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Chapter 3

Variation in alphabetic cuneiform: Rethinking the 'Phoenician' inscription from Sarepta[1]

Philip J. Boyes

In 1972 the University of Pennsylvania's excavation in the Lebanese town of Sarepta (modern Sarafand) uncovered a fragment of a handle from a large vessel, bearing a brief inscription, written from left to right in alphabetic cuneiform, made before firing (Fig. 3.1). Like all alphabetic cuneiform, it is dated to the second half of the thirteenth century BC.

It is read by Bordreuil (1979, 65) as:

ʾgn z pʿl yd [?
r/nbʿl z lḫdš$_2$ *bʿl [?*

and by Dietrich and Loretz (1988, 234–235) as:

*ʾgnn z pʿl yḏ**
n bʿl z l ḫdšbʿl*

In either form it would translate as something like:

> The jar which Ydnbʿl made, which is for Ḫdšbʿl.

The inscription received preliminary publication in 1975 (Teixidor and Owen 1975). It was initially held by Beirut National Museum under the catalogue number SAR 3102, but was entrusted to the University of Pennsylvania during the civil war. Its whereabouts are currently unknown. It is included in the corpus of Ugaritic inscriptions, *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places* (conventionally abbreviated to KTU; Dietrich *et al.* 2013), as KTU 6.70, which is how I shall refer to it henceforth.

1 This chapter is part of the research output of the project *Contexts of and Relations between Early Writing Systems (CREWS)*, funded by the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant no. 677758).

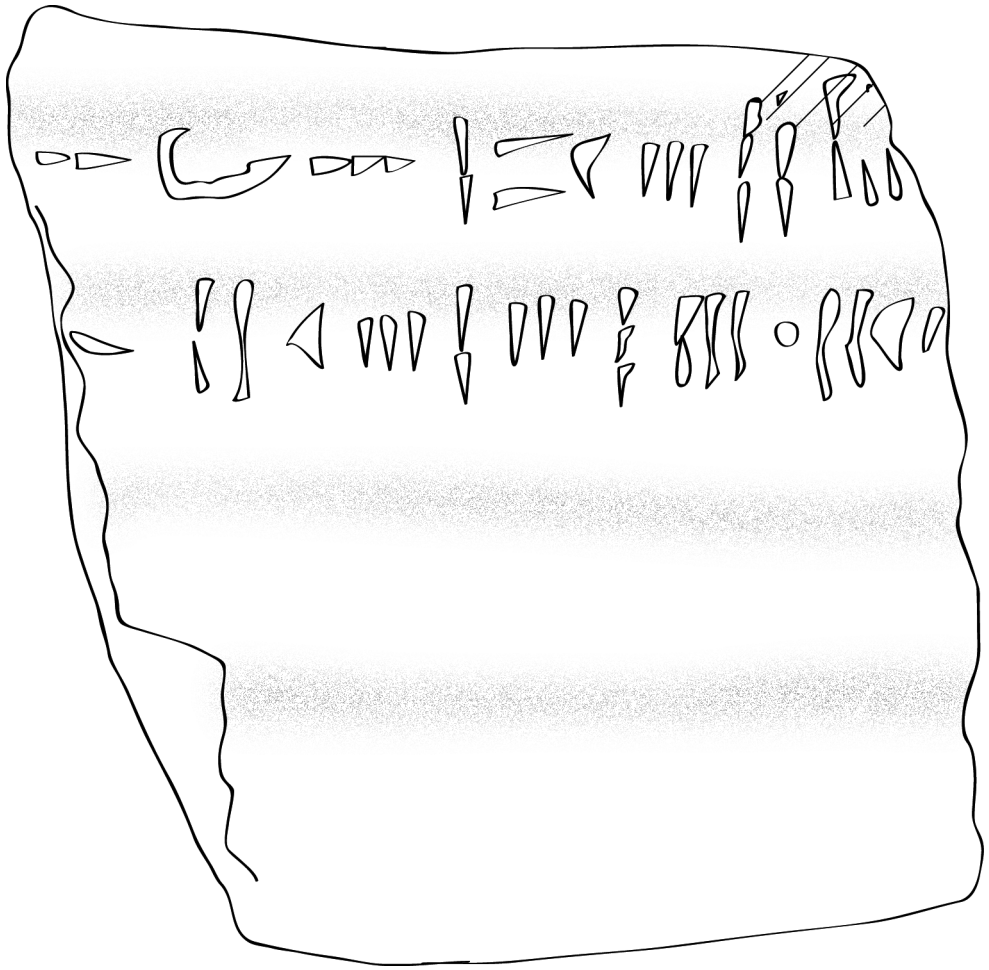


Figure 3.1. The Sarepta inscription (drawn by the author).

It was recognised in the preliminary publication that this is an example of what is generally known as the Ugaritic short alphabet, which has broad affinities with the long alphabet familiar from the vast majority of alphabetic cuneiform-inscribed material but also displays a number of important differences (Bordreuil 1981, 1983, 2012; Dietrich and Loretz 1988, 145 ff.; Hawley *et al.* 2015). As this chapter will go on to discuss, the defining characteristics of the 'short alphabet' can be rather fuzzy, with no single set of features existing which apply to all inscriptions that people have sought to classify in these terms. However, a number of broad tendencies can be identified:

- Most obviously a smaller sign repertoire – generally 22 signs (though naturally, not all signs are attested in every inscription, and an intermediate 27-letter alphabet is also attested in abecedaries such as that from Beth Shemesh and KTU 5.27).

- Variant spellings of words caused by the lack of some signs – for example, a single sign 𐎎 (long alphabet /ḫ/) covers what in standard Ugaritic would be /ḫ/ and /ḥ/.
- Certain signs have different forms (see Table 3.1).
- There is a general (but not universal) right-to-left direction of writing rather than the usual Ugaritic left-right.
- The script tends to be written on artefacts rather than purpose-made tablets.

Its Lebanese find-spot is far from surprising: the majority of short alphabet inscriptions have been found outside Ugarit and its surrounding area, several as far south as Palestine and one as far away as Tiryns on the Greek mainland. A second short alphabet cuneiform-inscribed handle from Sarepta was recognised by Puech in 1989.

It was swiftly realised, however, that if there is such a thing as a 'straightforward' example of short alphabet Ugaritic, KTU 6.70 is not it. In 1976 Edward Greenstein argued that it is not in fact written in the Ugaritic language at all, but Phoenician.[2] He adduced lexical, morphological and formal evidence to support this:

- The word *pʿl* – make/do – only occurs in this form in Phoenician and Hebrew; the Ugaritic equivalent is *bʿl*.
- The relative pronoun is the Phoenician z, not the Ugaritic *d*.[3]
- He sees the unusual *g*-sign 𐎂 as the accidental use of a linear Phoenician *gimel* – 𐤂 (reversed for the dextroverse direction of writing and carelessly rotated).

Greenstein had only been able to work from the drawings and rather murky photographs included in the preliminary publication. After examining the inscription itself in Beirut, Bordreuil supported Greenstein's classification of it as Phoenician, although not his identification of a stray linear *g*; rather, he saw the odd form of the inscription's second sign as a standard alphabetic cuneiform 𐎓 with a 'tail' born of scribal laziness, not lifting the stylus sufficiently as he moved to write the following 𐎍 (Bordreuil 1979, 65). Notwithstanding the question of whether we should speak of Phoenician as a separate language in the Late Bronze Age rather than a local Canaanite dialect that would eventually develop into Phoenician, Greenstein and Bordreuil's conclusions have received general acceptance (*e.g.* Dietrich and Loretz 1988), making this the earliest known 'Phoenician' inscription.

2 When not used as a linguistic descriptor, 'Phoenician' in this article refers to the area of Levantine coast between Arwad in the north and approximately Tel Dor in the south. This is a conventional shorthand and does not imply cultural, political or ethnic unity for this area, or their distinction from their neighbours; although in practice the various polities covered had a great deal in common.

3 Greenstein actually believed the pronoun to have been accidentally omitted after a word divider, which is plausible if it is the similarly-shaped z (𐎗), but less so if the rather more distinctive *d;* however, with the advantage of being able to inspect the inscription itself rather than merely the published photographs, Bordreuil (1979) confirmed that what Greenstein took for word dividers are in fact z-signs.

Table 3.1. Sign differences between 'long' and 'short' alphabets.

	'Long Alphabet'	'Short Alphabet'
b		
d		
š		

This is essentially where research on KTU 6.70 stands, and all before the publication of the full site report covering its archaeological context (Khalifeh 1988). It is hardly surprising, then, that the character of the discussion has been almost exclusively epigraphic and palaeographic, with very little consideration of the inscribed handle as an artefact, its context or its wider cultural significance. Even if the additional information offered by the site report is hardly fulsome, it is still time we looked again at KTU 6.70 in this new light, as well as with the benefit of nearly 30 years' thinking on inscriptions not just as texts but as material, archaeological objects embedded within and contributing to a dynamic cultural milieu.[4]

The theory and practice of material culture studies have received a great deal of scholarly attention, but this work has figured very little in discussions of Near Eastern inscriptions to date. It often been overlooked that inscriptions are not free-floating and self-contained textual items but are written on – and are part of – actual *artefacts* that had uses, contexts and histories, from creation to discard and decay. Even where philologists and epigraphists have paid lip-service to the physicality of the inscription, rarely has there been much consideration of the nature of this materiality or how it relates to wider cultural questions. Especially over the last decade or so, a large body of material culture theory has encouraged us to recognise that artefacts are not passive instruments of human intentionality, *tabulae rasae* on to which meaning – and inscriptions – can be projected at will. Rather, objects have agency of their own, constraining, enabling and prompting human action through their physicalities, affordances and requirements. We can see an example of this dialectical relationship at a very basic level in the Sarepta inscribed handle – in order to make it easier to grip, the potter has shaped the clay of the handle into ridges. When the time came to inscribe the vessel, the ridges prompted a particular direction and placement of script – between the raised ridges and parallel to them – and through their interaction with the stylus would have affected the shapes of the signs. Perhaps the unusual ridging contributed to the slip that created the 'tail' on the *g*. This much is fairly obvious, and has been noted by commenters since the object was first published. But this is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the interactions

4 There is a large and growing body of research on various aspects of materiality but see, for instance, Taylor 2011; Ellison 2015 and contributions to Piquette and Whitehouse (eds) 2013.

between humans and material object (and indeed between this and other objects – such as the stylus, for instance). Theoretical approaches such as Actor Network Theory (Latour 2005) and contributions to Knappett and Malafouris 2008 have stressed how material culture is situated within complex webs of relationships, concerning everything from where raw materials are obtained, to how the object is used, understood and culturally construed, how it affects the behaviour of the people, animals and things around it, to its decay and discard. These webs are highly complex, highly contextually-contingent, and so very dynamic. No surprise, then, when Hodder talks about the relationship between material culture and the world around it in terms of 'entanglement' (Hodder 2012). These ideas shape my approach here: first I will examine the archaeological and material aspects of the inscribed handle itself, and compare it with similar items from other sites; then we will consider how these relate to the contents of the inscription itself. Finally, with these basics established, we can take a wider view and begin to consider the connections, relationships and ideas that embed and entangle this and other such objects in their wider socio-cultural contexts.

The inscribed handle as material culture

Sarepta is a small but archaeologically important coastal town approximately 6 km south of Sidon. Until the current British Museum excavations in Sidon it had the distinction of being the Lebanese coastal settlement whose Late Bronze and Early Iron Age levels had been most extensively excavated with modern methods and relatively full publication.[5] This site is situated in a typical Phoenician position on a promontory, affording it at least two harbours. Numerous imports at the site demonstrate its integration into regional and Mediterranean trading networks. The University of Pennsylvania's excavations of the late 60s and early 70s focused on two areas of the tell, uncovering industrial facilities for the manufacture of pottery which remained in use, without major change or discontinuity, from the Late Bronze Age II until the Persian period (Pritchard 1975, 1988; Anderson 1987, 1988; Khalifeh 1988).

The inscribed handle was found in Area II X, the part of the site with the greatest concentration of kilns, on the tell's lower slopes near the modern sea-shore. It came from a deposit south of a wall in a workshop, near to a kiln. This industrial area also included signs of textile-working and metallurgy. Although the preliminary publication reported stratigraphic problems with the context, it was eventually assigned to a floor in period V of the site, which has ceramic correspondences with Tyre's Stratum XIV and has been carbon-dated to 1290±52 BC. Taking together both

5 The sounding in Tyre carried out by Patricia Bikai (1978) was extremely limited in scope, while the Byblos excavations had major practical and analytical shortcomings which mean that with the exception of the royal tombs, evidence for these periods was almost totally overlooked. The ongoing excavations in Sidon are yet to be fully published, but regular interim publications are finally remedying this chronic lacuna of good evidence for the principal Phoenician cities.

ceramic and carbon dates, Khalifeh (1988, 113) suggests a date of 1275–1150 BC – that is, very much in line with the dates for other alphabetic cuneiform inscriptions.

While such dating confirmation is nice to have, the archaeological publication leaves a number of other questions unanswered. For example, nothing is said about the form and fabric of the vessel, or how it compares to others from that workshop or elsewhere in Sarepta. We do not know whether uninscribed handles of similar form were found, and if so how many. Even its dimensions are a matter of some obscurity, though from the scale on the published photographs the fragment seems to be about 12 × 9 cm. Crucially, it is not even entirely clear what kind of vessel it belongs to. Usually it is referred to as an 'amphora' (Khalifeh 1988, 28, 186), but it is also on occasion reported as a jar, jug or krater (*ibid*., 28; Puech 1989; Dietrich *et al.* 2013, 634).[6] This being the case, and in the absence of typological or petrographic analysis, we cannot determine where it was manufactured, what the vessel's function was, or at what stage in its life-cycle it found its way into the archaeological record. Since the inscription was made before firing, we know it was inscribed as part of the manufacturing process rather than later, but we do not know for certain that this occurred in the workshop it was found in. Was it a newly-produced vessel, created and inscribed in the workshop but broken while it waited to be shipped off to its recipient Ḫdšbʿl? Was it produced elsewhere in Sarepta or in another town entirely, before finding its eventual way to this workshop? Did it contain a valuable commodity such as wine or foodstuffs, or was it a simple storage jar related to the industrial function of the complex – a container of water or slip for use in ceramic manufacture, perhaps? Such questions have a major impact on how we think of the potters of Sarepta interacting with this item, and with the cuneiform inscription it bore – whether it was a prized object of status or a forgotten piece of the everyday background of the workshop – or something in between. Unfortunately, these questions are very difficult to get traction on from the incomplete published information. To tease out further details, we can no longer think about it in isolation, but must approach it in comparison with other similar material.

Determining what constitutes 'similar material' can be less than straightforward since it is not always easy to correlate alphabet with object type. It is a measure of the priorities of the alphabetic cuneiform corpus that it does not even include a distinct category for recording the type of object bearing the inscription – it has to be assumed that everything not specifically labelled as something else is a clay tablet, but this is just an assumption.[7] Nor does it systematically record the version of alphabetic cuneiform texts are written in. Sometimes short alphabet inscriptions

6 Bordreuil (1979) notes that *ʾagn* – the word used on the vessel to describe itself – seems to mean 'amphora' in Phoenician, Hebrew and Aramaic, but 'basin' in Ugaritic. It is possible, perhaps likely, that the ambiguity is entirely based on this word and that the actual shape of the handle itself has yet to be considered from an archaeological/typological standpoint at all.

7 Sometimes this information is provided under 'genre' along with information on the content of the inscription, but even then it is often vague (KTU includes 44 objects listed as 'ivory'; none specify what the ivory object actually *is*) and unsystematic.

are marked as such (or as 'mirror-writing'), but for a more definitive list of short alphabet inscriptions, we must cross-reference with the same authors' earlier monograph (Dietrich and Loretz 1988). Short of undertaking a new examination of the inscriptions themselves, there is no way to distinguish between inscriptions which actively display features seen as belonging to the long alphabet and those which do not provide sufficient diagnostic evidence one way or another. For the purposes of the following comparisons, I have had to lump everything not discussed as examples of the short alphabet in Dietrich and Loretz 1988 together as 'long alphabet', but with the recognition that this likely includes material which is more accurately thought of merely as 'alphabetic cuneiform', neither one sub-variety nor another.[8]

Looking at the corpus of all alphabetic cuneiform inscriptions in this way offers the following range of object types among the material not assumed to be 'standard' long alphabet clay tablets (see Table 3.2).[9] This can be further broken down, as seen in Tables 3.3 and 3.4.

The geographical split in the distribution of the two alphabets could hardly be more obvious. As has been universally recognised for many years, the vast majority of long alphabet inscriptions come from Ugarit and its associated sites of Minet el-Beida and Ras Ibn Hani, even when they are not on clay tablets. By contrast, short alphabet inscriptions are scattered across Syria, Lebanon and Israel/Palestine, even single examples from Cyprus and the Aegean.

Relative to the size of the corpora, the short alphabetic inscriptions come on a much more diverse set of objects than the long, and these are different in kind. The short alphabet inscriptions show an apparent tendency to be inscribed on everyday or utilitarian items: coarseware ceramics, a knife, an ostracon. The principal exceptions to this are the silver bowl from Cyprus and the small number of clay tablets, two of which come from Ugarit, where the strong tablet-writing tradition would obviously have exerted a powerful influence. Of the other two tablets, the Beth Shemesh one is also an unusual artefact, an abecedary showing a strange hybridisation of north-west Semitic alphabetic cuneiform and letter-order similar to the halaḥam one most familiar from later South Arabian abecedaries (Dietrich and Loretz 1988; Sass 1991). A second sinistroverse alphabetic cuneiform abecedary with a similar, but not

8 On the wider merits of dividing up alphabetic cuneiform into taxonomies in this way, see below; for now, I use the long and short alphabetic categories which remain standard within much of scholarship.

9 As described, this takes its starting-point from KTU (Dietrich *et al*. 2013). Object types are generally not recorded for the unclassified material, but Dietrich and Loretz (1988) give KTU 5.29 (formerly 7.60) as an inscribed votive nail. Also included is the second inscribed handle from Sarepta (Puech 1989), and short alphabetic inscriptions from Tell Taanak and Beth Shemesh (Dietrich and Loretz 1988), which are not in KTU. I retain the category 'axe' as used in KTU, but from the photographs and drawings the objects in fact seem to be adzes, hoes or mattocks, and are described as such in the original publication (Schaeffer and Dussaud 1929).

Table 3.2. 'Non-standard' object types (i.e. not long alphabet clay tablets)

Object/Material	*No.*	*Proportion of total (%)*
Knife	1	<1
Lion-head cup	1	<1
Mycenaean pottery	1	<1
Clay votive nail	1	<1
Silver bowl	1	<1
Spindle whorl	1	<1
Ball	1	<1
Pithos shoulder/handle	1	<1
'Oracular Rod'	1	<1
Pithos Rim	1	<1
Sherd	2	2
Stele	2	2
Stamp seal	2	2
Clay tablet (short alphabet)	5	4
Cylinder seal impression	5	4
'Axe'/Hoe	6	5
Ceramic vessel handle	7	6
Weight	7	6
Cylinder seal	8	7
Label	17	14
Ivory	48	40

Table 3.3. Object types bearing short alphabetic inscriptions, with find locations

Object/Material	*No.*	*Proportion (%)*	*Sites*
Knife	1	7	Mt. Tabor
Silver bowl	1	7	Hala Sultan Tekke
Sherd	1	7	Qadesh (Tell Nebi Mend)
Clay votive nail	1	7	Ugarit
Pithos shoulder/handle	1	7	Kamid el-Loz
Cylinder Seal	1	7	Ugarit
'Oracular Rod'	1	7	Tiryns
Ceramic vessel handle	4	27	Minet el-Beida, Kamid el-Loz, Sarepta
Clay tablet	4	27	Beth Shemesh, Tell Taanak, Ugarit

Table 3.4. Non-tablet object types bearing inscriptions in the long (or unspecified) alphabet, with find locations

Object/material	*No.*	*Proportion (%)*	*Sites*
Lion-head cup	1	1	Ugarit
Mycenaean pottery	1	1	Ugarit
Spindle whorl	1	1	Ugarit
Ball	1	1	Ugarit
Sherd	1	1	Ugarit
Pithos Rim	1	1	Ugarit
Stamp seal	2	2	Ugarit
Stele	2	2	Ugarit
Cylinder seal impression	3	3	Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani
Ceramic vessel handle	3	3	Ugarit
'Axe'/Hoe	5	5	Ugarit
Cylinder seal	7	8	Ugarit
Weight	7	8	Ugarit
Label	17	17	Ugarit
Ivory	48	48	Ugarit

identical, letter order was found at Ugarit in the House of Urtenu (Bordreuil and Pardee 2001; Bordreuil 2012).

This raises the question of the status of the scripts, and of the items inscribed with them. At first appearances, the short alphabet inscribed objects skew towards the mundane. Contextual information is vaguer than would be desirable, but by and large they do not seem to be particularly associated with high-status or administrative locations. As well as the industrial locations of the Sarepta inscriptions, one of the handles from Kamid el-Loz came from the area of the city wall; the other, while from the palace, was found in an apparent industrial/workshop area (*Wirtschaftshof*) (Wilhelm 1973; Hachmann 1986; Mansfeld 1986). The Hala Sultan Tekke bowl was found together with pottery – mostly coarse wares – inside a rubble wall beside a courtyard in the site's Building C (Åström and Masson 1982, 72). The sherd from Qadesh is merely recorded as coming from Late Bronze Age levels on the western side of the tell (Millard 1976, 459), and the tablet from Tell Taanak from a layer of ash and brick detritus covering a large building (Hillers 1964). The short alphabet tablets from Ugarit came from the southern part of the acropolis and the Ville Sud (Bordreuil and Pardee 1989). I was unable to find any contextual information for the Beth Shemesh tablet or Mt. Tabor inscriptions.

A different set of items and locations are apparent for inscriptions in the long alphabet. More than half of those not on tablets are ivory replica livers presumed to

have been used in divination (Gachet-Bizollon 2007); a large proportion of the remainder are administrative items such as labels, seals and sealings. While not necessarily élite or prestigious in character, these do seem to pertain to a different world than the sherds and tools of the short alphabet. This is borne out in the find-spots for the items: the majority of long-alphabet non-tablet artefacts were discovered in higher-status and administrative locations such as the royal palace archives or private archives such as that of the High Priest. Alongside these administrative artefacts, we find imports such as a piece of Mycenaean pottery painted with a cuneiform inscription and deposited in a tomb, or elaborate votives such as the lion-head vessel. There are, of course, everyday items too – a spindle whorl, a weight – but these are few and we should repeat the earlier caveat about small items that present insufficient evidence to be assigned to one alphabet or the other. There seems a reasonable *prima facie* basis to suggest that the items inscribed in the long alphabet tend to be higher-status and more closely associated with the administrative and religious establishments. These patterns, along with hints that some apprentice scribes at Ugarit may have had prior knowledge of the short alphabet, which they were being trained out of, led Dietrich and Loretz (1988) to see the short alphabet as a substrate writing-system, at least in Ugarit: indigenous and, to a certain extent, demotic, in contrast to the long alphabet which they believed to have been superimposed in Ugarit for official purposes by a foreign élite.[10]

Status is dynamic rather than inherent, however. It depends on use, context, object history and the attitudes and ideologies of the person interacting with the item. It is, in effect, a property of material culture theory's networks and entanglements, not the items themselves. We must consider how the material object and the inscription interact (not just the content, but the specific realisation, as well as the very idea and connotations of the script and of literacy). An inscribed handle might mean something very different in Ugarit than it does somewhere else. Indeed, there is reason to believe this might have been the case. Within the range of utilitarian objects inscribed in the short alphabet, handles emerge as the most common, especially if we add to them other fragments from the upper portions of large storage vessels inscribed before firing: a storage jar shoulder from Kamid el-Loz (Wilhelm 1973; Mansfeld 1986)[11] and the sherd from Qadesh (Millard 1976, 459). Of these nine handles or similar objects, five are from what we might call 'Phoenicia'. Indeed, all the alphabetic cuneiform inscriptions from Phoenicia are written on such items. What are we to make of this? Should we see the practice of inscribing utilitarian ceramic vessels' handles as particularly Phoenician, or posit a Phoenician taste for such vessels imported from elsewhere?

10 Their notion that Ugarit's elite originated in Arabia is highly questionable both palaeographically (see especially Sass 1991) and archaeologically – references to kings in Ugaritic texts suggest that the same dynasty ruled there from around the end of Middle Bronze I until the destruction of the city at the end of the Late Bronze Age; they have local, north-west Levantine names, not even Hurrian like the rulers of other nearby states such as Amurru or Karkemiš, and certainly not Arabian (Saadé 2011, 61–62). There is no noticeable sign of Arabian influence in the city's material culture.

11 It is incorrectly listed as a handle in KTU.

Before we can take this question further, we must make a brief detour to consider that the 'Phoenician-ness' of the short alphabet-inscribed material from Kamid el-Loz has been called into question: Dietrich and Loretz (1988, 223–226) read the inscribed handle (KTU 6.2) from the site *d rb* – 'the one of the great one', with the relative pronoun *d* showing that this is written in Ugaritic, not Phoenician (though this does not, of course, necessarily preclude its still having been written in Phoenicia). The more significant question concerns the inscribed pithos shoulder sherd (KTU 6.67), which they believe to have originated in Cyprus. Their basis for this is twofold – content: they read it as *ymn*, which they translate as '(made in) Cyprus', and character-form: they see a resemblance between its rounded wedges and those of the Hala Sultan Tekke silver bowl. This rounding, they say, recalls the 'teardrop' shape of Cypro-Minoan inscriptions and thus suggests they were made with a round Cypriot stylus (Dietrich and Loretz 1988, esp. 228–231; 1989).

This seems suspect on several counts. *Ymn* is apparently the same place that appears as *ymʾan* in the Baʿal epic (KTU 1.4 I, 42), but cannot be identified from the context there. It does not appear among the towns of the Kingdom of Ugarit known from the rest of the Ugaritic corpus (van Soldt 2005). In first-millennium Akkadian, *Yamanu* occurs as a place-name, with an associated gentilic *Yamani* which also occurs as a personal name, and has generally been taken as an attempt to render 'Ionian' and thus designating Greek peoples in general (Brown 1984. Late Akkadian underwent a sound-change that merged /m/ and /w/, although there is some debate as to which one changed to the other; regardless, they are both written with signs traditionally read as including /m/). This would be somewhat anachronistic the Bronze Age. The suggestion that it refers to Cyprus, or at least a place on the island, comes from Masson (1986, 188–191), who links it to her readings *i-le-mi* and *i-ya-mi-ne-ti* in Cypro-Minoan. Given that more than 30 years later the reading of Cypro-Minoan is still not agreed upon (Steele 2018), the reading of *ymn* as 'Cyprus' should be treated as speculative at best. Even if we accept this reading, there seems no clear reason why we must supply 'made in' before the 'Cyprus'. Any number of alternative interpretations suggest themselves other than it being a label of place of manufacture. There is no obvious way to choose between them that I can see. The argument regarding letter-forms is also highly problematic. We know little about the tools used for inscribing Cypro-Minoan, except that there was considerable variation in ductus, medium and, presumably, implements used (Ferrara 2012, 201). To stereotype rounded sign-forms as characteristically Cypriot is excessively simplistic, particularly when all but one of the examples they cite come from the Levant and we do not know where the bowl found at Hala Sultan Tekke was produced. A Cypriot origin for these items cannot be excluded, of course, but it is not proven; and given the strong clustering of this admittedly small set of items in Phoenicia, it is not, I think, the most likely.

But what of the inscribed handles which are not from Phoenicia? One, in the short alphabet, comes from Ugarit's harbour, Minet el-Beida (KTU 1.77). The others are from Ugarit itself. One (KTU 6.76) belonged to a Canaanite jar found in a possible

storage area in a fairly typical middle-class residence in the city centre (Yon 1987a, 82), one (KTU 9.413) is an unpublished surface find from the vicinity of the 'House of the Alabasters' in the residential district east of the palace, and the final one, (KTU 9.415) also unpublished, came from the large building in the north-west of the site known as the 'Residence Nord'. An inscribed pithos rim (KTU 6.106) came from the palace at Ras Ibn Hani. As usual, we have no good evidence to suggest where any of these vessels may have originated.

The data-set is, of course, tiny and we should be very careful of drawing far-reaching conclusions from it. But there is, I think, reason to wonder tentatively whether vessels with alphabetic cuneiform inscriptions on or about their handles had some particular significance in Phoenicia. Given that the examples from Phoenicia are mostly in industrial areas and those in Ugarit mainly residential, it is tempting to see a difference in how they were being used, or maybe even to imagine that these vessels were being produced in Phoenician workshops and sold to customers in cities such as Ugarit. Unfortunately, the archaeological evidence at present is simply too sparse for such notions to be anything more than speculative hypotheses. We have gone as far as we can by looking at the archaeological evidence alone: the time has come to turn back to the inscriptions themselves.

The writing on the inscribed artefacts

Much has been written about the epigraphic and palaeographic character of the shorter alphabet inscriptions, their interpretation and their implications for reconstructing the history of the development of alphabetic cuneiform (Bordreuil 1981, 1983; Dietrich and Loretz 1988, 1989; Sass 1991; Hawley *et al.* 2015). It is not my intention to rehearse or challenge that work here. Rather, what I am interested in is how this information, when combined with the archaeological evidence discussed above, informs our understanding of the place of these items and the scripts they bear in the cultures and societies in which they were found.

As I have already mentioned, the Phoenician inscription from Sarepta has been plausibly interpreted as a maker's signature and label of the recipient:

The jar which Ydnbʿl made, which is for Ḫdšbʿl.

The content of other short alphabet inscriptions has been interpreted as follows. I have used English adaptations of the German translations offered in Dietrich and Loretz (1988) unless otherwise noted.

Personal Name labels

Hala Sultan Tekke bowl – owner's label (*'Bowl of Akkuya, son of Yiptaḥ-Addu'*).
Mt. Tabor knife – recipient label (*'For Sillī-Baʿal, son of Pi/ulsī-Baʿal'*)
Qadesh sherd – recipient label (*']... for Mbǵl, the administrator'*)

Minet el-Beida handle – sender and recipient label (ʾmry *brings herewith a sacri[ce.] B[ʾl] bless him. Bʿl bless him. From Mšk the Hittite for the residents of [xxxxx] a large jar for mixed [wine].*)
Kamid el-Loz handle – owner's label (*'the (jug) of the great one'*)
Sarepta non-Phoenician handle – personal name or title? *(ʾdn)* (Puech 1989)

Records and reports

Tell Taanak tablet – medical (?) report (Obv: '*Kkb has collected a stem from the Cypriot bushes. We will make use of it.*' Rev: '*The sick*')
Ugarit tablets – economic records

Other

Ugarit clay nail – Very unclear. Dietrich and Loretz (1988) are unable to offer a coherent reading or translation, not even attempting the outer row of signs, which they deem 'untranslatable'. Object generally seen as votive
Beth Shemesh tablet – abecedary (Halaḥam letter order)
Kamid el-Loz pithos shoulder – place name (*ymn*)
Tiryns rod – *mšʾl[t]* – 'wish'/ 'carry'/ 'saying' (Tropper and Vita 2010).

The Phoenician inscription from Sarepta is, then, similar in type to the majority of short alphabet inscriptions, which concern the people with whom the object is associated – its owner, maker or recipient and, as Greenstein (1976, 53), points out, also bears a marked resemblance to typical northwest Semitic dedicatory formulae – as seen on the Aḥiram sarcophagus, for example:

ʾrn zpʿl [ʾ]tbʿl bn ʾḥrm mlk gbl lʾḥrm ʾbh

The sarcophagus that ʾIttobaʿal son of ʾAḥiram king of Byblos made for ʾAḥiram his father.

(KAI 1.1, adapted from Greenstein 1976, 53)[12]

Kings, especially dead kings, are well on their way to divinity in the Late Bronze Age Levant, (Boyes 2013, 210 ff., with further bibliography) so this example can readily be taken alongside more obviously religious dedications such as those of the slightly later rulers of Byblos:

mš zpʿl ʾlbʿl mlk gbl byḥ[mlk mlk gbl] [lb]ʾlt gbl ʿdtw

The stele that ʾElibaʿal, king of Byblos, son of Yehimilk, king of Byblos made for Baʿalat Gebal, his mistress.

(KAI 6.1–2, adapted from Greenstein 1976, 53)

12 The reading ''Ittobaʿal' is traditional but Lehmann (2015) has recently argued that the damaged name of Aḥiram's son should rather be reconstructed as 'Pilsibaʿal' *vel sim*. This is incidental to the present paper, but it may be noted that this same name occurs on the alphabetic cuneiform inscribed knife from Mt. Tabor.

Should we see the Sarepta text as a dedication, then, (as Teixidor and Owen 1975 did upon its discovery) or as a more prosaic example of exchange between humans? While not significant in the semantics of the Sarepta text, this question is rather important for our understanding of the cultural place of this object. Our best evidence for beginning to answer it comes with the item's recipient Hdšbl. This is generally vocalised as Hodešbaʿal, which is a compound of the ubiquitous theonym Baʿal and the common North West Semitic word for 'new' or 'new moon'.[13] Usually it is taken as a personal name, meaning something like 'Baʿal renewed' (Bordreuil 1979, 66), although this is not attested elsewhere. The name *bn ḥdš/bn ḥḏṯ* occurs in both Ugaritic and Phoenician and is usually understood as meaning 'son of the new moon' *vel sim*. Gröndahl (1967, 134) sees this in purely calendrical terms, believing it to be a reference to when the individual was born and the supposed propitious nature of the new moon. Krahmalkov, on the other hand, believes it to be theophoric, referring to 'Ḥudis, god of the new moon' (Krahmalkov 2000, 177–178). We have, then, a number of potential ways Hdšbʿl could be read:

- A theophoric personal name: 'Baʿal is renewed'
- A theophoric personal name: 'Ḥodeš is lord'
- A theonym: 'new Baʿal'/'Baʿal of the new moon'
- A theonym: 'lord Ḥodeš'

We can exclude an additional possibility – that it is not a name at all but an adjective and noun combination meaning 'his new lord' or similar – since it lacks the definite article and possessive suffix. Phoenician adjectives usually follow the noun, for which reason the two theonyms proposed above can likewise be considered less probable. As far as I can tell, Krahmalkov's deity Ḥudis/Ḥodeš is not unambiguously attested anywhere else in NW Semitic, so the options including that element also seem unlikely. That leaves the most plausible reading as the one proposed by Bordreuil: a personal name meaning 'Baʿal is renewed', which we must simply accept is not attested anywhere else. This places the inscribed object firmly in the temporal and mundane world of a maker and a human recipient; it seems to record a gift or transaction rather than being a votive dedication, and this is consistent with its discovery in an everyday, workshop setting. It is also in line with the majority of other short alphabet inscribed objects: if we look again at the list above, the only other ones which seem to afford a religious interpretation are the possible votive nail and the handle from Minet el-Beida with its references to sacrifice and the blessings of Baʿal. It may be significant that both of these come from the Ugarit area.

13 *ḥdš* in Phoenician and Hebrew; *ḥḏṯ* in Ugaritic (though names incorporating it are rendered in Akkadian as *ḫu-da-ši* (RS 14.016:23) and *ḫu-dá-ši* (RS 15.132:5)). One of the features of the short alphabet is that the same sign ḫ is used for both *ḥ* and *ḫ*. Ugaritic regularly has ṯ where Akkadian has š.

We can seek parallels in other Bronze Age cultures.[14] The overwhelming focus of Assyriologists on tablet inscriptions and relative lack of interest in the objects being inscribed means that there is little published about inscribed pottery from Mesopotamia, so it is hard to assess whether, and if so, to what extent similar practices obtained there. We do have examples of inscribed storage jars used to store tablets in archives, which are labelled with brief summaries of the origins and contents of the tablets they hold.[15] The short alphabet inscribed pottery is evidently not being used in this way. Otherwise, inscribed ceramic material from Mesopotamia mostly consists of metric labels of the vessels' contents, without saying what these contents are or where they come from (Postgate, pers. comm.; Postgate 1978).

The inscribed stirrup-jars of the Aegean would seem to be a closer parallel: these are large, coarse-ware vessels bearing short Linear B inscriptions – usually personal or place names. Like the short alphabet-inscribed vessels, there is some evidence to suggest they were intended to be read from above (Van Alfen 1996–1997) and the numbers of inscribed examples are very low compared to the overall corpus of vessels. A range of interpretations have been proposed for these inscriptions, mostly centring around the production and distribution process for the vessels and the commodities they contained: some believed they labelled the producers of the pots or their contents, (Olivier 1996–1997; Van Alfen 1996–1997); others that they signalled the items as involved in a network of prestige gift-exchange (Duhoux 2011). Recently, Judson (2013) has affirmed their status as administrative marks, concluding that while the evidence remains equivocal, the inscriptions most likely refer to potters, but that some may be the names of regional 'managers' overseeing the production process. The low proportion bearing inscriptions may be due to a single pot being marked to stand for a whole batch.

Despite the apparent similarities, we must be wary when comparing the Aegean vessels to the Levantine ones. It is clear that whatever their exact purpose, the Aegean inscriptions are deeply embedded within the specific economic and administrative context of the Cretan and Mycenaean world. We should not expect the same situation to obtain in the Levant, and given the rather sparse evidence for economic and administrative structures in the region beyond Ugarit, it is very difficult to assess what the points of overlap are. Furthermore, there are important differences in both the context of writing and the production of the inscriptions which argue against overstating the closeness of the parallels. In the purely practical, the

14 After this chapter went to the publishers, Cassandra Donnelly drew my attention to the phenomenon of Cypriot potmarks. These often feature Cypro-Minoan signs and occur on a very similar range of material culture to the alphabetic cuneiform examples we are discussing. Furthermore, numerous examples occur at Ugarit. I regret that this information came too late to incorporate fully into the discussion, but it seems very clear to me that this is a closely related phenomenon and our understanding of both the Cypro-Minoan and alphabetic cuneiform would be greatly enhanced by studying them together.

15 Postgate (2013, 90) describes three such vessels from the Offerings Archive in the Temple of Aššur, dating from the reign of Tiglath-Pileser I (1114–1076).

Aegean inscriptions were painted after firing, which makes sense if they are part of the process of administering batches of vessels or commodities. Most of the short alphabet inscriptions were pressed into the leather-hard clay before firing, which at the very least indicates a different production process. More significantly, Linear B seems to be exclusively administrative and economic, so far as we can tell from the surviving material, so it stands to reason that inscribed vessels should follow this pattern. Alphabetic cuneiform, however – even in the rarely-attested short alphabet – has a much more diverse range of uses, entailing not only a broader set of potential interpretations, but also a completely different cultural status for writing itself.

Despite the differences, it is probable, I think, that KTU 6.70 from Sarepta and most of the other short alphabet inscriptions on pottery are closer to the Linear B stirrup jars than anything more exotic such as being ideological or religious, and were concerned with the distribution of the vessels and their contents, but, unlike the Mesopotamian examples, not so much with what they actually contained.[16] In keeping with the evidence presented above that short alphabet-inscribed objects were not closely associated with places of prestige or centralised bureaucracy, we should see these distributive processes as being relatively decentralised, probably in the hands of individual potters who inscribed (or had someone inscribe on their behalf) the labels before firing. This would be in contrast, perhaps, to the more centralised situation in the Aegean. This is consistent with our general understanding of the Phoenician and wider Levantine economic situation in the Late Bronze Age as decentralised, profit-driven and without strict demarcation of 'public' vs. 'private' commerce, (Boyes 2013, esp. chapter 3, with further references), and surely has implications for our understanding of the extent of literacy and the cultural position of writing at the time.

The Cultural Status of Alphabetic Cuneiform in the wider Levant

For this final section, I want to explore what the evidence discussed above tells us about wider questions of script, culture and identity in the Late Bronze Age Levant. If we are correct in the belief that alphabetic cuneiform was being used by relatively lowly Phoenician pottery producers outside of any kind of centralised administration, then three obvious questions present themselves:

- What were the cultural connotations of this script?
- How widespread was literacy in the Late Bronze Age Levant?
- How does the use of alphabetic cuneiform relate to the development of the linear Phoenician alphabet?

I will address these in order.

16 This is in keeping with first-millennium inscriptions on vessels from Phoenicia (see Cook 1925; Kempinski and Naveh 1991), although many of these are stamped or painted rather than directly incised, so the parallel is not absolute.

The Cultural Connotations of Alphabetic Cuneiform

I have already discussed the idea that outside Ugarit, alphabetic cuneiform does not appear to have been particularly associated with the élite establishment, so far as the evidence permits us to tell. That is not to say that literacy did not carry cultural capital and prestige, but the details of this are hard to get at. The question I wish to address here is how it relates to other forms of social identity, particularly ethnicity. I have previously argued that one of the key features of Phoenicia at the end of the Late Bronze Age and beginning of the Iron Age is a gradual shift in how social identity was constructed with regard to foreign referents (Boyes 2013). The Late Bronze Age might be crudely stereotyped as internationalist, with both élites and the general population seeking to assert their prestige and identity through the active engagement with, and deployment of, material culture from foreign powers. For the élites this principally meant Egypt, and in the Amarna period they adopted what I have called a discourse of vassalage to integrate themselves into the international system of the time. For the wider population – including the inhabitants of Sarepta – the engagement was with other foreign sources of prestige, particularly the Aegean. The instabilities of the end of the Bronze Age seemed to disrupt this system by weakening the prestige both of specific referents such as Egypt and of the whole idea of traditional internationalism. We see, among other things, an apparent shift to forms of display and consumption that place greater emphasis on the Levantine, and there are some signs that North Syrian, and especially Ugaritian, models served as a particular inspiration in Phoenicia – we observe, for example, Syrian parallels for the iconography of the Aḥiram sarcophagus, or the construction at Achziv of chamber tombs very similar to those under well-to-do Ugaritian houses (Boyes 2013, 80–83).

Considered against this background, the Sarepta handle prompts a number of further questions, not all of which can be satisfactorily answered at present. Should we see the use of Ugaritian-style alphabetic cuneiform as part of this process? How Ugaritic was this script seen as being, and did the fact that it was a form of cuneiform carry any vestigial connotation of Mesopotamian-ness that might perhaps have affected its perception as 'local' or 'foreign', particularly in comparison with any linear alphabets that may also have been current?

To answer these, we must consider the extent to which alphabetic cuneiform is a single, coherent 'thing'. It remains common to lump all alphabetic cuneiform under the umbrella heading of 'Ugaritic', with the main sub-distinction being the long alphabet/short alphabet dichotomy which this chapter has followed up till now, along with its associated geographical corollaries. However, this taxonomy is rather less clear-cut than its prevalence in the literature might suggest. Dietrich and Loretz (1988, 179 ff.) point to texts in the long alphabet which display apparent features of the short,[17] and to multiple variants of the short alphabet itself: some are in Ugaritic,

17 These are school exercises, which the authors plausibly suggest show scribes already familiar with the short alphabet being instructed in the long. Key examples for this are KTU 5.11 and 5.10

one Phoenician, some could be in either language; some are written left-to-right, some right-to-left; some have rounded-looking wedges that they connect spuriously with Cyprus, others standard or elongated wedges; some inscriptions use entirely different signs to others; the Beth Shemesh abecedary uses sign-forms similar to those from Ugarit, but displays a south Semitic letter-order. Dietrich and Loretz rightly make the point that these variants are perfectly to be expected if we have various local schools, each with their own traditions, and also correctly say that the umbrella term 'Ugaritic' is unhelpful and should not be maintained (Dietrich and Loretz 1988, 266–267).

But while this is right so far as it goes, it is hard not to wonder whether it is appropriate to think of the short alphabet as a coherent entity at all. With so much variety in such a small corpus, even in items found at the same site, can we really speak of 'traditions' or 'schools'? I do not see that from so few examples there is any way we could distinguish those from the quirks, choices or mistakes of individual writers. The problem is compounded by the essential absence of any time-depth in the material. As we have seen, the dating for the objects inscribed with short alphabetic inscriptions, where they can be dated at all, is hardly more precise than 'the end of the Late Bronze Age'. Chronological distinctions are somewhat more possible in the long alphabet corpus – mainly because some tablets record the reigning monarch or geopolitical events – but even there, the surviving material belongs to a relatively brief period and does not display much in the way of diachronic change in either script or language. We cannot, in short, trace much in the way of internal development in practice within the alphabetic cuneiform corpus, which makes looking for 'traditions' or 'schools' highly speculative at best. Rather than trying to establish bounded, reified forms of a script and trace discrete variants as derivatives of these through a kind of family tree (whether the long alphabet is taken as the original and all other variations as essentially permutations of it, or vice versa, as Dietrich and Loretz would have it), it makes more sense to me to think in terms of a network of script-forms and practices analogous to how we think about culture more broadly – either utilising shared elements or innovating in ways driven by local contingencies and the agency of users (Fig. 3.2); nothing fixed or bounded but each attestation in some way an example of hybridisation (Bhabha 1994; Voskos and Knapp 2008).

From this perspective there is no such thing as 'Ugaritic' script, or even 'alphabetic cuneiform' as a coherent entity, but rather a mesh of interrelating but idiosyncratic realisations of the idea of writing using an alphabet of wedge-forms. While in some places, such as Ugarit, local élites may have promoted and reinforced particular bundles of practices, this does not grant them primacy and we should not assume that, for example, a Phoenician potter in Sarepta saw themselves as consciously 'Ugaritising' when they wrote using alphabetic cuneiform, any more than they believed themselves to be evoking the writing practices of Kamid el-Loz or Qadesh or Beth Shemesh.

which are in the same hand and seem to show a progression towards greater proficiency in the standard orthography on the part of the scribe.

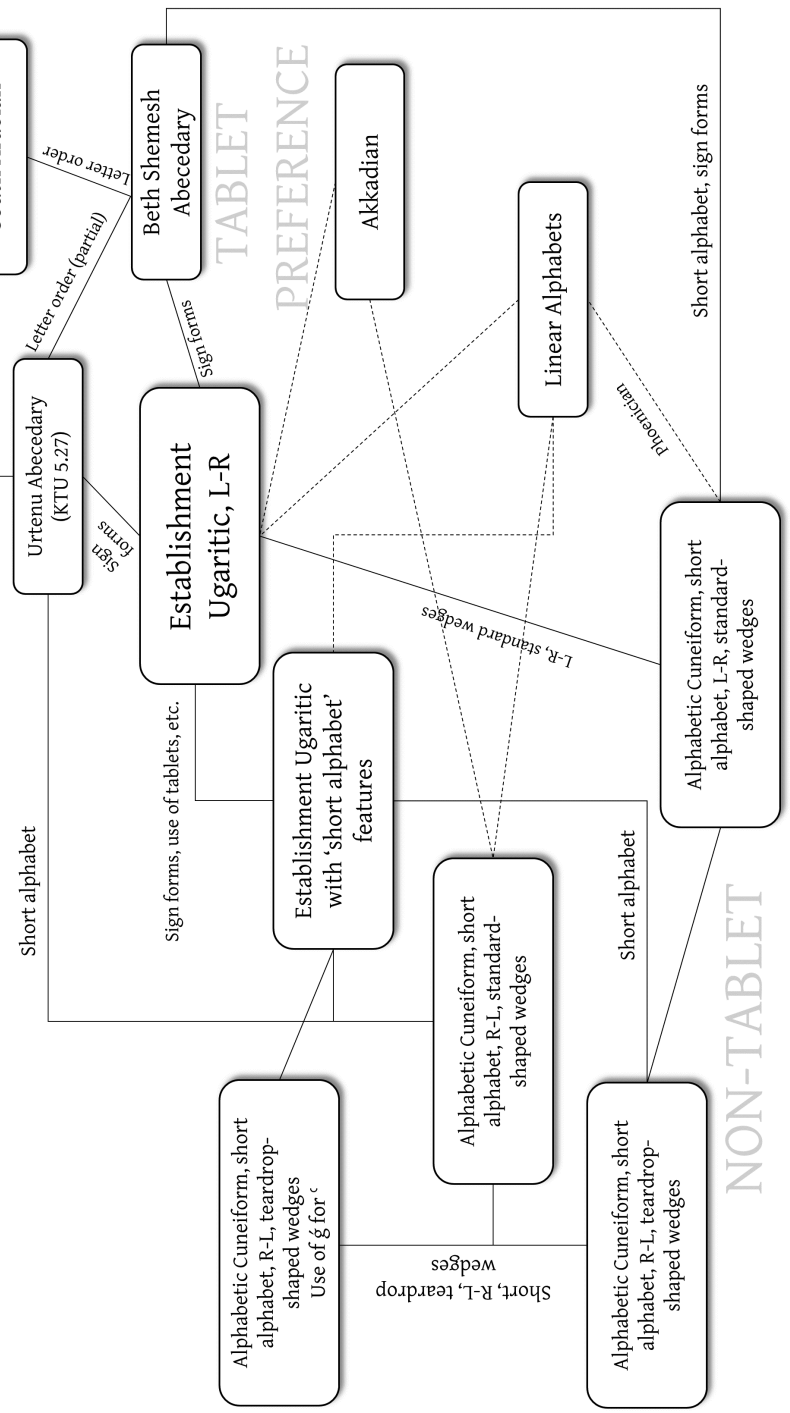


Figure 3.2. An attempt at drawing a mesh of relationships and links relating to Alphabetic Cuneiform. Such networks might be drawn in several ways based on various characteristics; this is intended to illustrate the method, not propose a rigid or definitive 'right answer'.

Of course, it may be that they did indeed see the script as particularly associated with a particular person, centre or tradition – at present the evidence is far too scanty to draw any conclusions. It would be premature to see Phoenician use of this script as part of a wider turn towards the local or Syrian.

Much the same will apply to questions of any Mesopotamian connotations the cuneiform script may have held. Certainly the idea of cuneiform came to the Levant from the east, and it has been suggested that some alphabetic cuneiform signs derive, at least partially, from Akkadian forms (Dietrich and Loretz 1988, 35 ff., 99 ff.), but if we see the relationships and inspirations of alphabetic cuneiform as a mesh or network, then there are a great many nodes between Sarepta and Mesopotamia. It is doubtful how much knowledge the average potter would have had of these more distant links, and how much day-to-day thought they would have given to them if they did. Probably no more than the average English-user gives to the Greek or Phoenician forebears of our own script.

The Question of Literacy

The second question is what this inscribed object tells us about literacy in Late Bronze Age Phoenicia. I have suggested that the inscribed handle from Sarepta is most likely the work of an individual potter, working outside a centralised administration or production structure. This implies that literacy was not confined to élite cadres of specialist scribes, but that other members of society may have been literate, particularly skilled artisans such as pottery producers.[18] There is a question, however, of what exactly 'literacy' means in such cases, and we should not make the mistake of assuming it was an all-or-nothing affair. On the contrary, in all lettered societies literacy is a spectrum, ranging from complete illiteracy at one extreme to complete mastery of sophisticated literary effect or detailed scholarly writing at the other.

Even among scribes it is likely there were different degrees of proficiency, with some having the multilingual, multi-script and historic knowledge attested by multilingual lexical tables such as those found at Ugarit, while others merely had the knowledge of Ugaritic or Akkadian necessary for them to carry out their regular tasks; once we move beyond the world of the establishment and its administrative and religious needs, writers could have been fully proficient in a script sufficiently

18 It has often been assumed that literacy in the Near East was the prerogative of the elites only, even after the advent of the alphabet, which was considerably simpler to learn than the large, complex and multivalent repertoire of Akkadian cuneiform, *e.g.* Whitt 1995; Rollston 2010; however, while levels of literacy fluctuated over time, there is evidence that for much of the second millennium cuneiform writing was practised beyond elite circles (Vanstiphout 1995; Charpin 2010, 53 ff.; Veldhuis 2011). It is therefore far from unlikely that the same was true for the much simpler alphabetic scripts.

to serve their purposes – such as labelling the recipients of a commodity – without having anything like the breadth and depth of knowledge of writing of palace scribes.[19]

A potter might have full command of the writing skills necessary to be able to write or read any permutation of label of producer, recipient, place of origin or destination on a vessel, and might do so with full confidence; but they might struggle when faced with the rather different conventions of, for example, writing a letter. The short alphabet inscriptions vary greatly in the levels of skill and literacy they presuppose – the three signs of KTU 6.67 from Kamid el-Loz are a different proposition from the carelessly-written full sentence of KTU 6.70 from Sarepta, and different again from the wedges incised into metal on the Hala Sultan Tekke bowl (KTU 6.68) and Mt. Tabor knife (KTU 6.1). If these items imply a wider literacy beyond the scribal tradition, they do not point to a simple or uniform phenomenon, and we will need considerably more evidence before we can properly illuminate its full nature.

The Relationship between Alphabetic Cuneiform and Linear Alphabets in Late Bronze Age Culture

The earliest canonical inscriptions in the linear Phoenician alphabet are generally dated around the tenth or eleventh centuries BC, depending whether one wants to begin counting with the Aḥiram Sarcophagus or the inscribed bronze arrowheads found at various Lebanese sites.[20] It is clear that this script had an extensive and complex prior history, as attested by the several 'proto-Canaanite' inscriptions from the Levantine littoral, which point to a tradition stretching right back to the 'proto-Sinaitic' inscriptions made by Canaanite miners at Serabiṭ el-Khadim, apparently inspired by Egyptian hieroglyphs (Sass 1988, 2004–2005; Haring, this volume). Unfortunately, the relatively small corpus of material and its rather wide dispersal in time and place leave a number of major lacunae that make it exceedingly difficult to establish clear through-lines or relationships, to identify which script variants led to others and which were evolutionary dead-ends, and to say what the status of linear alphabetic writing was in any particular period or location.

This is evidently a subject that requires a much fuller treatment than space permits here, so I will confine myself to the uncontroversial statement that linear script almost certainly existed in the coastal Levant at the time these alphabetic cuneiform inscriptions were made, and likely in forms every bit as nebulous and multifarious as those of alphabetic cuneiform itself, though we might assume that one or more variants were coming to closely resemble early Phoenician script.

While the majority of proto-Canaanite inscriptions come from Palestine, a number of authors have argued for the linear script having been an important inspiration for

19 For a discussion of these issues as they relate to Akkadian cuneiform, see Veldhuis 2011.

20 Benjamin Sass has recently argued for a lower date in the ninth century (Sass 2005, 2017; Finkelstein and Sass 2013).

the creation of alphabetic cuneiform, and linear prototypes have been suggested for a number of alphabetic cuneiform signs, occurring both at Ugarit and in varieties from elsewhere (Sass 1988, 5; Dietrich and Loretz 1988; Rollston 2010, 17). The convincingness of these identifications unsurprisingly varies greatly, and this is not the place to debate them in detail; certainly at least some are persuasive enough that contact and mutual influence between linear and cuneiform alphabetic scripts seems likely from internal evidence as well as the general common-sense assumption that two alphabetic writing systems in a relatively small, culturally similar region are unlikely to have developed entirely independently.[21]

We should, then, tentatively add linear alphabets into our imagined meshes of writing variants in play in the Late Bronze Age Levant, and it follows that users may have thought about their acts of writing as much in relation to these as to other forms of alphabetic cuneiform. As to what they may have thought, or why cuneiform may have been chosen over linear scripts, that will have to await further evidence, but I think it will probably be more productive to approach the issue from the basis that all these ways of writing were entangled together in a single mesh encompassing the various ways of writing available in the region, their relationships with each other and with the broader culture; it was not a straightforward linear/cuneiform dichotomy any more than it was a simple long/short alphabet dichotomy within alphabetic cuneiform.

cuneiform-inscribed objects. In spite of the scanty evidence, it seems likely that the Sarepta handle was inscribed by someone in the workshop of the potter who made it, a man by the name of Ydnbʿl. We do not know that he worked in the pottery workshop where the broken fragment was found, but Ockham's razor would suggest that is probably the likeliest possibility. An artisan rather than a scribe per se and not affiliated with any centralised bureaucracy, Ydnbʿl nevertheless had sufficient literacy to label his products with his own name and that of the intended recipient, using good grammar and phraseology similar to that seen in later dedications. We might never know why he chose the particular variety of alphabetic cuneiform that he did, or whether he felt he was doing anything significant in using his local, Phoenician, dialect rather than that of Ugarit, but it seems more likely that this was just another crystallisation of the shifting, nebulous, unstandardised mesh of writing practices current in the Levantine littoral towards the end of the Bronze Age.

Conclusion

In looking again at the inscribed storage-vessel handle from Sarepta, this chapter has had both methodological and specific intentions. Methodologically, I have sought to re-emphasise that inscriptions are not free-floating things-in-themselves that can be understood entirely through epigraphic and palaeographic techniques, but are physical artefacts whose materiality and archaeological contexts are crucial to how we understand their places in society. If we are to move forward in our understanding of the inscriptions, and of Phoenician and Ugaritian culture in general, we need to unite archaeology with epigraphy and think carefully about what inscriptions are written on, what these objects were used for and how they enabled, limited and required actions of the people who interacted with them. If, on asking these questions, this chapter has often been able to offer only tentative answers on the basis of the available evidence, this only reinforces the need for the physical objects to be looked at again, and for new discoveries to be given much more rounded, interdisciplinary publication than has often been the case in the past.

The more specific focus of this chapter was to elucidate the place of this early Phoenician-inscribed object, both within Phoenician and wider Levantine culture at the end of the Late Bronze Age, and in terms of its relationships with other alphabetic

21 The most persuasive correspondence between the cuneiform and linear alphabets is between 𐎎 and Phoenician s: 𐤎. See Pardee 2007; Dietrich and Loretz 1988.