

JAMIL JABRE

Byblos
THROUGH
history

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Beginnings of Byblos

FROM THE TIME
BEFORE HISTORY
to recorded history

The Period of Egyptian Domination (1580 – 1200 B.C.)

THE EVOLUTION OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF BYBLOS WITH EGYPT

The common interests in the relationship of Byblos with Egypt remained until the era of the Twelfth Dynasty at the beginning of the second millennium B.C.

The pharaohs of Egypt retained much respect for Byblos governors, who remained under their protection. Egyptian pharaohs gave them the surname of the noble princes, and refrained from exerting influence on the customs and traditions of Byblos. At the same time, Egyptians were influenced by the “Gebalite” rites of worship.

When Thutmose III (1504–1450 B.C.) invaded Mesopotamia which was, at the time, under the suzerainty of the Hittites, he asked the King of Byblos to build him a navy and the king responded favorably. This navy was transported on board wagons pulled by bulls to the Euphrates River. The Egyptians named the warships *Giblet* in a reference to Jbeil. Before that they had given them the name of *Kebniyyat*, derived from the name of Byblos “Kebny” used in ancient Egypt. They described the “Gebalites” as “men of a peculiar experience in navigation who can feel the storm coming before it arrived.”

When Ramesses II attacked the Hittites in the thirteenth century B.C., he passed by Byblos and gave a valuable gift to its king. This pharaoh had liberated the Phoenician cities from the Hittite dominance in the wake

of the battle of Kadesh. In return, Byblos honored him, accepted his protection, and welcomed the building of a temple for the Egyptian god Amun. In his era, trade resumed between Egypt and Byblos after it had been suspended for an extended period.

This pharaoh registered the date of his victories on three reliefs near the Dog River in 1290 B.C. On the first relief (rock number 5) there is a monument showing him grabbing the hair of a Hittite prisoner before the god Amun-Ra'.¹ Ramesses is also seen, on two other rocks (number 14 and 16) beheading a prisoner as sacrifice for the god. Excavations in Byblos have led to the discovery of tombs containing advanced arms buried with the dead or offered as gifts to the gods from the same era.

During the period, Byblos was refortified by huge rocks outside the ancient walls. The inhabitants of the city grew in number and there was no more room for them and for their war machinery. As a result, most of inhabitants lived outside the walls leaving the inside of the city to the military and to the priests and servants of the temple.

The Hittite Empire which rose in Asia Minor grew to reach Babel and the shores of the Mediterranean. Its kings tried, by means of their agents, to take revenge from Byblos which had supported their enemies the Egyptians. The Tell al-Amarna discovery of written exchanges between the kings of Byblos and the pharaohs revealed the strategy.

Byblos remained a link between Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Armenia and the islands of the Aegean Sea for

¹ Napoleon III's military expedition erased this inscription in 1860, then inscribed its own date in its place.

centuries. These civilizations interacted through trade. The other Phoenician cities participated in this interaction in the service of human progress.

The Egyptians and the peoples who successively inhabited Mesopotamia adopted much from the Phoenicians, especially from the “Gebalites”. These civilizations adopted the religious and social customs in addition to the industries, models, and engineering. The “Gebalites”, in their turn, adopted much of the customs of these peoples in addition to their art, clothing, decoration and the means of writing in pictures and in cuneiform before they achieved the discovery of their own alphabet.

This creative interaction distinguishes the open cultures, for the exchange of experience and knowledge had a significant impact on their development and prosperity and of following the trends of the ages. On the other hand, closed cultures were threatened with suffocation. In this respect, Roger Kayo¹ stated what amounts to: the capacity to assimilate the experience of others spurs peoples to develop towards the better because the building of a culture is not a game of chance but the work of an aware and open mind which seeks, explores and endeavors to possess knowledge wherever it may be.

¹ Roger Kayo (1913–1978) was a French writer and sociologist famous for his research on mythology and its relation to society.

The Discovery of the Sarcophagus of Ahiram and the First Alphabet

During the era of Ahiram, King of Byblos, the relationship of this city with Egypt, headed by Ramesses II (1300–1235 B.C.), resumed.

Pierre Montet discovered the sarcophagus of Ahiram in one of the royal tombs. This sarcophagus is of sandstone and consists of a basin and a lid.

Two lion heads appear on the lid, whereas two engravings of bearded figures wearing robes – one of them carries a lotus flower and the other a withered flower – appear on each side. The first figure stands for a token of life and the second is a token of death. The basin is held up by four lions surrounded from both sides by four women with naked busts striking them in grief.

The side of the sarcophagus depicts Ahiram sitting on a throne in front of a dining table nestled between two lions drinking from a cup in one hand and holding a withered lotus flower in the other. A person stands in front of him chasing flies from the food with a handkerchief. Behind him are mostly male followers – some saluting and others holding gifts – with two women.



On the upper part of the basin there are lotus buds and on its lid a bunch of colors. The lid of this sarcophagus (kept in the National Museum in Beirut) holds the most ancient text in the alphabetical letters, the first alphabet in the world¹ with the following translation:

This sarcophagus was made by IthoBa'al, son of Ahiram the King of Byblos, for his father Ahiram as an abode of eternity. If a king or governor wages war against Byblos and discovers this sarcophagus, the scepter of his authority shall be destroyed, the throne of his reign shall be torn down and peace shall prevail in Byblos. Anyone who erases this writing he be thrown into the mouth of hell.²

The sarcophagus of Ahiram was discovered next to a piece of ivory with a Greek inscription, a stone container inscribed with the name of the pharaoh Ramesses II as well as a stone carrying the picture of an eagle and a lion attacking a bull. A dagger with an ivory grip inlaid with gold was also discovered in the same site.

Two sarcophagi, among many located in the tomb of the kings, showcase the wealth of the kings. The tombs of Shamo Abi (father) and Ashmo Abi (son) were adorned in an array of silver and bronze scepters, gold knives and spoons, statues, jewelry, and amulets.

¹ Maurice Dunand found a text in five lines, in Phoenician letters which is older than that written on the sarcophagus of Ahiram. This text pertained to the construction of a wall built by Ba'al, son of Elie Ba'al, son of Yaheem Malak. Those notables were kings that succeeded in governing the city of Byblos.

² See "The Alphabet" entry by Maurice Hafez Chéhab in The Encyclopedia "Da'irat al-Ma'arif".

Sarcophagi were rendered in a variety of materials. Some were sculpted from hard rock, whereas others were made of cedar wood decorated with colored faience fabric. On the other hand, sarcophagi of common people were created from earth and contained a number of ceramic utensils, arms, and amulets; the body was typically contorted to the fetal position before being placed within the earth mud sarcophagi.³

Deciphering the Phoenician Alphabet

Father Bartéléme, a French archeologist, decoded the Phoenician alphabet after several failed attempts by other archeologists. Father Bartéléme's expertise in Hebrew proved beneficial, as the two scripts are similar. He also conducted investigations into different eastern coins, some of which were Phoenician coins emblazoned with the names of cities in Phoenician letters. Father Bartéléme also discovered two significant pedestals of statues in Malta. These pedestals date back to the twelfth century B.C. and carry the inscriptions of two texts, one in Phoenician letters and the other in Greek letters. Father Bartéléme's research into the correspondence of the two helped him to determine the sound value of each letter.

This is the translation of the two texts:

To our lord Melkart, the Ba'al of Tyre, this is what your senior servant I'dousir and his brother Uzir Shamar vowed

³ Al-Rihani, Amin, سياحات قصيرة في جبالنا وتاريخنا, *op. cit.*, p. 497.

to you. They present to you this monument in return for your compassion for them, therefore, bless them.¹

THE ALPHABET, THE MOST IMPORTANT CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

René Dussaud wrote in *L'origine de l'alphabet et son évolution première, d'après les découvertes de Byblos* (The Origin of the Alphabet and its First Evolution Based on Byblos's Discoveries):

We should return to the Phoenicians all that is absolutely theirs; they are the creators of one of the most important inventions in the world. They realized this invention when they decided to renounce the complicated writings universally used in their age. They isolated twenty-three resonances representing all the resonances of sound in their language and established an extremely simple system to express them. This system is very clear and does not raise any obscurity or ambiguity, each one of the letters differs from the other, from the first sight. In this respect they reached perfection in one go and the numerous alterations to the system which took place later on, in various countries, did not represent any improvement.²

The discovery of the alphabet simplified the writing system and led to the proliferation across civilizations. In turn, the spread of alphabets in many cases supplanted the

¹ Contenau, Georges, *La civilisation phénicienne*, op. cit., p. 257.

² Dussaud, René, « L'origine de l'alphabet et son évolution première, d'après les découvertes de Byblos » (The Origin of the Alphabet and its First Evolution Based on Byblos' Discoveries) article issued from *Syria*, revue d'art oriental et d'archéologie, tome 25 folio 1, 1946, pp. 36–52.

material expression through drawn signs and pictures, as was the case with the Egyptian hieroglyphic and Chinese, the latter of which depends on the syllables of the word. Yet a brief and precise alphabet emerged to simplify the rules of expression and mark a decisive historical shift in the development of human culture.

The significant discovery of the alphabet meant writing was no more restricted to the upper classes. While priests and governors were literate in Egypt and Mesopotamia, the alphabet meant literacy was within the reach of individuals from all levels of society.

Schools teaching the alphabet soon spread throughout Byblos and beyond. Schools were established around the region in other Phoenician cities.

The Greek historian Herodotus (484–420 B.C.) regarded Kadmous as the inventor and the main promulgator of the alphabet in the west around 1250 B.C. Herodotus derived this conclusion from correspondence between the Phoenician Kivop and the pharaohs in cuneiform writing.

Dr. Philip Hitti explained:

The system of writing the alphabet in its twenty-two letters from the right to the left ³was mostly the work of the Phoenicians in Byblos. Other Phoenicians, those who lived in Ugarit, invented another alphabetical system on a different basis. They wrote the alphabet with a pen on the clay boards which was the reason it took the shape of hieroglyphic signs.⁴

³ Hitti, Philip, *History of Syria*, op. cit., p. 120.

⁴ Writing began from right to left in order to conform to the inscription on the stone. The writing from left to right started with the use of pen and ink.

SOME CAUSES OF THIS GREAT DISCOVERY

The discovery of stone and bronze artifacts in Byblos revealed around one hundred different types of characters with similar characteristics to the writings widely used on the island of Crete and other Aegean Sea Islands. Archeologists have not yet decipher these different scripts.

Written communication was imperative for Phoenicians due to the heavy reliance on commerce and maritime navigation. Written communication provided a very practical and essential means to facilitate and enhance trade.

The Phoenician alphabet simplified the means for written communication, and led to ease of use across civilizations. Egyptian and Mesopotamian writing systems were complicated and vague. While the seemingly simplified – and short – script in the Aegean Sea basin offered one alternative, it was shrouded in ambiguity and vagueness. Thus, the Phoenicians, with the people of Byblos at the forefront, discovered a new writing system distinguished by accuracy, clarity, and brevity. That is how the discovery of the alphabet was achieved at the hands of the Phoenicians, the results of advanced research across the ages.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PHOENICIAN ALPHABET

The Phoenician alphabet is a writing system based on the analysis of sound resonance in its simplest form. The characters each represent sounds within the total twenty-two character – all consonants – alphabet. Traces suggest an evolution very much rooted in experimentation with different

forms before arriving at the most appropriate shapes that give the best expression to thought and things.

These experimentations took two different directions. Northern Phoenician cities adopted character shapes similar to cuneiform script which differs from Babylonian cuneiform characters. Ugarit, the city north of Lattakia, was a region with extensive contact with Babylon, and this reflects in their script. Discoveries in the city revealed cuneiform-shaped letters used for epics and songs dating back to the fourteenth century B.C.¹ At the same time, middle cities, such as Arwad and Byblos, and those in southern regions, such as Tyre and Sidon, were nearer to Egyptian culture and their relationships were closer with the Nile Valley. Inhabitants of these cities used the pictorial hieroglyphic writing, and this explains why drawings accompanied individual characters in the early years of use of the alphabet. Eventually, these drawings were abbreviated with shapes nearer to geometrical figures rather than drawings.

The most ancient text to be written in this alphabet was the text inscribed on the sarcophagus of Ahiiram in the thirteenth century B.C.² The earliest traces of the Phoenician alphabet found on daggers, axes, and stone utensils that date back to the eighteenth century B.C. reveal the experimentation and evolution of the script prior to most advanced stages in Byblos.

¹ See "The Alphabet" entry by Maurice Hafez Chéhab in The Encyclopedia "Da'irat al-Ma'arif".

² *Ibid.*

WRITING IN BYBLOS BEFORE THE ALPHABET

The ongoing excavations in the city of Byblos stretching back to the 1920s rendered many discoveries. One such discovery was writings inscribed on monuments, sheets, or trowels³ made of bronze resembling the peculiarities of hieroglyphic writing. Scholars believe these writings were crafted from syllables, because they were limited to 120 signs. The attempt to invent a writing model different from the familiar cuneiform script in Mesopotamia and the Egyptian hieroglyphic had significant implications. This represented a shift away from the pictorial script that was mixed with the sound and inflection signs in a way that nobody may be able to read it except the professionals. In turn, this democratized written communication.

Maurice Dunand detected similarities between these writings and the writings prevalent in the islands of Crete and Cyprus, as well as in the Sinai Peninsula.⁴ Archeologists discovered texts similar to simplified, abbreviated hieroglyphic in the Sinai, where the pharaohs excavated turquoise from the mines. Some historians believe this writing may have opened the way to the final Phoenician alphabet.

In pictorial renderings, the broken script refers to water from which the letter *M* was derived. *Meem* means water in the Semitic language. It also has the same meaning in the Egyptian writing when it is repeated three times. The pronunciation is the same, too.

³ Plural of trowel, a hand tool used for plastering.

⁴ Similar writings were found in Kamed al-Louz (Beqaa, Lebanon).

DAYLIGHT... *Boats and small ships cruise into Byblos harbor today as they did in the 1960's and 70's when Marlon Brando and Frank Sinatra were regular visitors to the city*



SUNSET... *Old harbor's entrance,
once crowned by a small fort*



NIGHTTIME... *"When my eyes were
stabbed by the flash of a neon light, split
the night and touched the sound of silence"*





The Old Souk by day

Stroll along old narrow streets of cobblestone... Stop by small shops for souvenirs, antiques, pottery jugs and handmade designs



The Old Souk by night

"Memory of Time", known as the Byblos Fossil Museum, located in the Old Souk, takes you millions of years back, with its wide collection of fossilized fish, sharks, eels, shrimps, squids, rays, coelacanths, flying fish, and other marine life

