Alphabetic Writing in the Mediterranean World: Transmission and Appropriation*

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The Mediterranean Sea not only facilitated the transfer of goods by boat, but made easier the transfer of knowledge and technology. Writing is a method of recording and communicating information, itself a kind of knowledge and technology that emerged, diffused, and evolved over historical time. During the 2nd millennium BCE in the Near East, a new system of writing, an alphabetic script began to emerge, that is to say, a system limited to around 30 signs representing essentially, at its origin, the sound of a Semitic language, though initially only its consonants. The intention of this paper is to try to comprehend the manner by which the first alphabetic scripts arose and how their use spread around the Mediterranean world over the period up to about the middle of the 1st millennium BCE.

It must immediately be emphasized, however, that the documents available for reconstructing this history of the diffusion of the earliest alphabetic scripts in the Mediterranean world remain limited, even if each passing year sees a gradual increase in their number. That is to say: numerous aspects of this history are still unknown to us, and we are hence reduced to putting forward working hypotheses “according to the current state of the documentation,” hypotheses which at times provoke sharp differences of interpretation among specialists, while we all await the verdict of new epigraphic discoveries.

It is in such a context that this study examines first the birth of alphabetic writing, then its initial spread through the Levant until about the end of the 2nd millennium BCE, then finally the diffusion of alphabetic scripts around the Mediterranean Sea in the first half of the 1st millennium BCE.

1 The Birth of Alphabetic Writing

The emergence of the first alphabetic script is not directly documented and remains shrouded in obscurity. Nevertheless, some aspects seem clear

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* This contribution is a corrected, adapted, and updated version of Lemaire 2008a, taking into account the limits of the title and the discoveries, researches and publications of the last years.
and are generally accepted by those studying this problem in its historic context:¹

1. Ancient Greek and Latin authors generally attribute the origin of the Greek alphabet to the Phoenicians: according to Herodotus, the “Phoenicians… introduced into Greece, after their settlement in the country, a number of accomplishments, of which the most important was writing, an art till then, I think, unknown to the Greeks… they were taught these letters by the Phoenicians and adopted them, with a few alterations, for their own use, continuing to refer to them as Phoenician characters—as was only right, as the Phoenicians had introduced them.”²

2. Nevertheless, according to Tacitus, referring to the moment when new letters were introduced to the Latin alphabet during the reign of Claudius, the Phoenicians were simply intermediaries, with the ultimate origin of this form of writing linked to the Egyptians: “(The Egyptians) also claim to have discovered the alphabet and taught it to the Phoenicians who, controlling the seas, introduced it to Greece and were credited with inventing what they had really borrowed.”³

3. There is evidence that the Egyptian script from its time of origin possessed around 30 signs whose consonantal value was derived by acrophony. They were especially used in the transcription of foreign proper names. However, Egyptian scribes never systematized the use of these consonantal signs to make an alphabetic script from them.⁴

4. Following upon J.-F. Champollion⁵ and Ch. Lenormant,⁶ modern commentators have certainly seen that the Phoenician alphabet had borrowed from Egypt both the principle of single-letter signs, the derivation of their consonantal value by acrophony, the linear script form and even the selection of a certain number of signs which were more probably suggested by the hieroglyphic script.⁷ At the same time they emphasize that

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² Hdt. 5.58. Translation from de Selincourt 2003 unless otherwise noted. See also Plin. Nat. 5.13; 7.16.


⁴ Freu 2000.

⁵ 1822: 42.


⁷ And not hieratic, pace Hamilton 2006.