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Chapter 2

A ‘top-down’ re-invention of an old form: Cuneiform alphabets in context

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This chapter, following the spirit of a contribution to the first VRBS publication (Ferrara 2017), is fundamentally theoretical and aims to reconstruct the archaeological and historical setting of alphabetic cuneiform at large, with a specific focus on the Ugaritic varieties, in parallel with other alphabetic systems attested elsewhere in the Levantine area. This broad perspective is a necessity, since Ugaritic studies appear to be bedevilled by a division, felt also in other parts of the ancient world, between epigraphy and archaeology, context and language, treated as separate domains of investigation and at times almost surgically separated. This should prompt scholars to adopt a multidisciplinary outlook that combines linguistic analysis with a solid archaeological reconstruction – it’s an old adage that has been stressed many a times, but it is all the more necessary when faced with material creations such as scripts.

A few issues tied to methodology will therefore be addressed, considering the big overarching questions related to the inception of the alphabet in this part of the world. These questions will contend with origin, but will be necessarily tied to the motivation behind the origin, ‘how’, but especially ‘why’, as it were, the creation of the cuneiform alphabetic script took place. A clear distinction will be made between the Ugaritic cuneiform alphabetic script proper, and other instances of alphabetic scripts in the same area, whose documentation is less than substantial.

1 I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Pippa Steele for yet another gracious invitation to be part of the VRBS legacy. I was invited to the first VRBS conference in 2015 and was even more delighted to be part of the sequel. I am also grateful to Professor Dennis Pardee for the photograph of the Ugarit RS 88.2215 tablet, published here with his permission. Thanks are due to Dr Ben Haring for enriching the bibliography on the early alphabet, and to Dr Giovanni Mazzini for his precious expertise. All shortcomings and mistakes are, predictably, my own. This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Dr Andrea Zerbini, who helped me with Figure 2.3, who was an amazing scholar and an even more amazing friend.
The textbook narrative regarding their origins will be briefly mentioned, in an effort to contextualise, as fully as possible, the Ugaritic cuneiform alphabet, and strike a comparison with the settings of the other varieties of cuneiform alphabets found outside of Ugarit. The socio-cultural realm is of interest here, all the more important in light of the necessity to reconstruct the linguistic and archaeological context tied to the varieties of cuneiform alphabets in the Syro-Palestinian region and Ugarit itself.

**Linear source vs. invention**

The cuneiform tradition impresses wedges with a stylus on clay. It was normally used to write logo-syllabaries, until it was borrowed lock stock and barrel for an alphabetic system. This, in all likelihood, should have happened at Ugarit, where the official scribal class was extremely well versed in writing syllabic cuneiform. Therefore, from an epigraphic perspective, the cuneiform tradition provided the template – this element is related specifically to the manner of inscription, namely wedge-shaped signs impressed on clay. From a palaeographic perspective, instead, the inspiration originated from a linear version of the alphabetic script, which was contemporary and geographically close – this conclusion hinges on the original shapes of the signs (Pardee 2007, with refs).

If a ‘linear’ (as opposed to ‘cuneiform’) type of script was the original prompt, it left no trace in the archaeological record (Stieglitz 1971; Lundin 1987; Pitard 1992). Our evidence for the source is thus indirect and circumstantial, and forces us to rely on *ex post* reconstruction of the sign shapes, following the the letter-by-letter sequences that we find in linear alphabets of the first millennium BC. This implies that the cuneiform alphabet as a system is not an invention, of any kind, on both epigraphic and palaeographic grounds. The alphabetic principle could already boast a long-standing tradition by 1200 BC, despite the hot debate on precise dates (Dietrich and Loretz 1989; Sass 1991; Kammerzell 2001; Goldwasser 2006; Hamilton 2006; Pardee 2007; Morenz 2011; Vernus 2015). Sass, for instance, places this quite late, as opposed to the linear attestations that are commonly ascribed to the beginning of the second millennium BC in the Sinai peninsula (Proto-Sinaitic), in Canaan (Proto-Canaanite), and in the western desert of Egypt, the Wadi el-Ḥôl inscriptions (Darnell et al. 2005).

So, formally, the alphabetic cuneiform (AC)\(^2\) is nothing but a calque. Yet, Ugarit is often made out to be the place where the ‘first alphabet’ was invented, in an effort to create a false mythical legacy, disseminated by commercial merchandise (Fig. 2.1), despite the attempts of those who rightly decry it as ‘a straw man’ (Pardee 2007).

\(^2\) As the term ‘Ugaritic alphabet’ is often conflated with ‘cuneiform alphabet’, I have chosen to use the latter (AC).

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Figure 2.1. Alphabetic replica of tablet RS 12.063 from Ugarit, as displayed in the Museum of Damascus, 2007 (photo by S. Ferrara).

**Dismantling Babel: Writing (and speaking) at Ugarit**

Matters are not helped by the fact that the alleged birthplace of AC, Ugarit, is often made out to be a cauldron of multilingualism and multigraphism, to extents that are overstated. While representing an undoubtedly important trading outpost, located at the crossroads between east and west, the city is portrayed as a veritable Babel of scripts and languages (as defined by Palaima 1989), home to eight different languages (Sumerian, Akkadian, Ugaritic, Hurrian, Hittite, Luwian, Egyptian, Cypro-Minoan) and six different scripts. Offering a proper context to the presence of these scripts and languages is a key aspect, for the inflated cosmopolitanism ought to be nuanced vis à vis their significance and purpose. Only once the settings for the alleged multitude of different scripts and languages are rationalised (Malbran-Labat 1999), will the picture gain in authenticity.

It will be apparent that the contrastive opposition is not so much language-bound, but script-bound, and that the peculiar aspect of Ugarit does not lie so much in its multiplicity of scripts (or languages, for that matter), but in the stark contrast between the two types of cuneiform systems, the alphabetic and the logosyllabic. This perspective will be developed in the following section. But in the meantime, following the reasonable stance taken by Malbran-Labat, the presence of this variety needs to be contextualised, through, as it were, a reductionist lens.
Sumerian only occurred as a cultural reference in the logographic system in Akkadian cuneiform (Arnaud 2007). Egyptian Hieroglyphic can be found sparsely (Schaeffer 1962, 124, 133–5; Matoian 2015, 48–9), and especially on imported objects (Malbran-Labat 1999) and although it may point to a presence of Egyptians in the city (Vita and Galán 1997), it does not tell us much about its extent, or whether it was spoken at all (Grimal 2013). As for Hittite or Luwian, the data is even more limited: these languages are represented very little, with fewer than ten texts altogether. The Cypro-Minoan script, and its unknown language/s, is attested on fewer than a dozen inscriptions, some of which appear to have been sent from Cyprus, while some were perhaps part of intriguing experiments with an ‘exotic script’ on the part of the Ugaritic scribal class (Ferrara 2016).

So, even from a cursory survey of the literate population in the town of Ugarit, we surmise that language diversity was, as expected, a key feature of its resident population, but the complexity of this phenomenon needs to be modulated, and, to an extent, played down. Branding Ugarit ‘a Babel of languages’ fosters a misleading trope. Ugarit was a diverse city, where many foreigners may have been permanent or temporary inhabitants. But this should not, in any way, imply or explain the extent of multilingualism. Writing things down regularly and transmitting the practices involved in the process was the prerogative of scribes, seldom (if ever) the domain of laypersons. Our window is forcibly tied to this bias.

However many scripts are represented, when it comes to re-enacting the daily life of its citizens, what languages would we hear spoken across the streets and squares of Ugarit? The largest section of the population would have used Ugaritic as their mother tongue, but also as a second language acquired by the emigrés resident in the town. We could infer the presence of Assyrians at the high levels of the society, in the capacity of scribes and high officials, but also of Hurrian people involved in the cultic sphere or employed in the translation business. So, even if it is true that eight languages are attested in the archives, only three were de facto written down: Akkadian, Hurrian, and the local Ugaritic language. That the former may have been presumably spoken with the same regularity as the latter, if at all (van Soldt 1991), is to be doubted. Hurrian may have been spoken in smaller (if strategically placed) segments of the society.

### Akkadian logo-syllabic vs alphabetic cuneiform

The stark opposition is thus neither linguistic, nor embedded in a sea of multilingualism. The contrast is, instead, set out in terms of graphic differentiation, between a logosyllabic script (LS) of long-standing tradition, and a cuneiform alphabet (AC) of local flavour. To shed light on this contrast, archaeology comes to the aid. The precise contextual associations in which AC and LS texts were distributed at the site and its archives show illuminating patterns, that hinge on four aspects: 1. AC and LS receive equal attention in terms of quantities; 2. They almost never contaminate one another, even though they can be found in close proximity, or even on the same tablet, but such cases are very rare (cf. for instance Urtenu’s archives, Bordreuil, Pardee, Hawley 2012); 3. The genres are, broadly speaking, kept separate; 4. They project a different perception of literacy. On this latter point, the socio-cultural significance of LS at that time, and not just at Ugarit, worked towards projecting international officialdom, positioning local rulers in strategic communication through linguistic accessibility. It thus fostered institutional status, keeping international relations international. As such, LS worked as an open system, as opposed to a closed vernacular. Therefore, let us concentrate on AC, and what makes it ‘special’.

The bulk of the documentation for both LS and AC comes from a rational distribution of texts in the archives of the Royal Palace and it also comes from a number of private archives of important individuals. These individuals (Yabninu, Urtenu, Rashapabu and Rapanu) were active in various capacities on behalf of the central administration, but also involved in private entrepreneurial activities, as merchants in contact with polities scattered around the eastern Mediterranean.

In total, the texts written in AC amount to c. 1,500, if we add the corpus that was recently published from the house of Urtenu, adding up to some eighty new tablets (Bordreuil et al. 2012). What is extraordinary is that the distribution of these documents across the whole town, in eleven different archives, is meticulously organised, and their classification is, more often than not, arranged thematically to high degrees of precision. The palace archives occupy several wings of the building (Fig. 2.2). These buildings housed tablets that focused on administration and management of towns and villages in the kingdom, personnel, and commodities. A small percentage, also, dealt with religious matters and school texts.

The residences attributed to specific individuals who were employed by the central organisation, but who also carried out private business (shaded in black), instead, had a more varied thematic breadth. What is interesting to note is that all AC texts tied to administration and the economic workings of the town seem to involve the royal family directly. This is significant, yet seldom emphasised: it seems that the scribal class is piloted, guided and directed to recording all things local that specifically involve royal influence and royal affairs. A particular emphasis is given to the involvement of the queen’s business, as if her individual chancellery were less ‘akkadisé’ than that of the king (Malbran-Labat 1999, 78).

In terms of graphic split, the space occupied by AC never contaminates that of LS. This orderly separation is taken to such a level of organisational order that whenever the rigour slips off, which happens less than rarely, it is assumed, by the editors of the texts, to be an odd feature, sometimes so utterly unexplainable as to be baffling. To be sure, as apparent in the recently published AC texts from Urtenu (Bordreuil et al. 2012),

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3 The Egyptian inscriptions are peculiar. They seem to depict a Canaanite deity, with pointed headdress, streamer and horns. Ben Haring (pers. comm. 28 March 2017) suggested to me that ‘the inscription refers to local (Ugaritic/Syrian) deities, and that the inscription in question could be a local product, made by experts since the hieroglyphs look entirely Egyptian, Ramesside to be more precise’. 

2. A ‘top-down’ re-invention of an old form
the evident template upon which the structure of the alphabetic training is moulded. And nowhere is this clearer in the Ugaritic training than when scribes went back to basics, in the compilation of abecedaries (Hawley 2008a, 2008b). These, in turn, represent the crucial factor to which we must turn when investigating the origin of the cuneiform alphabet. But not before we have introduced a third factor into this dual and neat arrangement (and separation) of scripts.

Tertium comparationis: Hurrian

The Hurrian situation is sui generis. It seems almost surprising that full columns were devoted to Hurrian in multi-lingual lexical lists, on bilingual documents written also in Akkadian, and on ritual tablets also written in AC. An example of this code switching is most famous: the earliest music notation on a tablet in Hurrian (RS 15.30+49+17.387, Schaeffer and Nougayrol 1968, 462–496), with the guidelines on reading notes written in LS, presumably for easier access and wider dissemination. This may indicate that Hurrian was not just recorded for the sake of literate documentation, but that it was actively spoken and used. Whether this may reflect that a contingent of Hurrians was resident in the city cannot be safely concluded, but if that is indeed the case, the likelihood is that these residents may have enjoyed a privileged social position. The occurrences in which Hurrian appears are particularly significant: in lexical texts, in bilingual and trilingual dictionaries. This can lead us to conclude that this integration was, in all likelihood, still a work-in-progress: that translations were needed and that multilingualism was in the process of being formally instituted within the scribal class. The motivation behind this is that there was, clearly, a wish to disseminate it.

Hurrian also appears to be highly specialised, tied to the cultic context. But its strength lies not so much in its specificity (which may be coincidental), but in its very flexibility, given that this language switches graphically, from AC in the Maison du Grand Prêtre, to LS within the royal palace. This is important: it speaks for scribal classes that receive differentiated training, and again, indicates that this graphic swapping was very much working towards instituting multilingualism (Roche-Hawley 2015). This hybridity is not accidental, of course. The Maison du Grand Prêtre itself is important (see Fig. 2.2), because its library is where the main concentration of the extensive mythological texts is housed, such as the Baal Cycle and the birth of the gods. All these texts are in AC. Within the library, several trilingual dictionaries were found (in Sumerian, Babylonian and Hurrian), and also a deposit of weapons and adze heads in bronze, with engraved dedications to the Grand Prêtre in AC (Schaeffer 1956, fig. 216). And the fact that Hurrian mingles with AC in this location should not be overlooked.

Considered to be the ‘centre d’études et de pensée proprement ougaritique’ – the centre of properly Ugaritic studies and thought, the Maison du Grand Prêtre has also been seen as the cradle of the Ugaritic alphabet (Malbran-Labat 1999, 73). Despite the obvious appeal of this statement, the very fact needs to be demonstrated. We have circumstantial evidence, not so much for proving that the alphabet was invented there,
but for its specific connection with Hurrian. This evidence is tied to the structure of the long alphabet. This represents the fully expanded version of this script, with three additional signs, two of which are glottal stops with a particular vocalic colouring. It seems now accepted that these were added to record other languages than Ugaritic (Pardee 2007; Vita 2013, etc.).

These must have been, inter alia, languages whose words may begin with a vowel, a feature not attested in the Semitic family. The Hurrian language fits the bill, as much as Akkadian does, but the latter was consistently recorded in LS in an inextricable duo, which means that no need was perceived to expand the basic sequence of the cuneiform alphabet for this language. This very fact is significant: could we surmise that the cuneiform alphabet itself was developed and fixed in its extended version for the sake of the Hurrian language, as well as for the Ugaritic? That this process went, as it were, in parallel, with Hurrian and Ugaritic being equal beneficiaries, and not by way of re-adaptation (Vita 2013, 208, but see also Giorgieri 2013, 179, who mentions a poor linguistic ‘matrix’ for the Hurrian texts at Ugarit)? If this is the case, the origin of the extended cuneiform alphabet must have been the city of Ugarit itself. But this cannot prove to be valid for the short alphabet as well, which could have been invented elsewhere and then imported at Ugarit, where it, to be sure, underwent changes that included the insertion of the supplemental signs.4

### Whence the alphabet?

So what precise role did Ugarit play in the creation of the cuneiform alphabet? The extended sequence served to record other languages, and not just the local Ugaritic language, therefore it could have been ‘formalised’, prepared and polished to be transmitted in institutional format, but not necessarily created there. Ugarit is not the only site that yielded examples of cuneiform alphabet. There are very sparse, but significant, attestations of this shape as far south as modern Israel and as far west as Cyprus, and Tiryns in mainland Greece (Fig. 2.3). The distribution includes fewer than a dozen sites, but these are sufficiently widespread in the eastern area of the Mediterranean to indicate that the practice of using clay for an alphabetic script template was not uncommon.

Yet, it seems inescapable that the documentation overwhelmingly favours Ugarit as the birthplace. Several scholars confront this question directly, asking whether we should accept it as inextricably intertwined with the origin of the Ugaritians (Dietrich and Loretz 1989) to make their vernacular culturally visible in a political or ideological stance, tied to the recording of rituals for unity and collective redemption (Sanders 2009, 104). In fact, it seems to me that the opposite should instead be stated: that, indeed, the extended version of the alphabet appears as proof of an intention to make

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4 On the chicken-egg debate regarding the development of the long (extended) and short (22-letter ‘Phoenician’ alphabet), the so-called ‘reduction theory’, and the ‘anti-reduction theory’ see among others, Millard 1979; Dietrich and Loretz, 1988, 1989; Sass 1988; Pardee, 2007; Lehmann 2012.
this form of alphabet universal and not local, to include the possibility of registering other languages than Ugaritic, to aspire to a degree of collective accessibility – collective not just for the Ugaritians, but for all its multilingual residents.

This would imply two things: that this process of ‘universalisation’ shows a high level of phonological awareness, which befits the Ugaritic scribes and their sophisticated expertise, and that this was implemented within an organised system that promoted literacy and its diffusion, and that this took the shape of a ‘political’ programme. The types of texts produced, the very quantities of these texts and their chronological horizon indicate that the process was fast, targeted, in bulk, and localised. Let us consider these factors in proper order.

Types and quantities of texts

If abecedaries in AC are attested around the Levantine area in scant numbers, a total of 18 is attested at Ugarit. These numbers speak of an intense dissemination of literacy – well embedded in the Ugaritian schools. Not only numbers of abecedaries at Ugarit outdistance all other attestations elsewhere, but only here do the three different alphabetic systems converge, in the abgd (in short and full format), and the halaham sequences. As is known, the halaham sequence of alphabet follows a different order and is later found in the South Arabian peninsula (Hayajneh and Tropper, 1997). At Ugarit, it is attested on a 27-letter example, neatly crafted (Fig. 2.4).

This tablet shows that the two orders of the alphabet were part of the Ugaritian school system, that the halaham order was as much at home there as the abgd (Bordreuil and Pardee 1995). So evidence shows that several versions of the alphabet had already been set into clay format at Ugarit. And while these are not the unique attestations, all the same, those found elsewhere help us to prove that the perception of this alphabet outside of Ugarit was different.

In today’s Israel, not far from Jerusalem, a site that was a vibrant cultural setting for traders at the very close of the Late Bronze Age, Beth Shemesh, yielded a tablet with an abecedary bearing the halaham sequence. Although it is very damaged, the shape of this tablet, with one section tapering into a sharp edge, seems to be reminiscent of the shape of a mould for casting metal weapons (Sanders 2009, 92). The alphabet sequence is odd, as it is to be read continuously from the left, by rotating it 180°. In the different treatment of the same concept, as shown by these two examples, the Ugarit abcedary and the Beth Shemesh tablet, we see a striking contrast: one is stubbornly compliant with a top-down system of standardisation, of regulated transmission of set practices, while the other is non-standard, free-form, idiosyncratic, almost haphazard. In the latter case, if Sanders and his expert consultants are right (Sanders 2009, 209, n. 62), a mould originally conceived for a specific purpose – casting metals – became useful for an unforeseen application – casting tablets. This projects a completely different, almost opposite, perception of literacy.

Other attestations of these alphabets are not dissimilar, largely detached from a standardised format, and not absorbed by the demands of bureaucracy or scope for literature. They often have a personalising function, like the knife from Nahal Tavor (Yeivin 1945; Millard 1979; Dietrich and Loretz 1988, 244), or mark property and owners, and as such bearing a strong individualising character, such as the text from Sarepta (Pritchard 1975; Bordreuil, 1979; Boyes, Chapter 3, this volume). They also appear to be experimental, such as the tablet from Taanach (Hillers 1964; Moore Cross 1968), rather than linked to a collective voice or institution. Dietrich and Loretz claim that the discovery, inter alia, of the Beth Shemesh tablet demonstrates the doubtfulness of the claim that the birth of AC took place at Ugarit (Dietrich and Loretz 1989, 111) and that it is presently impossible to establish the location of its birth. This is an assumption that, on evidence, can be at least nuanced.

Four factors point in the direction of Ugarit as the original location of AC: 1) the number of abecedaries, and their varieties, at Ugarit exceed all other extant attestations; 2) the Ugarit school system favours the transmission of this script and thus may have triggered its launch; 3) the Mesopotamian scribal curriculum provides a fertile ground for the development of a clay-based, cuneiform-shaped system; 4) a ‘court’ institution, such as the Ugaritic, promotes the implementation of targeted boosts to literacy and its diffusion. These facts (alone) tip the balance, and do so quite compellingly, in favour of Ugarit as the birthplace of AC. In brief, there is no reason to envisage a different scenario (pace Dietrich and Loretz 1989).

Chronology

The chronological span of AC texts from Ugarit seems to be concentrated to a few generations of kings, the precise number highly debated, during the last centuries of the Late Bronze Age. Growing scholarly consensus places the introduction to the mid-thirteenth century (Roche-Hawley and Hawley 2013; Finkelstein and Sass 2013,

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5 For a close comparison of the two tablets, see Bordreuil and Pardee 2001, 345–348.
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185). Some 1336 texts seem to be concentrated to the 1350–1200 BC phase, but there is reason to believe that the timespan may have been even shorter and far more focused.

Early evidence is available for the first documented Ugaritian king (Niqmaddu I) sometime at the beginning of the fourteenth century, known only from a seal, which is hardly a window into the development of literacy (but see Vidal 2006 for earlier kings, however shrouded in mystery). The bulk of our textual documentation spans the reigns of Ammistamru I to the last king Ammurapi, so we should be more confident in placing the birth of AC well into the thirteenth century. In fact, Pardee argues convincingly that this may have been the case (Pardee 2007, 189). This very fact gives us a mere three generations of use. The implications are easy to deduce: if this date is right, then 1) the script is short-lived or, indeed, very short-lived; and 2) the texts were part and parcel of an intent to apply this format as widely and intensely as possible. The next question is: why?

Fine-tuning the chronology of the texts is of crucial importance to answer this question. If most of the LS Akkadian texts are to be dated to the fourteenth century (and this is evinced by the names of the kings mentioned in them), the precise dates for the AC material is less certain. The Ugaritic texts seem to be substantially later. Pardee (2007) dates them to the late thirteenth century, perhaps belonging to the reign of Ammistamru II (1260–1230 BC). This implies that a great number of tablets were compiled and amassed within a single generation or reign.

We can draw estimates on the labour force involved in this ephemeral use of AC, bearing in mind, however, that a (not insubstantial) number of tablets may have not survived preservation, or undergone excavation. If we accept an intensive use of AC, and confine it to just one generation or so, inferences are that: 1) up to 50 tablets were compiled each year by the scribes; 2) this number encompasses a plethora of genres, with whole epic cycles and mythologies, administrative and legal, entire translations committed to writing; it needs to be noted that compiling different genres may well involve different time/energy investments: a literary text may take a lifetime, an administrative less than an hour, so this is a sweeping average 3) scribal institutions were high-intensity industrial hubs of text-production involving a rapid interface between oral and written transmission and translation.

The cuneiform alphabet as a singularity?
The process of committing all of this knowledge to clay was clearly very fast, and the reason for this is still unclear. But if we think about the setting, and the invention of AC itself, we can find some clues. It has been claimed that AC represents a singularity and a unique script (Sanders 2009) and that its cuneiform format possessed a certain “cache” [sic] (Rollston 2010). This conclusion needs to be slightly tweaked. AC as a script is neither new, nor revolutionary. As a re-adaptation of a known structure (alphabet) into a well-established graphic format (cuneiform), it seems a pragmatic and efficient remoulding, rather than a stroke of creativity: ‘ratchet effect’ explains its genesis much more than the often invoked ‘invention’. This script can only take that direction and that shape for contextual constraints and ease of use. Its birth was piloted, perhaps even sculpted to fit the practices of the long-established, organised system tied to the Mesopotamian scribal expertise. What was new in this development was the endeavour, successful while it lasted, to standardise it, and make its potential application as expansive and universal as possible.

The premise is that the scribes realised that AC could be put to use to record local and native works, and their financial domain, but its potential impact was not confined to that only. This creation was not tied, as often suggested, merely to notating the local language. Indeed, if such were the case, the addition of supplemental ‘foreign’ signs attached to the basic alphabet would make no sense. Rather, AC aspired to become a tool that crossed linguistic boundaries. This is why this creation should not be made to be an ideological one, even though it may have been incentivised by socio-linguistic considerations. The fact that abecedaries and school texts were written in AC seems to suggest, from our vantage point of hindsight, a veritable rush to create a legacy in the making, setting the agenda for future generations – that this effort was ultimately stunted does not detract from its synchronic success.

Ugarit was a fertile spot for producing a different kind of alphabet that became standardised. And to do so, the scribes made use of what was already available: the cuneiform scholastic machine and a perfectly viable, if possibly underused, alphabetic principle. AC had a double inspiration (cuneiform and the alphabet) and was driven by expediency and speed rather than strictly ideological motives. Its creation was situated in a learned context that promoted experiments. In this setting, the Ugaritic scribes projected not a new writing, but a new idea of writing.

By adaptation, a real rupture was produced and this was achieved by careful planning. Its impact was more powerful because of its very cohabitation with a dominant Akkadian system, in a setting of highly unequal internal relations. Yet, despite this, and by sensible and practical reaction, the creators of AC built a scribal institution complete with schools and practice texts, geared towards transmitting (a key word, in my view) all aspects of their multilingual culture (Hawley 2015). They went to such lengths as to experiment with exotic scripts, such as Cypro-Minoan, declined in a local variant (Ferrara 2016). How was all this made possible?

The way we should envisage it, in light of the chronology and archaeological setting for the use of the Ugaritic script at Ugarit specifically, is as a top-down imposition: the royal court directed the royal scribal class, and especially the schools housed in the private residences, where experiments were conducted, towards a fast, systematic, momentous transcription of the Ugaritic and Hurrian packages into AC. The way that the scribes of Ugarit confront this implies no stroke of genius whatsoever, no singularity, and especially no invention. The particulars of the script they created are the result of linguistic and epigraphic compromise. Functionality, efficiency and exploitation of ready-made instruments were the key tactics.
The pivotal question they must have pondered over is: how can a large amount of complex information be recorded in the fastest, most efficient, and easiest possible way? Certainly not by using a linear script – which they had perhaps no daily exposure to or familiarity with, and which did not fit the clay used for Akkadian LS. Thence the stratagem to turn to a support that accommodated their pre-existing training, implements and raw material included. Thence a cuneiform script. This is the reply to the key question pondered over by the Ugaritic scribes, goaded on by royal direction, confronted with the hurdles of linguistic constraints: pragmatic, efficient, and literally – given that clay is involved – down to earth.