Compte rendu de:Robert M. Kerr 2010, " Some thoughts on the origins of the Libyco-Berber Alphabet. " Études berbères V. Actes du "Bayreuth - Frankfurt - Leidener Kolloquim zur Berberologie". Köln : 41 - 68.

Werner Pichler, Jean-Loïc Le Quellec

▶ **To cite this version:**

Robert M. Kerr 2010, «Some thoughts on the origins of the Libyco-Berber Alphabet.» *Études berbères V. Actes du "Bayreuth – Frankfurt – Leidener Kolloquim zur Berberologie".* **Köln : 41 - 68.**

There is a long tradition of attempts to derive the Libyco-Berber script from the Phoenician one (Halévy 1874, Meinhof 1931, Bates 1914, Prasse 1972, Chaker 1984, Iliffe 1997, Pichler 2007), comparatively few colleagues favoured the Punic thesis (Février 1959, O'Connor 1996). In a recent publication Kerr extended the list of the second group. The summary of his review of historical sources is that the «excogitation of the Libyco-Berber script was […] one of the outcomes of the Second Punic war […] It was at this period, when large numbers of the Libyco-Berber peoples of North Africa were united in an indigenous kingdom […] was there a need for the use of an indigenous administrative language» (Kerr 2010 : 63). But Kerr's attempt to find the «*Sitz im Leben*» of the Libyco-Berber script suffers mainly from the fact that he takes into account only the funerary steles and totally ignores the existence of the important group of old rock inscriptions — besides the short comment that the dating of the famous Azib n'Ikkis inscription is «nothing more than an educated guess at best» (Kerr 2010: 47). The lacking of these archaic rock inscriptions is made plain by Kerr's division into four groups :

1. Libyco-Berber of Classic Antiquity = ancient Libyco-Berber
    1.a. Eastern alphabets
    1.b. Western alphabets
2. Ancient Tifinagh
3. Modern Tifinagh

He cites «cursive» and «rounded» forms of characters as distinguishing features of these groups. Both assertions are not justified. In contrast to the Latin of Punic scripts, Libyco-Berber never and nowhere used cursive forms. «Cursive writing» means everyday handwriting in a quick and sloppy way using a lot of ligatures and even disfigured forms which are –*in fine*– nearly unrecognizable. Dozens of scholars have stressed the fact of an extraordinary geometric structure of Libyco-Berber signs, which gave no opportunity for a «cursive evolution» (examples in Pichler 2007 : 32). Rounded forms are –just as acute angled ones– only graphic variants of the «normal» forms (*Ibid.*: 45). They appear in every period of the history of the Libyco-Berber script and thus never can be a distinguishing feature. Writing round or square Libyco-Berber letter forms always is a matter of individual choice, most likely depending on the basic material and on the technique of writing : sand or rock, carving or pecking. Thus we can notice a clear predominance of rounded forms at pecked inscriptions in contrast to more angled forms at carved or scratched inscriptions. Because of the reduction of Kerr's corpus, some of his assertions are only valid for the inscriptions on classic steles and not for rock inscriptions : e.g. the assertion that «The highest single concentration of Libyco-Berber epigraphy is in the hinterlands of Hippo» (Kerr 2010 : 53).

Considering that «the abundance of right angles [is] indicative of lapidary script», Kerr concludes that this «points to a more recent and less established script», as if rock inscriptions were not part of his «lapidary script».

According to Kerr «The commencement of this tradition is usually dated to approximately the fifth century AD, i.e. the construction of the Tin Hanan funerary monument at Abalessa.» In fact the wooden coffin found in this monument yielded a date of 254 Cal AD to 782 Cal AD (Camps 1974-a), but a thorough study of the archaeological findings indicate that the deceased buried there and popularly identified with the legendary queen Ti-n-Hinan (not Tin Hanan: cf. Badi 1994 : 201) lived probably during the second half of the fourth century AD (Grébénart 1994 : 270). The important point here is that the date of the burial only indicates the date of the transformation of the monument as a mausoleum. Before that, it was a *tighremt*, whose date of construction remains unknown (Arib 2002). As several of the inscriptions found on the site were cut when the builders prepared the blocks for the construction, these inscriptions must predate the second half of the fourth century AD (Camps 1974-b: 164).

A short critical comment to the classic stele inscriptions cited by Kerr. He cites 29 lines in Libyco-Berber letters but not a single one is identical with the cited source (RIL : Chabot 1940). We know about the difficulty of printing lots of special signs. Anyway, 100 % divergence is a very bad rate. It is but inaccuracy when Kerr often changes ⊢ with ⊥, ||| with ≡, ∿ with ⟨, ⊠ with ∞ or ⌐ with ⌐. It is misleading when he changes ⇐ with ⇒ because this sign usually indicates the direction of writing. It is totally incorrect when he changes | with ⌐, ⊔ with ⊏ or even ⊐ with ⊏ because these signs change their phonetic value by turns of 90° or 180°.

A few examples:
RIL 151 is | ⇒ + +, not — ⇐ + +
RIL 232 is ⊏ · ⊓ ×, not ⊐ · ⊏ ×
RIL 556 is ⊏ ⇒ · ≡, not ⊐ ⇐ · ≡
RIL 378 is ⊏ — ≡ — |||, not ⊐ | |||| | ≡

And how should Kerr's totally damaged version of RIL 378 ever can be read as « Montanus » ? Kerr's statement « Libyco-Berber imitated the Punic scribal practice of the period, but at the same time invented their own letter-forms (possibly from their own artistic tradition) and direction of writing » (Kerr 2010 : 63) must be firmly restricted. What did they really imitate ? Not the letter-forms, not the direction of writing, only the idea of writing and the system of abjad ? — A very shaky argumentation.

In order to follow Kerr's theory, one must deny the existence of rock inscriptions older than Punic times, the strictly geometric structure of the script, the obvious similarity of several characters with Old-Phoenician ones as well as the possible corridor for adaptation (Pichler 2007 : 32). Nobody disputes some Punic influences upon the Libyco-Berber script : the direction of writing in the inscriptions of Dougga, possibly the invention of *matres lectionis*, but these influences appear to be factors of modernisation and not original elements.

Kerr rightly criticize the positions of « those such as Littmann (1904) who saw an ancient North Arabic (esp. Thamudian) acting as the model and deriving tifīnaġ from Greek πίναξ (here *in sensu* "writing-tablet" ~δέλτος) »… but Enno Littman does not mention this greek etymology in his paper (Littmann 1904).

Kerr also mentions « rock art from ca. 11 000 BC » but, although North-African rock art is still not precisely dated, we are not aware of any petroglyph or painting securely attributable to such an old period. He qualifies the argumentation for an indigenous developement of the Libyco-Berber script, as « a sophisticated argumentation », although most of the documents presented to support this old theory are very doubtful (Le Quellec 2011).

Werner PICHLER (†)
& JLLQ

References

ARIB Karim 2002. *Ahaggar, aux origines du patrimoine architectural*. Alger: Dalimen, 101 p.

BADI Dida 1994. «Tin-Hinan: un modèle structural de la société touarègue.» *Études et documents berbères* 12 : 199-205.

BATES Oric 1914. *The eastern Libyans : an essay*. London : Macmillan, 298 p.

CAMPS Gabriel 1974-a. «L'âge du tombeau de Tin Hinan, ancêtre des Touareg du Hoggar.» *Zephyrus* 25 : 497-516.

——— 1974-b. «Recherches sur les plus anciennes inscriptions libyques de l'Afrique du Nord et du Sahara.» *Bulletin archéologique du Comité des Travaux historiques et scientifiques* 10-11 : 143-166.

CHABOT Jean-Baptiste 1940. *Recueil des inscriptions libyques*. Paris : Imprimerie Nationale, xxiii-248 p.

CHAKER Salem 1984. *Textes en linguistique berbère : introduction au domaine berbère*. Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 291 p.

FÉVRIER James-Germain (1959). «Écritures libyques et ibériques.» *In* James-G. Février (Ed.), *Histoire de l'écriture* (pp. 321-332). Paris: Payot.

GRÉBÉNART Danilo 1994. «Le tombeau d'Abalessa (Hoggar, Algérie). Contribution à l'étude du mobilier funéraire.» *Antiquités Africaines* 30 : 261-270.

HALÉVY Joseph 1874. «Essai d'épigraphie libyque.» *Journal Asiatique* 7 (3) : 73-203.

ILIFFE John 1997. *Geschichte Afrikas*. München : Beck, 435 p.

KERR Robert M. 2010. «Some thoughts on the origin of the Libyco-Berber alphabet.» *Études berbères Actes du Bayreuth-Frankfurt-Leiderner Kolloquim zur Berberologie* (Köln): 41-68.

LE QUELLEC Jean-Loïc 2011. «Rock Art, Scripts and Proto-Scripts in Africa : The Libyco-Berber Example.» *In* Nigel Penn & Adrien Delmas [Eds.], *Written Culture in a Colonial Context : 1500-1899.* (p. 3-29). Cape Town: UCT Press.

LITTMANN Enno 1904. «L'origine de l'alphabet libyque.» *Journal Asiatique* 10 (4) : 423-440.

MEINHOF Carl 1931. «Die libyschen Inschriften.» *Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 19 (1) : 1-46.

O'CONNOR M. 1996. «The Berber scripts.» *In* Peter T. Daniels & William Bright [Eds.], *The World's Writing Systems* (pp. 112-119). New York: Oxford University Press.

PICHLER Werner 2007. *Origin and Development of the Libyco-Berber Script*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, Berber Studies, 143 p.

PRASSE Karl-G. 1972. *Manuel de grammaire touarègue (tăhăggart). I-III, phonétique, écriture, pronom.* Copenhague: Édition de l'Université de Copenhague, 274 p.