

Keywords: ancient Greece, Phoenicians, transmission of alphabet, history of writing.

Abstract: *The invention of the alphabet is still a problem for the contemporary historiography, archaeology and linguistics. This study emphasizes some of the most important aspects of this process. After a critical review of the most important theories, the author takes into consideration the issue of the author and the reason of inventing the vowels. The latter is presented here as a linguistic necessity.*

Rezumat: *Inventarea alfabetului constituie încă o problemă pentru istoriografie, arheologică și lingvistică. Acest studiu pune în evidență aspectele cele mai importante ale procesului amintit. După o privire critică asupra principalelor teorii, autoarea ia în considerare motivul inventării vocalelor, prezentat ca o necesitate lingvistică.*

The alphabet has such a great importance for the history of mankind that its origin and reason of inventing still need to be looked into and analyzed, despite the large amount of information we dispose today of.

The alphabetical writing can be traced back to Egypt², but it was used in Antiquity especially by Semitic peoples and a major process in its history is the Phoenician transmission to the Greeks. In this article, I will study some aspects of the ways in which the Greeks acquired writing.

Firstly, I shall present some of the major theories regarding the process of how the Phoenician *abjad* became an *alphabet*.

An innovative theory belonged to Barry Powell. The main point in introducing the alphabet to Greece was its reason: to set down Homer's epopees. The person who transforms the Phoenician script in accordance with the rules of the Greek language is called "the adapter" and he is compared with other inventors of alphabetical scripts, like Ulfilas,

¹ "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University Iași; iuliapetrariu@yahoo.com.

² DARNELL et al. 2005, *passim*.

Cyrrillus, etc. The moment this would have taken place would be about 800 BC.³

His theory has many counter-arguments. Firstly, we must look for suggestions in Homer's literary and linguistic critics. Moses I. Finley shows that the Greeks did not hand down the Homeric poems in the poet's century, or during the following one⁴. Also, Gregory Nagy divides the period of transmission of the Homeric Poems into five episodes: the first two are still oral transmission, up to the middle of the sixth century, while the next one is just of "transcription" of the text, followed by a centralization of the different versions⁵. So the language and style offer little credibility to a written form in the 8th or 9th century BC.

Secondly, many historians dismiss this theory, because one of Powell's arguments was the lack of inscriptions before the proposed date: "[...] he would presumably be forced to move the date of Homer back, should some inscriptions turn up dated to, say, -900"⁶. In other words, the *argumentum ex silentio* is not an argument.

On the other hand, J. N. Coldstream suggests that "the birth of the Greek alphabet is most likely to have occurred somewhere within the first half of the eighth century"⁷. His arguments are based on epigraphic proofs, found in Athens (a graffito from the Dipylon Workshop), written in the Phoenician manner (from right to left) and a Cretan inscription dated before 700 BC, where the "old-fashioned character of the local alphabet, which suggests firsthand acquaintance with Semitic writing" shows a great importance. Another one is a mid-eighth-century Greek graffito from Rhodos⁸.

Lillian Jeffery places the transmission of the alphabet to the Greeks round the middle of the eighth century⁹, on the Syrian coast. Her interest

³ POWELL 1991, 20.

⁴ FINLEY 1968, 5.

⁵ NAGY 2003, 2.

⁶ MILLER 1994, 39.

⁷ COLDSTREAM 2003, 279.

⁸ COLDSTREAM 2003, 280-281.

⁹ JEFFERY 1963, 22.

focuses on the following questions: where, when, by what routes and what were the dates of changes (Semitic to Greek and dialectal improvements). But, in our opinion, the most important aspect of her theory is the ascription of the invention to Greek traders travelling to Phoenicia.

Joseph Naveh argues against Lilian Jeffery's theory regarding the eight-century BC adoption. His argument is the direction of writing. While the Phoenician script was already linear, the Greeks "neglected its achievements and turned it into a more primitive, almost pictographic script"¹⁰. Because of this reason, he looks for a more archaic script, particularly the Proto-Canaanite: "We suggest, therefore, that the Greeks learned the West Semitic writing at approximately the same time that the Hebrews and Aramaeans achieved literacy"¹¹, consequently the mid-eleventh century¹².

Also, Henry Rogers agrees with Naveh's early date because the use of the boustrophedon use by the Greeks¹³, but considers Cyprus as the place of adoption.

Moreover, a very early date is offered by Isaac Taylor. He sustains that Greeks learned the alphabet in the 13th or 12th centuryBC¹⁴, but from an Aramean source (the "a" from alpha, beta, etc is a postclitic article of the Aramean idiom)¹⁵ and pays more attention to the Cadmean legend.

According to Roger Woodard, the adaptation of the alphabet took place in Cyprus. After the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization, when Greece faced a period of illiteracy, those people who migrated to Cyprus continued their tradition of writing and created the Greek alphabet based on the Phoenician one. The historical moment would be, according to him, at a time when a Phoenician settlement appeared in Cyprus; "It is probable, then, that a *terminus post quem* for the acquisition of the

¹⁰ NAVEH 2005, 178.

¹¹ NAVEH 2005, 184.

¹² NAVEH 2005, 42.

¹³ ROGERS 2005, 154.

¹⁴ TAYLOR 1883, 23.

¹⁵ TAYLOR 1883, 25.

Phoenician script by the Cypriot Greeks is to be established at approximately 850 BC or perhaps slightly earlier"¹⁶.

Why, then, was the Cypriot syllabary still in use? Woodard argues that the "hellenocentric conservatism" of the Cypriot society rejected the new form of writing while continuing to use a syllabic script¹⁷.

After a brief review of the major theories of specialists, I shall try to find out what was the reason of adoption and, accordingly, if there have been a single adaptor or a collective one, and to explore the cause of vowels innovation.

First of all, "Whereas the early evidence for writing is associated with bookkeeping in Mesopotamia or in Mycenaean Greece, or with religion for Hebrew and Arabic, or with oracular predictions for Chinese, such associations for Greek are less clear"¹⁸. Consequently, we must look for another reason as the cause of borrowing an alien script. For example, a more practical one was represented by commercial necessities. As L. Jeffery pointed out, the traders might have been Greeks' teachers of alphabetical writing and in order to support her thesis she offers philological arguments for the process involved. The scholar's point of view is based on the process of learning itself (analysis of punctuation, influence of the Semitic cursive script, etc.)¹⁹.

But, if one person, as Powell suggests, had created a form of writing, then the newly created signs and their meanings would have been used in the same manner. But the local differences show a progressive diffusion according to dialectal variations; a simultaneous spread with Homeric epopees would favor a centralized and fixed alphabetical type.

Thus, I think there was a collective author who took the alphabet from the Phoenicians. For example, if some merchants had considered the idea of using written materials as being more helpful, it became soon a new trend and had time to develop in both chronological and geographical ways in a more liberal manner.

¹⁶ WOODARD 1997, 219.

¹⁷ WOODARD 1997, 224.

¹⁸ ROGERS 2005, 155.

¹⁹ JEFFERY 1963, 7.

Furthermore, for a collective author pleads the preservation, in the Greek language, of the name of instruments, which might indicate schools or groups of persons for achieving letters: "The writing tablet, *deltos* in Greek, has even kept its Semitic name, *daltu*—*daleth* in Hebrew—together with the name of the special wax with which it is covered, *malthe*"²⁰.

Finally, we may invoke the existence of commercial centres in Antiquity which were also schools for scribes come to receive special training, like Ugarit²¹. Thus, from such a type of school might Greeks have learned the alphabet, especially since it was not necessary to exist a mixture of the two cultures, but just enough knowledge regarding the basic language of the teachers (Phoenician). Economical contacts offer such an opportunity.

Another collective author for the alphabet was proposed, as mentioned above, by Woodard. But the Cypriot Greeks are less probable to have adopted a foreign script, taking into account that they had their own. If they had wanted to have an alphabetical system of writing, they could have adopted Cypro-Minoan signs according to the Phoenician matrix, or could have only simplified the syllabary, not create another one and use both of them. In conclusion, the Cypriot theory of the adapter is less probable.

Regarding the place of alphabet in history, Salomon Reinach considers that "L'histoire de l'alphabet grec n'est qu'un chapitre [...] de l'histoire générale de l'alphabet phénicien, qui s'impose successivement à tous les peuples civilisés [...]"²². Was it indeed so? We believe that the introduction of vowels was an innovation which determined spreading and later large use, so the Greek reform has the greatest importance.

But how were the vowels created and for what reason?

First of all, Joseph Lam draws attention: "When Hebrew and Aramaic speakers adopted this alphabet for their own texts, they did not create additional symbols for phonemes in their languages that were

²⁰ BURKERT 1992, 30.

²¹ SCHNIEDEWIND 2007, 3.

²² REINACH 1885, 175.

absent in Phoenician; they simply utilized the twenty-two available signs, making practical accommodation where necessary. Whether this was due to the perceived prestige of the Phoenician script or some other reason is difficult to ascertain"²³.

In my opinion, the issue is not the lack of changings in these two scripts, but the reason of the Greeks for introducing the vowels. Many theories regard this as a misunderstanding of the Semitic languages. For example, Walter Burkert considers the invention of vowels just a mistake. Learning the alphabet by heart, the Greeks took just the first sound, because they did not have the Semitic glottal within their language and the initial meaning of letters had no sense for them²⁴. Learning by heart was accompanied by rhyming, as Gordon Hamilton suggests, comparing the Greek "zeta, eta, theta, iota" and so on, with other practices (in Ethiopia, for example, "wawi, lawi, tawi", etc.)²⁵.

It has also been suggested that the vocalic value of certain signs (Y) as a consequence of the double pronunciation in Phoenician was the pattern for the Greek vowels. However, these signs were *matres lectionis*, thus auxiliary materials, and might have inspired the Greeks if they had known and understood their role, but they were not to be considered vowels.

Furthermore, the invention of doublets (*upsilon* from *wau* and *omega* from *omicron*²⁶) for some signs and dialectal supplemental letters (ϕ, χ, ψ) make obvious the intelligence and capacity of creation of the adapters, because these letters fit the linguistic necessity of the Greek language.

As a consequence, I think that the introducing of vowels was in relation with the Greek language itself and must be regarded as a linguistic problem.

The Semitic family of languages is consonantal and the words consist of three consonant roots²⁷, while the vowels have secondary

²³ LAM 2010, 193.

²⁴ BURKERT 1992, 28.

²⁵ HAMILTON 2006, 286.

²⁶ JEFFERY 1963, 4.

²⁷ CORNIȚESCU, ABRUDAN 2002, 10 and 74.

functions and they are used in order to express grammatical processes²⁸. Phoenician is a North-Western language of this family²⁹ (sometimes considered just Western or just Northern) and every word begins with a consonant, which is also reflected in writing: "Following the acrophonic method one could never come upon a vowel, for no word began with one"³⁰.

But there are words beginning with a vowel in Indo-European languages, thus also in ancient Greek. Besides, vowels have a greater importance in phonology and also in morphological relations (like ablaut or apophony, where the vowel gradation might indicate a difference in time or aspect for verbs). We can read a Hebrew text in *scriptio defectiva*, but for Greek it would be quite difficult.

Consequently, I think that the Greeks took the principle of representing *each* sound in writing and they included both vowels and consonants, according to their often use and importance. This was natural and logical to happen, and it is important to mention the fact that in the Linear B syllabary there had existed signs for vowels, too. They chose only well-defined sounds from their language and that is the reason why the alphabet lacked semi-vowels or representation of the pitch (only by later improvements: accents and orthographic symbols). The Greeks had no reason for keeping the Semitic tradition of writing, but for Hebrew and Aramaic it was useful, so they adopted the Phoenician alphabet without changes, as Joseph Lam showed above.

In conclusion, there is no *communis opinio* of the specialists about the alphabetical phenomenon as a whole. We need more primary sources in order to answer the question raised in the beginning of this study. Eventually, archeology and epigraphy will show exactly where and when the creation of the Greek alphabet took place and up till then, "it is difficult

²⁸ CORNIȚESCU, ABRUDAN 2002, 11.

²⁹ JOUON 1947, 3.

³⁰ HARRIS 1936, 15.

to think about writing because writing is a form of thinking and it is difficult to think about thinking"³¹.

REFERENCES

- BURKERT, W. 1992. *The orientalizing revolution*, Harvard.
- COLDSTREAM, J.N. 2003. *Geometric Greece. 900-700 BC*, London/ New York.
- CORNÎTESCU, E., ABRUDAN, D. 2002. *Limba ebraică biblică*, Bucharest.
- DARNELL, J.C., DOBBS-ALLSOPP, F.W., LUNDBERG, M.J., MCCARTER, P.K., ZUCKERMAN, B., MANASSA, C. 2005. *Two Early Alphabetic Inscriptions from the Wadi el-Hol New Evidence for the Origin of the Alphabet from the Western Desert of Egypt*, *The Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 59, 65-124.
- FINLEY, M.I. 1968. *Lumea lui Odiseu*, translated by D. M. Pippidi, Bucharest.
- HAMILTON, G. 2006. *The Origins of the West Semitic Alphabet in Egyptian Scripts*, Washington.
- HARRIS, Z. 1936. *A grammar of the Phoenician language*, Connecticut.
- JEFFERY, L. 1963. *The local scripts of the archaic Greece. A study of the origin of the Greek alphabet and its development from the eighth to the fifth centuries B.C.*, Oxford.
- JOUON, P. 1947. *Grammaire de l'hebreu biblique*, Rome.
- LAM, J. 2010. *The invention and development of the alphabet*. In: WOODS, C. (ed.), *Visible language. Inventions of writing in the Ancient Middle East and beyond*, Chicago.
- MILLER, G. 1994. *Ancient scripts and phonological knowledge*, Amsterdam.
- NAGY, G. 2003. *Homeric responses*, Texas.
- NAVEH, J. 2005. *Early history of the alphabet. An introduction to west Semitic epigraphy and paleography*, Illinois.
- POWELL, B. 1991. *Homer and the origin of the Greek alphabet*, Cambridge.
- REINACH, S. 1885. *Traité d'épigraphie grecque*, Paris.

³¹ POWELL 1991, 69.

-
- ROGERS, H. 2005. *Writing systems. A linguistic approach*, Oxford.
- SCHNIEDEWIND, W.M. 2007. *A Primer on Ugaritic. Language, Culture, and Literature*, New York.
- TAYLOR, I. 1883. *The Alphabet. An account of the Origin and Development of Letters*, London.
- WOODARD, R. 1997. *Greek Writing from Knossos to Homer A Linguistic Interpretation of the Origin of the Greek Alphabet and the Continuity of Ancient Greek Literacy*, New York-Oxford.