WRITING

It is doubtless that the birth and spread of writing were the biggest revolutions of history, because they helped the development of civilization.

But what do we mean when we say “writing”?

Aristotle defines it as “the symbol of the spoken word”; Voltaire describes it as “the picture of the voice”. Today, less romantically, it’s considered the relation between a symbol and its shared meaning.

In ancient times, nobody knew that they had to invent writing, so its invention was a process that lasted thousands years, enriched with continuous progress and achievements.

As all human inventions, writing was born from necessity: all commercial operations and administrative procedures, as well as the expansion social life in big cities, required a technological support that couldn’t only be expressed by counting objects and memorizing what they meant. With the expansion of the cities and of the big urban centers and increase of commercial activities, there was a production of increasingly more complex signs, allowing new trades that were difficult to achieve between populations with different languages.

The writing appeared on solid bases more that 5.000 years ago, but in the Paleolithic age (30-40.000 years ago) man already started to draw petroglyphs and pictures on rocks and caves. The older petroglyphs, scraps of bones and stones with notches are dated around the same period. Scholars think that animals pictures are connected with magical rites to help hunting, notches served to count something like days, moon months and captured animals.

When and where the writing was born seems impossible to be determine. Sumerians and Egyptians are considered the most important civilizations for its birth, but a large amount  of  scholars thinks that the writing developed in other zones of the world in different periods. For example, there are codes of writing used in Mexico by a population called “Olmec”, and these codes were in anticipation of the more famous glyph Maia, used since VI century BC, or we it was talked about the ideograms used in the north of China in 1200 BC.

 The first step of the writing evolution was the cuneiform writing, defined because of the linear whether and small wedges. At the beginning this type of writing didn’t have wedges and in the clay tablets they affected the figure of the object that they wanted to represent and any number signs. Generally, farm animals and agricultural products were represented with conventional signs, while other objects and wild animals were pictured with drawings that meant their distinctive features. This kind of writing spread in Middle East at Sumerians, Babylonians and Assyrians which spoke Semitic languages, but the cuneiform system was used also by Indo populations, like Hittites, and Egyptians to communicate with princes of east Mediterranean.

Cuneiform writing was used for thousands years but it was replaced with alphabet writing because it was easier to learn and use. However, cuneiform writing didn’t disappear as soon as alphabetic writing became available, but lived many centuries because scribes considered it higher to express thoughts. First clay tablets that allowed to study cuneiform writing were found in Iraq, near Uruk, and they can be dated 3200 BC.

It’s believed that ideograms of Uruk can be the reproduction of the older clay tokens engraved called “Calculi” and used since 8.000 BC. These clay tokens served to remember the type and the number of goods exchanged during the trade. For example, a big token with an engraved cross meant a sheep, a conical token was for some wheat, an ovoid token was compeered to some oil etc and to distinguish sheep, rams and lambs they engraved different signs. Then, clay spheres were replaced by engravings, with a thin reed, in clay tablets. This passage showed the evolution to a code of signs two-dimensional. Because of clay wasn’t a good material to write circles and curves, ideograms were often signs made of elementary lines, with a wedge shape.

Of the same time of the cuneiform writing is the hieroglyphic writing, usually associate to Egyptian people. The term “hieroglyph” is Greek and it means “holy writing”. For Egyptians, their symbols had the proprieties of the objects to which they referred, so they were alive, magic and they exercised an influence, a power. They wrote the same things with different symbols because in base of the mythological sense the writing had a meaning or shade that it couldn’t be transmitted with alphabetic writing. Every word had three parts: the first had phonetic signs for the pronunciation, the second ( often omitted) was formed by a picture of the object and the third was composed by a sign that showed the scope. The latter helped the correct interpretation of the word but it didn’t have a phonetic value.

The change of the support, from clay tablets to papyrus, to parchment was fundamental for a better diffusion of the new technology.

Phoenicians, to simplify the technique, associated an unique sound to every symbol, “inventing” the alphabetic writing; the first source comes from the omeric poems.

This writing was used for centuries by poor people to write simply inscriptions. The problem was the absence of vocals; in fact, phonetic signs consisted only in consonant sounds. Greeks inserted new signs associated to vocals, so the problem has been solved.

Greek alphabet, adopted also by Etruscan and Latin, had a lot of evolutions and transformations that brought to our alphabet, spreading all over Europe.

Today we take writing for granted, but we study the life and works of big writers at school so we should realize that times are really changed. New technologies make us use more computers to write and communicate. Blogs and social networks become new sources of inspiration of daily life and at place of bottle messages and letters everything is solved with an sms or an e-mail. From clay tablets that were difficult to engrave, we arrived to write with a simply touch of the fingertip on flat displays. The question is natural: over the years, where are technologies going to take us to write? Are we going to create instruments for the reading of the though, making every word appear in front of us? Or will there be particular pens to write everything that is in our mind? Or are we going to communicate telepathically with messages and information without the use of sms and e-mails? Maybe, we will be tired of all this evolution or not satisfied of changes, there will be a regress and we’ll go back to communicate with handmade letters.  Everything has to be seen