

An alternative hypothesis on the origin of the Greek alphabet

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Did the Greeks learn the alphabet directly from the Phoenicians or did they learn it from non-Semitic intermediaries? Were these intermediaries the Phrygians or did the Phrygians learn it from the Greeks or some other people? Discussing the form taken by certain Phoenician letters in the Greek and Phrygian alphabets, this article raises the hypothesis that the current forms of these two alphabets emerged for the first time in Cilicia Pedias towards the end of the 9th century BC at the chancery of the Achaean kingdom that had settled there. They were the first “Westerners” to master the Phoenician alphabet. From there, the alphabet, which by then had become consonantal and vocalic, would have spread to Phrygia through Cappadocia, and then to the peoples of the Mediterranean coast of Anatolia through Cilicia Trachea.

Keywords: Greek alphabet, Phrygian alphabet, Cilicia, Achaeans, Karatepe, Çineköy, İvriz, Cebel İres, Tyana.

1. The state of the art¹

On the origin of the Greek alphabet there is a vast bibliography and everything seems to have been said already: the Greeks learned the alphabet from the Phoenicians in the 8th century BC. Before entering into the discussion, it is worthwhile to define the issue in terms of space and time. There is no doubt that the art of expressing oneself in writing by means of letters that distinguish vowels from consonants was learned by the Greeks in all the Asian and European territories they populated at the time when the Hellenic Middle Ages ended and the urban aggregates described in the Homeric poems emerged. The most ancient documents written in Greek that have been found go back, as it is known,

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to the 8th century BC. Two of these inscriptions have been written on painted pottery in the geometric style, dated between the years 735 and 720 BC. One of them comes from Eretria, a city of Euboea; the other, called “the Cup of Nestor,” comes from Pithekoussai, “the Island of Monkeys,” the Greek name for Ischia (Johnston-Andriomenou 1989).

According to Herodotus (5th century BC), the Phoenicians introduced the use of the alphabet in the very heart of Greece, namely in Thebes, in Boeotia. It must have been a widespread opinion in his time because the Greeks called their alphabet, in all its epichoric variants, *phoinikéia grámmata*, “Phoenician scripts.” Some scholars argue, however, that the ethnonym *phoiníkeos* alludes not only to the Phoenicians but also to the inhabitants of Caria, the region of Asia Minor opposite Rhodes, and that it was probably extended to other peoples on the Mediterranean shore of Anatolia (Garbini 1980: 128). On the other hand, the inhabitants of Phoenicia never called themselves “Phoenicians:” they either distinguished themselves by the name of their port city or were called “Canaanites” KN’NYM, from the name of the easternmost coastal strip of the Mediterranean (Garbini 1980: 5).

There is a widespread opinion that an innovation as technically and culturally important as the alphabet spread because of interpersonal relationships that occurred repeatedly in the markets of the various Greek ports on the mainland, islands and colonies: on the one hand, enterprising Phoenician merchants, on the other hand, illiterate Hellenic customers. The decision taken in 402 BC by the *boulé* in Athens should refute this view. On that occasion, on the initiative of the archon Euclid, the highest legislative institution of the city officially adopted the “blue” alphabet in use in Miletus with appropriate modifications. It was to become the graphic dress of the Hellenistic civilization.

The alphabet, therefore, is above all a political, institutional and cultural fact, just as essential to the administration of a community as are monetary units and the laws regulating commerce and justice. For this reason, an alphabet requires careful regulation, official codification and formal stabilization guaranteed by state-recognized scribal schools, as well as activities related to the operation of a chancery, such as archiving, bookkeeping and the production of writing media such as papyrus, parchment or rigid tablets. The codification of the Greek alphabet yielded significant practical effects of daily relevance: in accordance with the Phoenician model, the rigidly established order of succession of its letters implies that each letter corresponds to a figure relating to the units (1-10), tens (20-90) and hundreds (100-900).

2. The adoption of an alphabet as a state issue

The adoption of an alphabet is a state issue, it is the result of an important political decision. A surprising innovation concerning writing was launched in the 15th century CE by the Korean king

Sejong the Great (1397-1450). His proposal (*hangŭl* or *chosŏngŭl*), initially aimed at women's literacy, became established as the national script of Koreans in the last century. Much more rapidly implemented was the reform imposed on the Ottoman people on 1.11.1928 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938), the father of modern Türkiye. The Arabic alphabet was abandoned in favour of the Latin one with the introduction or elimination of some diacritical signs. Essentially the same reform has been mandatory in Azerbaijan since 1.12.1991 with the abandonment of the Cyrillic alphabet imposed by Stalin in the 1930s. Other Turkic-speaking Central Asian republics are currently imitating Azerbaijan.

One may ask what Hellenic power, in the 8th century BC, could have officially adopted the alphabet proposed by Phoenician merchants. A comparison of the Greek and Phrygian alphabets may help answer this question. Phrygians were a Balkan people akin to the Greeks who migrated to central western Anatolia in the 12th century BC and who created a powerful kingdom that, to the east, bordered with Cilicia (as far as the western Taurus) and, to the west, extended to Lydia and the Propontid. Its capital, Gordium, is known to be connected with the exploits of Alexander the Great.

The oldest preserved document written by the Phrygians dates back to about 740 BC. Since then, the Phrygian alphabet continued to be used for about 1200 years, as shown by inscriptions dating from the 8th to 5th century BC and from the 1st to 4th century CE (Sowa 2020: 284, fn. 1). Its derivation from the Phoenician alphabet seems to date back to the 9th century BC. Its resemblance to the archaic Greek alphabet is extraordinary.

Зап. гр.	Фриг.	
Α	Α	а
Β	ΒΒ	б
Γ	Γ	г
Δ	Δ	д
Ε	ΕΕ	е
Ϝ	ϜϜ	в
Ζ	ΖΖ	з
Ι	Ι	и
Κ	ΚΚ	к
Λ	Λ	л
Μ	ΜΜ	м
Ν	Ν	н
Ο	Ο	о
Π	ΠΠ	п
Ρ	ΡΡ	р
Ξ	ΞΞ	с
Τ	Τ	т
Υ	Υ	у
Φ	Φ	ф
Χ	Χ	х

Table 1. The Phrygian, West Greek and Cyrillic alphabets

(<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Phrygiae.jpg>)

Similarities highlighted by this table led scholars to argue that the Phrygians learned to write from the Greeks, who, in turn, were taught directly by the Phoenicians. But here again a question arises: in the 9th century BC which ruler or tyrant of a Greek colony recently settled on the Asian coast of the Aegean could enjoy such prestige as to propose its alphabet to the institutions of a kingdom already largely consolidated in the interior of Anatolia? Although there is no convincing answer to this question, there is still a strong temptation to consider the Greeks as the promoters of the Phoenician alphabet among the Phrygians (Powell 1991; Woodard 1997, 2010).

All the same, in the Phrygian alphabet there is also a letter for the phoneme /j/. This is similar to the Phrygian letter for the phoneme /z/ (in Cyrillic з). In fact, if you look carefully at texts in the Phrygian alphabet, you will notice that they present a letter formed by a Z, with or without a short horizontal stroke placed in its middle in the opposite direction to the direction of reading. In Phrygian, it specifically indicates /j/, a semivowel which is preserved in certain Greek dialects, while in Attic it is the allophone of the vowel /i/ in certain positions (Allen 1987: 47-52).



Table 2. The Phrygian inscription on the Monument of Midas Yazılıkaya, Midas Kenti, province of Eskişehir, Türkiye, 6th century BC: BABA: MEMEFAIΣ: ΠΡΟΙΤΑΦΟΣ: ΚΦΙJANAFEJΟΣ: ΣΙΚΕΝΕΜΑΝ: Ε[ΔΑΕΣ] “Baba, advisor, leader from Tyana, dedicated this niche”
(<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MidasSehri.TombDetail.jpg>)

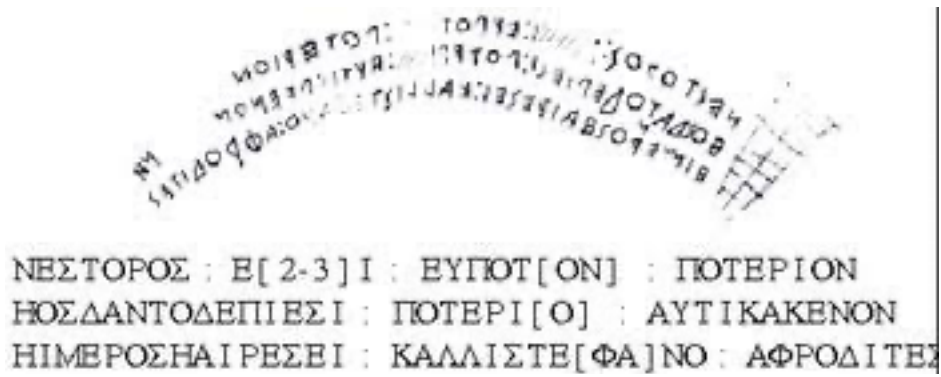


Table 3. The Cup of Nestor, Pithekoussai (Ischia), Italy, in the Greek “red” alphabet, 720? BC
 (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Iscrizione.png>)

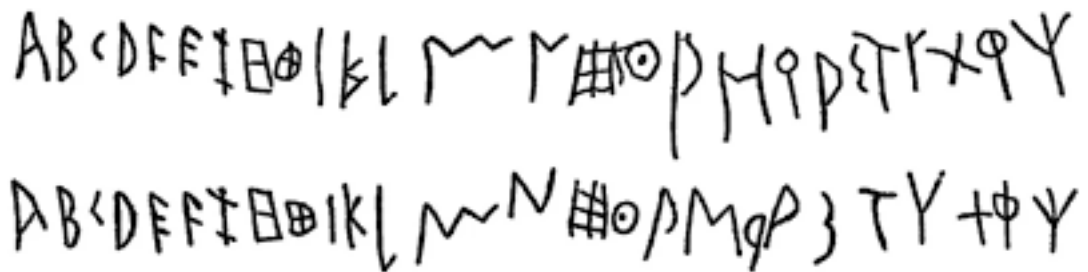


Table 4. Greek “red” alphabets from Cumae (Pozzuoli), Italy
 (<https://www.archeoflegrei.it/quando-cuma-insegno-a-scrivere-agli-etruschi/>)



Table 5. The Phoenician alphabet
 (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Phoenician_alphabet.svg)

The letter for the phoneme /j/ appears in several Phrygian inscriptions, as well as in an epigraph dated to the middle of the 6th century BC, engraved on a rock temple known as the *Monument of Midas* (see above).² The same letter, however, is missing from an older epigraph from the same site, which explicitly mentions the famous Phrygian king Midas (beginning of the 7th century BC); it is also missing from Phrygian inscriptions discovered in the ruins of Pteria and of Tyana in Cappadocia (Elti di Rodeano 2020a: 269). We will return to the letter for the semivowel /j/ later.

There is now another Greek letter that deserves special attention: *sigma* Σ.

- Thesis 1: The Greek and Phrygian letter Σ for the phoneme /s/ was obtained by shifting the Phoenician letter <W>, used for the phoneme /š/, to an upright position. It is unlikely that this operation would have been suggested by a Phoenician scribe):

W ∪ Σ

In my opinion, in order to be convinced that it was not the Phoenicians who handed down the alphabet to the Greeks and Phrygians, but that instead we can assume that they intervened through intermediaries of different culture and language, it is sufficient to consider the fate that befell the Greek capital letter *sigma* Σ and consequently also the Latin letter S, which is the same letter in simplified form. In the Phoenician alphabet, as well as in all other Semitic alphabets, the letter called *šin* or *sīn* that graphically corresponds to *sigma* is never upright, it is never vertical. Instead, it appears in a horizontal position, lying on the reading line with its three tops facing upwards, as it happens in the grapheme <W>. However, since the 8th century BC, the vertical position assumed by *sigma* appears on Greek or Phrygian texts, graffiti or engraved on tombstones (see above the “Cup of Nestor” and the alphabets of Cumae).

It is well known that the Phoenician alphabet was conceived according to the intuitive principle of acrophony: each letter of the alphabet, schematically representing an object, should call to mind a certain phoneme of the Phoenician language. The phoneme to which it alludes is the one with which the name of the depicted object begins. Phoenician letter <W> presents the symbolic profile of two upper teeth, that is the shape of two objects that, in every being with teeth, usually work in a horizontal position. Indeed, the Phoenician grapheme <W> is called *šin* or *sīn* because it recalls the Semitic word **šinn-* ‘tooth.’ Since the phoneme inventory of Greek and probably Phrygian does not include the phoneme /š/, the vertical *sigma* Σ has taken over the task of indicating the phoneme /s/.

² This rock temple, dedicated to the Phrygian goddess Kybele, is located in the place called *Midas Kenti* “the town of Midas,” in the province of Eskişehir, Türkiye.

One may wonder why in the Greek and Phrygian alphabets the grapheme <Σ> is vertical while in the Phoenician alphabet it is horizontal <W>. Normally the explanation given to this issue is that *sigma* Σ is vertical to differentiate it from the form M that the Phoenician letter *šade* had taken in the archaic Greek alphabet and in the Carian alphabet. In these scripts the *šade* also denoted the phoneme /s/, before serving as the numerical letter *sampi* “90.” This explanation does not seem to fit: ancient Greek inscriptions use either *sigma* or *šade* to indicate /s/, but never both in the same text. The Phoenician grapheme <W>, or rather the hypothetical horizontal *sigma*, could not even be confused with the Greek letter *mu* M, since at the time it had not yet developed its classical form. As shown by the Phrygian inscription on *the Monument of Midas* and by the Greek alphabets of Cumae, the letter *mu* in the 8th century BC still retained its original Phoenician form.

But it is also believed that the form of the vertical *sigma* came into conflict with the original appearance of the Phoenician *yod*, forcing the latter to be stripped of its angularity and to transform itself in the Greek alphabet into a simple vertical rod, the classical *iota* <Ι> (Elti di Rodeano 2000a: 265-266, §§ 0.1. and 0.2.). To this one could retort, first, that in Phrygian the letter for /j/ has not been stripped of its angularity at all; second, that the vertical *sigma* of Phrygian and Greek constitutes an innovation, while the Phrygian letter for /j/ still retains the original Phoenician form.

- Thesis 2: The Phrygian and Greek hammer-shaped letter <T> for the phoneme /t/ was obtained by setting upright and by decapitating the Phoenician letter <X> for the same phoneme. It is unlikely that this operation was suggested by a Phoenician scribe):

X ∩ T

But there is a further aspect common to the Phrygian and Greek alphabets that deserves attention. This is the hammer shape that the grapheme <T> presents in both alphabets from their earliest attestations, which is also found centuries later in both Etruscan and Latin. I believe that the Phoenician scribes could not have imagined that the *taw* letter <X> “mark” would assume the maimed and unrecognizable form <T>. They would not have given up the cruciform appearance of their last letter.

On the basis of the preceding considerations about the origin of the Phrygian and Greek alphabets, the question arises as to who spread to the Hellenic West an alphabet that was already culturally connoted as “non-Phoenician.”

I believe that the non-Phoenician intermediaries in the transmission of the alphabet to the Phrygians and Greeks were the *Aḥḥiyawa* (in Greek *Achai[w]ói* ‘Achaean’) of Cilicia. Around the 11th century BC a Hellenic population settled in Cilicia, more precisely in Cilicia Pedias, the fertile alluvial plain of Anatolia, northeast of Cyprus. In the 8th century BC these Achaean were subdued by the

Assyrians and in the 6th century BC by the Babylonians. Herodotus (5th century BC) called them *Hupachaiói*, that is to say “sub-Achaean” (Histories 7: 91), perhaps in the derogatory sense of “barbarized Achaeans.”

In the Bible (1 Kings 10: 28-29) they are remembered as Qoweh, as well as in Assyrian texts in the form of QU-E and in Babylonian texts in that of 𐤗𐤍-𐤌𐤅 [ḥuwe] (Liverani 1988: 885). However, they did not call themselves Achaeans but DNNYM, i. e. “Danai.” Living in the midst of a majority population of Luwian-speaking neo-Hittites, these Achaeans tried to culturally distinguish themselves by adopting as official means of expression a language and an alphabet alien to both, the language and alphabet of the distant Tyre, a Phoenician city that between the 10th and 9th century BC had reached the height of its economic and cultural supremacy (Garbini 1978 and 1980: 103).

This is proved by two bilingual stelae discovered in Cilicia Pedias, the one from Karatepe (Bossert 1948) and the other from Çineköy (Tekoğlu, Lemaire, İpek and Tosun 2000). In these inscriptions, the text written in the local language and its hieroglyphic script was engraved below the Phoenician text, as if in second order. Since there was not yet a Greek written language, the chancellery of the Achaean kingdom of Cilicia resorted to the language and writing of a prestigious Phoenician city. This is not surprising. Even today, for many activities, for example in the field of science, the language of a foreign nation is used, willingly or unwillingly.

It is likely that, on becoming familiar with the Phoenician alphabet, the Greek scribes of Cilicia tried to adapt it to their own language, even inaugurating the way of indicating its vowels in writing. It is known that, for the phonemes /a/, /e/ and /o/, it was sufficient to change the function of three Phoenician consonantal letters that were unrelated to the inventory of Greek phonemes: thus the Phoenician letter alpha, used for the glottal occlusive /ʔ/, served for /a/; the Phoenician letter he, used for the glottal fricative /h/, served for /e/ (to indicate the phoneme /h/ it was sufficient to resort to the Phoenician letter 𐤇et); and the Phoenician letter 𐤑ayn, used for the pharyngeal fricative /ʕ/, served for /o/.

When this process of adaptation and reform was completed, the Phoenician alphabet in “Cilician” hand finally lost its original link with acrophony and its reference to the shape of specific objects. Only then did the names of the letters (alpha, beta, gamma, delta, etc.) become purely conventional. With one exception, however: the Phoenician letter 𐤑ayn ‘eye’ <O>, not only because of its name, but also

because of its rounded shape, suggested the association with vowel /o/ of the Greek words *ómma* and *ophthalmós* ‘eye’ and probably also of the corresponding Phrygian word.³

What can we say as regards the vowels /u/ and /i/?

- Thesis 3: The Greek and Phrygian letter Y, used for the vowel /u/, has NO direct Phoenician ancestry. It is NOT even derived from the Greek and Phrygian letter F used for the semivowel /w/):

Y ← F

It is commonly believed that the Greek and Phrygian letter Y, used for /u/, originated from the splitting of the Phoenician letter waw Y used for the semivowel /w/: on the one hand, the Phoenician waw would have assumed the function of the vocalic letter for /u/, maintaining the original form and becoming *upsilon* Y; on the other hand, would have emerged both the Greek letter *digamma* F of the Phrygian and of the Greek “red” alphabet, used for /w/, and the Etruscan and Latin letter F used for /f/. Instead, I believe that *upsilon* Y (in the Latin alphabet V) is a letter that was introduced by a non-Phoenician scribal school. Being an innovation, it was consequently placed after the letter *tau* T, the last letter of the Phoenician alphabet, beyond which all the innovated Greek letters up to *omega* are collected. If the *upsilon* had not been invented, it would certainly have assumed the numerical value “6,” which in Greek is instead supported by the letter *stigma* ζ.

- Thesis 4: The Greek and Phrygian letter I, used for the vowel /i/, has NO direct Phoenician ancestry. It is NOT even derived from the letter, similar to <Z>, exclusively used by the Phrygians for the semivowel /j/. Some archaic Greek alphabets used the same letter for /i/):

I ← Z

Equally invented, in my opinion, is the letter *iota* <I> used for /i/, the simplest, graphically speaking, of all the letters of the Phrygian and of the Greek alphabet. It is commonly considered the result of a drastic simplification of the characteristic features of the Phoenician letter *yod*, which has already been mentioned. This thesis is refuted by the fact that, in the Phrygian alphabet, the straight stroke *iota* <I> indicates only the vowel /i/, while the *iota* in the shape of <Z>, more complex and graphically more similar to the Phoenician *yod*, indicates the semivowel /j/ exclusively. Evidently in the phonology of Phrygian the vowel /i/ and the semivowel /j/ were still two distinct phonemes.

³ In some archaic Greek alphabets, like that of Cumae, the letter *omikron* shows even a central dot in its circle in order to represent the pupil.

It is precisely the formal simplicity of the grapheme <I> of the Phrygian and of the Greek alphabet that increases the probability that the corresponding letter was introduced by Phrygian or Greek scribes immediately after acquiring the purely consonantal alphabet of the Phoenicians,

However, the hypothesis remains that the grapheme <I> was invented even before the Phoenician alphabet had come to the knowledge of Phrygians and Greeks. Probably a scribal school, by then independent of the Phoenician tradition, introduced it into the alphabet. That scribal school should be credited with having first started the spread of the alphabet in the West. Since the phonemes /j/ and /i/—one a palatal approximant, the other a palatal vowel—were no longer distinct in many Greek dialects (Allen 1987: 47-52), the grapheme <I> took the place of the Phoenician *jod* (position 10) in the Greek sequence of the letters in the alphabet. It has thus replaced the original Phoenician grapheme for /j/ in most Greek alphabets. Unfortunately, we do not know the sequence of the letters in the Phrygian alphabet, an alphabet that reflected a language in which the phonemes /j/ and /i/ were still distinct.

If we accepted the hypothesis that the first popularisers of the alphabet were the Achaeans of Cilicia, there would be two routes along which, perhaps at the same time, the alphabet, already transformed into a script that included vowel letters, would have moved towards Phrygia and Hellas.

One of the two itineraries would have passed the Western Taurus by crossing the “Cilician Gates” (Gülek Boğazı) and entering southern Cappadocia. There existed a vassal kingdom of the Phrygians which was subdued by the Assyrians with the name of Tabal. Its capital was Tyana (*Tuwanuwa* in Hittite). Among the ruins of that city, inscriptions in the Phrygian alphabet were also found. Not far away, in İvriz (Aydinkent), a bilingual stela emerged, in Phoenician and Luwian, the local Neo-Hittite language (Dinçol 1994). This suggests that even Tyana’s chancellery has become familiar with the use of the Phoenician language and alphabet. For this reason, southern Cappadocia could be considered as one of the corridors that the alphabet would have crossed until it reached the chancellery of the great Phrygian king.

The second hypothetical corridor would instead wind its way, from east to west, along the Mediterranean coast of Anatolia starting from Cilicia Trachea. Along this path, the alphabet would later arrive in Lycia, Caria and Lydia, and finally in Hellas. Unfortunately, the only clue to support this hypothesis is represented by a single Phoenician inscription which, moreover, is more than a century later compared to the hypothetical date of the establishment of the standard form of the Phrygian and archaic Greek alphabets. As a matter of fact, in Cilicia Trachea, but already in the vicinity of Alanya, a Phoenician inscription from the second half of the 7th century BC has emerged. It was located in the

ruins of the city once called Laertes,⁴ about 800m above sea level, above the coastal town of Mahmutlar (Mosca-Russel 1987).

This document proves that local scribes have continued for more than a century to use the Phoenician language and script: a fact that is the premise for the spread of this alphabet along the Mediterranean coast of Anatolia among the Lycian, Carian and Lydian chancelleries. Inspired by the Phoenician alphabet, the scribes of these kingdoms have created their respective ethnic alphabetic scripts.⁵

3. Conclusions

In summary, the four Phrygian and Greek graphemes <Σ>, <Τ>, <Ι> and <Υ> are so divergent from the original appearance of the corresponding Phoenician letters as to suggest the possibility that they had already taken shape towards the beginning of the 8th century BC, simultaneously with the emergence of the “full” alphabet, with the letters for vowels. An innovative process of this kind could be attributed to the chancellery of an important kingdom, such as that of the Achaeans of Cilicia, where presumably the Phoenician element was no longer predominant.

However, this is an impossible hypothesis to prove because, both in Cilicia Trachea and in Cilicia Pedias, no documents written on perishable media have been found, the only types of clue that could substantiate it. There are only a few official Achaean stelae written in the language and in the alphabet of the distant Phoenician city of Tyre, as well as in Luwian and in its Neo-Hittite script. Brixhe had already assumed that the Phrygian alphabet was formed independently of the Greek one (Brixhe 1991: 343). Young in turn assumed that the Phrygian and Greek alphabets had a common ancestor, probably in use in the coastal region between Syria and Cilicia (Young 1969: 264; Jeffery 1982: 832-833, and 1990: 10-11).

This hypothesis is based on evaluating, on the one hand, the role probably played in this regard by the Achaeans of Cilicia, and on the other, the anomalous aspect (at least in the eyes of a Semitist) of the Greek and Phrygian graphemes <Σ> and <Τ>, and the relatively recent emergence of the graphemes <Ι> and <Υ>.

⁴ Laertes appears to have been the birthplace of Diogenes Laertius (180-240 CE), the biographer of the Greek philosophers.

⁵ See Elti di Rodeano on the Lycian (2020b: 51-73), the Lydian (2020b: 104-118), and the Carian alphabets (2020b: 150-174).

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