

Summary

PROBLEMS CONNECTED WITH CREATION OF THE GREEK ALPHABET I.: NATURE OF THE INVENTION AND ITS DATE

Reviewing the otherwise well-known issue of adaptation of Northwest Semitic abecedarium to the Greek again, the present article compares the two phonetical systems exploiting Semitistic as well as Graecistic perspective, relatively in detail. As background, a systematic overview of phonetic type of writing is given with emphasis on representation of vocals in preceding Near-Eastern writing systems (ranging from acrophonic use of Egyptian hieroglyphs through proto-Canaanite consonantal alphabet and, mainly, Aramaic device of vowel-letters down to the primitive Greek alphabet with independently represented vocalic phonemes). The Greek alphabet is described not as an innovative system, the value of which should lie in the ability to roughly represent all the phonemes, but as an innovative and crude one at the same time: the oldest alphabet failed to represent certain Greek phonemes, while introducing creative changes into the received abecedarium (vowels).

A more significant point of the present article, however, lies in a study of the date of creation of the Greek alphabet. To be able to introduce my approach, I give, as a secondary result of my study, a rather comprehensive review of the issue. In the 1930s, a methodological break took place. R. Carpenter applies a typological principle by which the date of the creation depends on the correspondence of letter-forms on both the Semitic and the Greek sides. Due to available epigraphic material of the period, Carpenter dated the creation of the alphabet to 720–680 B.C. Epigraphists come to a consensus following the methodological lead, although they gradually raise the lowest date (given by Carpenter), depending on new finds, too. The situation changes in the early 1970s. Inspired basically by J. Naveh, the Semitists introduced a very high date, reaching even to the 1100 B.C. with the lowest end in the 9th century (e.g., P. K. McCarter, B. S. J. Isserlin). Even though innovative in its results, the “Semitists’” approach had quite the same methodological base – the date of the most similar letter-forms is, basically, the date of the introduction of the alphabet. In my eyes, the typological principle, as applied during the 20th century, spawned results too

various (ranging 400 years) to be accepted as the sole criterium of the date of the alphabet. (The article touches upon ancient literary traditions on Greek alphabet's birth and finds their role as only subsidiary, though not without a worth, for its dating.)

With the oldest finds from, possibly, 770 B.C., the Greek epigraphists allow for a period between the creation of the alphabet and actual alphabetical documents as yet without finds extending up to 800 (e.g., R. Wachter). Although this approach is very reasonable and well grounded, I still find room for an admittedly experimental perspective which is based on a broader perspective on the Greek world of the time, understanding the epigraphic material and its interpretations as only an important guideline. I reflect on the ways to substantiate even an earlier date, which, in my opinion, is the end of the 9th century B.C. Combined, they culminate in proposal that such an early date for the creation of the alphabet should be taken into consideration as a possibility.

1) Gradually, more older inscriptions have kept coming to light over the last century. Starting at the date of about 700 in the 1930s we have arrived at 770 (so far?). Not that it should mean automatically that new and even older inscriptions are, so to say, supposed to appear but as the finds have continued to show for quite a long time, it would be unsafe to press too hard for too low a date.

2) In the 10th century already B.C. the Phoenicians and Greeks were in contact, albeit sporadic. However, during the 9th and 8th the "orientalizing period" brings inspirations on various levels such as technical or mythological. Phoenician craftsmen settled in the Aegean in the period and taught Greeks some of the more demanding techniques, which presupposes at least some knowledge of their partners' language (be it Greek, or Phoenician) which, in its turn, may be a convenient starting point for writing experiments.

3) The nature of Phoenician inscriptions in the West (not in the Phoenician home country) bears evidence to their votive use. An approximate accordance was found with the nature of the oldest layer of the Greek material which often has a character of a signature, a votive sign or the like. At Kommos, in southern Crete, for example, the native Greeks could see Phoenician voyagers dedicating their votive inscriptions in the 9th century, even though none were found in there (J. B. Shaw). As they shared a cult there, the Greeks may have taken a liking in the new religious practice (A. Willi).

4) Despite the fact that the first Greek signs come from 770 (or 750) B.C., there is still a provoking possibility: certain individual artifacts with writings in the Semitic alphabet were set before Greek eyes long before 850. To be sure, this does not prove anything but for some it may be vexing (as J. N. Coldstream voiced it).

5) Oral, un-written character of archaic Greek culture – which the article reviews on several pages – including poetry, commerce or law, borne by almost all archaic and classical “literature”, corroborates, to an extent, to the picture of the late 9th-century alphabet as of an almost hidden invention. Writing itself was expendable in Greek society of archaic age (even until the middle of the 4th century B.C.), and there was no urgent need to use it. Therefore, it might have been that the invented alphabet was waiting in the shadow, not being used but by several dispersed individuals, who were not possibly even willing to pass the knowledge (or lacked reason to). Also, as we can see from the uses of the earliest alphabetic materials, writing was not something Greeks would really need. Rather, it seems as a clever, entertaining device which can emphasize an owner’s individuality by a signature or, in a more serious usage, strengthen religious act of a votive object. The overall unimportance of the alphabet could have added to hindering its diffusion, and only a very small number of supposed first inscriptions (from the end of the 9th century) may lay undiscovered. Only later, during the 8th century, alphabet could have come “in fashion”. Dominating orality and the unnecessary character of writing itself might be another support for an earlier date of the invention of the alphabet than our evidence suggests.

Finally, the present article gives a thought to whether it was a Greek, or a Phoenician who invented the Greek alphabet. Purposely against the usual view, I try to argue for the Phoenician origin. A Phoenician, possibly a craftsman, was more motivated to work with writing than the Greek fellow, since in Greece, where he came to make a living (the *cui bono* principle), it was up to him to learn the native language. Moreover, he had already some experience with writing. Therefore, he was better predisposed for inventing an alphabet suitable for the Greek language than his Greek colleague who was a mere beginner in writing. The whole argumentation is, again, a mere proposition.

Appended bibliography is meant to include all the substantial and smaller scale contributions on the problem of the date of the alphabet. The second part of the article (to appear in the next issue of this journal)

contains some more literature, as it dwells on two neglected problems (the “Aramaic” hypothesis of the alphabet’s origin and the theory of its Cypriot provenance).

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