From Tablets of Stone to Digital Communications

by John Henry (August 2022)

> *Mighty indeed are the marks and monuments we have left. Men of the future will wonder at us, as all men do today.* –Pericles, 430 BC.

> *The Yankees beat the Red Sox with a telephone* –CBS news leader, 7/9/2022

I suppose it started with a finger in the sand or dirt, then blood-stained hands slapped on a cave wall. Primitive paintings were not a sufficient medium to record more detailed information, so cuneiform and then hieroglyphics emerged. From painted rock, to impressions on clay and then cuts made into stone, how we permanently transmit our thoughts and aspirations to others, from recording events and measuring commodities, has evolved over hundreds of thousands of years (millennia?). And now we have AI bots who still cannot translate a live event correctly.

When the Almighty elected to give us a roadmap describing divine law covering the rights and wrongs of daily life, it was handed to humanity on two tablets of stone. The intention of every jot and tittle in that carved message was an eternal edict that was not to be altered in any way. There was no proof reading necessary, no carbon copies, no white out required. The message was hewn in stone. It was not recorded on papyrus or in mud.

Stone is not a forgiving medium on which to make a statement. If you had clay and a triangular pointed stick, you could convey just about any message you liked and if a change had to be made, a relatively small one, a bit of water and reformulation of the medium allowed you to rework your jabs. Or, you simply started on another small moist tablet and rewrote. Then you baked it and made it quite permanent.

While the idea for a graphite pencil might have come from someone picking up a charred piece of wood and scraping it onto stone or parchment, the earliest example of a manufactured pencil was from Barrowdale near Keswick in Cumberland England in the late 18th century. Styli were used by the Romans and consisted of sticks or metal rods that were dipped into ink wells. The use of small brushes with which to paint a subject were found as early as the Paleolithic era (2.5 million years ago) and the applicators were formed first by plant matter and then by animal hair.

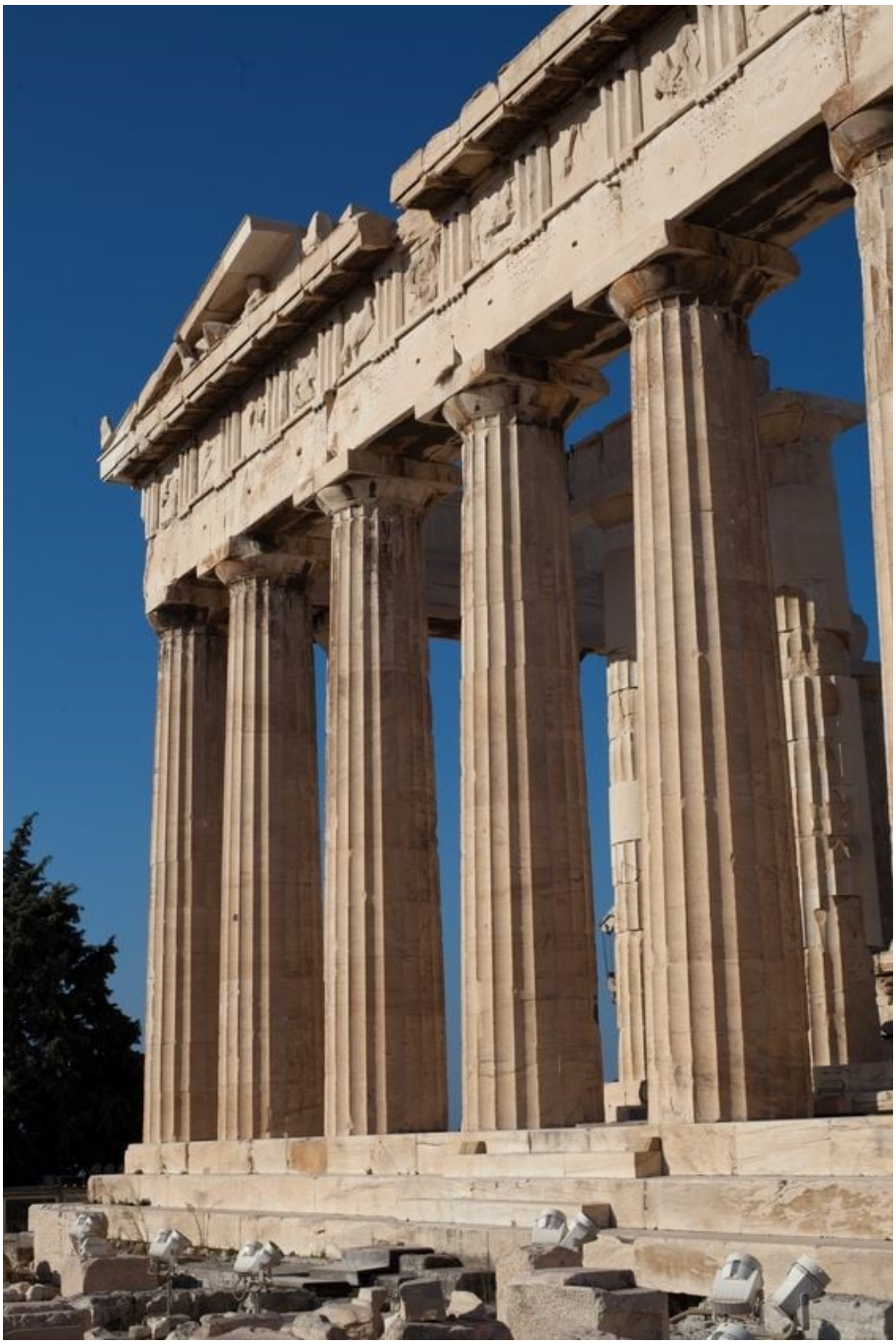
The Greeks painted their stone edifices probably using cloth rags and paint brushes. For many hundreds of years historians admired the colorless examples unearthed every few years and the blank looking temples. But after spots of paint were scraped from obscure areas, the full picture became known. The Egyptians likewise used brushes to paint hieroglyphics and ornamentation on temple exteriors and interiors. Some Egyptian royalty did not like their predecessors and were able to scrape off images and representations of them and erase and recolor the decorations and restate tributes.

Chiseled stone imagery and messages were also defaced for the same reasons from the Hittites to the Greeks and Romans in their art and (politically charged or commemorated) architecture.

If I may go over a quick aside… and this has to do ultimately with the point of this small diatribe…

The difficulty and pressure (on the craftsperson) to carve stone for any purpose must have been immense. Stone is not forgiving in any way. Every cut must be nearly perfect. Stone cut messaging have been the most expensive method to record ideas, edicts, tombstones, and love letters. We know the effort Renaissance greats took to carefully select the stone from the quarry, transport it many miles away, and then carefully cut an image by brute force out of an inert block using somewhat primitive wood and metal implements. There were mistakes; carving stopped at times and entire blocks were abandoned, etc. Consider now, the effort to carve stone 2,000 years earlier…

Contemplate the Greek temple for a moment. The one in Athens is carved from marble. Next to granite, marble is the most dense available stone in the Mediterranean. (Granite was also employed by Greek and Roman temple builders and other examples are found starting in Egypt, India, and China.)



Sandstone and limestone are easily more forgiving but will wear much faster under sun, wind, rain, and even fire.

The Parthenon was constructed, and the decorative program finished in just under 9 years. The original joints between the blocks are said to have been indistinguishable by a microscope. By the way, the building endeavor was intended to revitalize the economy of Athens—to the chagrin of many who objected to the lavish depletion of the treasury.

When I was in my mid high school years, my parents

investigated the archaeological remains of Priene, a hilltop city on the southwestern part of what is now Turkey, close to Miletus. On that spring afternoon the sun was shining brightly and very few people were at the site. In a breathless quiet, I examined some of the fallen stone fragments and followed the carvings with my hand. My mind rushed to envision the people who lived there proudly and what they had left for posterity. Beautiful flowers and imaginative details were expertly rendered on large blocks of marble, worked by hand, yellowed by time.

For many years I wondered how the stone workers carved the columns. I concluded that each giant stone drum must have been carved on the ground very meticulously and then hoisted with block and tackle into place (the Greeks borrowed this technology from their ship engineering). This of course, would have never worked. There would be too many imperfections in final alignment. The way it was done was by stacking large rough blocks at the correct height and spacing, leveled perfectly between courses, and then a sculptor would start at the top, carving the capitol, and then proceeding downward with the meticulous fluting in this case, (simulating women's dresses of the time) to the bottom. There was no putty or caulk, nothing to manage human error or dealing with a flaw in the stone leading to imperfection. Imagine halfway down, a flaw in the Pentelic marble (quarried and dragged about 10 miles away) resulting in a fluting mar. The engineers would have to lift out several of the 14-ton drums and insert another rough one, then restack to the top and continue with the delicate fluting work. Talk about pressure. It was presumed the lifespan at that time was approximately 35 years but evidence shows that many of the aristocracy reached a lifespan of over 75 years. The tough slave labor and also the precarious nature of the artisans dangling on scaffolding, must have reduced that class of worker longevity.

When metal was used again to write/record messages, the

printing press had gone from wood to lead, antimony and tin alloy. Metals. But the greatest manuscripts and scores for literature, philosophy, business, politics, music and related arts were penned by hand on paper. The pyramids were designed and built by hand, as was the Eiffel Tower, Empire State Building, San Francisco bridge, up to the Gateway Arch in 1935. The latter commemorated Thomas Jefferson's vision of a transcontinental United States.

Mr. Jefferson was 33 years old when he penned on a scroll the Declaration of Independence. He was a self-taught lawyer for 7 years prior to that. There were no typewriters, word processors, internet (no Google or Wikipedia), electricity, etc. The newspaper was a front and back weekly. There were horses used to contact each other from farm to farm and to the slowly emerging towns and cities. A quill pen and ink on parchment were the implements used to produce one of the most significant documents in human history. The Magna Carta was written over 500 years earlier with ink on cotton parchment.

Jefferson's penmanship is quite good, the lines measured, the lettering even and florid. It was drawn up in cursive. With only one or two errors crossed out, it is a near artistic masterpiece.

Of course, a lot of thought went into its development and likely there were one or two drafts started and then reworked. There were no further 'mistakes' to correct, grammar to revise, spelling errors to rectify. When the ink dried, that was it. A copy of the document was delivered to the English

king. That process of manually handled ink quill or pen scribbled on a paper medium continued for several centuries. One had to be quite certain about inking any idea, process, argument, the news, correspondence, etc. There was little recourse or editing possible. Keep in mind paper, pen and ink were relatively expensive, so this type of communication was reserved for dignitaries in every field. Fast forward a few centuries.

Up to the development of the IBM typewriter with its ubiquitous ball, allowing immediate strikes and revision within a word or even a complete rewrite within a line or two, the standard metallic key (cold rolled steel) typewriter seemed a godsend to many. Unless you were executing your own work, a secretarial specialist or steno groups would take a recording or rough draft, type it up and allow one revision before going into a final document. More pressure. The author had to still be quite resolute and thoughtful about what was going to be printed so elegantly and perfectly on vellum.

So from Shakespeare to Kissinger, the writer of any pronouncement, correspondence, or fact/fiction really did not have the pleasure, time, or means of rewriting or reimagining the output of their thinking without laborious efforts and stress… Do you recall trying to fix a few errors on a college

essay while using a manual typewriter, carbon copy paper between sheets, and an eraser? It would drive you crazy, especially with a deadline ahead. If you were writing a book, Gutenberg's design allowed changes on the printing press, but that was messy and time consuming as well. As all this became more automated and 'fool proof', something wonderful happened.

That something was compact desk top computing and the word processor. For a nearly self-admitted Luddite who couldn't stay awake during Fortran engineering classes and then subsequent despiser of early personal computing, this advancement must be considered one of humankind's greatest engineering/scientific breakthroughs. Countless authors were relieved, news organizations were satiated, and in general those in the communications fields roundly thrilled.

Except now there was another problem. As easily as one could type and make changes, the problem and prospect of endless editing and reconsidering content in general raised its ugly head. Even faulty grammar can be electronically pointed out and allowed to be corrected. Spelling correction: great! To be able to cut and paste: wow! Moving paragraphs and sentences around: amazing! To be able to find a synonym and antonym immediately in a browser: yay! No more thumbing through a thesaurus.

For seasoned thinkers and writers who have a clue about how to form ideas in their minds and elocute properly, this tool can be mastered and used for good.

For those not so facile there can be endless trepidation and thrice the effort to get simple ideas recorded.

With new technology, there is a corresponding learning curve, even if intended to make human processes easier to execute. Making something easier to do, doesn't necessarily guarantee a better output or outcome. See how much drivel is written on social media, and music posted on YouTube that is either mediocre or simply banal and desultory. Right now there is a movement to teach cursive writing in grade school again. A few generations were so glued onto their personal devices that the base act of writing by hand with a stylus had been lost. Even for adults, picking up a pen or pencil and scribbling a few words yields a rather embarrassing product. Another invasion into proper thinking and communication is AI attempting to intervene with what that imperfect system hopes to rectify as we type along in our word processors but to greater insult, over cell phones. The unchecked communiques quite often must be received with astonishment and often in anger, too late to remedy. Speed leads to gross error.

(A sad aspect of constant texting and email using smart phones is the addictive nature of quick and constant communication, a subject which needs further examination.)

This essay has been written with a concept in mind attempting to show how basic communication and artistic effect was

perhaps more lucid and direct, honest maybe, smarter even in times past, though seemingly primitive, as compared to our digitally enhanced modern world rife with some consternation between mind and interface, and at least on personal devices which might transmit unintentional potentially deadly errors that could lead to disastrous outcomes.

Without the word processor, I would never have written the volume of work I have to date (since about 1985 when I first put my toe in the water)—but mostly in the last 15 years. The frustration of manual old time typing (the seemingly inferred professionally preferred method of transmitting thoughts during the last few decades) would have been too much for me. If you find this to be an issue as well, then I suggest taking up a quill and parchment (oh you can pick up a ball point and paper) and write by hand the principal thoughts brewing in your mind. A rough draft, pencil on paper will assist you.

Most likely the first draft will be the best so don't start from scratch with an alternate and go into an endless edit! Don't back down, let the words flow. If still timid, pick up a chisel and hammer and start carving out your treatise on stone. You will be eminently proud of yourself. Just DO IT.

"The Yankees beat the Red Sox in a tough game" corrected AI voice recognition error

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John Henry is based in Orlando, Florida. He holds a Bachelor of Environmental Design and Master of Architecture from Texas A&M University. He spent his early childhood through high school in Greece and Turkey, traveling in Europe—impressed by the ruins of Greek and Roman cities and temples, old irregular Medieval streets, and classical urban palaces and country

villas. His Modernist formal education was a basis for functional, technically proficient, yet beautiful buildings. His website is Commercial Web Residential Web.

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