Chapter 7

Mother or sister? Rethinking the origins of the Greek alphabet and its relation to the other ‘western’ alphabets

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According to prevailing opinion, the alphabet – the origins of which can be traced back to the beginning of the second millennium BC in Egypt – was introduced to Greece via the Phoenicians in or shortly before the eighth century BC. The introduction of this script to Greece meant the re-introduction of writing to the Aegean after an illiterate Dark Age of some 300 years – the preceding syllabic Linear B script had been in use till c. 1200 BC. In this view, the Greeks adjusted the Phoenician script, most importantly by adding vowel signs, and the resulting Greek alphabet was the mother of related scripts such as the Anatolian and Italian alphabets.

The above paradigm was strongly advocated by Rhys Carpenter (1933) and has been generally accepted since. This scenario is, however, not without problems and from early onwards there have been voices, mostly of Semitists, arguing for an earlier transmission date. The emergence of new data over the last decades that are difficult to reconcile with the present model make it worthwhile to re-address this debate.

This article aims to challenge the current paradigm on two fronts. First, it will propose that there was no sudden ‘explosion’ of writing in the eighth century after a long dark age, but that writing (on perishable materials) was already introduced to Greece around or before 1050 BC. It is further hypothesised that the other ‘western’ alphabets are not derived from Greek, but rather that all these ‘western’ alphabets (including the Greek) go back to a shared (unattested) ancestor, which may already have featured some shared innovations such as (some of the) vowel signs.¹

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for his or her very helpful comments and suggestions. Needless to say, I alone remain responsible for the views expressed here.
Problems with the current paradigm: The date of the introduction of the alphabet to Greece

In classical studies, it is the communis opinio that the alphabet was introduced in or shortly before the eighth century BC, when the first attestations of Greek alphabetic writing appear. The paradigm was first advocated by Rhys Carpenter (1933). In the field of Semitic epigraphy, however, scholars overall tend to favour an earlier transmission date (eleventh–ninth century BC), especially since the influential article of Joseph Naveh (1973) who argued for a transmission in the eleventh century BC.

As I have argued elsewhere (Waal 2018), there are a number of significant facts that are hard, or even impossible, to reconcile with the late transmission date proposed by Carpenter. Since these arguments are of relevance for the present article, I will briefly present the most important ones below.

The diversity and wide geographic spread of the archaic Greek alphabets

From the eighth century onwards, Greek alphabetic inscriptions regularly turn up in a large area including the Greek mainland, the Aegean islands, Italy and Sicily. These early inscriptions show regional variety; no less than 33(!) different versions of the alphabet can be distinguished. These local or epichoric scripts are generally divided into the following main groups after Kirchhof 1887: the blue (further split into light blue and dark blue), red and green alphabets.

Despite their obvious differences, however, these alphabets all share certain innovations, such as vowel signs, which means that they must ultimately go back to the same source (e.g. Wachter 1989; Jeffery and Johnston 1990, 6). Since all these different, yet related alphabets are attested from the very start of the eighth century, the current model enforces the assumption of an incredibly rapid adoption, development and spread of alphabetic writing throughout the Mediterranean, which is hardly conceivable (see already Ullman 1934). The explanation that such unparalleled development and spread of alphabetic writing is possible because the Greeks were ‘intensively active people’ (Carpenter 1938, 69) is not satisfying, if only because it assumes an undemonstrated cultural superiority (see also below p. 123).

The archaic scribal habits of the Greek alphabet

Another awkward fact for the current model are the archaic writing habits of the Greek alphabet. The Greek alphabet shares certain characteristics with West-Semitic inscriptions before c. 1050 BC, as has already been pointed out by Naveh (1973). These include

(a) The direction of writing. The writing direction of the earliest Greek inscriptions is not yet fixed and the letters may be written from right to left, left to right, or boustrophedon (horizontally and vertically). Only from c. 500 BC onwards the dextroverse writing (i.e. from left to right) became the norm. The early Greek alphabets share this feature with the early West-Semitic inscriptions, which could also be written in any direction: right-to-left, left-to-right, vertical, and boustrophedon (vertically and horizontally). From around the middle of the eleventh century, however, the writing direction became stabilised and the letters were written only horizontally from right to left (Naveh 1982: 42; Millard 2012a: 17–18). With respect to the direction of writing, the early Greek inscriptions are thus more archaic than the Phoenician script, in which the direction of writing had been established from right-to-left.

As observed by, e.g., Naveh (1973) it is remarkable that (a) the Greeks would have operated a less developed system if they had the standardised ninth–eighth century retrograde Phoenician example at their disposal, and (b) that their system coincidentally mimicked writing practices that existed much earlier. It is further telling (c) that the eventual writing direction of the Greek alphabet (left-to-right) is the complete opposite of that of Phoenician (right-to-left). It is more logical to assume that these different writing directions are the results of independent developments from a writing system whose writing direction was not yet fixed, than that the Greeks would have ignored the already established Phoenician writing direction and eventually chose for the opposite direction.

(b) The use of word dividers. Some, though by no means all, of the early Greek inscriptions make use of word divisions by means of multiple dots and/or short vertical strokes. Similar kinds of word division are attested in the early West-Semitic inscriptions, but not in later Phoenician inscriptions, which are written in scriptio continua.

(c) The instability and variety of letter forms. The early Greek inscriptions show a great variety in letter shapes. Naveh (1973, 1982) explains this diversity by assuming that the alphabets stem from a proto-type which had unstable letter forms. This implies that the alphabet was introduced in or before the eleventh century, when the West-Semitic script did not yet have fixed letter forms. Alternatively, one could see the regional diversity as the result of local developments, which must

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2 Literature about the date of introduction of the alphabet to Greece is vast and cannot all be discussed within the scope of this paper. For an overview of previous scholarship, see, e.g., McCarter 1975, 1–27; Heubeck 1979, 75–76; Bernal 1990, 1–26 and Bourguignon 2010.

3 Notable exceptions of classical scholars who have argued for an earlier date are, e.g., Cornelis Ruijgh (1995, 1998) who has pleaded for a date around 1000 BC and Martin Bernal (1990) who dates the transmission of the alphabet to the fifteenth/fourteenth century BC. Colvin (2014, 76) pushes the date back to at least the mid-ninth century, possibly earlier.

4 A noteworthy exception in this field is Benjamin Sass (2005) who has proposed a late introduction date.
have taken place over a longer period of time. Both scenarios imply an earlier date for the introduction of the alphabet (see also Waal 2018).

**The text genres of the first Greek inscriptions**

The first Greek inscriptions that have survived are of a private nature, such as proprietary inscriptions on pottery and tombstones and rock graffiti (for an overview, see Powell 1991). As observed by Teodorsson (2006, 173), this early private use of writing would indicate ‘an astonishingly broad and rapid propagation among the population’.

It is further of interest that some of the oldest known inscriptions, namely the Nestor cup of Pithekoussai, the Dipylon inscription from Athens and the Hakesander cup from Methone (see now Jankó 2015) present elaborate poetic verses in perfect hexameters. Some have taken these early literary attestations as proof that writing was invented by the Greek for the sole purpose of recording Homer (Powell 1991). Generally speaking, however, poetic and fictitious texts and erotic rock graffiti are unlikely candidates for primary use of writing. A more pragmatic explanation may be that writing was already in use for documents of an economic and administrative nature – typically the first kind of records for which writing is used – on perishable materials, before the first surviving inscriptions on more durable materials (see, e.g., Ruijgh 1995, 37).

**Linguistic arguments**

Since the Phoenician consonantal script was not entirely suited for the Greek language, some changes and adjustments were made. Letters were added and some Phoenician letters acquired a different sound value in the Greek alphabet. Though this remains a hotly debated topic, some of these modifications appear to be better explained if one assumes that the alphabet was introduced to Greece already before the ninth or eighth century. As argued by Cornelis Ruijgh (1995, 1997), for example, an earlier introduction date would explain the choice for the letter *heta* for /h/. It would also offer an appealing solution to the longstanding problem of the origins of the letter *phi* (Brixhe 1991). By contrast, to my knowledge there are no linguistic arguments that favour a later date.

**Summary**

In the present model, in which the Greeks took over the Phoenician alphabet in the late ninth or earlier eighth century BC, one has to assume that the Greeks ignored certain accomplishments of the Phoenicians, such as a fixed direction of writing and standardised letters, but instead turned it into a more primitive script without fixed direction of writing or standardisation of letters, accidentally imitating the situation in the Proto-Canaanite phase. The Greek alphabet subsequently would have spread, developed and diverged with enormous speed over a large geographical area and instantaneously circulated among the population being used for all kinds of private purposes – facts that are all the more remarkable after a long ‘dark age’ of some 300 years in which writing is assumed to have been unknown.

If, by contrast, one allows for an earlier date, i.e. in or before the eleventh century (as advocated by Naveh 1973), a more plausible scenario unfolds itself: the Greeks took over the script and writing conventions (writing direction, letter shapes and word dividers) in the form in which it was in use at that time. The Greek alphabet then gradually spread and developed, which accounts for the regional divergences, as well as the dissimilarities between Greek and Phoenician writing. In all likelihood, writing was in first instance primarily used for administrative and economic records, like in most other ancient societies. These earliest records have not survived, as they were written on perishable materials. In the same way that the cuneiform script was closely connected to the durable writing material clay, alphabetic writing was (and for the most part still is) mostly tied to ephemeral materials such as papyrus, wood, parchment and leaves. It was only in a later phase, when the use of writing extended to other (private) domains, that it also became to be used on more durable materials – such as pottery and stone.

**Further problems with the current paradigm: The relations between the Greek alphabet and the other ‘western’ alphabets**

The problems with the current paradigm do not end here. When the Greeks took over the consonantal script of the Phoenicians they are thought to have introduced vowel signs, which is why for some the Greek script is the first ‘true alphabet’ (see also below p. 120). As the Greeks are seen as the inventors of the vowel signs,

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5 The valid suggestion of Luraghi (2010) that the local alphabets were consciously created and associated with ethnic boundaries and dialects still leaves the problem how this all happened so rapidly.

6 It has further been claimed that the Greek letter shapes at times more resemble the archaic West-Semitic rather than the Phoenician forms (Naveh 1973). However, this is arbitrary and Carpenter (1938) has claimed the exact opposite, arguing that they are more similar to the Phoenician letters (see also Waal 2018).

7 For an elaborate critique of Powell’s claim, see Woodard 1997, 253–256.

8 An earlier introduction of the alphabet to Greece could further account for the fact that the already partly obsolete F was present in all alphabets, though other explanations for this are certainly possible as well.

9 Note that the objections of Slings 1998 against the arguments of Ruijgh for an earlier date do not necessarily call for a later date.
all other alphabets that have vowel signs are automatically considered to be derived from the Greek alphabet. As a consequence, these alphabets are often ignored in the discussion about the date of the Greek alphabet (see also Young 1969, 253). However, as will be shown see below, there are a number of facts which plead against the idea that the Anatolian, Iberian and Italian alphabetic writing traditions are all descendants of the Greek alphabet.

**The Anatolian alphabets**

**The contemporary, independent tradition of the Phrygian alphabet**

Like the archaic Greek inscriptions, the earliest Phrygian inscriptions are written from left to right, right to left and in boustrophedon (Brixhe 2004, 778). As word dividers, multiple dots may be used, but this is done irregularly (ibid., 2004, 781; see also Fig. 7.1).

It is clear that the Phrygian and Greek alphabets are closely related and it has long been assumed that the Phrygian alphabet was derived from the Greek. There is, however, no clear single Greek alphabet that can be identified as the source (see, e.g., Young 1969, 254; Diakonoff and Neroznak 1985, 4). The Phrygian alphabet bears most resemblance to the red group, but some elements are more similar to other local alphabets, notably that of the green group. A crucial new development in this discussion has been the redating of the destruction of Gordion. The first Phrygian inscriptions have turned out to be some 100 years older than previously thought. They can now be placed at around 800 BC (Brixhe 2007a, 278), which makes them earlier than the oldest Greek inscriptions.

The fact that Phrygian inscriptions now predate Greek inscriptions does of course not automatically imply the reverse scenario, i.e. that the Greeks received the alphabet through the Phrygians, but it does force us to rethink the current hellenocentric model.10

It is further of interest that the Phrygian alphabet underwent some clearly independent developments, such as the addition of the extra, non-Semitic sign † for /ts/ (Young 1969, 295, see also p. 120 below). This sign is also attested in other Anatolian alphabets, as well as in some of the Italic and Palaeohispanic alphabets (see below p. 117).

Last but not least, the earliest inscriptions demonstrate that the Phrygian alphabetic tradition was already well established at the beginning of the eighth century. This has been explained by Brixhe (2004, 277, 2007a, 278–279) as the result of a much longer development, which must go back to at least the ninth, if not the tenth century.

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10 That this is not the case is evident from, e.g., the presence of the Phoenician letter šet in the Greek alphabet that was not part of the Phrygian alphabet (cf. Brixhe 2004, 284, 2007a, 279).

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**Table 7.1. Writing direction and word division in the earliest inscriptions of the Phoenician, North-West Semitic and main ‘western’ alphabets.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alphabet(s)</th>
<th>Date of first attestation</th>
<th>Writing direction</th>
<th>Presence of Word Dividers (not excluding the simultaneous use of scriptio continua)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northwest Semitic</td>
<td>19th c.–</td>
<td>All directions</td>
<td>Yes (dots, vertical lines)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoenician</td>
<td>11th c.–</td>
<td>Right → left</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>8th c.–</td>
<td>All directions Classical period: Left → right</td>
<td>Yes (dots, vertical lines)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phrygian</td>
<td>8th c.–</td>
<td>All directions</td>
<td>Yes (dots, inconsistent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etruscan</td>
<td>8th c.–</td>
<td>All directions Classical period: Right → left</td>
<td>No (in later inscriptions use of dots)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydian</td>
<td>7th c.–</td>
<td>All directions</td>
<td>Yes (dots, vertical lines)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carian</td>
<td>7th c.–</td>
<td>Egypt: Right → left Caria: Left → right</td>
<td>Yes, but only sporadic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South-Western</td>
<td>7th c.</td>
<td>All directions</td>
<td>Sporadic (vertical lines)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**The Carian alphabet**

The corpus of Carian texts consists of some 200 inscriptions of which the oldest date to the seventh century. Some have been found in Anatolia, but the majority stems from Egypt. The inscriptions show a number of local alphabetic varieties (Adiego 2007d, 205–228), but they do all share the same innovations, which must mean that they go back to a common source. The more archaic Egyptian inscriptions are written from right to left, the Anatolian ones from left to right. Scriptio continua is frequent, and the use of word dividers sporadic (Melchert 2004, 609).

The Carian alphabet resembles the Greek alphabet, though, as in the case of Phrygian, no single Greek variant can be identified as its ancestor. A great unsolved enigma is the fact that some of the Greek letters have deviant sound values in Carian. To explain these abnormal sound values, the ‘chaos hypothesis’ has been proposed, which assumes that the Greek letters were just randomly attributed to phonetic values. However, this does not explain why the other signs did retain their Greek value.

Another proposed solution is that the Carian alphabet underwent a strong process of cursivisation, dramatically changing the form of many letters. At a certain point this graphic system underwent a change to ‘capital’ letters, for which the Greek capital letters were used as models – but now only from a formal point of view, disregarding their phonetic values (Adiego 2007d, 231). Both these solutions are, however, altogether far from satisfying and difficult to accept (ibid., 233).
The Lydian alphabet

The Lydian alphabet is attested in some 115 inscriptions, of which the oldest date to the late-eighth century/beginning of the seventh century. The most archaic inscriptions (eighth-sixth century) are written from left-to-right, right-to-left and boustrophedonically. From the classical period onwards, the script is exclusively sinistroverse (Gusmani 1964, 21; Melchert 2004, 602; Gérard 2005, 28) – in contrast to the dextroverse Greek alphabet. Most words are divided by means of a blank space, but single or multiple dots and vertical lines may be used as word dividers. Scriptio continua is attested twice (Gérard 2005, 28).

It is generally assumed that the Lydian alphabet is derived from the Greek alphabet, but the exact relationship remains unclear (Melchert 2004, 602 with references). For fourteen signs there is a more or less direct correspondence with Greek letters, but a number of letters (six) represent a different sound value in the Greek alphabet and yet others (five) do not stem from the Greek alphabet (Gérard 2005, 24–26).

The Lycian, Pamphylian and Sidetic alphabets

Of a slightly later date, but of interest nonetheless, are the Lycian, Pamphylian and Sidetic alphabets: The Lycian alphabet is attested in some 170 inscriptions (including two in Milyan or Lycian B) dating to the fifth-fourth century BC and some 150 (distinctive) coin legends. The script runs from left-to-right and most use single or multiple dots as word dividers, though not consistently (Melchert 2004, 592). Similar to the other Anatolian alphabets, the relationship with the Greek alphabet is opaque (Melchert 2004, 592). Over 80% of the letters can be matched with the Greek alphabet, but the remaining signs are considered to be either original creations or borrowings from other writing systems. The value of some signs is still a matter of debate (Swiggers and Jenniges 1996, 282).

The Pamphylian alphabet is most closely related to the blue Greek alphabet, but it also contains some unusual, possibly archaic features (Swiggers and Jenniges 1996, 282). The Sidetic alphabet, usually written in scriptio continua, is not completely deciphered. There are about half a dozen inscriptions and some coin legends, which probably date to the third and second centuries BC. Its origins are unclear, but a few letters can be linked to those of the Greek alphabet (ibid., 282).

The Italic alphabets

The Etruscan alphabet

More or less simultaneously with the Greek and Anatolian alphabets, several alphabetic scripts emerge in Italy from the eighth century BC onwards, of which the Etruscan alphabet is best attested.12 The archaic Etruscan inscriptions (seventh-sixth century BC) are written from left to right and occasionally boustrophedonically. The earliest texts are written in scriptio continua, but from the sixth century onwards words may be divided by two or more dots.

The Etruscan alphabet most resembles the western or red Greek alphabets, but there are also significant differences. This is most apparent in the case of the sibilants. In the Etruscan alphabet, both the letters sigma and san are retained, whereas none of the Greek alphabets contains both these letters: they have all chosen one of the two sibilants. This circumstance has been explained by assuming that the Etruscan alphabet was taken over in a period when the Greek alphabet still had both these letters, that is before its split into the blue and red groups (Bonfante and Bonfante 2002, 45). This scenario would imply an earlier date for the origins of the Greek alphabet than its first attestations.

The other Italic alphabets

Apart from Etruscan there are some more scarcely attested Italic alphabets, such as those of Bolzano, Magre, Sondrio, Novilara and the ‘East Italic’, Messapic, Venetic, Lepontic and Sicel alphabets. These alphabets were used for several Pre-Italic languages and dialects (Ligurian, Lepontic, Raetic, Venetic, Messapic, Sicel, East Italic).13 They are usually considered to be derived from the Etruscan alphabet, but some features seem to point at direct knowledge of the Greek alphabet. In addition, other, possibly Anatolian, influences can be detected (Whatmough 1993, 502; Penney 2012, 1–2, see also below p. 120).

The Palaeohispanic alphabets

From at least the seventh century onwards and possibly earlier, de Hoz 2010a, 358–361) there were several related writing systems in use on the Iberian Peninsula, which are referred to generically as the Palaeohispanic scripts. It has been suggested that these Palaeohispanic scripts (excluding Graeco-Iberian, see below) have a common origin: the so-called South-Western (SW) script, although this cannot be established with certainty (de Hoz 2010a, 489, 2010b, 200–219). The corpus of SW texts, of which the underlying language is unknown, comprises nearly 100 inscriptions. They mainly stem from Portugal, supplemented by a modest number from Spain. The direction of writing is not stable: inscriptions may be written leftward, rightward or in boustrophedon. Word division is rare, but at times words are separated by vertical strokes.

The origins of the SW script are much-debated, except for the later Graeco-Iberian script which is derived directly from Greek and is attested from the fifth century BC

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11 Swiggers and Jenniges 1996, 284 assume it is based on the ‘red’ alphabet group, just like Lycian.
12 The oldest currently known alphabetic inscription from Italy stems from a flask found in a cemetery in the Osteria dell’Osa at Gabii (Bietti Sestieri et al. 1990, 83–88). The flask has now been radiocarbon dated to c. 825 BC at the latest (Nijboer et al. 2000, 173–174), but the language of this inscription cannot be established with certainty. The earliest Etruscan abecedaria date to the second quarter of the seventh century (Cr 9.1: 447 and Fa 9.1: 416, see Meiser 2014, 447 and 416 respectively).
13 For a succinct overview of these alphabets, see Bonfante 1996, 297–311.
onwards (de Hoz 2010b: 175–177). For the other scripts, a Phoenician derivation of the script is now favoured by most scholars (Valério 2008, 112; de Hoz 2010a, 487–517). However, this does not explain the fact that the script also shares similarities with the Greek alphabet (de Hoz 2010a, 488–500) as well as with the Anatolian (and some of the Italic) alphabets (see, e.g., Gomes 1997, 18–19). Therefore, Greek (Schulten 1940, 39), Greek/Phoenician (Untermann 1997) and Greek/Anatolian intermediates (Gomes 1997, 18 with references to Beirão) have also been proposed.

**Summary**

From c. 800 BC onwards, several different alphabets are in use in Anatolia, Italy and Spain. They are clearly related to the Greek alphabets, but at the same time display some significant differences. None of them can be attributed to a single (Greek) source and some share additional signs that are not present in the Greek alphabet. At times, there is no correspondence to the sound values of the Greek alphabet, for which only unsatisfying ad hoc solutions have been offered. Further, the alphabets already reflect well-established local writing traditions from the very start.

**An alternative scenario**

The above facts are all hard to reconcile with the current paradigm which holds that (a) the alphabet was introduced to Greece only in or shortly before the eighth century and (b) the Greek alphabet was the mother of all ‘western’ alphabets (see Fig. 7.2a). A different scenario is therefore suggested, in which:

(a) the introduction of the alphabet to Greece took place around or before 1050 BC, several centuries before its first attestations. Rather than an ‘alphabetic big bang’ after three centuries without writing, the script spread and developed at a more natural pace. The first records, in all likelihood largely of an economic and/or administrative nature, were written on perishable materials and have therefore not survived. It was only much later, in the eighth century BC when the use of writing extended to other domains and became more widespread among the population, that the script was also used on more durable materials, such as proprietary inscriptions on pottery and graffiti on stone.

(b) the Anatolian, Italic and Iberian alphabets are not derived from the Greek alphabet(s), but rather go back to a shared (unattested) common ancestor. This ancestor already contained certain shared innovations such as (some of the) vowel signs. The various alphabets derived from it subsequently underwent independent developments before their first attestations (see Fig. 7.2b). This scenario that would account for the existence of the many regional varieties, which display obvious similarities but also discrepancies from the very start, as well as for the fact that not in a single case a clear Greek source can be established for the western alphabets.

**In search of a common ancestor**

The above-proposed model, in which the Greek alphabet is not the mother, but rather a sister of the Anatolian, Italic and Iberian alphabets, has several advantages. It would not only account for the fact that the Greek and the other alphabets display

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14 Note that this Graeco-Iberian script is also the only purely alphabetic system; the other scripts may best be defined as ‘semi-syllabaries’.

15 Note that a similar suggestion has been made with respect to the Greek and Phrygian alphabets by Young (1969, 256) who suggests that they stem from a common ancestral alphabet that already contained vowels.
both differences and similarities from the very beginning, but it could also offer new possible solutions for the above-discussed ‘abnormal’ sound values in the Anatolian alphabets. If the Anatolian alphabets are not derived from the Greek alphabet, it is not so alarming that some values differ from their Greek counterparts, as they may be the result of independent, internal (possibly phonological) developments, which took place over the course over a long period of time.

The model would further account for the above-mentioned interesting similarities between some signs that occur in the Anatolian, Italic and Paleohispanic alphabets, but which are not present in the Greek alphabet. An interesting case in point is the non-Semitic sign ʾא, which is used for the sound value /ts/ in the Phrygian alphabet. This sign occurs with the same value in other Anatolian alphabets as well as in the Raetic alphabet (Bonfante 1996, 3.04 table 23.2). In addition, the sign is attested in the Paleohispanic alphabet, but here it is uncertain if it has same the sound value (Gomes 1997, 18–19; Valério 2008, 130–131). Though these parallels may of course be a coincidence, they could also point to a common origin.16

The same holds true for the often-noted remarkable fact that the Lydian and Etruscan alphabets both use the sign 8 for the sound value /f/. This correspondence is usually explained as pure chance, or a later borrowing. Proposals that they might go back to a common source have in the past been made (see, e.g., already Sommer 1933), but they have overall received (too) little attention (cf. Gérard 2005, 26 with note 58).

It is further worthwhile to entertain the possibility that the unattested common ancestor also contained (some of) the vowels, which were thus not necessarily a Greek invention. As has long been observed the vowels a, i and u which are shared by all western (Valério 2008, 116), were already used as so-called matres lectionis in Cilicia in bilingual Aramaic and Hieroglyphic-Luwian (an Indo-European language) inscriptions. In the Aramaic inscriptions, the Luwian vowels a, i and u are rendered with the consonants ʾalph, ʾod and ʾaww. Therefore, some scholars assume that the Greeks received the vowel-letters (matres lectionis) together with the alphabet (see e.g. Lipiński 1994, 29–30), but this view is not generally accepted (see e.g. Naveh 1982, 183; Powell 1991, 44–46; Kuichh, 1997, 573).

As kindly pointed out to me by Alwin Kloekhorst, it is of interest that the Greeks only added signs for long vowels in a later stage. If they had been the original ‘inventors’ of the vowel signs, would it not have been more logical that they would have made a distinction between long and short vowels from the start? This circumstance may be seen as an indication that the vowel signs were ‘invented’ for a language in which vowel length was not so relevant as it was for Greek.17 When discussing vowel inventio, it is further important to bear in mind that the vowel signs are not typical for ‘western’ alphabets, but that vocalic components were developed independently in different regions of the globe such as Ethiopia and India (Rodriguez 2002).

New discoveries and insights since 1933
The above scenario implies that (a) the alphabetic script was in use much earlier and on a larger scale across the Mediterranean than is now generally assumed and (b) there were extensive contacts in the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age between the regions in which the ‘western’ alphabets were used. In the previous, it has been shown that there are a number of indications that the Greek alphabet is much older than its first attestations. Likewise, the first inscriptions of other western alphabets, such as the Etruscan and Phrygian alphabets show certain characteristics that imply that they must go back to an older tradition.

Further, new finds and insights made over the last decades support the idea that (alphabetic) writing was more widespread and that cultural contacts were more intense in the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean than was long thought. It is important to realise that since the current paradigm was established in 1933, there have been important discoveries that have fundamentally changed our understanding of the historical context in which the transmission of the alphabets took place. The most important ones are listed below.

Discoveries of more (and earlier) alphabetic inscriptions
In the last decades, our corpus (and knowledge) of early alphabetic inscriptions has significantly increased. Discoveries at Wadi el-Hol have shown that the earliest alphabetic traditions date back already to 1900–1800 BC (Darnell et al. 2005). Further, there are growing indications that the alphabet was regularly used in the ancient Near East from at least the fifteenth century onwards (Haring 2015).

Within the Aegean, the number of early Greek inscriptions has steadily grown since 1933 and some discoveries have led to a revision of some 100 years for the first attestations of the Greek alphabet from c. 700 to c. 800 BC (possibly even earlier, see Janko 2015). Among these new finds are the hexametric inscriptions on the Nestor cup from Pithekoussai (found in 1954) and the recently discovered Hakesander-cup from Methone (see also above p. 111), which date to the eighth century BC. These two objects show that already at that time, the practice to use writing for poetic and private ends was not confined to Athens – where the contemporary Dipylon inscription was found in 1871 – but that this occurred in a wide geographic area which included Italy.

16 As has been observed before (Gérard 2005, 26–27; Melchert apud Valério 2008, 130) this sign is very similar to the Hieroglyphic Luwian sign which represents the sound value /ts/. This could be an interesting indication for the possible place of origin of the assumed common ancestor – an intriguing question that falls beyond the scope of this paper.

17 Compare, e.g., the Linear A script, which was also less suitable to write the Mycenaean language (see recently Colvin 2014, 35). Note that the Cypriot syllabaries which are also derived from Minoan scripts, also do not have vowel length (Panayotou-Triantaphyllopoulou 2003, 203–215).

18 For a recent overview of the early history of the alphabet, see Millard 2012a. See also the contribution of Ben Haring in this volume (chapter 4)
A further significant new insight is the above-mentioned redating of the Phrygian alphabet, which is now contemporaneous of even older than the earliest Greek attestations (see above p. 114).

**The decipherment of Linear B**

When discussing the introduction of the Greek alphabet, it is important to bear in mind that the Aegean has a long history of writing: from at least c. 1700 till c. 1200 BC several writing systems were in use, most notably Cretan Hieroglyphs, Linear A and Linear B. Michael Ventris’ decipherment of the latter script in 1952 revealed that it was used for the Mycenaean language. The Linear B script, of which the oldest texts probably date to c. 1450–1400 BC, is attested at various sites on the Greek mainland and Crete. Thus, a firmly established and widespread tradition of writing a ‘forerunner’ of the Greek language existed for at least 200 years. This makes the assumption that a period of some 300 years without any writing would follow less likely, especially in light of new insights about this period (see below).

**Interconnectivity in the Mediterranean**

The last decades, insights about interconnectivity in the ancient world have altered drastically. It has become clear that the Aegean world was not isolated, but stood in close contact with its eastern and western neighbours. The now available textual and archaeological data show that an international network of trade and/or diplomatic contacts across the Mediterranean existed from at least the third millennium onwards, intensifying in the second millennium BC (recently Broodbank 2013, esp. chapters 8–9). In the following ‘Dark Age’ our sources are scanty and interaction may have been less intense, but they were certainly not absent (see below).

Archaeological evidence from Italy has revealed that there were trade contacts with the Eastern Mediterranean in the Late Bronze Age (Broodbank 2013, esp. chapters 8–9). Data from Spain and Portugal are scarcer, but not absent. Recent excavations at, for example, the Late Bronze Age site La Bastida in the southeast of Spain, have revealed that this settlement bears a strong resemblance to contemporary ancient Near Eastern cities, demonstrating that the intercultural contacts may have been more intense than hitherto assumed (Lull et al. 2014).

In short, we know now that the necessary infrastructure for a transmission of the alphabet was already in place long before the traditional date of its assumed introduction in the Aegean and beyond.

**New light on the Dark Age**

Not only our views on intercultural contacts in the ancient world, but also our perception of the Greek Dark Age has changed. Recent archaeological studies have shown that this Dark Age was not as dark as was long assumed. Apart from obvious decline, there was a substantial amount of prosperity, certainly in places like Knossos and Lefkandi (e.g. Crielaard 1995, 264). Further, though it was certainly a period of change, there are also signs of continuity with the preceding Late Bronze Age. Maritime activity continued and there was still exchange with the Near East (e.g. Dickinson 2006, 196–218, see also above). The fact that this period has proved to be not all bleak and regressive, and that the Greeks remained in continuous contact with the Phoenicians (and other people), who made use of writing, make a scenario in which Greece, as the only region in the area, would have remained illiterate for over three centuries, less appealing.

**Unthinking Eurocentrism**

The study of classical antiquity has long been dominated by a Hellenocentric view. The ‘Greek Way’ has been presented as unique in world history and it is viewed in a special relation with the modern Western civilisations. Among the many achievements attributed to the Greek brilliance is the ‘invention’ of the first ‘true’ alphabet (Colvin 2014, 27).

An eloquent illustration of this very biased way of thinking is the reaction of Carpenter (1938), already briefly referred to on p. 110, when his theory was criticised by Ullman. When Ullman expressed his doubts about the incredible speed in which the Greek alphabet must have spread and developed in Carpenter’s scenario, Carpenter replied that he held it ‘worse than absurd, un-Greek and hence unthinkable that it should have lingered for any considerable lapse of time among this intensely active people, in passive abeyance, known but unutilized’ (Carpenter 1938, 69, emphasis my own). The acclaim of the ‘dynamic Greeks’, implicitly setting aside the Phoenicians as inactive, is typical for the Eurocentric view in which the ‘west’ is seen as the only agent in world history, and the rest of the world is merely a passive bystander (see, e.g. Marks 2002, 8; Hobson 2004, 4).¹⁹

However, since Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) has ruthlessly exposed the (unconsciously) eurocentric outlook prevalent in academia, the ‘legend of the Greek wonder’ has been under increasing attack. It is more and more being recognised that ancient Greece was not isolated, but formed an integral part of the ancient Mediterranean world and should be studied and appreciated as such.²⁰

The paradigm of Carpenter is clearly a product of its time, in which a pivotal role for the Greeks and their alphabet was seen as self-evident and unavoidable. This view, however, has become obsolete and out-dated.

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¹⁹ See also Bernal 1991, 8–15, who sees Carpenter’s views in the context of intensified anti-Semitism.

²⁰ Of great importance have been the pioneering works of West (1997) and Burkert (1984–1992), for recent studies see, e.g., Rollinger 2004; Henkelman 2006, Haubold 2013, Bachvarova 2016.
Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence

Though virtually all parameters have changed in the last decades, the paradigm itself has remained remarkably intact. The only argument for a late introduction date that is currently still standing is the argumentum ex silentio: there are no certain Greek alphabetic inscriptions attested before the eighth century BC. Yet, an argument from silence is never more than that: it remains inconclusive, however deafening this silence may be. Moreover, this particular silence is hardly surprising nor unique.

First of all, it is clear that the dominant writing mediums for alphabetic scripts were perishable materials such as leather, wood or papyrus. Due to their ephemeral nature, their survival (under Greek climatic conditions) is not to be expected. The oldest papyrus from Greece dates from the fourth century BC, but no one seriously claims that this material was not in use before to record writing (Ruijgh 1997, 536).

Secondly, this ‘silence’ not only occurs in Greece, but throughout the entire region in which alphabets were used – which is of course linked to the perishable nature of the writing materials. The situation for, e.g., the Hebrew alphabet is very similar (see, e.g., Cross 1979, 109; Bernal 1990, 55; Naveh 1991, 150).

Against the argument from silence stand the above-discussed new discoveries, that have resulted in a substantial revision of our views of the early origins of the alphabet. Not only do we know that the alphabet is much older than long assumed, the date for the earliest Greek inscriptions have also been pushed back by a century (see p. 121). These new finds are a clear warning of the dangers of relying too heavily only on the evidence presently available to us.

Final remarks

Needless to say, the above scenario is inevitably tentative and many issues, such as the modes of transmission, or the language(s) and location(s) of the supposed common ancestor, have not been addressed here. This paper is first and foremost meant as an incentive to break away from the current paradigm, and to open up new horizons for research. In the present debate, the assumption that the introduction of the Greek alphabet took place around 800 BC is treated as an established fact and it forms the starting point of virtually all new research, preventing real progress. New facts and insights are being forced into the existing paradigm – at times with far-fetched \textit{ad hoc} explanations – whereas these new facts should instead force us revise the paradigm. Paraphrasing Sherlock Holmes, the facts are insensibly twisted to suit the theory, instead of theories to suit facts (Doyle 1892, 7).

A different approach, allowing an earlier date for the introduction of the Greek alphabet and a less decisive role for the Greeks in the transmission of the alphabet to the ‘west’, may yield new insights and help us to better understand relations between (alphabetic) scripts.