2. SCRIPTS, THE GRAPHICS OF LANGUAGE <previous - next>

The cradle of most of the modern phonographic scripts is the Middle East. The oldest known Sumerian and Egyptian pictographic inscriptions considered to be scripts date from the 4th millennium BC.

- Scripts were developed to extend man's scope and range.

- Pictograms: purely pictorial symbols.

- Pictograms were used to represent the concepts (ideograms) or words (logograms) they represented.

- Ultimately, logograms develop into phonograms, in which the sound value (phoneme) of mono-syllabic words is attached to the symbols representing these words.

- Finally the syllabic script develops into an alphabetic script in which symbols represent single phonemes instead of syllables.

Universal sequence from purely pictorial representation (**pictograms**) to sets of abstracted sound-representing symbols (**phonograms**).
Pictograms convey meaning without intervention of sound values; there may be a symbol meaning 'town', 'river' or 'mountain' irrespective of what the word for 'town', 'river' or 'mountain' sounds like, and thus regardless of any specific language. Such a symbol is named a **logogram** (*pictogram for a specific word*). The advantage of logograms is their universal applicability – because they are language-independent – but they have the obvious disadvantage that there must be a separate symbol for every word.

All complete writing systems the world has ever known, do effectively contain both logograms and phonograms. As purely pictorial 'proto-scripts' develop into 'scripts' or writing systems, naturally drawn pictograms are stylised and augmented with drawings for abstract phenomena (hence called **ideograms**), and will ultimately contain logograms for all basic words of a specific language. Phonograms are developed out of logograms through a process starting with the **rebus** principle: the sound values (in a specific language!) of mono-syllabic words are attached to the logograms representing these words, thus creating a phonetic syllabary or syllabic script.

A fully syllabic script would contain as many symbols as the language it is used for contains syllables. A syllabic script can develop further into an alphabetic script, in which single phonemes (units of sound) instead of syllables are represented by symbols – thus requiring even less symbols. Alphabets may contain both the consonants and the vowels used by a language, or be consonantal (containing consonants only). To the symbols (**letters**) of consonantal alphabets, the vowels following consonant sounds may, either optionally or obligatory, be added to the letters by diacritical marks (**vocalization**), as may certain phonetic modifications of the consonants (nasalization, aspiration etc.).