

Phoenician

The Phoenicians have a special place in the history of linguistics, since their language was one of the first to be written in a phonetic script, unlike other contemporary writing systems which were pictorial. The Phoenician script can be dated at around 1050 BCE, and from it the Arabic, Hebrew and by extension Greek, Roman and Cyrillic scripts evolved.

The Phoenician civilization was centred along the Mediterranean coast in an area known as Cana'an (marked in green). The map below shows eight ancient cities in the area. The spellings reflect their pronunciation in Phoenician.


⊕74⋄	×5⋄⋄
⋄7⊕	⋄⋄0
⊕⋄7⊕	W⋄⊕
Y⋄1W	⊕⋄⋄⋄





Match up the Phoenician names with the names on the map. One of the cities is still a regional capital: which one?


Phoenician problem – solution

The first thing to consider is that the Phoenician words all have fewer letters than their transliterated equivalents, so each symbol must represent more than just one sound. But the system was described as phonetic, so a reasonable assumption is that the symbols represent consonants, with the vowels having to be assumed.

A scan for repeated patterns reveals that the pattern  appears in two words. Are there any repeated sequences of consonants in the transliterated names? Yes,

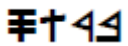
BL in RIBLAH and EBLA. So let's assume the two symbols in  are B and L.

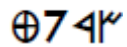
This would mean however that  is of the form LB?, but there are no names of that form. However, there is one other name with an L and B next to each other: HALAB. This leads to the realisation that Phoenician is written right-to-left, a fact hinted at in the introduction (if you know anything about Hebrew

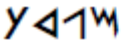
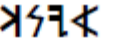

and Arabic). So  are L and B (which they resemble somewhat, too).



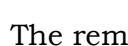
So we now have three of the names, as follows:

 EBLA  HALEB and  RIBLAH























Only one name begins with B, so we can add to the above list  BERITOS (which nowadays is called Beirut, in answer to the extra question).

And only one other name contains an R, namely TSAREPATH: 

The other three cities are MEGIDUW, QADESH and AYNUK, and the following three Phoenician names are still unassigned:   

None of the letters in those three names have appeared in any of the names we have so far deciphered. However one of the letters, , appears in two of the names. The only consonant repeated in our three remaining names is D, in 2nd and 3rd place in QADESH and MEGIDUW respectively. So that allows us to match  with MEGIDUW, and  with QADESH. The remaining name must be AYNUK.

Here is the full alphabet (excluding a couple of letters that we didn't use) in its traditional alphabetical order.

'	B	G	D	H	W	H	T	H	Y	K		
												
L	M	N	S	'	P	Q	R	T	S	H	T	S
												

You will see that two of the letters are given as ' and ' – they are used for words which begin with a vowel, and represent (roughly) two types of glottal stop. You will also see that there are two Hs. One is actually the CH sound also

found in German, Welsh, Irish, Scots, etc. and is often written with a dot below it: Ḥ.

Actually alphabets such as Phoenician, Hebrew and Arabic, which don't show the vowels, are called 'abugidas', based on the traditional first four letters ABGD (which we also see in Greek and Cyrillic).