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## A REEXAMINATION of the EARLY EVIDENCE of ALPHABETIC SCRIPT

Everybody will have been informed very early in school about the fact that the alphabetic script, used by the Greeks, was borrowed by them from the Phoenicians and 'Phoinikika grammata' was the first invention of an alphabet. There exists a very early tradition about this fact and until now it has been believed to be correct. But today the question must be raised, whether this tradition is to be followed by us in the light of the new discoveries about the history of the alphabet.

Now it has become clear that there exists no single way to an alphabetic script, but that some preliminary stages were developed and trial-phases not in the Phoenician proper, but at different places in the whole area. On the other hand it can be shown that in some regions special developments occurred and so local traditions were founded which later have been changed in favor of the kind of script at least developed in Phoenicia. It is impossible to demonstrate this process here and now but some outlines which derive on just published or republished material can be sketched here. Many questions connected with the whole complex of scientific research<sup>1</sup> and the complicated state of our present knowledge cannot be discussed in a satisfactory way here, but I will in short give you an idea of the problems which are now under consideration

1. The connection between the Egyptian scripts and alphabetic writing is much disputed. On the one hand it seems probable that the system of alphabetic writing, the very new and successful idea of writing a purely consonantal script without ideograms and determinatives, was influenced by the special kind of Egyptian writing of foreign words, well known now as the 'Gruppenschrift'. On the other hand there have been from the beginning of the discussion about alphabetic origins many theories about the connection between hieroglyphic signs and early alphabetic signs. The not yet fully deciphered inscriptions from Sinai gave support to the hieroglyphic origins of the alphabetic script, but proof until now is lacking. The problem is not to be solved with respect to the hieroglyphs, which were used in official inscriptions and therefore could scarcely be the prototype of alphabetic signs. In consequence Wolfgang Helck<sup>2</sup> combined the ideas of the borrowing not of the hieroglyphic script but of the more cursive version named

'hieratic' and of using principles of the 'Gruppenschrift', familiar in Syria and Palestine in the time of the New Kingdom of Egypt. He argues that the commercial connections between the Canaanite states and the Egyptians were accompanied by a good knowledge of the principles and the sign-form of the 'Gruppenschrift', and so this kind of script was chosen as an example of typical writing and represents the earliest stage of Canaanite writing. But in fact proof of this very simple and not implausible theory is lacking until now and I do not believe that proof for it can be found. Helek adds a list of hieratic signs and their phoenician counterparts, but it is obvious in a very brief glance at the table that the choice of the hieratic and especially of the phoenician sign-forms is very subjective. It may be that one day a full repertoire of signs will be available from both sides and a comparison will be easier, but I doubt that exact proof of a connection will solve the problems of the borrowing of the very specific Egyptian writing system into Canaanite.

2. The second vexing problem is the chronology of the different stages of Canaanite script and the very beginning of this system. It is well known that the Ugaritic writing system is alphabetic and it is also accepted worldwide that the invention of the Ugaritic script followed an alphabetic system which was developed before some<sup>3</sup>. It goes without saying that even sign-forms of Ugaritic have been influenced by the Canaanite script and some specimens of Ugaritic going from the right to the left point to a specialisation of the alphabetic script in contrast to cuneiform<sup>4</sup>. (Outside of Ugarit we have now seven places where this script also has been used, a hint for the wide-spread knowledge of the alphabetic principle of writing<sup>5</sup>). It deserves mention that two of these places are typical later phoenician settlements which yielded alphabetic script also (Sarepta and Tall Soukas), and that at Kamid el-Loz in the Beqa' have been found sherds with a very old alphabetic script, connecting the northern and the southern branches, besides one Ugaritic alphabetic text.<sup>6</sup> (Of special interest is Sarepta. It is said that the short text in Ugaritic cuneiform script which has been found here contains phoenician language<sup>7</sup>). But I think that this claim is until now not absolutely convincing. The sherd is very small, the inscription short, and it can demonstrate only that Ugaritic cuneiform has been used here. Besides this text has been found another one, which also is very short, but the script of this fragment is 'proto-Canaanite'.<sup>8</sup> So it seems clear that both script forms, the Ugaritic-cuneiform and the proto-Canaanite form, could exist side by side and so an interconnection is confirmed. If the Ugaritic script in some way is dependent on a canaanite alphabetic script, it is fairly sure that the alphabetic script was developed earlier than the invention of the Ugaritic cuneiform script, that is between the 14th and the 13th centuries B. C.

3. Now it is well known that the alphabetic script in a readable form does not yet go back to such an early date. There are inscriptions of earlier times the Gezer sherd, the Sinai inscriptions, the Lachish dagger<sup>9</sup>) – which resist decipherment. They can be dated in the long period between the 17th century and the 14th century B.C. They may be first steps in the direction of an independent canaanite script, but they were without success. The same is true for the so-called hieroglyphs from Byblos, which are even later<sup>10</sup>.

Through archaeological context the sherds from Kamid el-Loz are dated in the 13th century, but their shortness does not allow far reaching conclusions. Nevertheless they demonstrate that not only at coastal sites or in Palestine an alphabetic script existed. And they also prove to my satisfaction the fact that a very close connection between the northsemitic and the southsemitic script existed in this early time<sup>11</sup>).

Now we have an increasing number of early inscriptions from Palestine and Syria, and we can ask some questions for them in the hope of finding satisfactory answers. One question must be: Is a centre to be found where alphabetic writing has been introduced and may have developed? Another one is: Can we find specific peculiarities which can be used for dating and localizing the objects often found by chance or in the antiquities market?

At the moment we are confronted with the situation that most of the early alphabetic inscriptions come from Palestine. The situation is not surprising because archaeological activities there have been very intensive. It can be expected that in the course of similar activities in the adjoining countries more material from other sites will be produced so that the picture will change. Now we know around 14 documents from the centuries between the 14th and late 11th centuries B.C.: The Beth Shemesh – ostrakon, the Lachish ewer, the Lachish bowl, the jar-handle from Raddana, the Tell el-Hesi sherd, the Megiddo bracelet, the sherd from Qubur Walaydah, the sherd from Izbet Sartah, the arrow-heads from el-Hadr and the Manahat sherd<sup>12</sup>). Most of these inscriptions are very short and have a few letters only. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish two different kinds of writing. There is a clearly recognizable province in the south, represented by the famous sherd from Izbet Sartah with its abecedary and by the just published sherd from Qubur Walaydah, 10 Km. south of Gaza. It is characterized by a special kind of lamed, which is curled from right to the left, and by an aleph, standing nearly upright and with a rounded head. This type of aleph also occurs on the jar-handle from Raddana and all the three specimens should be dated in the late 12th century.

Quite surprising is the shape of the mim in the Qubur Walaydah inscription. It cannot be compared with the Izbet Sartah sherd, which is not

so clear at this point. On the other hand it resembles very much the archaic form of the Sinai inscriptions, where it follows in an acrophonic way the beginning of the word *mayim* 'water' with the picture of a wave. It is clearly distinct from the letter shin, written no more in the snake-like shape of the Izbet Sartah sherd, but with short, straight strokes as in later phoenician script, not yet horizontal, but vertical in direction. It should be noted that the same form of the letter shin appears also in the so-called archaic Byblos inscription B<sup>13</sup>), where a reading mim, proposed by Teixidor <sup>14</sup>), cannot be excluded. From this and from other features in the short inscription it can be argued that this is the oldest of the two inscriptions, which F.M. Cross republished and discussed adequately. On the other hand the two aleph-signs in these old Byblos inscriptions show the typical early phoenician style without the rounded peak of this sign in inscriptions from other sites.

It should be stressed that on the one hand every argumentation in palaeography must come from the shape of the sign. On the other hand just now F. M. Cross has made the remarkable statement <sup>15</sup>). « We should underline the fact that considerable variation in form in the drawing of graphemes was still permissible. « So it should be kept in mind that far-reaching conclusions from a single pit of evidence cannot be drawn. This is true also with respect to some peculiarities of the early inscriptions. F.M. Cross himself argued often that the principle of the writing in boustrophedon, – one line from the right to the left, the next one in the opposite direction, – was used until the 11th century B.C. and then lost. But I think that it can be shown that the direction of writing in early times had not been fixed – apart from one – line or more than one – line inscriptions, – and that the writing direction was free. You will remember that this principle also is followed in some Ugaritic texts, especially from syro-palestinian cities.

Against the southern Palestinian group one may set the rest of the early alphabetic texts, which have peculiarities well known from the younger phoenician inscriptions. Remarkable is the hoard of arrowheads which has been found in el-Hadr near Bethlehem. Five pieces are now published bear inscriptions, and all of them should be from the same workshop and the same time <sup>16</sup>). Without knowing this, we would be inclined to see a development in the forms, especially of the letters lamed and aleph, but this is impossible. So we have to recognise that at the same moment 'archaic' forms could exist next to more developed signs, which remind one of the real early phoenician shapes.

It is also remarkable that in northern Palestine and also in the coastal

region of Lebanon the development of the sign forms toward the well-known Phoenician script continues. Now we have a lot of monuments, through external evidence, which allow a view over a longer process of development at one place. Byblos is here the for most site where a considerable number of inscriptions have been found. I am absolutely sure of the fact that the famous Ahiram inscription should be dated in the 10th century and not as G. Garbi proposes again, in the 12th century B.C. <sup>17)</sup> This is self-evident in a brief glance at a tab with the sign forms of the early Byblos inscriptions, where the evolution is shown by letters such as aleph, waw, mim, etc.

The next question could be the diffusion of the Phoenician script in this developed form through the Mediterranean, but this question is too far-reaching. One example should be mentioned: The early Nora inscriptions. F. M. Cross tried to show that these inscriptions belong to the 11th century B.C. <sup>18)</sup> This would be quite exceptional because we do not have archaeological evidence of such an early invasion or intrusion of the Phoenicians in Sardinia. There is no doubt that both inscriptions, the smaller and the longer one, are from an early date. But in comparison with the Byblos inscriptions it seems clear to me that they are to be dated to the second half of the 10th century; they fit very well into the picture of the increasing use and world-wide spread of the alphabetic script <sup>19)</sup>.

In the course of the spread of this script special shapes also developed such as the Aramaic shapes or the early Hebrew shapes <sup>20)</sup>. There was no direct connection between the early stages of alphabetic script for example in southern Palestine or the Bija and the scripts later used in these regions. Historical reasons may be responsible for this astonishing process: The tradition at separate places ceased as a result, of the invasion of these peoples and the devastation of the commercial centres. In Phoenicia the centres survived in a diminished number and recovered earlier and so took the lead in the evolution. In this sense it is right to speak of an invention of the alphabet by the Phoenicians.

## NOTES

1. See for example W. Röllig, *Die Alphabetschrift*, in: U. Hausmann, *Handbuch d. Archäologie Bd. 1: Allgemeine Grundlagen der Archäologie* (1969) 289–302. – F. M. Cross, *Early Alphabetic Scripts. Symposia Celebrating the 75 th Anniversary of the Founding of the American Schools of Oriental Research 1* (1979). – G. Garbini, *Storia e problemi dell'epigrafia semitica*, Suppl. 19 to *AION* (1979). – J. Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet* (1982).

2. Helck, *zur Herkunft der sogenannten « Phönikischen Schrift », Ugarit-Forschungen 4* (1972) 41–45.

3. Cf. R. R. Stieglitz, *The Ugaritic Cuneiform and Cananite Linear Alphabets*, *JNES 30* (1971) 135–139.

4. See in general M. Weippert, *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins 82* (1966) 312ff. The textual evidence is Gordon, *UT No 57 ; 94 ; 500 ; 501*.

5. They are : 1. The knife from Tabor–2. The Beth-Semes-tablet. – 3. The Taanach-tablet. – 4. The Sarepta-šerd. – 5. The Tell Soukas-fragment, cf. *AAS 11* (1960) 141. – 6. The Kamid el-Loz fragment, cf. G. Wilhelm, *UF 5* (1973) 284 f. – 7. Tell Nebi Mend cf. A. R. Millard, *UF 8* (1976) 459 f.

6. See note 5 and cf. G. Mansfeld, *Scherben mit altkanaänischer Schrift vom Tell Kamid el-Loz*, *Saarbücker Beiträge 7* (1970) 29–41; *BMB 22* (1969) 67–75; G. Garbini, *AION 32* (1972) 95–98.

7. J. Teixidor in J. B. Pritchard : *Sarepta. A Preliminary Report on the Iron Age. Museum Monographs 1975 Fig. 30, 4. 55,2; p. 102 ff.* Cf. E. L. Greenstein, *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society 8* (1976) 49–57; M. G. Guzzo Amadasi, *Rivista di Studi Fenici 5* (1977) 98; P. Bordreuil, *UF 11* (1979) 63–68.

8. J. Teixidor, *loc. cit.* 101 and fig. 55,1; F. M. Cross, *Early Alphabetic Scripts* (1979) 97 f. 113.

9. Gezer – šerd see G. R. Driver, *Semitic Writing* (1976) p. 98 and Fig. 41. Dagger from Lachish: G. R. Driver. *loc. cit.* 98 f. Fig. 43. – Proto-Sinaitic-Inscriptions: W. F. Albright, *The Protosinaitic Inscriptions and their Decipherment*, *Harvard Theol. Studies 22* (1966); M. Sencycer, *Supplement au Dictionnaire de la Bible VIII* (1972) 1384v-1395.

10. M. Dunand, *Byblia Grammata* (1945), cf. H. H. Sobelman, *Journal of Semitic Studies 6* (1961) 226–245; M. Martin, *Orientalia 30* (1961) 46–78; 31 (1962) 197–222; 332–338; G. Posener, *Mélanges de la Université Saint Joseph 45* (1969) 225–239.

11. With respect to this peculiar problem cf. G. Mansfeld–W. Röllig, *Zwei Ostraka vom Tell Kamid-el-Loz und – ner Aspekt für die Entstehung des kanaänischen Alphabets*, *WO 5* (1969–70) 265–270; G. Garbini, *Storia e problemi dell'epigrafia semitica* (1979) 40 ff. 69 ff.

12. Cf. for 1. Beth-Shemesh: D. Diringer, *Le iscrizioni antico ebraiche palestinesi* (1934) 311f. pl. 28,6 ; Fig. 29. – 2. Lachish Ewer: O. Tufnell et al., *Lachish II* (1940) 49–54; pl. LI A: 286. B; 287; LX 3. – 3. Lachish Bowl : J. L. Starkey, *PEFQS 1935 pl. XVI*; O. Tufnell et al., *Lachish IV* (1958) 129; pl. 43–44. – 4. Raddana Jar Handle: F. M. Crossi D. N. Freedman, *BASOR 201* (1971) 19–22. – 5. Tell el-Hes/Sherd: W. F. Albright, *AfO 5* (1928) 150–152. – 6. Megiddo Bracelet : P.L.O. Guy – R.M. Engberg, *Megiddo Tombs* (1938) 173–176. – 7. Qubur el-Walaydah Sherd: F. M. Cross, *BASOR 238* (1980) 1–4; Fig. 1.2. – 8. Izbet Satah. Ostrakon: M. Kochavi, *Tel Aviv 4* (1977) 1–13. – 9. el-Hadr Javelin Heads: F.M. Crossi J.T. Milik, *BASOR 134* (1954) 3–15. – 10. Manahat potsherd: L. E. Stager, *BASOR* (1969) 45–52.

13. M. Dunand, *Fouilles de Byblos II* (1950) 1933–38, F. M. Crossp. K. McCaster, *Rivista di Studi Fenici* 1 (1973) 3–8.
14. J. Teixidor, *BASOR* 225 (1977) 70f.
15. F. M. Cross, *BASOR* 238 (1981) 7b.
16. See F. M. Cross, *Newly Found Inscriptions in Old Canaanite and Early Phoenician Scripts*, *BASOR* 238 (1981) 4 ff. and the just published javelin head of Zakarba'al king of Amurru: J. Starcky, *Archéologie au Levant. Recueil R. Saidah* (1982) 179–186.
17. See recently: W. Röllig, *Die Ahirom-Inscription. Bemerkungen eines Epigraphikers zu einem kontroversen Thema*, *Praestant Interna*, FS U. Hausmann (1982, 367–373).
18. F. M. Cross, *Leaves from an Epigraphist's Notebook*, *CBQ* 36 (1974) 486–494, see also *ibid.* *Early Alphabetic Scripts* (1979) 103 ff. ; *BASOR* 238 (1980) 15.
19. W. Röllig, *Paläographische Beobachtungen zum ersten Auftreten der Phönizier in Sardinien*, *Antidoron Jürgen Thimme* (1982) 125–130.
20. See now J. Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet* (1982).