A Palette of Scripts

Writing in and around the Iron Age Mediterranean

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Introduction

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While the emergence of alphabetic writing in the Mediterranean is a much-told story, it is rarely set within its broader context of nearby contemporary writing cultures. That is the context which this Element seeks to explore: the palette of scripts in use during the Iron Age (c. 1200–600 BCE) in the highly connected area between western Asia, northern Africa and the shores of the Mediterranean (Figure 1). Some of these scripts continued from the Bronze Age while others were newly introduced. Far from the startling innovation it has often been conceived as, Greek alphabetic writing was a relatively late introduction owing much not only to the Levantine script from which it was immediately developed but also to a much longer and far more widespread legacy of literacy. We consider not only the types of writing system in play and their graphic features, but also their usage, treating writing as a fundamentally cultural practice undertaken by socially and culturally diverse human beings.

In the first chapter (by Colton G. Siegmund) we begin by looking east to Mesopotamia, an area set apart from the Mediterranean yet at the same time a constant literate presence in interactions over the millennia. Cuneiform writing in the Iron Age consists of several traditions developed by speakers of different languages in different geopolitical circumstances, from Assyrian and Babylonian to Elamite and even Urartian.

The second chapter (by Jordan S. Miller) explores the similarly long-lived writing of the lower Nile Valley, where the traditional categorisation of Egyptian writing in three types (hieroglyphic, hieratic and demotic) betrays a modern perspective not necessarily shared by ancient writers. A closer examination reveals that Egyptian literacy was both socially variegated and constantly in flux as orthographic fashions changed over time, while outside of Egypt its writing remained highly iconic in very different ways.

The third chapter (by Philip J. Boyes) focuses on the Levant, and cautions us not to oversimplify the progression of alphabetic writing systems from the Bronze and through the Iron Age. Early Alphabetic writing followed varying trajectories at the local level before widespread adoption and the establishment of distinctive traditions associated with particular

languages and political entities, setting the scene for the wider dissemination of what we label Phoenician writing westwards.

Finally, the fourth chapter (by Philippa M. Steele) explores the Mediterranean palette of scripts through the Iron Age, from Anatolia and Cyprus to Iberia, Italy and Greece. Some areas preserve literate continuity from the Bronze Age, while others feature regional adaptations of more recently arrived scripts, but in all cases literacy bears the marks of wide-ranging contact and a concern with expressing identities.

You may find that the chapters of this Element are in individual voices and styles, the result of bringing together four different specialists from Assyriology, Egyptology, Levantine studies and Aegean/Cypriot studies. We hope this will only add to the intended sense of diversity that could be seen to reflect the many voices of the ancient world.



Figure 1: Map of the eastern Mediterranean, with key sites mentioned in this Element. Drawing by Philip Boyes.

Chapter 1: Cuneiform Cultures

Colton G. Siegmund

The cuneiform script has a legacy dating back to the thirty-fourth century BCE in southern Mesopotamia when the Sumerians devised it as an administrative technology. When one speaks of cuneiform, one must be cognisant of the fact that it was hardly a monolith; it changed visually over time and its methods of encoding linguistic expressions evolved as it was adopted to write languages other than Sumerian. Furthermore, there are also alphabetic types of cuneiform that seem to have taken visual inspiration from the traditional form of the script but are otherwise radically dissimilar.

Accordingly, when one views how cuneiform manifested in the Iron Age (c. 1200–600 BCE), one is more so examining how an ancient script survived, morphed, and travelled than how it came into being. This chapter will discuss through what channels cuneiform entered the Iron Age, how it was employed by those who continued its use as well as those who chose to adopt it, and what new mechanisms it developed for representing new languages and emerging dialects. To accomplish these tasks, this chapter will be divided into surveys for each of the following users of the cuneiform script during the Iron Age: the Kassites, Assyrians, Elamites, Urartians, and Babylonians.[1]

1. The Kassites

After the Hittite sack of Babylon in 1595 BCE, a foreign people known as the Kassites seized control of the region and began a period of reign spanning just under six centuries. Although much of Kassite history antedates the Iron Age, the fall of Kassite rule in 1155 BCE overlaps briefly with the start of our period of focus from 1200 BCE. As such, the Kassites provide a useful and easy starting point for our surveys as they were the rulers of the Babylonian heartland at the beginning of the Iron Age.

Although non-native to Babylonia and having their own traditions and language, the Kassites in many regards assumed the trappings of traditional Mesopotamian kingship. As rulers of Babylonia, the Kassites adopted the cuneiform script. Interestingly, however, documents from

[1] Ugaritic cuneiform, which went out of use around the beginning of the Iron Age, is touched on briefly in Chapter 3 on Levantine writing (see also Boyes, 2021).

this period are not written in the Kassite language. Rather, cuneiform was used to write utilitarian documents in the Middle Babylonian dialect of Akkadian and to write ceremonial and monumental texts in Sumerian (Brinkman, 1976: 74). While the excavation of two bilingual Kassite-Akkadian lexical lists hints at a scholarly interest in the Kassite language, Akkadian remained as the main functional language of written discourse throughout the period of Kassite rule (Balkan, 1954: 1–11). Written sources from the Kassite period include royal inscriptions, letters, archives of legal and economic texts, *kudurru* stones (boundary stones recording land grants to vassals) (Fig. 1.1), literary texts, and scholarly texts (Paulus, 2022: 803–4). Ultimately, the Kassite rule of Babylonia came to an end after the Elamite king Šutruk-Naḫḫunte (r. 1184–1155 BCE) invaded Babylonia and sacked its major cities in 1158 BCE and after his successor Kutir-Naḫḫunte III (r. 1155–1150 BCE) dealt the final blow and relocated the cult statue of the Babylonian god Marduk to Elam.



Figure 1.1: A white limestone kudurru from the time of Meli-Šipak (r. 1186–1172 BCE) (BM 90827) (King, 1912: pl. V).

2. The Assyrians

The use of cuneiform to write the Assyrian dialect of Akkadian has a long and enduring history, during which the cuneiform script underwent radical changes. Beginning in the Old Assyrian period (c. 2025–1364 BCE), the script appears relatively simple in that it displays a rather small inventory of signs and a limited implementation of logograms and determinatives (Luukko and Van Buylaere, 2017: 322). By the Iron Age, during both the Middle Assyrian period (c. 1365–912 BCE) and the Neo-Assyrian period (c. 911–609 BCE), the script appears to have increased significantly in complexity in ways discussed below.

The Middle Assyrian period began after Aššur-uballiṭ I (r. 1365–1330 BCE) breached his contract as a vassal of the Mittani empire by claiming independent sovereignty over a polity localised around the city of Assur. During the approximately five centuries of its existence, the Middle Assyrian polity underwent various stages of expansion and decline where it vied to maintain the Assyrian heartland and the surrounding areas. Compared to text corpora from other periods in Mesopotamian history, the number of surviving texts from the Middle Assyrian period is relatively low. Nonetheless, hundreds of artifacts inscribed with Middle Assyrian cuneiform have survived that preserve multiple text types (e.g., royal inscriptions, literary texts, administrative records, letters, contracts, loan documents, receipts, inventories, etc.). Middle Assyrian cuneiform is mostly known from documents on clay, but the script was also used on stone and metal when fashioning commemorative monuments. In this period, cuneiform also seems to have been written on wooden writing boards covered with a wax-like substance when recording administrative information that either did not need to last for long durations or required updating over time (Jakob, 2021: 1162).

The exact type of cuneiform script utilised by the Middle Assyrian polity stems from a larger script-family popular amongst the various chancelleries of Upper Mesopotamia at the time (Schwemer, 1998: 15). The earliest stage of the cuneiform utilised by the incipient Middle Assyrian empire, circa fifteenth to fourteenth centuries BCE, is commonly referred to as ‘Early Middle Assyrian’ (henceforth EMA). EMA shows visual similarities with the script utilised by the Mittani empire but also various distinguishing features (Homan, 2020: 116–48). To cite one example, the inventory of sign-forms in the EMA corpus is significantly larger than that of the contemporaneous Mittanian corpus (Homan, 2020: 148). By the thirteenth century BCE, the script used by the Middle Assyrian empire displays unique visual

characteristics that distinguish it from its predecessor; accordingly, this younger script is commonly referred to as 'Later Middle Assyrian' (henceforth LMA). Once LMA had fully materialised, it was clearly distinguishable from EMA due to 'the length of the tails of the wedges, and a general straightening out or flattening of impressions' in LMA (Homan, 2020: 145). One characteristically Middle Assyrian orthographic feature that is attested in both EMA and LMA sources was the tendency to ligaturise two consecutive signs, especially of the type Ca+a (Jakob, 2021: 1167).[2]

Determining when the Middle Assyrian period ended and the Neo-Assyrian period began is not a straightforward task. From a historical perspective, it is conventionally agreed upon that the former ended officially with the reign of Aššur-dan II (r. 934–912 BCE) and the latter began with the kingship of Adad-nirari II (r. 911–891 BCE). The situation, however, was likely more gradual and nebulous with a 'dark age' of approximately a century preceding Aššur-dan II's kingship.

When the periods are demarcated on linguistic grounds, however, it has been suggested that by approximately 930 BCE 'Middle Assyrian had been entirely replaced by Neo-Assyrian, which survives in the form of a rich textual corpus preserved on thousands of clay tablets' (Luukko and Van Buylaere, 2017: 316). It is only around the early tenth century BCE that one can securely detect significant linguistic and orthographic changes from the Middle Assyrian norm that can be characterised as properly Neo-Assyrian (Jakob, 2021: 1137). The Neo-Assyrian dialect of Akkadian was one privileged written language of first-millennium Assyria and is attested in cuneiform documents spanning multiple genres (e.g., letters, administrative texts, royal inscriptions, scholarly writings, etc.). The majority of Neo-Assyrian cuneiform on clay tablets (approximately 7000 documents) comes from 'the Assyrian capital cities – in their varying locations over time – and from a number of provincial outposts of the empire itself' and dates to a period of roughly two centuries, that is the late ninth to late seventh century BCE (Fales, 2021b: 1347–48). Neo-Assyrian cuneiform written on clay or stone, however, was not the only orthographic framework utilised during this period. It is well known that in addition to writing cuneiform on clay tablets, Neo-Assyrian scribes also wrote in the cuneiform script on wooden or ivory writing boards (Fig. 1.2) covered with a wax-like

[2] When discussing the shape of syllabic cuneiform signs, 'C' represents any consonant, 'V' represents any vowel, and either category can be further specified (e.g., CV- = CONSONANT.VOWEL-, CVC- = CONSONANT.VOWEL.CONSONANT-, V- = VOWEL-, Ca- = CONSONANT./a/-, etc.).

surface and in the Aramaic language and script on papyrus and leather (Frahm, 2017: 164; Fales, 2021b: 1369; Luukko and Van Buylaere, 2017: 316).



Figure 1.2: Ivory panels from a Neo-Assyrian writing board excavated at Nimrud. Metropolitan Museum of Art 54.117.12a, b. Public Domain.

The interaction between these scribal traditions is also evident in cuneiform tablets bearing short Aramaic texts, which begin to appear during the Neo-Assyrian period. Typically attested on legal documents, these Aramaic texts are referred to by modern scholars as 'endorsements' (i.e., one to two lines in the margins of deeds summarising their contents) (Fales, 2021a: 6).[3] These endorsements demonstrate that cuneiform and Aramaic writing were not merely employed contemporaneously on different media but could coexist on a single object. Such cases provide tangible evidence for the interaction between cuneiform and

[3] Monolingual Aramaic texts on clay also occur in the Neo-Assyrian period on the so-called 'dockets' (i.e., texts of a legal character, typically longer than the endorsements, which prototypically are written on triangular shaped tablets) (Fales, 2021a: 6).

Aramaic scribal traditions during the Iron Age. Eventually, Aramaic overtook Akkadian as the dominant language in the region; although debates remain about the rate at which the former replaced the latter, one reasonable suggestion estimates that 'the Aramaic script became more and more common and probably displaced cuneiform as the dominant writing system shortly before the empire collapsed' (Luukko and Van Buylaere, 2017: 322).

3. The Elamites

During the Iron Age, the general geographical area of what is now the nation of Iran was controlled by the Elamites. This period of Elamite rule is referred to as the Neo-Elamite period by modern scholars and subdivided into three phases: Neo-Elamite I (c. 1000–744 BCE), Neo-Elamite II (c. 743–646 BCE), and Neo-Elamite III (645–539 BCE) (Potts, 2016: 249).

The Elamites had a long orthographic tradition predating the Iron Age that should briefly be discussed first. Denizens in the region first utilised their own form of logo-syllabic script in the late fourth millennium BCE (c. 3300–3000 BCE) known as 'proto-Elamite' (still undeciphered), which was likely adapted from or influenced by the contemporaneous Urukean 'proto-cuneiform' (Dahl, 2009: 24; Glassner, 2018: 454). In the late third to early second millennium BCE (c. 2300–1880 BCE), an indigenous syllabic script referred to as 'Linear Elamite' was in use (Desset *et al.*, 2022: 11). The adoption of traditional Mesopotamian cuneiform to write the Elamite language probably occurred during the Old Akkadian period (c. 2334–2154 BCE); during this period, the ductus and sign-values at use in Elam closely followed those of contemporary Akkad (Reiner, 1969: 68). Between the adoption of Akkadian cuneiform and the Iron Age, monumental cuneiform signs in Elam developed in parallel to their usage in Babylonia. The more cursive Elamite cuneiform script found on clay documents, however, exhibits internal developments independent from those seen in Babylonia (Reiner, 1969: 68).

Returning to the Iron Age, a range of Elamite texts in cuneiform are attested during the Neo-Elamite period. During the earliest phase, indigenous sources are scant. From the end of the eighth century BCE onwards, however, one finds monumental inscriptions, several hundred economic texts from Susa, approximately twenty-five letters from Nineveh in Upper Mesopotamia, an omen text, a fragmentary legal text, and some seals (Khačikjan, 1998: 2;

Waters, 2000: 81–100).[4] The most robust corpus (i.e., the economic texts) records transactions centred at Susa, 'although their administrative concern extended throughout much of Khuzistan', and attests to 'the receipt and disbursement of various commodities: primarily textiles but also weapons, tools, precious metals, and other sorts of merchandise' (Waters, 2000: 93).

Concerning internal characteristics of the cuneiform script used to record the Elamite language during the Iron Age, one development has traditionally been highlighted by scholars as the most remarkable. Historically, scholars have noted that Neo-Elamite cuneiform, in contrast to its Mesopotamian counterpart, is distinguished by its tendency towards simplification in sign form, abandonment of complex signs, and the reduction of the corpus of logograms (Reiner, 1969: 68–69; Grillot-Susini, 1987: 9). M.-J. Steve, however, has demonstrated that while the total number of Neo-Elamite signs from the Middle Elamite through the Neo-Elamite periods remains roughly constant, the total number of logograms in the system steadily increases (Steve, 1992: 11–12). Such developments underscore that Elamite cuneiform was a living orthographic system capable of selective simplification and elaboration in response to changing historical contexts.

4. The Urartians

Beginning sometime in the ninth century BCE, a great polity most commonly known by the Assyrian exonym Urartu (endonym: Biainili) solidified in eastern Anatolia, roughly corresponding to the area of the modern state of Armenia. While most text-based information about the Urartians is known from Neo-Assyrian sources, the Urartians did leave behind a textual record of their own. The earliest textual sources written by the Urartians themselves were written in the Neo-Assyrian dialect of Akkadian in a Neo-Assyrian ductus of the cuneiform script. One such early Urartian inscription by king Sarduri I (r. 834–828 BCE) in the Neo-Assyrian dialect and script occurs in six copies on massive, well-hewn stones at the ancient fortress on Lake Van in modern Turkey (Salvini, 2014: 305). Although the use of Neo-Assyrian at the Urartian court continued in a limited capacity after the death of Sarduri I, his son Išpuini (r. 828–810 BCE) began the practice of writing the indigenous Urartian language in the cuneiform script with a Neo-Assyrian ductus (Salvini, 2014: 309).

[4] For a more detailed summary of Neo-Elamite cuneiform sources, see Steve, 1992: 21–23.

Exactly how and when the cuneiform script as a graphic technology became introduced to and adopted by the Urartians is a matter of some dispute. One theory proposed by Igor M. Diakonoff posits that the script was imported via Hurrian or Hittite channels during the mid-second millennium BCE with no Assyrian influence (Diakonoff, 1963). Other scholars, such as Mirjo Salvini and Warren C. Benedict, however, reject this hypothesis on various grounds (Salvini, 2014: 308; Benedict, 1958: 11). According to Salvini, the large chronological gap between the mid-second millennium BCE and the ninth century BCE during which no written evidence exists in the Urartian highlands makes the Hurro-Hittite hypothesis untenable (Salvini, 2014: 308). According to Salvini, it is more likely that the Urartians adopted the cuneiform script from the Assyrians (Salvini, 2014: 309). The Assyrian hypothesis seems the most likely given the chronological gap raised by Salvini. The Urartian adoption of cuneiform is thus a remarkable event in orthographic history as no other region during the Iron Age adopted cuneiform as their script of choice (Wilhelm, 1986: 97). During the preceding Bronze Age, use of cuneiform extended well beyond the confines of the Mesopotamian heartland (at least for a period before being phased out in certain locales for other scripts), but never did it take hold in what would become the Urartian homeland.

While rock-cut royal inscriptions are the best attested forms of Urartian cuneiform text, the script is also attested on other media. For example, there exist numerous bronze bowls inscribed with Urartian cuneiform, typically denoting royal ownership of the inscribed object (Novikova, Bonfanti and Dan, 2025: 7–23). Concerning the more commonly attested material support of cuneiform writing (i.e., clay), Urartian cuneiform is found on a small number of clay tablets dating to the seventh century BCE that were found at the sites of Toprakkale, Karmir, Blur, Bastam, and Ayanıs; these tablets record epistolary and administrative texts, which show that cuneiform was not purely reserved for royal presentation purposes in Urartu (Zimansky, 1998: 100).

To conclude, it should be noted that the Urartians also recorded their language in a script referred to as either ‘hieroglyphic’ or ‘linear’. Because of its hieroglyphic nature and visual resemblance there is a debate about whether it is related to the Anatolian hieroglyphs (also known as Luwian) used in the Hittite Empire in the Late Bronze Age and in the Syro-

Anatolian polities of northern Syria in the Iron Age.[5] Regardless, this enigmatic Urartian script is found on ceramic vessels, plaques, metal bowls, seals, sealings, bullae, and even one clay tablet from Toprakkale (Zimansky, 1998: 160). Scholars continue to debate if this script 'formed a coherent writing system or represent[ed] a multiplicity of independent popular attempts at recording limited types of information graphically', but it nonetheless warranted mention in a section dedicated to Iron Age writing in Urartu (Zimansky, 1995: 107).

5. The Babylonians

The Neo-Babylonian period (c. 626–539 BCE) is traditionally cited as the epoch when the last great Mesopotamian polity ruled by native monarchs existed. This period began when Nabopolassar (r. 626–605 BCE) was crowned the independent king of Babylonia following a revolt against the Neo-Assyrians. The period came to an end when Nabonidus (r. 556–539 BCE) lost Babylon in 539 BCE to the Achaemenids ruled by Cyrus the Great. Since this period only briefly overlaps with the end of the Iron Age, it will serve as a convenient terminus for this chapter.

Cuneiform texts from the Neo-Babylonian period are written in the Neo-Babylonian dialect of Akkadian. Thousands of cuneiform documents exist for this period which span the genres but are best exemplified by texts pertaining to legal and administrative matters (e.g., loan documents, contracts, receipts, family law documents, etc.) (Holtz, 2009: 1). Just as was the case in the Middle and Neo-Assyrian periods, there is evidence that writing-boards covered with a wax-like substance were also used to record both administrative and literary texts in Neo-Babylonian cuneiform (MacGinnis, 2002: 222).

As a script, Neo-Babylonian cuneiform has a few notable characteristics. Firstly, Neo-Babylonian cuneiform displays a marked increase in the use of CVC-signs. Secondly, the Neo-Babylonian syllabary introduced relatively few new sign values. Thirdly, as has been argued by Christian W. Hess, 'the most salient characteristic of [Neo-Babylonian] orthography is a variable degree of alphabetisation, the trend towards undifferentiated expression of vocalic quality in syllabic' CV- and CVC-signs (Hess, 2021: 1405).[6] Although

[5] It is noteworthy that at Altıntepe, proper Luwian hieroglyphs were used to write Urartian words for vessel capacities (Hawkins, Morpurgo-Davies and Neumann, 1974: 153–55).
[6] For example, *a-nam-dan* for /anandin/ 'I give' (ABL 795 rev. 14) (Harper, 1902: no. 795, cited in Hess, 2021: 1405).

this tendency is first detectable in second millennium BCE sources, it became a hallmark of Neo-Babylonian cuneiform where its usage was expanded. For example, the vowel of CVC-signs in this system can be marked via the addition of a CV- or VC-sign as a phonetic complement;[7] additionally, the sign sequences (C)VC-CV and CV-CV can be used to mark a closed CVC syllable whereby the vowel in said CV-sign is irrelevant (i.e., the CV-sign serves to indicate solely the consonant) (Hess, 2021: 1405).[8] A final noteworthy characteristic of Neo-Babylonian cuneiform was the increased implementation of spellings that record grammatical elements like suffixes and enclitics in a fixed, standardised way, rather than changing their written form to match how they were actually pronounced in speech (Hess, 2021: 1406). Taken together, these orthographic tendencies reveal Neo-Babylonian cuneiform not as a mere residue of earlier practice, but as a highly optimised system calibrated to the demands of the last native Mesopotamian polity.

6. Concluding remarks

The Iron Age marked neither the beginning nor the end of cuneiform, but rather the continued survival, adaptation, and diversification of the script within a transforming sociopolitical landscape. As this chapter has sought to demonstrate, cuneiform during this period was not the vestigial remnant of a fading tradition, but a living technology that was tailored to suit dynastic agendas, administrative needs, and linguistic conditions.

In the case of the Kassites, the script functioned as a tool of continuity and legitimacy that bound foreign rulers to the well-established conventions of Babylonian kingship. Among the Assyrians, cuneiform evolved in various ways, mirroring the expansion of imperial bureaucratic apparatuses and reflecting internal linguistic developments. The Elamite cuneiform of this era is notable because it displays tendencies toward formal simplification and simultaneously shows increased logographic usage, attesting to both innovation and conservatism within a single scribal tradition.

Perhaps most remarkable is the Urartian adoption of cuneiform. This was not a case of inherited tradition, but of deliberate orthographic importation and adaptation, evidencing the

[7] For example, *ta-kaš^{áš}-šá-du* ‘(before) it arrives’ (OIP 114, 39: 19) (Cole, 1996: 110, no. 39, line 19, cited in Hess, 2021, 1405).
[8] For example, *ú-šad^{da}-ba-bu* for /ušadbabū/ ‘they cause to claim’ (BM 118969: 22) (Frame, 2013: no. 06b, cited in Hess, 2021: 1405).

script's prestige even beyond its traditional geographical sphere of influence. While Urartian cuneiform is the only adaptation of cuneiform clearly attested during the period covered by this Element, Old Persian appears shortly afterwards. This was a radically different script of cuneiform appearance, based on an alpha-syllabic principle with a much smaller repertoire of signs. Finally, in Babylonia, cuneiform endured into the final century of the Iron Age, and beyond, as an entrenched medium of legal and administrative communication, with its resilience grounded in temple economies and archival institutions that outlived their royal patrons.

What unites these diverse regional manifestations is not uniformity but precisely the opposite: cuneiform in the Iron Age was a plural phenomenon. It was a graphic technology unbound by linguistic determinism or rigid institutional constraints. Its longevity was due not to a fixed form, but to its capacity for reinvention across different cultural and political milieus. To speak of 'cuneiform cultures' in the Iron Age, then, is to speak of complexes of scribal knowledge that preserved, modified, and occasionally reimagined one of the most enduring scripts of the ancient world.

Chapter 2: Egypt

Jordan S. Miller

Egypt has always been a crossroads of the Mediterranean, Africa and Asia. Archaeological, visual and linguistic data from the region challenge attempts at synthesis, and no consensus has been reached about how best to model the formation of Egypt's social and cultural environments, and how such conditions were experienced on the ground (Bussmann, 2015). What is clear is that the northeastern corner of the African continent was home to multilingual and multiscriptal communities at least as complex as those of the other Mediterranean settings treated in this Element (recent reviews from various angles, with references to earlier literature, include Haring, 2023; Schneider, 2023; Cooper, 2025). These groupings resist definition. They were bound up with the changing faces of empire, as Egypt and its neighbours wrestled for control of the Nile valley and delta. As troops and traders, envoys and refugees, and resettled populations plied Egypt's desert roads and maritime routes, they exchanged aspects of culture from culinary practices to art and literature, and they revealed to one another the different forms writing could take. Multifaceted lifeways and senses of individual and collective identities emerged that are challenging to resolve from archaeological contexts (Liszka, 2025).

The period can be taken to span the later New Kingdom, commencing with the Nineteenth Dynasty (c. 1295–1077 BCE), to the middle of the Late Period (664–332 BCE), specifically the beginning of the Twenty-Seventh Dynasty in 525 BCE when Egypt came under Persian rule for the first time, totalling around 770 years. For better fit with the other cultures treated in this Element, the Twenty-Seventh Dynasty is not covered here. The writing practices contributing to this picture of complexity in early Iron Age Egypt are the subject of this Element. Sources encompass three broad phases of the Egyptian language – Middle, Late and Demotic – written in scripts nowadays classified as hieroglyphic, hieratic and demotic. We begin by introducing the scripts, describing how they worked to represent language and how the basic system was extended. Next, we consider how the openness and adaptability of Egyptian writing was a double-edged sword. Low literacy rates enhanced the power of writing in Egyptian society. Differently literate groups encountered and engaged with writing in varied ways. Abilities to access writing, to read it, and potentially to uncover deeper layers of meaning associated with the use and manipulation of scripts and signs, marked out literate

elites against nonliterate inferiors while carving out finer hierarchies among writers and readers of different proficiencies.

Comprehending the historical and contextual relationships of the scripts, as well as their cultural values and social significance within Egypt, is crucial for approaching the perceptions and uses (or indeed, non-use) of Egyptian writing in the wider Mediterranean context of this Element. Commerce and diplomacy exposed many Egyptians to non-Egyptian scripts and writing systems, but awareness of and facility in the region's syllabic and alphabetic traditions did not threaten the vitality of the Egyptian scripts, which were prestigious but often arcane outside Egypt's borders. Constituting a cultural encyclopaedia of landscapes, material culture, and social life, they flourished along the Nile but resisted uptake by those leading different ways of life.

1. Visual and social patterning of scripts in Egypt

Egyptian writing emerged in the late fourth millennium BCE out of a sophisticated visual culture with increasingly standardised conventions of pictorial representation and tied to social stratification and display (Wengrow, 2008; Baines, 2010). Egyptian signs have phonographic and ideographic functions (the literature is extensive; an overview and updated approach is provided in Polis and Rosmorduc, 2015). The logoconsonantal writing system remained closely tied to the Egyptian language, which, like other Afro-Asiatic languages, is structured around the inflection of roots consisting of one or more consonants (Quack, 2010: 241–42). No signs mark vowels specifically, though certain combinations of consonantal signs approached the character of *matres lectionis* by marking vowel length and quality, in a subsystem known as group writing (Kilani, 2023, with references), while certain consonantal signs could indicate word-final vowels (Allen, 2013: 53–54). Determinatives or classifiers – ideograms without phonetic value, appended to phonetically-written words – variously place words in semantic categories, establish metaphors and focalise specific associations (Goldwasser, 2002; McDonald, 2002).

A palette of scripts, today divided into three basic categories of hieroglyphic, hieratic and demotic, reinforced the encyclopaedic quality and sociocultural values of Egyptian writing. The three categories derive largely from Greek interpretations of Egyptian writing traditions and contexts, and do not necessarily correspond to indigenous Egyptian understandings during a single period, let alone over the course of millennia. Hieroglyphic writing, from the

Greek ἱερογλυφικός – ‘sacred carving’, was a translation in the first millennium BCE of the Egyptian term *mdw nṯr* ‘divine words’. However, evidence from the cusp of the Iron Age indicates that *mdw nṯr* referred not to a script per se, but to the prestigious content of the literary and religious texts written in the pictorial scripts (Allon, 2023), so the later Greek interpretations may not be generally appropriate. The three-part taxonomy of hieroglyphs, hieratic and demotic furthermore conflates Greek categorisations from different times, by different authors, and in different types of historical and literary accounts, from Herodotos in the fifth century BCE, who contrasted ‘sacred’ (ἱερά) with ‘popular’ (δημοτικά) scripts (*Histories* 2.36), to Clement of Alexandria in the second century CE, who distinguished sacred carvings, priestly script and epistolographic scripts, respectively ἱερογλυφική, ἱερατικήν, and ἐπιστολογραφικὴν (*Stromata* 5.4.20–21). The two indigenous categories, comprising hieroglyphs and hieratic on the one hand, and demotic, called *sḫꜣ šʿt* ‘document writing’ on the other hand, correspond imperfectly with the various known schemes (Depauw, 1997: 19–21; Quack, 2010: 236).



Figure 2.1: Granite stela, year 3 of Psamtek II (c. 593 BCE). Incised hieroglyphic text in columns, reading right to left with signs facing right, and emblematic upper part with symmetrical configurations of hieroglyphs and iconographic elements. Village of Shellal, moved to New Kalabsha island, Egypt. Photo by Olaf Tausch, Wikimedia Commons. CC BY 3.0.

By and large, hieroglyphs and hieratic are visual variants of one writing system, differentiated by signs' degree of iconicity. Hieroglyphs depict recognisable figures within the conventions of Egyptian visual representation and they are frequently combined in complex ways with iconographic elements. An example typical of all periods, including the Iron Age, is the upper part of the Shellal stela of king Psamtek II (595–589 BCE), which commemorates his victorious campaign into Nubia. It features symmetrical, outward-facing configurations of hieroglyphs and iconographic elements in a visually pleasing arrangement, set above the

main hieroglyphic text which is arranged into columns reading right to left (Fig. 2.1; Bakry, 1967; Jansen-Winkeln, 2016).

Hieroglyphic and hieratic scripts were entangled and in constant dialogue throughout Egyptian history, including the Iron Age. The hieratic analogues of hieroglyphic signs are more abstract and linear. Reducing and simplifying iconic forms meant that some hieratic signs were distinguished by diacritic strokes. Take, for instance, the 'mouth' and 'tether' signs  and in hieroglyphs,  and  in Twenty-First Dynasty hieratic around 1000 BCE (P. British Museum EA 10490: Lenzo 2010: 63–83). In other cases, different hieroglyphic signs were hardly distinguishable in earlier phases of hieratic, only for the hieratic forms to diverge as the script developed. Good examples are the 'vulture' and 'buzzard' signs:  and  in hieroglyphs (and often conflated even in that script),  and  in late Thirteenth Dynasty hieratic of around 1750 BCE (P. Cairo CG 58069: Mariette, 1872: 6–8, pls 14–56), but  and  in Twenty-First Dynasty hieratic (P. Berlin 3056: Anonymous, 1905). Naturally, these examples smooth over the sheer quantity of hieratic hands from Egypt and variability of hieroglyphic renderings. The diacritical 'tick' on the breast of the buzzard in hieratic, for example, features in some earlier hands, and it was occasionally transferred back into the hieroglyphic form as a lobe-like feature, . Other hieratic hands do away with the diacritic, so its presence in other examples may reflect yet another transfer, this time back into hieratic from a hieroglyphic variant – itself a transcription of a fossilised hieratic form.[9]

The ligaturing of common sign clusters is another prominent feature of hieratic. This means it is not always possible to draw one-to-one correspondences between hieroglyphs and hieratic, because the scripts require different approaches to reading (Meltzer, 1994). In addition, hieratic was written right-to-left only, not left-to-right as was possible with hieroglyphs.[10]

[9] The hieratic facsimiles provided here are reproduced from the AKU-PAL database: https://aku-pal.uni-mainz.de/ (accessed 23 August 2025). Stable URLs of entries above, in order of citation: https://aku-pal.uni-mainz.de/signs/11273; https://aku-pal.uni-mainz.de/signs/11537; https://aku-pal.uni-mainz.de/signs/9317; https://aku-pal.uni-mainz.de/signs/9320; https://aku-pal.uni-mainz.de/signs/9681; https://aku-pal.uni-mainz.de/signs/9673. All images licensed under CC BY 4.0.

[10] Directionality relates to the orientation of signs, which typically face the beginning of the text. 'Retrograde' writing, which is common with fully figural and linear hieroglyphs, and uncommon in hieratic, describes cases where signs face the end of the text instead (Simpson, 2017).

This probably relates to the physical practice of writing fluidly with a brush, especially on textured surfaces such as papyrus, leather, or stone (overview of brush and pen use: Hagen, 2025: 12–14, with references; for papyrus, see Parkinson and Quirke, 1995).

The demotic script, with its preponderance of ligatures and an exclusive right-to-left writing direction, emerged in the early Iron Age and can be considered an offshoot of the basic writing system represented by hieroglyphs and hieratic (an overview is Quack, 2010: 245–49). Demotic sign forms vary considerably depending on their position within a word, supporting swifter writing and the ligaturing of signs. Again, ligatures pose challenges when transcribing demotic into hieratic, let alone hieroglyphs. Artificial spellings are inevitable (Johnson, 2000: 2–5). Unlike hieratic ligatures, which were made for expediency and were ultimately not integral to orthography, ligatures in demotic were fixed elements of the script. Some of them can be traced back to group writing, which flourished in the late Bronze Age but largely diminished in use as demotic arose. Group writing consists of syllabic rebuses made up of graphic units derived from monosyllabic words or morphemes, from phonograms, or from monoconsonantal signs followed by strokes (Kilani, 2023: 1–3, 8–9).

In the early Iron Age, ‘early demotic’ signs can often be transcribed into hieratic, but this ceases to be the case as the script continued to develop. From the mid-first millennium BCE onwards, demotic ligatures typically represent one or more combinations of hieratic signs. Furthermore, the exact reading of a ligature depends on its context within the ‘graphic syntagm’: the collection of signs in a specific spatial arrangement, which make up a word (Polis and Rosmorduc, 2015: 155). Egyptian scribes likely processed demotic writing at least partially as sequences of words, rather than as groups of signs making up words – a radical departure from writing hieroglyphs and hieratic, and one exemplifying a different trajectory towards orthographic simplification and transparency than that occurring elsewhere in the Mediterranean world through the development of alphabets.

The categories of hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic are fuzzy, with no straightforward chronological progression. Notionally, the subcategories of ‘linear hieroglyphic’ and ‘sacerdotal hieratic’ used for religious manuscripts lie between the main categories of hieroglyphic and hieratic, but how far we may consider them distinct scripts remains unclear, especially when hieratic forms frequently pepper linear-hieroglyphic compositions, or vice versa. A characterisation as ‘graphic registers’ conveying sacrality, monumentality, or ritual

efficacy is preferable in many environments (Albert and Ragazzoli, 2025). Linear hieroglyphs (also known as cursive hieroglyphs) reduce detailed bodily forms to ‘stick figures’; jagged or bendy sections become straight lines or simple curves. Religious manuscripts bearing ritual recitations and cosmographic descriptions helped to transform the world through the power of language and images. They were prime contexts for iconic, figural sign-forms adapted from the world. Because linear hieroglyphs retain the basic contours of figural signs, they balanced these cultural values of hieroglyphs with the need to copy long manuscripts at speed. Sacerdotal hieratic, also known as formal hieratic, of the early Iron Age achieved similar effects and was used to write hymns to gods, as on P. Berlin 3048 (Anonymous 1905), but it approached the matter from the opposite direction. Linear hieroglyphs reduce fully figural hieroglyphic forms, while sacerdotal hieratic elaborates on abstracted hieratic ones, returning a degree of figuration to them (Vernus, 1990: 44–45). The end results differ considerably in appearance (Fig. 2.2). Many hieratic manuscripts outside sacred contexts exhibit beautiful handwriting, but their calligraphic quality comes mostly from the elegance of the brushstrokes – their thickness, smoothness, and clarity – rather than the handling of figural forms.



Figure 2.2: Beginning of the Book of the Dead of Nesiamun, c. 1070–945 BCE. On the right, Nesiamun presents incense to Osiris, a scene captioned in linear hieroglyphs. On the left, a Book of the Dead spell is written in formal or sacerdotal hieratic. Said to be from Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, Thebes, Egypt. Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 26.2.51. Public domain.

Early Iron Age relationships between hieratic and demotic illustrate how intertwined societal transformations are with changing script uses. A traditional, simpler model posits a geographic division. The late hieratic script of the Twenty-First and Twenty-Second Dynasties developed, in Upper Egypt, into what Francis Llewellyn Griffith called ‘abnormal hieratic’ during the tenth century BCE (Griffith, 1909: 11), while demotic arose in Lower Egypt in the seventh century BCE (Fig. 2.3: Donker van Heel, 1997). After kings from the northern city of Sais took control of Egypt in 664 BCE to form the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty, and no later than 644 BCE, demotic script and associated phraseology spread south (Malinine, 1975; Vleeming, 1981: 32–35; Donker van Heel, 1994; 1995: 48–49, with additional references). According to another hypothesis, two northern traditions existed prior to Saite ascendancy. First, the early demotic script which ‘intermingled with a good hieratic style, i.e. with well-formed signs’. Second, an analogue to abnormal hieratic, which fell into disuse like its southern counterpart after becoming impracticably cursive (el-Aguizy, 1992: 93–94). In any case, demotic had become the primary documentary script of Egypt within a century of Saite rule (Hagen, 2025: 6). Its associated legal frameworks expanded countrywide too, judging from the spread of distinctive verbal constructions, formulae, and turns of phrase (Vleeming, 1981: 45–46). Hieratic was largely relegated to religious texts, absorbing the functions and contexts of linear hieroglyphs (Parkinson, 1999: 88–89).

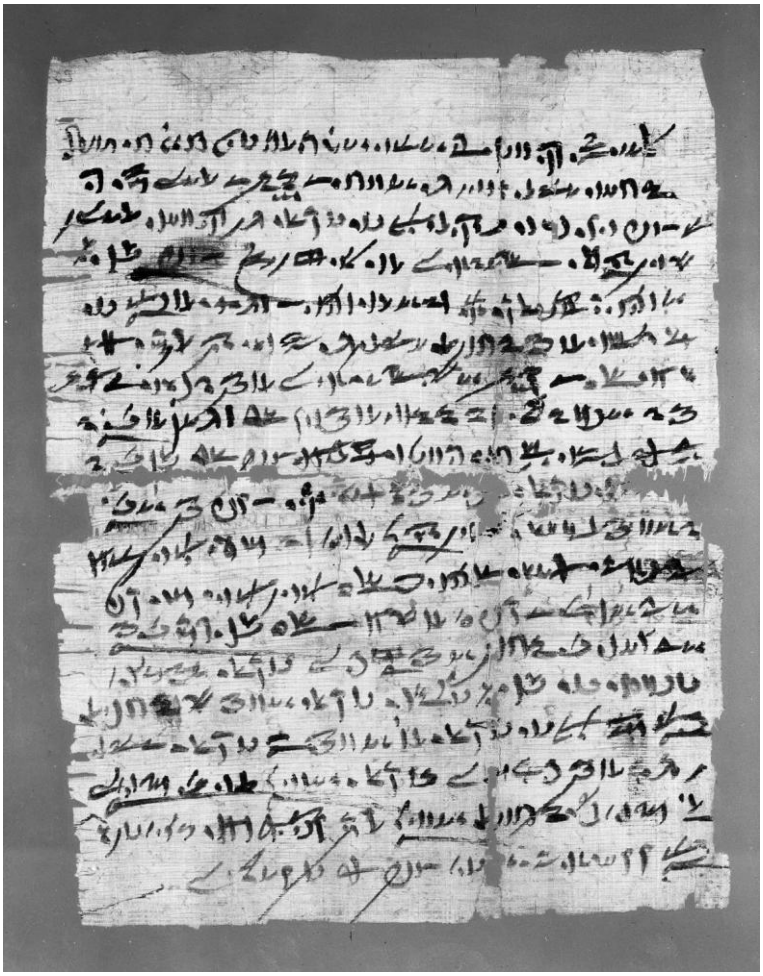


Figure 2.3: Papyrus inscribed in abnormal hieratic, 664–525 BCE. Brooklyn Museum, inv. 37.1799E. Public domain.

Models such as these simplify realities of scribal training, ability, and awareness of tradition, cultural conventions around display of writing, and even 'a scribe's emotional state or idiosyncrasies' in the moment of putting pen to papyrus (Hamdy Abu Hamed, 2025: 223). The history of hieratic and demotic is a window on to Egyptian society in the early Iron Age. Educated Egyptian elites of the early Iron Age travelled around the country, cultivating their knowledge of ancient monuments and emulating older iconographies, texts, and styles of writing in their own creations (e.g., Payraudeau, 2007: 150–56). Centuries-old literary texts, which had acquired classic status in Egyptian society, were recopied in earlier forms of hieratic by masterful scribes from the Twenty-Second to Twenty-Sixth Dynasties, c. 950–650 BCE (Verhoeven, 2001: 250–56; Quack, 2022). Legal records incised on stone stelae in hieratic proliferated during that period. Most surviving specimens come from the Nile delta, but examples are known from as far south as the Dakhla Oasis in the western desert (Fig. 2.4;

overview: Meeks, 1979: 661–87). Monumentalised hieratic emphasised authenticity and confirmed the legal force of the texts (Hagen, 2025: 31–33).

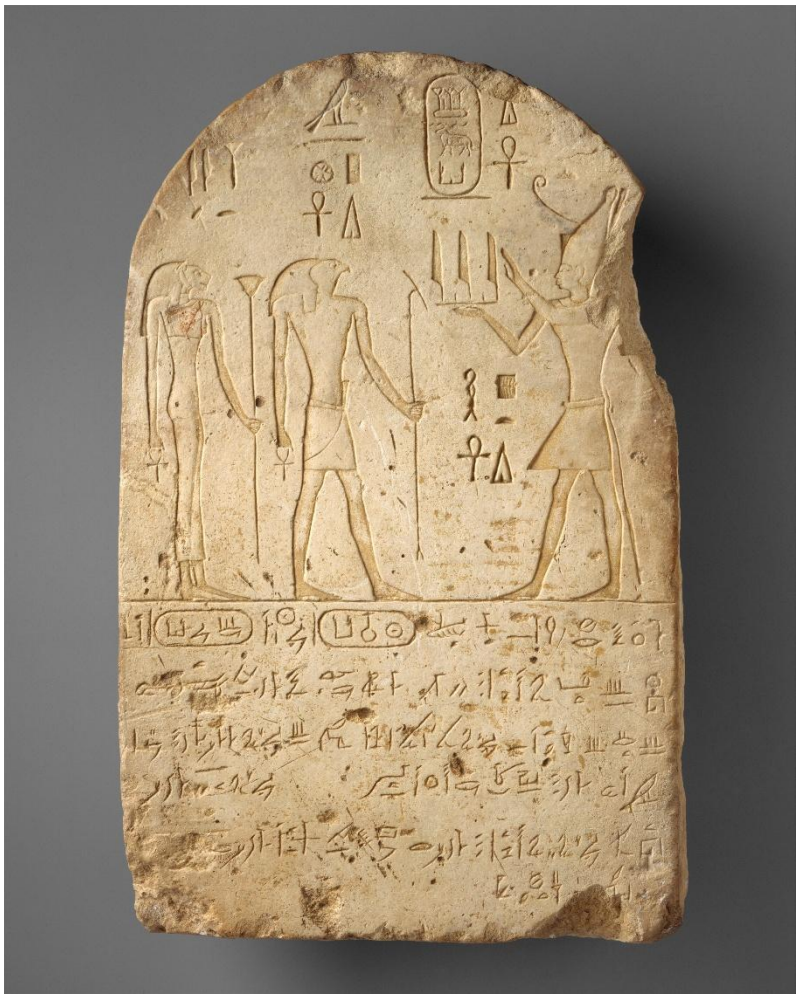


Figure 2.4: Donation stela of Shabaqo, c. 705–690 BCE. Limestone. Unprovenanced. In the upper part of the stela, king Shabaqo offers the hieroglyph for 'field' to a pair of gods, with hieroglyphic captions. A record of land donation is written in hieratic in the lower part of the stela. Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 55.144.6. Public domain.

Working between scripts and media was not always straightforward. Signs in Egyptian writing are organised into square or rectangular spaces known as quadrats, which supported aesthetically pleasing layouts. Sign arrangements in the quadrats of several incised hieratic texts mimic those of hieroglyphic inscriptions (Vernus, 1990: 45). However, a stela from Memphis, dated to the eighth year of king Psamtek I (656 BCE), features an incised hieratic text whose palaeographic features resemble early demotic signs. It may have been copied from a demotic reference manuscript, perhaps by a scribe more familiar with the latter script

(Louvre C101: Malinine, 1975: 168–73; el-Aguizy, 1992: 92–93). Another stela, set up in a tomb at Saqqara and dated to the reign of Psamtek I (664–610 BCE) or his successor Apries (589–570 BCE), illustrates the difficulty of working between the diverse Egyptian script traditions of the time. It was inscribed in crudely formed hieroglyphs transcribed from a manuscript in hieratic, demotic, an intermediate phase of the script, or a mixture of the two, and it is clear that the writer often struggled to relate cursive references to discrete figural forms (stela Florence 1639: Pernigotti, 1979: 21–22; Vleeming, 1981: 45–47).

2. Valuing Egyptian writing around the Mediterranean

Education and practice in Egyptian writing was tied to its importance for social display. Designers and patrons did not always prioritise transparent sign values, grammar and syntax, or even the visibility of writing. Instead, they negotiated graphic conventions in order to make their work more prominent, memorable, or artistically meritorious. Occasional use of challenging and unfamiliar spellings could enrich otherwise banal content and signalled interventions with genre and context. Take, for example, a statue of the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty priestess Amenirdis I, originally set up in northern Karnak and inscribed with a relatively straightforward appeal for offerings (Cairo CG 565, c. 714–700 BCE). The reversed orientation of the text first catches the eye of the passer-by, who is then confronted with many unusual spellings: logograms without expected phonetic complements; purely phonetic spellings, often without determinatives; and visual variants of common signs. The devices recall spellings and layouts from the Old Kingdom, around two thousand years earlier (Perdu, 1996). By alluding to ancient wishes and threats on monumental stelae, in addition to ritual texts inscribed in royal pyramids, designers of the statue addressed audiences who knew how contexts and conventions of writing changed over vast spans of time. Sufficiently educated readers could have appreciated how Amenirdis I benefited from a statue which, while intended to endure forever, continuously participated in the daily rhythms of temple life and simultaneously embedded her in an ancient past. For Amenirdis I, writing was central to establishing not only an eternal, but a multi-temporal existence (compare Bahrani, 2014).

Stylistic strategies such as these lie at right angles to longer-term shifts in script conventions, and contrast with specialised graphic practices in adjacent domains of elite culture. Writing practices changed with aesthetic taste, itself tied to prestigious Egyptian cultural domains for writing. Given these cultural resonances, it is no wonder that Egyptian writing was not adopted more widely around the Mediterranean during the Iron Age. Take enigmatic writing

for example, a practice of assigning new values to common signs and employing novel spellings for common words, often exploiting the decorative qualities and religious associations of pictorial forms. Most enigmatic writing of the New Kingdom and Graeco-Roman period – that is, the late Bronze Age and later Iron Age – is characterised by a maximalist visual character that tests readers' vocabulary, facility with the rebus principle and range of sign functions, as well as knowledge of Egyptian religion and iconography. These puzzles require lateral thinking, a slower pace, and closer reading (Klotz and Stauder, 2020; Kurth, 2007–2015).

Yet, in the intervening Iron Age, beginning in the period of this Element and stretching beyond it, many monumental hieroglyphic inscriptions display a minimalist quality, dropping ideograms, phonetic complements, and determinatives. Monoconsonantal values were privileged, such that biconsonantal signs with a weak final aleph took on monoconsonantal values: 𓎛 *kꜣ* > *k*, for example (Engsheden, 2006: 1–2). Concentrating on uniliteral signs 'removes most traditional word boundaries and contextual clues'. Laden as they were with 'biographical clichés and offering formulas', the extent to which such spellings challenged ancient readers has been questioned; perhaps 'these minimal phonetic clues may have sufficed to prompt the correct readings' (Klotz, 2023: 1). At the very least, the spellings require a different, slower approach to reading, involving backtracking and continuous re-parsing of longer sequences of signs than required by earlier orthographies. As a rough comparison, one might consider an English text which does away with the complex spelling rules of English writing in favour of a phonetically consistent style. Reduced complexity, especially when novel and unexpected, can in fact increase reading difficulty. In an opposite engagement with the potential of the Egyptian script to that represented by group writing (discussed above), they represent deliberate moves towards visual austerity by virtuosic scribes, not the mark of less competent writers struggling with anything beyond uniliteral signs (for which see Laboury, 2020: 89). We might wonder if these experiments bespeak more intensive interaction among Egyptian elites with the writing systems and alphabetic scripts thriving around the eastern Mediterranean at this time, as also suggested by word lists arranged in the *halaḥam* letter order better known from other regional writing traditions (Haring, 2015: 193–196).

Foreign engagements with Egyptian writing differed between regions. We discuss contexts and uses along the Mediterranean seaboard in Chapter 4, but at this juncture it is worth briefly mentioning relationships between Levantine accounting notation and ongoing script developments in Egypt. Scribes in the southern Levant wrote mostly in the local Northwest Semitic scripts and dialects. However, evidence from Jordan and the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah shows they continued to use hieratic numerals and hieratic signs for grain measures after the Egyptian administration's withdrawal from the region at the turn of the millennium. The notational system was separate to that derived from cuneiform and employed in contemporary Phoenician and Aramaic documents (Wimmer, 2008: 272–281; 2023: 140–41). Renewed political connections between Egypt and the Levant in the eighth century BCE spurred further changes. The numerals and hieratic signs of Levantine accounting notation of this later phase are palaeographically close to abnormal hieratic and early demotic, and it was employed in fiscal records from the eighth to early sixth centuries (Wimmer, 2008: 276–79). Other Egyptian signs make infrequent, isolated appearances, sometimes in conjunction with Hebrew script (Yeivin, 1966; Wimmer, 2006). However, southern Levantine hieratic did not spread, and it died out shortly after the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II sacked Jerusalem in 587 BCE (Wimmer, 2023: 142).

Embedded in administrative contexts, hieratic in the southern Levant contrasts with hieroglyphic writing in elite Nubian contexts, where the script retained deep cultural resonance. Nubia had a rich linguistic landscape (Rilly, 2019), but early Iron Age rulers of Nubia favoured hieroglyphic Middle Egyptian for their monumental inscriptions (e.g., Darnell, 2006; Zibelius-Chen, 2011). Nubian engagements with Egyptian writing were shaped by long and complex sociopolitical relationships with the Egyptian state (e.g., Budka, 2019; Lemos and Budka, 2021; Lemos, 2024). It would not be accurate to describe them as adaptation or appropriation, for Nubian elites operated within a close cultural sphere, with some eventually coming to rule Egypt as the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty (for Bronze Age antecedents, see, e.g., Cooper, 2018).

Whereas Nubian elites adapted customs of monumental display and political ideology from the north, Egyptians looked to their eastern and western neighbours for potent magic and ritual. As the Iron Age was dawning in the reigns of Ramesses II or III in the 13th century BCE, 'a spell for snakes in the speech of the Qeheq' (*r n ḥfꜣw m ḏd n qꜣ-ḥꜣ-qꜣ*) was recorded on a papyrus (P. Turin Cat. 2106/380 = CGT 54030). Analysis has demonstrated a non-

Egyptian, non-Semitic, potentially Berber affiliation for the language or languages recorded on this manuscript, some two centuries prior to the 'Libyan' dynasties of Egypt (Silvestri, 2024: 333–40). Within an Egyptian religious sphere, the cultural values of Egyptian writing were intertwined with those of non-Egyptian languages. Opposite perspectives on such entanglements are visible in the treatment of inscribed Egyptian artefacts in non-Egyptian contexts. A striking example is a vessel recovered from Assur in Mesopotamia. A hieroglyphic inscription on it states, in the first person, that the vessel contained wine from the Bahariya Oasis, located in the desert west of the Nile. After reaching Sidon in the Levant, the vessel may have been looted by Assyrians, who took it to Assur and added an Akkadian cuneiform inscription naming the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (Jansen-Winkeln, 1989: no. 5). Something about the wine jar's Egyptian provenance gave it value in Near Eastern circles. Trade in Egyptian goods continued to thrive in the Mediterranean for hundreds of years, and it has been suggested that their exchange across early Iron Age Greece in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE cultivated nascent regional identities and bolstered claims to prestigious cultural heritage (Parmenter, 2024: 53–86).

Related issues are projected into a fictionalised Mediterranean context in the Egyptian tale of Wenamun (Schipper, 2005; convenient English translation: Simpson, 2003: 116–24). Known from a single manuscript from el-Hiba (P. Moscow 120) and dated to the Twenty-Second Dynasty (943–716 BCE), the 'simulated record' is set around 150 years earlier, at the cusp of the Twenty-First Dynasty (Baines, 1999: 215–16). It recounts the misadventures of the Theban priest Wenamun, dispatched via Tanis in the Nile delta to Byblos in Lebanon to purchase cedar wood. Recognised as a literary fiction, two episodes from the story stand out as reflections on the spread and use of writing. While interrogating Wenamun about his documentation, Zakarbaʿal the ruler of Byblos summons a 'scroll' (*ʿrw*), the word written with a 'string-tie' determinative, but there is no suggestion whether this was written in Egyptian, a Levantine script, or some other form of writing. Zakarbaʿal furthermore offers to give Wenamun a tour of the *mʿḥʿ(t)*-monuments set up for Egyptian envoys who had died in Byblos. The word *mʿḥʿt* typically refers to memorial chapels which frequently include inscribed stelae, and it is unclear if inscriptions on such structures should be understood as being in Egyptian or in a Levantine script. Wenamun goes on to suggest that Zakarbaʿal should celebrate his business with Egypt by erecting his own stela – here called *wḏ* and featuring the determinative of a pyramid – inscribed in typical Egyptian commemorative

phraseology, and to be read by a future envoy ‘who knows writings’ (*rḫ sḫw*, with a ‘string-tie’ determinative for *sḫw*).

Compounding the complex political and cultural values of writing are problems of literacy and fluency in this multilingual and multiscriptal world. Back at the beginning of the Iron Age, around 1200 BCE, trainee scribes practising foreign vocabulary and group writing copied out a ‘satirical letter’ written in the voice of a military scribe named Hori, who lambastes his arrogant colleague Amenemope (P. Anastasi I = P. British Museum EA 10247: Fischer-Elfert, 1992; English translation: Wente, 1990: 98–110). Part of Hori’s polemic includes a dazzling display of Northwest Semitic words connected to military life (Schneider, 2023: 88–89, 155; Allon and Navratilova, 2017: 128–32), a profession often ridiculed and pitied in other scribal exercises circulating among the relatively well-off and decidedly non-military residents of the village of Deir el-Medina near Thebes (e.g., P. Anastasi III, cols 5.5–6.10: Caminos, 1954: 91–98). Language and associated writing practices reinforced a sense of privilege around literacy and the scribal profession.

Centuries later, Saite rulers of Egypt struck up alliances with the Greeks against the westward expansion of the Achaemenid empire. Carian, Greek, and Semitic languages were spoken alongside Egyptian in the Saite army. In 591 BCE, troops on king Psamtek II’s campaign into Nubia scratched a short Greek inscription into the legs of a colossal statue at Abu Simbel. The graffito describes how ‘Potasimto commanded the speakers of foreign tongues (άλ(λ)ογλόσ(σ)ός), and Amasis the Egyptians’ (Bernand and Masson, 1957: 5, 7–8; Agut-Labordère, 2013: 993; Briant, 2017: 237–38), but it need not imply that contingents of the Egyptian army were separately administered. The admiral Hor, with his traditional Egyptian name, held the title ‘chief of the fighting ships of the Great Green (i.e., the Mediterranean Sea) and commander of the Greeks’ (Braun, 1982: 50), while the army’s commander-in-chief had the Egyptian name Psamtek but was the son of a man with the Greek name Theokles (Van de Mieroop, 2011: 299). One might know how to read and write a Greek name in Egyptian script, but not fuller texts in the Egyptian language.

For 120 years after falling to Cambyses II in 525 BCE, Egypt was a satrapy, part of the empire serving the Persian king and his tutelary god (Khatchadourian, 2016: 81–117; King, 2025). Although the Achaemenid period of Egypt lies outside the scope of this Element, it suffices to say that this watershed did not dampen developments in the forms, contexts, and

perceptions of Egyptian writing. Just as we have observed among cuneiform cultures in Mesopotamia, the deep cultural roots of the Egyptian scripts and writing system contributed to their enduring and evolving prestige in the imperial environment.

Egyptian writing was valued in diverse ways during the Iron Age as an emblem of Egyptian society. So often, accounts of developing alphabetic writing prioritise transparent representations of language through minimal graphic repertories and semiotic modes, a focus that does not adequately factor in cultural, political and technological influences on the spread and perceptions of scripts and writing traditions. Almost inevitably, institutions and environments that bring together diverse populations end up as complex multilingual and multiscriptal environments, in which levels of fluency and literacy vary greatly between subgroups and individuals.

Much has been written on the derivation of the alphabet from the logoconsonantal signs in the Egyptian script (Hamilton, 2006). Less widely acknowledged is the cultural rupture represented by that development. Transferring Egyptian signs out of Egyptian landscapes and lifeways involved reconceptualising writing as a self-contained system, a technology primarily for conveying rather than potentially creating meaning in the world. The latter value is most intensely demonstrated by the metaphoric and symbolic resonance of ideograms and determinatives, and particularly in enigmatic writing. As with the other scripts examined in this Element, Egyptian writing developed in nonlinear ways and was adapted to new contexts. Moves toward alphabetic or syllabic writing were always possible in Egypt, but they were tempered by the socioculturally defining roles of scripts and writing practices, including their contexts and materialities.

Chapter 3: The Levant

Philip J. Boyes

When it comes to writing, the eastern coast of the Mediterranean – also known as the Levant and consisting of what is now south-eastern Turkey, coastal Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine – is mainly associated with the emergence of alphabets. In the Iron Age, this region has traditionally been treated almost as a kind of nursery, where the early, not-quite-ready alphabet was raised before being handed off to the Greeks to be perfected and delivered out into the world. Such Hellenocentric approaches are now dated, but they have not entirely fallen by the wayside. By a similar token, studies that are interested in the Levant and its writing for their own sakes often come from the perspective of biblical scholarship, with a strong emphasis on the southern Levant and on how writing practices there contributed to the script, language and content of biblical texts. Under this approach the rest of the region can often find itself relegated to the role of a supporting player, offering interesting sidelights and filling in gaps in the evidence from the south.

The cultural make-up of the Iron Age Levant was complex, however, as was its political composition and history. The coastline was a patchwork of different polities and networks of interaction which shared elements of language, culture, beliefs and material culture but were nevertheless not homogeneous. In this respect, the ethnic groupings that are often used to divide up the Levant can be misleading – Israelites, Judaeans, Aramaeans, Phoenicians and so on. Scholars have all too often been tempted to try and parcel up and neatly label people who did not necessarily think of themselves in those terms and who might have much in common with those from elsewhere. Writing practices are a case in point – we are accustomed to reading about Phoenician, Hebrew and Aramaic scripts as if these are clearly demarcated entities which map neatly on to the associated language and an ethnic group of the same name. The reality is much more ambiguous: script and language are separate things and particularly up to around the ninth or eighth centuries, it can be very unclear whether a piece of writing is in a specific variant of either. North-west Semitic languages (or dialects if we prefer) were still in the relatively early stages of divergence and many inscriptions do not include diagnostic features. Likewise the scripts were not really distinct at the beginning of the Iron Age and remained very similar for quite a long time. One traditional approach to language and writing in the Iron Age

Levant, then, is to focus on processes of local divergence and to frame this in terms of ethnogenesis and the rise of so-called 'national' languages and scripts.

There is a danger, however, that this traditional narrative of the coming-of-age of alphabetic writing is overly simplistic. Apart from its teleological valorisation of 'the alphabet' as a kind of unified endpoint of development, it can efface heterogeneity in culture, practice and identity. It also overlooks important non-alphabetic writing that was also used in the Levant at this time, such as Anatolian hieroglyphs.

1. Continuity and change in the early Iron Age

The beginning of the Iron Age is often characterised as a time of great rupture and discontinuity. As in many other parts of the East Mediterranean, the end of the Late Bronze Age (c. 1500–1200 BCE) was a time of crisis and upheaval for much of the Levant (e.g. Cline, 2014). This included climatic changes; site destructions and abandonments; changes in material culture and some evidence for population mobility; and political changes such as the disintegration of the Hittite Empire, which had laid claim to large swathes of northern Syria, and the retreat of Egyptian interests in the south. This imperial fragmentation and retrenchment was associated with the emergence of new local political forms such as the Syro-Anatolian kingdoms in the north or the kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the south.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that the Iron Age Levant was a blank slate with little connection to what came before. The picture is more complicated, with undoubted discontinuities existing alongside numerous aspects of life and culture which persisted from the Bronze Age. Local variation also plays an important role, with some areas demonstrating much more continuity than others. The Phoenician cities of what is now Lebanon in particular show little sign of destruction or political upheaval.

This mingling of continuity and change is as true for writing practices as it is for other areas of culture. None of the scripts or practices we will be discussing came out of nowhere as new developments of the Iron Age. Levantine writing was deeply rooted, going back at least to the beginning of the second millennium BCE – the Middle Bronze Age – and possibly much earlier. Some of these long-established writing practices did not continue through the Bronze/Iron Age transition; others adapted and expanded to suit new socio-cultural circumstances. To

understand the picture of Levantine writing at the outset of the Iron Age, we need to begin with this period of transition and transformation.

An important theme to highlight in Late Bronze Age Levantine writing is a split between 'international' or 'globalised' writing practices on one hand and local, vernacular writing practices on the other. Into the first category we can place cuneiform writing traditions (see Chapter 1 of this Element), Egyptian scripts (Chapter 2) and Anatolian hieroglyphs, all of which were utilised in various parts of the Levant for certain purposes. In the second category are a plethora of smaller, more local and more idiosyncratic writing practices, many – though not all – of which used alphabetic scripts. Perhaps the most crucial change in the Early Iron Age was a swing in the balance of usage and prestige from the former to the latter. Let us briefly explore this in more detail.

The Late Bronze Age is sometimes called an 'international' age of diplomatic exchange and long-distance trade, where elite goods and craftspeople circulated in the eastern Mediterranean, giving rise to shared motifs, ideas, myths and practices (e.g. Feldman, 2006; Aruz, Benzel and Evans, 2008). For communication between these eastern Mediterranean elites, Mesopotamian cuneiform was the standard. With it came the Akkadian language, the lingua franca of the Late Bronze Age world. As we can see from the most celebrated collection of diplomatic correspondence to have survived from this period, found at the pharaoh Akhenaten's capital at Tell el-Amarna in Egypt (Moran, 1992; Rainey, 2014), even the Egyptians used cuneiform and Akkadian when writing overseas. A great many of these Amarna letters were sent from the Levant. Cuneiform culture was deeply integrated into the writing culture of some northern sites such as Ugarit, but the degree to which it was part of literate life in more southerly sites in Phoenicia or the southern Levant remains less clear (Horowitz, Oshima and Sanders, 2006; Mandell, 2026).

Egyptian hieroglyphs and hieratic were also used by Levantine elites. As we have already explored in Chapter 2 of this Element, hieroglyphs were mostly not used for practical communication but for prestige display, especially at those sites with long-standing cultural, ideological and religious links with Egypt, such as Byblos and Ugarit. Further south, things look slightly different, with Egyptian interactions that were more intensive and less intermittent. The Levant was a frequent campaigning ground for Egyptian pharaohs, and throughout the Bronze Age and much of the Iron Age, Egyptian monarchs launched military

expeditions into the region. It is likely that at least during the final centuries of the second millennium, there was some form of direct Egyptian administrative and military presence at certain strongholds in the southern Levant, especially in and around Gaza (Morris, 2004, 2018). It is likely that hieratic – the mainstay of Egyptian bureaucracy and religion – was used in at least some of these footholds, and this is reflected in some Egyptian loanwords into Hebrew specifically relating to writing practice (Wilson-Wright, 2023). However, because it was probably mostly written on perishable papyrus and leather, the details of how hieratic was used in the Levant, whether by Egyptian administrators or local communities, are not well understood.

A third script spread through imperial expansion was Anatolian (sometimes known as Luwian) hieroglyphs, which became established in the areas of Hittite influence in south-east Turkey and Syria. By the thirteenth century, Anatolian hieroglyphs were used on monuments and seals within the Hittite sphere of influence. They were also probably used on perishable materials such as wood or leather or perhaps papyrus and it is likely on these surfaces that the script survived the fragmentation of the Hittite Empire at the end of the Bronze Age.

All three of these imperial writing traditions suffered major disruptions at the beginning of the Iron Age as the political, economic and diplomatic networks they operated within either fragmented or came under strain. There is little to no evidence for the use of Akkadian as a lingua franca or of the use of Mesopotamian cuneiform in the Levant between the end of the Bronze Age and the Neo-Assyrian conquest during the eighth and seventh centuries. The fate of Egyptian writing in the region is more complex. The Iron Age seems to be characterised by periods of waxing and waning in Egyptian prestige, as well as in the levels of direct Egyptian political or military interest in the region (Boyes 2013: Chapter 2). After an initial dip around the twelfth to tenth centuries, high-status *Aegyptiaca* continue to appear at sites like Byblos. At Byblos, imported pharaonic statues bearing local royal inscriptions in the Phoenician alphabet alongside the hieroglyphic ones of the pharaohs themselves point to the continued (or at least resumed) prestige of Egypt and its scripts among the site's tenth-century rulers (Fig. 3.1). Egyptian hieroglyphs – or linguistically meaningless imitations of them[11] – often appear on

[11] Parmenter, 2024: 76, 79-81 cites Herodotos' (2.106.5) spurious translation of the Karabel Anatolian hieroglyphic relief as an Egyptian campaign stele to point out that ancient ideas of what constitutes 'reading' an inscription may not match our own and suggests that similar 'readings' of things like seal inscriptions may have circulated alongside them in some contexts.

Iron Age scarabs and seals produced in the Levant. There was an ongoing legacy from hieratic writing practice in the southern Levant, including the use of rush brushes and papyrus, red ink to draw attention to important text, the incorporation of hieratic numerals into Hebrew alphabetic writing and a cluster of Egyptian loanwords around writing practices (Schniedewind, 2013: 36, 58-59). It seems unlikely, however, that hieratic itself continued to be used on a day-to-day basis for administrative purposes much beyond the eleventh century (Wimmer, 2024).



Figure 3.1: Bust of the Egyptian pharaoh Osorkon I (922–887 BCE) found at Byblos, with an added Phoenician alphabetic inscription of the Byblian king ʾElibaʿal. Drawing by Philip Boyes.

Attestations of Anatolian hieroglyphs become very scarce for several centuries, before re-emerging in the monumental display of the Syro-Anatolian states around the ninth century (Bryce, 2012; Osborne, 2021), alongside other scripts such as the Phoenician alphabet and,

later, Assyrian cuneiform. We must presume that the script was kept alive on perishable materials during this intermission before being re-adopted for elite display as part of the complex interplay of politics and identity-negotiation in the early first millennium BCE.

As mentioned above, there was a second strand to Late Bronze Age writing which seems rather marginal for the period but which took on new importance in the early Iron Age and shapes much of what we will be discussing in this chapter. Local, smaller-scale and perhaps and experimental writing practices seem to have flourished in the gaps and around the edges of these 'globalised' forms of writing. These range from extremely well-attested scripts such as the cuneiform alphabet used at Ugarit in Syria (Boyes, 2021, with further references) to tiny, undeciphered corpora such as the handful of inscriptions in the so-called 'Byblos script', a seemingly syllabic script of unclear date (Vita and Zamora, 2018; Sass, 2019). Linear alphabetic writing is also sporadically attested, mostly in the southernmost parts of the Levant. The script remained unstandardised and features like writing direction or letter stance could vary greatly. These Early Alphabetic B[12] inscriptions are found on pots, ostraca or metal goods and most seem to be ownership labels. We assume this is only a small fraction of what would have existed, with most alphabetic writing taking place on perishable materials which do not survive in the Levantine climate.

Where these non-globalised scripts can be read, they tend to be associated with vernacular north-west Semitic languages. Because they are often sparsely attested, the role and status they had within their societies is often not well understood. Were they marginal, practised as games or experiments by people of lower status or elite writers in their free time? Or were they elite projects in their own rights, tied up with local politics and culture? Whatever the exact details, they do seem to represent a simmering interest in using writing in new ways to express local identities and local languages. At Ugarit, the vernacular script is used for mundane accounting and record-keeping but also for writing down ideologically significant myth and other literature. With the possible exception of the Byblos script, these forms of writing do not seem to have been used for elite monumental display during the Late Bronze Age. That prestige field of writing was the realm of the international, imperially-backed scripts.

[12] 'Proto-Canaanite' is the older term, though still widely used. 'Early Alphabetic B' and its counterparts, Early Alphabetic A for 'Proto-Sinaitic' and C for the early Phoenician alphabet, were suggested by Hamilton (2014) as more neutral terms without ethnic or geographical connotations. His new terminology has seen wide, though not universal, adoption over the last decade.

Their apparently small scale of use made these scripts precarious and some traditions did not survive the end of the Bronze Age, especially when they were limited to single or just a few sites, such as Ugarit's cuneiform alphabet or, probably, the Byblos script. In contrast, widely-spread but unstandardised ink-written[13] alphabetic practices seem to have flourished, filling some of the gaps left by the decline of the international scripts.

2. Elites, prestige and the early Iron Age transformation of alphabetic writing

Although there are a handful of earlier Iron Age alphabetic inscriptions,[14] a key transformation is first attested at Byblos. There, we first see the Phoenician alphabet being used for official purposes, together with a stabilisation and standardisation of things like letter stance and writing direction (Hamilton, 2014 terms this Early Alphabetic C but the term has caught on less widely than its A and B counterparts). Although our corpus of early alphabetic inscriptions from Byblos is much smaller and more limited than the alphabetic cuneiform from Ugarit, in a way it goes beyond what we saw there. Ugarit's cuneiform alphabet was used for a wide variety of genres, but it was apparently never harnessed to official display. In contrast, from around 1000 BCE (although the dating question is complex; see Rollston, 2008), a number of royal inscriptions have been found at Byblos, often associated with other forms of visual culture, such as the Egyptian statues mentioned above or the celebrated and extremely lavishly decorated sarcophagus of ʾAḥiram (see below). While this is certainly a novelty for alphabetic writing, it does seem to build on what we saw earlier with the Byblos script. Indeed, there is an interaction or dialogue between the two scripts (Boyes Forthcoming). Sometimes they share object types, such as the enigmatic bronze 'spatulas' (possibly actually sceptre heads – see Ben-Marzouk and Donnelly-Lewis, In Preparation – which are very characteristic Byblos Script-

[13] The question of what constitutes 'ink' as opposed to other terms like 'paint' is an interesting one and is seemingly determined more by disciplinary convention and how the pigment was used than by the composition of the pigment itself. When discussing writing on materials such as papyrus, it is usual to talk of 'ink', which in this period would be made by mixing a pigment powder such as soot or red ochre with a binder such as gum Arabic or egg white. This would be left to dry to produce a hard cake which could be reactivated by the addition of water, similar to modern hard watercolour paint. Pigments made in the same way but used for things like wall-painting or decorating pottery might be referred to by scholars as 'paint'. This highlights how modern conceptual categories and the terminology associated with them can at times fit awkwardly with ancient practices. The distinction between 'painting', 'drawing' and 'writing' is often not one found in ancient terminology relating to these practices.

[14] See Malena, 2020: 16-17 for a convenient recent list of early Iron Age alphabetic inscriptions from the southern Levant. Some additional inscriptions have been discovered since then, for which see Richey, 2023: 180-182, 2025: 160-162.

inscribed objects, but one of which is inscribed in the Phoenician alphabet. Sometimes alphabetic inscriptions seem to be written over Byblos script ones in the form of palimpsests. The clearest of these is an inscription of King Yehimilk (KAI 4) on a stone stele, which reuses the line-ruling of the earlier inscription, but does not entirely obliterate the other script's signs (Fig. 3.2).

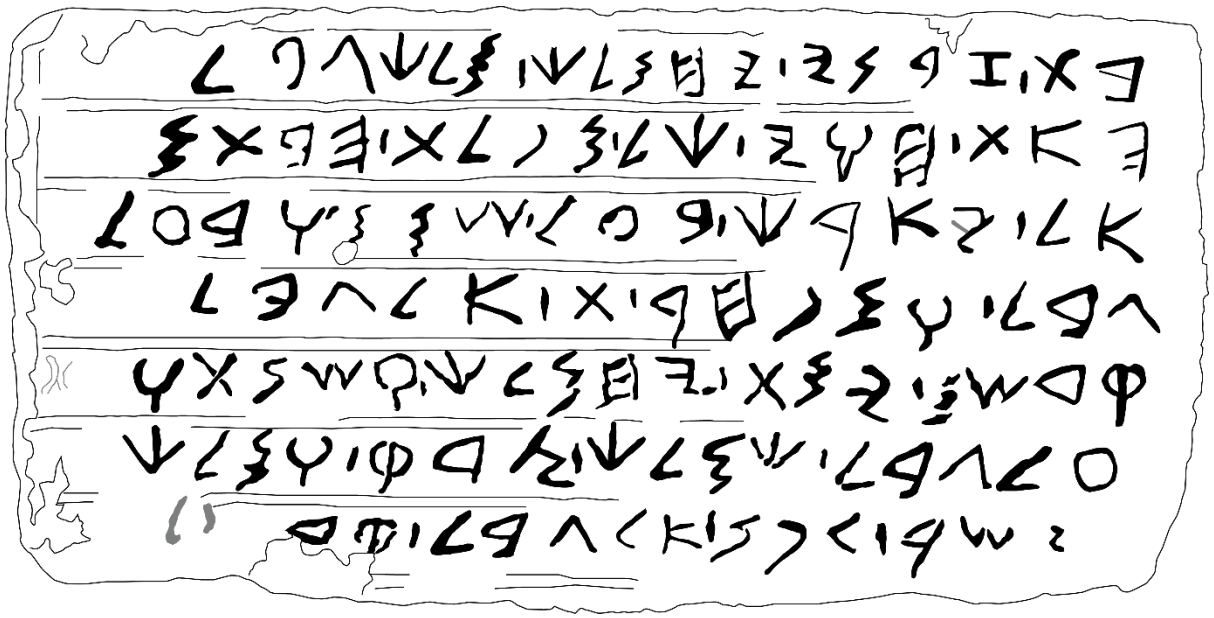


Figure 3.2: The Yehimilk inscription from Byblos, tenth century BCE. Drawing by Philip Boyes.

Also in dialogue with earlier periods may be the ʾAḥiram sarcophagus (Rehm 2004; Lehmann 2005). This was one of three stone sarcophagi found in Tomb V of Byblos' royal cemetery. It was the only sarcophagus in the whole necropolis to be decorated, with rich figurative reliefs showing an enthroned king feasting and a procession of mourners or celebrants (Fig. 3.3). Traces of paint still remain. Indeed, this object is unique not only at Byblos – nothing else like it has been found anywhere in the Levant. The sarcophagus bears two alphabetic inscriptions – one a dedication by a king ʾIttobaʿal for his father ʾAḥiram; the other a curse against anyone who would disturb the tomb. There is debate over the date of this artefact: in many ways the sarcophagus would fit better in the Late Bronze Age, and material culture of this period was found in the heavily looted tomb; however, palaeographers have been keen to date the inscriptions to the early tenth century. A possibility that has been suggested by several scholars, then (e.g. Lehmann, 2005: 20-22, with further references), is that this may be a usurpation or

appropriation of an earlier, Late Bronze Age sarcophagus through the addition of an early Iron Age inscription.

What we see at Byblos is alphabetic writing being brought out of the margins and given centre-stage by the city's elites. If those who see the inscription on the Ahiram sarcophagus as an act of usurpation are right, this might have been linked to the emergence of a new political dynasty at the site which otherwise – like other Phoenician polities – shows little sign of disruption or discontinuity either politically or culturally during the transition to the Iron Age. We might speculate that the use of vernacular writing for similar purposes was probably already established at the site in the Byblos script, which made it a likely crucible for such a transformation to take place. Our knowledge of the site and its politics in this period is so sketchy, however, that it is hard to move much beyond such speculation.





Figure 3.3: The Ahiram sarcophagus, possibly Late Bronze Age with tenth century BCE alphabetic inscription added later. Drawings by Philip Boyes.

3. Everyday writing and the emergence of localism

Monumental inscriptions like those found at Byblos are glamorous, but these are not the everyday, mundane documents that likely accounted for the majority of writing that took place. We are faced with a constant problem of how we can get at everyday writing which was practised on perishable materials that do not survive in the archaeological record. The Byblos royal inscriptions are not the tentative experiments of writers getting to grips with a new script: it seems much more probable that alphabetic writing was well-established in other media at the site by the time they were produced (Lehmann, 2008). It does not seem too much of a stretch to assume that this no-longer surviving use was state-aligned and probably administrative. Whether this was a creation of the twelfth or eleventh centuries BCE, or whether it went back to an earlier Late Bronze Age ink-writing tradition that has left no trace, we cannot say.

For glimpses into the nature of early Iron Age alphabetic ink-writing, we must look beyond Byblos. There are large numbers of ink-written inscriptions in the Phoenician language from Idalion and Kition on Cyprus, many of which are still awaiting publication, though these mostly date from after the period covered by this Element. Several Iron Age ink-written inscriptions exist from the southern Levant, particularly from the ninth and eighth centuries BCE. These are on pottery – either ostraca or complete vessels – or plaster attached to walls or stelae. Among the most significant is a lengthy religious inscription on plaster from Deir ʿAlla in western Jordan (Hoftijzer and van der Kooij, 1976, 1991). This has attracted a great deal of attention because of its content – which mentions the biblical figure of Balaam – but it is also an extremely valuable source for the form and nature of early ink inscriptions. It shows that the alphabet was used not just for mundane purposes at this time but also for literary, religious texts. Inscriptions such as this also allow us to reconstruct something of the implements and techniques used, which may offer insights into the process by which alphabetic writing spread and evolved.

It has been convincingly argued, based on the Deir ʿAlla inscriptions and others, that a rush pen was used for alphabetic writing in ink (van der Kooij, 1986; Lehmann, 2019). This

implement lies somewhere between a rigid pen and a brush, having a slightly supple chisel-shaped tip that allows the ink to be drawn in lines of differing thickness depending on its angle. This is very similar, if not identical, to the implement used by the Egyptians to write hieratic (Fig. 3.4) and seems to differ from the round-headed paintbrush that was apparently used for Late Bronze Age alphabetic inscriptions. The reasons for this change in writing implements between the Bronze and Iron Age are not clear, but it would be surprising if it were not linked in some way with Bronze Age interactions between Egyptian and local writers in the southern polities where they coexisted, and in the socio-cultural ramifications of the end of Egyptian imperialism in the region at the end of the second millennium. As the Iron Age progressed, the chisel-headed rush brush, however, seems to have become standard for alphabetic writing.



Figure 3.4: Egyptian scribal palette and rush brushes of the kind used in the Iron Age Levant; Twenty-First Dynasty, c. 1045–992 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 47.123a–g. Public domain.

This is not to say, of course, that there were not variations from place to place, and this brings us back to the theme highlighted at the beginning of this chapter of 'national scripts'. It has been suggested (e.g. Lehmann, 2008: 158) that some strokes are more difficult to make with the rush brush than others (in particular, those where the ink would be pushed rather than pulled), and that small differences in how the nib was cut would have had an effect on this.

Over time, this could lead to alterations in sign-forms as writers adapted them to be easier to write (van der Kooij, 1986: 91-3). While we do not want to be overly deterministic, this offers a plausible mechanism whereby local traditions within rush-cutting practices and sign adaptation within communities of practice could over time contribute to enduring alterations in the shapes of certain signs, which modern palaeographers consider to be diagnostic of, say, Hebrew script versus Aramaic. Whether ancient writers would have considered these local variants to be different scripts and associated them with ethnic identifications remains an unanswerable question. While some, such as Seth Sanders (2004, 2009) and Christopher Rollston (2010: 44) have viewed the creation of local varieties such as the 'Hebrew' script as a 'nationalistic statement', others (e.g. Greene and Hutton, 2025) have seen little evidence that script was an ethnic marker in this period. It is also true that the ethnic labels modern scholars apply to script and language do not always line up in neat ways – as, for example, at Kuntillet ʿAjrud, a site in the Sinai peninsula with some inscriptions said to be in Hebrew language but Phoenician script. If one takes script and language along with other features like religion as markers of ethnic identity, this can require special accounting for when drawing conclusions about the affiliation of the people who produced such inscriptions (e.g. Niehr, 2013).

Once alphabetic writing began to be picked up by elites, it took remarkably little time for writers across the Levant to begin using it as their main script. By the ninth century we find it in the Sinai peninsula in the south, Jordan in the east and the Syro-Anatolian cultural region in the north, not to mention its imminent voyage westward into the Mediterranean world. Again, the social factors driving this expansion are not well understood. It is not enough to assume, as many did in the past, that alphabetic writing is objectively and self-evidently 'better' than other scripts and that a rational person would obviously adopt it. The spread of the alphabet was not an inevitable side-effect of 'Phoenician' mercantile interests beyond their borders. Nor did it overturn established scripts overnight: in northern Syria and south-eastern Anatolia it coexisted with Luwian hieroglyphs for a time, with different preferences at different sites and the existence of bilingual and biscriptal inscriptions such as the Karatepe inscription. In Mesopotamia, it took centuries for Aramaic alphabetic writing to gradually supplant cuneiform (Geller, 1997; Brown, 2008).

4. The later Iron Age

From around the eighth to seventh centuries, the number of alphabetic inscriptions known from the Levant massively increases. Elite monumental inscriptions continued, as we can see, for

example, in a cluster of sixth- to fifth-century Phoenician inscriptions in and around Sidon.[15] But we also see evidence of more widespread use in lower social strata. Good examples of this are the numerous Phoenician funerary stelae. These are found at several sites, but the vast majority come from Tyre (Sader, 2005). From the rather rough and formulaic nature of most of these Phoenician funerary inscriptions, it has been suggested that these were sub-elite in both production and commission, possibly the work of craftspeople whose primary expertise was in cutting stone and whose literacy may not have stretched much beyond the production of epitaphs such as these (Sader, 2005: 89-90; and on craftspeople's literacy in general, see Mandell, 2023). Other Phoenician material comes from their expansion into the Mediterranean, discussed in Chapter 4 of this Element. The surviving corpus of Iron Age Phoenician alphabetic writing is unlikely to be representative of what existed at the time. Most of what we have is extremely formulaic dedications on stone, whereas we know from numerous allusions in classical literature that Phoenician literary production was extensive and diverse. Its failure to survive is testimony not only to the unhelpful soil conditions of the Levant for preserving perishable materials, but also to the great importance of the choices made in traditions of manuscript copying. Biblical writings or Classical texts in Greek and Latin were passed down because, in their different ways, they were deemed culturally significant and valuable; by contrast the Phoenician cities often found themselves commercial and political rivals of these societies and as such were othered and maligned, their literature not preserved.

If Phoenician writings are largely missing from the manuscript tradition, Hebrew is of course well represented. The question of dating the various components of the Hebrew Bible is complex and we do not have space to go into the details here. While Iron Age elements are likely part of the mix, they are layered with copious later editing and addition, the contours of which are often not universally agreed upon. As one would expect, the literature surrounding this is vast, but Schniedewind (2013, 2019, 2024) and van der Toorn (2007) are good starting points for writing practice, scribal culture and the emergence of the biblical tradition. While the Bible is the overwhelming centre of gravity for Hebrew writing, we should also not overlook the many inscriptions on seals, ostraca and other objects that also exist. Rollston

[15] These fall slightly outside the main chronological scope of this volume, but the most significant examples are the inscribed sarcophagi of Tabnit I and ʾEšmunʿazar II, and the inscriptions of Bodaštart at the sanctuary of ʾEšmun and elsewhere (Bonnet and Xella, 2002; Xella and López, 2005; Dixon, 2023).

(2010) offers a convenient and concise overview of the Iron Age West Semitic epigraphic evidence.

In this chapter we have put less emphasis on the idea of 'national' scripts than is the standard practice, partly because space doesn't allow us to delve into any in appropriate detail and partly because they are not well differentiated for the early period we have mostly discussed. The idea of 'nations', i.e. coherent ethno-political entities based on language and territory, is a rather outdated one derived from biblical tradition and eighteenth- to nineteenth-century Western political ideology rather than any solid evidence of how culture and identity actually worked in the Iron Age Near East, so arguably the term is best discarded. But regardless of how we conceptualise the different variants of alphabetic writing circulating in the Iron Age Near East, the fact is that variants did exist and that some became more widespread than others. I want to close by highlighting one version of alphabetic writing which became extremely prevalent later in the Iron Age: Aramaic. When scholars talk about 'Aramaic' inscriptions it is sometimes not clear whether they mean they are written in the Aramaic language, in a script variety seen as distinctly 'Aramaic', or that they were written by peoples whom we label as Aramaeans. The palaeographic features which distinguish Aramaic from other forms of alphabetic writing in the early first-millennium Levant are fairly minor: a lengthening of descenders and a preference for a Z-shaped zayin over an I-shaped one, which became more pronounced over time. Despite the difficulties defining it, especially early on, the Aramaic language and the alphabetic script it was written in became the dominant form of writing in the Mesopotamian world and then the imperial standard of the Persian Empire. As such, it spread to become the dominant form of writing throughout a large part of the Near East during the Achaemenid period.[16]

The geographical heartland of Aramaic is Syria and south-east Turkey. Among the first alphabetic inscriptions in the Aramaic language are examples from Syro-Anatolian kingdoms such as Samʾal (modern Zincirli), where the local dialect swiftly replaced Phoenician as the language of royal inscriptions.[17] Aramaic was also spoken further south in the areas of Aleppo and Damascus, among others. Important early inscriptions include a stele from Tell Dan and an inscribed statue from Tell Fekheriye. During the ninth and eighth centuries, Neo-Assyrian

[16] For an accessible summary of the history of the expansion of the Aramaic language and script, see van de Mieroop, 2022: 149-170 or, in greater depth, Gzella, 2015.
[17] There is some debate about whether the language of Samʾal ought to be labelled as Aramaic or a very closely related language Samʾalian, but for our purposes it is not important.

imperial expansion put an end to the Aramaean kingdoms as independent political entities, but this may have been the act that elevated the language and script from just another regional variant to an international standard. Neo-Assyrian conquests were often accompanied by mass population relocations, which helped spread Aramaic language and writing throughout their empire. By the eighth century, Neo-Assyrian reliefs from Tiglath-Pileser III's palace at Nimrud and frescoes from Til-Barsip show writers using soft perishable materials – papyrus or leather – alongside those working in cuneiform on clay tablets. Plentiful examples of alphabetic Aramaic writing on a diverse range of materials over the next few centuries attest to a gradual but very significant increase in the use of Aramaic as a vernacular language within Mesopotamia and, alongside it, the alphabetic script. This includes the addition of Aramaic dockets to cuneiform tablets. This socio-linguistic process survived the political collapse of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and continued under Neo-Babylonian dominance. By the time of the Persian conquest around 539 BCE, it is likely that a large proportion of the Mesopotamian population were first-language Aramaic speakers and that the Aramaic alphabetic script was that used for a great deal of day-to-day literate activity, with cuneiform becoming more and more restricted to scholarly and religious contexts. The further development and spread of Aramaic under the Persians is beyond the scope of this Element, but suffice to say that its role as a lingua franca of Persian imperialism led to it being spread back through much of the Levant and beyond, into Egypt and other parts of the empire.

What the case of Aramaic demonstrates well is both the slipperiness of 'national' scripts as a concept and the fact that the 'success' of a script variant often has far more to do with social factors and geopolitical happenstance than with the qualities of the script itself. At the beginning of the Iron Age, Aramaic was barely distinguishable from other forms of alphabetic writing. Certainly it was not in any sense 'better'. It is true that fairly early on, Aramaic incorporated *matres lectionis* – consonant signs used to represent long vowels – but there is no indication that people considered this an especially advantageous feature over other scripts or that it had any bearing on the script achieving the widespread use that it did. Rather, Aramaic's success – if we call it that – seems to be due to being in the right place at the right time to gain footholds in three successive regional imperial powers.

Chapter 4: Cyprus, Anatolia, Italy and Greece

Philippa M. Steele

We have seen that the nature of writing to the east and south of the Mediterranean in our period of focus was bound up with numerous aspects of practice: adaptations to new languages, reanalysis of script repertoires, changing usage across different media, shifting social circumstances and political backdrops. We now turn to the central-eastern Mediterranean and its northern shores to complete our journey. The eventual emergence of alphabets with separate vowel letters is not the tale of supreme Greek innovation that it is so often told to be, a point to which we will return when dealing with early alphabetic writing in Italy and Greece. However, there are two further areas that must first be considered in the palette of Iron Age scripts: Cyprus and Anatolia. In both cases a continuity in writing traditions from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age is attested, in contrast to the spread of the alphabet with vowels that was newly adopted in several areas.

Throughout this chapter, we will also see that the Phoenician language and script were themselves being transmitted to new areas, by settlers and traders alike, throughout the same period. In the western half of the Mediterranean (which will not be treated in detail in this Element for reasons of space), we see that Phoenician writing had a lasting legacy. In north Africa, Carthage (*Qart-ḥadašt*, 'new city') is the most obvious site of continued Phoenician settlement, although it has preserved very little epigraphic material from the earliest period, of which the medallion from a tomb at Douïmès is probably the earliest with a date of c. 800 BCE (see Schmitz, 2008: 167–72). Phoenician was the main language of Carthage and the surrounding area right down to and beyond the Roman conquest, usually classified as Punic from the sixth or fifth century BCE as it diverged dialectally from Levantine Phoenician (with accompanying changes in the ways in which it was written), by which time it was attested widely across north Africa, Spain, Malta and parts of Italy.

In the Iberian peninsula, Phoenician epigraphy is already attested by the ninth-eighth century BCE, adding considerably to our understanding of not only the spread of writing practices but also the phases of Phoenician trading activity in the western Mediterranean (see Zamora López 2017). Palaeohispanic writing, recording still undeciphered languages spoken on the peninsula at that time, owes a clear debt to Phoenician (as is especially clear from attested

abecedaria), and it is now quite widely accepted that there is no reason to postulate any Greek intermediary in the transmission of writing. The script is semi-syllabic rather than purely alphabetic, meaning that some letters have an inherent vowel that does not need to be written separately, constituting quite a significant structural difference from both consonantal alphabets and alphabets with vowels. Thus it shows quite different innovative features from the Greek alphabet and can be considered a separate – and perhaps earlier – development directly from Phoenician (see García-Alonso, 2024).

We will see that in the main areas under consideration here, Phoenician writing similarly remains a constant presence, and one that can interact with other writing traditions in multifaceted ways, acting as a reference not only for how a language might be codified in a script, and what a script might look like, but also for the kinds of texts that might be composed and the kinds of objects that might be written on.

1. Cyprus

Cyprus was home to a long-lasting syllabic writing tradition that thrived for more than a millennium. The first evidence of writing dates to the first phases of the Late Bronze Age, around the sixteenth century BCE. The 'Cypro-Minoan' writing tradition that emerged at this time had partial roots in the syllabic systems of the Bronze Age Aegean, particularly Linear A, from which it seems to have developed its sign shapes and values. Cypro-Minoan remains undeciphered and its palaeography is challenging to study (see recently Polig and Donnelly, 2022), but we know that it had a broad range of uses from the varied mercantile, administrative, domestic, religious and other contexts in which writing has been found and the diversity of written objects (see Ferrara, 2012). While the distinctive corpus of clay documents (most from the site of Enkomi) has often been the focus of analysis (e.g., Masson, 1971; 1974), the mercantile uses of Cypro-Minoan writing (including potmarking practices often overlooked in scholarship) were much more widespread and hint at wider contexts of literacy related to the island's special position within trans-Mediterranean trade (Donnelly, 2024).

The importance of briefly mentioning Bronze Age writing in Cyprus becomes apparent when we consider the legacy inherited in the Early Iron Age and the various continuities and ruptures that were witnessed in the practice of writing. Unfortunately, there is a quite significant gap in the epigraphic record between the tenth and eighth centuries BCE, when

highly significant changes in the writing landscape must have taken place, with only a handful of inscriptions dated with any confidence to this period. Whatever language or languages had been written in Cypro-Minoan, they were joined around this time by two new arrivals, Phoenician and Greek. Phoenician inscriptions are attested from the ninth century BCE onwards, and show particular association with the Phoenician-administered city kingdom of Kition and its sphere of influence, as well as Lapithos in the north, although over time it becomes clear that there was more widespread use of the language and its consonantal alphabet in other parts of the island too. Phoenician is attested in a wide variety of religious, funerary, administrative and informal inscriptions that attest to its presence as a major component in Cypriot multilingualism (see Cannavò, 2024). In the earlier period in focus here, the epigraphic finds are more sparse, but include portable items like ceramic vessels as well as a newly introduced model of epigraphy in writing on stone monuments, previously unknown in Cyprus. In this way, Phoenician writers were both participating in pre-existing and popular epigraphic practices and introducing new ones that were to catch on among writers of other languages and scripts (Steele, forthcoming).

Greek in Cyprus is first attested in a single inscription on a bronze obelos (or spit) found in a Cypro-Geometric I tomb at Palaepaphos-Skales (c. 1050–950 BCE), and thereafter is not attested again with certainty before the eighth century BCE. The script of this single inscription is perfectly in-keeping with the Cypro-Minoan tradition that went before it (and is contemporary with a small number of late Cypro-Minoan inscriptions, one of which was found on a similar object in the same tomb), but the text is read using the sign values of the Greek Cypriot Syllabic tradition that is better established after the eighth century BCE: it records the Greek name *Opheltas* in the Cypriot dialectal form of the genitive. Much ink has been spilt on this inscription, particularly the question of whether we should call it a Cypro-Minoan inscription in Greek language or an early Cypriot Syllabic inscription, reflecting modern biased as to the way we think writing developed on the island (see Egetmeyer, 2013; 2017). Did Greek speakers simply begin to write in Cypro-Minoan around the end of the Bronze Age or first part of the Early Iron Age? Or did they borrow Cypro-Minoan and make a decisive reform of its signs and values in order to write Greek most effectively? The extant epigraphic record from this period is too meagre to answer these questions effectively (Steele, 2018: 76–83).

What we do know is that by the eighth century BCE, there is a well-established orthography for writing Greek in the syllabic script (usually termed the Cypriot Syllabary for this period), and by this point the repertoire of signs has settled into a set of about fifty-five syllabograms – probably a reduction from Cypro-Minoan as practised during the Bronze Age. Not only Greek is written in the Cypriot Syllabary but also at least one indigenous language ('Eteocypriot') that appears to be a continuation of a language written in Cypro-Minoan. Like its Aegean predecessors, Cypriot Syllabic writing consists of signs for open syllables, either vowels alone or consonant-vowel combinations, always ending in a vowel. Greek, however, is a language with many syllable-final consonants, meaning that features like consonant clusters and word-final consonants cannot be represented easily (see Egetmeyer, 2010 on the written language). The spelling rules developed to cope with these issues were nevertheless quite straightforward: essentially, every sound is always written, even if it means using an extra sign with a 'dummy vowel' that would not have been pronounced (e.g., *sa-ta-si-ka-ra-te-se* for the name Stasikrates, where the vowels of the *sa*, *ka* and *se* syllabograms would not have been pronounced, only written).

Literacy in the Cypriot Syllabary during the first millennium BCE appears to have been both quite widespread and diverse, although for the eighth and seventh centuries BCE the evidence is somehow limited. There are continuities in some inscription types from the Bronze Age, such as the '1+1' type where a single syllabogram was followed by a divider sign and then another single syllabogram, a pattern appearing on diverse object types and difficult to decipher or identify as a particular language because of its abbreviated nature. Other uses of writing in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE look more innovative, however, such as the new and growing fashion for monumental inscriptions on stone (official, dedicatory, funerary, etc) as well as specifically royal inscriptions naming kings of Cypriot city kingdoms, which may represent a deliberate political harnessing of the visual uniqueness of the syllabic script at this time (see Iacovou, 2013; fig. 4.1). These uses of writing are also paralleled in the island's Phoenician epigraphic corpus. In some cases the newer inscription types are remarkably similar to those of the emergent Greek alphabetic tradition, especially the growing practice of inscribing vessels related to communal drinking activities and giving inscribed objects special agency by writing in the first person, an inscription type dubbed a 'speaking object' (see Steele, forthcoming, and the section on Greece below). However, for a long time there was no apparent interest in using the Greek alphabet on Cyprus, with very limited evidence of direct engagement until the Classical period as the island was gradually

pulled into the Greek political sphere, especially after the Persian Wars.[18] This began with gradually increasing interest in using the Greek alphabet occasionally in coinage or official inscriptions, and it was only under Ptolemy I that the alphabet became the official script of Cypriot administration. The shift eventually, and complicatedly, culminated in the demise of the Cypriot Syllabic script in the Hellenistic period as its usage even in private contexts waned (Steele, 2024a: 134–37).



Figure 4.1: Copy of one of the gold bracelets of Eteandros king of Paphos, seventh century BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 74.51.3552. Public domain.

[18] Similarly, there is no evidence that cuneiform writing was ever used by Cypriots, despite the fact that the island was under Assyrian rule for much of the eighth and seventh centuries BCE – as attested *inter alia* by a cuneiform-inscribed stele, depicting the Assyrian king Sargon II, found at Larnaca (see Radner, 2010).

Throughout its period of use, syllabic writing in Cyprus appears unusual and idiosyncratic in comparison with other areas. Its repertoire was based on the syllabaries of the Bronze Age Aegean but utterly resisted the iconicity latent in those scripts, a feature also prevalent in unrelated nearby systems such as Anatolian and Egyptian hieroglyphs. Cypro-Minoan and the later Syllabary constituted an open syllabary without logograms, making it structurally and functionally different from both Anatolian Hieroglyphs to the north (open syllabary with logograms) and syllabic cuneiform to the east (mixed syllabary with logograms), just as much as it was from alphabetic systems. Its sign shapes came to be so distinctive that it is difficult to match them up with their counterparts in the preceding Aegean tradition, even though the small number of signs that retain nearly identical shape and value suggest wider continuity. While some writing practices may have begun to homogenise with broader Mediterranean ones as explained above, the visual aspect of the script remained utterly and unmistakably Cypriot for as long as it was in use, a token of island identity in wider contexts (Sherratt, 2003; Steele, 2026). This stability was a marked feature of Cypriot writing from the Bronze Age through the Iron Age, and whatever internal sociopolitical changes may have occurred, the island's writing traditions remained adaptable to them as well as quite robust to outside influences.

2. Anatolia

While Cyprus is an island – large for the Mediterranean but small by global standards – Anatolia is a large peninsula with a diverse landscape and myriad connections by land and sea with communities around the Mediterranean, eastern Europe and western Asia. There are two writing traditions to consider within the period of focus: Anatolian Hieroglyphs (already mentioned briefly in the last chapter) and the Phrygian alphabet, traditions which may appear to be unrelated but can both be contextualised in wider developments in writing culture both within and outside of Anatolia.

Anatolian Hieroglyphs are first attested on seals and then a wider range of objects during the Bronze Age, with the first evidence for phonographic writing in the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries BCE. They belong broadly to the Hittite empire centred on the capital of Hattusa in central Anatolia, and were apparently devised to write a local language, co-existing with Hittite written in a form of cuneiform adapted from Akkadian writing. Hittite cuneiform was

closely associated with administrative practice, while the development of Anatolian Hieroglyphic writing seems to have been associated with the representation of local identity, particularly on the part of royal dynasties and increasingly associated with the Luwian language (for different perspectives see Hawkins, 1986; Yakubovich, 2008; 2010; van den Hout, 2021: 120–34). However, when the Hittite empire collapsed at the end of the Bronze Age, the conditions of writing changed considerably, and while Hittite cuneiform was lost, Anatolian Hieroglyphic writing continued. After a period of little visibility in the archaeological record (see Hawkins, 2008: 35–36), the script resurfaces in the Syro-Anatolian states (often referred to in older literature as Neo-Hittite) of south-eastern Anatolia and the northern Levant, which had once existed within but around the peripheries of Hittite imperial control (see Payne, 2012). The script was still used to write a heavily standardised form of the Luwian language that must have been ideologically important to the fragmented administrations that had withstood the fall of the centralised empire, and even to newer political entities in the area.

Anatolian Hieroglyphic writing is hieroglyphic in the sense that its signs are highly iconic visual depictions of real world referents, mostly quite identifiable although some signs rely on contemporary visual knowledge that is more difficult to recover three thousand years later (for a description, see Payne, 2015). Structurally the writing system is logo-syllabic, with syllabograms standing for open syllables (vowel or consonant-vowel, as in Cypriot Syllabic writing) and logograms standing for whole words that can be used syntactically: typically writing involved either spelling words out sound-by-sound with syllabograms or using combinations of logograms with syllabograms to specify sounds and morphological features. Orthographically there were some similarities with cuneiform, from a purely descriptive point of view, but in practice writing was of a very different nature. The surviving inscriptions are mostly monumental ones, where the text is presented in boustrophedon (alternating direction), with signs stacked on top of each other in meaningful units, making extensive use of the script's inherent iconicity especially in multimodal contexts.



Figure 4.2: Orthostats bearing a portion of the Anatolian Hieroglyphic part of the text of the Karatepe bilingual, eighth century BCE. Photo: Klaus-Peter Simon, Wikimedia Commons. CC BY-SA 3.0.

We have very little evidence for wider literacy in Anatolian Hieroglyphs of the Iron Age because most inscriptions are on stone, attesting to a very particular professional writing activity, with little to point towards other literacies other than contextual evidence for the use of wooden writing boards (see Payne, 2010) and the discovery of a small number of letters and economic texts inscribed on lead strips from the sites of Assur, Kululu and Kırşehir (see also Waal, 2022). We have much better evidence for the use of writing by royal dynasties and administrations as well as vassals, which accounts for the majority of monumental texts (alongside a smaller number of funerary inscriptions). The monumental inscriptions of this period show both an adherence to the longstanding tradition of Anatolian hieroglyphic writing and, in some cases, the introduction of bilingual/trilingual texts incorporating Phoenician (e.g., the Karatepe bilingual depicted in fig. 4.2), Aramaic and/or Akkadian, which can be understood in the context of elite appropriation of learned multilingualism in the exercise of propaganda, particularly in the case of regents whose basis for rule was more fragile (Posani, 2021; 2024). The complex interrelationships between language and script choices (see Giusfredi and Pisaniello, 2025) also become obvious in other shared features of inscriptions in different languages across Syro-Anatolia, such as the method of low relief inscription and attention to embodied figures (Crawford, forthcoming), against a background of complex region-wide dynamics where cultural and political identities were fluid rather than fixed (Osborne, 2021).

It has even been argued that the adoption of Phoenician writing (alongside Anatolian hieroglyphs) by rulers in Cilicia who claimed Greek descent could set the scene for the development of Greek alphabetic writing (Yakubovich, 2015). But another alphabet, nearly identical to the Greek one first attested in the second half of the eighth century BCE, appears in central Anatolia before the Greek tradition is archaeologically attested: Phrygian (sometimes referred to as Palaeo-Phrygian; for the inscriptions see Brixhe and Lejeune, 1984, with supplements, and Obrador-Cursach, 2020: 427–523). The earliest alphabetic texts in Phrygian are now dated to the end of the ninth century BCE, aligning with the redating of an important destruction layer at Gordion where four inscriptions were found (see Brixhe, 2004; one is depicted in fig. 4.3). The next-oldest inscriptions come from another location at the same site, the great Tumulus MM, and are comparable in date with the earliest known Greek alphabetic texts: they comprise inscriptions on jars and metal bowls as well as four names incised on a roof beam (Liebhart and Brixhe, 2010). Many early texts are short and tend to contain names, while the overall corpus between the eighth and fourth centuries BCE is dominated by religious inscriptions and short graffiti alongside some political and funerary texts (see Obrador-Cursach, 2020).

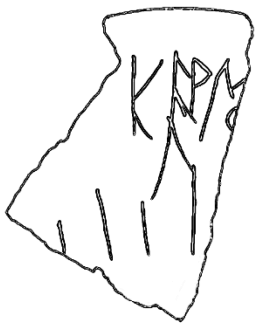


Figure 4.3: Inscribed ceramic sherd from Gordion (G-104), c. 800 BCE. Digital drawing by Philippa M. Steele.

The earliest attested stages of the Phrygian alphabet consists of a core set of letters that are essentially identical (other than stylistic differences like the Phrygian preference for vertical elongation) to that of the Greek alphabet, including innovations not shared by the Semitic consonantal alphabets (the most famous being the repurposing of consonantal letters to write vowels), and the only unresolved relationships between the two are a handful of less well attested Phrygian letters and the Greek ‘supplementals’ (letters added at the end of the alphabetic sequence; see Oreshko, 2022 on this issue). Many explanations for the rise of

Greek alphabetic writing have looked for its origins in times and locations when there would have been high levels of contact between speakers of Greek and Phoenician (for example in areas associated with trade and particularly connected with Euboea or its colonies and emporia), but such narratives fail to account for the Phrygian alphabetic tradition. Located principally in the central area of the Anatolian peninsula, Phrygia was certainly connected with wider networks across the Aegean and Mediterranean as well as the Black Sea, but it was somewhat removed from the Phoenician sea trade widely assumed to be closely associated with the transmission of 'the alphabet'. Despite the dating of the earliest Phrygian alphabetic inscriptions, there is still a tendency in scholarship to assume that Phrygian speakers adopted the Greek alphabet, and not the other way round (e.g., Janko, 2015: 19; Woodard, 2021: 96). However, a model that focuses on the high levels of sustained contact across areas using an alphabet-with-vowels may be the best way of explaining these relationships (e.g., Luraghi, 2021: 40). It is also important to note that across Anatolia there were quite significant shared trends in material culture, particularly involving highly mobile commodities like ceramics or textiles, and against this backdrop of contact the choice of scripts by different polities can be read as markers of distinct identities: for some this meant establishing connections with the past through the use of Anatolian Hieroglyphs, for others establishing new literate paradigms in the emerging alphabetic tradition seen (see Schnell, 2024).

3. Italy

Before we look at Greece itself, from a chronological perspective we must first consider alphabetic writing in Italy. In both Italy and Greece, alphabetic writing apparently represents a new introduction of literacy in local languages, first attested in the eighth century BCE: the only ongoing writing traditions known in either area (noting that Linear B does not seem to have survived beyond the twelfth century BCE) at the time of the introduction of the alphabet-with-vowels were those of Phoenician traders and settlers whose inscriptions are written in the Phoenician consonantal alphabet. In Italy in the ninth and eighth centuries, Phoenician settlement was particularly concentrated around Sardinia and Sicily, as well as Malta to the south and some coastal areas of the mainland, although with very little epigraphy surviving from the earliest phases (the most famous being the much-discussed stele from Nora in Sardinia, whose inscription remains quite mysterious: see Zammit, 2023).

The earliest non-Phoenician inscription is an isolated text of uncertain language: a short inscription on a large, round vase, locally made and containing a woman's ashes, found in a tomb at Osteria dell' Osa (Ridgway, 1996), dated to c. 775 BCE. The vase bears a four or five sign inscription in an alphabetic script including signs that look like vowel letters as found in the Greek, Phrygian and Etruscan alphabets, but its reading remains contested: Greek *EYΛIN* ('good at weaving'?) for some, Latin *NI LUE* ('do not touch'?) for others (see Janko, 2015: 14–15, for an overview of interpretations), all relying on quite shaky palaeographic and philological foundations. The Greek interpretation, for instance, would necessitate reading a *lambda* perpendicular to its usual orientation and facing in the opposite direction to the other letters, while the Latin interpretation turns all the other letters round – both certainly straining credulity, all the more so given the very doubtful appearance of a *lambda* in the inscription anyway. While the interpretation remains difficult, however, the context of the inscription is secure, thus finding this enigmatic object an important place in the history of alphabetic writing.

Otherwise, it is from the end of the eighth century BCE that alphabetic writing particularly seems to blossom throughout Italy, by which point the alphabets in use have very clear affinity with the Greek alphabets of the 'red' type (see further below). Etruscan, a language unrelated to the majority of languages in pre-Roman Italy and still poorly understood, was one of the first languages represented epigraphically, along with Latin and related languages of the Italo-Celtic branch of Indo-European (and a small number of uncertain linguistic affiliation). While Etruscan is generally assumed to be the first language of Italy to adopt the Greek alphabet and adapt it to its own sounds – which required some significant changes due to phonological differences – that does not mean that all other Italic alphabets have to be seen as straightforward 'descendants' of Etruscan (Tikkanen, 2019). The mystery of the voiced stops is telling: Etruscan did not have contrastive voicing and so did not use the letters *beta* and *delta* while at the same time adapting *gamma* (a voiced [g] in Greek) to represent a voiceless sound [k]; meanwhile Latin did have voicing and did make use of *beta* and *delta* (which became B and D) while strangely using *gamma* with its Etruscan value [k] as well as its Greek value [g]. This suggests that Latin writing grew up in contact with both Etruscan and Greek. In general, we should probably think of the whole peninsula as a site of multilingual interaction among both settled populations and itinerant groups like traders, affecting the ways in which communities came to develop the forms of their writing traditions.

Some of the kinds of epigraphy that developed appear to represent a manifestation of pre-existing indigenous practices that must previously have been enshrined in orality: the gift formula, marking the pedigree and exchange of prestige items among people of high status, is the most prominent example (Maras, 2015: 203–206; Benelli and Naso, 2021: 306–307). It is notable that gift inscriptions of this type are often inscribed as 'speaking objects', in which the inscribed object refers to itself in the first person, using the pronoun *mi* or *mini* in Etruscan. On the one hand, this could point towards the orality of related practices surrounding gift exchange, but on the other it is highly reminiscent of a type of inscription that had become common in both Greece and Cyprus around the same time. There seems to be an interplay here between indigenous traditions and wider networks of contacts across the Mediterranean, common threads in what has been called a 'communications revolution' surfacing both in writing and figurative art (Scholz, 2023).

It is striking that some of the earliest Greek alphabetic inscriptions are also found in Italy, including one of the longest and most famous: the late eighth-century Nestor's Cup inscription from Pithekoussai, a site that attests to contact between Greek and Phoenician/Aramaic speakers. The cup speaks in the first person and in hexameter, calling itself the cup of Nestor and thus alluding to the Homeric character of this name and, presumably, his far larger and more impressive cup as described in the *Iliad*. Another such 'speaking object' is found in the seventh-century vase from Campania that calls itself the lekythos of Tataie, a woman's name, and curses any thief with blindness. Such inscriptions, alongside briefer ones of similar periods, point towards well developed Greek alphabetic literacy in the Italian colonies (*apoikia*) of Greek cities, reflecting an already established tradition of writing in that was presumably shared with regions across the Greek islands and mainland.



Figure 4.4: Etruscan bucchero ware cockerel, with the alphabetic sequence inscribed around the body. Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 24.97.21a, b. Public domain.

Another reason for paying particular attention to early alphabetic writing in Italy is that we have several early surviving examples of abecedaria, the earliest known in any alphabet-with-vowels and attesting to a fuller inventory of letters than is found in any individual writing tradition – thus perhaps suggesting that a very early version of the sequence (complete with vowels and supplemental letters) was known for a hundred years or more after each regional alphabet started to become standardised (see Steele, 2019). Because such inscriptions record only the alphabetic sequence (or part of it), they cannot be said to be written in any language, making them an unusual but valuable source of information for the graphetic structure of the script (i.e., its set of signs along with their shapes and order: see Elvira Astoreca, 2021: 44–46). Two complete abecedaria date from the early seventh century BCE, one on an ivory model of a writing tablet from Marsiliana d'Albegna and one on a bucchero ware cockerel from Viterbo (Pandolfini and Prosdocimi, 1990: 18 and 22; the latter shown in Fig. 4.4). Each bears a sequence of letters that contains the innovating vowel letters but also has the full set of sibilant letters inherited from Phoenician. No regional Greek alphabet contains all these letters, meaning that these finds from Italy reflect a very early stage in the development of alphabets-with-vowels from before the regional Greek alphabets narrowed down their choices of certain letters, such as either *san* or *sigma* for /s/ (see Steele, 2019: 131–33). While the developing alphabetic writing used for Etruscan and Latin has certain letter values that suggest borrowing from a 'red' alphabet of the Euboean colonies (e.g., X to represent /ks/ not /k^h/), these full Italian abecedaria point again towards a more complex history of alphabetic relationships. A further find of an oenochoe from Cumae with the beginning of two abecedaria on the base, again seventh-century, further attests to the diversity of Greek alphabetic writing since one sequence uses a *beta* characteristic of Corinth and its colonies while the other appears Euboean.

4. Greece

Finally we arrive at the end-point of our journey, in Greece. This Element was originally planned to focus on the emergence of alphabetic writing in the Iron Age Mediterranean, a story that has seemingly been told many times with most accounts placing the Greek alphabet as central to the narrative; we wanted to avoid such a bias in this case, shifting the emphasis to the wider backdrop of script developments, and we hope that the reader will instead come away with a sense of the very rich palette of scripts and writing cultures around the Mediterranean and its shores throughout this period. Greek alphabetic writing did not grow up in a vacuum, it was not a startling innovation that enabled higher-level thought, it was not

the attainment of phonographic perfection and it did not instantly democratise writing – all assumptions you might be forgiven for jumping to from a slew of twentieth-century and even later publications that are too many to name here (see Boyes and Steele, 2019 for an overview), driving a sometimes demonstrably harmful impulse to *alphabetism* (Share, 2014). A huge amount of scholarship has been devoted to the questions of where, when, why and by whom The Greek Alphabet was developed, but not only are those questions that we have no intention of exploring in the present work, they are also questions that simply cannot be answered – as the vast number of very different and conflicting attempted answers is sufficient to demonstrate (on which problem, see e.g., Elvira Astoreca, 2021: 4–19; Parker and Steele, 2021). In fact, there are good reasons for thinking that these are the wrong questions to start with.

Let's begin instead by contextualising the earliest appearances of Greek alphabetic writing. As we have seen from the preceding survey, alphabetic writing with vowels in Greece itself is the last tradition to be attested archaeologically, with the earliest inscriptions dated to around the third quarter of the eighth century BCE. An earlier, eastern dialect of Greek (known as Mycenaean Greek) had been written in an earlier script, the Linear B syllabary, used in Crete and across much of the mainland during the Late Bronze Age (fifteenth to thirteenth centuries BCE); it is barely attested outside of bureaucratic contexts and appears to have gone out of use during the period when the centralised administrative complexes were destroyed and economic and social changes had a significant impact across the areas where Linear B had been used (see Steele, 2024a: 108–25). Although the assumption has been challenged (e.g., recently Waal, 2022), we have no direct evidence to suggest that writing continued to be practised in the twelfth to tenth centuries BCE.

The next identifiable instance of writing is an inscription in Phoenician on a bronze bowl, found in a tomb in the Tekke cemetery of Knossos on Crete dated to c. 900 BCE, thought to reflect a wider practice of inscribing bronze bowls around the end of the Bronze Age and beginning of the Iron Age in the eastern Mediterranean. Only a handful of Early Iron Age North-West Semitic inscriptions (both Phoenician and Aramaic) have been found in Greece, in spite of significant archaeological evidence for Phoenician activity and contact in the area (see Bourogiannis, 2021 and compare Negbi, 1992). It is difficult to construct an argument based on absence of evidence, but this may point towards different kinds of epigraphic

interactions between Phoenician and Greek speakers, ones that shifted with trade encounters rather than settling into the kinds of long-term close contact that we saw in Cyprus.

Greek alphabetic writing is not securely attested before the second half of the eighth century BCE, though there may be good reasons for thinking that these examples do not represent its earliest stage of existence. As we have already seen, there is earlier evidence of what looks like the same alphabetic tradition, used for what seem to be two other languages (certainly Phrygian, and perhaps an Italic language or even Etruscan in the case of the Osteria dell' Osa vase since no Greek interpretation is sufficiently convincing). The alphabet used in all these cases has a number of unifying features, the most prominent of which is the existence of five letters representing vowel sounds (typically for both short and long vowels). This was a departure from the Phoenician alphabet where every letter had a consonantal value, although a small number of these could occasionally be used as a *mater lectionis* (i.e., they could be used with an ad hoc alternative value as a long vowel, a practice that became somewhat more conventional in Aramaic than it ever did in Phoenician). The invention of dedicated vowel letters cannot be claimed unambiguously for Greek speakers, even if decades of scholarship have taken this as a given, looking quite exclusively for the motivation for developing vowel signs in the structure of the Greek language (for instance, the importance of vowels in morphology and especially in lexical roots, the frequency of initial vowels and the existence of vowel-only words) and its poetic uses. As it happens, Phrygian is not too distantly related to Greek as a member of the Anatolian branch of the Indo-European language family, and so has similar features and a similar vocalic inventory, making it difficult to distinguish between Greek and Phrygian needs in vowel notation. A further conceptual problem is that the development has been imagined as taking place in different ways, from a moment of invention on the part of an individual (e.g., Wachter, 2021: 24–25) to a mishearing of unfamiliar Phoenician consonants (e.g., Jeffery, 1990: 22; Oikonomaki, 2012: 94) or a borrowed orthographic practice based on the writing of *matres lectionis* (e.g., Luraghi, 2021: 37–38).

Accounts of the transmission of writing are plagued with extra theoretical baggage in the form of a common assumption that there was a single original variant of the Greek alphabet (the *Uralphabet* as it is commonly called), and that all attested variants of it have made innovations from this original form (see e.g., Wachter, 1989). This assumption has no basis of evidence whatsoever. What *is* very well attested, from the beginning of the surviving

Greek alphabetic record, is an exceptional degree of diversity in written forms. Beyond any expected variation related with individual usage over different writing materials, this diversity surfaces in systematic differences, ones that would become emblematic of regional linguistic and political entities as each area established its distinctive alphabetic repertoire (Luraghi, 2010; Johnston, 2012; Steele, 2019); these regional variations were famously depicted in a colour-coded map by Kirchhoff (1826) and have since been referred to as green, red and (light and dark) blue. When referring to Greek writing of the eighth to fifth centuries BCE, we should speak of alphabets in the plural.

The colour-coded Greek alphabets, using the terms conventionally applied to the four main types of regional alphabet, represent shared tendencies of usage across groups of *poleis* (city-states) of the Archaic period (c.seventh–fifth centuries BCE). All of them share the basic Phoenician sequence (with small adaptations) up to the letter Y. The Red alphabets, like those of Euboea (thought to be the direct 'ancestor' of the Italic alphabets) and Attica, add what are usually termed supplemental letters to the end of the sequence: Φ, X, Ψ. So too do the Blue alphabets, like those of Corinth (Dark Blue) and Ionia (Light Blue), but the values of the supplemental letters are different. The Green alphabets like those of Crete and Thera do not have the supplemental letters, leading to frequent suggestions that they represent an earlier stage of development, though it is difficult to tell whether these areas knew of the supplemental letters but did not use them (there are no surviving abecedaria to tell us one way or another).

There are also differences between the regional alphabets that cut across the colour-coded categories. Surprisingly few of these regional differences seem to have related to dialectal variation (e.g., *eta* for [h] in non-psilotic dialects or for [ɛ:] in psilotic dialects lacking [h], and other strategies for marking long vowels), which was well entrenched across Iron Age Greece. Instead most differences relate to the distribution of arbitrary letter shapes (e.g. crooked or straight *iota*, four- or five-barred *mu*, variant shapes of *beta*), letter choices (e.g. the use of either *san* or *sigma*, adapted from two different Phoenician letters, to write [s]) and differing assigned letter values (e.g. the X-shaped letter *chi* representing [k^h] in Blue alphabets or [ks] in Red ones) (see Elvira Astoreca, 2021; Steele, 2024b). Although this diversity has often been taken to indicate that we are lacking evidence for earlier, more unified writing, there is simply no way to evaluate such a claim, and thus no value in following its implications.

While the appearance and structure of Greek alphabetic writing was regionally diverse in its earliest attested phases of use, from an archaeological and material perspective there are shared trends in the kinds of texts that were written in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE and the kinds of objects they were written on. A small number of sites have produced significant regional corpora of inscriptions, allowing quite fine-grained statistical analysis of epigraphic practices: for instance Mt Hymettos at Athens, Kommos in Crete, Eretria in Euboea and Methone in Macedonia. As far as we can tell from surviving inscriptions, of which there are more than 700 known from this period, the majority of the earliest uses of Greek alphabetic writing were distinctly portable. Some eighty percent of known epigraphy from this period is found on ceramic objects, usually vessels of one kind or another (using the dataset of Elvira Astoreca, 2021). Their portability was not just an incidental factor but was central to their existence within developing practices of writing: a preference for inscribing small ceramic vessels strongly correlates with mobility and socialisation, the main strands of which are in commerce (particularly transport vessels), religious practice (one-handled cups pre-dominant in sanctuaries) and communal drinking (two-handled cups predominant in settlement contexts) (Kotsonas, 2022).



Figure 4.5. The Dipylon oenochoe, featuring an early Greek alphabetic inscription around the body, c. 740–730 BCE. Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.

The Greek symposium, a sort of elite drinking party as known from later sources, has been suggested as an important forum for circulating and displaying inscribed vessels, and thus a driver of literacy in particular social circles (Węcowski, 2017). This would fit in well with the idea that portable items could be inscribed in spaces and contexts where they were socialised. But we have very little evidence for the nature of the symposium in this early period before c. 600 BCE, making it very difficult to tell how communal drinking might have compared with what is attested in later sources. Meanwhile, again we have likely eastern parallels in the feast known as a *marzeah*, which has often been assumed to be the direct or indirect origin of Greek symposiastic activities (e.g., Murray, 1994; Matthäus, 1999–2000), perhaps mediated through Cyprus (Steele, forthcoming). Within this sort of context, the types of Greek inscription known as 'speaking objects' (or often in Italian, 'oggetti parlanti', where the inscribed object speaks in the first person) have frequently been seen as a something of a peculiarity of Mediterranean writing in this period. They appear not only in Greece but also in Italy and Cyprus (as already briefly mentioned), reflecting particular ways in which personhood and individuality were entangled with and expressed through material objects in social situations (see e.g., Wachter, 2010; Elvira Astoreca, 2021; Whitley, 2021, 2024). However, inscriptions written in the first person are well known from the near-contemporary Levant and Syro-Anatolia (e.g. Payne, 2016; Hogue, 2019) as well as Egypt (e.g. Frood 2019), though they are not identical in function. In these other traditions, first-person inscriptions appear on objects and monuments with quite different material and social contexts, and differ in the crucial detail in that they typically represent a person speaking in the first person while in the Greek, Etruscan and Cypriot cases it is the object that speaks (usually declaring itself to belong or relate to a person). While it is difficult to reconstruct particular interactions that could have conveyed the idea of writing in the first person from one area to another, the conceptual similarities could suggest that modes of writing in the Mediterranean were responding to similar historical processes, perhaps in relation to the proliferation of scripts and writing practices (Johnson, forthcoming). The Mediterranean speaking objects, however, certainly utilised the first-person inscription for very particular circumstances where an object expressed its own social role and relationships, empowering it to express belonging and vocalise wishes and curses (see further Steele, forthcoming).

Another apparent trend is the scarcity of writing on stone, with around one hundred inscriptions of which the overwhelming majority are relatively late within this period (seventh rather than eighth century), a perhaps surprising fact given that stone would become a widely popular writing medium in the later Archaic and Classical periods and beyond. The very concept of the monumental inscription on stone – whether funerary, administrative or religious – seems to be a relative late-comer to Greece, just as it was in Cyprus. On the other hand, monumental stone inscriptions were already well established by the ninth century BCE in the Syro-Anatolian and Levantine states, continuing practices that stretch back into the Bronze Age. The point is not a trivial one, as introducing monumental writing must have involved significantly reconfiguring community relationships with communicative media and fostering new kinds of social engagement with situated epigraphic objects (Hogue, 2021; 2022). It is difficult to draw direct links in the current state of evidence, but the incipient use of stone as a medium for writing in Cyprus as Phoenician epigraphic habits became increasingly known there could suggest a parallel process in the Aegean: some relationship, perhaps, between interactions with the eastern coastal communities of the Mediterranean and the impetus for monumental epigraphy in Cyprus and Greece. Of the earliest examples of stone inscriptions in Greek, many are funerary, but others are strikingly localised, particularly the distinctive rock inscriptions on Thera (perhaps late seventh or eighth century) and the earliest legal codes inscribed on temple walls in Crete (seventh century onwards).

Studying the uses of early Greek alphabetic writing and the context of inscribed objects ultimately tells us quite a lot more about the early history of alphabetic writing in Greece than any attempt to identify the elusive beginnings of vowel notation, or some trace of an unattested and purely hypothetical single *Uralphabet.* The diversity of writing practices is anchored in the geographical and political diversity of the Greek world of the seventh and eighth centuries BCE, such that any attempt to categorise inscriptions into types runs the risk of obscuring significant variation in regional practices. Many of the earliest alphabetic texts are dedications with a religious context, for instance, but these range across ceramic vessels and plaques, stone monuments, statuettes and other items. The 150 inscribed one-handled drinking cups found at the sanctuary of Zeus at the summit of Mount Hymettos (dated to the mid-seventh century), to take one extreme example, are a product of acts of worship in a very specific context. They cannot be understood without consideration of their social, physical and geographical context, and even their content – making reference to an otherwise unknown Zeus Semios (‘Zeus of the Sign’, potentially a reference to writing) –seems to hint

towards a special epistemological status for developing writing practices (see Steele 2025, 18–21).

Our evidence for Iron Age Greek alphabetic writing is inevitably patchy, a jigsaw puzzle of which we have some pieces, while we know others are missing. Some of those pieces are quite inestimable and will never be recovered, such as the likely but unquantifiable use of perishable materials like parchment, papyrus and wood for writing. What kinds of texts might have been committed to them will never be known. As new pieces of evidence on more durable materials occasionally come to light, we may be able to fill in some of the blank areas of the puzzle. From surviving evidence, everything points towards developing writing practices in Greece that were heavily entangled with those of other nearby areas. Rather than holding up Greek alphabetic writing as something exceptional, we should see the regional Greek alphabets as existing alongside the regional alphabets of both Phrygia and Italy, perhaps representing something more like a continuum of writing in an alphabet-with-vowels, with practices and styles and epigraphic habits changing and diverging over time in each area.

Conclusion

All the authors

There is a traditional narrative about writing in the Iron Age Near East and Mediterranean that privileges the rise of alphabetic writing, presenting its expansion as a kind of manifest destiny whereby the script's alleged superiority became apparent and led to its almost inevitable adoption. This Element has told a different story in two main ways. Firstly, we have emphasised the diversity of writing at this time, with alphabets just a few among many writing varieties thriving in the region. Second, we have emphasised human factors in how writing practices were used and spread. This Element has foregrounded the agency of different communities when deciding to adopt, adapt, elaborate, simplify and transmit their writing practices. Each of the regions surveyed tells its own story of how writing was received and adapted.

Mobility is a good point of departure. From our modern perspective there is a tendency to imagine that most people in the past were not particularly mobile and tended to spend their lives not far from where they were born. Similarly, the nature of modern transport infrastructure and borders can lead us to view the sea as separating rather than connecting. An important strand of historical scholarship has pushed back against these notions and emphasised the connective role of the Mediterranean (e.g. Horden and Purcell, 2000; Broodbank, 2024). Although potentially perilous and subject to seasonal variability, for much of history sea-travel was quicker and more reliable than going overland, though of course this does not mean that land routes did not also exist. Despite the difficulties, people in the Iron Age world did move around, just as they did in earlier and later periods, for reasons including trade, military service, diplomacy, economic advantage, and religious pilgrimage. Some of these moves may have been permanent, others shorter-term. The transmission and connection of writing practices across regions must be understood in this context.

Awareness of mobility and the interconnectedness of writing practices should not, however, diminish the importance of local histories and practices. This tension is evident in our choice to tackle regions separately in different chapters, by different authors, yet highlighting overlaps and points of continuity. For example, while Levantine writing practices were heavily intertwined with those of Mesopotamia and, especially, Egypt, the preceding chapters

demonstrate how perceptions of the potential uses and values of writing differed between those regions. Cross-regional and cross-cultural encounters with different scripts and writing practices offered communities new ways of thinking about how different forms of writing were more or less suited to their own needs (Meletis, 2020, 217-382; Steele, 2026). This was not a process of homogenisation, and no one set of writing practices emerged from the Iron Age as universally dominant.

A connected issue challenged throughout this Element is how writing related to cultural and social groupings. Writing practices, like any other product of human culture, can be used to negotiate communities' identity and memory. But, as outlined in our chapter on the Levant, a tendency in the literature to associate specific scripts with particular ethnic groups tells us more about the preconceptions of modern nationalism than it does about ancient views of writing. Alphabets, both with and without vowels, have been used by modern scholars alongside languages to define social or ethnic collectives which do not always correspond with how users of those scripts identified themselves.

While we talk about scripts and writing practices spreading, it is important to recognise that the communities adapting them would imbue them with cultural meanings possibly distinct from those salient in the originating region, if that 'homeland' can even be identified. Logosyllabic cuneiform, for example, played a major role in the self-fashioning of Assyrian and Babylonian political and scholarly elites but the ways it was adopted and transformed in other regions may suggest it was seen less as a token of Babylonian, Assyrian or other Mesopotamian cultural identity than as a practical technology flexible enough to represent a range of languages, or as a marker of globalised elite culture. In this connection, it is always important to remind ourselves that geographical or cultural origin may not have been the most important association with particular scripts, especially for less literate or less well-travelled groups. Such people may have encountered scripts only rarely and known little of their specific political and cultural histories, associating them more with status-based identity such as membership of a cosmopolitan elite culture. Even among itinerant traders and envoys, there would be those who never set foot in Mesopotamia or Egypt and never laid eyes on extended cuneiform or hieroglyphic inscriptions in their original settings, let alone shared the values attached to scripts.

Overcoming these challenges is as much a matter of understanding the limitations of the surviving sources as it is of setting modern archaeological and historical interpretations against possible ancient perspectives on the wider world. When discussing Egypt, for example, our angle of approach risks being too wide. Hieroglyphic writing is representative of high culture and associated institutions such as temples, which sought to preserve the ideology of a unified, hierarchical, homogenous Egypt. Yet, most users of Egyptian writing, working mainly in the companion scripts of hieratic and demotic, lay outside those domains of society and operated instead in a regional context of multilingual, multi-ethnic administration and commerce. The spread, transformations and rejections of Egyptian writing in the Iron Age suggest mixed opinions about Egypt's cultural power and place in the world, and it is difficult to recover such viewpoints from the archaeological record. Thinking back to the emergence of demotic and its relationship with regional forms of hieratic, it is also possible to see how deeply ingrained diachronic and multi-regional analyses are in studies of the ancient world. The societal and political shifts influencing such developments over the course of decades or centuries may be discerned retrospectively, but this does not mean they were as visible to ancient actors.

Such trends in scholarship have also affected our understanding of the emergence of the alphabets with vowels – though even 'emergence' is a somewhat loaded term given that we know so little about their first phases of usage. Scholars have been so preoccupied with finding a date and place of origin (most often for Greek alphabetic writing) that the similarities and differences in their earliest attested uses have been relegated to a secondary point of interest. But when we shift the focus, what we find is that it is not only formal features (like the dedicated vowel signs themselves) that are shared but also aspects of practice. Even more significantly, shared practices can cut across geographical 'divides' and typologically different writing systems. In the Iron Age Syro-Anatolian states, logosyllabic Anatolian Hieroglyphs could share the visible stage with alphabetic Phoenician, while Cypriot Syllabic writing practices might be very difficult to distinguish from early Greek or Etruscan alphabetic writing if the script were not itself so visibly different. The peculiar attribution of spoken agency to inscribed objects in first-person inscriptions likewise persists in diverse writing traditions across the Mediterranean, Levant and Egypt, albeit in varying forms.

Writing, then, was not transmitted in whole packages. The look of a script, the way it encoded language and the uses to which it could be put were variables that could travel independently to some extent. People were regularly exposed to multiple types of writing, often over years or generations. Greek alphabetic writing does not need to be understood as the result of a single point of genius. Indeed, the burden of that hypothesis is that it only makes it harder to understand the diversity of the attested epigraphic record. The established regional traditions that proceeded into the Archaic period are best understood as the crystallisation of long-term processes where local writing practices became associated with political entities (Luraghi, 2010; Johnston, 2012; Steele 2019), as are those of Phrygia and the Italic peninsula. Meanwhile their diverse starting points are best contextualised more broadly than has hitherto been fashionable.

This Element has sought to describe and interrelate the developing alphabetic traditions around the ancient Mediterranean in a way that is conscious of co-existing diversities in writing systems and practices. By surveying contemporary Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Levant, Anatolia and Cyprus as well as the areas marked by emerging use of alphabets with vowels, we can better approach the rich experiences of ancient participants in those writing traditions.

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