

The early alphabetic practice in the southern Levant and the Greek world: context and function

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Alphabetic writing emerged in the Levant and subsequently in the Greek world mostly during the Iron Age, albeit under different circumstances. This development has been dealt with extensively from literary, linguistic, paleographic, and archaeological points of view, whereby writing has predominantly been approached as a technological system, rather than an artifact or practice. While various aspects remain under debate, scholarship has aimed at outlining changes in and the spread of this system over time. At the same time, new approaches emphasize alphabetic writing as a material practice that can be framed in a cultural, social, political and economic context. Such approaches are for example focusing on the question of *who* was writing, over *what* writing is (for).

This paper focuses on the social context of the alphabet as a material practice and how this practice was anchored, comparing the context for its early development in the southern Levant and the Greek world. While in the Levant, the Proto-Canaanite alphabet emerged over the course of centuries (gaining momentum c. 12th century BCE), evolving during the Iron Age into Hebrew and Phoenician-Aramaic, alphabetic writing in the Greek world appears in comparison – based on preserved inscriptions – to have exploded upon its introduction through Phoenician intermediaries (c. 8th century BCE). Studying the first phases of alphabetic writing in both regions by approaching early inscriptions as artifacts, this paper offers a comparative assessment of the social and professional context in which writing as a practice was put to use. Focusing on the archaeological context, as well as the medium and content of the inscriptions, it is argued that alphabetic writing in the southern Levant emerged and was anchored in a professional scribal context related to a reconfiguration of political-administrative structures. In the Greek world, alternatively, concentrations of early writing can be associated with actors in relatively independent communities, often showing strong trade activity and boasting a new elite culture.

While the comparative or integrated study of early alphabetic inscriptions in the Levant and the Greek world has so far mostly served to trace the development and spread from one (the Levant) to the other (the Greek world), this approach enables us to reflect on the underlying social differences in how writing was anchored and the role played by writing in the emergence of different forms of social and political organization in both regions.

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