



**THE DIFFUSION OF THE ALPHABET IN THE SECOND MILLENNIUM BCE:  
ON THE MOVEMENTS OF SCRIBAL IDEAS FROM EGYPT TO THE LEVANT,  
MESOPOTAMIA, AND YEMEN**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The non-impact of the alphabet has garnered a lot of attention recently: how could an invention so revolutionary do so little? Researchers have been led to wonder whether the alphabet may not have been as revolutionary as had been thought, or perhaps that it was not invented as early as had been thought. Recent discoveries, however, coupled with a re-evaluation of data that has been long known, lead to a different conclusion: the alphabet did spread across the entire Near East, from Egypt, through Syria, into southern Mesopotamia, within a few centuries of its invention. The exact chronology differed from place to place, but the transmission is always seen to follow the opening of trade routes. Interestingly, the alphabetic script is typically seen in the hands of scribes, not formerly illiterate people. Thus the alphabet's revolutionary impact was limited by class structures, not geography.*

Since Sir Alan Gardiner identified the Sinai inscriptions as alphabetic just over a century ago, there have been two widely accepted views that seem to stand in tension with each other. The first is a Middle Bronze date for the invention of the alphabet. Already in 1916, Gardiner wrote about the inscriptions from Serabit el-Khadim, "I am by no means convinced that the end of the Twelfth Dynasty would not be a more probable date."<sup>1</sup> This hypothesis was ably defended by Sass in his 1988 book and received important support from the publication of the Wadi el-Hol inscriptions by Darnell, Dobbs-Allsopp, Lundberg, McCarter, and Zuckerman, dated based on context to the 19th century BCE.<sup>2</sup> In a recent volume on the origins of the alphabet, all the contributors agree that the earliest known alphabetic inscriptions are from the 19th century, and more specifically from the reign of Amenemhat III.<sup>3</sup>

The second accepted view was that the alphabet

had revolutionary power, not only in the sense that it was a conceptual revolution (which it certainly was) but also in that it had the ability to create a social revolution. Frank Moore Cross wrote:

With the creation of the alphabet came the first opportunity for the democratization of culture. [...] With the invention of alphabetic writing, literacy spread like wildfire and a new epoch of cultural history may be said to begin with the emergence of the Linear alphabet.<sup>4</sup>

Speaking more clearly in terms of potential rather than actual effect, Sass offered that "[i]t was the invention of the alphabet that brought literacy potentially within the reach of every man, even if this potential was not realized until much later."<sup>5</sup>

These two views, the early date of invention and the revolutionary potential of the alphabet, when

taken together, have run up against the fact that in actuality we find very little evidence of the use of the alphabet at all, much less an accompanying social revolution, until much farther down the timeline, in the Late Bronze and Iron Ages.

Because of this, in recent years, scholars have taken pains to point out the incongruity, and sometimes to try to solve it. Lemaire faced this problem head on, noting, “The spread of alphabetic writing was anything but spectacular; there was no explosion in its use, not any wildfire-like uncontrollable expansion.”<sup>6</sup> One recent theory even has it that the paucity of data shows that the linear alphabet spread no farther north or east than Philistia until the Iron IIA period, in the early 1st millennium BCE.<sup>7</sup> Goldwasser, on the other hand, is cautious in drawing conclusions from the apparent silence, pointing out that this may be simply the absence of knowledge, not the knowledge of absence:

The period between the invention of the alphabet in Sinai and its resurgence and extension by the end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age is still a dark period in the history of the alphabet. There are too few finds to allow us to safely reconstruct its history, and the question of how and who started the linearization should be left open until more finds come to light.<sup>8</sup>

Still, the absence of evidence for the wildfire-like effect of the alphabet has become more and more suspicious, and as the decades have passed without any major increase in our knowledge of the spread of the alphabet, it has become increasingly tempting to reject one of both of the heretofore-accepted views, and indeed each has recently been challenged.

On the one hand, there has been a tendency to avoid claims of “superiority” for the alphabet, and thus to in effect question the notion that the alphabet somehow *ought* to be adopted if available.<sup>9</sup> In part, this is an admirable effort to avoid claims of culture superiority, especially as Western languages are overwhelmingly alphabetic, and East Asian languages are primarily not. However, the question at hand is not one of abstract “superiority,” but the narrower question of whether alphabetic scripts are easier to learn, especially when compared with the earlier Near Eastern scripts (cuneiform and

Egyptian), and thus ought to lead to increased literacy. Rollston has contested even this claim, arguing that it may be just as difficult to acquire alphabetic competence as a first writing system as the other Near Eastern systems.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Sass has been led to the view that the received wisdom about the dating of the invention is wrong, arguing that the most parsimonious explanation is to reject the view that the alphabet is from the Middle Bronze Age, or even the early Late Bronze Age, preferring instead to date it to the late 14th century. Sass observed that this is “but a working hypothesis” based on currently known data, but it is a powerful hypothesis and reflects a profound awareness of the incongruity of the conventional wisdom.<sup>11</sup>

This paper will argue that we do actually have enough data to see that, contrary to what is often thought, the alphabet *was* spreading in the first centuries after its invention, and that by the 15th and 14th centuries, we have evidence for its presence, in *unofficial*, but *scribal*, contexts, in Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia—in other words, all throughout the Near East. Furthermore, the spread of the alphabet closely tracks the opening of communication routes, so it can be said that the alphabet went where it could, relatively quickly when it could. This is, then, something of a compromise position. On the one hand, the spread of the alphabet is visible and real. On the other hand, there is little indication of a “democratization” of writing: it seems to only be in the hands of those working as scribes in other scripts already.

It should be emphasized that even as the alphabet spread to new territories, it never displaced older writing systems. This goes part of the way towards explaining why it *appears* that its diffusion was limited: it was always, so to speak, underground. The conservatism of scribal traditions hardly needs to be demonstrated, and previous scholars have invoked this consideration in explaining why the alphabet did not spread. The weight of social pressure was likely heavily stacked against that happening:

Aside from the very frequent resistance which occurs within a culture faced by any innovation, any use of alphabetic script would have come up against various obstacles associated with social and political conditions.<sup>12</sup>

Our knowledge of the scribal education in Egypt, as well as Mesopotamia, allows us to appreciate how much of an investment such training was. It comes with perceived hardships, the constant potential for failure and humiliation, and the possibility of success leading to a life blissfully devoid of physical labor.<sup>13</sup> In such a context, any innovation that would *ease* scribal training would perforce be opposed vigorously by scribes. Where our reconstructions parts ways with previous studies, however, is in arguing that the alphabet did spread, albeit not in official scribal contexts, although it was (often) scribes circulating the alphabet for non-official purposes.

The discussion will move in geographical order, beginning in Egypt, and then moving to the Levant, Mesopotamia, and finally Yemen.

#### EGYPT

Since most scholars now appear to espouse the view that the alphabet was invented in Egypt or Sinai,<sup>14</sup> perhaps its presence in Egypt is not worthy of particular note. However, the 15th-century ostrakon from the tomb of Sennefri at Thebes published by Haring two years ago is in fact noteworthy.<sup>15</sup> This brief text, on a limestone flake, contains only 13 lines, including those with no legible writing remaining. The text clearly combines Egyptian and alphabetic writing. Line 1, for instance, reads (in Haring's hieroglyphic transcription):



The hieratic reads  $h^3w hn$ , with the  (if this is what it is) somewhat enigmatic.<sup>16</sup>  $H^3w hn$  could plausibly be a writing of *hy hnw* "to rejoice," and this is followed by the sign of a rejoicing man.<sup>17</sup> This sign is the old sign for /h/ in the earliest alphabetic texts, and although there has been some debate whether it represents a man saying "hey!" or the verb *hll* "to praise," it clearly fits the content of the hieratic line quite well. The text then continues in the same manner, offering on each line an Egyptian word followed by an early alphabetic grapheme that is semantically appropriate. Interestingly, this is structurally parallel to normative Egyptian writing, sine Egyptian words typically end with "determinatives," which relate semantically to the word just written out phonetically. A simple example:   spells out  $h^3$  "to go down," and

then has the "walking legs" determinative, to indicate that this is a verb of motion. Even the structure of the text on the Theban ostrakon, then, is modelled on Egyptian writing,<sup>18</sup> an indication of the scribal circles in which this text must have been produced.

As Haring understood, one crucial facet is the order of the letters in the text. The first four are *h-r-h-m*, and since Egyptian often represents /l/ with <r>, this appears to be a rendering of the *halham* order of the alphabet, known primarily from Iron Age South Arabia, but also from an abcdary at Ugarit and another at Bet Shemesh.<sup>19</sup> The text is also noteworthy, however, because the writer was clearly a trained Egyptian scribe. He writes in hieratic, followed by the alphabetic symbols at the end of the line.

Although geographically Thebes is quite close to Wadi el-Hol, this text is worlds away from the nearby graffiti in social meaning. Those were scratched into a rock in a remote part of the desert; this is a learned exercise composed by someone proficient in the official scribal repertoire and creatively experimenting with the interplay of the two writing systems at his disposal. One supposes that the scribe of the Theban Tomb (TT) 99 text would never have proposed replacing his hieratic with alphabetic writing, but he was playing with this new tool on the side, so to speak.

#### LEVANT

We move north and east now, to the Levant. The so-called Byblos syllabary has been studied by scholars over the past decades, but there is unfortunately no consensus that the script has been deciphered correctly, or even approximately correctly.<sup>20</sup> The date of these texts (perhaps early to mid-2nd millennium), and the fact that they are clearly not logographic, are intriguing, but little more can be said with any certainty. Some scholars, including recently Puech, have suggested that the alphabet was invented in Byblos, a site with deep Egyptian influence and native Semitic language.<sup>21</sup> Puech places the invention in the late 3rd millennium BCE, to allow for its importation to Egypt by the 19th century. There is of course no direct evidence for this, and for that reason it seems impossible to rely on this hypothesis. It is salutary, however, to recall that the fact that the earliest texts come from Egypt and Sinai is not in fact ironclad evidence for its invention in that region.

More clearly and directly relevant is the small corpus of inscriptions from the Shephelah. Some of these are quite early—the Lachish dagger and the Gezer jars and sherd perhaps even from the 17th and 16th centuries BCE—and these alone can demonstrate the spread of the alphabet relatively quickly after its invention.<sup>22</sup> Sass originally doubted that the signs on the dagger constituted an inscription, and now seems to concede that point but doubts the 17th century date.<sup>23</sup> Finkelstein and Sass have re-assigned these to the Late Bronze II–III.<sup>24</sup> This latter view seems particularly farfetched in the case of the Lachish dagger, as all comparable Levantine daggers found in graves are from the Middle Bronze Age and no later.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, as long as this (and other) inscription(s) are not understood, I prefer not to overly rely on them.

Support for the presence of writing in the Shephelah comes from the fact that in the 13th century, Lachish and surrounding towns are clearly a major site of alphabetic writing, as has been developed in recent years both by Finkelstein and Sass and by Goldwasser.<sup>26</sup> Especially worthy of note in this context is that the region is also clearly home to a large number of *Egyptian* scribes. Hieratic inscriptions were found in Lachish,<sup>27</sup> Tel Sera', 25 km farther southwest in the Shephelah,<sup>28</sup> Qubur el-Walaydah,<sup>29</sup> about 20 km farther southwest, and Tell el-Far'ah South, 6 km south of that,<sup>30</sup> and Tell eṣ-Ṣafi, 15 km north of Lachish.<sup>31</sup> This supports the central claim of this paper: the alphabet followed scribes. Although the Egyptian scribes would never have abandoned their own traditions and practices, and therefore continued to write in hieratic, they also brought knowledge of the alphabet in their wake.<sup>32</sup> Whether they themselves knew and taught the alphabet, or the connection is less direct, is impossible to know in this case, but the conjunction between the Egyptian scribal apparatus and the appearance of alphabetic inscriptions cannot be a coincidence.

More can be said about the state of affairs around the same time, 450 km to the north, in the city of Ugarit. The cosmopolitan scribes of this highly connected city utilized at least three forms of the alphabet, at least sporadically, but it is the longest and most common of the Ugaritic alphabets that is of primary interest here.<sup>33</sup> This alphabet, deciphered quickly after its discovery in 1929, is an adaptation of the alphabetic script known from the earlier inscriptions. It is an adaptation in at least three

senses. First, the very idea of an alphabet was not invented again by the Ugaritic scribes, but was taken over from their familiarity with alphabetic writing, presumably ink on papyrus, with which they were familiar.<sup>34</sup> Scribes at Ugarit wrote in numerous languages and corresponded with courts and administrations around the world, including Egypt, so multiple modes of transmission are conceivable.<sup>35</sup>

Second, when the Ugaritic scribes adapted the alphabet for use on clay, they did to some extent retain the basic shapes of the letters.<sup>36</sup> They have been stylized—better, “linearized”—to the extent that one can no longer see the ox underlying the morphology of the Ugaritic *aleph*, the house underlying the *bet*, and so on (see Table 1). The same processes were taking place in roughly contemporary Shephelah; there, too, the letter shapes were losing their iconographic value and were being reduced to properly linear forms.<sup>37</sup> The difference between the northern and the southern developments is in the medium of choice: the Ugaritic scribes were adapting the letter forms to the technology of cuneiform, wherein the allowable shapes are only the wedge (made by the end of the reed stylus) and the straight line (made by the long edge),<sup>38</sup> whereas the scribes in the Shephelah were incising their letters in clay and using ink on pottery, and probably also on papyrus, which has not survived. Comparing the Ugaritic letters to the earlier alphabetic forms makes it clear that in some cases, at least, the shape of the linear alphabetic letter was the basis for the coining of the Ugaritic letter form, as well. Certain letters are particularly striking in this regard (Table 1).<sup>39</sup>

Third, the order of the letters in Ugaritic is known, of course, from the abcedaries among the texts, including RS 12.063.<sup>40</sup> One of the fascinating pieces of data is that the three letters that are unique to the Ugaritic alphabetic tradition, and are therefore presumed to have been Ugaritic innovations—the two additional *alephs* and the additional sibilant (whatever the precise phonological values of the latter)—are found at the end of the alphabet:

ʔ a b ḡ ḥ d h w z ḥ ṭ y k š l m ḏ n z s ṣ p ṣ k r ṭ ḡ t ʔ i ʔ u ṣ

Clearly, the alphabet adapted by the Ugaritic scribes had 27 letters, to which these three were added. It is therefore clear that when the Ugaritic scribes invented their alphabet, it already had a canonical order—or, in other words, that they were adapting

TABLE 1: Comparison of Ugaritic letters to earlier alphabetic forms.

LETTER (MODERN HEBREW/ ARAMAIC FORM)	EARLY ALPHABETIC FORM (FROM HAMILTON 2006)	UGARITIC FORM (RS 88.2215, FROM PARDEE 2010)
כ		
ג		
ח		
ו		
ד		

an alphabet that already existed, rather than inventing one.<sup>41</sup>

The order in nearly all of the Ugaritic abcedaries is the one reflected in the word *abcedary*, but there is one abcedary, RS 88.2215, which reflects the *halḥam* order known from later South Arabian traditions. But whereas the South Arabian script has 29 graphemes, the *halḥam* abcedary from Ugarit has only 27.<sup>42</sup> While it is difficult to know where this tradition was invented, and then what lines to draw to situate this in the context of the spread of the alphabet, it is clear that there were already diverse traditions of “alphabetical order” by the 13th century in Syria, which in turn suggests that the alphabet had been transmitted in multiple circles and multiple directions over a significant amount of time by then.<sup>43</sup>

The point that demands our particular attention in the context of the present discussion is that here, again, the alphabet is seen in the hands of professional scribes. Ugaritic scribes were impressively multilingual, and they—or perhaps just one of them—invented the Ugaritic alphabet only for Ugarit’s own literary heritage. This was not a betrayal of the grand international tradition of writing, because, as Sanders observed, they kept the

two realms separate: Ugaritic script for Ugaritic literature, and Akkadian for international correspondence and other texts. “Ugaritic scribes were trained in the classical Mesopotamian curriculum, but declined to translate any of this into Ugaritic, nor is there any Ugaritic literature translated into other languages.”<sup>44</sup> A Ugaritic scribe called upon to write a letter to a foreign king or a treaty, or even a local legal text, would use Akkadian. Ugaritic was the norm only for local literary/religious texts.<sup>45</sup>

When did all this take place? There has been a recent downward dating of all Ugaritic texts from the 14th century to the late 13th century.<sup>46</sup> The evidence, by its nature, is inconclusive,<sup>47</sup> but signs of diachronic development within Ugaritic writing (in orthography and perhaps even phonology) hint that the texts derive from more than a single chronological horizon.<sup>48</sup> It does seem likely that in any event, the invention of the Ugaritic alphabet was enabled by the political events of the 15th and 14th centuries. After the expulsion of the Hyksos in the 16th century, and another century of rather distant relations between Egypt and the Levant until the beginning of the 15th century, the campaigning of Thutmose III brought the two regions into close

contact again.<sup>49</sup> It is possible that his son Amenhotep II actually conquered Ugarit itself,<sup>50</sup> and certainly the name of Ugarit appears in geographical lists from the reign of his grandson, Amenhotep III.<sup>51</sup> It appears that it is not coincidental that the following century may see the diffusion of the alphabet into the Levant.<sup>52</sup>

The Egyptian conquests were not the last formative event, however, and Ugaritic writing apparently did not develop in the 15th century: all of the texts come from the latest stratum of the city, post-dating the treaty with the Hittite king Suppiluliuma I in the mid-14th century. This seems to indicate that there was no native writing prior to that phase<sup>53</sup> (and the slightly earlier letters sent from Ugarit to Amarna are, of course, in Mesopotamian cuneiform). Perhaps under Hittite influence, the earlier training in Akkadian cuneiform now combined with the Egyptian-inspired system of alphabet writing,<sup>54</sup> thus producing a script that was both distinctly local<sup>55</sup> and strikingly international. This development then gave rise to the scribal class that flourished there for the last century and a half of the city's existence.

The idea of the alphabet had presumably spread northwards beginning in the 15th century, when there was close contact between the scribal classes in Egypt and the Levant. Although the precise means of diffusion will continue to elude us, we can be confident that at this point the transmission was in the hands of scribes. The Levantine and Egyptian scribes wrote to each other in cuneiform, and of course the Egyptian scribes were also trained in hieratic. But the alphabet was clearly interesting enough to these scribes to be worthy of discussion and transference. Once the Ugaritic scribes made the momentous decision to write their local literature in their vernacular, the alphabet was adapted to the recently adopted technology, cuneiform. While the road from Egypt to the Levant is untraceable, the effects of this diffusion are clear in the record from the 14th and 13th centuries.

Before leaving the Levant, it must be noted that while Ugarit can show us one way in which the alphabet had spread to the Levant by the 14th century, it is clear that for the later history of the alphabet, Ugaritic is a dead end. Fortunately, there were other centers of alphabetic development, and Lachish stands out in this regard. The Lachish ewer<sup>56</sup> and bowls from Lachish, as well as some of the technical innovations in the script in evidence in

these short texts, suggest that this city was an important locus of innovation that gave rise to some of the scribal traditions seen in the subsequent centuries in the Levant.<sup>57</sup> It had clearly spread beyond the borders of Lachish, as well, as seen in at least two letters on a broken ostrakon from Hazor and the Gezer sherd (which may be earlier but can be no later than the 13th century).<sup>58</sup>

#### ARABIA

We will move ahead in time now, to observe a similar dynamic in a different region. It now seems sure that the alphabet reached Yemen by the end of the 2nd millennium BCE, based on the radiocarbon dates of the wooden sticks with the earliest south Arabian inscriptions.<sup>59</sup> Both Knauf and Kitchen speculated that there were ties between the Levant and South Arabia already in the Late Bronze Age, relying in part on the *halḥam* abedary from Beth Shemesh, dated to the 13th century.<sup>60</sup> Since that order seems to have disappeared from the Levant by the end of the Late Bronze Age, it must have been transported to Yemen by then. It is important to note, however, that the Beth Shemesh abedary consists of only 22 letters, which suggests that it is a *modification* of the *halḥam* order presumably already in currency, since the version that spread to South Arabia contained 29 letters. It is worth mentioning, too, the echo of the Ba'al epic identified by Al-Jallad in a much later South Arabian text.<sup>61</sup> If this is correct, this too suggests cultural transfers going back to the Iron I period. I would allow a date up to the 11th century. By then, in any event, we can be sure that people in Yemen knew how to write with the alphabet.

The crucial point for understanding the dynamic of script transference is that it was in the century or so of the 2nd millennium that there was sustained and significant trade contacts between the Levant and south Arabia.<sup>62</sup> Once again, there seems to have been little lag time between intensive contacts and the transfer of the alphabet. When there were Arabian merchants traveling in the Levant, they rather quickly brought the alphabet back with them.

#### MESOPOTAMIA

The most extreme case—both the earliest and the most distant transfer—was to Mesopotamia. When she published the cuneiform texts in the Schøyen collection, Dalley (2009) drew attention to the presence of dockets on at least four of the texts in linear alphabetic script. In at least one case, the

reading, despite its irregular writing, is clear: the docket reads אִלִּי־דִּינִי־אִלִּי, and Ali-dīn-ili is a protagonist in the cuneiform text bearing the label. This is clearly his name written in the alphabetic script. Some of the other readings are also fairly clear, although not confirmable in the same way.

The texts are dated to the 16th or 15th centuries based on the cuneiform paleography and apparent political and cultural connections with what is known from elsewhere, especially Babylonia. The careful paleographic analysis of the alphabetic letters by Hamidović,<sup>63</sup> while exacting, does not seem beneficial, for two reasons. First, in no region is there regular development of the alphabetic scripts over its first centuries of existence. Second, even if it were possible to construct script charts for the Levant for the middle of the 2nd millennium, there is no reason to assume that the letter forms current in the Levant would be similar to those used in southern Mesopotamia, or that developments in one of these regions would echo in the other.

Indeed, D’Istria has observed that the forms look “modern” in comparison with what is known from the Levant even two centuries later,<sup>64</sup> but this ought not to surprise us. The “simplifying assumption” that we make that letter forms will change across the region in lockstep is a useful heuristic, but is no more than that. We need to be prepared to re-evaluate our simplifying assumptions when they come up against the complex data.<sup>65</sup> In this case, the dockets can show us that in the course of the transmission of the alphabetic script 1500 km to the east, the letters were linearized fairly rapidly. It may have helped that the acrophonic values of the signs were no longer meaningful to scribes out of the area of the Levant, and so the original iconic values of the signs lost their phonetic values quickly. Linearization soon followed.

These dockets were, of course, quite a surprising find. The idea of dockets is not surprising. They are most famous from the hundreds of published Aramaic dockets on Neo-Assyrian cuneiform texts,<sup>66</sup> but the technique is also known from Amarna, where some letters have hieratic dockets.<sup>67</sup> Assuming that this comparison is conceptually appropriate, the use here indicates that the scribes could readily read these labels and quickly identify the text and its contents based on them.<sup>68</sup> Normally we assume that the scribes were *more* proficient in the script and language of the dockets than in those of the body of the text—this is presumably why an

Egyptian scribe adds a hieratic label to a cuneiform text, for example. Does this mean that Sealand scribes were utilizing cuneiform but preferred the ease of the alphabet? It is difficult to be sure, but the dockets are very suggestive.

What is surprising, then, is not the idea of such dockets, but the fact that the scribes would utilize the alphabet so early and so far east, in a manner that indicates ready proficiency. It also indicates a gap between official usage, which had to be in Akkadian, and pragmatic sub-official usage, which could be in the alphabet.

In sum, the use of the alphabetic dockets in the Sealand texts provides very suggestive, but of course only fragmentary, evidence for the spread of the alphabet much farther and earlier than we had known. Equally significant is who is using the alphabet here: it is utilized by scribes, but outside of their normal professional contexts. For the actual contracts, they write of course in cuneiform. But for labeling—a practice of interest only to themselves, they utilize the alphabet.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this review was to argue that the alphabet spread more than was previously recognized in its first centuries of existence. Essentially as soon as there was the opportunity for prolonged and profound scribal communication, the alphabet appears. Within Egypt, this is seen by the 15th century; in Mesopotamia, it makes an appearance no later than that and perhaps even in the 16th century. The Levant, Egyptianized beginning in the 15th century, shows scribal adaptations of the alphabet in 14th-century Ugarit. And once trade with South Arabia begins in earnest in the early Iron Age, the alphabet quickly appears there, as well.

This allows us to affirm, then, the two views with which we began: that the alphabet was invented, probably, towards the beginning of the 2nd millennium BCE, and that it contained latent revolutionary potential that was easily discerned by those who encountered it. The pressure to keep the new invention from invading the broader scribal culture came from professional scribes, but those same scribes did much to spread and develop the alphabet, in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Levant.

The alphabet did spread, however, in the hands of scribes, proficient also in cuneiform (Mesopotamia and Ugarit) or hieratic (Egypt). The new technology

did not, therefore, quickly lead to any democratization of writing, or any overthrow of the scribal elite. On the contrary, based on current knowledge, the alphabet seems to have been kept in the hands of the scribes and benefited no one else.

In conclusion, it is worth considering the relationship between the reconstruction offered here and a crucial question that has been much debated in recent scholarship: was the alphabet invented by scribes knowledgeable in Egyptian writing, or by people formerly illiterate?<sup>69</sup> Since this paper has argued that the alphabet was *disseminated* by scribes, this may constitute suggestive evidence that it was *invented* by scribes, as well. Those scribes were presumably Egyptian scribes, as is suggested not only by the location of the earliest texts and the morphology of some of the signs, but also by comparison of the alphabet with hieroglyphs as writing systems.

It is striking, for instance, that the alphabet does not record vowels—a feature shared with Egyptian writing (but not, for instance, Mesopotamian cuneiform, or many other writing systems).<sup>70</sup> Does this suggest that the inventors not only could *see* the hieroglyphs but also understood the relationship between the script and the language? On the other hand, there are profound differences between the writing systems. The orthography of the early alphabetic texts is remarkably shallow, in stark contrast to Egyptian; there are no non-phonological components to the alphabet, very much unlike Egyptian; and words are not divided, and perhaps not even conceptualized as words, in early alphabetic writing.<sup>71</sup> These latter phenomena may suggest inventors who were unfamiliar with Egyptian writing—or were consciously setting it aside as a model.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Gardiner 1916, 13.
- <sup>2</sup> Sass 1988, 135–144; Darnell et al. 2006.
- <sup>3</sup> Rico 2015, xxiv.
- <sup>4</sup> Cross 1979, 111. Compare his comments in Cross 1989, 78: "The weight of the impact of the alphabet on the evolution of human civilization is difficult to exaggerate. Literacy spread rapidly and broadly (in centuries rather than millennia),

- and with it came the democratization of culture.”
- <sup>5</sup> Sass 1988, 1.
- <sup>6</sup> Lemaire 2008, 46–47 (= Lemaire 2017, 106).
- <sup>7</sup> Finkelstein and Sass 2013, 149–220, esp. 183 and *passim*; Sass and Finkelstein 2016, 19–42, esp. 26 and 37.
- <sup>8</sup> Goldwasser 2016, 156.
- <sup>9</sup> Coulmas 1989, 44, 47–49.
- <sup>10</sup> Rollston 2010, 92–95 and 128. See also Lam 2010, 189. This is not the place for a full discussion, but this claim is *prima facie* unlikely, and the reasoning used by Rollston is flawed.
- <sup>11</sup> See Sass 2004–2005 and in many subsequent publications.
- <sup>12</sup> Lemaire 2008, 46–47 (= Lemaire 2017, 106).
- <sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Williams 1972 and Delnero 2010.
- <sup>14</sup> Although see below, at n. 22
- <sup>15</sup> Haring 2015.
- <sup>16</sup> Haring 2015, 192.
- <sup>17</sup> This is Haring’s view: that the phonetic writing represents Egyptian. Both Fischer-Elfert and Krebernik 2016 and Schneider 2018 argue that the writing represents Semitic. The proposed equations require too many implausible leaps, however (e.g., reading *rntt* as a writing of *lʿt* (p. 107)—note that on p. 109 Schneider cites Hoch’s conclusion that Semitic /t/ was most usually transcribed as Egyptian /d/), and too many rare words dug up in lexicons but unlikely candidates for the names of alphabetic letters, so for now I prefer to understand the underlying language as Egyptian.
- <sup>18</sup> This is noted by Schneider (2018, 104), as well.
- <sup>19</sup> The data are collected by Haring (2015, 193–196).
- <sup>20</sup> Most of the texts were published by Dunand 1945; see also Dunand 1978. See also Sobelman 1961; Martin 1962; the ambitious proposals of Dhorme 1946–1948; Mendenhall 1985; and Best 2009; as well as Isserlin 1990 and Hoch 1990, and a series of articles by Colless (see especially Colless 1996–1997 and, with references to the author’s earlier studies, Colless 1998).
- <sup>21</sup> Puech 2015.
- <sup>22</sup> This is the date given in Sass 1988, 54–46, although the caution and wide range allowed for there should be noted with approval.
- <sup>23</sup> Sass 1988, 140–141.
- <sup>24</sup> Finkelstein and Sass 2013, 156.
- <sup>25</sup> Compare Philip 1989 with Shalev 2004, and see Goldwasser 2016, 140–142, esp. n. 39.
- <sup>26</sup> Finkelstein and Sass 2013; Goldwasser 2016.
- <sup>27</sup> Sweeney 2004.
- <sup>28</sup> Goldwasser 1984.
- <sup>29</sup> Wimmer and Lehmann 2014.
- <sup>30</sup> Goldwasser and Wimmer 1999.
- <sup>31</sup> Wimmer 2012.
- <sup>32</sup> This seems preferable than the possibility raised by Goldwasser of “an interference process between Canaanites—carriers of the alphabetic script—and Egyptian scribes residing in the Lachish area” (2016, 157). In my reconstruction, it was probably the Egyptian scribes themselves who “carried” the alphabetic script.
- <sup>33</sup> For an overview with references, see Pardee 2012, 12.
- <sup>34</sup> Millard 1979.
- <sup>35</sup> See Sanders 2004, esp. 42–47.
- <sup>36</sup> Pardee 2012, 10–11.
- <sup>37</sup> See esp. Goldwasser 2016.
- <sup>38</sup> Note that this is not a *practical* limitation, but a *cultural* one. The earliest cuneiform texts from Uruk IV, for instance, show a wide variety of shapes drawn in the clay.
- <sup>39</sup> Drawings of alphabetic letters are from Hamilton 2006; Pardee’s drawing of RS 88.2215 (the Ugaritic *hlhm* abcdary), in Pardee 2010, 193. Millard (1979 615) criticizes earlier such comparisons for utilizing later Phoenician letter forms for comparison. The chart presented here avoids that pitfall.
- <sup>40</sup> See Pardee 2010, 183–184, and the photograph and drawing on p. 190.

- <sup>41</sup> This was noted already by Gordon when he first published a Ugaritic abecedarium (Gordon 1950). See also Tropper 1995 and Pardee 2007, 183.
- <sup>42</sup> Bordreuil and Pardee 2001, esp. 341–348; Pardee, 2010, 185–186; Pardee 2012, 12–13.
- <sup>43</sup> This was observed by Claude F. A. Schaeffer already in his 1936 Schweich lectures (Schaeffer 1939: 36); see also Millard 1979: 616.
- <sup>44</sup> Sanders 2009: 41.
- <sup>45</sup> See, for instance, van Soldt 2010b, with notes on the language on p. 87. The only grey areas were administrative texts and local correspondence, where both Ugaritic and Akkadian were used in abundance.
- <sup>46</sup> See Pardee 2010, 189, with references; Pardee 2012, 11–12.
- <sup>47</sup> Pardee (2012, 11) writes frankly that “the nature of the data presently available is such that the question must remain open,” although he does believe that the evidence favors the later date.
- <sup>48</sup> For the data, but a different interpretation, see Lam and Pardee 2012. I am indebted to William Schniedewind for emphasizing to me the diachronic development evident within Ugaritic writing as relevant data here.
- <sup>49</sup> On the campaigns, see Redford 1992, 156–160; Redford 2006; Cooney 2014: 192–200.
- <sup>50</sup> For discussion, see Morris 2005, 167–169.
- <sup>51</sup> For the decades of Egyptian influence in Ugarit of the mid-14th century, see Singer 1999, 621–627.
- <sup>52</sup> Sparks 2013, 77: “When Canaan was conquered and incorporated into the Egyptian empire [...] the result was both to reinforce already existing markets for writing and to create a whole series of new audiences.” See also Finkelstein and Sass 2013, 184.
- <sup>53</sup> See van Soldt 2010a, 122–123.
- <sup>54</sup> Dobbs-Allsopp (2015, 455 n. 24) notes that “the script itself—alphabetic cuneiform—strongly suggests that the impress of syllabic cuneiform textuality was an important interruptive factor.”
- <sup>55</sup> This is emphasized by Sanders (2004, 46–47). Fewer than a dozen texts in Ugaritic script have been found outside of Ugarit; see the references in Pardee 2012, 10 n. 14.
- <sup>56</sup> On the inscription, see Steiner 2016b.
- <sup>57</sup> Finkelstein and Sass 2013; Goldwasser 2016, 151–156.
- <sup>58</sup> See also Vanderhooft 2017.
- <sup>59</sup> Drewes et al. 2013. Note that the radiocarbon study of the Munich collection by Stein et al. (2016) did not find confirmation of these early dates.
- <sup>60</sup> Knauf 1989; Kitchen 1995.
- <sup>61</sup> Al-Jallad 2015.
- <sup>62</sup> According to Grigson 2012 and Sapir-Hen and Ben-Yosef 2013, there were no domesticated camels available for such trans-Arabian trade, and therefore there was no such trade, until the 10th century BCE at the earliest, the 8th century at the latest (since then there is clear evidence from Beersheba for South Arabian contacts). But this ignores the substantial indirect evidence for such contacts from earlier, including the script traditions discussed here. Other evidence, as well, points to there being trade as early as the end of the Late Bronze Age, and certainly by the end of the Iron period. See Jasmin 2005; see also the reconstruction in Holladay 2006. If there were no camels, then contacts were operating in some other way. I suspect that the camels will be the solution, after all, but there is enough evidence of the contacts to allow us to be sure that it was taking place, even if the mechanism remains mysterious for now.
- <sup>63</sup> Hamidović 2014.
- <sup>64</sup> D’Istria 2012.
- <sup>65</sup> For the notion of “simplifying assumptions,” and the importance of being cognizant of them, see Steiner 2007 and Steiner 2011.
- <sup>66</sup> Fales 1986.
- <sup>67</sup> See, for example, Abrahams and Coulon 2008, esp. 13–17; Hagen 2011.
- <sup>68</sup> Compare the early medieval practice of including spaces between words in chapter headings, but not in the body of the text, suggesting that rapid legibility was more important in the chapter headings than in the

text itself. See Saenger 1982, 376 with n. 54.

<sup>69</sup> Orly Goldwasser has argued long and hard for an illiterate invention. For a thorough discussion, see Goldwasser 2011. Most scholars have assumed and now argued that the inventors must have been literate. See for instance, Hamilton 2006; see also Rainey's review of Hamilton 2009.

<sup>70</sup> For an explanation of how this state of affairs came to be within Egyptian, see Daniels 2006, with some additional comments on the alphabet, as well.

<sup>71</sup> For the orthography, see Steiner 2016a. I develop the argument from the conceptualization of words, and the broader question of the perceived relationship between the writing system and language, in a forthcoming paper, "What is a Word? The Conceptualization of the Relationship Between Language and Writing in Early Alphabetic Texts" (under review).