

Understanding Relations between Scripts II: early alphabets

Edited by Philip J Boyes

and Philippa M Steele

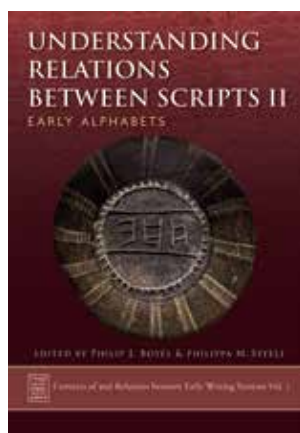
Oxbow Books, £50

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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 an Egyptian invention. Current epigraphical evidence supports both possibilities: that the alphabet originated in Egypt, but its transmission from 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



Multisensory Living in Ancient Rome: power and space in Roman houses

Hannah Platts

Bloomsbury Academic, £85

ISBN 978-1350114326

When you invite someone over for dinner, you probably want the food to taste good, and perhaps to be able to offer your guest a comfy chair. In this way, we try to manipulate the sensory experiences guests have in our homes.

The same was true for home-owners

in ancient Rome, where visitors may have been paying more than a social call.

Sight tends to dominate how we perceive the ancient world – we look at plans to see how a building is laid out, for instance – but, as Hannah Platts makes clear on her journey through the house, there is more than meets the eye. Focusing on the owner, but also considering the experiences of others in the household, this book draws on archaeological evidence from Rome, Pompeii, and Herculaneum, and texts by Pliny the Younger, Livy, Seneca, and others, to highlight how the domestic space can be used to display power, from the cool touch of marble to the sweet scent of flowers. There are ways to deal with unpleasant attacks on the senses, too, such as fountains to distract from the din from the street outside, and closed doors to weaken the smells of the kitchen (where there may also be a toilet), as this detailed book explores.

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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

University of Pennsylvania Press,

£22.99

ISBN 978-1931707145

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.

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