

Writing and Scripts (with Special Reference to the Levant)

Introduction

Writing in the Near East developed in the fourth millennium B.C.E., first in southern Mesopotamia and a short while later in Egypt. The two main types were the cuneiform system of the former and the hieroglyphic system of the latter. Eventually, a third major system, the alphabetic system, was developed in the Levant. The invention of the alphabet was a major step in the history of mankind. To fully understand its impact, one first must understand the other writing systems of the Near East, especially as they relate to the peoples of Syria and Canaan.

Mesopotamian Cuneiform

The earliest writing in Mesopotamia was pictographic—that is, the individual signs were intended to represent pictorially specific objects or actions. Within a relatively short time, however, two changes evolved: (a) the individual pictures became more and more stylized and thus developed into cuneiform, or wedge-shaped, writing; and (b) the simple pictographs came to stand for more than the object or action originally intended, and thus they emerged as syllabic signs (which means that the vowels were represented) and/or ideograms. The system included several hundred signs.

The raw materials used for cuneiform writing were clay and reeds, both omnipresent in southern Mesopotamia. The scribe would use a reed stylus and impress it into a wet clay tablet, which when baked (either in an oven or by the sun) became hard and durable.

Our earliest written records in this system are in the Sumerian language, so we assume that it was the Sumerians who first developed cuneiform writing. On the other hand, there are certain peculiarities in the writing system that do not match perfectly the phonology of the Sumerian language. Accordingly, it is possible that cuneiform writing was invented by a still earlier people (part of what scholars call proto-Euphratean culture) and that the Sumerians only adopted the system to record their own language. The cuneiform system eventually came to be used to record many other languages in Mesopotamia and beyond: Akkadian, Eblaite, Hurrian, Urartian, Hittite, Luwian, Elamite, and (in a variant of the system) Old Persian.

Egyptian Hieroglyphic

The invention of writing in southern Mesopotamia served as the cultural stimulus for the development of writing in Egypt. Here the hieroglyphic system developed, which also had several hundred signs. The system has affinities to the cuneiform system, but there are important differences. First, the individual signs

remained always as pictures; they did not become stylized. Second, vowels were not represented in the script. Third, a set of 24 basic signs was used to represent each of the consonantal sounds of the Egyptian language.

Hieroglyphic writing was used in a variety of media: for incising stone (for example, pyramid walls, temple walls, public monuments, stelae, and so on), painting tomb walls, and inscribing papyrus with reed pen and ink. By approximately 2000 B.C.E., however, a more cursive style emerged for writing on papyrus, known as hieratic. The original pictures of the hieroglyphic script generally are no longer recognizable. By about 700 B.C.E., an even more rapid and cursive handwriting system developed, known as demotic.

With few exceptions, for the three thousand years of ancient Egyptian history the hieroglyphic script (and its derivatives, hieratic and demotic) was used to record only the Egyptian language. Unlike cuneiform, which spread to various neighboring countries of Mesopotamia, the Egyptian writing system remained solely an Egyptian enterprise. Exceptions are: (a) the use of hieratic number symbols in various (especially administrative) texts from Canaan; and (b) a unique papyrus roll from about 400 B.C.E. with an Aramaic text written in demotic script.

The Levant

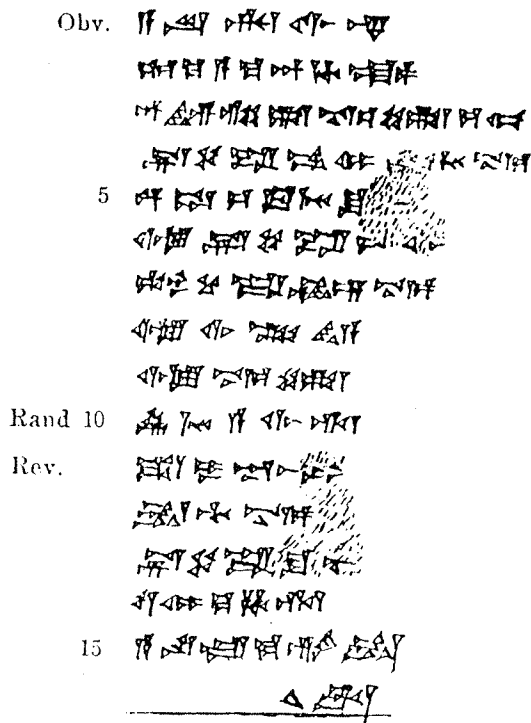


Fig. 1. An Akkadian letter from Ta'anach, known as Ta'anach text number 5. The text mentions the nearby city of Megiddo, spelled *Ma-gi-id-da* in the last line (line 15). Source: E. Sellin, *Eine Nachlese auf dem Tell Ta'annek in Palästina* (Vienna: Alfred Hölder, 1906), plate 3.

The cuneiform script spread to Syria and Canaan in the third millennium B.C.E. Above I noted the use of cuneiform for the recording of Eblaite, the language of ancient Ebla in northern Syria (and the oldest Semitic language attested). The archives of Ebla, which include about 1,750 complete or virtually complete texts, 4,900 relatively large fragments, and thousands of smaller fragments, reveal a high level of sophistication at a remarkably early date. Especially important is the bilingual dictionary, of which we have several copies, listing hundreds of Eblaite words with their Sumerian equivalents.

In the second millennium B.C.E., when Akkadian became the lingua franca of the Near East, the use of cuneiform writing became even more widespread in the region (fig. 1). Texts written in Akkadian have been found at the following Levantine sites: Ugarit, Alalakh, Kadesh, Hamath, Kamid el-Loz, Hazor, Ta'anach, Megiddo, Beth-

shan, Gezer, Aphek, and Hebron. Furthermore, the over three hundred letters found at Tell el-Amarna in Egypt show that scribes in Tyre, Byblos, Jerusalem, Amurru, and other places were adept at Akkadian cuneiform. The basic picture that emerges from this evidence is one of bilingualism; the scribes of the Levant could read and write both their native West Semitic language and Akkadian cuneiform. In certain instances, we may speak of polyglot scribes. Ugarit has yielded one copy of a trilingual dictionary (Sumerian, Akkadian, Hurrian) and multiple copies of a quadrilingual dictionary (Sumerian, Akkadian, Hurrian, Ugaritic); and Aphek has yielded a small fragment of a trilingual dictionary (Sumerian, Akkadian, Canaanite).

Egyptian hieroglyphic texts (fig. 2) have been found in late-second-millennium B.C.E. Canaan as well, but most likely they are the products of Egyptian scribes serving in the Egyptian administration of the land during the Empire period of the New Kingdom (18th and 19th Dynasties mainly). On the other hand, if the tale of Sinuhe (20th century B.C.E.) can be trusted, the Egyptian language could be heard (though not necessarily written) in the Levant.

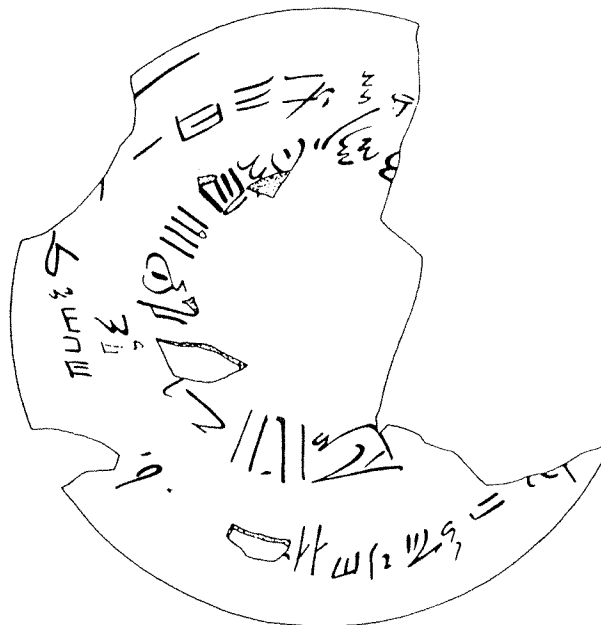


Fig. 2. An Egyptian hieratic text inscribed on a bowl found at Lachish, dated to approximately 1200 B.C.E. The text lists amounts of wheat, probably for tax purposes. Source: *Lachish (Tell ed-Duweir)* (4 vols.; London: Oxford University Press, 1938–58) 4.133. Courtesy the Wellcome Trust.

The Alphabet

We turn now to a discussion of the Levant's most important contribution to the history of writing and indeed to the history of mankind: the alphabet. As noted above, the hieroglyphic system included something very close to an alphabet, a set of 24 basic signs used to represent each of the consonantal sounds of the language. But the Egyptians never used these signs to the exclusion of the hundreds of other signs (ideograms, biconsonantal signs, triconsonantal signs, and so forth). Nevertheless, we assume that this component of the Egyptian writing system acted as the stimulus for the invention of the alphabet. The exact date and provenance for the invention of the alphabet cannot be determined. Most scholars speak generally of the first half of the second millennium B.C.E., somewhere in Canaan, by speakers of a West Semitic language.

In the alphabetic system, the only signs utilized are approximately two dozen letters, each representing a single consonant of the language. In the standard Canaanite alphabet, called the linear alphabet (because the letters are written

with lines [as opposed to wedges]), the forms themselves are taken from common objects whose words start with that sound. Thus, for example, the word for 'house' is *bayt* or *bet*, so the picture of a house is used for /b/; the word for 'hand' is *yad* or *yod*, so the picture of a hand is used for /y/; and so on. Vowels are not represented in this system. So, for example, if you want to write the word for 'house', the letters BYT or BT are written; if you want to write the word for 'hand', the letters YD are written. In time, as with cuneiform, hieratic, and demotic, many of the individual signs became stylized, so it is not always easy to recognize the original picture.

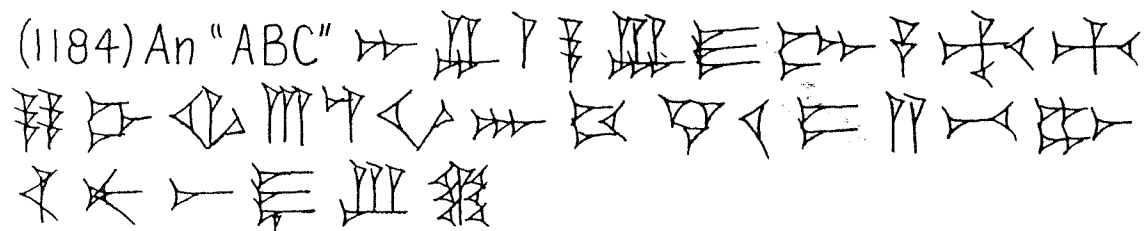


Fig. 3. An Ugaritic abecedarium, known as *UT 139/401/1184 = CAT 5.6*. Source: Handcopy by E. B. Smick, in C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967) 299. Used by permission.

The other variety of alphabetic script is the cuneiform alphabet (thus called because the signs are formed with wedges, as in the Mesopotamian cuneiform system) used at Ugarit and several other sites. The earliest alphabetic scripts, both linear and cuneiform, generally were written in a left-to-right fashion. Eventually, the right-to-left fashion became the norm.

The great contribution of the alphabet is its facilitation of literacy. We will never know what percentage of the general population in the ancient world was literate, but obviously the rate of literacy must have been higher in Canaan than in Egypt and Mesopotamia. The writing systems of the latter regions were cumbersome, as indicated by the fact that they each contained several hundred signs. Certainly, most people could not read and write, so in both Egyptian and Mesopotamian society a professional group of scribes developed. These individuals clearly were the educated elite. By contrast, the alphabet is quite simple, for only about two dozen signs need to be learned. One piece of evidence regularly cited in the debate about literacy is the biblical verse *Judg 8:14*, in which a lad apparently selected at random was able to write down the names of the 77 elders of his town. Though professional scribes functioned in societies that used the alphabet, it is hard to imagine that they far outdistanced many common folk in their ability to read and write (contra the situation in Egypt and Mesopotamia).

Second-Millennium Alphabetic Writings

Our earliest alphabetic writings are not found in the Levant proper. Rather, they are the so-called "Proto-Sinaitic" inscriptions, written in the linear alphabet,

found at Serabit el-Khadem in southwestern Sinai and dated to about 1500 B.C.E. The inscriptions are graffiti inscribed most likely by laborers (presumably from Canaan) who worked in the nearby turquoise mines. These inscriptions have apparently 25 different signs, so there is no doubt that they are alphabetic. Most scholars accept the fact that they record a West Semitic language.

The next oldest attested alphabetic inscriptions are the numerous texts discovered at Ugarit (Ras Shamra) and nearby Ras ibn Hani in Syria (14th–13th centuries B.C.E.). The Ugaritic alphabet comprised 30 letters, a relatively large number based on the rather conservative phonology of the Ugaritic language. As noted above, the Ugaritic alphabet is a cuneiform alphabet. Thus it combines the concept of the alphabet developed in Canaan with the technique of writing imported from Mesopotamia (again, with the use of a reed stylus to impress clay tablets). Among the texts found at Ugarit are several abecedaries, our oldest inscriptions of this kind, presenting for us the order of the thirty letters (fig. 3). The order is essentially that of the later-attested Phoenician-Hebrew, Greek, and Latin alphabets.

The scribes of Ugarit experimented in using the Ugaritic alphabet for the recording of Hurrian and Akkadian; a handful of texts in each of these languages written in the cuneiform alphabet was found at Ugarit. Conversely, we possess several fragmentary texts in which the Ugaritic language is written in the Mesopotamian cuneiform syllabary.

Three texts found at Ugarit contain a shorter variant of the Ugaritic alphabet, reflecting a reduced phonetic inventory. A small number of texts in this script have been found at a variety of sites well to the south of Ugarit: Mount Tabor, Ta'anach, Beth-shemesh, Kamid el-Loz, and Sarepta. All of these date to before approximately 1200 B.C.E. Apparently, after this date the cuneiform alphabet fell into disuse and was replaced totally by the linear alphabet.

In our discussion of early texts, mention should also be made of occasional discoveries of linear alphabetic inscriptions, all extremely short, some with only a few letters: a dagger blade from Lachish (ca. 1500 B.C.E.); a small prism from Lachish (ca. 1400 B.C.E.); a votive bowl from Lachish (ca. 1250 B.C.E.); and a javelin head from El-Khadr (ca. 1150 B.C.E.).

Other Scripts

Our survey would not be complete without reference to still other scripts used in the region. Luwian is a language belonging to the Anatolian branch of the Indo-European family. It was written either in the cuneiform script imported from Mesopotamia or in a natively produced script known as Hieroglyphic Luwian. Texts in Hieroglyphic Luwian date to the 15th–8th centuries B.C.E. and have been found at both Anatolian sites and north Syrian sites (Carchemish, Hamath, etc.).

Byblos Syllabic refers to the nine or ten texts found at Byblos, written in a hieroglyphic-type script comprising about 80 signs (and thus assumed to represent a syllabary), dating to approximately 1500 B.C.E. Deir 'Alla Syllabic refers to

three texts found at Tell Deir 'Alla, in Transjordan, dated to about 1200 B.C.E. Because these three texts alone attest to more than 50 signs, here too we probably are dealing with a syllabary. Both of these scripts have defied decipherment.

Recently scholars have found two fragmentary Minoan Linear A texts in Israel, at Lachish and at Tel Haror (most likely to be identified with Gerar), the former dating to about 1175 B.C.E., the latter to about 1600 B.C.E. Minoan Linear A refers to the syllabary attested on several hundred tablets found at several sites on Crete (most importantly Hagia Triada), dated to the 18th–15th centuries B.C.E. Although not all of the texts can be read with equal facility, the ones that have been read are written in a West Semitic language related to the languages of Syria and Canaan.

Most likely derived from the Linear A script is the Cypro-Minoan script, also a syllabary, in use during the 15th to 12th centuries B.C.E. Most texts found in this script were excavated on Cyprus, but a group of Cypro-Minoan texts was found at Ugarit as well.

First-Millennium Developments

During the Iron Age, with the rise of the Phoenician city-states and the emergence of national entities such as Israel, Ammon, Moab, Edom, and the various Aramean kingdoms, the number and variety of alphabetic epigraphic remains greatly increases (fig. 4). Concomitantly the Egyptian Empire retreats from the region, and direct Mesopotamian influence recedes, so that texts in Egyptian and Akkadian from this period are fewer in number. Important royal inscriptions include those of King HDYS'Y of Gozan found at Tell Fekheriyeh (Aramaic; 9th century B.C.E.) and King Mesha of Moab found at Dibon (Moabite; 9th century B.C.E.). Important historical texts are the Sefire treaty inscriptions (Aramaic; 8th century B.C.E.) and the Lachish letters (Hebrew; 6th century B.C.E.). Of special in-

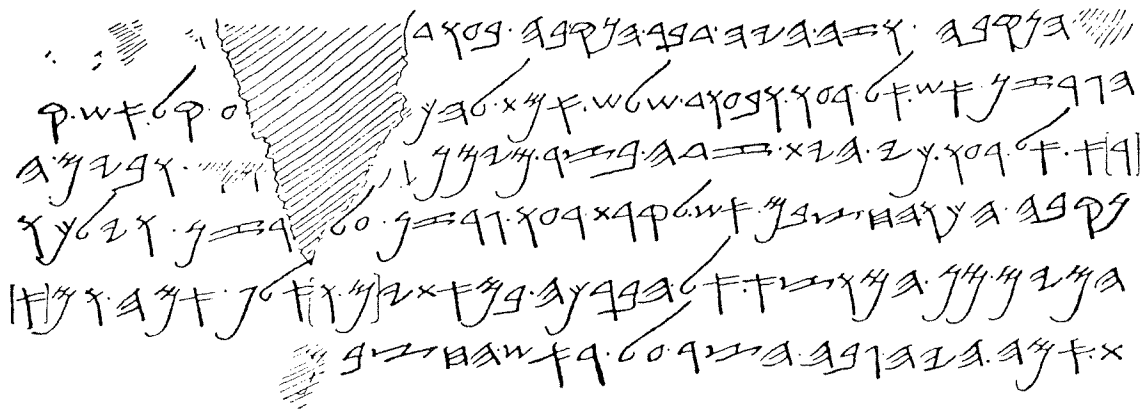


Fig. 4. The Hebrew inscription from the Siloam Tunnel dated to the reign of Hezekiah of Judah, approximately 701 B.C.E. (see 2 Kgs 20:20 for reference to the construction of the water system). Source: E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (trans. A. E. Cowley; Oxford: Clarendon, 1910) second plate following p. xvi. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

terest for religious and literary study are the Deir 'Alla texts (classification debated by scholars, but most likely Canaanite and not Aramaic; 8th century B.C.E.) mentioning Balaam. We also should state the obvious, that the Hebrew Bible was written during this period, and although our earliest manuscripts date to centuries later, the corpus of biblical books remains the largest extant set of texts written in the Levant in antiquity.

In time, the scripts and languages of the Levant spread beyond the boundaries of this area. For example, to the north, King 'ZTWD (8th century B.C.E.) of the Danuna, presumably a Luwian-speaking people, wrote royal inscriptions in both Luwian and Phoenician (found at Karatepe in modern Turkey). The Phoenicians colonized the entire Mediterranean region (as far west as Iberia), and thus Phoenician texts have been found throughout the Mediterranean basin. The later stage of the Phoenician language spoken in the western Mediterranean (for example, Carthage in North Africa) is known as Punic. At times Phoenician-Punic was written in the Greek alphabet or in the Latin alphabet.

Aramaic also spread far and wide. Arameans moved in greater numbers into Mesopotamia during the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods, so that eventually the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires became truly bilingual (Akkadian and Aramaic). Through the spread of these empires and the succeeding Persian Empire, Aramaic became the lingua franca of most of western Asia and Egypt. A famous passage in the Bible (2 Kgs 18:26) reveals that both an Assyrian envoy to Judah and the officials of Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E. could speak Aramaic (although it was the native language of neither, unless we assume, as some scholars have proposed, that the envoy was an Aramean in the employ of the Assyrian army). From the Persian period, Aramaic inscriptions have been found as far west as southern Egypt (Elephantine) and as far east as modern Afghanistan.

In late antiquity, with the diaspora of the Jews, Hebrew also spread throughout the Near East and the Mediterranean world.

The Canaanite linear alphabet developed throughout the Iron Age, and eventually two main types emerged: the Phoenician variety (used by Phoenicians, Hebrews, Moabites, and so on), which was more conservative; and the Aramaic variety (used by the Arameans mainly but also in the Deir 'Alla texts), which was more innovative. From these various forms, either the old Canaanite or the derivative Phoenician and Aramaic, all other alphabets in the area were derived: Old South Arabian, Greek (and thence Latin and Coptic), North Arabian, Syriac, Arabic, and so forth.

Because the Levant lay at the crossroads of the ancient Near East, it was a very international and cosmopolitan region. This explains why some Old South Arabian inscriptions have been found at various sites in Israel (Jerusalem, for example) and why what appears to be a Thamudic (North Arabian) inscription has been found at Hamath in Syria.

The date by which the Greeks borrowed the Phoenician alphabet is a hotly contested issue, but more and more evidence points to an earlier (rather than a later) date, approximately 1100 B.C.E. or even earlier. The Greeks modified it in

several ways to make the alphabet more useful for their own purposes and added the important element of individual letters to represent the vowels.

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