

# The early history of the Greek alphabet: new evidence from Eretria and Methone

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*Inscriptions on new archaeological finds in the Aegean, examined alongside linguistic evidence relating to Greek and Phrygian vowels, are here used to explore the origins and spread of the Greek alphabet. The ‘invention’ of vowels happened just once, with all of the various Greek, Phrygian and Italic alphabets ultimately deriving from this single moment. The idea spread rapidly, from an absence of writing in the ninth century BC to casual usage, including jokes, by 725 BC. The port of Methone in the northern Aegean emerges as a probable candidate for the site of origin. A place where Greeks and Phoenicians did business together, with international networks; was this where Semitic, Greek and Phrygian letters first coalesced?*

*Keywords:* Aegean, Greek, alphabet, writing, inscription

## Introduction

The adoption of alphabetic writing from the Phoenicians, and its adaptation, by the Greeks sometime in the eighth century BC, was one of the most critical developments in world history. The ramifications were almost immediate and far-reaching. For the first time, writing was not limited to a scribal class serving a ruling or religious elite, whether in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Levant or in the syllabic Linear B world of the Mycenaean palatial system. As I have stated elsewhere:

*Henceforth, a bard could reach across centuries to relate a real or imagined world of heroes [Homer], a woman could write poetry [Sappho], a farmer could write of works and days, even on the birth of gods [Hesiod], a playwright could construct figures of high tragedy or slapstick comedy [Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes], a seasoned traveler could recount his journeys and the customs of the peoples he chanced across [Herodotus], a failed and frustrated general could write a history of a war*

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[Thucydides], and any male citizen could scratch on a potsherd the name of whomever he wished to ostracise (Papadopoulos 2014: 192).

Writing was invented independently in three places: first in Sumer, southern Mesopotamia, the oldest example being from *c.* 3200 BC at Uruk (Michalowski 2004) and in Egypt soon after (Loprieno 2004); Chinese script appeared by the middle of the second millennium BC (Peyraube 2004); and in Mesoamerica, Maya glyphs first appeared *c.* 300 BC (Bricker 2004). Mesopotamian cuneiform was the most widely used system of writing before the alphabet, which was first developed in western Asia in the second millennium BC (Isserlin 1982; Naveh 1982) and, indeed, most alphabets can ultimately be traced back to the west Semitic alphabet (Sass 2005).

Of importance here is that the west Semitic alphabet was introduced, adopted and adapted to the specific cultural context of Early Iron Age Greece. Drawing on new archaeological finds, notably from Eretria and Methone, in the context of linguistic evidence, this paper reassesses the place(s) where the Greeks—and Phrygians—adopted and adapted the Phoenician/Aramaic alphabet to create their own. There are many locales where Greek and Semitic speakers co-existed in the Mediterranean. As Barry Powell (2002: 193) noted: “Greeks and Semitic Levantines mixed in the Orontes estuary, Euboia, Boiotia, Samos, Crete, Cyprus, and Italy”. Other locales have also been suggested, not least the Nile Delta, although the evidence from Egypt largely post-dates the adoption and adaptation of the Phoenician alphabet by the Greeks. Often neglected in discussions of the Greek adoption of the Phoenician alphabet is the remarkable agreement among the Greek and Phrygian vowels, to such an extent that they could not have been adopted from the Semitic script independently (Table 1). The signs for the vowels are taken from Semitic script but represent Semitic sounds largely superfluous to Greek and Phrygian phonology that were at hand and available for use as signs for vowels, which Semitic ostensibly lacks (Young 1969: 255): *’ālep* (α: *alpha*), *hē* (ε: *epsilon*; cf. *hēt* [η: *eta*]), *yod* (ι: *iota*), *’ayin* (ο: *omikron*) and *wāw-upsilon* (υ: *upsilon*) (Jeffery 1989: 21–42). The similarity in the vowels is such that it demands a place of adoption and adaptation that includes Phrygians, not just Greeks and Phoenicians. Before enumerating the various locales where the adoption/adaptation occurred, it is important to review the new information from Eretria and Methone.

## The new evidence from Eretria and Methone

Eretria, in central-western Euboia, is the traditional *metropolis* (mother-city) of Methone, in Pieria (Macedonia), strategically located near the delta of the Haliakmon River and at the south-eastern edge of the Thermaic Gulf (Bessios *et al.* 2012) (Figure 1). Early Euboian settlers found in Methone a thriving settlement that was continuously occupied from the Final Neolithic period, through the Bronze Age, Early Iron Age, Archaic and Classical periods. The city was destroyed by Philip II in 354 BC (Bessios *et al.* 2012: 44, fig. 1).

The new finds from Eretria were encountered in the sanctuary of Apollo Daphnephoros, the majority dating to the Late Geometric period (750–700 BC). They were published in exemplary detail by Kenzelmann Pfyffer *et al.* (2005) in eight categories: I) small open vessels for drinking (42 inscriptions, 3 painted or inscribed before firing, the remainder inscribed after firing; nos. 1–42); II) large krater with post-firing inscription (no. 43); III)

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Table 1. Comparison of Phoenician, Greek and Phrygian vowels, adapted from Coldstream (1977: 297, fig. 94), but showing only the Greek vowels. The Euboian column is based on vowel forms for Pithekoussai and Lefkandi; the Old Phrygian column is based on the eighth-century inscriptions from Gordion (Young 1969); the Early Greek Other column is based on Jeffery (1989: 23, fig. 1, *alpha* 3–5). Most of the letters are shown retrograde.

| Phoenician        |                          |                 |                      |                                      | Greek                  |                              |         |                         | Phrygian        |                    |
|-------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|---------|-------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| Phoenician letter | Shipitbaal<br>c. 925–900 | Mesha<br>c. 830 | Kition<br>c. 850–800 | Kara<br>Tepe<br>c. 8 <sup>th</sup> C | Cretan<br>Herpetidamos | Attic<br>Dipylon<br>oinochoe | Euboian | Early<br>Greek<br>Other | Old<br>Phrygian | Greek letter       |
| 'Alep             | 𐤀                        | 𐤀               | 𐤀                    | 𐤀                                    | Α                      | Α                            | ΑΑΑ     | ΑΑΑΑ                    | ΑΑΑΑ            | Alpha              |
| Hē'               |                          | 𐤁               | 𐤁                    | 𐤁                                    | Ε                      | Ε                            | ΕΕ      | ΕΕΕΕ                    | ΕΕΕ             | Epsilon            |
| Wāw               | 𐤂                        | 𐤂               | 𐤂                    | 𐤂                                    |                        | Υ                            | Υ       | ΥΥ                      | ΥΥΥ             | Digamma<br>Upsilon |
| Yōd               | 𐤃                        | 𐤃               | 𐤃                    | 𐤃                                    | Ι                      | Ι                            | Ι       | ΙΙΙΙ                    | Ι               | Iota               |
| 'Ayin             | 𐤄                        | 𐤄               | 𐤄                    | 𐤄                                    | Ο                      | Ο                            | ΟΟ      | Ο                       | ΟΟ              | Omicron            |



Figure 1. Map of the Mediterranean showing some of the sites mentioned in the text and the main spheres of Greek, Phoenician and Etruscan influence (© Christine Johnston, Myles Chykerda & John Papadopoulos).

small closed vessels, 4 post-firing inscriptions (nos. 44–47); IV) amphorae (14 inscriptions, 2 before firing, the remainder after firing, nos. 48–61); V) large coarse vessel (inscription before firing, no. 62); VI) *ostraka*, inscriptions on already broken sherds (nos. 63–64); VII) inscription on a spindle-whorl or bead (no. 65); and VIII) solitary Semitic inscription.

Of these 66 marks, I illustrate only two, both painted or incised before the vessels were fired, both small open vessels: one *dipinto* and one inscription (Figure 2). The latter preserves a small portion of an *abecedarium*, written retrograde (from right to left) (Figure 2b & c; Bourogiannis 2015: 162, fig. 3), by someone practising to write the entire alphabet. Both were made by potters working at Eretria in the Late Geometric period; they are not post-firing marks, which could have been written later, although they were from secure contexts of the second half of the eighth century BC. More remarkable is that these very early dipinti and graffiti were not made by scribes serving a ruling elite, but by potters, a point that speaks volumes as to the extent and use of literacy during this early period when the Greek alphabet was being developed (cf. Johnston 1983).

Eretria has also yielded an even earlier Middle Geometric (850–750 BC) cup fragment, of local fabric, with a Semitic inscription KPLŠ, written retrograde after firing (Kenzelmann Pfyffer *et al.* 2005: 76–77, no. 66) (Figure 3). The inscription could be Phoenician or North Syrian or Cilician, and must have been written by a Semitic speaker, whether a trader or eastern resident alien (cf. Bourogiannis 2015). Indeed, evidence for immigrant craftsmen on Crete and in Corinth is clear, including examples from the earlier Iron Age (Hoffman 1997; Morris & Papadopoulos 1998).

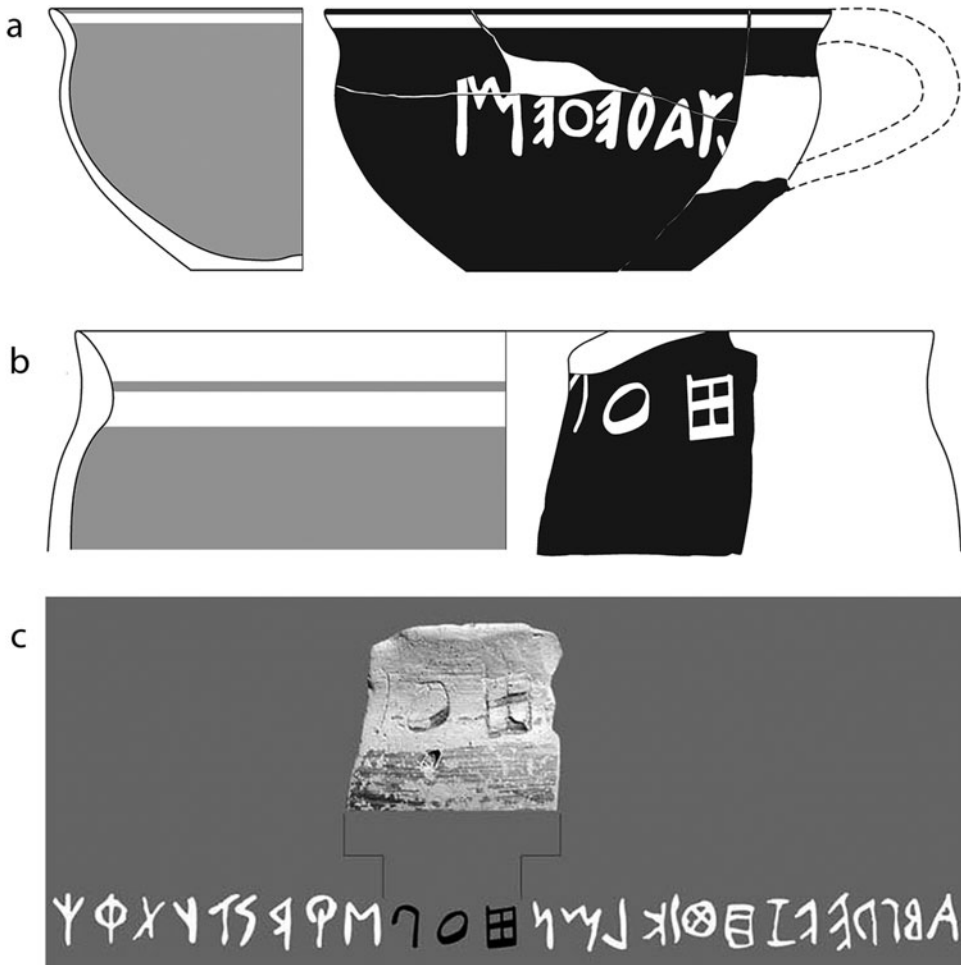


Figure 2. Two one-handed cups from Eretria, all Euboian Late Geometric: a) FK00382, painted possessive in white paint on exterior of body: ←]λ.χαδεοεμι; b) three preserved letters incised on exterior of body: ←]⊕οπ [(courtesy Swiss School of Archaeology in Greece); c) fragment 2b reconstructed as an abecedarium.

Dating to the late eighth and seventh centuries BC, the Methone marks (Bessios *et al.* 2012; Tzifopoulos 2013)—pre- and post-firing—are roughly contemporary with the corpus from Pithekoussai, also pre- and post-firing inscriptions (Bartoněk & Buchner 1995). The Methone marks are all the more extraordinary because they are found on pottery from all over the Greek world and beyond, in the heart of the Aegean (Clay *et al.* forthcoming). In this, the largely seventh-century-BC material from Kommos in southern Crete shares a good deal in common with Methone and Eretria, and a few of the inscribed pieces from Kommos are late eighth century (Csapo 1991; Johnston 1993, 2005; Csapo *et al.* 2000). Kommos and other sites in the Aegean reinforce the significance of the Aegean as a place of experimentation for the alphabet.

The new Methone inscriptions were found in a deposit in the so-called *hypogeion*, a large rectangular underground basement, over 11m deep (Bessios *et al.* 2012: 39–60). The



Figure 3. Euboian Middle Geometric cup fragment from Eretria (FK90657), with Semitic inscription KPLŠ (retrograde). Courtesy Swiss School of Archaeology in Greece.

deposit yielded, among other things, 191 pottery vessels or fragments with inscriptions, mostly post-firing, but some pre-firing. Of these, 30 were found in the upper portion of the deposit dating to the seventh–sixth centuries; the remainder date to the late eighth or early seventh century BC. Among this pottery, 25 pieces had early alphabetic inscriptions (see Table S1 in online supplementary material): 22 are securely dated on the basis of stratigraphy and style to the late eighth–early seventh centuries BC; three are later (late seventh or early sixth century); one is mid fourth century BC. Although many of the alphabetic inscriptions are in the Euboian epichoric alphabet, the range of pottery shapes inscribed, the eclectic nature of the inscriptions themselves and the provenances of manufacture are staggering.

The range of material on which the Methone inscriptions were inscribed is noteworthy and different to those of Eretria, where most of the inscriptions are found on locally produced pottery. Among the transport amphorae alone (see online supplementary material, Table S1), there are inscriptions on local Methonaian (2), Samian (4), Lesbian (1), Attic SOS (2), Chian (1) and three uncertain amphorae. Additional alphabetic inscriptions are found on five locally manufactured Thermaic Gulf drinking vessels, a locally made jug, three imported Euboian *skyphoi*, an Aeolian grey-ware drinking cup and a *skyphos* of uncertain provenance.

Two alphabetic inscriptions from Methone are illustrated. The first is the imported Euboian *skyphos* dating to *c.* 720 BC (Figure 4). The cup and inscription are fragmentary, but the main thrust of the inscription, as reconstructed and translated by Tzifopoulos

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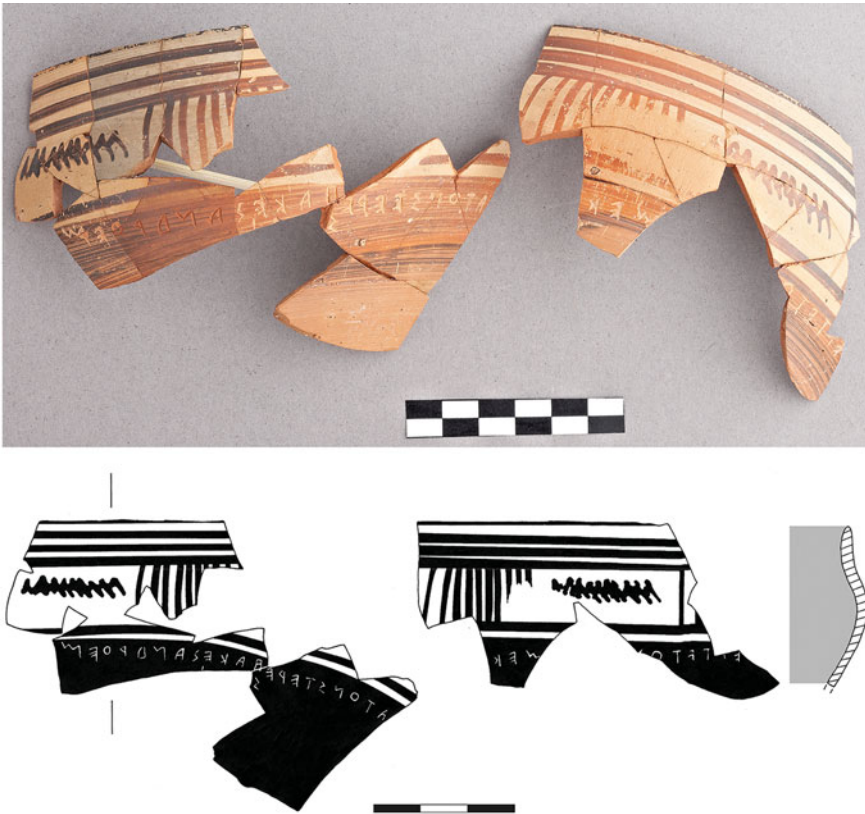


Figure 4. Fragmentary Euboian skyphos found at Methone, with a 'curse' inscription incised after firing; Meth 2248.

(2013: 30–31), is clear: “I am [the cup?] of Hakesandros”, the text concluding with a threat: -μ]άτων στερήσ [ετ]αι to the would-be drinker who may lose his eyes ([ὄμμ]άτων), his money ([χρημ]άτων), his cakes ([πεμμ]άτων), even his pain ([πημ]άτων) (cf. Bessios *et al.* 2012: 339–43; Janko 2015: 3). The inscription is in iambic verse, and, as such, the cup is a ‘speaking object’ introducing its owner, Hakesandros. It presents, in the language of a curse, to any would-be wrongdoer, the formula of the loss of his or her money (or whatever). In this, the language of Hakesandros’s cup is akin to the cup of Nestor from Pithekoussai, which carries a similar curse (Figure 5; Faraone 1996). Tzifopoulos (2013: 30) compares these cups and other vessels against the backdrop of an epigraphic habit within a sympotic context: wine, jokes, literary games and writing.

The second vessel is also an import: an Aeolian grey-ware, vertical-handled cup, probably from Lesbos (Figure 6). The inscription is much simpler: “I am [the cup] of Philion” or “I belong to Philion”. By engraving his name on a pot used in the context of communal drinking, Philion exhibited his literacy while also ‘insuring’ his property (Tzifopoulos 2013: 36–37).

Although there are, to date, no Semitic inscriptions from Methone, the site has some of the best preserved and earliest Phoenician amphorae in the Aegean (Kasseri 2012: 300–303,

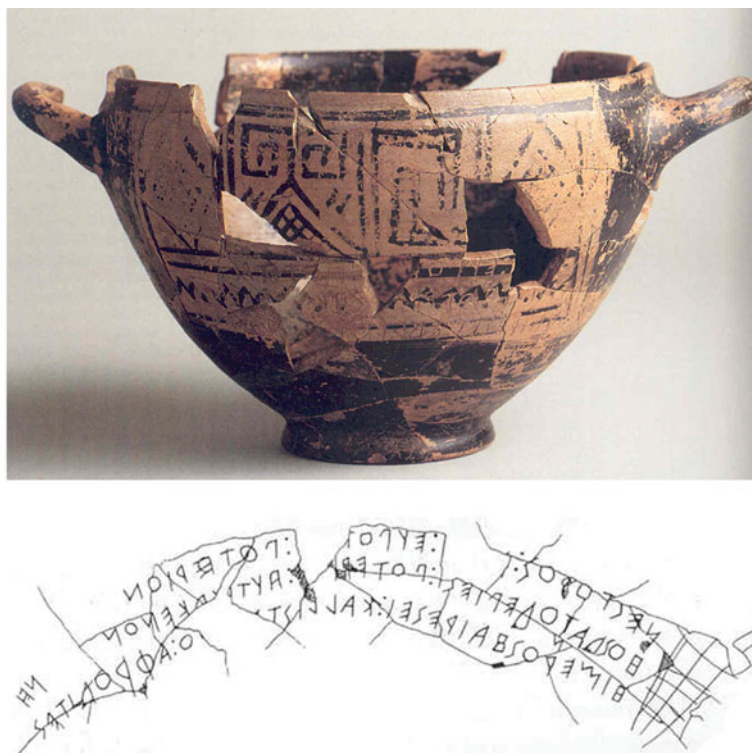


Figure 5. Late Geometric kotyle of east Greek (north Ionian) fabric, found at Pithekoussai on Ischia, with an inscription in the Chalcidian (Euboian) alphabet.

307, [figs 1–2](#)). The hypogeion has produced several from the late eighth to early seventh centuries BC, two of which are illustrated ([Figure 7a & b](#)); and the destruction deposit of the site in 354 BC revealed another ([Figure 7c](#)), dating to the first half of the fourth century BC. These Phoenician commodity containers point to contact with Greeks and Phoenicians over time.

## Where and when did the adoption and adaptation of the Phoenician alphabet occur?

The growing number of non-alphabetic Early Iron Age potters' marks ([Papadopoulos 1994](#), forthcoming), and contemporary post-firing marks in the Aegean, point to a time before there was an alphabet and allows us to return to the critical issues of where and when Greeks adopted and adapted the Phoenician/Aramaic alphabet ([Figure 8](#); compare the schematic language family trees drawn up by [Naveh \(1982: 10\)](#) and [Sass \(2005: 12\)](#)).

In terms of chronology, the evidence from Eretria, Methone and Pithekoussai only corroborates what is already known. The latest date for the adoption and adaptation would be around 750 BC, in keeping with the earliest Greek inscriptions, such as the Dipylon oinochoe ([Figure 9](#)), and with Semitic prototypes. As [Sass \(2005: 145\)](#) has shown, after

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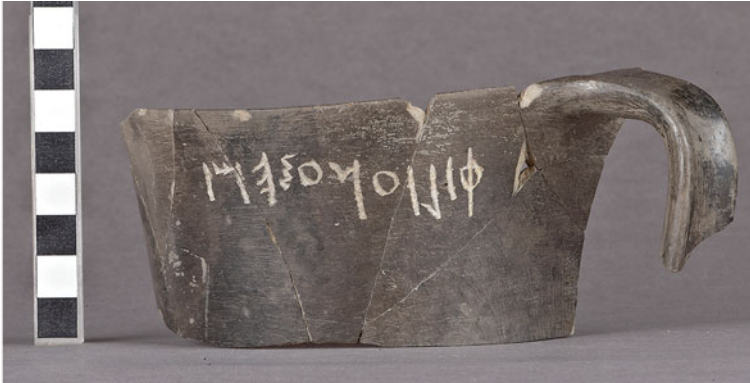


Figure 6. Drinking cup from Lesbos found at Methone, with an inscription incised after firing; Meth 2249, late eighth to early seventh century BC.

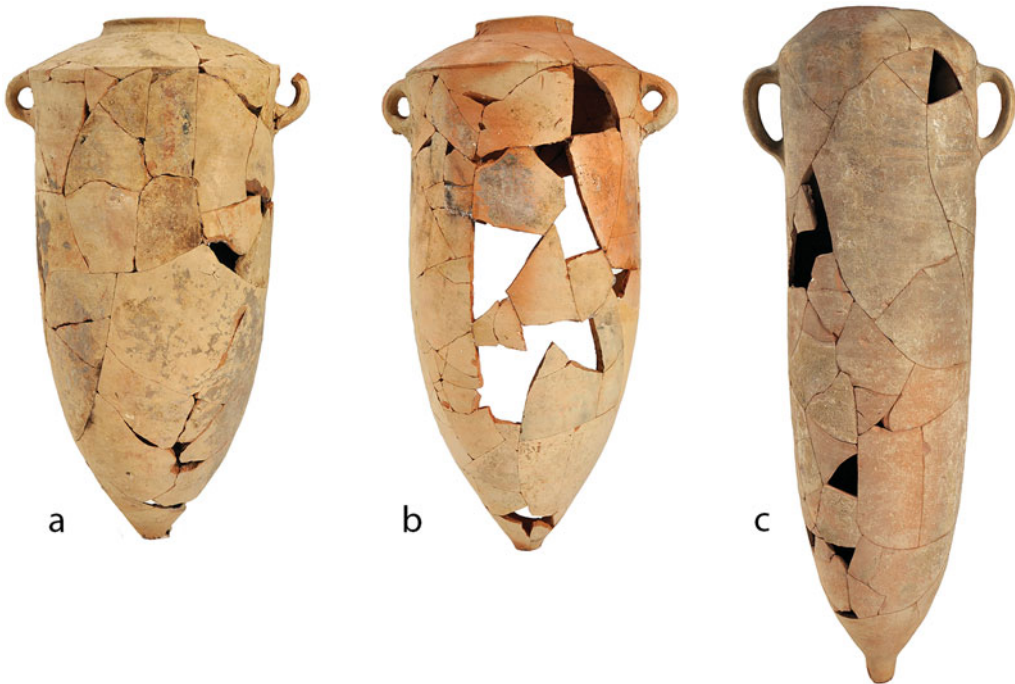


Figure 7. Three Phoenician amphorae from Methone (a–b from the hypogeion, late eighth–early seventh century BC; c from the destruction deposit of Philip II in 354): a) Meth 2033; b) Meth 2034; c) Meth 3878 (photographs by Ian Coyle).

the middle of the eighth century BC, several Phoenician and Aramaic letters evolved away from the shapes that served as models for the corresponding Greek letters (this is despite Naveh's 1982 arguments for the adoption occurring earlier, *c.* 1100 BC). The latest evidence, based primarily on letter forms, would suggest that a date range of *c.* 825–750 BC can be reasonably well substantiated by the Semitic evidence (Sass 2005: 145).

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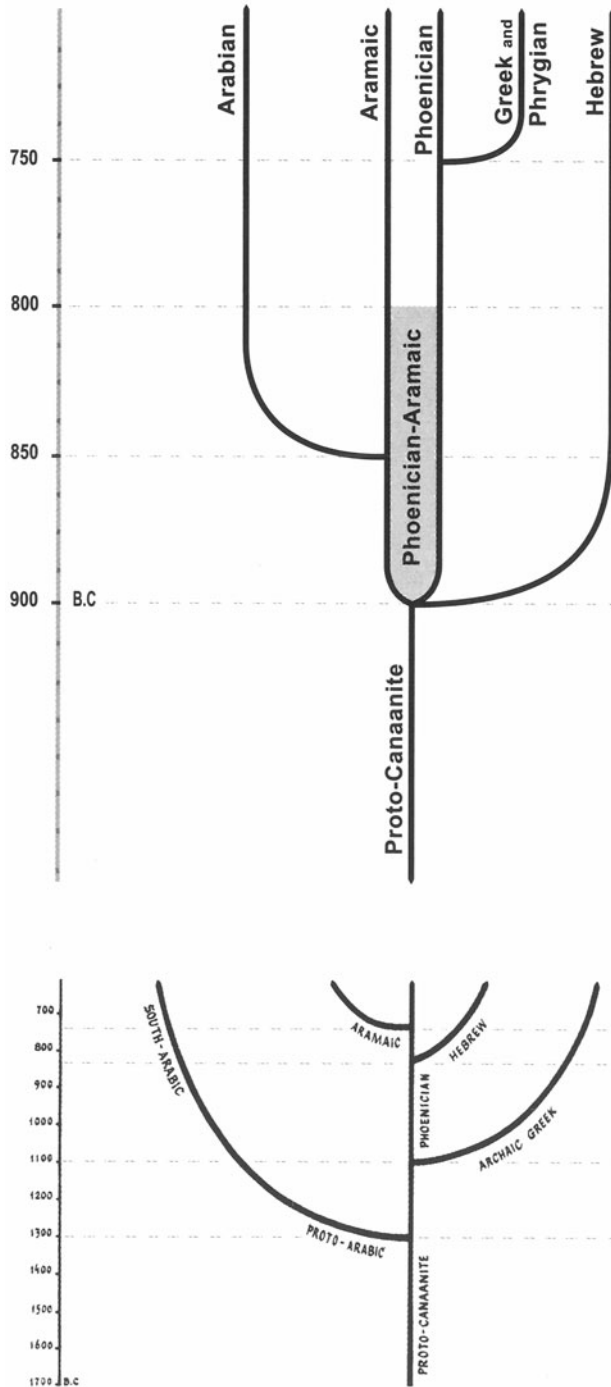


Figure 8. Schematic family tree of the early alphabetic scripts (with the pertinent segment of the tree in Naveh (1982: 10) below). After Sass (2005: 12) (prepared by Christine Johnston).



Figure 9. *The Dipylon oinochoe*, Athens, National Museum 192 [2074], with the inscription: “He who, of all the dancers, now performs most daintily, this is his”.

The issue of *where* the transmission or adoption occurred is more problematic. There are three alternatives for the mother script of Greek: it could have been exclusively Phoenician, Phoenician/Aramaic, or Phrygian deriving from Phoenician (Sass 2005: 133–52). As for the physical *place(s)* where the adoption and adaptation occurred, several areas in the Mediterranean have been suggested, from Al Mina in the east to Pithekoussai in the west (Figure 1). Cyprus has loomed large in this discussion, especially the Phoenician settlement at Kition, as has Euboeia and other Aegean islands, including Rhodes and Crete (Powell 1991: 12–18; Kenzelmann Pfyffer *et al.* 2005: 76–77). The problem is well framed by Sass (2005: 149): “The fact that at least four different locations for the adoption could be defended so eruditely and with such excellent arguments [...] indicates that the evidence presented thus far is perhaps less forthcoming than one would wish”.

Greece, specifically Boiotian Thebes, adjacent to the Euboian Gulf and the Aegean beyond. Whatever date Herodotus (*Histories* 5.58; Jeffery 1967: 153) had in mind, he does not mince his words:

For Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BC, the place of transmission—directly from Phoenicians—was mainland

*These Phoenicians who came [into Boiotia] with Kadmos [...] after settling in this district introduced to the Greeks many kinds of learning (didaskalia) and particularly writing (grammata), which did not previously exist among the Greeks.*

In the same passage, he goes on to note:

*At first they [the Greeks] used the same script as all Phoenicians use. Then, as time went on, they changed, with the language (phonē), the shape (rhythmos) also of the letters. At this time, the Greeks occupying most of the land round them were Ionians. These learnt the letters from Phoenicians, and reformed a few of them and used them, but in this usage spoke of them by name as ‘Phoenician’ (Phoinikēia)—as was just, the Phoenicians having brought them to Greece [...] I personally have seen Cadmeian writing (Kadmeia grammata) in the precinct of Ismenian Apollo in Thebes, incised on three tripods, and for the most part similar to the Ionic.*

Thebes was where Phoenician Kadmos settled and married Harmonia, and where he introduced writing. Of course, the evidence of Herodotus should be taken with a pinch of salt, but one noteworthy feature of the adoption of the alphabet in his scheme is the proximity of Ionian Greeks and the use of Ionic letters in the process. Herodotus also observes that these Ionians reformed a few of the Phoenician letters for their own use. When the shapes of the letters of Greek and Phrygian vowels are compared with the Phoenician symbols from which they derive (Table 1), there is a noticeable similarity between Ionic and Old Phrygian letter forms. This is perhaps clearest in the case of the *iota* (Phoenician *yōd*), which is usually a crooked *iota* in most Greek scripts, except for west Ionic (i.e. Euboian)—and Phrygian—although it is found by the early seventh century in several other regions of Greece.

In most accounts of the adoption of the alphabet, the general view is that Greek was adopted from the Phoenician, and Phrygian was then adapted from Greek. This interpretation is complicated by the strong similarity of the Greek (especially Euboian) and Phrygian vowels, which argues for Phrygian agents in addition to Phoenicians and Greeks. Jeffery (1982: 822) argues that, on the balance of the evidence, a limited area of origin of the Greek alphabet seems more likely. She favours Al Mina in the estuary of the Orontes River on the northern coast of Syria as a promising candidate, with its Greek pottery from Euboia—and elsewhere—and evidence for Greeks dwelling among west Semitic speakers, and where Phrygians also had early contact (Jeffery 1982: 822–23; see also Young 1969: 256). One problem with the Orontes region as the place where the Greeks and Phrygians adopted and adapted (in this case the Aramaic script) lies in the transmission back to both the Aegean and Phrygia of the newly minted script. This may work for the vowels but not for all the consonants (although the Phrygian and Greek vowels are similar, the same is not true for their respective consonants: see Krebernik 2007). Had Al Mina been the place of origin, one would expect much more overlap in the letter forms of Greek and Phrygian consonants.

A more promising candidate is the northern or central Aegean and western Asia Minor. The overlap of the shared vowels in both Phrygian and Greek seems to rule out an adoption independent of one another: “Either the Phrygian script was adopted from the Phoenician and subsequently the Greek from the Phrygian, or vice versa” (Sass 2005: 147; cf. Young 1969: 265). Phrygian or Greek precedence, however, relies on the thorny issue of absolute chronology (Papadopoulos 2014: 184–86). This is not the place to enter this debate, but there is no shortage of Old Phrygian inscriptions securely dated to the middle and second half of the eighth century BC (Young 1969: 255–57), as early as any Greek inscriptions, and one (Young 1969: 257, no. 29; Brixhe & Lejeune 1984: G-104) is now securely dated to 800–790 BC (Sams 2012: 65, fig. 4.16). Two examples are illustrated, both magnificent bronze ring-handled bowls from the tomb beneath the Great Tumulus at Gordion (Young 1969: 258, fig. 1, nos. 33, 25; Figure 10). On both vessels there are *alphas*, and on one (25), there are straight *iotas*, and the standard *omicron*; on two contemporary inscriptions, we find the three-barred *epsilon* and the *upsilon* that is typical of both early Greek (especially Euboian), epichoric and Phrygian. The recently published evidence for Phrygian chronology seems to favour Phrygian chronological precedence, although the matter remains unresolved (Rose & Darbyshire 2011; Sams 2012).

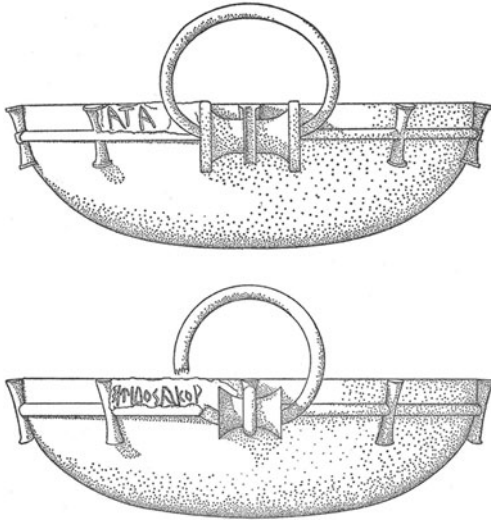


Figure 10. Two Phrygian bronze bowls from the tomb beneath the Great Tumulus at Gordion dating to the second half of the eighth century BC (Young 1969: 258, fig. 1, nos. 25 & 33).

That Greek writing in turn inspired Etruscan (and indirectly Latin, via Etruscan, together with other native Italic alphabets—Oscan, Umbrian, South Picene, Venetic) is beyond doubt. Less certain is the assumption that Greek writing also ‘jumped to Phrygian’ as some scholars still maintain (e.g. Powell 2002: 109).

I would temper Sass’s statement by not insisting on either Phrygian or Greek priority, but allowing instead the possibility of a place where Greeks and Phrygians, not just Greeks and Phoenicians, interacted in collaboration. A few decades ago various places seemed probable—Cyprus, most of the coastal Levant, Italy, the Nile Delta—but the primacy of many of these as possibilities for the adoption and adaptation diminish on account of the Phrygian complexities.

In Italy, there is also a very early inscription from Osteria dell’Osa, the cemetery of ancient Gabii, in Latium, east of Rome, that cannot be later than 775–770 BC, and perhaps earlier (Bietti Sestieri 1992: 184–85; Ridgway 1996; Sass 2005: 155–56). The inscription *EYLIN*, is most often read as Greek: εὐλιυ[ος], ‘good at spinning’ (Ridgway 1996; Janko 2015: 15), but this is little more than a guess and has been too enthusiastically embraced. Janko (2015: 15) tried to read it in the opposite direction, as Latin—*ni lue*, ‘do not pay’—but cogently notes problems with such a reading. In many ways, the Gabii inscription muddies the waters, and may well not be Greek. Sass (2005: 155) prefers to see it as a pre-Greek retrograde imitation of Phoenician letters, adding that it is a “nondescript scribble on a non-Greek object from a non-Greek context . . . it may be preferable to regard the . . . graffito as a pseudo-inscription—an ineffectual attempt by an illiterate person to reproduce some letters”. There is much to commend this view.

Whatever the nature of the Gabii inscription, there is no documented evidence for Phrygians in Italy. So where were Greeks and Phrygians co-existing? As noted, Jeffery favoured the North Syrian (or Cilician) coast, while others, most recently Woodard (1997, 2014), have argued for Cyprus as places where Greeks and Phoenicians (but not Phrygians) co-existed. As Woodard (2014: 146–49) observes, the Phoenician consonantal script, together with the two pre-alphabetic Greek writing systems of Linear B and the Cypriot syllabary, all played their part in the historical continuum of Greek literacy and the formation of the alphabet. The influence of the Cypriot syllabary is perhaps greatest for particular consonantal strings. Whether or not the Greek adapters of the Phoenician alphabet were literate in the Cypriot syllabary is a moot point. What is clear is that the adoption and adaptation of the Phoenician consonantal script did not happen wholesale at one particular time. The case of the vowels, however, demands an alternative narrative



involving both Greek and Phrygian players working together over a relatively short period. Here, the north Aegean ancestry of the Phrygians, as related by Herodotus (*Histories* 7.73; de Sélincourt 2003: 441), is intriguing:

*This people [the Phrygians], according to the Macedonian account, were known as Briges during the period when they were Europeans and lived in Macedonia, and changed their name at the same time as, by migrating to Asia, they changed their country.*

As related by Herodotus, Phrygian, although an Indo-European language, and in spite of its geographic location, does not belong with the Anatolian sub-group of Indo-European languages, such as Hittite or Lycian, but is much more closely connected with Greek (Brixhe & Lejeune 1984; Brixhe 2004). Most recently, Blakely (2012: 163–64) has collected material on Phrygians and Phoenicians on the northern Aegean island of Samothrace. Her arguments (Blakely *pers. comm.*) revolve around two points: first, the possibility that the toponym Dindymene (inscribed on a sherd from Samothrace) may refer to an Anatolian (Phrygian) mountain. Second, the Kabeiroi, who number among the gods of Samothrace, are Phrygians (according to various ancient sources, and also a number of Byzantine lexicographers, and derive their name from Mt. Kabeiros in Phrygia). Samothrace is not the only northern Aegean island with Phoenician complexities: both Herodotus (2.44) and Pausanias (5.25.12) mention Phoenician presence on Thasos. Additional evidence of Phoenician pottery and writing in the northern Aegean has recently come to light from Karabournaki, Torone and Stageira (Tiverios 2004; Fletcher 2008; Vainstub 2014).

A related issue is the relationship of the Phrygian language to that of the Thracians living along the northern coast of the Aegean. As Woodard (2004: 12) notes: “The Phrygian language does show certain similarities to Thracian, and some linguists have argued for linking the two in a single linguistic unit (Thraco-Phrygian)”. The appropriateness of such a sub-grouping remains uncertain, largely due to the dearth of conclusive evidence (Brixhe 2004), but it is in keeping with the testimony of Herodotus.

There is additional literary evidence for the close contact of Phrygians and Greeks. As DeVries (1980: 33) noted, Herodotus (1.14) claimed that a splendid wooden throne, on display at Delphi, was a gift of Midas, the Phrygian king of the late eighth to seventh centuries BC, and stories traceable back to the fourth century had Midas taking a wife from the East Greek city of Kyme. Phrygian fibulae and bronze bowls of eighth–seventh-century date have been recovered at sanctuaries in eastern and mainland Greece, and at Gordion, the Phrygian capital, there are sherds of Greek vases dating to the decades before and after 700 BC. Even Plato (*Cratylus* 410–14) has Socrates cite several words that are common in both Greek and Phrygian, not least the words for fire (*pyr*), water (*hydōr*) and dog (*kyōn*).

There is thus a confluence of evidence—the growing number of alphabetic inscriptions in the Aegean, the similarity of Phrygian and Greek vowels, the testimony of Herodotus—that places the adoption and adaptation of the alphabet squarely in the Aegean. Various places in this region thus emerge as contenders: not only Euboa, but especially the northern Aegean, not just Methone (arguably less so Crete and the Dodecanese).

Greek mythology, albeit a late tradition, furnishes another northern Aegean locale where Greek and Phrygian letters (*Phrygia grammata*) commingled: Troy. The critical evidence is



in Apollodoros's *Bibliotheca* (Vatican Epitome 3.8), where Odysseus 'planted' in the Greek camp a letter (*deltos*) written in Phrygian, as though to Palamedes from Priam; the letter fell into the hands of Agamemnon and the fate of Palamedes was sealed (Jeffery 1967: 152). It is telling that 'Phrygian' in ancient sources often means 'Trojan'; that is, that Greeks of the Classical era regarded the Trojan language as Phrygian.

As one of the most prominent harbours in the northern Aegean in the later Bronze and Early Iron Age with control of the Thermaic Gulf, Methone, with its Phoenician imports and over 20 early alphabetic inscriptions from a secure context, emerges as one of those places where Greeks, Phoenicians and Phrygians may very well have done business together: not only an emporion *par excellence*, intimately networked in the international world of the eastern Mediterranean, but a locale where Semitic, Greek and Phrygian letters may have coalesced.

## Coda

My argument is based more on circumstantial than direct evidence. Herodotus, for example, did not have archival references, but only oral sources. His evidence demonstrates that by the fifth century BC, Greeks had already noticed phenomena, such as similarities between words and names in Greek and Phrygian. His stories are explanations of observations, ways of accounting for the contemporary world; although interesting, they do not provide direct evidence of past realities. But his stories are not negated by the archaeological evidence.

Crucial to my argument are the Greek and Phrygian vowels, and that their 'invention' can have happened only once and in one place, with the consequence that all the various Greek, Phrygian and Italic alphabets ultimately derive from a single original moment. My fixation on this moment has obscured an equally important issue: the rapidity with which the idea of vowels spread. The new material presented here reinforces the existing patterns of finds, and emphasises the way in which we move rapidly from a Greek world without writing in the ninth century to one where writing is used for casual purposes, even jokes, in the context of communal drinking by 725 BC at the latest. It is remarkable that the invention of a new form of communication is adopted so widely within so few years—akin to the invention and spread of email in the late twentieth century—but in a world in which we have not been inclined to think that there was anything by way of appropriate infrastructure.

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## Supplementary material

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