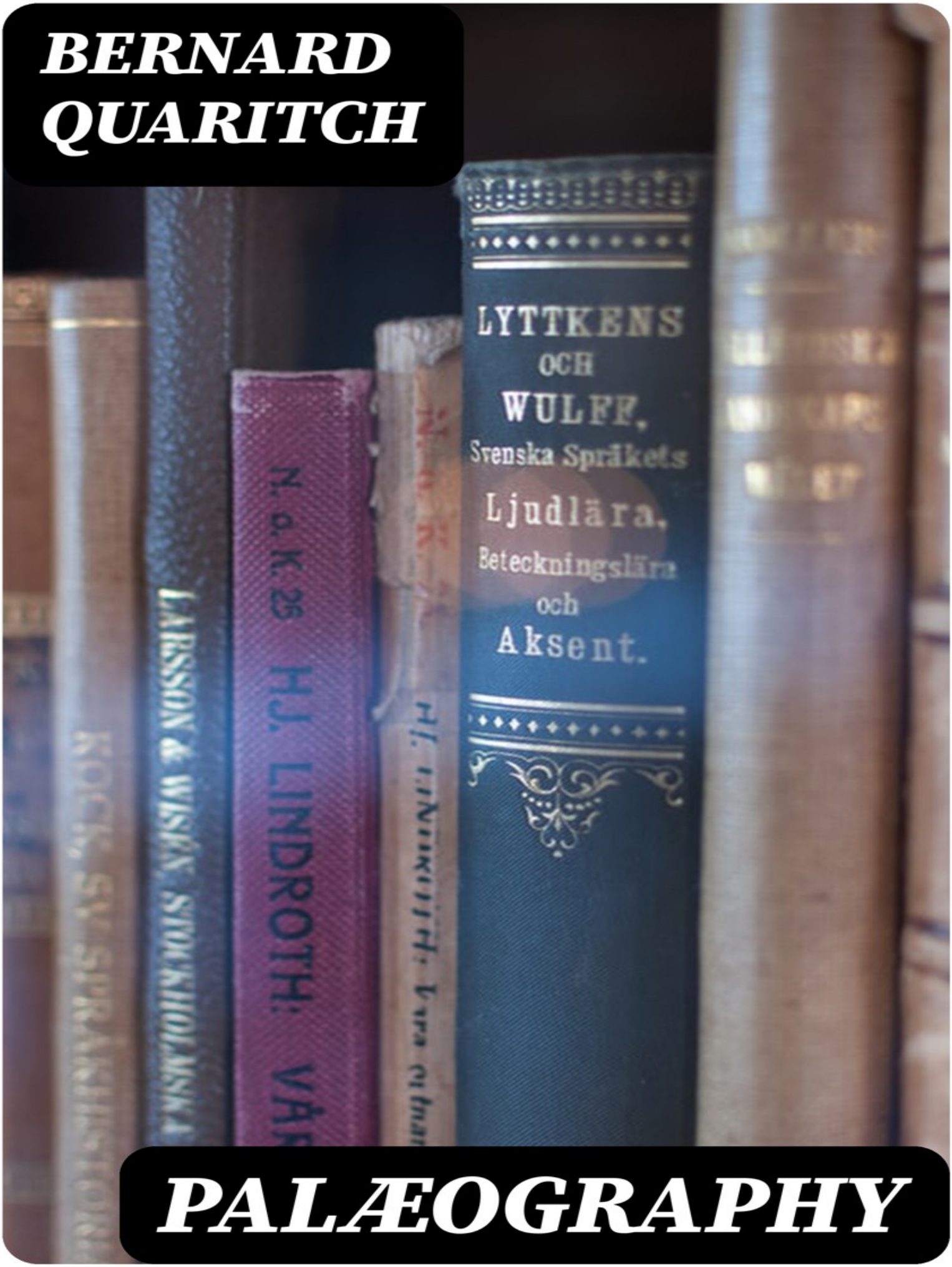
BERNARD QUARITCH



PALÆOGRAPHY

Bernard Quaritch

Palæography

Notes upon the History of Writing and the Medieval Art of Illumination

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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Foreword

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Of the books which preceded the invention of Printing, a much larger quantity is still extant than the world in general would suppose, but they are nevertheless so widely scattered and so seldom immediately accessible, that only a very long experience will enable any one to speak or to write about them in other than a blundering fashion. So many qualifications are required, that it may seem presumptuous in me to treat upon a matter bristling with difficulties and uncertainties. The brief but admirable outline of its history which Mr. Maunde Thompson has lately published is likely to mislead the inexperienced into a belief that a science defined with so much clearness and apparent ease may as easily be mastered. No one knows better than that accomplished scholar how hard it would be to supply sure and definite criteria for the guidance of palæographical students in all the branches of their fascinating pursuit. My excuse must be that the observations which appear in the present opusculum may be useful to some who are unable for various reasons to give the necessary fulness of study to Mr. Thompson's work, and who, while loving manuscripts as well as I do, have not had so large an experience. I may venture to justify myself by a personal anecdote. The author of the "Stones of Venice" once said that he was surprised by my apparently exact knowledge of the commercial value of manuscripts; and my reply was that, as I had for twenty years been the buyer of, or the underbidder for, all the fine

examples which had appeared in the public auctions, there was no great reason for his wonder.

The following sketch will consist of a number of cursory remarks upon the calligraphy and the ornamentation of medieval manuscripts; preceded by an historical sketch, arranged in chronological paragraphs, of the beginnings and the gradual diffusion of the art of writing throughout the world.

The Beginnings of Writing

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Palæography is the branch of science which deals with ancient writing (παλαιὰ γραφή). As the Greek word for writing comprises a great deal more than the work of pen and ink, palæographical study would be imperfect if it did not take into consideration the ancient inscriptions upon stone and metal which are usually left to numismatists and other archæologists. In a small treatise like the present, no such ambitious and comprehensive treatment is intended. The object is mainly to summarise the results of other men's labour, and to give a general idea of what is known at the present day about the diffusion of the art of writing and the methods of producing books before the sixteenth century.

The name for *book* in various ancient languages is indicative of the earliest stage in the history of writing. The English word itself appears in its oldest written form in the Gothic Scriptures of the fourth century, in which *boka* = writing, and *bokos* = things written = books. This is believed to be derived from the name of the tree we call *beech* and

the Germans *buche*, because it is supposed that the bark or wood of that tree was used for cutting runes upon. Similar to this is the Latin *liber*, which originally meant the inner bark of a tree, and afterwards came to mean book, because leaves were made from that inner bark for the purpose of writing. *Diphthera*, in ancient Ionic-Greek, was equivalent to book, because it meant a polished skin (like parchment or leather) used for writing upon before the Greeks adopted papyrus (*byblos*, *biblos*) from the Egyptians. Then the name for papyrus became the name for a book, and has been retained in modern speech in the word Bible. The word *diphthera* passed into use among the Persians about five hundred years before Christ, as the material was borrowed by them from the Ionians for the use of the scribes who kept the royal records, and it still remains in the speech of the modern Persians as *defter* = book. The Hebrew word *sepher* = engraving, and is therefore used to designate a book; and the same sense underlies the Arabic word *Kitab*. Writing was a scratching or incising of symbols representing sounds (or ideas) upon stone or metal, upon wood, or bark, or leaves (folia), dressed leather, parchment, papyrus, wax tablets, and paper.

The form in which the sheets (of skin, parchment, bark, papyrus, or paper) were gathered, may have been rolls in which they were united to form a single page, or a square combination of successive leaves united only at one side. The former was of course the earlier mode, but the latter was also in use at a remote date. Greek and Roman scribes had evidently begun to prefer the square fashion during the early days of the Roman empire; and we may take it to have

become the prevalent custom in the fourth century. Black ink has always been in use for writing, red and blue ink are of comparatively recent date. The use of gold ink, which was of course so costly that it could never be otherwise than rare, originated probably when the empire was as yet unshaken by barbarian inroads; it was, however, not extinct in Rome during the sixth and seventh centuries, and was relatively not uncommon at the magnificent court of Byzantium. Late examples were produced in Gaul for the Frankish princes in the ninth century; and in these the simple splendour of the Roman style was embellished with ornamentation chiefly drawn from Irish and Anglo-Saxon models.

Although people knew how to write and to read more than five thousand years ago, "a reading public," as we understand the term, came into existence for the first time in Greece in the fifth century B.C., and again in Rome in the first century B.C. By this it is meant that there were people who bought books for the pleasure of reading them, as distinguished from the class which produced or used books as an official necessity. The requirements of that reading public among the Greeks, led to the disuse of skins for the purpose of writing, since only a cheaper and more plentiful material could satisfy the demand. Egyptian papyrus being both cheap and plentiful, it was adopted and remained in use for over a thousand years among the people who spoke Greek and Latin. Books upon vellum or parchment—*charta pergamena*, an improved form of the old skins—were only produced occasionally, as luxuries, between the second century B.C. and the fifth century of our era. At this latter

period, the reading public was extinguished in the revolutions of barbarian conquest, and the cheap material ceased to be necessary. In the absence of a popular demand for books, and when only persons of exceptional learning, churchmen, statesmen, and monks, experienced the need of reading and writing, the supply of vellum was sufficient, and this dearer material was relatively economical because of its durability. A reading public can hardly be said to have come into renewed existence till the fifteenth century, and then once more vellum was superseded by the cheaper material of paper. Paper, from linen or rags, had been made in the Saracenic east for several centuries, but was little used in Europe till the thirteenth century, and was not fabricated in the west to any considerable extent until the fourteenth century.

Writing in Egypt 5000 B.C.

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The origin of writing, that is of the art of transmitting information by means of symbols representing speech, is, like the origin of every other invention, obscure and uncertain. It is not the proud Aryan, nor his elder brother the Semite, who can claim the honour of the invention. It belongs neither to Japhet nor to Shem (convenient eponyms) but to the despised Ham, with whom they are unwilling to acknowledge kinship. Four thousand years before Christ (the very period at which, in Milton's opinion, Adam and Eve were banished from Paradise) the people of the Nile Valley formed a rich and powerful monarchy, with

an old civilisation, and possessed the arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, and writing. Their writing was chiefly upon stone monuments, and recorded the deeds of their Kings or the greatness of their Gods. They also wrote upon leaves of papyrus the forms of prayer and eulogy which were buried with their dead. Among the surviving written productions of that great monarchy is a work containing the Moral Precepts of Ptah-Hotep. Written in the language of Khem (old Egypt), and in the hieratic character, upon papyrus, it is "the oldest book in the world." The period of its composition is more ancient than the date of the writing, which, by internal evidence, has been proved to be over 2000 B.C. It is now in the Bibliothèque Nationale, and is known by the name of the Papyrus Prisse. As there can be no question that hieroglyphic writing (engraving) upon stone was considerably anterior to the evolution of the cursive hieratic written with pen and ink upon papyrus; and as there is a hieroglyphic inscription on stone in the Ashmolean Museum which is assigned to 4000 B.C.—we must infer that the real age of Egyptian writing is beyond our ken. It must be at the least six thousand years old; and there are numerous examples in lapidar inscriptions which represent the millennium preceding the date of the Prisse Papyrus. With this book, written several centuries before Moses dwelt in the land of Egypt, a sketch of the history of writing may modestly begin. It must not be imagined that the dates of Egyptian and Babylonian documents are based upon enthusiastic conjecture, or upon unaided calculation of the years assigned to the lives and reigns of monarchs in their newly discovered and deciphered records. Josephus and

Eusebius have preserved fragments of older historical writers, among them portions of the lost Chronicles of Berossus the Chaldæan and Manetho the Egyptian, whose works were written in Greek in the fourth and third centuries before Christ. In former days, when scholars were nurtured upon the Christian chronology which counted the birth of Christ as A.M. 4004, or A.M. 5870, according as the Hebrew Bible or the Septuagint was adopted as the authority for dates, it was the custom to deride as fabulous the immense lists of Chaldean and Egyptian dynasties, which spoiled the story of Genesis; but the hieroglyphic and the cuneiform monuments have yielded up their long-buried testimony to justify the discredited chroniclers. Nothing in romance is more wonderful than the story of the work of interpretation, by which old Egypt and old Assyria have been brought forward into the light of authentic history. Two generations of acute and patient scholars working contemporaneously in England, France, Germany, and Italy, have contrived, without dictionary, without grammar, without even a key to the mysterious letters, to decipher and to read the stony records of those ancient empires. Their first labour was to distinguish the symbols, and to assign to them a phonetic value, then to compare the resultant words with the vocabulary of known languages supposed to be akin to the old ones. In the case of the hieroglyphics, the Coptic language alone offered its aid, this being the tongue of Egypt as written and spoken in the first ten centuries of our era, genuine Egyptian indeed, but necessarily differing enormously from its earliest phases thousands of years back. As to the cuneiform inscriptions, the various Semitic

tongues furnished means of comparison for Assyrian texts, the Persian and "Zend" for old Persic and Median, and certain cuneiform vocabularies were discovered which rendered it possible to understand a third language, the most ancient of them all, which had been utterly unknown even by name. From the time of Christ, perhaps even before it, down to sixty years ago, the languages and monuments of Egypt and Chaldæa had never been looked upon by the eye of intelligence. The mystery of ages is a mystery no more.

Writing in Chaldæa, 4000 B.C.

The age of Chaldæan writing (engraving) is not far behind that of the Egyptian hieroglyphics. It is said that an inscription of the first Sargon, King of Akkad (in the square or angular character out of which the wedge-shaped or cuneiform letters were evolved), carries the record back to 3800 B.C. Even if we take a large latitude in discounting the chronology, there still remains a certainty that the cuneiform character of Babylonia was used over the greater part of Western Asia from at least 2500 B.C., and in Persia and its tributaries down to 300 B.C. While, of the Egyptian writing, we have remains exhibiting all the stages of development, namely (1) the hieroglyphic, (2) the hieratic, (3) the demotic, (4) the Coptic in Greek letters; of the cuneiform script we have only the two phases which may be roughly said to correspond to the Egyptian hieratic and demotic, or more exactly to two stages of the hieratic. We cannot reconstruct the original Chaldæan hieroglyphics which must have preceded the Chaldæan hieratic and cuneiform; nor do we know (at present) of any truly cursive

hand developed from the wedge-letters. Among the relics of the Assyrians is a great number of stone tablets of small size, containing reports to the monarch from provincial governors. One of them, now in the British Museum, is supposed, from a phrase which occurs in it, to show that the stone tablets were simply copies made for preservation in the archives, while the actually transmitted originals were written on papyrus. If that were the practice, and there is inherent probability in the suggestion, there would assuredly have been a great quantity of papyrus used throughout the Assyrian empire; yet not a fragment of that material has been discovered. In the absence of some positive evidence, we can but suppose it likely that the Assyrians used papyrus (or skins) for writing on, as well as the Egyptians, but applied it only to temporary purposes, trusting rather to granite and brick, than to paper or to leather, whatever was intended for enduring record.

Progress of the Art, B.C. 2500-1500

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At about 2500 B.C. all the civilisation of the world was confined to the regions bordering the whole length of the Red Sea, and extending northwards to Armenia. In the South was Egypt, a powerful monarchy dominant at times from Ethiopia to Asia Minor, and in the North the Chaldee kingdom of Akkad dominant over Mesopotamia and the frontier lands. The country of Egypt was named by its people Keme or Kheme, and their language was called the

speech of Keme (out of which the Hebrews made Ham). The name of Ai-Gupt was given to the Delta by its Semitic neighbours and inhabitants, while they called the whole country Mizr (Mizraim) or Misr. The former name has prevailed in European use, as well as furnished the words Copt and Coptic, although this is questionable. The Kheme language was written both in hieroglyphic and in hieratic characters at the year 2500 B.C. The former were the ancient picture-symbols, which were arranged in vertical columns and read from top to bottom and from left to right. This practice was retained to the end, notwithstanding that the Egyptians had been long in contemporaneous possession of the cursive hieratic characters, written in horizontal lines from right to left, just as Hebrew and Arabic. The hieratic character was simply an abridgment of the hieroglyphic, a reduction of the pictorial to conventional forms.

The two scripts endured side by side till Christianity supervened, and then the modified Greek alphabet which we call the Coptic came into existence. The demotic script, a still more cursive reduction of the hieratic, had come into use probably a thousand years B.C., but it was only used for private mercantile transactions, and it died out on the establishment of the Coptic. Examples of both hieroglyphic and demotic writing are given in the plates accompanying this sketch.

The Akkadian Chaldee language (to be distinguished from the later Semitic Syro-Chaldee) has, like the Egyptian Khemi, no immediate affinities with any other important form of speech. They are both of an older type and stock than the oldest known members of the Aryan and Semitic

families. The Akkadian is called Turanian, as showing undoubted resemblances to the Turki and Mongol languages of the lands lying north and east of Persia, which were named by the Persians Turan, as distinguished from Iran. The place of the Khemi in philology is not so easily defined. It does not seem that any other language than that of Egypt was ever written in the Egyptian script. The case is somewhat different with the Chaldee characters. They were adopted in varying modes for writing Semitic and Aryan languages, as well as the native Akkadian. This resulted from the blending of populations by successive conquests. The Akkadian-Chaldees ruled in Mesopotamia till 1500 B.C., when they went down before the Semites from Northern Arabia. A branch of these Semites had already for a considerable time occupied the eastern side of Mesopotamia and were in possession of the region round Nineveh, at the time when their Arabian kindred swept away the old dynasty that had had its chief seat in Babylonia.

At or about 1300 B.C., the Ninevite Assyrians or Syro-Chaldæans united the whole of Mesopotamia by conquest, and completed the downfall of the Akkadian Chaldæans who were thenceforward reduced to servitude. Even the later uprisings in Babylonia were only the work of princes of Assyrian blood. The date mentioned is another standpoint in the history of writing. The Semite Assyrians were now the chief users of the cuneiform script. At Babylon they seem to have retained it in the same form into which it had developed in the hands of the Akkad people. At Nineveh, it had undergone a modification; the combinations of the symbols being considerably altered, so that one may speak

of Babylonian characters and of Assyrian characters as being two scripts, although they look identical.

The Semitic Alphabet about 1700 B.C.

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This is (in chronological sequence) the place at which mention should be made of the Greek myth that alphabetical letters were introduced into Bœotia by Cadmus the Phœnician. It has always been accepted as substantially true, even by those who knew that Cadmus in Semitic speech meant simply The Ancient, or The Eastern; and has usually been assigned to about 1500 B.C. The story requires some modification, and the date is probably a good deal out of reckoning. Here it is only referred to as showing the early use of letters by the Phœnicians. There are really no extant monuments to prove the anteriority of the Semite alphabet to that of the Greeks, but there can be no question as to the fact. The names of the Greek letters are manifestly borrowed from a Semitic speech, and the Cadmus story is in itself a sufficient acknowledgment of the secondary position of the Hellenes. It is generally held that the Phœnicians derived their alphabet by means of a selection from the phonetic symbols of the Egyptian hieratic script. Whether the process was due to the Phœnicians themselves, is not so clearly asserted. Mr. Maunde Thompson, following Lenormant and the Vicomte de Rougé, seems to consider that it gradually took place in Egypt after the Arabs had conquered the country, and when the Hyksos or Shepherd