

The “Scribal Turn” from Egyptian Hieratic to the Alphabet

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Abstract

The cultural contact between Canaanite and Egyptian hieratic scribes in Late Bronze Age southern Canaan promoted the consolidation and refinement of the Early Alphabet, which had hitherto been mainly modeled after hieroglyphic sign shapes. Lachish seems to have been pivotal in these encounters. Based on two recently found inscriptions from this site, one hieratic and one Early Alphabetic, it can now be shown that the “handshake” between the scribal traditions occurred already during the 18th Dynasty, in the mid–late 15th century BCE. This is more than a century before the region’s Ramesside administration of the 19th and 20th Dynasties when the scribal contacts intensified considerably.

Keywords: Early Alphabet; proto-Canaanite; hieroglyphs; hieratic; Hebrew hieratic; Lachish

1. Introduction

As I will demonstrate below, the epigraphy of Judah in the Iron Age was intimately engaged with Egyptian scribal traditions. It was the Egyptian scribal context where the Early Alphabet was invented around 1800 BCE in Sinai (see Section 5 below). Subsequently, in Late Bronze Age southern Canaan, the Early Alphabet developed specific contours before it was refined into its Iron Age II branches, Hebrew among them. This paper will address the formative centuries of Egyptian scribal influence and dominance over Late Bronze Age Canaan during the New Kingdom.



It is important to stress that the Egyptian scribal context involves primarily hieratic, not hieroglyphic. A common misunderstanding (wrongly presented in literature) perceives hieroglyphs and hieratic as two distinct Egyptian scripts. In practice, they are different *ductus* of the same Egyptian script.¹ To some degree, today’s use of print and cursive letters is comparable: We would not classify a handwritten text as a script distinct from the same Latin (or Hebrew or Arabic or other) letters of a print text. While hieratic text (i.e., various cursive *ductus* written in ink on papyrus or ostraca) has a different visual appearance than carefully painted or chiseled hieroglyphs, both are variants of the same script: Egyptian. The difference is technical and functional, as hieroglyphs were used when an inscription’s *sitz im leben* was the eternal and divine world. For worldly purposes, be they personal, administrative, educational, literary, or other, the cursive *ductus*, which we conventionally call hieratic, was used. Accordingly, Egyptian scribes’ day-to-day almost exclusively involved hieratic, which was what students were taught in scribal school when they learned and practiced how to read and write. In contrast, producing hieroglyphic inscriptions was a craft performed by specially trained artisans, not professional Egyptian scribes.

2. Context

Hieratic inscriptions from Canaan have almost exclusively been found in the Shephela and Northern Negev of the Late Bronze Age.² Some 45 hieratic inscriptions have been found to date, more than half of which come from two sites: Tel Sera’, which produced 16 inscriptions, and Lachish, which yielded 14 (see Wimmer 2022a: 37f).³ Most of these comprise incomplete bowls or fragments thereof registering harvest tax deliveries. The inscriptions seem to follow a standard form, listing date, commodity, quantity, and origin. The form is introduced by the heading *brt ntj jm=s*, “the *brit*, which is in it: (...).” The Canaanite term *brt* (cognate with Hebrew ברית) was used in Egyptian New Kingdom texts to denote the products of forced labor or corvée imposed on conquered populations. I have suggested designating these items *brit bowls* (Wimmer 2022a).

¹ Demotic is different; it designates both a distinct phase of the Egyptian language (between Late Egyptian and Coptic) and a separate script developed and introduced in the 26th Dynasty (664–525 BCE). Unlike hieratic, Demotic characters cannot be transliterated into hieroglyphs.

² The only exception is the Egyptian stronghold Bet She’an, where four hieratic inscriptions were found (Wimmer 2022a: 37).

³ This count includes two hieratic sherds from Lachish found in 2015; they will be published by Orly Goldwasser (Michael Hasel, personal communication). The present author is preparing a new and complete re-edition of all published hieratic inscriptions from Israel (Wimmer, forthcoming a).

3. New Evidence from Lachish: Hieratic

In 2019, a new hieratic inscribed sherd was found by the Austrian-Israeli expedition to Lachish, directed by Felix Höflmayer and Katharina Streit, in fortified Building 100, Area S (Fig. 1). It was published by Wimmer et al. (2022) and numbered Lachish Hieratic Inscription XII (LaHI XII). It comprises three adjoining fragments of an ostracon and is inscribed on both sides in black ink. The text is poorly preserved and difficult to decipher but apparently lists personal names and grain rations. Of the seven personal names on the ostracon, five can safely or tentatively be identified as Canaanite (among them is *Bn-ʿnt*, Ben-Anat), and one (*Pwj*) is readily labeled Egyptian. The content, layout, *ductus*, and paleography of the ostracon are clearly different from the later Ramesside *brit* bowls.

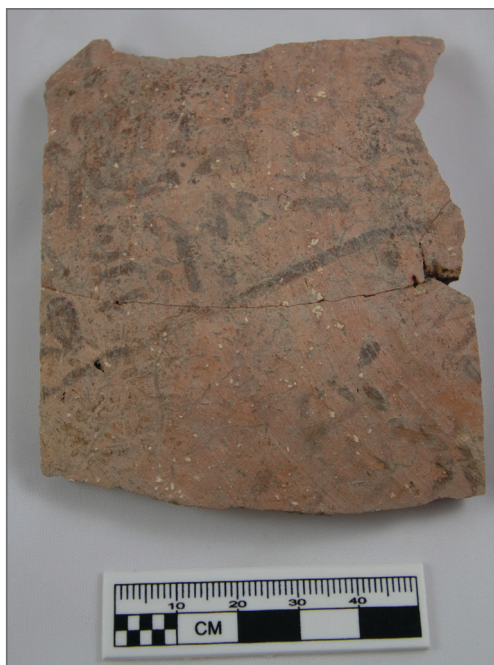


Fig. 1. Lachish Hieratic Inscription XII, recto (after Wimmer et al. 2022).

What singles out this new hieratic inscription from the known other hieratic inscribed sherds, apart from its contents, is its early date. Based on its secure stratigraphic provenience in lower Stratum S-2 and a robust radiocarbon date, which positions it in the LB IIA (ca. 1400–1350 BCE; Wimmer et al. 2022: 146–149), the ostracon is best attributed to the reign of Amenophis II in the last quarter of the 15th century BCE. Only one other hieratic ostracon is similarly early: Lachish Hieratic Inscription VI (LaHI VI), a small fragment, 3.8 × 2.5 cm,

from a locus adjoining Building 100, assigned to Stratum S-3 and dated to the mid-15th century BCE (Goldwasser 1991: Fig. 1:2). It has the short expression *ḏb.t*, remainder, which points at an administrative accounting context (Goldwasser 1991: 250; Sweeney 2004: 1610). These dates are compatible with the mentioning of Lachish in Papyrus Hermitage 1116A, where this site is listed first among messengers from Canaanite towns to receive beer and grain assignments at the royal court of Amenophis II (Weippert et al. 2010: 122–124; Webster et al. 2019). All the other known hieratic inscriptions from Canaan, except for LaHI VI and XII, are of a later, Ramesside, date (i.e., the 19th and 20th dynasties, 13th–12th centuries BCE).

4. New Evidence from Lachish: Early Alphabet

In 2018, the same Austrian-Israeli expedition found a small sherd in Area S adjoining Building 100 (Fig. 2). Its exterior bears a typical Cypriote White Slip II decoration, while its interior features an Early Alphabetic inscription in reddish-brown ink (Höflmayer et al. 2021). Following a suggestion by Goldwasser (2021), the sherd came to be known as *the Dalet Ostrakon*. It, too, is assigned to Stratum S-2 and can be roughly dated to the mid-15th century BCE. The authors identified the words *ʿbd* and *npt*, written in two lines from right to left, leaving some characters unexplained. I propose that the inscription be read consecutively from left to right as the sherd is turned counter-clockwise. In this manner, the inscription would read *npt ndb ʿl* [...], [...], גפת נדב על [...] [“honey/nectar voluntarily (offered) by (? ...).”]

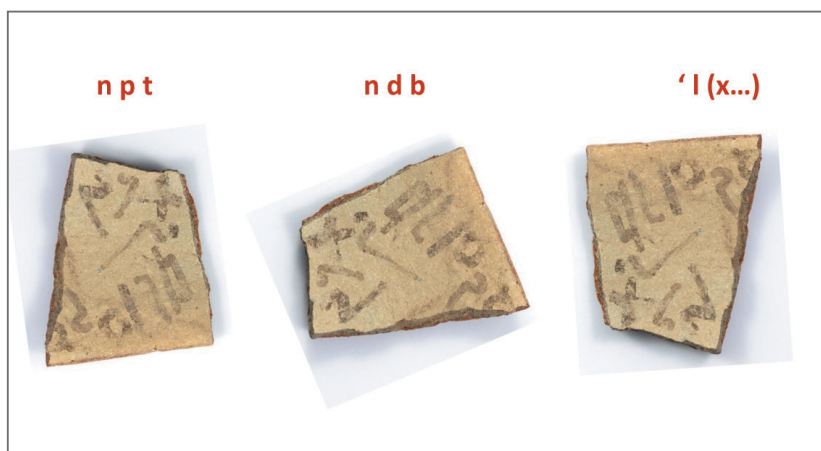


Fig. 2. The Dalet Ostrakon from Lachish turned counter-clockwise and read from left to right (after Höflmayer et al. 2021).

5. A Handshake between Hieratic and the Early Alphabet

The question of when and where the alphabet emerged has been vigorously debated for some decades, and several positions are still in circulation. However, largely thanks to the extensive new research by Orly Goldwasser (2006; 2010; 2016) and by Ludwig Morenz with ongoing projects in the field (2011; 2012; 2016; 2019a; 2019b; 2021; 2022), the traditional scenario established in 1916 by Alan H. Gardiner has *grosso modo* been verified. We may now assume that the alphabet was invented in Sinai at the turquoise mines and Hathor-Ba'alat temple of Serabit el-Khadem under the 12th Dynasty, in the late 19th century or around 1800 BCE. The temple's hieroglyphic-inscribed stelae and walls must have triggered the idea and inspired the Semitic, or broadly construed Canaanite, inventors of the so-called Proto-Sinaitic letters.⁴

Only some five centuries later, from ca. 1300 BCE on, so-called Proto-Canaanite inscriptions began to appear, mainly in southern Shephela and Northern Negev sites, where and when the Ramesside administrative hieratic *brit* bowls and cognate inscriptions also occurred. Only a few inscriptions can be attributed to the lengthy temporal gap between the abovementioned chapters, all featuring one uncertainty or another (Fig. 3). The Shechem plaque, usually considered Middle Bronze Age

Early Alphabetic inscriptions		Hieratic inscriptions	EGYPT
1900	Sinai (ca. 40 inscr.); Wadi el-Hôl (2 inscr.)		MK 12 th dyn.
1800			
1700	Shechem Plaque Gezer Sherd		Hyksos
1600	<u>Lachish Dagger</u> <u>Lachish Comb</u>		NK 18 th dyn.
1500	<u>Lachish "Dalet-Ostr."</u>	<u>LaHI VI, XII</u>	
1400			
1300	<u>Lachish Bowl</u> <u>Lachisch Ewer</u> Tel Rehov Tel Nagila	ca. 45, among them	Ramesside 19 th /20 th dyn.
1200	<u>Beit Shemesh</u> Qubur el-Walayda <u>Lachish Fragment</u> <u>Lachish Jar Sherd</u> Khirbet al-Ra'i	<u>14 from Lachish</u>	End of Egyptian rule
1100	Izbet-Sarta Khirbet Qeyafa Ostracon Kh. Qeyafa Jar		
1000	Jerusalem (Ophel)		
900	Standardization: Phoenician – Hebrew – Aramaic		
			"Hebrew Hieratic"

Fig. 3. Tabular compilation of Early Alphabetic and hieratic inscriptions from Canaan (grey = uncertain doubted date; blue = ink inscriptions; bold and underlined = from Lachish).

⁴ Some letters' models readily trace back to shapes specific to Serabit el-Khadem (Goldwasser 2006; 2010; Morenz 2019a; 2021; 2022).

in date, perhaps 17th century BCE, was found out of context and has no safe date (Wimmer 2001; Morenz 2012: 196–205). The Gezer sherd is also of insecure provenience, rendering its attribution to the 17th century BCE questionable (Albright 1935; Sass 2004–2005: 149). The recently published Lachish comb is of an indefinite date, too (Vainstub et al. 2022). The Lachish dagger derives from a 17th-century BCE burial and may be considered the earliest securely dated instance of a Proto-Canaanite inscription (Tufnell 1958: 128). However, whether the incised symbols are Early Alphabetic has been called into question by Cross (2003: 319, n. 13) and Sass (1988: 53; 2004–2005: 150).

Against this background, the 15th-century BCE Dalet Ostrakon from Lachish was rightly proclaimed to be the earliest securely dated and uncontested case of Early Alphabet script in Canaan (Höflmayer et al. 2021). It is, at this point, striking that the earliest hieratic inscriptions we have from Canaan—LaHI VI and XII—are from roughly the same time and site, Lachish (Fig. 3).

At Lachish, and perhaps other sites in the region as well, it was the hieratic scribal practice that now impacted the Early Alphabet.⁵ While ancient scribes did not perceive hieratic and hieroglyphic signs as disparate or essentially separate, the hieratic *ductus* was differentiated from the hieroglyphic *ductus* by the use of a brush and ink. All Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions were engraved in stone, as were the Egyptian stela inscriptions at the site, even though they vary considerably in technical craftsmanship. The Dalet Ostrakon is the first ink inscription in Canaan;⁶ it was followed by more Proto-Canaanite ink inscriptions in the 13th–11th centuries BCE, alongside incised inscriptions, which maintained the older technique (Fig. 3).

Of the six Early Alphabetic ink inscriptions currently known, three—the Lachish Fragment (Yardeni and Ahituv 2018: 22), the Bet Shemesh Ostrakon (Yardeni and Ahituv 2018: 26), and the Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostrakon (Yardeni and Ahituv 2018: 42–45)—are written in black ink, and three—the Dalet Ostrakon (Höflmayer et al. 2021), the Lachish Ewer (Yardeni and Ahituv 2018: 29), and the Khirbet er-Rai Sherd (Rollston et al. 2021)—are written in reddish-brown ink. Egyptian hieratic was usually written in black ink. Red ink was used in accounts to mark either outstanding amounts to be delivered or distinguish quantities of emmer or wheat (in red ink) from barley (in black ink). This

⁵ The toponym Lachish can, in my view, be read on the Hieratic Lachish Bowl (LaHI I; Wimmer 2019).

⁶ Goldwasser (2021: 7–9) noted that the shape of the letter bet on the Dalet ostrakon testifies to the influence of hieratic script. Her paleographic assessment that the corresponding hieratic shape of (O.1) lasted from “the second part of the 18th Dynasty ... until the middle of the 20th Dynasty” must be adjusted. The same tall shape was already common in the early 18th Dynasty (e.g., under Thutmose III; Marciniak 1974: 219).

practice is attested on one fragment of a *brit* bowl from Tel Sera‘ (TSHI 4)⁷ and another, yet unpublished, *brit*-bowl fragment from Tell el-Hesi.^{8,9} By its appearance, the reddish-brown color used for the Canaanite ink inscriptions differs, however, from the typical brighter red ink of hieratic inscriptions. It is, on the other hand, very similar, if not identical, to the color of painted decorations on pottery. On the Lachish Ewer, the letters were evidently written with the same ink as the iconic patterns that decorated the jar. The peculiar anthropomorphic ceramic coffin from Lachish features imitations of hieroglyphs in the same reddish-brown color (Tufnell 1958: 131–132; Ben-Tor 2016: 98–100). It seems that the Canaanite producer of this Egyptianized coffin applied the same colorant used for decorations but inadequately reproduced some Egyptian funeral expressions. He properly chose the hieroglyphic *ductus*, as it was intended for eternity. But in doing so, he not only produced an unintelligible inscription but also contravened the Egyptian rule that a text destined for eternity in the hieroglyphic *ductus* would not normally be written in ink.

The reddish-brown ink in Canaanite inscriptions should, thus, not be considered a direct borrowing from hieratic. But the use of ink, generally speaking, derives from Canaanites’ interactions with Egyptian scribes. It can now be shown that this handshake must have taken place already during the 18th Dynasty, in mid–late 15th-century BCE Lachish (Fig. 3). This is more than a century earlier than we had expected. During the Ramesside 19th and 20th Dynasties (13th–12th centuries BCE), this scribal contact must have intensified considerably, and it can certainly be implied that the slowly solidifying right-to-left writing direction, which became standard in the northwest Semitic (NWS) alphabets, was also adopted and inherited from hieratic scribal practices.¹⁰

6. Ramifications: “Hebrew Hieratic”

The various processes of standardization of the Early Alphabet and the emergence of the distinctive Hebrew, Phoenician, and Aramaic branches of the NWS Alphabet script must have occurred over a long time, overlapping with the late Iron Age I and the early Iron Age II. During this phase, in some regions, paleographically diverging sign shapes—more “archaic” Early Alphabet and

⁷ Unpublished; TSHI 4 was not included in Goldwasser (1984); it will be included in a new edition of all hieratic inscriptions from Tel Sera‘ by this author and in Wimmer (forthcoming a).

⁸ To be published by this author, Jeffrey Blakeley, and Nathaniel Greene.

⁹ An ostrakon from 11th-century BCE Ashqelon, classified as a variant of Cypro-Minoan (Cross and Stager 2006), is also written in red ink.

¹⁰ Dobbs-Allsopp devoted a paper to this topic, concluding “that the direction of alphabetic writing should also derive from hieratic, in the end, is perhaps unsurprising” (2023: 46). The *perhaps* can, in my view, be deleted.

standardized “modern” *ductus*—were used simultaneously.¹¹ By the 8th century BCE, numerals and special signs for measures and commodities were borrowed from Egyptian hieratic and adapted into the Hebrew branch of the NWS Alphabet script. The Phoenician and Aramaic branches developed their own system of numeral notation, which differs from the hieratic notations (Wimmer 2008: 195–196). This peculiar *eigenleben* of hieratic was investigated in my monograph of 2008, *Palästinisches Hieratisch: Die Zahl- und Sonderzeichen in der althebräischen Schrift* where I coined the term “Palestinian Hieratic” (cf. also Wimmer 2018).

In recent years, significant advances have been made regarding relevant materials, including new (multi-spectral) imaging techniques and the discovery and publication of important groups of relevant sources. I am currently completing an update on the new and revised material (Wimmer, forthcoming b), and I suggest replacing the term “Palestinian Hieratic” with “Hebrew Hieratic.” In 2010, an altar pedestal was unearthed at the Jordanian site of Khirbet ‘Ataruz in a Moabite context. It carries two inscriptions, which employ hieratic numerals to an impressive extent (Bean et al. 2018; Wimmer 2018). For the first time, hieratic numerals were confidently documented outside what is (in the more precise sense) conventionally called Palestine. This suggests that the direct offspring of Moabite from the Hebrew main branch of the alphabet is the reason for these Hieratic adaptations, if and where they occur.

For our concerns, the Khirbet ‘Ataruz inscriptions are of further significance due to their relatively early date in the Iron Age II, possibly as early as the late 9th century BCE (Bean et al. 2018). The famous inscriptions from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, which also contain Hebrew hieratic numerals, are of a similar date or around 800 BCE (Wimmer 2015). Some inscriptions from Tel Rehov in the north are even earlier, dating from the early 10th century BCE. These inscriptions might have been considered pertinent to the present discussion if numerals were attested (Wimmer 2008: 140f. for Tel Rehov Inscr. 2). However, as I will demonstrate in Wimmer (forthcoming b), this is not the case (cf. also Wimmer 2022b: 58–63). Only one exception has been cited, comprising the numeral “1” in Tel Rehov Inscription 2. Still, it consists of a single stroke, which is, of course, an elementary feature that need not be classified as hieratic. Hebrew hieratic is thus now attested from the late 9th century BCE onward. As the evidence indicates, by then, it must have been already well established, even at the peripheries of the Hebrew Kingdoms and in neighboring Moab.

¹¹ For example, Maier et al. (2008) published an ostrakon from late Iron Age I–early Iron Age IIA Tell es-Safi featuring an inscription written with comparatively archaic forms.

A significant observation by Schniedewind (2020) has shown that hieratic numerals and special signs of the type called “Palestinian” or “Hebrew Hieratic” possibly occur on the Lachish Jar Sherd, which dates from the 12th century BCE. Even though the signs are not as plain and consistent as presented by Schniedewind, their identification is convincing when we assume that the Alphabet scribes did not reproduce hieratic signs as fairly and consistently as their Egyptian colleagues (Wimmer, forthcoming b). Based on this new observation that hieratic may already occur in Early Alphabet inscriptions, Brian Donnelly-Lewis is currently working on some more examples where this may be the case (personal communication). Among them is the Lachish bowl fragment from around 1200 BCE; it even seems to feature one of the special signs, which was not directly borrowed from Egyptian hieratic but was independently developed by the Alphabet scribes (cf. Wimmer 2008: 272).

As it seems, we can now witness how the adoption and adaptation of hieratic signs occurred at the same time and place while the Canaanite scribes of the Early Alphabet cultivated intense contacts with the Egyptian scribes of hieratic during the Ramesside presence at Lachish. When we assign these numerals and special signs later dates, we qualify them as “Hebrew Hieratic”; at these earlier times, we might speak of “Proto-Hebrew Hieratic.”

7. Conclusions

It has been repeatedly noted that Lachish must have played a pivotal role in the scribal cultural contact that led to the consolidation and refinement of the Early Alphabet. In other words, it facilitated the “scribal turn” that, as delineated above, occurred through the impact of hieratic scribal practice. These processes were quite certainly multi-faceted and multi-layered, and not single-lane, linear developments.¹²

The mound of Lachish is among the most extensively excavated sites in the country. In contrast, we should bear in mind the total lack of archaeological evidence from Gaza, the actual center of the Egyptian administration over Canaan. What we discover in Lachish may be just a shadow of what must have occurred in Gaza in terms of cultural contact, scribal training, and practice.¹³

¹² Therefore, it is futile to attempt paleographically dating the Dalet Ostrakon on account of its very few letters (Goldwasser 2021: 12f, described as a “mixed script”). Anyway, it derives from a secure stratigraphic context with a robust radiocarbon date (S-3, mid-15th century BCE).

At any rate, the “scribal turn” from Egyptian hieratic to the alphabet was triggered by a handshake, which, as far as we can presently determine, first became tangible in the mid-late 15th century BCE (mid-8th Dynasty). This handshake was a first “date,” which developed into an intimate “relationship” in the two Ramesside centuries. It eventually begot a baby, which may have been fathered in Late Bronze Age Lachish and later became known as “Hebrew Hieratic.” We know little or nothing about its childhood. It grew up, matured, and made a career later in the Iron Age, from the 8th century BCE on, before it suddenly died in 587 BCE.

Acknowledgments

It was an Honor and pleasure to be invited to this conference at the Hebrew University, where I studied in the 1980s and received my PhD in Egyptology under the late Sarah Groll (1925–2007). She taught me and evoked my passion for hieratic. It is not self-evident for a conference on the epigraphy of Judah to host a paper on the Early Alphabet, and I am grateful to the organizers for their positive attitude and open mind. I also thank Brian Donnelly-Lewis, who is working on the relationship between Egyptian scribal practices and Early Alphabet inscriptions, for contacting me and sharing valuable information.

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¹³ Gaza is probably mentioned in a small hieratic fragment from Tel Haror (Weippert et al. 2010: 177). Jaffa, another regional coastal center, may also have been more important than its archaeological evidence presently attests. An enigmatic sherd, in black ink, to be published by B. Donnelly-Lewis, Aaron Burke, and this author, is most probably *not* hieratic.

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