

Rev. Kevin Massey-Gillespie
7810 Elmgrove Drive
Elmwood Park, IL 60707
internet:75111.3525@compuserve.com

Dr. Emmett L. Bennett
Institute for Research in the Humanities
University of Wisconsin-Madison
1401 Observatory Drive
Madison, WI 53706-1295

28 October, 1996

Dear Dr. Bennett,

Thank you for your letter of 22 October inquiring as to the particulars of Gublitic. I will below explain what it is and where you can find documentation of it. I'd also like to use this opportunity to crystallize for you what our findings are, and make a proposal concerning our future direction.

You've admonished us to document carefully exactly how we have taken the several steps of our progress. I'll back up and explain how it went, including some of the less "academic" occurrences that contributed to our findings.

Keith and I became aware of the Phaistos Disk when I saw a picture of the disk in a guide book that my in-laws brought back after a trip to Greece. The disk is of course aesthetically pleasing and it captured my attention. Keith and I have collaborated on several projects, and so I e-mailed him asking if we might not mutually attack the Phaistos Disk for a while. Now Keith and I, as we explained to you, are not skilled classicists. Keith majored in Classics, I majored in Linguistics. We both have strong Latin, having studied at the UW, including under Prof. MacKendrick. Keith has very strong Greek, mine is limited to usage for the New Testament and the LXX. We are primarily semitists. Our deepest training and entire record of publication¹ has been in the field of Semitic linguistics and orthography.

-
- ¹ 1993 "A Dialogue of Creeds" *ISLAMOCHRISTIANA* 19, by Keith A.J. Massey and Kevin Massey-Gillespie
1994 "A New Approach to basic Hebrew colour terms" *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 20/1 by Kevin Massey-Gillespie
1995 "Semitic Quadriliteral Animal Terms: An Explanation" *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 21/1 by Keith A.J. Massey and Kevin Massey-Gillespie
1996 "Mystery Letters of the Quran" *ARABICA* by Keith A.J. Massey
1999 (forthcoming) "God of the Udder: Another Look at El Shaddai" *Zeitschrift für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* by Keith A.J. Massey and Kevin Massey-Gillespie

For that reason, we first approached the disk as though it might be in a Semitic language. I have seen articles by Cyrus Gordon that suggest that Linear A is a Semitic language.² While I did not find these articles convincing, they gave me courage to stay in my element and force a Semitic language out of the Phaistos Disk (henceforth PD).

Well, we had no luck on finding a Semitic language in the PD. But along the way, we looked closely at many Semitic Scripts to find similarities and comparisons. Now, you explained well the possible pitfalls of a comparative method in our meeting. It stands to reason that if two orthographic systems are unrelated, no amount of comparison will yield any fruit. Therefore no comparison of Linear B to anything would ever have worked, for the system is unrelated to the other known systems. Nevertheless, if an orthographic system *were* actually related to another, then comparisons should be helpful. The burden would first fall on demonstrating that the systems are likely related, that they bear enough similarity of style, appearance, synchronic and geographic setting, and genre to make the comparison a meaningful pursuit. We will now show how a comparison of the PD characters with the Gublitic system meets these criteria.

Gublitic is also known as Proto-Byblic, and perhaps one would have more luck in an index looking for that term. I use Gublitic because I like the way it sounds, and because I deem the term Proto-Byblic to be inaccurate for it did not develop into a later "Byblic" but rather into a variety of Semitic Scripts, many still in use today.

Ancient Byblos is modern Jubayl in Lebanon. It was one of the chief cities of the later Phoenician Empire, but it is of great antiquity than the other Phoenician cities. Byblos is understood to have the oldest port in the world, and it was undoubtedly a major center of shipping and trade for the Eastern Mediterranean.

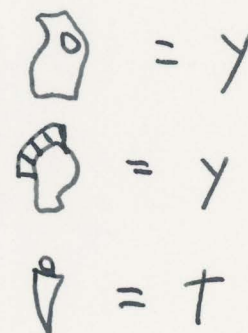
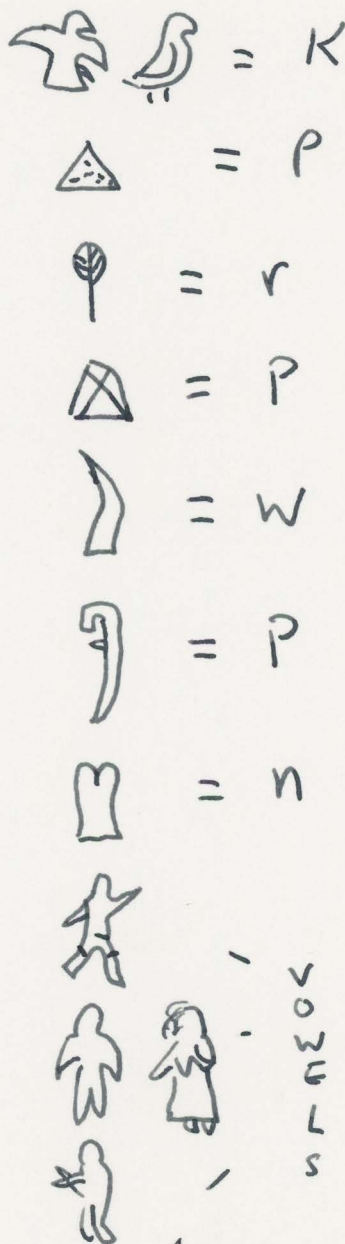
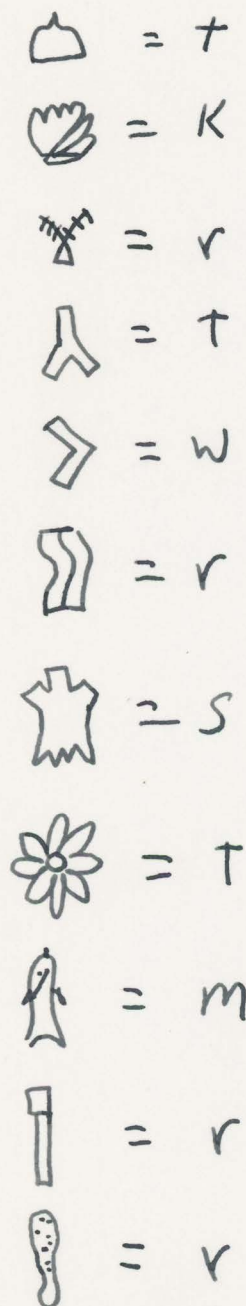
The Gublitic Script was found in the archaeological work done there earlier in the century. The texts were first shared in an undeciphered way by Maurice Dunand in his book, *Byblia Grammata* (Beyrouth, 1945). Later Dunand deciphered the script and has translated the texts, in my opinion, in a satisfying way. He made his decipherment by supposing that the end of one of the tablets would end in a manner fitting the genre of Akkadian texts, with a time designation. He supposed it to read somehow like "in the (number) year, in the (number) month, in the (number) day, of so and so's rule". In this way he found a Semitic language in the tablets.

Byblos also used the Babylonian cuneiform script with the Akkadian language for a Lingua Franca in the period corresponding to the Ugarit language 1700 BCE to 1200 BCE. The Gublitic Script is dated, according to the strata in which it has been found to date to the early part of the 2nd, if not the late part of the 3rd millennium BCE. That puts the Proto-Byblic into the same time as the PD probably falls. It had a restricted use, more inscriptions have been found at Byblos using the common cuneiform. That shows a strange correspondence of genre, as the PD stands more or less alone, with the possible exception of the Arkelochori Ax.

Intensive contact between the Syro-Phoenician coast and the Greek Isles is well documented in the Ugarit texts. Brisk trade and intellectual sharing was going on in the whole eastern Mediterranean of the period.

² 1957 September and December *Antiquity*

With those comparisons made we decided to try to make phonetic assignments to the PD characters based on the Gublitic values. We did some thinking prior to the actual assignments on what could be expected of the system lying behind the PD. The Gublitic Script includes 72 known characters, not counting slight variations in characters not believed to imply phonetic difference, but rather stylistic. With the 45 known PD symbols, the length of the PD would imply a system including around 60 characters. The Linears employ 87 known characters. This means that the PD orthographic system will be at least as economical as any of those systems, probably more economical. Therefore we assigned phonetic value to the PD characters by comparison to their Gublitic values, but reducing the values to more closely resemble the tolerances of the Linears, that is, all characters become unvoiced, the two liquids /l/ and /r/ are treated as one, and all fricatives are made into stops. That allowed us then to make the following assignments to some PD characters.



Knowing that the system is likely syllabic, not alphabetical, we nevertheless made assignments of consonants only, our Semitic language training would allow us to see words lying behind the consonants. We were at this stage still hoping to find a Semitic language in the text, and were especially hopeful of that having found the similarities between the PD and Gublitic. When we put the values on the disk however, we both noticed two surprising words. We will refer to the words on the disk according to their designations from the photocopy enclosure that I have sent along.

The two words were B1 (t-r) and B5 (k-t-r-?-t). We saw in them, reading left to right, of course the Greek words $\tau\rho\iota$ and $\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\rho\iota\tau\omicron$. We had intended to read the disk right to left along with everyone else, but those words struck us and we re-examined that thought. We now believe the right to left to be a sort of red herring. Everyone suggests that hieroglyphic characters always are read beginning in the direction to which the characters face. Further there is the instance where the one character stamped over the other shows that those two characters were stamped right to left. Both of these things can have other explanations. It could just be that these "hieroglyphs" defy the handy, though not even absolute, rule. And that the two characters were stamped right to left does not prove that they all were stamped that way. I mentioned in our meeting that as I make bulletin boards with pre-cut letters, I frequently place the letters out of order to ensure proper spacing. The disk would certainly have required those considerations as well.

We began to look and found much more that displayed Greek language in the syllables that we could create, just from the symbols whose values were assigned from the PD/Gublitic comparative method. It is clear that many of the words end with the symbol of the man in the head-dress. We began to think of that symbol as filling some purpose like /yo/ with an implied or supplied /s/ on the end of it. And so we found words like A20 (t-r-k-?-yo) $\theta\omega\rho\alpha\kappa\alpha\iota\omicron\varsigma$ a word we take to mean "breast works." In B23 and B25 we see a Greek idiom (w-e-r-t-?) (p-w-r-t) $\epsilon\omicron\lambda\epsilon\tau\alpha\tau\alpha \pi\upsilon\rho\tau\epsilon$ "and struck by lightning" (compare $\nu\eta\alpha \kappa\epsilon\rho\alpha\nu\omega \epsilon\lambda\sigma\alpha\varsigma$ "having struck the ship with a thunderbolt").

These findings we made based only on those characters which we could establish by our comparative method. We were excited by what we had found at that point. But we also knew that we didn't have enough characters to make a complete transcription and translation. At that point we proceeded to another level, an attempt to compare the remaining PD characters to characters in the Semitic scripts which derived from the Proto-Byblic.

After Dunand deciphered the Proto-Byblic, his work was accepted in general. But one of his students, George E. Mendenhall, has recently challenged his work.³ Mendenhall assigns new values to most of Dunand's work, and produces as a result, transcriptions and translations of the texts that amount to jibberish. A comparison of the product of the work alone would tip the scales in favor of Dunand's assignments, but a further comparison also vindicates Dunand's work, and that is a comparison of the Proto-Byblic system with the earliest other Semitic scripts.

We have been largely spoon-fed the idea that the Phoenician alphabet was developed out of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics and that later the Phoenicians gave the





³ 1985 *The Syllabic Inscriptions from Byblos*, American University in Beirut

Greeks their alphabetic system. This is not really how it works. It is now acknowledged that the Proto-Byblic was more or less the source of the Semitic Scripts. But in fact, the scripts of the Ancient Near East, like all scripts in my opinion, function like languages. For any language there are also dialects, and further, each person has an idiolect. So too with Scripts. With every orthographic system, there are also, "dia-graphs," regional, even socially determined ways to write the language which are similar to, but not identical to other systems in use even across the street. So too each of us has our own person idio-graph, so that one can get arrested for forgery because handwriting experts know it was you.

What this means is that scripts are not really borrowed, but they rather influence each other, and develop just as languages change. A given script may become dominant, just as a language can supplant another, but it is always with vestiges of the old, and new innovations. It may even be that a given script may have symbols and systems which are never attested at one period, like certain vulgar aspects of language, but which are nevertheless present and can be found popping up somewhere later. Think of latin *equus*. It seemed to be the standard word for "horse," but none of the Romance languages use it today, they all have some form related to cavalry.

Applying this to the Semitic Scripts, the different Semitic Scripts that developed in the Ancient Near East borrowed from different sources, including a large part from the Proto-Byblic, and they demonstrate regularities that imply that there were characters that were in the source Script, but which are otherwise unattested. For example, Moabitic and early Phoenician share a symbol \neq "S" which is otherwise unattested, so one could suppose that it came from a stratum of development that was just not attested, but which could have been in some way present in the Proto-Byblic. And so we can suppose that the PD symbol \neq could be related to it and assigned the value "s."

In this way, by a comparison to a number of Semitic Scripts connected to and probably derivative from Proto-Byblic, we were able to assign further values. These and their comparisons are below.

PD		comparisons
	= y	2 phoen. 7 moab. "y"
	= K	1 Tham. 1 phoen. "q"
	= vowel	0 phoen. 1 Tham. "c" ('ayin)
	= m	2 sab. 2 Tham. "m"

We believe that Dunand's assignments are vindicated by more closely reflecting the evidence that the Proto-Byblic influenced the development of the other scripts. And that relationship allowed us to assign those few extra characters above.

From that point, we have proceeded to do what every decipherer eventually has to do, a great deal of guess work. But our guess work has been undoubtedly helped by the fact that we didn't have to do it for the whole system from scratch. The comparative method gave us most of what we needed to find first Greek language in the script, and then to be able to solve problems for assigning the other characters by internal comparison, i.e. by trying to see what parts of the system did not yet have full enough inventories of characters in comparison to the other parts. That process then allowed us to come up with the rest of the system. Thus the system which we explained to you when we met last month.

We are quick to point out however, that those characters must be considered to be in another category than those established by the comparative method. We can not yet be as confident about them, even though they have allowed us to find a coherent Greek text in the disk.

The text produced by our attempt, which we explained to you in our meeting, tells a believable story. It is a formulaic curse. It employs vocabulary and style in a way that one would expect that such a text should do. It includes striking figures of speech like B27, B28, B29, and B30 (s-p-t)(e-r-k-yo)(n-t-r-s)(t-n-t-a-yo) σῆπεντο εἰργιο νερτεροῖς θανάταιο "let them putrify in the prison of death with the under-worldlings."

We can see in the text a remarkable coherence and consistency that one simply cannot find in any other attempt at deciphering the disk. Frankly, Dr. Bennett, I have never found any attempt other than our own to produce anything except random stream of consciousness jibberish which I am surprised the alleged decipherers are even willing to make public because it makes them look ridiculous. Our attempt is simply different than all that. First of all, it is not primarily a decipherment, it is a comparative method. Second, it is a comparative method which has never been truly attempted. Others have tried to do comparisons with the PD characters and the Linears, and with hieroglyphs, but it is like comparing Icelandic to Hebrew, there are practically no real similarities. Therefore, alleged comparisons are in fact just another kind of guess work. Again, ours is completely different.

We are comparing the symbols to an orthographic system that we can place in the same region and time as the PD, we are comparing symbols that bear a striking resemblance to one another. When the comparison is done, we have produced a text that has internal coherence and consistency. It tells a story, which is what a text should do. It honors the word boundaries in a consistent way, which other attempts at deciphering don't do.

We are more convinced than ever that the orthographic systems used at Byblos in the 2nd millennium BCE and the orthographic system of the PD are closely related systems. The Proto-Byblic system provides the closest thing to a Rosetta Stone that will ever be found for the PD. This approach will eventually lead to a sort of decipherment of the Disk. But we are also more convinced than ever that we don't personally have the skill in Greek language, especially archaic Greek language to complete this project. We can see the obvious words in the text, as we showed you as well in our meeting, we can

see the general structure of a text. We know generally what the text is about, but I doubt that we will be able to get any further with the Greek text than we have. This leads us to the proposal part.

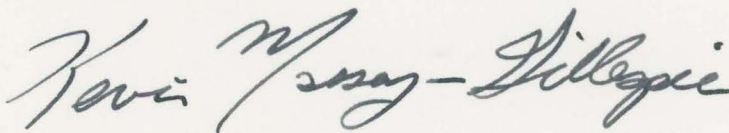
Keith and I would like to suggest to you that you take the materials that we have already given you and make your own effort at interpreting, transcribing, and translating the text. In short, we're asking you to be sort of Chadwick to our Ventris. We know that you could make a good text out of it, you have the background in reading archaic Greek, you know what is fair and what is not in terms of supplying letters for sense and grammar. We have done the lion's share of the decipherment through the comparative method, but the work of translating the text competently is beyond us.

An interesting test that is yet to be given to our method is the Arkelochori Ax. We have never been able to find a text of the Ax, though I have read in several places that it presents several lines of text with characters closely similar to those on the PD. Perhaps as a sort of test on whether you would like to join yourself to this project, you could apply our values in the closest way possible to the text on the Ax and see if any coherent text is produced. We've never seen the Ax, we'd appreciate it too, if you have anywhere a photocopy of the text, if you could send it.

Perhaps you have no intention of ever linking yourself with any attempt to decipher the disk. That would be understandable. If so, could you suggest someone competent in Mycenaean Greek with whom we could share our materials and collaborate on finishing this project? It would be greatly appreciated whatever assistance you could provide.

That is the story of the decipherment as it has happened so far. We look forward to hearing from you at your soonest convenience.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kevin Massey-Gillespie". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Kevin Massey-Gillespie

CC: Keith A.J. Massey

Enclosures:

- Gublitic Chart
- Phaistos Disk Chart