The origins of the alphabet have intrigued human curiosity since ancient times’, wrote Joseph Naveh in his significant study, *Early History of the Alphabet* (1982). Herodotus in the 5th century BC stated that the Greeks learned the alphabet from the Phoenicians through the legendary figure of Cadmus, c.2000 BC. Other ancient thinkers agreed about the Phoenician link, but differed as to how the Phoenicians acquired their knowledge of alphabetic writing. Diodorus Siculus and Pliny the Elder credited this to the Assyrians; Plato and Tacitus claimed it was of alphabetic writing. Diodorus Siculus and Pliny the Elder stated that the Greeks learned the alphabet from the Iberian peninsula, which show both Phoenician and Greek alphabet and the 6th-century Palaeohispanic scripts of the Levant, to the earliest, 8th-century evidence of the Phoenicians to the Greeks was modified by the scribal practice of Aramaic, the language of the later Assyrians.

Naveh did not claim to have resolved the question. Nor does the latest volume on the subject, *Understanding Relations between Scripts: early alphabets*. It ranges expertly and thought-provokingly from the possible Egyptian origins of the alphabet as early as 1900 BC (as suggested by brief, apparently alphabetic inscriptions discovered in Egypt in the 1990s), via the 13th-century Ugaritic cuneiform alphabet from Syria and the 11th-century Phoenician alphabet of the Levant, to the earliest, 8th-century evidence of the Greek alphabet and the 6th-century Palaeohispanic scripts of the Iberian peninsula, which show both Phoenician and Greek influence. The book arises from a conference of the same title that took place in Cambridge University’s Faculty of Classics in 2017 as part of an ongoing project, Contexts of and Relations between Early Writing Systems (CREWS). Its contributors – all academics writing for fellow specialists – assess the often-conflicting evidence. As the editors Philip Boyes and Philippa Steele comment, the essays ‘open a set of windows on to the development, adoption, and adaptation of alphabetic scripts by people in cultures across the Mediterranean and Near East, allowing both the similarities and differences to shine through.’

Perhaps the most-puzzling problem is that advanced scripts existed in Crete and Greece during the 2nd millennium BC: first Cretan Hieroglyphs, then Minoan Linear A, then Mycenaean Linear B, which ceased to be written after 1200 BC, leaving Greece apparently unlettered until c.730 BC – the date of a vase from Athens, inscribed in alphabetic Greek to ‘him who dances most delicately’. Yet, in that illiterate interval – the so-called Greek ‘Dark Age’ – the Phoenician alphabet certainly spread around the eastern Mediterranean. Quite possibly, it triggered the Greek alphabet long before the 8th century, suggest several contributors. Rather than an ‘alphabetic big bang’, the Greek alphabet ‘spread and developed at a more natural pace’, writes Willemijn Waal: its earliest usage does not survive because it was largely for economic and administrative records written on perishable materials, unlike that artistic vase. Possibly so – yet Linear B, undoubtedly used for economic and administrative records, has survived. The Greek alphabetic mystery surely persists.

*Andrew Robinson*

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**Journey to the City**

**a companion to the Middle East Galleries at the Penn Museum**

*Edited by Steve Tinney and Karen Sonik*

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The history of the Penn Museum is tied up with archaeology in the Middle East. Founded in 1887, when the University of Pennsylvania was organising the first American archaeological project in the region, the museum came to house finds from their many excavations at sites across Iraq and Iran, among them Nippur, Ur and Hasanlu. This book introduces these sites and the rise of urban living, through the lens of Penn’s Middle East Galleries, which reopened after renovation in 2018. The result is an attractive publication, rich in images of objects. Informative chapters set the sites and related artefacts in context, covering currency, warfare, religion, death, and more. Some chapters are devoted to a particular city: At Nippur the target of Penn’s first excavations in Iraq (the first season of which ended with the camp burned down), we see how a city that had lost some of its status as a religious centre survived under successive empires until AD 800. While urban centres from prehistory to the early modern period are the focus, the book also looks beyond the city limits to consider the lives of nomads and how they have shaped the story of the city.