

The Phoenician Alphabet

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[Slides] maps of Mediterranean Sea, Lebanon

The following are places which I shall be discussing: Mesopotamia, Egypt, Phoenicia (Sidon, Tyre, Byblos), al-Mina, Ugarit, Cyprus, Troy, Greece, Aegean Sea, Rhodes, Samos, Halicarnassus, Crete, Euboea, Boeotia, Thebes, Carthage, South Italy, Croton, Etruria, Rome.

Pythagoras, the famous Greek philosopher and mathematician, whose father was a Phoenician and who acquired some of his knowledge while staying in Phoenicia, lived during the 6th century BC and conducted his teaching in beautiful natural surroundings, including on the Greek island of Samos, where he undertook his own philosophical teaching and research in a cave outside the city.

Pythagoras later lived in southern Italy at Croton and founded a philosophical and religious school there. We can also imagine that he taught his followers in beautiful natural surroundings there.

You are like the men and women followers in the outer circle of his school, known as the *akousmatics*, that is, ‘those eager to hear’, who lived in their own houses and came by day to the society. You are fortunate that, like them, you can eat the biscuits and drink the tea and coffee and can retain your own possessions. I am like one of the members of the inner circle, who were called the *mathematikoi*, that is, ‘those fond of learning’, who lives permanently

with the society, and thus, as they had a restricted diet, it is uncertain if I can enjoy the food and drink with you today.

The Phoenicians invented the alphabet, upon which our alphabet is based. This is their most notable and significant contribution to civilisation.

Before the Phoenician invention of the alphabet, the writing systems in the Middle East were, in one case, *cuneiform*, whose name comes from Latin *cuneus* meaning ‘wedge’, which is the system developed in ancient Mesopotamia.

[Slide] Akkadian diplomatic letter found at Amarna, Egypt, 14th cent. BC

It used triangular wedge shaped marks applied by the end of a stick to wet clay or cut into stone to produce symbols to represent the syllables or words of the writing system. The symbols were stylised pictorial forms of what the symbols meant.

The other was *hieroglyphs*, whose name comes from Greek *hieros* and *glyphos*, and means ‘sacred carving’, which was developed in Egypt, whose symbols resemble small pictures.

These were either, as their name suggests, carved into stone or written on other materials such as papyrus.

[Slide] *Papyrus of Ani (The Book of the Dead)* a papyrus manuscript written in cursive hieroglyphs (c.1250 BC), British Museum.

In both systems, the symbols represented syllables and words, and the systems were complex, because many symbols are required to represent syllables and words, and, as a result, their use was restricted to a small scribal class, or limited numbers of symbols were used by a larger number of people for accounting purposes.

[write syllables]

For example, if a writing system represents syllables, a combination of the consonant *b* and the vowels would need five symbols for *ba*, *be*, *bi*, *bo* and *bu*, and very many more for all the combinations of consonants and vowels. (To avoid more complex definitions, the vowels are *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*, and the consonants are the other sounds, although it is a bit more complicated than this). You can thus imagine the complexity of such a system, compared to an alphabet, even with the use of just consonant and vowel combinations. These writing systems have many other symbols for larger combinations of consonants and vowels, whole words and concepts.

The Phoenicians are said to have had a role in these pre-alphabetic writing systems. Egyptian legend states that Taaautos invented the first writing system, which was thought by them to be Egyptian hieroglyphs. His traditional date is placed well before 2000 BC. He was the inventor of ‘tautology’ or imitation. (His name in Greek is the word which means ‘the same’, hence the etymology of the word ‘tautology’). Taaautos is said to have been a Phoenician and came to Egypt from Byblos. He had been the flute player for Ba’alat Nikkal, a moon-goddess, who was the chief deity of Byblos.

The Greeks called Taaautos *Thoth* and the Egyptians called him *Djehuti*. He has the mythology of Thoth and Dionysos, who was the Greek god of wine, or of Njörth, who was the snake priest and sometimes the consort of the moon-goddess. The Greeks considered Thoth to be the same as the god Hermes, whom the Romans called Mercury, who was the messenger of the gods and the god of commerce.

The earliest alphabetic writing of the Phoenicians is known from Ugarit in the Late Bronze Age, and a cuneiform script was used to write it. The symbols thus emerged from the system of Mesopotamia, although the concept of what they were used for was a new one. This concept was that the consonants were represented by a single symbol and they could be combined in any order to form syllables and words. The Phoenicians subsequently developed an alphabetical script of their own, the ancestor of our alphabet, which was used in Byblos as early as the 15th century BC.

The Phoenicians are of course famous as seafarers and traders throughout the Mediterranean Sea and beyond, including overland trade in the Middle East. The motivation for the invention of the alphabet by the Phoenicians could have been the need to have a more efficient method of record keeping as a result of their developed commercial activities and trade. The equipment for using the alphabet was also developed, including the pen and ink, and writing materials, such as papyrus, parchment and wax-writing tablets.

Like cuneiform and hieroglyphs before it, the Phoenician alphabet is also based on pictorial forms. For example, the first letter, *aleph*, is derived for the shape of an ox head, which is the meaning of the name of the letter. Similarly, the second letter *beth* or *bait* is derived from the shape of a house, which is its meaning. However, the letters themselves do not mean 'ox' or 'house', although the first letter of their names is the same as the sound of the letters.

[draw letters]

These symbols are used in the Phoenician alphabet for only 22 letters, which represent only the consonants out of which words are composed. The vowels were not written and are understood by the context of the arrangement of consonants, and by the grammatical context of the word. For example, the word *alphabet* would be understood if it was written *lphbt* [write word],

particularly if it is in the phrase *Phoenician alphabet*, written *Phncn lphbt*.

[write word].

Because of their small number and conceptual simplicity, these letters could be learnt very quickly and the alphabetic system was thus accessible to everyone. It thus permits the spread of universal literacy, education and democracy.

The Phoenician language is written horizontally from right to left, and originally there were not usually spaces between words in inscriptions. By the 6th century BC, the words were being separated by spaces. The various variants of the Phoenician alphabet changed only in the letter shapes from its original North Semitic version. Although there was little change in letter shapes in mainland Phoenician, they varied considerably in Punic, the language of the North African Phoenician colonies, such as Carthage, and neo-Punic.

[magazine] inscription on prow of Carthaginian ship from the 1st Punic War, Battle of the Aegates Islands, off the western coast of the island of Sicily, 10 March 241 BC.

The various forms of the alphabet remained the same as the North Semitic script, that is, a Semitic alphabet of 22 letters, written from right to left, with only consonants represented and the same phonetic values.

In the Middle East, from the Phoenician alphabet developed that of Aramaic, which was the ancestor of the modern alphabets of the Semitic languages including Syriac, Hebrew and Arabic. Indeed, its influence eastwards in to central and east Asia was widespread, since from it was derived the Sogdian, Old Uyghur, Mongolian and Manchu scripts, the latter being used in Manchuria in the north east of China.

[Slide] Gate of Sovereign Purity, Manchu-Chinese in the Forbidden City, Beijing (Qing Dynasty, 1644-1912)

The Phoenician traders passed on knowledge of their alphabet to the Greeks in the 8th century BC, possibly in the area of the Aegean Sea, Rhodes, Crete, Cyprus or the trading colony at Al Mina in north Syria. The Euboeans, who were Greeks from Euboea, the island north of Athens, were the traders probably responsible for adopting it for the Greek language. The most plausible theory is that the alphabet was transmitted for use in commercial transactions from Phoenician to Greek traders. The Greek traders may well also have appreciated the advantage of the alphabet for their activities, as the Phoenicians probably did in their creation of it. However, soon after its adoption, it was used by the Greeks to write down poetry, including the epic poems of Homer.

The Greeks made some of the Phoenician consonantal letters, of which they had no equivalent, correspond to vowels, which thus gave the form of the modern alphabet which we use. The order of the letters and their form in the Greek alphabet are borrowed directly from the Phoenician alphabet, and indeed the names *alpha*, *beta*, *gamma* and *delta* are Greek forms of Phoenician words *aleph*, *beth/bait*, *gimel/gamel* and *daleth/dal*. Thus, the word *alphabet* has its roots in the Phoenician language.

[draw Greek letters]

In its earliest form, Greek was written right to left, a direction derived from Phoenician and shared with Aramaic, Syriac, Hebrew and Arabic.

The Greek cities in south Italy in turn passed on the alphabet to the Etruscans, who lived in Etruria, modern day Tuscany, and, as rulers of early Rome, in turn passed it onto the Latin language of the Romans, from whom the alphabet which is used for English and many other languages is derived.

[draw Latin letters]

Greek formed the basis of the Cyrillic alphabet used for Russian. Thus, the Phoenician alphabet is very influential in being the origin of the alphabet of many of the world's languages. Not only the form of the letters, but also their order in the Greek alphabet, and Latin alphabet which we use, are borrowed from the Phoenicians.

The borrowing of the alphabet by the Greeks from the Phoenicians is alluded to in Greek mythology. Cadmus is said in Greek mythology to have taught the alphabet to the Greeks. The myth states that he was a Phoenician who founded Thebes in the region of Boeotia in central Greece, not far from Athens. He was the brother of Europa and is said to have come to Greece to search for his abducted sister. One form of the legend states that he invaded with his army, and the city which he founded was called 'Cadmea' after Cadmus, and it was later called 'Thebes', with 'Cadmea' remaining an alternative name. Cadmus is said to have combined the consonants of the Phoenician alphabet with vowels, as we find in the Greek alphabet, thus permitting the correct use of the alphabet to represent the language. The date

of these events is placed many years before the Trojan War, whose historical date is in the 12th century BC. The Greek tradition places Cadmus several generations before the Trojan War. Traditionally, it is said that the alphabet of Cadmus originally had sixteen letters and that later, at the time of the Trojan War, four further characters were introduced. Indeed, the Greeks did also create new letters, which are not in the Phoenician alphabet, to represent sounds peculiar to their language: phi, chi, psi

[draw Greek letters]

The story of Cadmus introducing the alphabet is related by the Greek historian Herodotos of Halicarnassus (c.484– c.425 BC) in his *Histories* (Bk V, Ch. 58), who says that in the earliest form the Greeks call the alphabet ‘Phoenician’.

The period preceding the Trojan War is related in the legends in the Theban cycle. Situated in Boeotia, Thebes was outside the area dominated by the Greeks. Because Thebes had been reduced just before the Trojan War commenced, it was not in a position to send a contingent, and thus Thebes is not recorded to have taken part along with the other Greek cities. With the traditional date of the Trojan War being at the beginning of the 12th century BC, Cadmus should be placed in the 14th century and there were several rulers of his dynasty before the conquest and destruction of Thebes by the Epigoni, the Greek heroes who fought and were killed in the Theban war. Some of the Epigoni participated in the Trojan War.

The mythological date of the story may reflect contact between the region of Phoenicia and Thebes in the Mycenaean Period (c.1600-c.1100 BC). Indeed, Near Eastern cylinder seals have been found at Thebes, which proves direct contact with the Middle East, and the

Mycenaean syllabary for Greek, called Linear B, was used extensively at Thebes, and such writing was inspired by the scripts of the Middle East, as a result of contact with the region.

Although we cannot be certain whether someone called Cadmus actually lived, such mythological stories often reflect an actual basis of fact, and, in this case, it reflects the actual fact that the Phoenicians brought the alphabet to the Greek world in remote antiquity and that it was borrowed by the Greeks. The Phoenician traders, who brought the alphabet, would very likely have been significant figures in Greek states, as Cadmus is portrayed to have been. Furthermore, the earliest written form of the Greek alphabet in the 8th century BC has a system of vowels, which shows that the story of the addition of vowels at the time of the borrowing of the Phoenician alphabet by the Greeks has a foundation of truth. His Phoenician sister Europa gave her name first to the area of Greece around Thebes, but the name has since been attributed to the whole of modern day Europe.

Today, I have painted a picture of the Phoenician alphabet, how it was borrowed by the Greeks, and in turn by the Romans, which led to the use of a form of it as our alphabet and many of the world's alphabets. It is influential on civilisation because it allows everyone to have access literacy.