The Proto-Semitic fonts*

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Abstract

The protosem package provides a set of fonts for the Proto-Semitic alphabet which was used around 1600 BC in the Middle East.

Contents

1 **Introduction** 1
  1.1 An alphabetic tree 1

2 **The protosem package** **2**

1 Introduction

The Phoenician alphabet and characters is a direct ancestor of our modern day Latin alphabet and fonts. The font presented here is one of a series of fonts intended to show how the modern Latin alphabet has evolved from its original Phoenician form to its present day appearance.

This manual is typeset according to the conventions of the LaTeX DOC-STRIP utility which enables the automatic extraction of the LaTeX macro source files [GMS94].

Section 2 describes the usage of the package. Later sections, if any, contain commented code for the fonts and source code for the package.

1.1 An alphabetic tree

Scholars are reasonably agreed that all the world's alphabets are descended from a Semitic alphabet invented about 1600 BC in the Middle East [Dru95]. The word 'Semitic' refers to the family of languages used in the geographical area from Sinai in the south, up the Mediterranean coast to Asia Minor in the north and west to the valley of the Euphrates.

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The Phoenician alphabet was stable by about 1100 BC and the script was written right to left. In earlier times the writing direction was variable, and so were the shapes and orientation of the characters. The alphabet consisted of 22 letters and they were named after things. For example, their first two letters were called *aleph* (ox), and *beth* (house). The Phoenician script had only one case — unlike our modern fonts which have both upper- and lower-cases. In modern terms the Phoenician abecedary was:

A B G D E Y Z H Θ I K L M N X O P ts Q R S T

where the 'Y' (*vau*) character was sometimes written as 'F', and 'ts' stands for the *tsade* character.

The Greek alphabet is one of the descendants of the Phoenician alphabet; another was Aramaic which is the ancestor of the Arabic, Persian and Indian scripts. Initially Greek was written right to left but around the 6th C BC became *boustrophedron*, meaning that the lines alternated in direction. At about 500 BC the writing direction stabilised as left to right. The Greeks modified the Phoenician alphabet to match the vocalisation of their language. They kept the Phoenician names of the letters, suitably 'greekified', so *aleph* became the familar *alpha* and *beth* became *beta*. At this point the names of the letters had no meaning. Their were several variants of the Greek character glyphs until they were finally fixed in Athens in 403 BC. The Greeks did not develop a lower-case script until about 600–700 AD.

The Etruscans based their alphabet on the Greek one, and again modified it. However, the Etruscans wrote right to left, so their borrowed characters are mirror images of the original Greek ones. Like the Phoenicians, the Etruscan script consisted of only one case; they died out before ever needing a lower-case script. The Etruscan script was used up until the first century AD, even though the Etruscans themselves had dissapeared by that time.

In turn, the Romans based their alphabet on the Etruscan one, but as they wrote left to right, the characters were again mirrored (although the early Roman inscriptions are boustrophedron).

As the English alphabet is descended from the Roman alphabet it has a pedigree of some three and a half thousand years.

2   The **protosem** package

The Proto-Semitic alphabet provided by this package is probably a precursor to the Phoenician alphabet. As far as I can make out from Davies [Dav97], Drucker [Dru95] and Healey [Hea90], there may have been several proto- alphabets being referred to as Proto-Siniatic or Proto-Canaanite for example. I have taken what I can from the sources available to me and produced a sort of generic Proto-Semitic font.

The alphabet consisted of 23 letters, some of which came in two different forms. The writing direction was normally left to right but could also be vertical.

Table 1 lists, in what I hope is the Proto-Semitic alphabetic order, the transliterated values of the characters and, where I know it, the name and meaning of

Table 1: Names and meanings of Proto-Semitic letters

Value	Name	Meaning	ASCII	command	ASCII	Alternative Command
a	alpu	ox	' a	`\Arq \Aa \Aaleph`	A	`\AAa \AAaleph`
b	betu	house	b	`\Ab \Abeth`	B	`\AAb \AAbeth`
g		throw-stick?	g	`\Ag \Agimel`		
d		fish	d	`\Ad \Adaleth`	D	`\AAd \AAdaleth`
h		man?	e	`\Ah \Ahe`	E	`\AAh \AAhe`
w	wawwu	hook/peg	w	`\Aw \Avav`		
z			z	`\Az \Azayin`		
$ḥ$	hotu	fence	h	`\Ahd \Aheth`	H	`\AAhd \AAheth`
$ṭ$		twisted flax	T	`\Atd \Ateth`		
y	yadu	hand/arm	y	`\Ay \Ayod`	Y	`\AAy \AAyod`
k	kappu	palm of hand	k	`\Ak \Akaph`	K	`\AAk \AAkaph`
l	lamdu	ox goad/whip	l	`\Al \Alamed`	L	`\AAl \AAlamed`
m	mayyuma?	water	m	`\Am \Amem`		
n	nahasu	snake	n	`\An \Anun`		
o	enu	eye	' o	`\Alq \Ao \Aayin`	O	`\AAo \AAayin`
s			s	`\As \Asamekh`		
p		leg/foot?	p	`\Ap \Ape`	P	`\AAp \AApe`
$ṣ$		plant?	x	`\Asd \Asade`	X	`\AAsd \AAsade`
q		knot?	q	`\Aq \Aqoph`	Q	`\AAq \AAqoph`
r	rasu	head	r	`\Ar \Aresh`	R	`\AAr \AAresh`
$š$		lotus pool?	S	`\Asv \Ashin`		
t	tawwu	mark	t	`\At \Atav`		
???			v	`\Av \Ahelmet`	V	`\AAv \AAhelmet`

the corresponding Proto-Semitic letter. Several of the glyphs are obviously based on Egyptian hieroglyphs. There seems to be general agreement that the glyphs I have coded as:

`a b g d e w H T y k l m n o r S t`

fall into this category.

`\protofamily`   This command selects the Proto-Semitic font family. The family name is `proto`.

`\textproto`   The command `\textproto{`⟨*text*⟩`}` typesets ⟨*text*⟩ in the Proto-Semitic font.

I have provided two means of accessing the Proto-Semitic glyphs: (a) by ASCII characters, and (b) via commands. These are shown in Table 1. The columns headed 'Alternative' are for accessing an alternative form of the glyph, if it exists.

`\translitproto`   The command `\translitproto{`⟨*commands*⟩`}` will typeset the transliteration of the Proto-Semitic character commands (those in the fifth and seventh columns of Table 1).

`\translitprotofont`   The font used for the transliteration is defined by this macro, which is initialsed to an italic font (i.e., `\itshape`).

References

[Dav97] W. V. Davies. *Reading the Past: Egyptian Hieroglyphs.* University of California Press/British Museum, 1997. (ISBN 0-520-06287-6)

[Dru95] Johanna Drucker. *The Alphabetic Labyrinth.* Thames and Hudson, 1995.

[Fir93] Richard A. Firmage. *The Alphabet Abecedarium.* David R. Goodine, 1993.

[GMS94] Michel Goossens, Frank Mittelbach, and Alexander Samarin. *The LaTeX Companion.* Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994.

[Hea90] John F. Healey. *Reading the Past: The Early Alphabet.* University of California Press/British Museum, 1990. (ISBN 0-520-07309-6)