

THE BIRTH OF LITERACY

The skills of reading and writing first developed in Mesopotamia (in modern Iraq) and Egypt, before 3000BC. Literacy helped civilizations to develop because it allowed rulers to keep records and pass messages, helping them to organize large societies and develop trading links with other peoples.

THE GREEK ALPHABET

After the Mycenaean age, the art of writing was lost in Greece. Later, around 800BC, the Greeks adapted an alphabet used by the Phoenicians from the eastern Mediterranean (see page 31). The new script contained fewer letters than previous scripts, which made it much easier to learn. It also included vowels, which made it clearer to read. All modern European alphabets - Roman, Greek and Russian - developed from this Ancient Greek one.



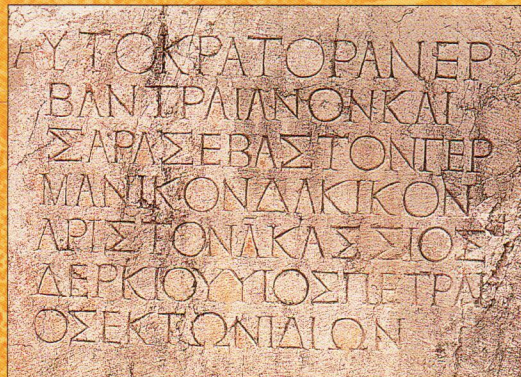
Left: some of the letters from the new Greek alphabet

THE SPOKEN WORD

Before the spread of literacy, stories and information about the past were passed down by word of mouth. Professional poets, known as bards, journeyed widely throughout Greece, passing on stories of the gods and Mycenaean heroes.

HOMER

Little is known about Homer's life, although tradition relates that he was blind. His poems were probably written down in his lifetime, or soon after his death, but we don't know exactly how.



This Greek inscription comes from a memorial stone beside the Sacred Way at Delphi, Greece.

The most famous bard was Homer, whose epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, retold the traditional tales of the Trojan War. Composed between 850BC and 750BC, they are the earliest surviving examples of Greek literature.



INTERNET LINK

For links to websites where you can learn how to speak like an ancient Greek and translate Greek names in an online game, go to www.usborne-quicklinks.com

This Roman bust of Homer is based on a Greek original.

