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Cuneiform, Linear, Alphabetic: The Contest between Writing Systems in the Eastern Mediterranean

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The island of Crete is first mentioned in 18th century BCE Mari documents as *Kaptara* (Biblical *Caphtor)* one of the destinations for shipments of tin.[1] The traders from Mari and Crete met at Ugarit, the cosmopolitan port-town on the northern coast of Syria. Quite significantly, the merchant of Kaptara was accompanied by a *targamannum*, i.e., a professional translator who was able to speak both languages. The Mariote year-name "when the Cretans (*Kapitariyu*^{KI}) built a ship" was interpreted as denoting a visit by Cretans to Mari.[2]

In Egypt the first textually documented contacts with the Aegean belong to the second half of the second millennium BCE. It is still disputed whether there were earlier commercial links between Egypt and Crete, or whether the third millennium stone objects of Egyptian origin were shipped to the island from a Levantine mediator, such as Byblos.[3] The *Keftiu* (the Egyptian rendering of *Kaptara*) are depicted on wall-paintings in the tombs of Egyptian dignitaries of the 18th dynasty as offering spectacular Aegean and Syrian vessels in exchange for luxury items, such as ivory, ebony, alabaster, precious stones and gold.[4] Live animals were probably also exported from Africa to the Aegean, as exemplified by the monkeys depicted on the wall-paintings from Knossos and Thera.

Besides the exchange in exotic items and luxury products, there were probably also travelling artists whose skills were renowned throughout the entire region.[5] This has recently been demonstrated by the exciting discovery of Minoan style

wall paintings at Tell el-Dab'a in the eastern Nile delta, the site of ancient Avaris. An Austrian expedition revealed a large New Kingdom palace decorated with wall-paintings executed partly in fresco and partly in secco technique.[6] The themes include floral and figural motifs, landscapes and animals, but the most interesting are obviously the scenes with bulls and bull-leapers set against a maze-like background. A comparison with the so-called "Taureador" series from the palace of Knossos shows that practically everything in the Tell el-Dab'a paintings is typically Minoan, from techniques to themes, including the details of clothing, such as Minoan kilts, belts and boots. Even the partly shaven scalp of the head represented in blue finds its exact parallel in the paintings from Thera. Undoubtedly, these wall-paintings were executed by first rank Aegean artists who were invited to work in 18th dynasty Egypt. Nor was Egypt the only destination for these travelling masters: similar, though far less well preserved wall-and floor-paintings were discovered in the late Middle Bronze Age palaces of Alalakh in northern Syria and in Kabri in the western Galilee.[7]

The unfolding scope of Minoan-Near Eastern relations must have had a considerable impact on various cultural aspects, including language and script. An Egyptian medical papyrus contains a formula against the 'Asiatic disease' written 'in the language of the Keftiu'.[8] All attempts to decipher these "spells" have so far failed, but their very existence shows that the Egyptians, who were renowned in antiquity for their medical skills, must have acquired some knowledge of the Cretan language, at least for medical purposes. Although the drugs over which these formulas were recited are not specified, it is very likely that they were also brought from Crete. A type of "Keftiu-bean" is recorded in another Egyptian papyrus, and a further plant to be considered is the lichen used in the mummification process.[9]

Unfortunately, the written documents discovered by Sir Arthur Evans in Crete at the beginning of the century have so far provided very little additional information on Minoan contacts with the Near East. This situation may however change with the recent attempt of two Israeli scholars to identify the language of Linear A script through a well-controlled combinatory method, unlike the etymological methods applied in the past with limited success.[10] Applying the phonetic values of Linear B to Linear A, the resulting vocables show a number of distinctive morphological features typical for the Luwian languages of Anatolia, in particular the 1st millennium BCE Lycian language. This is by no means the first proposal to compare Linear A with Lycian, but previous attempts have mainly drawn upon etymological affinities, which can now be supported by more solid grammatical evidence. One is of course reminded of what Herodotos has to say in his *Histories* about the Cretan origin of the Lycians: the two nations were the descendants of two sons of Europa, Minos and Sarpedon, respectively.[11]

Another important development in the field of Minoan literacy is the discovery of Linear A inscriptions at a considerable distance from the "homeland".[12] Only a short while ago the orbit of the Linear A script covered, outside Crete itself, only the Cycladic islands (Kea, Melos, Cythera, Thera) and the Peloponnese. Five recent discoveries extend this map to more distant areas, some of them quite unexpected. Three of them come from the eastern Aegean: 1) in Mikro Vouni on the island of Samothrace several sealing devices inscribed in Cretan Hieroglyphic and in Linear A were found in well-stratified deposits;[13] 2) Miletos, at the mouth of the Meander River, has yielded a locally-made Late Minoan Ib potsherd with three incised signs;[14] 3) another Minoan inscription from Asia Minor has recently been identified on the shoulder of a *depas amphikypellon* unearthed by Schliemann at Troy.[15] It contains five signs closely resembling Linear A with simple crosses between them. Perhaps the potter copied a genuine Minoan inscription and used it as a decorational device on this and similar pots.

These three inscriptions re-open the vexed discussion on Minoan thalassocracy in the Aegean.[16] In particular, the roundels from Samothrace which were used for a complex accounting system indicate more than a simple chance find. Whether this proves direct Minoan involvement, or only the adoption by locals of a Minoan administrative system is difficult to tell, but on the whole, we may safely assume that the Cretan script, perhaps also the Cretan language, were sufficiently well understood along the eastern Aegean coasts. If indeed Cretan is a Luwian language, its use in western Anatolia should not come as a surprise. Without delving into the various historical models proposed to explain this substantial Aegean presence in western Asia Minor, suffice it to say that the entire Aegean basin must be considered to have been a basically homogenous cultural *koine* already in the second millennium BCE.[17]

The last two discoveries of Aegean inscriptions surprisingly take us to distant Israel. At Tel Haror in the western Negev a graffito was inscribed on a 16th century BCE pot before firing.[18] It contains three ideograms, signifying "fig", "cloth" and a "bull rhyton" closely resembling the rhyta carried by the Keftiu to Egypt. The potsherd was subjected to a renewed petrographic analysis, and the results show that the vessel was probably manufactured in Crete.[19] At Tel Lachish in the inner coastal plain a fragmentary inscription was carved on a large, locally made, limestone bowl.[20] The archaeological context is late 12th century BCE, but it may very well be a stray find from a much earlier level. The reading of the only preserved word is *ri-da-u*, which has some parallels in Linear A inscriptions. It is interesting to note that both the Lachish and Tel Haror inscriptions include signs which apppear to be intermediary between Linear A and Linear B.

How are we to explain the appearance of these early Aegean inscriptions in the Levant? Admittedly, two swallows do not make a summer, but in association

with the Minoan frescoes and various imported artefacts it appears that there was a considerable Cretan influence in the Levant in the era of the Late Minoan palaces.

The influence of the Minoan script in the East is, of course, not restricted to the new inscriptions from Israel. Far more enduring is the second millennium script of Cyprus, the so-called Cypro-Minoan.[21] The term was coined by Sir Arthur Evans who noted the distinct resemblance between this script and the Aegean linear scripts, especially Linear A. The still undeciphered script shows a curious combination of Western and Eastern characteristics. Most signs are clearly descended from the Aegean linear scripts, but they are written by impressing the stylus as in cuneiform, rather than drawing it as in the Linear scripts. The second millennium Cypro-Minoan script was the precursor of the first millennium Cypriote syllabary, which was employed for writing Greek alongside the alphabetical Greek writing.

Another intriguing writing system which seems to exhibit both Eastern and Western influences is the so-called "Pseudo-hieroglyphic" script of Byblos. The language of the Byblian script is assumed to be Semitic, but all attempts to decipher it have failed so far.[22] The sign forms are quite distinctive, but many of them resemble Egyptian hieratic signs,[23] whereas others are closer to the Aegean-Cypriote scripts.[24]

Whatever the extent and the significance of Minoan influence in the writing traditions of the Levant may eventually turn out to be, it is obvious that it met with tough competition from the cuneiform system originating from Mesopotamia. This oldest script of mankind had gradually been adopted by most peoples of the Near East, with the notable exception of Egypt. Moreover, cuneiform Akkadian became in the second millennium BCE the *lingua franca* of written communication for the entire Near East, including Egypt. Nonetheless, it would seem that despite the apparent invincible success of the cuneiform script, the peoples of the Levant also experimented, so-to-say, with Aegean writing systems. The Cypriotes even opted for a script descended from Crete, despite the geographical proximity and political domination of the Levant.

A brief comparison between cuneiform and the Linear B syllabary readily exhibits the advantages and disadvantages of the two competitors. If facility of learning is considered, the Aegean syllabary with some 60 syllabic signs easily beats the cumbersome cuneiform script consisting of more than 600 logograms and syllabograms. On the other hand, the reduced number of Linear signs comes at the expense of the accuracy of phonetic rendering. In particular, the lack of vowel-consonant (VC) signs causes much ambiguity in the notation of consonantal clusters, and some spellings can be rendered into as many as eight different Greek words.[25] But, of course, a cultural choice, especially in the domain of writing, is seldom dictated by logical considerations of facility and compatibility: otherwise,

we would not write Hebrew in a script which does not represent the vowels, nor would the Japanese persist in using the Chinese script, the most complex writing system ever invented. As an integral part of the Near East, the Levant naturally adopted the leading cultural canon of Mesopotamian civilization. Only an island like Cyprus could "afford" to prefer another cultural authority, that of a sister island.

To round up this picture of East and West meeting in the Levant, it should be added that the North and the South never really participated in this bazaar of writing systems. The hieroglyphic script of Anatolia had an ephemeral success only in the regions dominated by the Hittites in northern Syria. Egyptian hieroglyphic spread even less. The "snobbish" Egyptians preferred to keep their elegant writing for themselves, and corresponded with the rest of the world, including their Canaanite vassals, in cuneiform Akkadian. All this while, surrounded by four major cultures, each with its own writing system, the creative Levantines were slowly giving birth to their own writing system, which eventually prevailed over all other scripts in the world. But before the advent of the Alphabet, a few remarks are in order on the subject of written communication in the Mycenaean Age.

The excitement over Ventris's decipherment of Linear B as Mycenaean Greek was mixed with disappointment over the contents of the tablets, which consist entirely of administrative texts. To be sure, serious historians can extract information on socio-economic aspects of the Mycenaean state and society even from these allegedly boring lists. However, the great expectations for a real pre-Homeric archive, with historical, religious and mythological texts, as found in the Near East, were utterly shattered. Aegean scholars have suggested that other types of inscriptions must have been written on perishable materials, such as parchment, papyrus or wooden tablets. There are some paleographic indications that the Linear scripts were not devised for writing on clay tablets, but rather on some other medium. There are also some archaeological indications for the use of ink and there are clay sealings with traces of vegetable matter adhering to them, which could have sealed documents written on papyrus.

The most spectacular confirmation for the use of wooden tablets in the eastern Mediterranean was provided by the excavation of the Uluburun shipwreck, off the coast of Lycia in Turkey.[26] The ship was sailing westward when it sank in the mid-14th century carrying an exceptionally rich cargo of bronze ingots and implements, as well as other raw materials and luxury items. It also produced a well-preserved wooden writing-board consisting of two recessed boards made of box-wood, joined by three cylindrical hinges made of ivory.[27] From Near Eastern and Greco-Roman parallels[28] we know that these writing-boards were filled with wax which served as the writing surface, but, unfortunately, nothing from this

coating survived on this oldest specimen in the world. The nationality of the ship and its crew is still disputed, but in any case, the board could have been inscribed with any of the scripts used in the eastern Mediterranean. Although we lack any proof for the use of wooden tablets in the Aegean, attention has been called to the Homeric reference to a 'folding tablet' containing 'baneful signs', which Bellerophon carried to the king of Lycia (*Iliad* VI:169). If these indirect indications carry any weight, we should bear in mind that large written corpora from the Aegean might have been lost forever, a consideration which is also relevant for the question of the beginning of Greek alphabetic writing.

We must, however, deal only with what we have, and the astonishing fact is that, with the notable exception of the Hittite documentation, we have almost nothing *in writing* on the allegedly massive Mycenaean involvement in the eastern Mediterranean trade. The Amarna tablets from Egypt, which cover the prolific correspondence between the major Near Eastern royal courts in the mid-14th century, are suspiciously silent about the Aegean. 13th century Ugarit, the hub of the booming trade in the northeastern Mediterranean, has a single mention of a ship returning from Caphtor.[29] Therefore, we have to assume that this surprisingly meager written documentation points to an indirect trade between the Mycenaeans and the East, with Cypriot and Levantine merchants serving as middlemen.[30]

If we have any real historical information on Mycenaean Greece at all, it is thanks to the Hittite documentation, which is seldom given its due weight in Aegean studies. Some eighty years ago, shortly after the discovery of the state archives of Hattusha, Emil Forrer recognized Homer's *Akhaioi* in the Land of *Akhiyawa* often mentioned in the Hittite texts. After decades of vehement debates about the validity of this identification, it is nowadays almost universally accepted.[31] Akhiyawa appears as a strong maritime power which competed with the Hittites over the political domination of Western Anatolia. The two lands had gone through periods of peace and war, with one of the disputed territories being the Land of Wilusha, most probably Homeric Ilion or Troy. The showpiece of the Akhiyawa dossier is a tablet containing the third and last part of a long letter sent by the Great King of Hatti to the Great King of Akhiyawa in the mid-13th century.[32] It deals primarily with a request for the extradition of a western Anatolian gang leader, Piyamaradu, who refused to obey the Hittites and threatened to disrupt the peaceful relations between the two great powers. For our topic here, the significant fact is that extensive mail travelled between the two royal courts, although unfortunately we do not have the name of the Great King of Ahhiyawa, nor his mailing address.

In which language did the Hittites and the Mycenaeans communicate? The long letter from Hattusha must be a copy or a draft written in Hittite. Such drafts were composed for letters sent to Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, which were then

translated into Akkadian, the language of international correspondence. I doubt that this was the case for Akhiyawa too. Though an acknowledged great power, it lay too far from the Near Eastern *koine* and perhaps it did not employ professional Akkadian scribes in its foreign office. We know for a fact that various kingdoms of western Anatolia where Luwian dialects were spoken, such as Arzawa and Wilusha/Troy, used Hittite as the language of written communication, including in their correspondence with Egypt. Perhaps it was easier for the Mycenaean diplomats to learn Hittite, a Indo-European language, than Akkadian. I would not even exclude the possibility that someone at the court of Hattusha could speak and write Mycenaean Greek, but the evidence is lacking.

When the Hittite Great King Hattushili warned his Akhiyawan partner of the dangers posed by the unruly elements in the no-mans-lands in south-western Anatolia, he sounded a prophetic note. Half a century later, both empires collapsed to the pressure of the Sea Peoples originating from these very territories of the eastern Aegean. The Sea Peoples, the best known of which are the Biblical Philistines, scattered over large territories in the eastern Mediterranean, extending from Sardinia in the west, to Canaan in the east. The Bible has the Philistines coming from Caphtor, and the tradition linking Philistia with Crete persisted well into the Classical period, when the town of Gaza was also known as Minoa. There is presently not much archaeological evidence to support this connection, but one of the signs on the enigmatic Phaestos disc somewhat resembles the feathered headdress of Philistine warriors.

Among the various cultural assets brought by the Philistines from their homelands, there was also a writing system with clear Aegean affinities. However, there is only a handful of specimens, far too little for a sensible decipherment. Perhaps more examples will come to light in the excavations presently being conducted at the Philistine cities of Ashkelon and Ekron. However, it is quite clear that the Philistines followed the example of all their neighbours in the Levant and soon adopted the Canaanite/Phoenician alphabet. Incidentally, the excavations of Ekron have recently yielded the first substantial alphabetic Philistine document, a building inscription for a temple dedicated to a goddess.[33]

Indeed, the simple but ingenious alphabet of some twenty to thirty signs, undoubtedly the greatest contribution of the Canaanites to mankind, had a sweeping victory over all other scripts amongst the nations of the Levant. It took much longer to replace the traditional scripts of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Anatolia. In the Aegean, the Linear scripts sank into oblivion with the fall of the Mycenaean palaces. Only Cyprus kept alive a descendant of the Linear tradition (Cypriote Syllabic), although this island was one of the first meeting points of the new Phoenician and Greek alphabets. The question of when and from where the Greeks adopted the Semitic alphabet is still a much debated topic. In any event, by the

second quarter of the first millennium BCE the entire eastern Mediterranean had adopted the alphabetic script, using many variants. Written communication must had become quite easy, especially compared to earlier ages. I assume that a Phoenician merchant could easily read Greek characters, and vice versa. Whether they also understood each other's language, is another question, but I would certainly not exclude this possibility.

Notes

1. Dossin 1970.
2. Villard 1986: 402, n. 106.
3. Klengel 1984; Lambrou-Phillipson 1991; Warren 1995.
4. Wachsmann 1987.
5. See Cline 1995, with earlier literature.
6. Bietak 1995; Morgan 1995.
7. Niemeier 1991.
8. For refs., see Warren 1995: 7.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Finkelberg 1990-91; Uchitel and Finkelberg 1995.
11. For refs., see Finkelberg 1990-91: 82 f.
12. Finkelberg 1998.
13. Matsas 1991; Matsas 1995.
14. Schneider 1996.
15. Godart 1994.
16. See articles assembled in Laffineur et Basch 1991.
17. See Gates 1995, with further literature.
18. Oren *et al.* 1996; Oren 1997: 271.
19. Y. Goren, personal communication.
20. Finkelberg *et al.* 1996.
21. See Bennett in Daniels and Bright 1996: 130, with refs.
22. Sznycer 1994.
23. Hoch 1995.
24. Dunand 1945: 123-126, fig. 43.
25. See Bennett in Daniels and Bright 1995: 125-130.
26. See refs. in Payton 1991: 99, n. 1.
27. Payton 1991.
28. Symington 1991.
29. Astour 1973: 25 f.
30. Wachsmann 1987: 125.
31. For refs. to the extensive literature on the subject, see Gates 1995: 294 f.
32. See Singer 1983, with refs.
33. Naveh *et al.* 1997.

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