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## **The Byblos script**

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### **Citation**

Haring, B. J. J. (2024). The Byblos script. In D. G. of A. (L. ) Ministry of Culture (Ed.),  
*Byblos* (pp. 181-184). Leiden: Sidestone Press. doi:10.59641/z8124cl

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3732019>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## THE BYBLOS SCRIPT

Ben Haring

A small corpus of inscriptions in a highly characteristic but as yet unreadable script was collected by Maurice Dunand during his excavations of Byblos (Figs. 27.1-2).<sup>1</sup> The total number of stone and metal artefacts inscribed with certainty with this type of writing is 14; a few more inscriptions are possibly related to this group (Dunand 1945a, 71-88; Dunand 1978; Vita and Zamora 2018). Dunand (1945a, 87) recognized several isolated marks on objects from offering deposits associated with the Obelisk Temple as signs of the Byblos script, but that identification is doubtful (Sass 2019, 178).

The script is most commonly described among specialists as ‘pseudo-hieroglyphic’. The word ‘hieroglyphic’ refers to ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, which is commonly thought to have been the source of inspiration for the script found at Byblos. The prefix ‘pseudo-’ would appear to distinguish the script from actual Egyptian hieroglyphs, but in fact it stresses the ostensible relationship with these: in the case of Hittite and Maya hieroglyphs, for instance, which are supposedly unconnected with Egyptian writing, such a prefix is not deemed necessary.

The absence of a convincing decipherment so far, despite several attempts, means that the principles of the ‘pseudo-hieroglyphs’ and the language they are supposed to encode are insufficiently understood, as are the extent and manner in which Egyptian hieroglyphs might have inspired them. The word ‘hieroglyphic’ is therefore best left aside, and the writing system is more simply and appropriately called the ‘Byblos script’, the more so since no clear example of the script has been found outside Byblos (Vita and Zamora 2018, 89). The Byblos script is assumed by many to have been used in the Middle Bronze Age (c. 2000-1600 BC), but as we shall see, even that is not certain. The expression ‘Proto-Byblian’ has also been used (Sobelman 1961); ‘proto-’ probably serving to distinguish it from Byblian Phoenician of the 1st millennium BC.

During the Middle Bronze Age, the dominant writing systems in the Near East were cuneiform, which had been developed much earlier for writing on clay tablets in ancient Mesopotamia, and the Egyptian hieroglyphic and hieratic scripts, for inscribing monuments and for papyri respectively. The Mesopotamian and Egyptian systems were both complex mixtures of phonograms (expressing sounds of language) and ideograms (expressing notions), and each had many hundreds of different signs. Cuneiform phonetic notation was syllabic, whereas Egyptian phonetic writing was basically consonantal. Another type of writing, notating individual consonants and not using ideograms, is thought to have developed in the Middle Bronze Age, and to have been the ancestor of all alphabetic writing systems. The earliest known writing of this type is Proto-Sinaitic,

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Elizabeth Bettles for polishing my English.



Figure 27.1: Bronze tablet *d* with Byblos script (h. 21; w. 11.5 cm), DGA 16598 © Ministry of Culture, Lebanon/Directorate General of Antiquities.

Figure 27.2: bronze spatula  
*b* with Byblos script (l. 9;  
 w. 4.3 cm). DGA 16484  
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 of Antiquities.



so called because it is attested in the south of the Sinai Peninsula. Its pictorial signs were possibly developed under Egyptian influence (see e.g., Hamilton 2006).

Which of these linguistic principles the Byblos script used is uncertain. Dunand's compilation of the script has 114 graphs (Dunand 1945a, table opposite 88), but some (for instance, those representing birds) may very well be graphic variants of the same signs. The total number of different signs distinguished by specialists is slightly more than a hundred. That is considerably less than the hundreds of signs in cuneiform and hieroglyphic writing, but seems to be too much for an alphabetic system. It is, in fact, quite possible that the Byblos script is syllabic (see especially Sobelman 1961), but the use of other categories of signs including ideograms cannot be excluded. A syllabic system would make the script conceptually similar to cuneiform. Byblos was in contact with Mesopotamia, and we know for a fact that cuneiform was used at Byblos in different periods (Dossin 1969), but Byblos' climate is unfavourable for the preservation of clay tablets.

On the other hand, the graphic appearance of many Byblian characters, and indeed the very use of pictorial signs (representing e.g., animals, plants, architectural elements), are more reminiscent of Egyptian hieroglyphs, although the degree of iconicity is not as high as with the latter. Some signs are rather suggestive of hieratic (Posener 1969). Other features known from Egyptian monumental writing also appear in Byblos inscriptions: the arrangement of text in horizontal lines and in vertical columns, and the framing of lines and columns by single or double borders. The use, in some Byblos inscriptions, of short vertical strokes as dividers between signs or words is a feature not known from Egyptian hieroglyphs.

This brings us to the contacts and exchanges between Byblos and Pharaonic Egypt, and the unmistakable Egyptian influence on Byblian material culture. Egyptian objects, often bearing hieroglyphic inscriptions, came to Byblos from the early 3rd millennium BC onwards. The best known examples are the stone vessels with Egyptian

royal names from the Early Dynastic Period and Old Kingdom (c.2900-2200 BC), and the precious objects found in monumental tombs I-IV of Byblian rulers. On the latter we find the names of Pharaohs Amenemhat III and IV of the late 12th Dynasty (early 18th century BC). Consequently, that period has long been considered the heyday of Byblo-Egyptian relations. Byblian rulers had themselves depicted in Egyptian style, with their names in Egyptian hieroglyphic texts (e.g., Montet 1928b, 90-92). One of the stelae inscribed with the Byblos script includes several hieratic lines (Hoch 1995). The hieratic script would have been used at Byblos in the same period, but the local climate is as unfavourable to papyrus documents as it is to clay tablets. Ever since the inscriptions in the Byblos script were discovered, they were seen as the products of a Byblian Golden Age, and of close contacts with Egypt and its hieroglyphs. The contacts with Egypt suggested by the above finds provided the ideal basis for this scenario, with the 12th Dynasty (c. 1700-1650 BC) and immediately following centuries as the preferred period (Dunand 1945a, 131-32). However, recent archaeological research suggests that the objects found in the Byblos tombs (also including Egyptianizing objects and ceramics) were deposited there, not at the time of Amenemhat III/IV, but after the 12th Dynasty, possibly even during the Hyksos Period (c.1650-1550 BC) (Kopetzky 2018). The Byblo-Egyptian relations during the Middle Bronze Age certainly require more research, but the strong Egyptian influence on Byblian material culture must have made itself felt by the end of the Middle Bronze Age, if not (long) before.

It remains difficult to establish the period during which the Byblos script was in use, especially in view of the problematic contexts in which the inscribed artefacts were found. Some inscribed stones, which Dunand suspected were originally part of Middle Bronze Age buildings, had been reused in structures of (much) later periods; other inscriptions were surface finds, or finds in layers that included objects from periods widely apart (Dunand 1945a, 1954, 1978).



Since the archaeological contexts are not helpful, attempts at dating the material must largely rest on the inscribed artefacts themselves. As long as the script remains undeciphered, only material features can be of help, such as palaeographic comparison with other scripts used at Byblos: hieroglyphic, hieratic (Posener 1969, 239; Hoch 1995, 64) and alphabetic (Sass 2019, 169-71). Possible indications may be provided by the presence of word-dividers and framing lines (Sass 2019, 168-72), and the typology of the objects inscribed.

Given the very limited corpus of inscriptions, it is extremely risky to use palaeographic comparison for dating purposes. Word dividers are absent from hieroglyphic and hieratic texts, but they are well known from Phoenician alphabetic texts of the early 1st millennium BC; they are therefore among the reasons for a late dating of the Byblos script as recently proposed by Benjamin Sass (2019, 170). An equally important observation is the occurrence of the Byblos script on four bronze spatulas (Fig. 27.2), and possibly on a fifth that was re-inscribed with a Phoenician

text in the early 1st millennium (Vita and Zamora 2018, 86-87; Sass 2019, 172). Even if the traces under that text would turn out not to belong to the Byblos script, it is remarkable to find both that script and Phoenician on the same *type* of object. The palimpsest spatula might represent the unique case of a metal object re-inscribed after many centuries, but one may equally suppose that the spatulas inscribed with the Byblos script and the one with Phoenician are from periods closer in time.

Thus, while much of the relevant literature considers the Byblos script a product of the Middle Bronze Age, any suggestion that it is typical or exclusive for that period (and more specifically, contemporary with the Hyksos Period, the Egyptian 12th Dynasty, or even earlier) stands on very loose ground. Early dates are hardly supported by any documented archaeological context, and possibly contradicted by features that are otherwise known at Byblos only from texts of a much later period – a period in which contacts with Egypt still existed, and in which Egyptian objects still found their way to Byblos.