The Development of the Greek Alphabet within the Chronology of the ANE

Andrew Cross
University of Calgary
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The transition from a pictogram based writing system to the alphabet transformed societies by bringing literacy to the masses. Pictogram based writing systems such as Egyptian hieroglyphics used more than 400 signs to represent syllables or objects, many of which had multiple uses. Such a complex writing system required many years of study to gain literacy. With the invention of the alphabet, one needed only to learn 22 signs, each representing a phoneme. The shift from pictograms to the alphabet resulted in the democratization of writing; a change that is reflected in the types of inscriptions found. For example, not a single graffito exists in Linear B, a pictograph based writing system, whereas most of the early Archaic Greek inscriptions are graffito.

If the introduction of the alphabet was such an important step in the development of society then when was the alphabet adopted by the Greeks? This has proven to be a difficult question. It is generally agreed that the cultures in the South West Levant transitioned to the alphabet in the 11-10th centuries BC. However, based on the archaeological evidence, it has been maintained that the Greeks must have adopted the alphabet much later, around the mid 8th century BC. Joseph Naveh disagrees with this late date and argues that early Greek inscriptions currently dated by many scholars to the mid 8th century BC should be dated earlier based on

characteristics the early Greek texts share with Old Canaanite and early Phoenician inscriptions that date to the 10th century BC or earlier.

The earliest use of an alphabet has been traced to Old Canaanite inscriptions in the Sinai dating to the Late Bronze Age. These early texts indicate show that the alphabet developed on the basis of acrophony where "each symbol represents an object whose name begins with the sound to be represented." (Senner 1991) The oldest 'securely' dated Old Canaanite inscription was found at Gezer and dates to the 16th century BC. Old Canaanite was replaced by linear Phoenician – a transition that is somewhat difficult to nail down but has been dated to around 1050 BC by Frank Cross and Joseph Naveh based on a series of arrowheads found at El-Khadr. The El-Khadr arrowheads reveal intermediate forms of letters that form a crucial bridge between the Old Canaanite alphabet and the Early Phoenician.

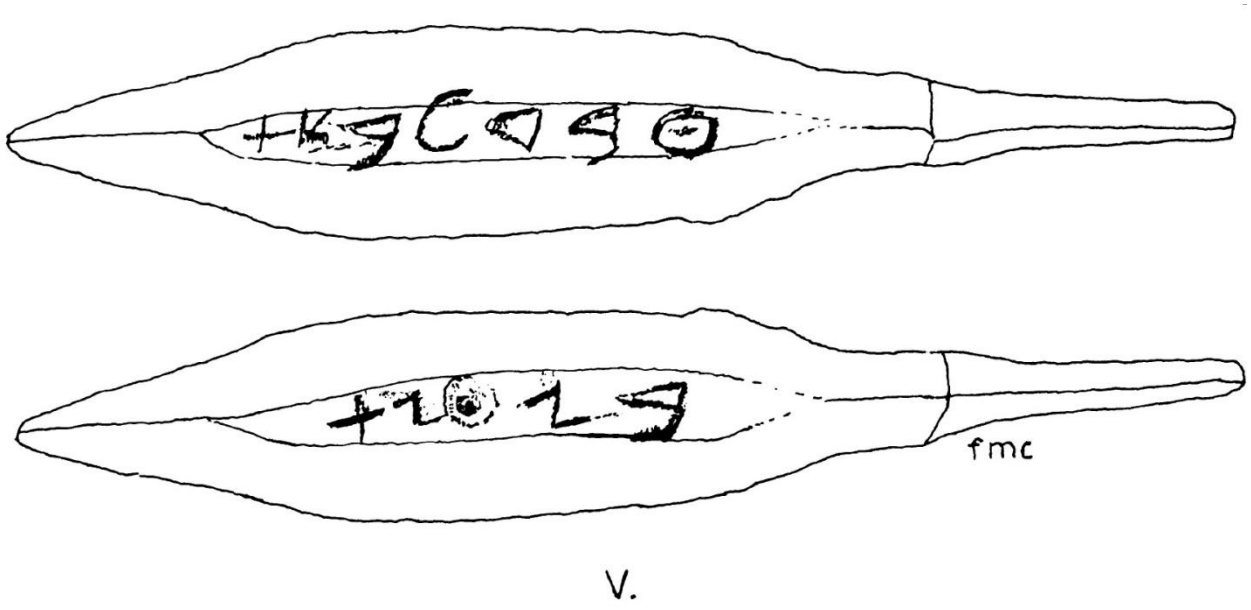

Fig. 1: El Kahdr arrow head No. V depicting Early Phoenician dated by Cross to 1100 BC. Note: omicron has center dot depicting an eye, the archaic 'nun' and 'ayin', etc. (courtesy Cross 1980)

Naveh gives four major reasons why it is universally agreed that the Greek alphabet was developed from an early Phoenician alphabet.

1 According to Herodutous "the Phoenicians who came with Cadmus… brought into Hellas the alphabet, which had hitherto been unknown, as I think, to the Greeks."

2 The Greek Letters, alpha, beta, gimmel have no meaning in Greek but the meaning of most of their Semitic equivalents is known. For example 'aleph' means 'ox', 'bet' means 'house' and 'gimmel' means 'throw stick'.

3 Early Greek letters are very similar and sometimes identical to the West Semitic letters.

4 The letter sequence between the Semitic and Greek alphabets is identical. (Naveh 1982)

It is quite possible that the Greeks learned the alphabet from the Phoenicians through close interaction and intermarriage with them. This interaction could have taken place in any number of locations. Frank Cross notes the discovery of an early Phoenician inscription found at Tekke on Crete. The "archaic forms of the letters 'ayin' and 'bet' in the inscription require a date no later than the end of the llth century". (Cross 1980) Based on this inscription found in Crete, it is possible that the alphabet was introduced to the Greeks by Phoenician traders.

Jeffery argues that the Greeks must have adopted the alphabet at a much later date and therefore suggests that the Greek settlement of Al Mina on the south shore of the Orontes River on the Levantine coast is a better candidate. (Jeffery 1961) There were Greek settlers living here by 8th century who would have certainly learned Phoenician writing and had an opportunity to adapt it to their own tongue. The reason Jeffrey places the date for the adoption of the Greek alphabet so late is that no Greek inscriptions have been found dating before the 8th century.

Thus Taylor states, “There is no evidence of Linear B after the twelfth century and an entirely new form of script, Phoenician-inspired and totally unrelated to Linear B, did not come into use till the eighth century BC.” (Taylor 1983) If Taylor is correct, then this leaves a 400 year gap during which there was essentially no literacy at all. This alone seems unlikely but there are other problems with this hypothesis. Epigraphic evidence indicates that the Greeks adopted the semitic Phoenician alphabet at an early stage in its development - long before the 8th century BC.

Figure 2: Early Phoenician inscription found at Tekke, Crete dated by Cross to the 11th century. (Courtesy Cross 1980)

By the 8th century, the Phoenician alphabet had evolved from the Old Canaanite into a systematic and linear alphabet. However, the archaic Greek script was neither systematic nor linear. The earliest inscriptions from the 8th century reveal local variation. The archaic Greek letters are lapidary (means ‘cut’ and refers to a block style consistent with engraving) in style rather than a more cursive form that the Phoenician alphabet had adopted by the 8th century (though still found in inscriptions). Joseph Naveh lists a number of letters that share more similarity with Old Canaanite letters than with linear Phoenician. He also highlights the variation of symbols for the same letter from Greek inscriptions of the same time period. One

example is the ‘alpha’ on the Diplyon vase (8th Century) and on the Arybollos vase (7th Century B.C.)

Figure 4: Diplyon vase from the 8th century. Reads from left to right, “Whoever now of all dancers performs most nimbly…” Note the alpha on its side, the crooked 3 bar iota and the hooked pi. (Jeffery 1961)

It has been argued that these variations in the Greek script correspond to variations that are also found in Phoenician scripts. However, both Linear Phoenician and local Hebrew and Aramaic scripts were uniform by the mid-8th century B.C. Naveh argues that the variations are “realizations of the pictorial conception of the letter forms” that share more in common with Old Canaanite inscriptions. (Naveh 1982) In addition to the variation of letter forms, Archaic Greek inscriptions have been found in right-to-left, left-to-right and bosphedron orientations. This lack of uniformity was characteristic of Old Canaanite but not of Linear Phoenician; its orientation having been settled right-to-left by 1050 B.C. It wasn’t until the 4th century that the

archaic Greek forms of script were replaced with the classical Ionian script and the left-to-right direction of writing was fixed. For the Greeks to have adopted the Phoenician alphabet at such a late date would require them to have, in the words of Naveh, "neglected all its achievements and turned it into a more primitive, almost pictographic script." (Naveh 1982)

Figure 5: Bronze statuette circa 700-675 BC. Note the bosphedron orientation of writing and the upright alpha.

Another line of evidence that supports an early date for the adoption of the Greek alphabet is the amount of time that must have been required to adapt a Semitic alphabet to the needs of Greek speakers. Syllables in Semitic languages always begin with consonants and their vocalic structure is simple thus reducing the need to develop letters to represent vowels sounds. (Senner 1991) Greek, on the other hand, had many sounds that did not exist in the Semitic languages and syllables that started with vowels. For example, they adapted the 'alp' and used it to represent the vowel 'a', 'ayn' became 'o', and 'het' became 'ē'. These changes took time. For

this reason Joseph Naveh argues that the Greeks must have adopted the Phoenician alphabet perhaps even as early as 1050 B.C. Frank Cross agrees and states that the, "Greek script was borrowed before the time when the standardization of direction and stance took place." (Senner 1991)

Jeffery disagrees with Naveh and Cross and argues that the Greeks must have adopted the alphabet in the mid 8th century BC. This is primarily an '*argumentum a silentio*'. Jeffery states, "Must we believe that the inhabitants of Greece in the ninth and first half of the eight centuries, in flat contradiction to the habits of their descendants, forbore to inscribe their pottery with graffiti in any circumstances?" (Jeffery 1961) Although Naveh agrees that the argument from silence cannot be disregarded, he points out that it is known that the Hebrews adopted the alphabet in 12th or 11th centuries yet there is only one inscription, the Gezer calendar, that dates before the 8th century. (Naveh 1982) Since then, Ron Tappy has found a Hebrew abecedary that has been tentatively dated to the 10th century. (Tappy 2005) Naveh suggests that the Greeks may have adopted the alphabet before the 8th century without any archaeological evidence to substantiate this fact if their writing was done on waxed wood tablets, leather or papyrus. Thus Naveh's gives more weight to epigraphic evidence whereas Jeffreys gives more weight to the archaeological evidence.

In considering the origin of the Greek alphabet, it is necessary to consider one of the greatest and earliest masters of Greek literature - Homer. The epic poem of Homer has traditionally been dated to the 8th century BC although Ruijgh places Homer in the 9th century, the same date given to Homer by Herodotus. Ruijgh notes that Homer describes the Black Sea as a gulf of the Mediterranean and he makes no mention of Italy. This is not consistent with an 8th century

Greek understanding of geography during which period they made a thorough exploration of the Black and Tyrrhenian Sea. (Ruijgh 2004) Whether we accept an early or late date, the question remains. Is it possible that the alphabet would have just begun to be used by the Greeks at the time when the great Homeric epics were recorded?

Barry Powell argues that Greek literacy must have flourished in an aristocratic world, "really rather like Homer's description of life in the palace of Alkinoos." (Powell 1989) Ruijgh envisions Homer performing his poems for Euobian princes - one of the few places in the Greek world where wealth and civilization survived though the Greek Dark Age. Upon comparison of the early Greek inscriptions with those found in other places in the Ancient Near East, it becomes evident that the Greek inscription are almost all written as art and poetry. Noticeably absent is any early Archaic Greek inscriptions that record commercial transactions or even dedications to the gods. Powell therefore argues that, "the Greek alphabet was designed specifically in order to record hexametric poetry." (Powell 1989) If Naveh's proposal is correct that the Greek alphabet was introduced in the 11th century, it seems highly unlikely that hexametric poetry would have its genesis in a period marked by cultural decline that would last for centuries. This raises some serious questions about the proposed Dark Age that enveloped Greece for 400 years. How is it possible that a culture developed and refined an alphabet and even wrote hexametric poetry without cultural innovation in other areas such as architecture, pottery or handiwork?

The divergent evidence for a late or early adoption of the Greek alphabet highlight has led some scholars to hypothesize that the problem does not lie in the material evidence so much as in the absolute chronology of the Near East. For example, Peter James accepts Naveh's epigraphic

evidence for an early adoption of the Greek alphabet but also agrees with Jeffery that it is unlikely that there would be no archaeological evidence for writing if the Greeks adopted the alphabet in the 11th century. He argues instead for a shortening of the absolute chronology of the Near East by 250 years. James quotes Snodgrass, an authority on Dark Age Greece, "Why did it come about that some four centuries elapsed during which Greek material culture appears to have changed so little? Why did it take so long for literacy, representational art, monumental architecture, and other attributes to appear, or reappear, in the form in which they eventually did?" (James and Thorpe 1993)

Pottery	**Period**	**Date - Petrie**	**Date - Torr**
LHBI - LHBIIIC	Mycenaean Period	1550 -1100 B.C.	1250 - 800 B.C.
	The Dark Age	1100-800 B.C.	
Proto-geometric	Archaic period	800-700 B.C.	800-700 B.C.

Fig. 6: The traditional and revised dates assigned to chronological periods in Greece.

The original formulation of dates for Mycenae was made by Petrie in the late 1800's. In his excavations at Gurob, in the Nile Delta, Petrie found pottery identical to that found by Schliemann at Mycenae. The discovery of Mycenean pottery in strata belonging to the 18th and 19th dynasties led Petrie to date the Mycenean pottery to 1580 BC. Cecil Torr thought this date was too high for Mycenean pottery and wished rather to lower the date for the beginning of the 18th dynasty to 1280 BC. In this way, Torr removed the 300 year 'dark age' between LHBIIIC

and and Proto-geometric pottery types that was introduced by Petrie's high chronology. Despite Torr's objections Petrie's chronology was widely accepted by scholars.

James and Thorpe have revisited the debate between Petrie and Torr and have challenged Petrie's (and later Egyptologists) reliance on Manetho, supposed fixed astronomical dates based on the Sothic cycle, and the apparent synchronism between Shishak mentioned in the Bible and Pharaoh Shoshenq of the 22nd dynasty. They contend that that the reason we have not found inscriptional evidence for Greek writing before the 8th century is not because the Greeks adopted the alphabet quite late but because 300 years have been artificially inserted into the Greek chronology due to its peg to the Egyptian chronology. Although their revised chronology goes beyond the scope of this paper, it is should be noted that their revised chronology offers a solution to what is otherwise an impasse.

In this paper we have briefly considered the arguments for and against an early adoption of the Greek alphabet and have concluded that an early adoption is most likely. We briefly considered the variation in forms of Greek letters and orientation of writing and seen that this variation is consistent with Old Canaanite. The modification of the script to suit the needs of a non-Semitic language such as Archaic Greek must have occurred over a lengthy period of time - a period longer than what can be reasonably accounted for if the alphabet was adopted in the 8th century. The lack of Greek inscriptional evidence for the alphabet before the 8th century may be due to the rarity of inscriptions as is the case in the Levant or because the length of the Greek Dark Age has been artificially inflated due to its peg to a high Egyptian chronology. We have also briefly considered the dating of Homer's epics and the requirements of both a settled alphabet and a high level of culture in order to record the epics. It seems most likely then, that the

Greeks were introduced to the alphabet through interaction with Phoenician traders who brought the knowledge of the alphabet with them to Euboia as evidenced by the Phoenician Tekke inscription found in Crete.

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