

IN THIS ISSUE: ANCIENT SOCIAL, ECONOMIC, MILITARY, AND POLITICAL REVOLUTIONS (CA. 3500 BC – AD 400)

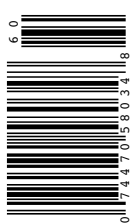
ANCIENT HISTORY

NO. 60

REVOLUTIONS IN ANTIQUITY

INNOVATIONS AND SHIFTING IDEAS

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A LAND OF FIRSTS

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Early Greek vase painters liked to experiment with the depiction of movement and speech.

PHRYNE EXPOSED

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Print: Grafi Advies

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Customer service: service@karwansaraypublishers.com
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Contributions in the form of articles, letters, reviews, and news are welcomed. Please send to the above address or use the form on www.ancienthistorymagazine.com

Subscriptions

Subscriptions can be purchased at www.kp-shop.com, via phone, or by email. For the address, see above.

Distribution

Ancient History is sold through retailers, the internet and by subscription. The exclusive distributor for the UK and the Republic of Ireland is Seymour Distribution Ltd, 2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT, United Kingdom. Phone: +44 (0)207 429 4000.

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Ancient History is published every two months by Karwansaray B.V., Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

ISSN: 2451-8700

Printed in the Netherlands.

ON THE COVER

A bronze wheel, dated to ca. 1100–900 BC, from southern France. As an object reflecting human creativity and technology, the wheel is ubiquitous. The invention of the wheel was one of the earliest, most impactful technological innovations in human history.



© Marie-Lan Taÿ Pamart / Wikimedia Commons



REVOLUTION IN ANTIQUITY

The ancient world was a dynamic place, constantly changing. Not only did different political regimes rise and fall, whether the kings of Rome or democracy in Athens, there were also many cultural, technological, and social advancements.

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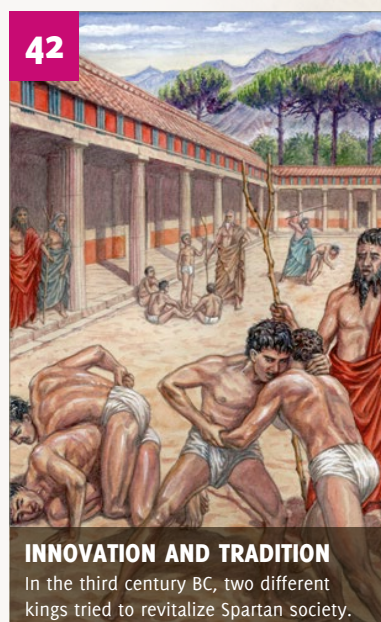
56 Book reviews

A look at new ancient history titles



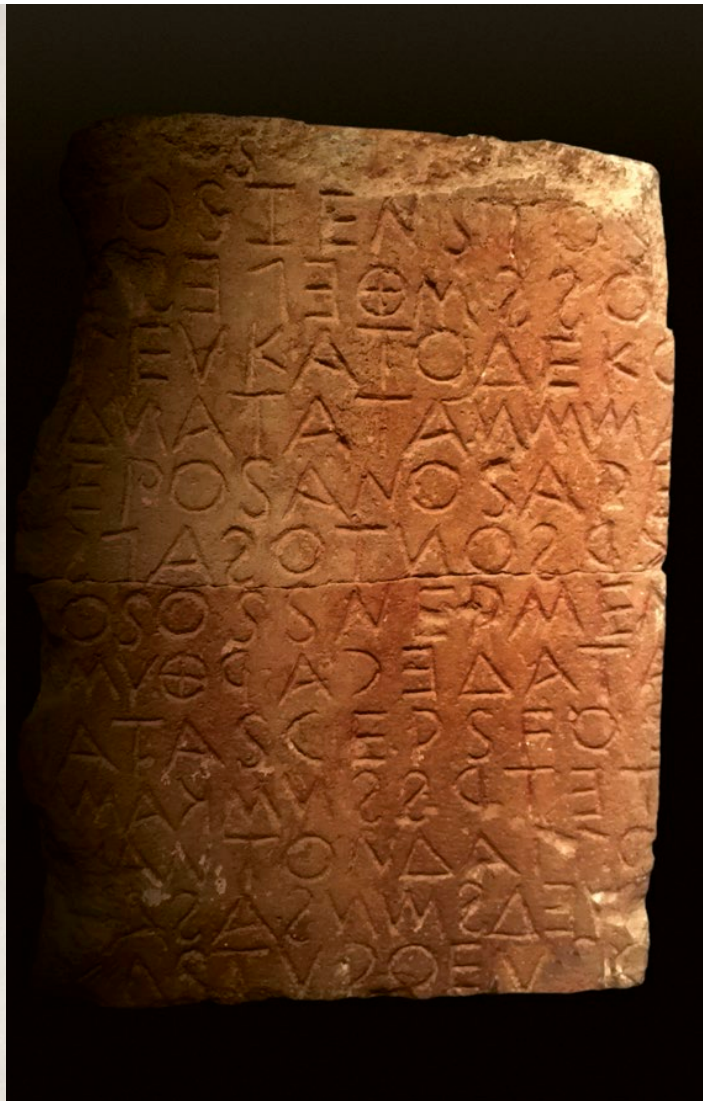
A BAD RAP?

Was the Emperor Tiberius really so tyrannical as his later reputation suggests?



INNOVATION AND TRADITION

In the third century BC, two different kings tried to revitalize Spartan society.

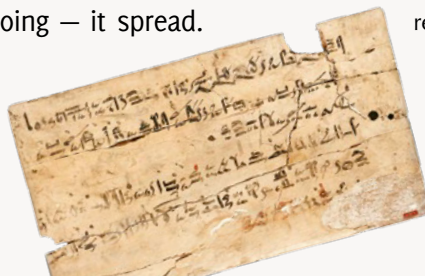


An inscription, dated to ca. 600–550 BC, from Gortyn, Crete, written in the archaic Cretan alphabetic script. The alphabet spread throughout the Mediterranean in the Iron Age, but may have had its origins as early as the late third millennium BC.

By the From Aleph to Alpha project

THE SPREAD OF THE ALPHABET A REVOLUTION IN WRITING

Perhaps one of the greatest revolutions of all time was the development of alphabetic writing. Traditionally thought to have been a Phoenician invention which was subsequently adopted, perfected, and disseminated by Greeks, recent discoveries and reinterpretations of old data are forcing scholars to revisit many widely shared assumptions about its origins, and the ways by which — and by whose doing — it spread.



A scribe's exercise board from Egypt, dated to ca. 1514–1493 BC, written in the hieratic script.

© The Brooklyn Museum

At the end of the fourth millennium BC, writing makes its appearance in Mesopotamia. The first documents are clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform script, so named after its wedge-shaped sign forms. The script was initially used for the Sumerian language, but soon taken over by speakers of other languages, including Akkadian, a Semitic language with two main dialects, Assyrian and Babylonian. It was also used for Hittite, an Indo-European language that was the official language of the Hittite Kingdom (ca. 1650–1200 BC) in Anatolia. The Hittite cuneiform co-existed with an indigenous writing system: the Anatolian hieroglyphs, which recorded Luwian (see Bachhuber, *AH* 44). By the second millennium BC, several writing systems existed in the Aegean, notably the Cretan hieroglyphs, Linear A, and its derivative Linear B.

Compared to the hundreds of thousands of cuneiform records, our sources for Linear B (and A) and the Anatolian hieroglyphs are rather limited. This is because, unlike the cuneiform script, these scripts were normally not written down on the durable material clay, but on wood, parchment, and papyrus. Such materials can only survive for millennia in exceptional circumstances, like, for instance, the dry desert climate of Egypt. In Egypt, the Egyptian hieroglyphs emerge around the same time as the cuneiform script, at the end of the fourth millennium BC. Out of the Egyptian hieroglyphs, a cursive variant called 'hieratic' developed. Hieratic was used for administrative and private documents on papyri, and the Egyptian hieroglyphs for official and monumental inscriptions (often on stone).

A silver Hittite stamp seal, dated to the fourteenth to thirteenth century BC, with a hieroglyphic inscription.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art



The end of the Bronze Age

Around 1200 BC, the political landscape changed, and some of these writing systems, such as Linear B and Hittite cuneiform, disappeared. Especially in case of the Aegean, the end of the Bronze Age is often described as a watershed, ushering in an illiterate 'Dark Age', characterized by simpler societies and decreased long-distance contacts. The relative synchronicity of destructions

A Cretan hieroglyphic inscription from Petras, dated to 1900–1700 BC.

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and abandonments of major sites has led scholars to speculate on a Mediterranean-wide ‘system collapse’. Recent scholarship has questioned the veracity of this narrative of destruction and decline. New excavations at sites like Tiryns in the Argolid and Knossos on Crete and a re-examination of older evidence suggest that some places thrived amidst the supposed chaos, and that long-distance trade continued unabated but was no longer the preserve of kings and nobles, who appear to have suffered more than most during the Late Bronze Age Collapse.



A tablet from Ugarit, dated to the thirteenth century BC, recording an abecedarium in alphabetic cuneiform.

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The disappearance of Linear B and cuneiform in Anatolia are illustrative, for these scripts were used almost exclusively by the elite, whereas other scripts of the ancient world remained in use and were further developed. In the Levant, for example, destructions and setbacks seem to have affected only a select few sites, while others thrived and boasted sizeable and remarkably literate populations. To be sure, the end of the Bronze Age did see major changes, as old regimes collapsed and major states crumbled, but this was also a period that saw the emergence of new identities, and the development of new technologies and ideas — including novel ways of writing. Alphabetic writing flourished in the wake of the Late Bronze Age Collapse, and its subsequent spread throughout the ancient world may rightly be called a revolution. But how, when, and where alphabetic writing developed and spread is one of the thornier issues discussed amongst specialists.

inventors of the alphabet,

like Hebrew *báyit* or Arabic *bayt*.

As words in early Semitic languages always started with a consonant, no signs were available for vowels, and these were, accordingly, left unwritten.

Short inscriptions using up to 27 alphabetic signs of this type were first discovered in the Sinai Peninsula, leading to the common suggestion that the alphabet was invented there by Semitic speakers involved in Egyptian turquoise mining operations somewhere between the eighteenth and sixteenth centuries BC. Since the earliest discoveries, however, additional inscriptions have been found elsewhere in Egypt, but also in the southern Levant, Syria, and even as far away as southern Mesopotamia. The finds from Syria seem to be

(Top) An Anatolian hieroglyphic inscription found at the Hittite capital of Hattuša. It dates to the fourteenth or thirteenth century BC.

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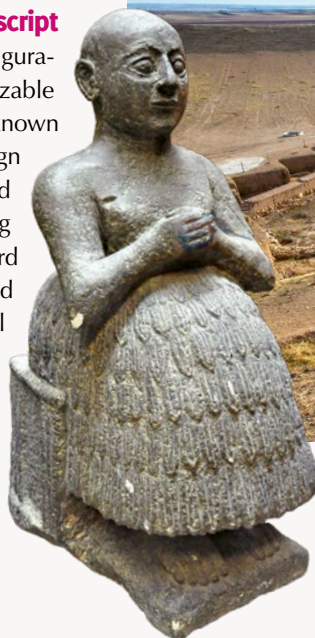
(Bottom) A view of the remains of Palace G in Ebla, an important regional centre in Syria during the Middle Bronze Age. In the palace, archaeologists discovered 1800 complete tablets and 4700 fragments dated to ca. 2500–2250 BC. These included bureaucratic and economic records as well as ritual and literary texts, written in Sumerian and a Semitic language using cuneiform.

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The development of alphabetic script

The first alphabetic writing was figurative, using little drawings of recognizable objects from real life following a rule known as the ‘acrophonic principle’: each sign represents the first sound of the word for its pictured object. Thus, a drawing of a house does not represent the word ‘house’, but just expresses the sound *b*, which was, apparently, the initial sound of the word for ‘house’ in the Semitic language spoken by the



A gypsum replica of a Sumerian scribe named Dudu; the original dates to ca. 2600 BC.

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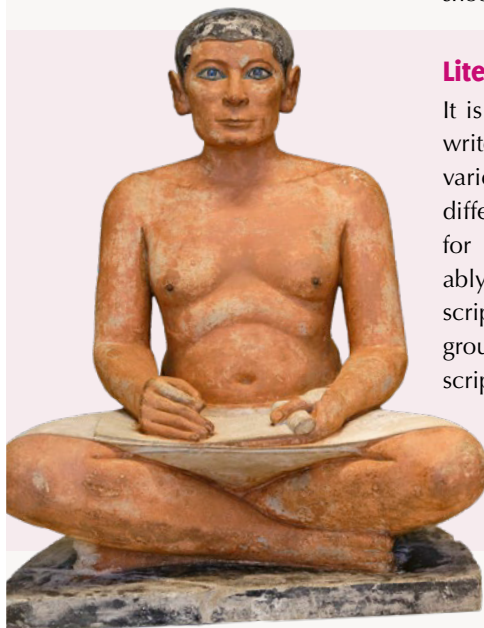


The remains of the Reception Hall in the royal palace of Ugarit. Here, in the Late Bronze Age, a 30-letter alphabetic cuneiform script was developed, and used to record correspondence, administrative records, and literary texts.

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An Egyptian sculpture, dated to ca. 2620–2500 BC, known as the Seated Scribe. In Egypt, and likely across the Near East before the widespread adoption of the alphabet, literacy was largely the domain of a professional scribal class.

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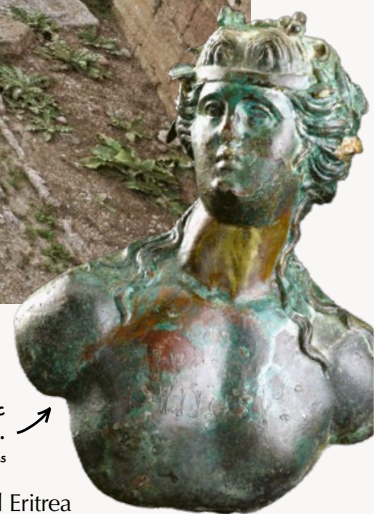


particularly ancient, dating to the late third millennium BC, which casts serious doubt on the conventional out-of-Egypt origin story.

Whatever its origins, the second half of the second millennium BC saw the early alphabet break up into several distinct systems. One branch of the family travelled south, developing into the South Semitic scripts used to write various languages of the Arabian Peninsula, including early forms of Arabic. In the form of Sabaic, it survived — and thrived — in Yemen until shortly before the rise of Islam, while its offshoot across the Red Sea, Ge'ez, has remained

A statue of Dionysus from Yemen, dated to the first century AD, bearing a Sabaic inscription on its chest.

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in use in Ethiopia and Eritrea until the present day.

Back in the Late Bronze Age Levant, scribes in the coastal city-state of Ugarit took inspiration from Mesopotamian cuneiform to develop their own 30-letter alphabetic cuneiform script. Roughly 2000 clay tablets from the thirteenth century BC record Ugaritic

Literacy in non-alphabetic societies

It is hard to say who was able to read and write in the ancient world, and it probably varied per region and period. Moreover, different levels of literacy existed. In Egypt, for example, very few people were probably versed in the monumental hieroglyphic script, but a larger — though still limited — group of people could write in the hieratic script. Another kind of literacy is found at the workmen's village of Deir el Medina, where a system of hieroglyphic marks functioned as a pseudo-script for daily administrative records.

School texts from Mesopotamia demonstrate that the scribal training was not only about mastering the cuneiform script, but also included mathematics, music, and literature. Most literary compositions that have come down to us are anonymous. Remarkably, the first author known by name is a woman: Enheduanna. This daughter of the famous king Sargon (ca. 2350 BC) is credited as the composer of several hymns (see Pryke, *AH* 56). Female scribes are, indeed, attested in the cuneiform records, though by far most professional scribes were men.



An ostracon from the Valley of the Kings in Egypt, dated to ca. 1184–1070 BC, recording a list of workmen and absences in hieratic.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art

A block from Byblos, dated to ca. 1600–1200 BC, inscribed with an undeciphered script that preceded the Phoenician alphabet.

© Lauren van Zoonen



correspondence, administration, and literary texts like the Baal Epic. Interestingly, texts in a shorter, 22-letter cuneiform alphabet are also known from various places in the Levant. This reduced consonantal inventory matches that of a contemporaneous non-cuneiform alphabetic tradition that, unlike the cuneiform alphabets, would survive the Bronze Age Collapse.

From the twelfth and eleventh centuries BC, alphabetic inscriptions in this Proto-Canaanite script are mostly known from the Shephelah, a hilly region in the centre of modern-day Israel. Like the early alphabetic script of the Bronze Age, it had no fixed writing direction and letters varied wildly in their orientation. Some letters retained some notable figurative elements, like the circular ‘, originally an eye (Hebrew ‘áyin), which had not yet lost its pupil.

After centuries of relatively little change, the alphabet suddenly underwent a phase of expansion and standardization in the early first millennium BC. Alphabetic inscriptions, now practically always written from right to left, appeared throughout the Levant. By the middle of the ninth century BC, the stance of each letter was mostly stable and certain letters had been streamlined, losing picturesque details like the eye’s pupil in the process. While this stage of the alphabet is commonly known as (Early Linear) Phoenician, finds over the past decades have increasingly made clear that this standardized script was not just used by Phoenician cities, but equally by the Hebrew- and Aramaic-speaking kingdoms of the southern Levant and Syria.

able. There is now substantial evidence that trade between the Greek world and Cyprus and the Levant had never ceased. Rather than ushering in a period of cultural and economic decline, the Late Bronze Age Collapse triggered the emergence of far-flung trade networks across the entirety of the Mediterranean, perhaps fostered by the emergence of a new class of independent merchants. It is precisely in such a context that one might assume the adoption of a versatile and relatively easy to learn script, such as the alphabet.

It is, therefore, surprising that Greeks, if we judge the archaeological record, appear to have

(Top) A fresco from the tomb of the nomarch Khnumhotep II in Beni Hassan, dated to 1887–1878 BC, depicting an Asiatic delegation arriving in Egypt.

© Macquarie University / Wikimedia Commons

(Bottom) The ruins of the Egyptian copper and turquoise quarry at Serabit el-Khadim, where it was believed that Semitic-speaking workers invented the alphabet between the eighteenth and sixteenth centuries BC.

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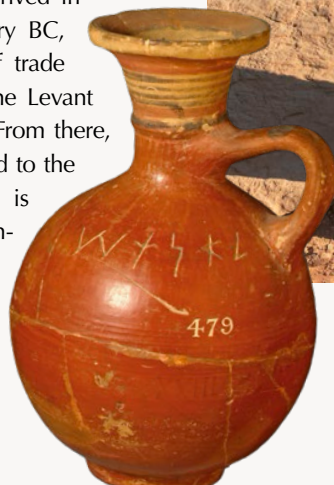


The journey to the West

In its initial stage, alphabetic writing was restricted to Egypt and the Levant, but it subsequently spread throughout the Mediterranean. In the first millennium BC, alphabetic scripts are found in Greece, Anatolia, Italy, and the Iberian Peninsula. How and when the western expansion took place is debated. It was long thought that the alphabet arrived in Greece in the eighth century BC, following the resumption of trade contacts with Cyprus and the Levant after the Greek ‘Dark Age’. From there, it was thought to have spread to the other regions. This scenario is looking increasingly question-

A Phoenician terracotta jug, dated to the seventh century BC, with an inscription on its shoulder, possibly recording a name.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art





(Top) The so-called Midas Monument in the Phrygian settlement at the archaeological site of Yazılıkaya. The monument bears an inscription in the Phrygian alphabet. Once thought to have been introduced to the Phrygians by the Greeks, the Phrygian alphabet may, in fact, be older than the Greek alphabet.

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(Bottom) A detail of a relief from the Mortuary Temple of Ramesses III in Medinet Habu, dated to ca. 1200–1150 BC, depicting the Battle of the Delta. It was fought between Egypt and the Sea Peoples, who were once thought to have been a root cause of the Late Bronze Age Collapse.

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A wooden diptych from Huelva, the site of a major Phoenician-dominated commercial port in southern Spain, dated to the late eighth to early seventh century BC.

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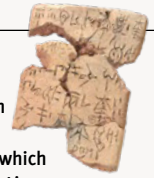


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AEGEAN SCRIPTS (ca. 1800–1450 BC)

LINEAR B (ca. 1450–1200 BC)

Various writing systems developed in the Aegean world. The first was Cretan Hieroglyphic (ca. 2100–1700 BC), which remains undeciphered. The next was Linear A (ca. 1800–1450 BC), a logosyllabic script which was used on Crete at the same time as Cretan Hieroglyphic. It, too, remains undeciphered. Linear A was replaced by Linear B (ca. 1450–1200 BC), a logosyllabic script recording an early form of Greek.



3000

2500

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CUNEIFORM (ca. 3100 BC – AD 100)

The successor to proto-cuneiform, this script used wedge-like logograms (hence the name cuneiform, from the Latin *cuneus*) to represent syllables. It was originally used for Sumerian, before being used for other languages like Akkadian, Hittite, and Hurrian.



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PROTO-CUNEIFORM (ca. 3350–3100 BC)

Proto-cuneiform contains both numerical and logographic symbols. It is unknown what language it records, and it remains largely undeciphered.



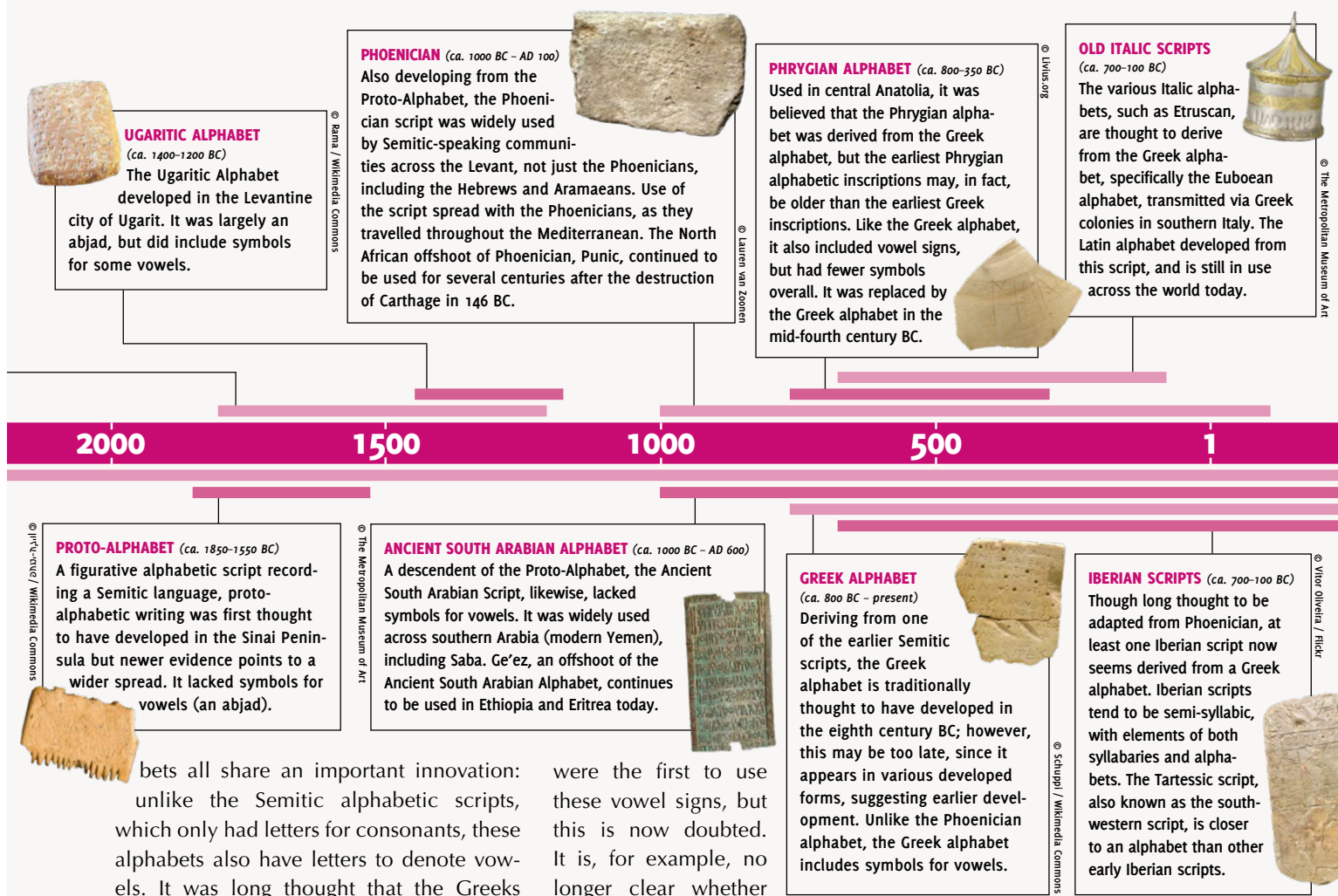
been slow to adopt this new way of recording. Indeed, the earliest Greek inscriptions we know of date to the so-called Late Geometric period; which is traditionally thought to have lasted from ca. 760–700 BC. Yet these dates may be in need of revision. Recent radiocarbon dating data from the Greek sites Sindos and Zagora on the island of Andros suggest that the Geometric period may have started at least a century earlier than previously thought. The ramifications of these new insights can be immense, for it may well mean that some of these early Greek inscriptions may be at least a century older, too.

There is more that argues for much earlier Greek writing. For instance, the very first alphabetic inscriptions show a substantial regional variety: there are no less than 33 different variants of the Greek alphabet, that are often grouped into green, red, and blue alphabets. This diver-

sity must be the result of a longer development, which in turn suggests that writing was already in use before the first surviving inscriptions, but on perishable materials. Indeed, whole swathes of early literacy may simply not have survived. The problem of missing evidence is not just limited to the Greek world. The rare survival of a late-eighth- to early-seventh-century-BC wooden diptych in a waterlogged site at Huelva, in southern Spain, is a reminder of how much may have been lost. Huelva was a busy, Phoenician-dominated commercial port, where huge amounts of Greek pottery dating to the ninth century BC, and lesser numbers from Etruria and Sardinia, were imported. It would be remarkable had the Greeks, who were so clearly involved in an extensive trade network which included literate people like the Phoenicians, not already learned of alphabetic writing.

Relations between 'western alphabets'

The Greek, Italic, Iberian, and Anatolian alphabets are sometimes referred to as the 'western alphabets'. These western alpha-



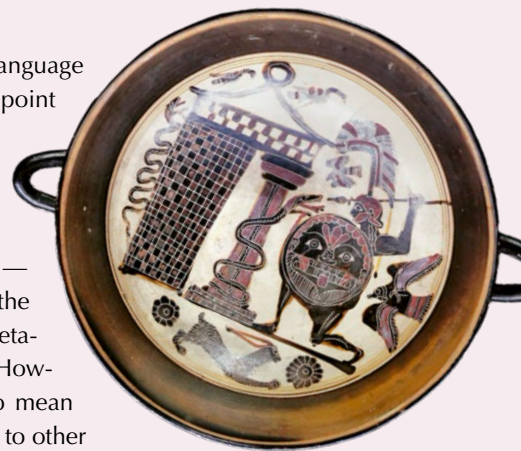
A legendary invention

The introduction of writing to Greece was a popular topic among classical authors, and many different stories circulated in antiquity. One can roughly distinguish between traditions that assert a foreign origin of writing (Phoenician, Egyptian, or Assyrian) with Danaus, Cadmus, Phoenix, or the Phoenicians as inventors or mediators, and traditions that ascribe the discovery to a Greek god or hero, such as Prometheus, the Muses, Hermes, Sisyphus, Palamedes, Pythagoras, and Orpheus — to name but a few.

It is remarkable that all invention stories are situated in the Heroic Age, so much earlier than the usually assumed date of the introduction of the Greek alphabet. This raises the possibility that the myths were originally not about the alphabet, but rather about the invention of the Linear B script, which was

used to record the Mycenaean language in the Late Bronze Age. A case in point is the story of Cadmus, who was widely celebrated for introducing the *phoinikeia grammata*. Herodotus interpreted this expression as “Phoenician letters”, referring to the — in his view — Phoenician origins of the Greek alphabet (5.58). This interpretation is followed by most scholars. However, the adjective *phoinix* can also mean ‘palm’ or ‘palm leaf’, and according to other ancient traditions, the *phoinikeia grammata* refer to writing on palm leaves or fronds, a (now lost) writing material used for the Linear B script.

Interestingly, in the earliest sources, Cadmus is portrayed as a Greek hero, a descendant of the Argive heroine Io. From the fifth century BC onwards, however, Phoenicia becomes his country of origin. Thus, the Greek hero who invented the Linear B script changed into a Phoenician prince bringing the alphabet.



A Laconian kylix, dated to 550-540 BC, possibly depicting Cadmus, the legendary founder of Thebes, fighting a dragon. According to Herodotus, Cadmus was a Phoenician who settled in Greece, introducing the alphabet. However, earlier sources portray Cadmus as a Greek hero.

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A tablet from Crete recording a list of male names in Linear B, dated to 1800 - 1450 BC.

© Jebulon / Wikimedia Commons



A Greek vessel known as the Dipylon *Oinochoe*, dated to ca. 740 BC. On the shoulder of the vessel is an inscription in the Greek alphabet, one of the oldest known examples of its use.

© Gary Todd / Flickr

The earliest Greek writing

Perhaps the most famous example of early Greek writing is the verse inscribed on a *skyphos*, produced in the late eighth century BC, proclaiming the cup to be Nestor's drinking cup and cautioning that the desire of beautiful-wreathed Aphrodite would seize whomever drinks from it. Playfully engaging with Nestor's *depos* in the *Iliad* (11.641), two of the inscription's three verses were set in hexameter. The cup was broken, along with dozens of other clay vessels, at the funeral pyre of a child buried at the necropolis of the Euboean colony on Pithecusae in the Bay of Naples. Judging by the Early Proto-Corinthian vases (ca. 720–690 BC) contained in the cremation, the burial took place some decades after the *skyphos* was produced. On another Middle Geometric Rhodian vase (ca. 720 BC), the Dipylon *oinochoe* (wine-jug) named after the cemetery near the gate of Athens where it was found, an inscription proclaimed it as the prize to the best dancer. Provocative calls were scratched on boulders near the sanctuary of Karneios Apollon on Thera, understood as erotic play or ritual acts during a festival. Such snippets of literary inscriptions, impromptu and seemingly playful, evoked not only a literate but a literary Greek world.

Traditionally, this early writing was considered evidence for the 'uniquely Greek' way of doing things, with some suggesting the alphabet was adopted and developed specifically to write down the verses of Homer. Yet inscriptions found during recent excavations at Methoni and Toroni on the Chalkidiki peninsula in northern Greece indicate that this view must be rejected, and that merchants had already adopted the script by the eighth century BC at the latest, and used

The so-called Cup of Nestor, dated to ca. 750–700 BC, one of the most famous examples of early Greek writing.

© Shonagon / Wikimedia Commons



it for their everyday affairs. By the eighth century BC, then, alphabetic writing was widespread and used for myriad purposes throughout the Greek world. The snippets that have come to us likely do not represent the very first Greek writing; whatever was committed to writing prior to these has not yet been found or simply did not survive the ravages of time.

A room from the Minoan palace at Knossos known as the Queen's Megaron. The Minoans developed a script called Linear A, which was likely used for administrative purposes. However, it remains largely undeciphered.

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alphabetic writing in Anatolia was introduced by Greek colonists, or whether Anatolian communities had, in fact, already embraced the new way of writing before the Greeks. One of the earliest Anatolian alphabets is the Phrygian alphabet that was in use in the Kingdom of Phrygia, the realm known

primarily for its legendary king, Midas. Important new insights in Phrygian archaeology now suggest that the earliest Phrygian inscriptions are in fact older than their Greek counterparts. Similarly, the role of Greeks as the prime 'exporters' of the script to Italy may be less decisive than previously thought, whereas there are hints that people in Iberia became acquainted with the alphabet well before the first Greeks came to their shores — likely the result of early Phoenician trade with the region.

Ultimately, the relationship of the various alphabets can only be determined on the basis of their features. If, for example, the Anatolian and Italic alphabets show characteristics that are demonstrably Greek inventions, they must indeed be derived from the Greek alphabet. As mentioned above, the addition of vowel signs is commonly regarded as a Greek invention, but since all western alphabets show this innovation, and all language communities involved could



A Greco-Etruscan ivory writing tablet, known as the Marsiliana Tablet, with an alphabet carved into it.

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have been motivated to make this adaptation, it does not point specifically to Greek. More relevant are the letters Φ, X, and Ψ that were added at the end of the alphabet (with Ω being an even later addition). Crucially, the alphabet used on Crete and a few islands to its north appears to reflect a stage of development in which these supplemental letters were not yet in use. The aspirated sounds *ph* and *kh*, for which the Semitic model did not offer any analogues, were, therefore, not distinguished from *p* and *k*. In Greek, however, this could be the difference between (examples from the classical language) ‘how?’ (*pōs*) and ‘light’ (*phōs*), and ‘cut!’ (*keire*) and ‘hands’ (*kheire*). The supplemental letters found in the rest of the Greek-speaking world fixed this inconvenient situation: *ph* was written with Φ, and *kh* either with X (in the east) or with Ψ (in the west).

Since the situation on Crete is by all appearances archaic, the supplemental letters Φ, X, and Ψ can be identified as Greek innovations after the Greek adoption of the alphabet, and any non-Greek alphabet featuring them is, therefore, suspect of being derived from a Greek model. This is, however, not the only possibility;

A Minoan labrys, dated to ca. 1550–1500 BC, inscribed with four signs from the Linear A script.

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for example, it is possible that Ψ, a shape also found in Semitic as a variant of the sign for *k*, was borrowed in a later wave both in Greek and in other traditions. The relationship between the Greek and the Anatolian alphabets remains to be clarified in this regard. In the case of Italy, the situation is more suggestive: not only do we have the full set of supplemental letters in *abecedaria* and Ψ used with a value akin to that of the western Greek alphabets, but we also find the use of X for *ks*, possibly a simplification of the combination XΣ, which occurs in the so-called red alphabets, including the Euboean alphabet. This aligns well with the traditional narrative by which the Euboeans were responsible for spreading the alphabet to the Etruscans through their eighth-century colonies in the Bay of



Naples. Nevertheless, even in this case, there is a mismatch: Etruscan uses the letter *san* (denoting a sibilant) which had been abandoned by the Euboeans already by the time of our earliest attestations. Could this letter have been revived from a dormant existence in *abecedaria*, or did the introduction of the alphabet in Italy take place earlier than usually assumed?

Whilst the spread and development of the alphabet is arguably one of the world's most consequential revolutions, it remains one of the least understood. New dates, excavations, and reinterpretations of old data, however, are slowly shedding more light on this momentous development. **AH**

By Jorrit Kelder, Stefan Norbruis, Eleftheria Pappa, Benjamin Suchard, and Willemijn Waal as part of the project From Aleph to Alpha.

(Top) A view of a staircase and the Cyclopean walls around the citadel of Tiryns. After the Late Bronze Age Collapse, Tiryns was one of several sites that demonstrated continued habitation and long-distance contacts.

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(Bottom) A watercolour reproduction of a scene from the so-called Hunt Krater, a vessel which dates to ca. 570 BC. The scene depicts several figures, labelled with their names in the Corinthian alphabet, and their hunting dogs killing the Calydonian Boar.

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A Greek terracotta kylix, dated to ca. 420 BC, with the symbols of the Greek alphabet painted onto it.

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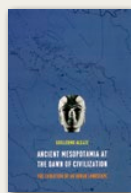
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