

The Spread of Alphabetic Scripts (c. 1700–500 BCE)

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There are very many ways by which the transfer of knowledge may take place, both in the past as in the present. Nevertheless, over the last five millennia or thereabouts of human history, the spread of human knowledge has been crucially assisted by the use of writing, whether for the benefit of contemporaries or of later generations. Writing, as a method of recording and communicating information, itself forms part of this human knowledge that emerged and evolved over historical time. Its appearance, in several different forms, dates from around the end of the 4th millennium before the Common Era. Then, during the 2nd millennium BCE in the Near East, a partially alphabetic script began to emerge, that is to say, a system limited to around 30 signs representing essentially the sounds of a Semitic language, though initially only its consonants. The history of the diffusion of this form of writing, which was simpler and easier to learn than the Egyptian and cuneiform scripts then current, provides us with a fine example of the uncertainties facing the spread of a particular form of human knowledge into regions and civilizations that are different one from another. The intention of this article is to try to comprehend the manner by which the first alphabetic scripts arose and how their use spread over the period up to about the middle of the 1st millennium BCE.

It must immediately be acknowledged, however, that the documents available to us for reconstructing this history of the diffusion of the earliest alphabetic scripts remain limited, even if each passing year sees a gradual increase in their number. That is to say that 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 documentation', hypotheses which at times provoke quite sharp differences of interpretation among specialists, while we all await the verdict of new epigraphical 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 near the end of the 2nd millennium BCE, then finally the diffusion of alphabetic scripts to the Middle East and around the Mediterranean in the first half of the 1st millennium BCE.

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The birth of alphabetic writing

The emergence of the first alphabetic script is not directly documented and remains shrouded in a good deal of obscurity. Nevertheless, some aspects seem clear and are generally accepted by those studying this problem in its historic context (Naveh, 1982; Amadasi Guzzo, 1987; Sass, 1989: 44–50, 195*;1991; 2005; Whitt, 1995: 2379–84; Azevedo, 2001; Johnston, 2003; Vita Barra, 2004; Lemaire, 2007):

1. Ancient Greek and Latin authors generally attribute the origin of the Greek alphabet to the Phœnicians: according to Herodotus (2003, Book V, 58: 332), the 'Phœnicians . . . 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 Phœnicians and adopted them, with a few alterations, for their own use, continuing to refer to them as Phœnician characters – as was only right, as the Phœnicians had introduced them' (cf. Pliny the Elder 1961, Book V, 13: 271, Book VII, 16: 635–637).

2. Nevertheless, according to Tacitus (*Annals* XI, 14), referring to the moment when new letters were introduced to the Latin alphabet during the reign of Claudius, the Phœnicians were simply intermediaries, with the ultimate origin of this form of writing being linked to the Egyptians: '(The Egyptians) also claim to have discovered the alphabet and taught it to the Phœnicians who, controlling the seas, introduced it to Greece and were credited with inventing what they had really borrowed' (Tacitus, 1979: 239–40).

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 (Freu, 2000).

4. Following upon J.-F. Champollion (1822: 42) and Ch. Lenormant (1866: 94–6; 1872: 87–8; cf. de Rougé 1874: 6–8), modern commentators have certainly seen that the Phœnician 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. At the same time they emphasize that the consonantal value of the signs did not correspond to that of the Egyptian language but to that of a West-Semitic language (to which Phœnician, Hebrew and Aramaic were associated in the 1st millennium BCE).

The problem which remains unresolved is that of the location and date of this first alphabetic script: regarding the site, various hypotheses have been put forward which most often are based around the geographical locality where the oldest alphabetic inscriptions have been found. As a consequence, the following areas have been proposed:

- (a) The Southern Levant, that is to say, the former area of Canaan, and more specifically the South of Palestine in a site such as Gezer, Lachish or Tell el-'Ajjul (Sharuhén?) (Lemaire, 2000b).
- (b) The Sinai, more particularly the turquoise mines of Serabit el-Khadim where 45 non-Egyptian 'proto-Sinaitic' inscriptions have been discovered, for which

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- there is general agreement in considering them to be alphabetic, even if it has not been possible to decipher them with any certainty;
- (c) The Egyptian delta, possibly during the period of the 'Hyksos' domination (XVth dynasty) who established their capital at Avaris/Tell ed-Dab'a and who, it is generally now agreed, were of Asian and Semitic origin.
 - (d) The recent discovery of an apparently alphabetic piece of graffiti on a rock in the Wadi el-Hôl (Upper Egypt) has led to the suggestion that the first alphabetic writing might have been located there, created by Asian mercenaries in the service of the Egyptians (Darnell and Chesson, 2005).

The date of the 'invention' of the alphabet is even more imprecise. Almost the full range of dates between the Egyptian Middle Kingdom and the end of the New Kingdom has come to be put forward, that is, between 2000 and 1300 BCE approximately. A revelatory example of this continuing uncertainty is the fact that the same author who 20 years ago maintained a dating from the period of the Middle kingdom (XIIth dynasty) (Sass, 1988: 135–44; 1989: 44–50, 195*) now today proposes a much later date: *c.* 1300 (Sass, 2004/5), whereas the publishers of the Wadi el-Hôl inscriptions hold to a probable dating of the origin of the alphabet at the beginning of the Middle Kingdom (Darnell and Chesson, 2005: 90).

It is true that most of the earliest alphabetic inscriptions are very difficult to date because they have been inscribed on rocks or discovered in a very fragmentary state dissociated from any stratigraphic layers. Nevertheless, if it is accepted that the Lachish dagger inscription is very probably alphabetic, that suggests that the alphabet was known at Lachish at the end of the Bronze Age, around 1600 BCE (Lemaire, 2000b: 112–13. Sass, 2004/5: 156, admits that this is the point of weakness of his new working hypotheses). Furthermore, the existence of a sort of bilingual inscription in Egyptian hieroglyphics and Semitic alphabetic script on the famous sphinx of Serabit el-Khadim seems to suggest the existence of a sort of official bilingualism which would be quite understandable during the Hyksos period. What is more, such a scribal innovation can better be understood if it arose within a milieu of bilingual royal scribes, such as was probably the case under the Hyksos domination. Thus, in the current state of the documentary evidence, the most credible working hypothesis would seem to link the origins of the alphabet with the period of Hyksos dominance in the south of Palestine or in the Egyptian Delta around the XVIIth century BCE, thus around the middle of the period 2000–1300.

The expansion of alphabetic writing in the Levant in the 2nd millennium

If it is accepted that the birth of the alphabet can be dated to around the XVIIIth century BCE, one also notices that, contrary to what is sometimes affirmed, the spread of alphabetic writing was anything but spectacular: there was no explosion in its use, nor any wildfire-like uncontrollable expansion (Cross, 1979: 111; 1989: 78). In fact, it is only around the VIIIth century that alphabetic writing begins to be found, both in territory corresponding to modern-day Iran as well as around the Mediterranean fringe (see below). Aside from the very frequent resistance which

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occurs within a culture faced by any innovation (Warner, 1980: 80), any use of alphabetic script would have come up against various obstacles associated with social and political conditions. Some would have related to the established customs of royal administrations, others to the materials that were used, still others to the difficulties of transcription into various different languages.

If the exact circumstances of the emergence and early development of alphabetic writing in the Hyksos period is largely obscure apart from the two Wadi el-Hôl inscriptions, a few fragmentary Canaanite examples and some Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions whose dating remains in dispute (Lemaire, 2000b: 110–18), it appears that the diffusion of this new type of writing was halted in Egypt itself by the expulsion of the Hyksos out of the Nile Delta after the capture of Avaris by the pharaoh Amosis in 1526 BCE. Indeed, for the Egyptians, alphabetic writing was an invention associated with the now defeated and expelled invaders, and with their foreign West-Semitic tongue. Further than that, as this alphabet had clearly drawn its inspiration from Egyptian writing, which had for a very long time incorporated alphabetic signs, to the scribes of the New Kingdom this innovation must have seemed like little more than a simple adaptation of their own scribal traditions for the needs of a foreign enemy people. They therefore persisted in using the different types of their own prestigious national script in its diverse forms: hieroglyphic, hieratic and very shortly demotic. Throughout the whole of Antiquity, the various alphabetic inscriptions that are attested in Egypt (whether Aramean, Phœnician, Carian, Greek, Latin or other) would remain connected with the presence of foreign domination. It is therefore paradoxical that alphabetic writing would never become acculturated in the land which probably saw its birth.

Furthermore, the political dominance of the Egyptian New Kingdom over the Levant during the later Bronze Age (c. 1526–1185) would have constituted a serious obstacle to the use and transmission of the new alphabetic script among the West-Semitic populations of Canaan: their tribal leaders had to accept the status of ‘vassals’ of the pharaoh, and their scribes were obliged to learn and use either Egyptian writing or, more often, the cuneiform script and the Akkadian language, which was considered at the time as the language of international communication.² The technical innovation brought by the alphabetic script and its great ease of use did not carry much weight with the scribes of the Canaanite tribal kings, who were obliged to write in Akkadian cuneiform even to the pharaoh. In the XIVth century, the El-Amarna letters show that the ‘mayors’ or petty kings of the Levant each had the services of at least one scribe capable of reading and writing in Akkadian (Moran, 1987). According to K. van den Toorn (2000: 99), ‘between Ugarit and Gaza around 50 centres formed a moderately dense network, with each city having its own local administration’. These Akkadian cuneiform documents did not correspond to the local language of the scribes: such languages had clearly at the time no prestige when measured against Egyptian or Akkadian, and hence the scribe who wanted to ensure his own professional future had imperatively to learn and use Akkadian.

Under such conditions the alphabetic West-Semitic script seemed condemned to filling strictly secondary functions, to providing a sort of game or pastime for the local populations: if we can go by the very limited evidence that that there is available (Puech, 1986), its use remained very sporadic. Indeed, even if, over nearly 80

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years now, archaeological discoveries have been revealing that a new type of alphabetic script would appear alongside the linear script, this latter remains very poorly attested in the Lower Bronze Age, not only because it represents the script of subjugated peoples, but also because it was associated with papyrus and leather, materials which preserve very poorly in any climate that is at all moist, and which have generally not come down to us: the very limited examples of this script discovered in excavations are often painted or incised on shards of pottery, whole vases or on stone. It should be especially noted that two inscriptions painted on vases from the period have been found at Lachish (D. Diringer, in Tufnell, 1958: 128–9) and seem to fit a particular cultural context: they could well constitute evidence that it was in particular the priests of the local shrines who preserved and developed the use of this ‘Canaanitic’ alphabetic script, perhaps so as to express a certain specific religious and cultural tradition.

It was perhaps also priests who adapted this ‘Canaanitic’ linear alphabetic script to the writing material used in this period in Syria and Mesopotamia: the clay tablet. This adaptation of the alphabetic script to cuneiform is reasonably well known today as from the XIIIth century (Dalix, 1999; Bordreuil and Pardee, 2004: 32), one of the official forms of writing of the kingdom of Ugarit, in the north of Syria (Watson and Wyatt, 1999), but it is also sporadically attested throughout the Levant (Puech, 1986). Following a suggestion of F. Malbran-Labat (2000: 73–4), in our view the ‘inventor’ of the Ugaritic alphabetic script could well have been the celebrated scribe ‘Ilumilku the Shubanite, disciple of Attanu-purlianni, chief priest, chief shepherd, inspector (*tl’y*) of Niqmaddu, king of Ugarit’,³ mentioned in several colophons. Or, even more likely perhaps (?) it was his master ‘Attanu-purlianni’ himself. However, this is as yet nothing more than a working hypothesis which concerns only the particular form of cuneiform alphabet particular to Ugarit.

In fact, the spread of alphabetic cuneiform tablets throughout the whole of the Levant could indicate that the earliest adaptation of the linear alphabet to a cuneiform one occurred elsewhere than at Ugarit, where the training of scribes in the alphabetic script is attested by various exercises, among which are several abecedaries. However, other than a 30-letter table of the long left-to-right Ugaritic abecedary in the *abgd* [abjad] order, a short right-to-left alphabet of 22 letters is also known, both at Ugarit itself as well as in the rest of the Levant. Further, there has been recently identified a left-to-right abecedary of 27 letters set out in the order of the Proto-Arabic tradition *hlhm* (Bordreuil and Pardee, 2004: 33).

Around the XIIIth century BCE, therefore, at least three types of cuneiform alphabetic script could be distinguished (Röllig, 1998):

1. a right-to-left alphabet of 22 letters whose order is not directly known to us but was most likely *bgd*
2. a left-to-right alphabet of 27 letters in the order *hlhm*
3. a left-to-right alphabet of 30 letters in the *abgd* order, used and perhaps created in Ugarit.

At the present time one can propose as a working hypotheses that the West-Semitic linear consonantal script, primitively consisting of 27 consonants,⁴ was sometimes reduced to 22 letters, in certain ‘Proto-Phœnician’ cities of the Levant, that is, on the

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coast. These two types of linear alphabetic script, first the 27-letter script, then the 22-letter one, went through an adaptation to cuneiform. Finally, at a latter stage, in the VIIIth century BCE, the 27-letter cuneiform alphabet may have been adapted, perhaps at Ugarit itself, with the inclusion of the *aleph* coloration and the addition of a letter *S* to transcribe a sibilant which appeared particularly in loan-words. This diversity is thus probably already reflecting the development of several alphabetic script traditions in the Levant of the Lower Bronze Age.

In concrete fashion, the abecedaries themselves show evidence of two different scriptic traditions for the learning of letter formation, in one of which the table began with *'bgd* and the other with *hlhm*. These two script traditions went at least as far back as the XIIIth century BCE and are also to be found at a later time, the first in the North-West Semitic script tradition (Phœnician, Hebraic, Aramaic . . .), the second in the South-West Semitic tradition, that is to say, North and South Arabic (29 letters) (Hayajneh and Tropper, 1997).

Several aspects of the developmental history of alphabetic writing in the Lower Bronze Age remain still poorly attested and very uncertain, in particular the problem of a possible Proto-Arabic linear alphabet tradition. Indeed, it seems difficult to derive the Proto-Arabic alphabet of the VIIIth century BCE from the Phœnician alphabet of the Xth–IXth centuries, or from the Canaanitic linear alphabet of the Lower Bronze Age.⁵ Furthermore, from its *hlhm*-type abecetary, the Proto-Arabic script tradition can be relatively clearly associated with a scriptic tradition already attested in the XIIIth century BCE. It would therefore not be surprising to find that the forms of the letters were also linked to a script tradition of that era.

It is in this context that one can propose, as a working hypothesis, to associate with a Proto-Arabic linear alphabetic tradition (Garbini, 2006: 57) two series of Transjordanian inscriptions⁶ from the XIIth century BCE:

- the Deir 'Alla tablets, in the Middle Jordan Valley, are clearly dated to the first half of the XIIth century by the archaeological context of the shrine in which they were found. To the first three discoveries made in 1964 (Franken, 1964, 1965; Lemaire, 1986: 85) the excavations of 1994 added a fourth (Ibrahim and van der Kooij, 1997: 108), while those in 2000 found three more, but which unfortunately were fragmentary (van der Kooij and Kafafi, 2002: 30).
- the stela of Balu'a in the territory of Moab to the east of the Dead Sea bears an Egyptian-style bas-relief dated to about the beginning of the XIIth century (Drioton, 1933) and surmounted by the remains of five lines of writing, which are unfortunately practically illegible today.

Around 1185 BCE, the invasion of the 'sea peoples' led to the disappearance of several kingdoms along the Levant coast, notably that of Ugarit. The alphabetic cuneiform writing which was well attested there (around 2000 tablets of it) seems to have totally disappeared in this political upheaval: alphabetic writing would henceforth subsist only in its linear form with, as an immediate consequence, an increase in the *lacunae* of available documentation for the Upper Iron Age (XIIth–XIth centuries BCE). Due to the material disappearance of linear inscriptions on papyrus and on leather, only a small number of inscriptions on vases or on potsherds out of Palestine, as well as a good 50 or so bronze arrowheads dating approximately from

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the XIth century and coming generally from Lebanon have come down to us (Deutsch and Heltzer, 1999: 13–19: the same arrow appears under nos XVI and XIX; Bordreuil and Briquel-Chatonnet, 1999; McCarter, 1999; Puech, 2000; Sader, 2000; Deutsch and Lemaire, 2003: 9–10; Lemaire, 2005; Elayi, 2005).

The spread of alphabetic writing in the first half of the 1st millennium BCE

The fall of the Hittite empire and the momentary eclipse of the Assyrian and Egyptian empires in the XIth–Xth centuries soon led to the emergence in the Levant of North-Western Semitic kingdoms, those of Phoenicians, Philistines, Hebrews, Arameans, Ammonites and Moabites, who, freed from the tutelage of their previous Egyptian, Hittite or Assyrian imperial masters, employed alphabetic scripts in their royal inscriptions and for their administration.⁷ Each language, possibly covering several different kingdoms, rapidly developed its own scriptic tradition, with a particular evolution perceptible in the forms of the letters. From the end of the XIth, and particularly from the VIIIth century onwards, a progressively clearer distinction can be seen, for example, between the Phœnician script on the one hand, and the Hebraic or Aramaic script on the other (Rollston, 2006).

Alphabetic writing was thus used by the Philistine pentapolis in South Palestine, where the invading Philistines acculturated very rapidly with the local Canaanite culture. Recent discoveries, such as the brief inscriptions found at Tell es-Safi/Gat⁸ and Tell Zayit (Tappy et al., 2006) show clearly that the Philistine civilization, in full expansion in the XIth–Xth centuries, essentially adopted a local Canaanite dialect (Lemaire, 2000a) and used the linear alphabet even to transcribe non-Semitic Philistine names. The use of the linear alphabet is even more apparent from the royal inscriptions of the Xth century at Byblos.⁹

In the Levant hinterland, around the year 1000, the Arameans were expanding their control, and posing a threat to Assyria. It was apparently from this era that dates the introduction of alphabetic writing into the headwaters region of the Khabur (Upper Mesopotamia), more precisely in the kingdom of Guzanna, as seems to be indirectly revealed by the original palaeography of the Aramaic inscription of the king Hadadyis'i around 826–10 BCE (Abou-Assaf et al., 1982).¹⁰

From the middle of the IXth century, the expansion of the Neo-Assyrian Empire was to lead in several stages to the subjugation, then disappearance, of all the Aramean kingdoms of the Levant, something which would be practically a *fait accompli* by the end of the VIIIth century. After more than a century, marked in particular by a certain number of Aramaic royal inscriptions¹¹ found in the Levant hinterland, including from Upper Mesopotamia (Abou-Assaf et al., 1982) and from the east of the Amanus range (Tropper, 1993), alphabetic writing was once again to be relegated to the camp of the vanquished, as the official form of writing of the Assyrian empire was the Akkadian cuneiform script, well attested by numerous monuments and thousands of clay tablets. However, rather than disappear, the Aramaic language and script was to become, to some extent, the second language and writing form of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, as is shown by the Aramaic tablets of the VIIth century (Lemaire, 2001b).

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More significantly, after a few incisions on VIIIth-century vases coming probably from the region of Iranian Luristan and inscribed in Aramaic (Dupont-Sommier, 1964: 108–15; Lemaire, 1999, 2006b), the discovery of a monumental Aramaic inscription at Bukân in Iranian Azerbaijan, dated from around 700 BCE, reveals that the use of Aramaic script was reaching non-Semitic populations of the Middle East, since the culture of the Mannean kingdom was, at least in part, close to that of the Urartian culture, that is to say, Indo-European. ‘The Bukân stela bears witness that from that time Aramaic was in official use in the west of Iran, more particularly in the kingdom of the Mannans, two centuries before its spread under the Achaemenid Empire’ (Lemaire, 1998: 299). However, it was effectively not until the reign of Cyrus (551–30) that Aramaic, which was used as the language of administration and communication of that vast empire, became widespread, from Asia Minor to the Indus and from Upper Egypt (Elephantine-Aswan) to Bactria (in the north of Afghanistan) (Shaked, 2004).

Further west, on the shores of the Mediterranean, Phœnician script had a very different fate. Not only did it succeed in maintaining itself along with the kingdoms of Tyre, Sidon, Byblos and Arwad, but its use spread along with the Phœnician expansion of commerce and colonization, reaching out into non-Phœnician regions such as southern Anatolia.

Just after the Second World War, on the site of Karatepe at the foot of the Taurus mountains, the discovery of the longest Phœnician inscriptions known to date caused considerable excitement. These findings, however, were able to be linked with two other Phœnician inscriptions discovered around 1900 on either side of the Amanus range: one was the fragmentary inscription of king Urikki discovered at Hassan Beyli (Lemaire, 1983) and the other the inscription of the king of Samal Kilamuwa (second half of the IXth century) found in Zencirli. A further Phœnician inscription, unfortunately still unpublished and in a rather degraded state, and perhaps originally in three languages (Luwian, Neo-Assyrian and Phœnician), was found at Incirli and is now preserved in the museum of Gaziantep. The bilingual inscriptions of Karatepe (Dupont-Sommer, 1948a, b; Bron, 1979; Röllig, 1999), Çineköy (Tekoglu and Lemaire, 2000), Ivriz (Dinçol, 1994) and Incirli (Kaufman, 1997: 107) reveal the extent of the expansion of Phœnician script, alongside the Luwian hieroglyphic script, in a region where in general a Luwian dialect was spoken. Following the discovery of the Çineköy inscription, it appeared reasonably clear that Phœnician was one of the two official written languages of the kingdom of Que/Cilicia in the VIIIth century, and probably had been so at least since the IXth century (Lemaire, 2001a).

By adopting Phœnician as an official written language alongside Luwian and its hieroglyphic script, the kingdom of Que, ruled for several centuries by ‘house/dynasty of Mopsus’ (Lemaire, 2006a), systematized the use of Phœnician script by Indo-Europeans and even began to adapt this script to Indo-European proper names with the possible use of *matres lectionis*, in particular the *aleph* (Lemaire, 1991), so as to denote the vocalization *â*. The discovery of the bilingual Ivriz inscription shows how this use of Phœnician script to the north of the Taurus could have led the Phrygians, during the course of the VIIIth century, to adopt Phœnician letters to write their own language, as seems to be shown by the first Phrygian inscriptions,

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which are practically contemporaneous with the first Greek ones (Brixhe and Lejeune, 1991: 313), or even slightly earlier as the most recent archaeological discoveries may well show (Brixhe, 2004). Thanks to the bilingual Phœnician–Luwian inscriptions in the general region of Cilicia, it is better understood today how the Phœnician alphabet was able to be adapted to neighbouring Phrygia.

Around 800 (Amadasi Guzzo, 1991; Lazzarini, 1999: 54) adaptations of the Phœnician alphabet were also arising in Greece itself, as in shown by the inscription on the Cenochoe of Dipylon of Athens, dated to around 725 BCE, and especially the recently published graffiti of Eretria, with a graffito in Phœnician script but reflecting probably a Greek name, which dates at a minimum from the beginning of the VIIIth century (Kenzelmann Pfyffer et al., 2005: 76–7, n. 66) and a Greek graffito dating back to the Middle Geometric period, that is, to the first half of the VIIIth century (p. 75, n. 64). However, quite paradoxically, the most ancient Greek inscriptions discovered in Italy seem to be practically contemporaneous with these: those of a vase from Pithecoussai, opposite the Bay of Naples, dated from around 750 (Heubeck, 1979: 123, n. 6a–b, Pithecoussai et al., 1995) and a graffito from Osteria dell’Osa dating from about 770 (Bietti Siesteri et al., 1989/90), which seem to reveal a development of alphabetic writing by maritime diffusion right round the Mediterranean.

It was probably also in the VIIIth century, through contact with the Greek script, that the Etruscan script developed: notable among its earliest manifestations was the Greco-Etruscan abecedary (Wachter, 2005) of the Marsiliana tablet (around 670), thus going back to the beginning of the VIIth century. The Etruscan language remains in large part undeciphered, but its civilization directly or indirectly influenced the rest of Italy, and hence a large part of the western Mediterranean. Among the various adaptations of the alphabet to Italic dialects, the Latin script, attested from the VIth century, was to have enormous success lasting to the present.

However, in the ancient world, it was Phœnician which seems to have had the most widespread influence throughout the greater part of the western Mediterranean basin. In southern Sardinia, the famous Phœnician inscription on the Nora stela is probably to be dated back to the IXth century BCE (Röllig, 1983) and the traditional date for the founding of Carthage (814), which seems to be soundly based (Lemaire, forthcoming), gave notice of the latter development of Punic civilization in the southern half of the Mediterranean’s western basin.

It was Phœnician merchants who introduced alphabetic writing into southern Spain at the end of the IXth century, especially in the area of Cadiz and along the Andalusian coast. The trade in metals with the indigenous populations would quite quickly lead to the adaptation of the Phœnician script,¹² perhaps as early as around 800 (Rodríguez Ramos, 2002: 193), to transcribe the local languages, still not well known, within the tradition of Iberian written forms whose first manifestations can ostensibly be traced back to the VIIth century (Gonzalez de Canales et al., 2000).

In concluding this overview, for which documentary evidence still remains often very limited, it seems established that progression of alphabetic writing eastwards by land routes and westwards by both land and sea showed three types of diffusion:

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1. a spread associated with the political and commercial expansion of West-Semitic populations (especially Arameans and Phœnicians);
2. a spread associated with the adoption of a West-Semitic language (Aramaic or Phœnician) as a written language by non-Semitic populations (cf. notably the Manneans in Iranian Azerbaijan and the 'House of Mopsus' in Southern Anatolia);
3. a spread by the adaptation of West-Semitic alphabetic scripts for reducing local languages to a written form (Phrygian, Greek, Etruscan, Iberian languages) by populations for whom writing was previously practically unknown.

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Notes

1. Reworked and updated by Lemaire (2006a,b).
2. This was already the case in the XVIIIth century BCE (Horowitz et al., 2006; Durand, 2006).
3. On the devices and titles of Ilumilku, cf. recently Dalix (1996: 90). On the prestige of the high priest, see also Roche (2005: 123).
4. The number of letters proposed by Puech (1986: 187) for the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions.
5. For Scagliarini (2003: 65), even if there are some similarities, it is a matter of '*due tradizioni indipendenti*'. The attempt made by Hayajneh and Tropper (1997: 184–92) does not seem particularly conclusive, as even the authors themselves consider that it is '*freilich nicht ganz gesichertes*' (p. 195).
6. For the 'inscribed' potsherds of Kamid el-Loz (in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon) see recently Bron (1995: 83).
7. On the political function played by the alphabet, see also Sanders (2004).
8. Note the provisional report in *Biblical Archaeology Review* March/April (2006: 16); *Le Monde de la Bible* 170 (2006: 49).
9. Despite the most recent hypothesis of Sass (2005), the earliest Phœnician royal inscriptions at Byblos are definitely dated from the Xth century BCE (Lemaire, 2006/2007). For a newly found Xth century Phœnician inscription which can probably be linked to the kingdom of Tyre see Alexandre (2006).
10. The particular palaeography of this Aramaic inscription (Cross, 1995) represents essentially the Aramaic script of the end of the XIth century. The collapse of the Aramean hegemony of Hadadezer under the onslaught of David may well have led to a sort of isolation of the Arameans of the Euphrates bend, an area soon to fall under the domination of the Assyrians.
11. See for example the inscriptions of the kings Hazaël, Bar-Hadad, Zakkur, Matí'el, and more in Schwiderski (2004).
12. On the rarity of Phœnician inscriptions in Spain, see Zamora López (2004).

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