

The Ge'ez Script

Origins and Development

The **Ge'ez script** originated and is still used in the **Ethiopian/Eritrean region**. It first developed around the **1st-3rd c. CE**. Scholars believe it was adapted either from the **South Arabian script**, which was the previous script used in the region, or from another **Semitic** script in common with South Arabian.

Ge'ez started as an **abjad**, only encoding consonants in its alphabet. For unknown reasons, it morphed into an **alphasyllabary**, or **abugida**, by the **4th c.** The original **consonant graphemes** gained the inherent vowel sound **ä**, so for example the sign **በ**, which originally only signified **b**, became the **syllabogram** for **bä**. The other vowel sounds used in the Ge'ez language were then denoted through adding markings to the original syllabogram.

The ordering of the Ge'ez signs is called the **hahu**, based on the first two syllabographs in the sequence, **ሀሀ**. The word **abugida** is derived from an alternate ordering of the signs based on the order of other Northwest Semitic scripts, starting with the string **አ[ʔä] ቡ[bu] ጊ[gi] ዳ[da]**.

Linguistic and Literary History

The Ge'ez script gained a significant status in the Ethio-Eritrean region in the **4th c.** when **King Ezana**, ruler of the ancient **Aksumite** dynasty, converted to Christianity and helped found what became the **Ethiopian Orthodox Church**, which to this day uses the Ge'ez language and script as its liturgical language.

Despite the spoken language and dynasty that birthed it both dying out around the **8th c.**, Ge'ez remained the region's sole written language for centuries. A later kingdom, the **Solomonic** dynasty, used Ge'ez as the official written court language while **Amharic**, a related Ethiosemitic language, was the official spoken language. Written Amharic was rare until the **16th c.**, when **Jesuit missionaries** arrived from Europe to convert the populace to Catholicism. They proseletyzed in Amharic and taught people to read in the common languages Amharic and Tigrinya, as well as Portuguese. However, due to cultural difficulties, they were expelled in the early **17th c.**, and the Orthodox Church reasserted Ge'ez as the sole literary language for the next two centuries.

In the **19th c.**, Western missionaries were re-allowed into Ethiopia, and they again disseminated religious writings in the common Ethiopian languages. This time, **Emperor Tewodros II** embraced the change and made Amharic the official written court language, and his later successor **Menelik II** established the first imperial printing press in Amharic. With the advent of the modern schooling system in the early **20th c.**, **Emperor Haile Selassie** made Amharic the sole language used in primary education and later declared Amharic the sole national language of Ethiopia.

C_	Vowel Order						
	1 st <i>gaʃəz</i>	2 nd <i>kaʃəb</i>	3 rd <i>śaləs</i>	4 th <i>rabəʃ</i>	5 th <i>xaməs</i>	6 th <i>sadəs</i>	7 th <i>sabəʃ</i>
<i>h</i>	<i>ሀ</i> [ha]	<i>ሁ</i>	<i>ሂ</i>	<i>ሃ</i>	<i>ሄ</i>	<i>ህ</i>	<i>ሆ</i>
<i>l</i>	<i>ለ</i>	<i>ሉ</i>	<i>ሊ</i>	<i>ላ</i>	<i>ሌ</i>	<i>ሎ</i>	<i>ሎ</i>
<i>ḥ</i>	<i>ሐ</i> [ħa]	<i>ሑ</i>	<i>ሒ</i>	<i>ሓ</i>	<i>ሔ</i>	<i>ሕ</i>	<i>ሖ</i>
<i>m</i>	<i>መ</i>	<i>ሙ</i>	<i>ሚ</i>	<i>ማ</i>	<i>ሜ</i>	<i>ም</i>	<i>ሞ</i>
<i>ś</i>	<i>ሠ</i>	<i>ሡ</i>	<i>ሢ</i>	<i>ሣ</i>	<i>ሤ</i>	<i>ሥ</i>	<i>ሦ</i>
<i>r</i>	<i>ረ</i>	<i>ሩ</i>	<i>ሪ</i>	<i>ራ</i>	<i>ራ</i>	<i>ር</i>	<i>ሮ</i>
<i>s</i>	<i>ሰ</i>	<i>ሱ</i>	<i>ሲ</i>	<i>ሳ</i>	<i>ሴ</i>	<i>ሰ</i>	<i>ሶ</i>
<i>kʼ</i>	<i>ቀ</i>	<i>ቁ</i>	<i>ቂ</i>	<i>ቃ</i>	<i>ቄ</i>	<i>ቅ</i>	<i>ቆ</i>
<i>b</i>	<i>በ</i>	<i>ቡ</i>	<i>ቢ</i>	<i>ባ</i>	<i>ቤ</i>	<i>ብ</i>	<i>ቦ</i>
<i>t</i>	<i>ተ</i>	<i>ቱ</i>	<i>ቲ</i>	<i>ታ</i>	<i>ቱ</i>	<i>ት</i>	<i>ቸ</i>
<i>x</i>	<i>ኀ</i> [xa]	<i>ኁ</i>	<i>ኂ</i>	<i>ኃ</i>	<i>ኄ</i>	<i>ኅ</i>	<i>ኆ</i>
<i>n</i>	<i>ነ</i>	<i>ኑ</i>	<i>ኒ</i>	<i>ና</i>	<i>ኔ</i>	<i>ን</i>	<i>ኖ</i>
<i>ʔ</i>	<i>አ</i> [ʔa]	<i>ኡ</i>	<i>ኢ</i>	<i>ኣ</i>	<i>ኤ</i>	<i>እ</i>	<i>ኦ</i>
<i>k</i>	<i>ከ</i>	<i>ኩ</i>	<i>ኪ</i>	<i>ካ</i>	<i>ኬ</i>	<i>ክ</i>	<i>ኮ</i>
<i>w</i>	<i>ወ</i>	<i>ዉ</i>	<i>ዊ</i>	<i>ዋ</i>	<i>ዌ</i>	<i>ወ</i>	<i>ዐ</i>
<i>ʃ</i>	<i>ዐ</i> [ʃa]	<i>ዑ</i>	<i>ዒ</i>	<i>ዓ</i>	<i>ዔ</i>	<i>ዕ</i>	<i>ዖ</i>
<i>z</i>	<i>ዘ</i>	<i>ዙ</i>	<i>ዚ</i>	<i>ዛ</i>	<i>ዜ</i>	<i>ዝ</i>	<i>ዞ</i>
<i>j</i>	<i>የ</i>	<i>ዩ</i>	<i>ዪ</i>	<i>ያ</i>	<i>ዬ</i>	<i>ይ</i>	<i>ዮ</i>
<i>d</i>	<i>ደ</i>	<i>ዱ</i>	<i>ዲ</i>	<i>ዳ</i>	<i>ዴ</i>	<i>ድ</i>	<i>ዶ</i>
<i>g</i>	<i>ገ</i>	<i>጑</i>	<i>ጒ</i>	<i>ጓ</i>	<i>ጔ</i>	<i>ጕ</i>	<i>጖</i>
<i>tʼ</i>	<i>ጠ</i>	<i>ጡ</i>	<i>ጢ</i>	<i>ጣ</i>	<i>ጤ</i>	<i>ጥ</i>	<i>ጦ</i>
<i>pʼ</i>	<i>አ</i>	<i>ኡ</i>	<i>ኢ</i>	<i>ኣ</i>	<i>ኤ</i>	<i>አ</i>	<i>ኦ</i>
<i>sʼ</i>	<i>ጸ</i>	<i>ጹ</i>	<i>ጺ</i>	<i>ጻ</i>	<i>ጼ</i>	<i>ጽ</i>	<i>ጾ</i>
<i>ḍ</i>	<i>ፀ</i>	<i>ፁ</i>	<i>ፊ</i>	<i>ፋ</i>	<i>ፈ</i>	<i>ፅ</i>	<i>ፖ</i>
<i>f</i>	<i>ፈ</i>	<i>ፋ</i>	<i>ፊ</i>	<i>ፋ</i>	<i>ፌ</i>	<i>ፍ</i>	<i>ፎ</i>
<i>p</i>	<i>ፐ</i>	<i>ፑ</i>	<i>ፒ</i>	<i>ፓ</i>	<i>ፔ</i>	<i>ፕ</i>	<i>ፖ</i>

The **Ezana Stone** (**4th c.**), which recounts a military victory by King Ezana in the Ge'ez, South Arabian, and Greek scripts.



References

A.Davey. “The Ezana Stone.” Flickr, Yahoo!, 8 Sept. 2008.

Fellman, Jack. “The Birth of an African Literary Language: The Case of Amharic.” Research in African Literatures, vol. 24, no. 3, 1993, pp. 123–125.

Meyer, Ronny. “The Ethiopic Script: Linguistic Features and Socio-Cultural Connotations.” Oslo Studies in Language, vol. 8, no. 1, 2016, pp. 137–172.

Yacob, Daniel. “Ethiopic at the End of the 20th Century.” International Journal of Ethiopian Studies, vol. 2, no. 1/2, 2005, pp. 121–140.

Non-Phonetic Features

While its predecessor script had no punctuation except for a vertical bar (|) to denote **spaces between words**, Ge'ez developed an extensive punctuation system. The vertical bar was switched to a colon (:) and entirely original symbols were invented for the **full stop** (⋈), **paragraph separator** (⋉), **comma** (⋊), **colon** (⋋), **semicolon** (⋌), and **preface colon** (⋍).

The script also adopted the **Greek numeral system**, which assigned numerical values to Greek letters. This system is not common in current use in Ethiopia, as it has no concept of 0 or way to represent fractions, but it is still occasionally used in non-mathematical contexts.

Modern Issues

Ethiopia today is a very ethnically and linguistically diverse country, with over **90 individual spoken languages**, many of them tied to a specific ethnic identity. Amharic and the Ge'ez script have a heavy association with the former **monarchy**, the historically dominant **Amhara ethnic group**, and the **Ethiopian Orthodox Church**. Even after the first modern regime change in **1974** that toppled the monarchy, Amharic retained its primary literary status due to it being one of **only three languages** legally allowed to be **printed** in Ethiopia.

After the second revolution in **1991**, all ethnolinguistic groups were allowed to write in their native languages. At first, they continued to use the Ge'ez script to encode their languages, but due to the oppressive history linked to it, many groups have since moved to use the **Roman script** instead, which has less negative connotations due to Ethiopia's historically successful resistance to European colonization efforts.