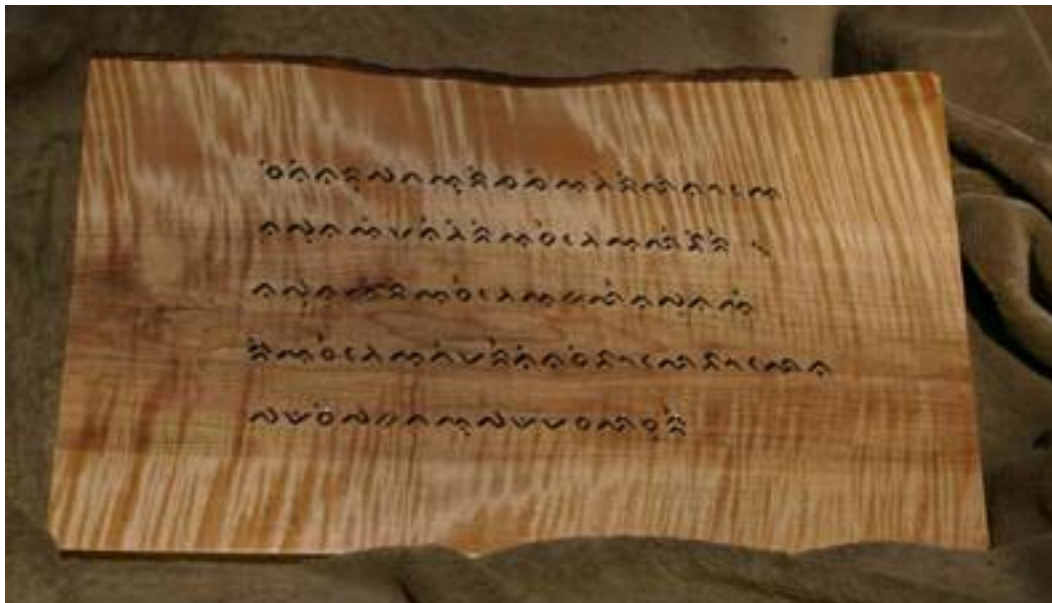


The Eerie Beauty of Rare Alphabets

EDWARD TENNER AUG 1, 2011

A Vermont-based writer is preserving ancient scripts by carving them into wood



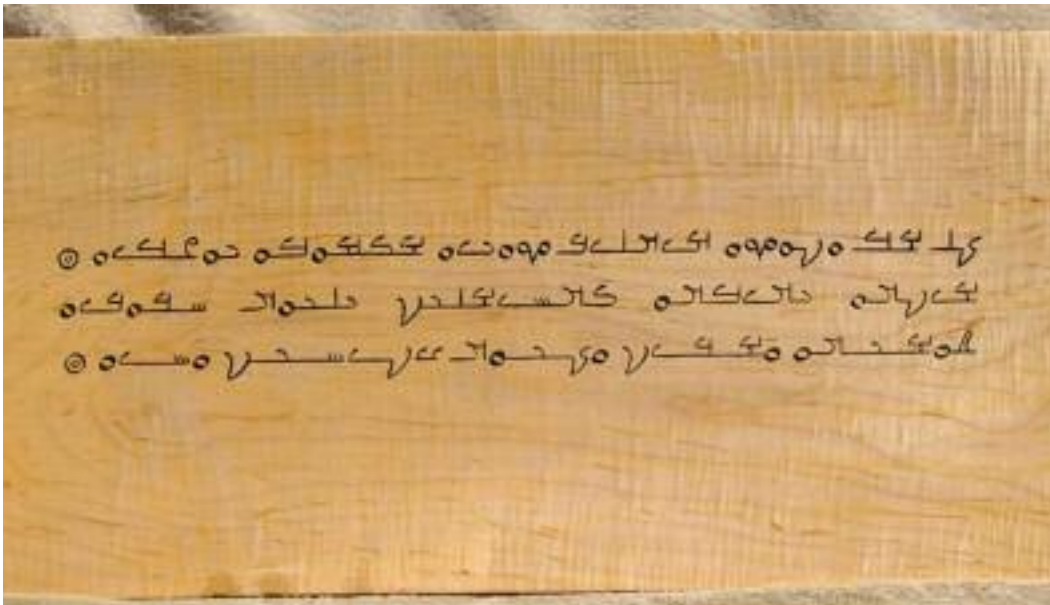
The Roman alphabet as we know with upper-and lower-case it is an amazing achievement of information design, a medieval and Renaissance European refinement of Roman culture. And it's easy to overlook the remarkable histories of other scripts, some of them barely surviving, but each with a story of its own.

Without support from governments, NGOs, or foundations, the English-born, Vermont-based writer Tim Brookes has been documenting this heritage in a unique way, carving specimens on local curly maple in his Endangered Alphabets Project. Every research library may have one or more reference books of world alphabet specimens, but wood carving presents texts in what is literally a new light.

Once in a geology laboratory at Berkeley, I had a chance to compare offset and letterpress books under a microscope at just the right magnification. To my surprise, the edge of offset letters was actually significantly sharper than that text printed by a plate that left a slight impression in the paper. There was a noticeable splatter of ink drops. Yet the latter looked sharper, probably—I haven't pursued the neuropsychology of this in the literature—because of the way the brain processes the “bite” of the type.

Letters in carved wood filled with black enamel paint, even when seen in photographs, also make everything sharper and convey something of the awe of ancient inscriptions, even if the some of the alphabets are comparatively recent in origin. And there's a story behind each. Syriac and Samaritan are survivors of the ancient Near East. The Samaritans, Mr. Brookes tells us in his book about the project, were reduced to only four families and 120 individuals a hundred years ago, but now number 700 and cherish their language, some considering it the original form of Hebrew. When Sequoyah introduced Cherokee script to his nation in 1921, Mr. Brookes writes, he was "the first person who became literate by inventing his own writing system—and in the process brought literacy to an entire people." The Buginese language spoken on Indonesian islands has five genders—feminine woman, feminine man, masculine female, masculine man, and bissu ("a gender that embodies both male and female energies, and is thus revered as mystical and wise"). The script is called Lontara. The Tuareg script Tifinagh said to be derived from Phoenician, is a symbolic code found in caves of the Sahara, still poorly documented, conveying messages among caravans.

My favorite from Mr. Brookes' book, though, is Mandaic, spoken by only a hundred or so survivors of an ancient people and faith, the only language written so that even in handwriting all lines are equal. Mandeans also may be unique in believing their language was created by God before humanity itself, and highly developed letter mysticism is at the core of their religion.



The Endangered Alphabets project is not just about language or typography but about the unique insights into humanity and world that obscure scripts preserve. And I'm happy to say that Rutgers, where I'm a visiting scholar, is a center for Mandaean studies.