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SEMITIC EPIGRAPHY
AND THE ANTIQUITY OF THE GREEK ALPHABET

1. Phoenicians in the Aegean

Since Rhys Carpenter's paper of 1933,¹ classical scholars have rejected any suggestion that the Greeks could have learned the alphabet before the eighth century B.C. In support of their stand they have relied, *inter alia*, on two main points: the absence of earlier Greek inscriptions, and the lack of archaeological evidence for any Greek contact with the Phoenicians before the eighth century. Now that clear evidence of such contacts during the Greek 'Dark Age' has been discovered, scholars endeavour to detract from its significance.

Coldstream's excellent article 'Greeks and Phoenicians in the Aegean', read in 1979 and published in 1982,² is most instructive. He admits that fourteen years earlier, when he read a paper on almost the same topic, the title 'Phoenicians in the Aegean' had to be followed by a question mark.³ Then he says:

"I had first become involved in the subject during a period of extreme scepticism. This scepticism, in its turn, was the child of an earlier period of uncritical belief in ancient Greek authors from Herodotus onwards; authors who inform us that in early times the Phoenicians had indeed established themselves in permanent settlements on various Aegean islands: Rhodes, Thera, Thasos, and Kythera, among others. ... But, in the first half of this century, as the study of Greek art advanced, so the claims for Phoenician penetration quickly receded. Excavations failed to produce the slightest trace of Phoenician settlement, either at the places mentioned by Herodotus, or anywhere else in the Greek homeland. So the impact of the Phoenicians on Greek civilization, in the minds of many scholars, was drastically reduced. There was still the transmission of alphabetic writing, which no one could deny. ... But, in the 1930s, scepticism went even further.

¹ Rhys Carpenter, *The Antiquity of the Greek Alphabet*, *AJA* 37, 1933, 8–29.

² J. N. Coldstream, *Greeks and Phoenicians in the Aegean*, in H. G. Niemeyer (ed.), *Phönizier im Westen*, Mainz am Rhein 1982, 261–275.

³ *Ibid.* 261.

... Thus many Hellenists came to believe that, after the Greek Dark Age, the recovery of contacts with the Orient should be attributed almost entirely to the initiative of the Greeks in the Levant.”⁴

Coldstream goes on to discuss the finds at four Aegean sites, all cemeteries, which are especially important for the “early signs of eastward contact”: the Keramaikos cemetery of Athens; the cemeteries of Lefkandi in Euboea; that of Tekke near Knossos in Crete, where a bronze bowl bearing a Phoenician inscription has been found; and the Seraglio cemetery of Cos.⁵ Whereas the Keramaikos and Seraglio cemeteries have produced ninth-century Phoenician imports, the graves of Lefkandi are, as the excavators say, from “the years between about 1100–850, spanning the so-called Dark Age of Greece. At this stage Lefkandi was shown to have been a comparatively large community, unusually prosperous for its period and one of the earliest places to have obtained luxury goods from the Near East”.⁶ Sznycer dates the Phoenician inscription on the bowl from Tekke to ca. 900 B.C.,⁷ but he misreads, failing to realize the existence of the pictographic *‘ayin* with its pupil and the archaic *mem* in vertical stance; the correct date, as pointed out by Cross, is the end of the eleventh century B.C.⁸ To these finds one should add the recently-discovered temple at Kommos in Crete, where, in addition to a tripillar shrine of possible Phoenician characteristics, Phoenician pottery has been found.⁹ “Broadly speaking, the chronological range of the Phoenician pottery is from the founding of Temple A (late 10th century) through the end of Temple B’s phase 1 (ca. 750 B.C.), with a more conservative estimate beginning during the second phase of Temple A (ca. 875–800) and extending to perhaps 760 B.C., a period of perhaps a century or less”.¹⁰

⁴ Ibid. 261–262. For another view on the history of research in this field see M. Bernal, *On the Transmission of the Alphabet to the Aegean Before 1400 B.C.*, BASOR 267, 1987, 1–5.

⁵ Coldstream (n. 2), 263–264.

⁶ M. Popham, E. Touloupa & L. H. Sackett, *The Hero of Lefkandi*, *Antiquity* 56, 1982, 169–170.

⁷ M. Sznycer, *L’inscription phénicienne de Tekke, près de Knossos*, *Kadmos* 18, 1979, 89–93.

⁸ F. M. Cross, *Newly Found Inscriptions in Old Canaanite and Early Phoenician Scripts*, BASOR 238, 1980, 15–18.

⁹ Joseph W. Shaw, *Phoenicians in Southern Crete*, *AJA* 93, 1989, 165–183.

¹⁰ Ibid. 181–182.

2. The Greek Adoption of the Alphabet and the Local Scripts

Despite these clear indications of Phoenician presence in Greece during the Dark Age, scholars of Archaic Greece are not inclined to take this new evidence into serious consideration. Various modifications of the orthodox concept have been offered, but the conservative view still prevails. Coldstream admits that "In Attica, in Euboea, in Crete, and in the Dodecanese, Phoenician specialists of various kinds had made themselves at home since the ninth century".¹¹ Muhly rejects the idea that these objects were made in Greece by resident oriental craftsmen, and regards them as Phoenician imports.¹² After discussing the inscribed bowl from Tekke and other (later) Phoenician inscriptions found in Greece, Coldstream reassures us that "the new Phoenician graffiti have not shaken the orthodox view that Greek alphabetic writing began in the eighth century".¹³

Now the question of the antiquity of the Greek alphabet, or the date of the Greek adoption of the West-Semitic twenty-two-letter script, should be the concern of epigraphists of both classical and Semitic disciplines. Indeed, since the problem is when the Greek alphabet branched off, a thorough knowledge is essential of the trunk from which sprang the offshoot. "The point where chronologically contemporary resemblances are strongest" (as phrased by Carpenter)¹⁴ should be sought on a much broader Semitic screen than that available to most Greek epigraphists. Scholars intending to deal with this question should be familiar — or, at least, acquainted — with the development of West-Semitic writing in its various branches, from its very beginnings until at least the seventh century B.C. However, even this knowledge does not provide the epigraphist with all the equipment necessary to analyse the evidence. In order to fix the date of the Greek adoption of the alphabet, the epigraphist must be aware of the process of development of new script-branches — experience which can be gained from West-Semitic epigraphy, mainly of the later periods, and notably from a study of the diffusion of the Aramaic scripts in the second and first centuries B.C. and the first three centuries A.D.

¹¹ Coldstream (n. 2), 269–270.

¹² J. D. Muhly, *Phoenicia and the Phoenicians*, *Biblical Archaeology Today*, Jerusalem 1985, 183.

¹³ Coldstream (n. 2), 272.

¹⁴ Carpenter (n. 1), 10.

Rudolf Wachter has recently written a long article entitled 'Zur Vorgeschichte des griechischen Alphabets', on the development of the archaic Greek local scripts,¹⁵ which he summarizes as follows:

"Wir haben hier zahlreiche Kontakte zwischen Griechen verschiedenster Gegenden aufgezeigt, die teils bei der primären Schriftübermittlung, teils bei den sekundären Modifikationsströmungen, in jedem Fall aber ganz am Anfang der neuen Schriftepoche stattgefunden haben müssen ... Diese mannigfaltigen Kontakte sollten wir uns m. E. immer vor Augen halten, wenn wir es bei der Diskussion der Lokalphabete mit Buchstabenformen zu tun haben."¹⁶

This very complicated process took place, in Wachter's opinion, "ganz am Anfang der neuen Schriftepoche" during a very short "Vorgeschichte".

In order to try and understand the phenomenon of the local scripts, let us look at the North-Mesopotamian branch of the Aramaic script,¹⁷ represented mainly in some four hundred inscriptions found at Hatra, an oasis between the Euphrates and the Tigris, where Aramaic-speaking Arabs established an autonomous kingdom in the late Parthian period. We are acquainted with this script only from the very end of the first century A.D.: the earliest dated Hatran inscription was written in 97/98 A.D. The latest dated inscriptions from Hatra are from 238 A.D., and soon after that Hatra was destroyed by the Sasanians. Inscriptions of this type, however, have been found not only in Hatra and the vicinity, but also in Dura Europus on the Euphrates, in Assur on the Tigris, and in Tur Abdin, as well as in Armenia and Georgia. All these inscriptions date to the second century and the first half of the third century A.D. Around 240, control of the area, till then Parthian, passed into Sasanian hands.

During the 140 years from 97/98 to 238 no significant changes occurred in the script represented in the inscriptions from Hatra. However, when we examine the contemporary scripts of the North-Mesopotamian branch used in Assur, Tur Abdin, Armenia and Georgia, substantial modifications are discernible in some letter-forms. The script

¹⁵ Rudolf Wachter, *Zur Vorgeschichte des griechischen Alphabets*, *Kadmos* 28, 1989, 19–78.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 69. Wachter's Appendix to his article (pp. 69–76, 'Wie alt ist das griechische Alphabet?') presents arguments for a late date, based partly on peculiar letter-forms, and partly on the lack of earlier inscriptions (p. 71). It is to this latter observation that the present article is specifically addressed.

¹⁷ J. Naveh, *The North-Mesopotamian Aramaic Script-Type in the Late Parthian Period*, *Israel Oriental Studies* 2, 1972, 293–304; *idem*, *Early History of the Alphabet*, Jerusalem–Leiden 1982 (hereafter: EHA), 138–143.

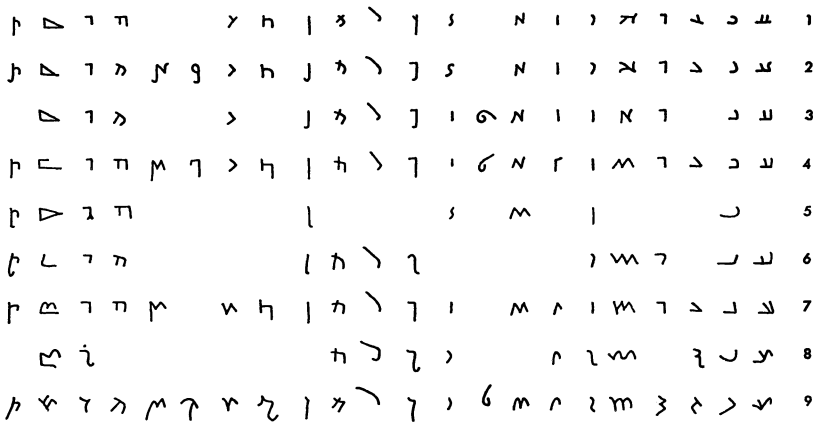


Fig. 1. The North-Mesopotamian Aramaic local scripts: 1. Hatra 214, A.D. 97–8 2. Hatra 35, A.D. 238 3. Dura Europus 4. Assur 5. S. of J. Sinjar, Abrat al-Saghira 6. Tur Abdin, Sari 7. Tur Abdin, Hassan-Kef 8. Armenia, Garni 9. Georgia, Armazi (Courtesy of Israel Oriental Studies)

spread from one location to another, undergoing minor changes with each new adoption. The result was a series of local variations (see Fig. 1).

The Hatrans, bound to their script by tradition, did not alter it. Whenever the script was taken over by another city or state, however, its new users introduced various changes, usually by adding strokes to certain letters. Thus the evolution is not chronological but rather geographical. The letters did not evolve slowly and gradually over a long period of time, but mainly in a series of transmissions from one centre to another. Since the individual scripts from each centre share the same features throughout the period represented by the extant corpus, the variations in letter-forms have no chronological significance. The North-Mesopotamian Aramaic script, with its local variations, evolved over two or three hundred years. Unfortunately, lacking relevant finds, we are as yet unable to trace this evolution.

It seems likely that the archaic Greek local scripts developed in a very similar way — with, however, an important difference: while each of the North-Mesopotamian local scripts is uniform, most Greek epichoric scripts exhibit a variety of letter-forms. This should be explained as a result of each script-branch having evolved from a prototype of different characteristics. The North-Mesopotamian Aramaic script developed from the uniform Aramaic script of the third century

B.C., whereas the Greek epichoric scripts could in theory have evolved *either* from different Phoenician local scripts,¹⁸ each having a variety of letter-forms, *or* from a prototype which had unstabilized letter-forms. As the Phoenician script had no local variations, it follows that the latter alternative was the case, and that the archaic Greek alphabet developed from a model whose letters had not yet become stabilized; that is, in which the pictographic conception still persisted. This conclusion is corroborated by the observation that the archaic Greek local scripts could be written in either horizontal direction or in horizontal *boustrophedon*. Since this variability disappeared from West-Semitic writing around 1050 B.C., it could have been accepted by the Greek script only from the ancestor of the Phoenician, that is, from the Proto-Canaanite script of ca. 1100 B.C.¹⁹

The evolution of the archaic Greek alphabet, as Wachter's study has demonstrated, was very complicated. Classical scholars nevertheless believe that the process of adoption, introduction of vowel-signs, and diffusion of the script took at most some fifty years. Lilian Jeffery, for example, stated in 1982: "meanwhile it is risky to posit on purely general grounds a Greek alphabet in the ninth century or earlier, i. e. more than one or two generations before our existing examples".²⁰ But the prehistory of the Greek alphabet must have been much longer than envisaged in this out-dated conception of the Greek epigraphists.

Since the scripts of Crete and Thera preserved more ancient features than the other epichoric scripts, and since moreover they did not include the additional letters Φ, Χ and Ψ, these islands should be considered as a possible locale for the adoption of the West-Semitic alphabet.²¹ The inhabitants of these islands might have learned the alphabet in an early period from which no inscriptions have survived. Being the first adopters of a new script, the Cretans and Therans (like the Hatrans about a millennium later) probably looked upon their script as part of their tradition, and hence reverently preserved the typologically earliest letter-forms. However, whenever the script was taken over by another Greek city, its new users had no such reservations regarding the introduction of various changes.

¹⁸ See, e. g., R. M. Cook and A. G. Woodhead, *The Diffusion of the Greek Alphabet*, AJA 63, 1959, 175–178.

¹⁹ J. Naveh, *Some Semitic Epigraphical Considerations on the Antiquity of the Greek Alphabet*, AJA 77, 1973, 1–8.

²⁰ CAH III/1, 823.

²¹ See, e. g., M. Guarducci, *Der Geburtsort des griechischen Alphabets*, in G. Pfohl (ed.), *Das Alphabet*, Darmstadt 1968, 197–213; Cross (n. 8), 17.

3. Argumentum ex silentio

Semitic epigraphists will not be impressed by the *argumentum ex silentio*,²² for there is a series of gaps in our knowledge of the development of the various West-Semitic scripts, even in the period which begins about a thousand years later than the transmission of the alphabet to the Greeks.

As mentioned above, the earliest inscriptions in the North-Mesopotamian Aramaic script belong to the very end of the first century A.D. There is no doubt that this script, like the other Aramaic offshoots, developed from the uniform Aramaic script, which ceased to exist in the second half of the third century B.C. But no inscriptions showing the evolution of this branch have so far been found.

The early history of the South-Mesopotamian branch was very similar. We have no inscriptions predating the second century A.D. However, despite the lack of direct evidence, the South-Mesopotamian script is obviously another derivative of the third-century B.C. Aramaic script.²³

Another eastern branch of the uniform Aramaic script is the Syriac-Palmyrene. The earliest known dated Palmyrene inscription was written in 44 B.C., the earliest Syriac example in 6 A.D. These scripts demonstrate two well-crystallized writing traditions, each the result of a development lasting some two hundred years from their apparent origins in the Aramaic chancellery of the Seleucid kingdom. Four inscriptions — two dating from 32 and 7/6 B.C., respectively, and two others from the first century A.D. — have survived from the allegedly parental Seleucid Aramaic script, but no single inscription from ca. 200–50 B.C. is known.²⁴

The only offshoot whose gradual development can be followed clearly from the third-century B.C. Aramaic script is the Jewish (or the so called 'square Hebrew') script; the Dead Sea scrolls include manuscripts that can be dated from the second half of the third century B.C. until ca. 70 A.D.²⁵ To a lesser extent, thanks to five Nabataean

²² See F. M. Cross, Early Alphabetic Scripts, Symposia Celebrating the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the Founding of the American Schools of Oriental Research I (ed. F. M. Cross), Cambridge, Mass., 1979, 108–109.

²³ P. W. Coxon, Script Analysis and Mandaean Origins, JSS 15, 1970, 16–30; J. Naveh, The Origin of the Mandaean Script, BASOR 198, 1970, 32–37; EHA, 132–137.

²⁴ J. Naveh, An Aramaic Inscription from El-Mal — A Survival of 'Seleucid Aramaic' Script, IEJ 25, 1975, 117–123; EHA, 143–153.

²⁵ F. M. Cross, The Development of the Jewish Scripts, The Bible and the Ancient Near East, Essays in Honor of W. F. Albright, Garden City, N.Y., pp. 133–202; EHA, 162–169.

inscriptions from ca. 170, ca. 100, 95, 77 and 66 B.C., respectively, we have some information about the evolution of the Nabataean branch of the Aramaic script. However, the earliest inscriptions written in the Arabic script, the derivative of Nabataean, belong to the sixth century A.D. The latest dated inscription in the Nabataean script is from 356 A.D. In other words, no inscription has so far been discovered from a period of at least 150 years, at a time ca. 1300 years after the period discussed in the present paper.²⁶

But we can illustrate our point with an example closer in time to the Greek adoption of the alphabet. The Hebrews must have learned the alphabet soon after the conquest of Canaan, ca. 1200 B.C., but the earliest Hebrew inscriptions do not antedate 800 B.C. There is thus a silence of approximately 350 years, but nobody would dare to suggest that during this period the inhabitants of Israel and Judah were illiterate.²⁷ The extant inscriptions from the eighth century B.C. demonstrate that by then the Hebrews had a well-developed independent writing tradition. Moreover, the Mesha stele and two fragmentary Moabite inscriptions clearly indicate that the Moabites were using the Hebrew script about half a century before the earliest extant Hebrew inscriptions.²⁸

To cite Cross: "An even better example is the extraordinary period of silence between the branching apart of the ancestral Proto-Arabic script from Proto-Canaanite in the 13th century B.C., and the earliest inscriptions in Old South Arabic dating to the 8th century B.C., a span of five hundred years".²⁹

The diffusion of writing in Greece in the eighth century should be compared with that in the East at the same time. From this century on there is an abundance of epigraphic finds, not only in Hebrew, but also in Phoenician and in Aramaic. The increase of literacy in the Ancient World should be associated with the general flourishing of the area, after the appearance of the Assyrians in Syria, Phoenicia and Palestine. Whereas the relative scarcity and even lack of inscriptions before the eighth century B.C. can be thus explained, one wonders why no documents have been found from such a late period as 200 B.C. and thereafter.

²⁶ EHA, 153–161.

²⁷ The Gezer Calendar was written, probably by an Israelite, in the Phoenician script in the late tenth century B.C. For another view see Cross (n. 22), 108, n. 48.

²⁸ EHA, 63–70.

²⁹ Cross (n. 22), 108.

4. The Tell Fakhariyah Bilingual

Since the concept of the Dark Age is a major principle in recent theories of the history of Archaic Greece, even orientalists sometimes feel uneasy with an earlier date for the Greek adoption of the alphabet.³⁰ Not surprisingly, therefore, the discovery of a bilingual Assyrian-Aramaic inscription, engraved on a life-sized statue of a king in Tell Fakhariyah in northern Syria, has been greeted by some of them as new support for the notion of a late Greek adoption of the alphabet:³¹ for the script of the Aramaic version has some very old letter-forms (mainly *dalet*, *kaf*, *lamed*, *mem*, *ayin* and *pe*), reminiscent of archaic Greek; but non-epigraphical criteria, namely ancient art, Assyriology and Aramaic studies, as well as historical considerations, have led scholars to date the Tell Fakhariyah statue to the ninth century B.C.³² The script, displaying such early forms as late as the ninth century, has been labelled 'eccentric' and 'peripheral'; and explained thus: "these features imply that we are faced with a local derivative of the Phoenician alphabet, perhaps adopted as early as 1000 B.C., and which continued in use and produced its unique characteristics".³³ However, since no West-Semitic local scripts of this period — whether in Phoenician, Hebrew or Aramaic — have come to light, it seems more likely that the script of the Aramaic version on the Fakhariyah statue was a successful product of deliberate archaization. At any rate, it would not be legitimate to identify this script as an ancestor of the archaic Greek local scripts: for one could hardly suggest that the Greeks rejected an alphabet which was in general use, *inter alia* by the Phoenicians who travelled and lived in the Aegean, and opted instead for an archaic, eccentric and peripheral set of letters employed by some Aramaeans who lived in far-off Tell Fakhariyah, some 350 km east of the Mediterranean shore.³⁴

³⁰ See, e. g., W. Röllig, *Die Phönizier des Mutterlandes zur Zeit der Kolonisierung*, in H. G. Niemeyer (ed.), *Phönizier im Westen*, Mainz am Rhein 1982, 15–30.

³¹ S. A. Kaufman, *Reflections on the Assyrian-Aramaic Bilingual from Tell Fakhariyah*, *Maarav* 3/2, 1982, 142–144.

³² A. Abou-Assaf, P. Bordreuil and A. R. Millard, *La statue de Tell Fekherye et son inscription bilingue assyro-araméenne*, Paris 1982.

³³ A. R. Millard and P. Bordreuil, *A Statue from Syria with Assyrian and Aramaic Inscriptions*, *Biblical Archaeologist* 45, 1982, 140.

³⁴ J. Naveh, *Proto-Canaanite, Archaic Greek, and the Script of the Aramaic Text on the Tell Fakhariyah Statue*, in P. D. Miller et al. (eds.), *Ancient Israelite Religion — Essays in Honor of F. M. Cross*, Philadelphia 1987, 101–113.

5. Conclusion

My first paper on the antiquity of the Greek alphabet was published eighteen years ago.³⁵ Since then new evidence has come to light, both in the East and in the West. Here I have tried to support my thesis with some fresh comparative data, without repeating the old arguments. I have therefore refrained from dealing with letter-forms. In this respect, some of my 1973 ideas may be wrong in detail, or at least inaccurate. Nevertheless, during the past years I have become convinced that any scholar who possesses a thorough knowledge of the development of the West-Semitic scripts, and compares the characteristics of the scripts, cannot escape the conclusion that the archaic Greek script must have branched off from the West-Semitic alphabet some time around 1100 B.C.³⁶

³⁵ Above, n. 19.

³⁶ See, e. g., Cross (n. 8); E. Puech, *Présence phénicienne dans les îles à la fin du II^e millénaire*, *Revue Biblique* 90, 1983, 365–395.