

The Ugaritic Script

Doç. Dr. Haluk Berkmen

The kingdom of Ugarit, on the northern coast of present Syria has been an important center of culture and trade some 4,000 years ago. Located between northern Anatolian and southern Mesopotamian cultures no less than ten languages and five different scripts were in use at Ugarit. It is here that the first alphabetical script based on simplified cuneiforms was invented. The 30 cuneiform signs (below) bore no resemblance to the signs of Akkadian or Babylonian cuneiform. Over 1,000 tablets of the Ugaritic script has been discovered consisting of both commercial accounts as well as religious texts bearing striking similarities to the stories written many centuries later in the Old Testament. The reason being that the people coming from the north still had the memory, through verbal accounts passed from generation to generation, of the flood that devastated their ancient country in Central Asia (see the maps in Chapter 5, **Climatic Changes** and in Chapter 18, **Towards Sümer and Elam**). These memories about an ancient flood have also found their place in the epic of Gilgamish, a Sumerian half god half human personality. But, the flood did not happen in Mesopotamia, as many believe, it happened in Central Asia.

A further clue for the Anatolian influence on Ugarit is the tablets found in Ugarit written in **Hurrian**, a language which precedes Hittite and is of non-Semitic origin (1). The Ugaritic alphabet was first deciphered in 1930 by Hans Bauer and Edouard Dhorme. The 30 cuneiform signs of this alphabet are shown below.

Ugaritic Alphabet

B G L A N A T

E. Dhorme deciphered the name of the Ugaritic main deity as “**B ‘ L**”. This form came to be known erroneously as Baal (2). This is because the velar g -shown as g-dot in the last row (second from left) of the above table- does not exist in Indo-European languages, but does exist in Turkish (ğ) as well as in most Semitic languages. Therefore, one way of pronouncing B-Ğ-L could be BUĞULU or BOĞULU. Since the A exists in the alphabet but does not take part in the name, one can insert the U or the O which are not part of the consonantal alphabet. In that case we obtain a meaningful name as: Buğ-Ulu or Boğ-Ulu meaning “the holy bull” in the Proto-language as well as in the actual Turkish (see Chapter 19, **The Bull and the Letter B**). A further understanding could arise if we read B’L as Bu-Oğulu, meaning “the son of the bull”, a distinctive way of defining the Ugaritic leader shown in the picture below.

Here is an extract from the myth of Mot and Alijan, the two sons of Baal (Buğulu), as a short example of Ugaritic literature (3):

**The days sped by,
The love of Anat overwhelmed her, as the heart of an antelope for her fawn,
As the heart of an ewe for her lamb,
So was the heart of Anat for Boğulu.**

The reason for selecting this extract is because Anat feels a motherly love for her brother Buğulu. Anat could also be read as **Ana-Ot**, meaning “the fire-mother” or equivalently “the sun-mother” (see Chapter 8, **The Double-edged ax**). This way of reading Anat is acceptable since the letter “o” does not take part in the Ugaritic alphabet. Notice that letters in **Anat** (above) are all horizontal and constitute the simplest cuneiforms of the Ugaritic alphabet. From these simple cuneiforms we can guess that the words “Ana” and “Ot” were the most frequently used words in the Ugaritic language.



We see above the stele of Buğulu (Baal) discovered in 1929, identified as the “storm-god of Ugarit”. One can see the horns on his helmet and a spear that he plants to the earth. The spear has taken root since leaves have emerged from its top end. He also lifts a scepter as a sign of power and threat. The symbolism in this image tells us the following: “***I am here to stay and am ready to defend this territory***”. The spear, the horns on his helmet tell us that he is an **Okh** leader and the waves under his feet indicate that he is or has a storming power. I am of the opinion that Buğulu was a ruling king who was elevated to level of god height by his entourage.

The Phoenician alphabet is generally accepted as being a variant of the Semitic alphabet, but their origin is different. The Semitic alphabet is a variant of the Egyptian Hieratic and Demotic scripts, while the Phoenician alphabet is based on Asiatic seals (see Chapter 13, **Evolution of writing systems**)

References

- (1) Ref. 1 of Chapter 10, page 217.
- (2) Ref. 2 of Chapter 7, page 120.
- (3) Ref. 1 of Chapter 10, page 218.