-going boats, and a creation myth (Gilgamesh) that was the ancestor of the Bible and Greek mythology.

Apparently agriculture, that began 10,000 years ago, was full-blown by the time of the Sumerians (and slightly later for Egyptians and Harappans in the Punjab region of today\222s India). Agriculture, we were told, provided the storable wealth that gave rise to religion, governance, division of labor, slavery, and warfare.

Now archeologists have found an 11,000 year old huge temple complex constructed in Asia Minor (today\222s Turkey)\227with vast carved stone work, art illustrating religious stories, built by hunter/gatherers millennia before agriculture. How did the builders get the rocks to the site? How were the workers fed and organized? And what was the art (writing) telling them and us? No answers for this yet.

By the 6th century, BC, many civilizations were writing, but being able to read required specialization. Only elite male or such specialists as scribes (in Egypt and China) were literate. But there was one group in antiquity, the ancient Jews, who mandated that every male upon reaching 13 (manhood) must demonstrate literacy. This unique culture arose from a people who particularly revered \223the word\224 (literacy) and considered such literacy essential for understanding their god and their history. Western religions arose from these roots.

The first people to expand literacy to a vast population were the Romans, during whose time literacy was not just for the elite, but for a majority. A source of papyrus from Egypt made writing portable and storable in libraries.

Can universal literacy be lost? Indeed it can, and this is what we call a \223Dark Age.\224 When Rome collapsed, the Germanic barbarian tribes filled the vacuum\227but did not bring about that dark age, as was once thought. The Germans wanted nothing more than to become Roman themselves. What brought the precipitous drop in literacy was the Muslim invasion into Egypt, cutting off the papyrus supply from Europe. All writing for the next five centuries in Europe used expensive parchment (sheepskin). Literacy plummeted.

When Chinese paper manufacture and the printing press came to Europe in the 16th century, Europeans not only caught up in literacy, but overwhelmed the Ottoman Turk, Persian, Mogul Indian, and Chinese civilizations) in learning, producing our modern world. Today, we may not be reading the books read in a less universally literate world, but more of us read. That glass is more than half full.

684 words

Dr. Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of How Do You Know

That? You may contact her at [Lfarhat102@aol.com](mailto:Lfarhat102@aol.com) or [www.globalthink.net](http://www.globalthink.net).