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Early Alphabets

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Issues in studying early alphabets

Philip J. Boyes and Philippa M. Steele

Within the Western world, the Alphabet (with a capital A) has become an icon of culture, knowledge and education.¹ It is among the first things learned as part of a formal education and in the form of alphabet charts and abecedarian literature is visually and conceptually ubiquitous as young children are first forming an awareness of what education is. In a sense, the alphabet has come to be identified with that education. Knowing the alphabet, being literate in that specific writing system, is seen as a watershed in intellectual development; the achievement of a certain minimum standard for the participation in mainstream, civilised society.

Of course, this is true to differing degrees with any modern writing system that is taught within a formal educational infrastructure and it is not unique to alphabets that writing can become closely bound up in ideas of identity and educational status. However, the West's historically-rooted cultural and political hegemony has allowed those socialised within it to normalise, privilege and arguably fetishise 'the Alphabet' in ways that are less open to users of writing systems without such a cross-cultural global reach and centuries of political and ideological dominance to back it up. For many, both in academia and the wider culture, the temptation has been to see alphabetic writing as the pinnacle of the development of human writing, with other writing systems either implicitly or explicitly relegated to primitive stages on the way, with corresponding implications for the societies that used and continue to use them.

For those of us who study alphabetic writing, we must walk the line between illuminating the history and importance of such scripts and fetishising them as part of a teleological and eurocentric historical and cultural narrative. Indeed, we must resist the very idea of 'the Alphabet' as a reified, single thing with a cohesive, unilinear evolutionary trajectory. As the contributions to this volume show, from the

1 Cultural histories of the alphabet are surprisingly few and far between. For one, albeit rather eurocentric and art-historically focused, see Drucker 1995.

outset alphabets have been plural, fuzzy-edged and characterised by experimentation. Even the question of what constitutes alphabetic writing is less straightforward than it might initially appear. Does a script count as an alphabet if it only represents consonants and not vowels? Some would say not, but it would be inconceivable to discuss the history of alphabets without considering the consonantal Semitic systems of the Bronze and Iron Ages. And even modern orthographic systems, which we tend to think of as alphabets with full vowel repertoires, can also allow for additional signs which function outside the alphabetic system. Ideograms (signs which represent entire concepts or ideas) can be used, such as for numbers; or logograms, where the sign stands for a word, as in £ or \$. Even the emojis which are now increasingly a feature of electronic communication can be seen as extra-alphabetic supplements to the writing system, sometimes specifying and clarifying the sense in which a word or sentence is to be read (like determinatives in other writing systems) or conveying other information on emotional or incidental context ☺. Similarly, writing systems which operate primarily along non-alphabetic lines may also include alphabetic elements, as Egyptian hieroglyphs did, or modern Japanese Rōmaji (employing Roman letters which supplement the already existing logographic and syllabic repertoires of the Japanese writing system).

Alphabets do not stand apart from and supersede other forms of writing, then, but co-exist with and blend into them. The contributions to this volume demonstrate that alphabetic writing can only be understood within the context of – and in relation to – other writing systems. This is true not just for the early period this volume is most concerned with, but throughout the history of alphabets, up to the present day. We will begin by looking in more detail at the questions of what alphabets are, then consider their early histories before moving on to explore what their importance and cultural impact has been, and how this has shaped, and continues to shape, research.

What is an alphabet?

As we have already seen, it is not necessarily obvious what counts as an ‘alphabet’ and what does not, and this depends in part on how we view the classification of writing systems. From a linguistic point of view, there are several ways in which the signs (or graphemes) of a writing system can be arranged to reflect the language represented, corresponding broadly to different ways of breaking the language up into units. The type of grapheme that is often thought of as the least analytical is the logogram, which stands for a whole word without breaking it up into smaller units, resulting in a writing system that could potentially consist of thousands of signs in order to allow full representation of the underlying language.² In practice, however, writing systems with logographic signs typically employed other types of sign and/or could

² Other terms regularly encountered are ‘ideograms’, which we have already discussed, and ‘pictograms’, referring to a deliberate visual representation of a concept/word in the form of its

read the sign with a different type of value, like the logo-syllabic cuneiform systems of Mesopotamia or the combination of logography and phonography (the latter applied to signs representing individual sounds or combinations of sounds) found in Egyptian hieroglyphics. Other types of notation can break language into smaller units, or segments, for example a sign for a whole syllable or a sign for a single phoneme, the latter broadly categorised as alphabetic; in either case, this involves a further step in analysing language by sound units (whether whole syllables or individual phonemes) and so relies on an attempt to represent the phonological repertoire of a given language. Syllabic scripts typically have a larger repertoire of signs than alphabetic ones because more combinations of phoneme+phoneme(+phoneme) grouping are being represented, while an alphabetic script minimises the number of signs needed by narrowing down further to one sign per phoneme. Consonantal scripts, sometimes classified as ‘abjads’ (on which, see below), essentially analyse language units at the same level as those that are often referred to as ‘true alphabets’ (like the Greek and Roman ones), but the difference is the extent to which or way in which certain phonemes (in this case the vowels) are marked.

The famous evolutionary model of the development of writing espoused by Ignace Gelb (Gelb 1963, esp. 220 ff.), whereby logo-syllabic scripts gave way to syllabic scripts and they in turn gave way to alphabetic scripts, viewed the more analytical systems as essentially better than the less analytical systems, such that only unidirectional development along this trajectory was possible. He envisaged the history of writing as a journey from semasiographic pre-writing (pictures for concepts) via the rebus principle (recognising the sounds of the word represented in the picture) to various stages of phonography (logo-syllabic, syllabic and then alphabetic systems), with each step representing an improvement on earlier versions of writing. Gelb’s study was undoubtedly an important one that marked a turning point in scholarship on the history of writing, but even though its ambitious attempt to analyse and categorise different types of writing system sparked widespread new interest in this field of study, which Gelb named ‘grammatology’, its legacy was for a long time an overemphasis on the evolutionary principles Gelb advocated. Indeed, twentieth century eurocentric discourse on the Greek alphabet as a civilising vehicle, which in turn enabled the progress of human thought, owed a considerable debt to Gelb’s work (see below).

One of Gelb’s more peculiar claims was that the consonantal scripts used to write West Semitic languages (Phoenician, Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, *etc.*), and with them the phonographic component of Egyptian writing, were in some sense syllabic, since each sign took for granted the inclusion also of adjacent vowels (Gelb 1963, 147–153); the suggestion was followed by, and refined in, Swiggers 1984. The advantage for Gelb’s line of argumentation was that this would place the West Semitic consonantal scripts at an earlier stage in the evolution of writing, making

sign. Such signs may often be logographic but they are not necessarily. For a consideration of this issue in relation to Linear B, for example, see Thompson 2012.

the addition of dedicated vowel signs and the move towards a ‘true alphabet’ (the accomplishment of the Greeks in his view) the ultimate achievement and end goal of human literacy. But consonantal writing systems are significantly different from the syllabic systems with which Gelb tried to group them, a key difference being that syllabic systems (like the linear scripts of the Aegean or the cuneiform scripts of Mesopotamia) will always specify the vowel involved in the syllable represented by a given sign, while the purely consonantal scripts entirely omit any indication of the presence or absence of vowels, as well as any specification of vowels that may be present in a given sequence.³

More recent work on writing systems has begun to redress the overemphasis on evolutionary principles found in Gelb’s work, but uncertainty or disagreement over the classification of types of system has lingered. Since we are particularly concerned here with the systems that encode language at the phonemic level (as opposed to syllabic or lexical), given that this is a volume themed around ‘Early Alphabets’, the different classifications proposed by Peter Daniels (Daniels 1990, 1992, 2006, 2018) cannot be overlooked. He separated ‘alphabets’, *i.e.* scripts with dedicated separate signs for vowel notation alongside consonant notation (containing ‘characters that denote all or most of the individual segments, the phonemes, of a language, both vocalic and consonantal’: Daniels 1990, 729), from two other types: scripts that denote consonants only and do not have signs for vowels (‘abjads’) and scripts that do have vowel notation but via some kind of diacritical marks rather than separate signs (‘abugidas’). The last category (‘abugidas’), represented by scripts such as Ge’ez or Devanagari, used for Ethiopic and Indian languages respectively, does indeed represent something slightly different from phonemic notation, because the sign to which a vowel-denoting diacritical mark is added starts with a basic *syllabic* value; this apparent mixture of phonemographic and syllabographic properties has given rise to other terms for such scripts, including ‘neo-syllabary’ (Février 1948) and the more prevalent ‘alpha-syllabary’ (Bright 1992, 2000). There have been many more attempts to create a typology of writing systems that distinguishes between such types effectively, usually with slightly different results each time; we have neither the space nor any intention to review or summarise this wealth of scholarship here.⁴

Whether or not phonemographic scripts with signs for both consonants and vowels are grouped together with scripts with signs for only consonants (not vowels) may appear from the to-ing and fro-ing of grammatological scholarship to be an entirely academic question; but there are some important underlying issues here, which also lie at the heart of our decision to group them both under the general heading of ‘alphabets’. The first is that, as we have seen, both types of script are based on

³ ‘Specification’ here should be understood usually as an indication of the quality of vowel, while vowel quantity was far less likely to be distinguished in other early writing systems.

⁴ There are some recent typological studies that give helpful accounts of the developments in the field over time (*e.g.* Joyce and Borgwaldt 2011; Gnanadesikan 2017).

language analysis at the level of individual phonemic units. If they differ in their extent of coverage of a given language’s phonemic repertoire, this can be observed to be more of a scale than an either/or scenario. For example, the Greek alphabet does not achieve full phonemic representation, given that phonemic vowel length is not distinguished in many early Greek alphabets; some West Semitic scripts do develop ways to write vowels (the system of *matres lectionis* used in Aramaic being a good example); the early Latin alphabet over-represents its velar phonemes with the allophonic C/K/Q signs; the modern English alphabet’s sign values show a very high degree of variation that has been strongly influenced by historical orthographic traditions (*e.g.* spellings reflecting older pronunciations and/or differing linguistic derivations); and so on. Even though the level of language analysis is at its basis the same, the script used for any one language is not a simple one-for-one phoneme-grapheme correspondence; rather it is a product of choices about which phonemes need or do not need to be represented, which may in turn be driven by language-dependent motivations such as the need to avoid ambiguity (see Meillet 1919 and, on choices related to vowel representation specifically, Crellin Forthcoming).

A second issue, and one often overlooked in typological studies, is that writing is determined and affected by its social and cultural as well as its linguistic context. Militating against Gelb’s contention that alphabets are the ultimate evolutionary outcome of the human development of writing, there are numerous instances of syllabic writing systems developed from alphabets (such as the Palaeohispanic scripts) or used in spite of familiarity with alphabetic writing, both in the ancient world (see *e.g.* Steele 2018, chapter 5, on Cypriot writing) and more recently (for example the alpha-syllabaries used for Cree and other languages or the Cherokee syllabary). Indeed, very often we can observe that the choice to use, or the development of, a particular writing system is determined far less by a desire for faithful language representation than by the purposes for and contexts in which it is used. In the case of supposedly inefficient syllabic scripts, for instance, it has been pointed out that assumptions about their unwieldiness for a given language (*e.g.* that Linear B is ill suited for writing Greek) are often inaccurate or overstated and fail to take into account the social landscape in which documents written in them operated (see Consani 2017 on Linear B; also Consani 2003 and Miller 1994 on linguistic motivation for design of syllabic scripts). As we shall see later, however, previous scholarship surrounding the cultural importance of alphabetic writing itself needs to be revisited with a critical eye.

The historical development and spread of alphabetic writing systems in antiquity

The developmental trajectory of alphabetic writing has traditionally been something of a paradox, both well understood and rather ambiguous. There has never been any doubt that it came to Europe from the Levant – Herodotos clearly stated as much (Histories 5.58), and the Greeks referred to their own system as φοινικία γράμματα – ‘Phoenician

letters'. Subsequent studies, both pre-modern and modern, have amply demonstrated the correctness of the ancient view. Until comparatively recently, however, there was much less interest in the alphabet's origins within the Levant – for many it was enough to know that it was Semitic in origin; the details of its invention were apparently of lesser importance to early modern scholarship (Delcor 1991).

Increasing light began to be shed on the origins of the alphabet in the late nineteenth and, especially, the early twentieth centuries. A key event was Flinders Petrie's discovery of early alphabetic inscriptions (which, in common with later Semitic writing systems, only record consonants and do not write vowels) in the Bronze Age mine-workings of Serabit el-Khadim in the Sinai peninsula. As Ben Haring illustrates in his contribution to this volume (pp. 53–67), while the date and translation of these texts remains subject to some controversy, it seems clear that these so-called Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions represent an early stage of the Levantine linear alphabets from which the Phoenician script developed. The more recent discovery of additional inscriptions of similar kind in the Wadi el-Hôl of Egypt's Western Desert (Darnell *et al.* 2005) confirms that these should be dated early; indeed, it pushes the likely date of the first creation of the alphabet back into the Egyptian Middle Kingdom, around the beginning of the second millennium BC. As Haring discusses, it is generally thought that these first alphabetic systems were created by Canaanite miners and soldiers who were drawing on and adapting ideas and signs from the Egyptian hieroglyphic and hieratic repertoires.

The development of the alphabet in the Levant during the second millennium BC remains ill-defined due to the rare and sporadic nature of the evidence (Finkelstein and Sass 2013; Sass 1988, 2004–5), but it is clear that this was a time of experimentation in which several related variants of linear alphabets were in use, and that they were gradually developing into the recognisable repertoire and sign-forms that would be standardised in early Phoenician around the turn of the first millennium BC.⁵ The processes of this standardisation are explored by Reinhard Lehmann in his chapter (pp. 69–90).

We should not, however, characterise the development of the alphabet in this period as straightforwardly, well ... linear. Alongside the linear descendants of the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions, other writing systems were in use in the Levant – principally the logo-syllabic scripts of Mesopotamia and Egyptian hieroglyphics. The influence of these other writing systems contributed to attempts to take the idea of the alphabet in different directions. Perhaps the most notable example is the alphabetic cuneiform writing system of Ugarit, which blended influences of the linear alphabets with those of the Mesopotamian cuneiform tradition to create a unique system of its own. In her chapter in this volume, Silvia Ferrara (pp. 15–28) explores issues relating to the emergence of this system. While undoubtedly productive within Ugarit – being

⁵ Finkelstein and Sass 2013 place the differentiation of the non-Hebrew scripts slightly later, around the eighth century.

used for thousands of texts, including the first surviving works of literature written down in an alphabetic script – alphabetic cuneiform is often regarded as something of an idiosyncratic cul-de-sac, strongly associated with only a single city and remaining in use for only a few decades before being extinguished in Ugarit's destruction at the end of the Bronze Age. Philip Boyes (pp. 29–51) argues that we should not see it as so divorced from the wider processes of alphabetic development in the Levant, examining its involvement in the wider networks of scriptal experimentation beyond Ugarit's scribal elite, focusing in particular on a tantalising example of its use to write the Phoenician rather than Ugaritic dialect.

The transition from the Bronze to the Iron Age around the beginning of the twelfth century BC was marked by substantial upheavals in the societies, politics and international networks that had previously characterised the Eastern Mediterranean and Near East. Tangled up in these disruptions – both as a contributing factor and result – was the expansion and increasing significance of the coastal trading cities in what is now Lebanon (Boyes 2013). It was within the context of this commercial expansion – and the similar but slightly later expansion of the resurgent Greek polities, especially those of Euboea – that the adaptation of the Phoenician script for writing Greek is generally assumed to have taken place. Most classicists place this around the eighth century BC, probably at one of the mixed communities where Greeks and Phoenicians mingled, such as one of the Euboean colonies. Several semitists would prefer an earlier date, however, a question which Willemijn Waal addresses in detail in her chapter (pp. 109–124) alongside a consideration of the wider spread of alphabetic writing in areas such as Anatolia and Italy.

The key innovation found in the Greek alphabet was the redeployment of mostly unused consonantal signs to represent vowels, creating what has often been labelled the first true alphabet. The question of vowel representation is explored here in depth by Roger Woodard (pp. 91–107), who compares examples of this phenomenon in a number of systems. As we will see below, the creation of vowel signs has sometimes been seen as a revolutionary step in the development of human writing and cognition. We should be sceptical of such 'quantum leap' hypotheses, however. Semitic speakers were no strangers to experimenting with vowels, both in the form of *matres lectionis* (consonant signs used, whether sporadically or systematically, to write vowels) and Ugaritic's three 'alephs, which were selected based on their associated vowels. Moreover, the addition of dedicated vowel signs manifestly did not result in a single new alphabetic system. Around the end of the ninth century and during the eighth century BC, a whole range of new alphabetic systems, all sharing the innovation of the vowel signs, begin to be attested in the epigraphic record. Alphabetic writing emerged in Phrygia and Italy too, while even in Greece there was not a single system but rather a set of regional alphabets with their own distinct features, as discussed here by Philippa Steele in a chapter using ancient Crete as a case study to consider the processes of standardisation that created these fixed local scripts (pp. 125–149). Giorgos Bourogiannis's contribution (pp. 151–180) takes a different approach to similar questions, looking at some of the

earliest surviving Greek inscriptions alongside contemporary texts in Phoenician and Aramaic, examined against the background of cultural contact and multilingualism that must have influenced literacy in the eastern Mediterranean area. Indeed, there continued to be considerable long-term experimentation and variation in the signs and repertoires of alphabetic systems as time went on, a fact highlighted in Karin Tikkanen's discussion (pp. 181–196) of alphabetic writing in the Italic peninsula, with a particular focus on the Umbrian alphabet.

The movement of the alphabet is often presented as rather unidirectional, an *ex oriente lux* from the Levant to the Mediterranean and thence, via the Greeks and Romans, across Europe. However, alphabetic writing certainly travelled in other directions. The spread of Aramaic writing east into Mesopotamia, for instance, had massive repercussions for the region's traditional cuneiform culture, and ultimately supplanted both the writing system and the ancient scribal establishment it entailed. To the west, on the other hand, the adaptations of alphabetic writing in the Iberian Peninsula, discussed in this volume by Coline Ruiz Darasse (pp. 197–206), show that there was potential for quite drastic changes to the whole system, with some of the Palaeohispanic scripts being based on semi-syllabic principles. Such developments emphasise the fact that movements and adaptations of writing do not follow pre-determined or predictable trajectories, but rather are dependent on a whole range of linguistic, practical and/or socio-cultural factors.

The cultural significance of alphabetic writing

During the mid- to late-twentieth century, a highly influential school of linguists and anthropologists built on the evolutionary ideas of Gelb to propose the thesis that the invention of alphabetic writing marked a sea-change in human cognition, culture and civilisation. A key figure in this was the classicist Eric Havelock, who, in his *Preface to Plato* (Havelock 1963) and subsequent work, argued that the creation of the Greek alphabet was unique in first bringing about large-scale literacy, allowed human thought to transcend the limitations of 'the oral mind' and permitted sophisticated philosophy, logic and scientific enquiry.

May not all logical thinking as commonly understood be a product of Greek alphabetic literacy? (Havelock 1986, 39)

According to this formulation, the creation of the alphabet is directly responsible for all the higher forms of human thought; and, by extension, a significant cognitive rupture exists between the alphabetic cultures of the classical world and Europe on the one hand, and on the other their predecessors in the Near East who used other forms of writing, such as Sumerian or Akkadian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs, not to mention those more geographically distant cultures with non-alphabetic writing systems, such as Chinese and Mayan. Havelock followed Gelb in re-analysing the linear scripts of west Semitic as syllabaries in which vowels are implicit rather than explicit.

The alphabet was thus reserved purely for the Greeks, and the supposed revolution in human cognition could be aligned squarely with the ascendancy of classical civilisation and the European tradition. This done, alternative and earlier forms of literacy outside this tradition could be elided completely as irrelevant.

The Greeks did not just invent an alphabet; they invented literacy and the literate basis of modern thought. (Havelock 1982, 82)

Havelock was not alone in such sentiments. His ideas were foundational for anthropological commentators on literacy such as Jack Goody and Walter Ong, and it was here, rather than in his home discipline of classics, that arguably he had his greatest impact (Halverson 1992b, 148). Goody and Watt's (1963) initial statement of what came to be known as the 'literacy thesis' was published around the same time as Havelock's and expressed a similar notion that alphabetic literacy prompted a cognitive revolution. It even went further, extending the repercussions of alphabetic writing into the realm of socio-political organisation, suggesting that this new mass literacy and more sophisticated modes of thought allowed for and in a sense prompted the emergence of Greek democracy.

To begin with, the case of alphabetic reading and writing was probably an important consideration in the development of political democracy in Greece: in the fifth century a majority of the free citizens could apparently read the laws, and take an active part in elections and legislation. Democracy as we know it, then, is from the beginning associated with widespread literacy; and so to a large extent is the notion of the world of knowledge as transcending political units: in the Hellenic world diverse people and countries were given a common administrative system and a unifying cultural heritage through the written word. Greece is therefore considerably closer to being a model for the world-wide intellectual tradition of the contemporary literate world than those earlier civilizations of the Orient which each had its own localised traditions of knowledge. (Goody and Watt 1963, 332–333)

It goes without saying that these ideas are highly helleno- and euro-centric; eliding the distinction between literacy and use of alphabets, misguided in their effacement of the achievements of the ancient Near East and jumping through hoops to disqualify the earlier alphabetic traditions of the Levant from their alleged cognitive revolution. Unsurprisingly, alongside their undoubted influence, they have garnered widespread criticism, which, over the last three decades especially, has largely eroded their credibility (Halverson 1992a, 1992b).

It is probably true that reading and writing have the potential to change the way individuals think (Dehaene *et al.* 2015; Olson 1996), and have clear implications for society and culture more broadly, ranging from how a society engages with its own past and cultural memory, to how people access law or engage with religion. What is less clear, however, is that there is anything qualitatively different about the cognitive effects of *alphabetic* literacy as compared to other forms of writing. The literacy thesis focuses on just that – literacy – but generally fails to make (or even acknowledge the need to make) any argument for why this revolution should be associated with

the alphabetic writing of the Greeks rather than Sumerian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphs or Chinese logograms.

The quantitative aspect is also unlikely: it no longer seems that large-scale literacy was inaugurated by the Greek alphabet while prior Near Eastern writing systems were restricted to the rarefied world of elite scribes and palace and temple bureaucracies. On the contrary, even within the notoriously difficult logosyllabic system of Akkadian cuneiform, we have letters written between merchants and their families – both male and female – as early as the Old Assyrian *karum* or trading colony at Kaneš in the twentieth century BC (Larsen 2015, 54 ff.). Mesopotamian scholarship is becoming increasingly comfortable with the idea that there may have been relatively extensive cuneiform literacy beyond formal scribal infrastructures right up until the writing system began to be supplanted by alphabetic Aramaic (Veldhuis 2011, 73). On the other hand, the ease of learning alphabetic systems and the resulting likelihood of mass literacy may well also have been overstated, as Rollston (2010) has argued for first-millennium Israel. In both cases, we might plausibly reconstruct a situation where the highest levels of literacy were dominated by an elite associated with the palaces and the temples, but where a significant degree of wider literacy existed, which nevertheless fell some considerable way short of what we might term ‘mass literacy’. A similar model of relatively few, highly-educated literati and a larger, but by no means mass or universal, literacy in the general populace would not seem implausible for alphabetic writing in early Greece.⁶ In Cyprus, meanwhile, syllabographic writing lasted well into the Hellenistic period (despite demonstrable knowledge of the alphabet used for Greek elsewhere) and is attested in a range of inscription types, from official dedications to humble graffiti, pointing again towards relatively widespread competence in writing that nevertheless undoubtedly falls short of mass literacy.

This raises the question of what we actually *mean* by literacy in a given writing system. For a long time now it has been recognised that one can identify varying degrees of literacy, but there remains little consensus on what are the most appropriate and useful categories (Rollston 2010, 127; Thomas 2009). Any schema must differentiate, for instance, sophisticated scholarly proficiency that often includes multilingual and historical dimensions; the ability to read or write a full range of ‘everyday’ or non-scholarly material; the ability to work competently with a relatively limited range of texts relevant to a particular activity – such as labelling pots, or the basic ability to simply write one’s own name. We might also want to account for proficiency in standard versus non-standard forms of writing, or differences between ability to read and ability to write, or for the possibility of understanding the principles upon which a writing sequence operates without necessarily knowing how to actually read or write it. ‘Literacy’ is a broad church, and when we think about how one writing system or another affects it, we cannot afford to be overly reductive.

⁶ As starting points on alphabetic literacy in ancient Greece, see Harris 1989; Thomas 1992; Robb 1994; Small 1997; Pébarthe 2006; Johnson and Parker 2009; Missiou 2011.

Although Havelock never altered his views to any significant degree, Goody rowed back from many of the more controversial implications of his original thesis in later publications. A recent re-issue celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of Ong’s *Literacy and Orality* (Ong 2012), which strongly endorsed the Goody hypothesis, now includes a retrospective chapter by John Hartley which is critical of several aspects of the literacy thesis, including the idea that ‘literate’ and ‘oral’ societies are in some way distinct and opposed, rather than being aspects of human society which can coexist in various combinations and to varying degrees.

Where does this leave the significance of the alphabet? Can it be said to have had any particular impact beyond simply being another form of writing system that happened to become established in Europe? The answer may well be ideological rather than functional. While alphabetic writing in itself may not have had the near-mystical effects proposed for it by the likes of Havelock, *ideas* about the alphabet, about who it is for and its special qualities, have proven potent and persistent, as the influence of the literacy hypothesis itself demonstrates.

Regardless of the degree to which alphabetic systems are or are not in reality easier to acquire as a first writing system than alternative systems, it is arguable that throughout its early history, alphabetic writing maintained a certain association with the masses and the subaltern rather than the privileged highest echelons of society. The most likely setting for its creation seems to be among miners and soldiers, far from their Levantine homes and in the service of the Egyptian state. In the Bronze Age Levant, alphabetic inscriptions are generally less standardised and appear on quite different kinds of objects and in quite different contexts to the Akkadian texts of the elite. Some of these seem to be functional or commercial items such as coarse-ware jars, which hint at the sub-elite ‘middle classes’ of artisans and traders being an important locus for experimentation with such writing (Boyes, this volume). Alphabetic writing is first clearly associated with the state in Ugarit at the end of the Late Bronze Age, where it appears as a comparatively late counterpart to Akkadian cuneiform, the traditional prestige writing system of international administration. Unlike Akkadian, alphabetic cuneiform is used almost exclusively to write the local vernacular language of Ugaritic, and it is noteworthy that the important works of Ugarit’s literature, religion and identity are written in this script. It first appears at a time when the city is increasingly asserting its independence within the imperial structures of Bronze Age globalism, and parallels other ‘anti-globalist’ or ‘vernacularising’ trends elsewhere, such as the expansion of hieroglyphic Luwian in Anatolia. Arguably, the adoption of alphabetic cuneiform writing by the Ugaritian state should be seen as part of an ideological push by the ruling elite to assert its local identity and cement solidarity with the general population, an act of resistance against imperial pressures and homogenising international norms (Boyes 2019).

In this connection, it is notable that after the crisis at the end of the Bronze Age put paid to the structures of international trade, diplomacy and political domination which had hitherto existed, it was the substrate alphabetic writing systems and the

vernacular languages which remained. Ugarit may have gone, but elsewhere in the Levant, from Phoenicia to Israel/Palestine, there had been a clear shift in the balance of power away from the culturally and politically hegemonic scripts of Mesopotamia and Egypt and to the indigenous, 'grass-roots' alphabetic systems, a shift which is also paralleled in other areas of cultural practice and display (Boyes 2013). This was not a uniquely alphabetic phenomenon, however. The same processes allowed the burgeoning logo-syllabic Luwian hieroglyphs of Anatolia to finally supplant Hittite cuneiform and become the principal writing system of the former Hittite vassal states of northern Syria during the early first millennium. However, like these so-called Syro-Hittite polities themselves, the Luwian hieroglyphic script proved relatively short-lived. As Aramaean groups became increasingly significant in the region, their Aramaic language and its Phoenician-derived alphabetic script became predominant (Van den Hout 2006; Yakubovich 2008a; Payne 2010; Boyes 2019).

It is impossible to say whether this early status of the alphabet as the script of vernacular languages, in opposition to the globalised writing systems of the great empires, contributed to its lingering reputation as democratic, progressive and well-suited to mass literacy; but it certainly established early on several themes which, as we have seen, recur again and again in the cultural reception of alphabetic writing.

Across the Mediterranean, the starting point for alphabetic writing was very different. It was predominantly in the Aegean area that Mediterranean literacy flourished for a period in the Bronze Age, with the syllabic scripts of Crete and wider Greece that became strongly associated with economic administration.⁷ Although that relationship may have been present from the outset of Cretan writing (Cretan Hieroglyphic and Linear A both being strongly associated with sealing practices as well as, to different degrees, documents in the form of clay tablets), what is striking is that literacy clearly existed outside of the centralised administrative sphere for a long time as well (on some related issues, see Steele 2017a). By the time Linear B was developed for the use of the Greek-speaking Mycenaean administrations, however, the surviving examples of non-administrative writing almost completely dry up, suggesting very strongly that literacy became restricted over time. This in turn can explain what looks like a complete loss of literacy at the time of the fall of the Mycenaean palaces around the end of the thirteenth century BC: when the palaces fell, the primary context in which writing had been used for perhaps the last two centuries disappeared. So, when alphabetic writing arrived in Greece, it was demonstrably a newly established phenomenon that must have followed a period of illiteracy, and had nothing to do with the earlier use of syllabic writing. Only in Cyprus did syllabic writing continue in an unbroken tradition from the Bronze to the Iron Age.

Judging from our earliest surviving attestations from the eighth century BC, when alphabetic writing surfaced in Greece it was being used for very different purposes

⁷ The Aegean scripts were the focus of the first *Understanding Relations Between Scripts* volume (Steele (ed.) 2017b).

from those that lay at the heart of Mycenaean administrative writing. Two important trends emerged. One was the use of writing in broadly-speaking elite circles and especially in sympotastic contexts (see recently Węcowski 2017); the use of hexameter in some of the longer inscriptions of this type has often been remarked on, but Barry Powell's corresponding thesis that the alphabet was adopted and adapted specifically for the purpose of recording the Homeric epics certainly stretches the available evidence too far (Powell 1991). The second trend, which saw the alphabet emerging in short inscriptions (including often-overlooked single-sign ones) in contexts that appear to be related to trade and exchange, indeed militates against Powell's Homeric theory and suggests that quotidian use of writing for more mundane purposes may have been part of the story from the beginning. The earliest surviving phase of alphabetic literacy in Greece probably incorporated both these elements, which should also be understood within a wider context of what may be non-literate markings (Thomas forthcoming). In all cases, pottery vessels are overwhelmingly the most popular objects upon which surviving early Greek alphabetic inscriptions appear.

Perhaps one of the most important oversights in studies of the development of the alphabet in the Mediterranean, however, is to see the phenomenon as a purely Greek one. Both the Italian and Anatolian peninsulas have provided specimens of alphabetic writing, almost identical in form to early Greek alphabetic writing (i.e. not only very similar sign shapes but most notably also the inclusion of the same dedicated vowel signs), that pre-date the earliest surviving Greek alphabetic texts.⁸ There could be an element of chance in what has survived and what has not, but it is clear that alphabetic writing in the earlier part of the first millennium BC was by no means restricted to Greece. Whatever we think about how Greece, Etruria and Phrygia adopted alphabetic writing and the relationship between these traditions (which remains a topic of continued debate as shown by some contributions to this volume), from a material point of view one thing is clear: Phrygia and Etruria display some very similar trends to Greece in terms of the media on which their surviving early alphabetic texts are written, especially in clay vessels of various kinds (some high status, some not) bearing short inscriptions. Reconstructing the exact path of the alphabet from one area to another may be beyond hope in the current state of evidence, but on the other hand we can go much further in observing the participation of societies around the interconnected Mediterranean sea in very similar modes of elite behaviour, trade and literacy.

Conclusions

It should be clear by now that there is no such thing as 'The Alphabet', a single reified landmark of human cultural and social evolution that superseded all other forms of

⁸ In Italy an inscription from Gabii dated to c. 770 (Bietti Sestieri 1990, 83–88), in Turkey the earliest Phrygian texts (see Brixhe 2004, 2007).

writing. Rather, alphabetic scripts have taken many forms, and their meaning and importance have also differed greatly depending on the social, cultural and political contexts in which they found themselves. The global ascendancy of alphabets has had less to do with a simple narrative of evolutionary progression resulting from their inherent 'superiority' than with alphabets being in the right places at the right time, filling cultural or ideological niches, and the societies that adopted and adapted them quickly finding practical uses for them. The spread of alphabetic writing must be understood, then, as fundamentally contextual and tied in at least as much with questions of human agency as the intrinsic qualities of the writing systems themselves.

The contributions in this volume present a series of case-studies that explore various aspects of early alphabets and considerably flesh out the framework we have presented here. They cannot, of course, be exhaustive in their coverage of every feature of early alphabets, but in their diversity of approach, areas of interest and chronological focus, they 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.