

The New Criterion

Books

March 1996

Shorter notice

by [Ben Downing](#)

On The Alphabetic Labyrinth: The Letters in History & Imagination by Johanna Drucker

The letters you are now reading came down to us, by way of Greek and Phoenician, from a Canaanite source probably developed in the Sinai between 1700 and 1500 B.C. Along with Chinese characters, which also appeared, curiously enough, around 1700 B.C., the proto-alphabet is ancestor to all living scripts, from Cyrillic to Persian to Armenian—this according to Johanna Drucker, whose mesmerizing book begins with a summary of origins as they are currently understood, and proceeds through the many accounts, both magisterial and loony, that humanity has given of its letters.

Or are they God's? Across the religious spectrum and into the nineteenth century, writing was generally assumed to be of divine provenance; Ganesh even snapped off one of his tusks to use as an ur-pen. To the Kabbalists, the Hebrew alphabet comprised the very stuff by which God brought—or, more properly, wrote—the world into being, each letter with its attendant angel. They shared with Gnostics and alchemists (to name only the least fringy devotees) a belief in the alphabet as repository of hidden knowledge. The hapless neo-Pythagorean Iamblichus tried to tap that esoterica using alectryomancy--divination by means of a letter-pecking fowl; he may have been executed because a chicken predicted (accurately, as it turned out) the emperor's death.

Naturally, mavens had their pet favorites. The Pythagoreans as a whole were partial to *upsilon*, whose "Y" shape suggested to them the forked paths open to the initiate. Marcos the Gnostic, meanwhile, doted on the old Greek *digamma*, since it had been mysteriously dropped from the ranks. Vowels were often accorded special status, pegged as they were to the planetary gods or the celestial spheres; Plutarch made known his affinities in *Essay on the Letter E at Delphi*. One dissenter gave the nod to consonants, however, by pointing out that any Eurasian vowel sound can be petulantly intoned by the average housecat.

Vowels versus consonants; an antediluvian alphabet versus a post-; a sacred set of lapidary signs versus an arbitrary accretion of all-too-secular marks; the finger (or tusk) of God versus the hand of man: these are some of the debates that have inflamed the literate millennia. Those weighing in on such issues include Herodotus, Plato, Pliny, Lucretius, Josephus, Cornelius Agrippa, Descartes, Defoe, Victor Hugo, Mallarmé, and Robert Graves. Yet the most vivid denizens of Drucker's narrative are not the aforementioned grandees, but rather those obscure alphabet buffs who have sallied forth with the omnivorous enthusiasm of conspiracy theorists, and often with as little rigor. In fact, the two groups occasionally overlap, as in the Hibernian yo-yo out to unmask the fact that Homer was a Celt. Another harmlessly proved Egyptian hieroglyphics to be of Irish derivation, while L. A. Waddell's 1927 *The Aryan Origin of the Alphabet* was, needless to observe, more

sinister in its tendentiousness.

By and large, though, there is a strange, syncretic beauty to even the daftest of these enterprises. They inevitably come bristling with all manner of charts and diagrams (many of them strikingly reproduced here), and with names like *Anaclypsis* and *The One Primeval Language traced Experimentally through Ancient Inscriptions in Alphabetic Characters of Lost Power From the Four Continents including the Voice of Israel from the Rocks of Sinai and the vestiges of Patriarchal Tradition from the Monuments of Egypt, Etruria and S. Arabia*. Although there are plenty of sober scholars mixed in with cranks like G. F. Ennis, who established that the aboriginal script of Atlantis could be dredged up from the nursery rhyme “Ina Mena Mina Mo,” veracity is almost beside the point—what matters (or at least what fascinates) is the sheer imaginative ardor of the systems. As an archive of those systems, *The Alphabetic Labyrinth* is invaluable. It runs a dexterous line straight through Western civilization, and does so with a subject most of us take no less for granted than air or tap water, but which, after reading Drucker’s book, we could never again neglect.

Ben Downing's biography of Janet Ross is forthcoming from Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 14 March 1996, on page 70

Copyright © 2012 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/alphabeticlabyrinth-downing-3629>