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ISO/CEI JTC 1/SC 2/GT 2
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Jeu universel de caractères codés sur plusieurs octets (JUC)

Universal Multiple-Octet Coded Character Set (UCS)

ISO/IEC JTC 1/SC 2/WG 2 N2907

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Title: Input from Canadian Experts on the Phoenician proposal
Source: John Hudson & Karljürgen Feuerherm (prepared by pandries@videotron.ca)
Action: For WG2 consideration and adoption in Amendment 2 of ISO 10646:2003
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Titre: Contributions d'experts canadiens sur la proposition de codage du phénicien
Source: John Hudson & Karljürgen Feuerherm (préparé par pandries@videotron.ca)
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ISO/IEC JTC 1/SC 2/WG 2 N2907

Introduction

Please find attached the contributions from Canadian experts regarding the Phoenician proposal (N2746 and related documents).

1. Should ‘Phoenician’ be encoded in the UCS as a separate script?

Having given it considerable thought, we oppose the separate encoding of the ‘Phoenician’ script (N2746). Throughout the many months of often acrimonious debate on this subject on the Unicode discussion list and elsewhere, we have avoided making a judgement on this issue, being more concerned to understand the arguments from various perspectives. We have recently reviewed all the formal documents related to ‘Phoenician’—N2746, N2772, N2787, N2792 and N2793—, and have come to the conclusion that the proposal amounts to a glyph-encoding of an arbitrarily selected variant of a single ancient Semitic alphabet that is identical to existing ‘Hebrew’ characters.

The defence of the proposal by Deborah Anderson and Michael Everson (N2772 and N2787) is not compelling: particularly not when, in a single document, Anderson on the one hand insists that the Phoenician/Hebrew unification would render the meaning of some texts senseless if displayed in the wrong (*i.e.* ‘square Hebrew’) font, and on the other hand indicates that she would make an equally important visual example about an early form of Greek *iota* by using an appropriate font. Also, the repeated identification of existing Hebrew characters as ‘square Hebrew’ is disingenuous. The UCS makes no such distinction, and the Hebrew characters are expected to encode Hebrew text regardless of style: the square or book hand is simply the most common style of Hebrew, which can also be written in Rashi (rabbinic), cursive, STAM (liturgical), and other styles, including what the Israeli scholar Solomon Birnbaum gave, for politico-cultural reasons, the new name ‘Palaeo-Hebrew’ in the 1970s, which style is visually much closer to the proposed ‘Phoenician’ glyphs than to any later Hebrew style.

Most of the examples in N2772 and N2787 are from texts that specifically discuss distinctions in the form of letters. From such examples, Anderson and Everson draw the conclusion that an encoding distinction needs to be made between ‘Phoenician’ letters and Hebrew letters, rather than reaching the—as it seems to us—much more obvious conclusion that *plain text is not an appropriate medium in which to discuss the shape of letters*. We would no more expect to be able to reliably distinguish ancient Canaanite, Palaeo-Hebrew, and square Hebrew style letters, in plain text, than we would expect to be able to distinguish early Anglo-Saxon, Carolingian miniscule and Italian humanist letters, which no one doubts *are the same characters*.

It is notable that of the consulted experts identified in the proposal itself, only one is a Semitist; the others all appear to be Indo-Europeanists or Classicists, whose interest is in a Phoenician precursor to Greek. Indeed, this interest is specifically cited by Anderson as a compelling reason for the separate encoding: *‘the subject of the history of the alphabet is of interest to*

Indo-Europeanists. It is perhaps of even greater interest to those studying Classics' (N2772). The identification of the writing system used by the ancient Phoenicians as the origin of the Greek script should not overshadow the identity of that writing system in the broader context of West Semitic or Canaanite writing, which Semiticists have convincingly described as a continuum that includes a wide variety of historical styles, across time and geography, of a single alphabet.¹ The selection of Phoenician as what Everson has called an 'important node' in this continuum, suited to separate encoding, seems to be based entirely on its presumed importance to the ancient Greeks, and hence to European civilisation. There is no reason to think that Phoenician, *in a Semitic context*, is any more important than any number of other regional writing styles.

2. If 'Phoenician' were encoded in the UCS, what should it be called?

We do not think the sky will fall if 'Phoenician' is separately encoded, as some of the more heated debate on this issue has seemed to imply. We think it would be a mistake, but not a desperate or damaging one in itself. As a model for making decisions about encoding other ancient scripts it would be more unfortunate.

However, if the set of characters currently identified as 'Phoenician' were to be encoded, it should be under the more general name 'Old Canaanite' as this more accurately reflects the range of writing systems for which Everson suggests that it might be used. The fact that the ancient Greeks might have thought of the precursor to their alphabet as 'Phoenician' should not dictate how a large number of both earlier and later ancient Semitic writing styles should be labelled in the UCS. Calling so large a subset of the Semitic script continuum 'Phoenician' is a bizarrely Eurocentric imposition.

3. Conclusion

We are generally concerned about the path of historical scripts into the UCS, and how decisions will be made about what constitute individual scripts when considering early periods. We believe every attempt should be made to understand the identity of writing systems within their specific historical, linguistic and geographical milieu, and not in terms of their importance to other cultures—for example, their role in the development of European writing systems—, which is distorted by selective contact with the periphery of that milieu. We do not believe that this effort has been made in the proposal to encode 'Phoenician'.

¹ *Some scholarship challenges the long-held tradition that the Greeks obtained the alphabet from the Phoenicians, citing evidence of an earlier transmission from another group. This is alluded to in Dean Snyder's submission (N2792).*

Annex A

More on the 'Phoenician' name for this script

A look at I.J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 2nd edition 1963) reveals the following:

WEST SEMITIC SYLLABARIES

of cuneiform signs and is therefore linear in form. The attempts of some scholars to derive the Ugaritic system from either the Proto-Sinaitic writing²⁷ or Mesopotamian cuneiform²⁸ have not been successful. Although foreign influence may have been instrumental in the choice of some signs, in the majority of cases the forms of the Ugaritic signs are the result of free individual creation.

Finally, around 1000 B.C. come the earliest Byblos inscriptions (Aḥīrām, etc.) written in a system composed of twenty-two signs purely linear in appearance. Of all the various Semitic attempts made in the second millennium B.C. to create a new writing this one was by far the most successful. From it directly, both from the structural and formal point of view, are derived

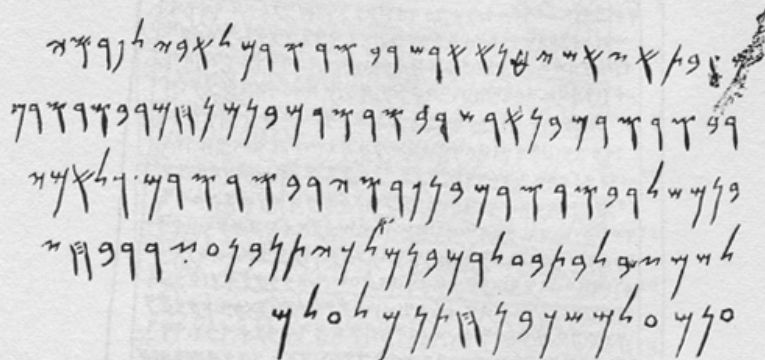


FIG. 71.—PHOENICIAN INSCRIPTION FROM CYPRUS

From Mark Lidzbarski, *Handbuch der nordsemitischen Epigraphik*, pl. vi, 2

three of the four main subdivisions of the Semitic writing represented by the Phoenician (Fig. 71), Palestinian (Fig. 72), and Aramaic (Fig. 73) branches. The fourth subdivision, represented by the South Arabic branch (Fig. 74), can only indirectly be derived from the Phoenician prototype. The South Arabic writings seem to have made their appearance in the first half of the first millennium B.C., although both earlier and later dates have been proposed by some scholars.²⁹ The writing consists of twenty-nine signs, a number which is almost identical with that of the Ugaritic writing, but exceeds by seven the number of signs in the Phoenician writing. The forms of the South Arabic writing are all linear; while a few are identical with those of the Phoenician writing, most of them were independently created.

“Finally, around 1000 B.C. come the earliest Byblos inscriptions ... written in a system composed of twenty-two signs purely linear in appearance. Of all the various Semitic attempts made in the second millennium B.C. to create a new writing this one was by far the most successful. From it *directly* (emphasis ours), both from the structural and formal point of view, are derived three of the four main subdivisions of the Semitic writing represented by the Phoenician..., Palestinian..., and Aramaic... branches. The fourth subdivision, represented by the South Arabic branch..., can only indirectly be derived from the Phoenician prototype.”

TRANS- LITERATION	UGARITIC	PHOENICIAN	PALESTINIAN	ARAMAIC	HEBREW	SYRIAC	ARABIC	SOUTH ARABIC	ETHIOPIC
A		K							
B	II								
G	T								
D	III								
P									
H	III								
W									
Z									
N									
HU									
T									
Z									
L									
K									
L	III								
M									
N									
S									
C									
G									
F(P)	E								
S									
P									
Q									
R									
S									
S									
T									
T									

FIG. 75.—COMPARATIVE CHART OF THE MOST IMPORTANT SEMITIC WRITINGS

It seems to us that if Gelb is right, then Phoenician is not the right place to put a ‘node’ – rather, we should want a node which encompasses at least the three directly descended scripts. Figure 75, above, seems to indicate that there is at most a minor glyphic variance between these three scripts... and apart from glyph variance, no real difference between them and what we have as Square Hebrew.

Of course, this is not the most recent source, but it is one to which we had ready access.

A chart from David Diringer, *Writing* (New York: Frederick Praeger; 1962), below, seems to take a similar position, and would seem to endorse our preference for some variation on “Old Canaanite”.

