The South Arabian fonts[*]

Peter Wilson[†]
Herries Press

2005/11/12

Abstract

The sarabian package provides a set of fonts, created by Alan Stanier, and LaTeX files for typesetting the South Arabian alphabet which was used around 600 BC in some of the ancient kingdoms of Southern Arabia.

Contents

1 Introduction

The Phoenician alphabet and characters is a direct ancestor of our modern day Latin alphabet and fonts. The font presented here is one of a series of fonts intended to show how the modern Latin alphabet has evolved from its original Phoenician form to its present day appearance.

This manual is typeset according to the conventions of the LaTeX DOC-STRIP utility which enables the automatic extraction of the LaTeX macro source files [GMS94].

Section 2 describes the usage of the package. Commented code for the fonts is in Sections **??** and **??** and source code for the package is in Section **??**.

1.1 An alphabetic tree

Scholars are reasonably agreed that all the world's alphabets are descended from a Semitic alphabet invented about 1600 BC in the Middle East [Dru95]. The word 'Semitic' refers to the family of languages used in the geographical area from Sinai

---

[*]This file has version number v1.1, last revised 2005/11/12.
[†]`herries dot press at earthlink dot net`

in the south, up the Mediterranean coast to Asia Minor in the north and west to the valley of the Euphrates.

The Phoenician alphabet was stable by about 1100 BC and the script was written right to left. In earlier times the writing direction was variable, and so were the shapes and orientation of the characters. The alphabet consisted of 22 letters and they were named after things. For example, their first two letters were called *aleph* (ox), and *beth* (house). The Phoenician script had only one case — unlike our modern fonts which have both upper- and lower-cases. In modern terms the Phoenician abecedary was:

A B G D E Y Z H Θ I K L M N X O P ts Q R S T

where the 'Y' (*vau*) character was sometimes written as 'F', and 'ts' stands for the *tsade* character.

The Greek alphabet is one of the descendants of the Phoenician alphabet; another was Aramaic which is the ancestor of the Arabic, Persian and Indian scripts. Initially Greek was written right to left but around the 6th C BC became *boustrophedron*, meaning that the lines alternated in direction. At about 500 BC the writing direction stabilised as left to right. The Greeks modified the Phoenician alphabet to match the vocalisation of their language. They kept the Phoenician names of the letters, suitably 'greekified', so *aleph* became the familar *alpha* and *beth* became *beta*. At this point the names of the letters had no meaning. Their were several variants of the Greek character glyphs until they were finally fixed in Athens in 403 BC. The Greeks did not develop a lower-case script until about 600–700 AD.

The Etruscans based their alphabet on the Greek one, and again modified it. However, the Etruscans wrote right to left, so their borrowed characters are mirror images of the original Greek ones. Like the Phoenicians, the Etruscan script consisted of only one case; they died out before ever needing a lower-case script. The Etruscan script was used up until the first century AD, even though the Etruscans themselves had dissapeared by that time.

In turn, the Romans based their alphabet on the Etruscan one, but as they wrote left to right, the characters were again mirrored (although the early Roman inscriptions are boustrophedron).

As the English alphabet is descended from the Roman alphabet it has a pedigree of some three and a half thousand years.

2   The **sarabian** package

The South Arabian alphabet provided by this package is a descendent of the Proto-Siniatic or Proto-Canaanite scripts [Hea90]. It was used for about 1000 years, from roughly 600 BC, in Southern Arabia.

The alphabet consisted of 29 letters, but the ordering has no relationship to either the Semitic alphabets nor our modern day one. Table 1 lists, in South Arabian alphabetic order, the transliterated values of the script. Note that there are many consonontal sounds represented that we no longer use. These are the letters with diacritics.

Table 1: The South Arabian alphabet

Value	ASCII	Command
h	h	\SAh
l	l	\SAl
$ḥ$	H	\SAhd
m	m	\SAm
q	q	\SAq
w	w	\SAw
$š$	S	\SAsv
r	r	\SAr
b	b	\SAb
t	t	\SAt
s	s	\SAs
k	k	\SAk
n	n	\SAn
$ḫ$	I	\SAhu
$ś$	X	\SAsa
f	f	\SAf
$'$	' a	\SArq \SAa
$'$	' o	\SAlq \SAo
$ḍ$	B	\SAdd
g	g	\SAg
d	d	\SAd
$ǵ$	G	\SAga
$ṭ$	T	\SAtd
z	z	\SAz
$ḏ$	D	\SAdb
y	y	\SAy
$ṯ$	J	\SAtb
$ṣ$	x	\SAsd
$ẓ$	Z	\SAzd

The font provided was developed originally by Alan Stanier of Essex University. I have made very minor alterations to make it easier to use with the LaTeX font selection system.

\sarabfamily   This command selects the South Arabian font family. The family name is `sarab`.

\textsarab   The command `\textsarab{`⟨*text*⟩`}` typesets ⟨*text*⟩ in the South Arabian font. I have provided two means of accessing the South Arabian glyphs: (a) by ASCII characters, and (b) via commands. These are shown in Table 1.

\translitsarab   The command `\translitsarab{`⟨*commands*⟩`}` will typeset the transliteration of the South Arabian character commands (those in the third column of Table 1).

\translitsarabfont   The font used for the transliteration is defined by this macro, which is initialised to an italic font (i.e., `\itshape`).

References

[Dav97]   W. V. Davies. *Reading the Past: Egyptian Hieroglyphs.* University of California Press/British Museum, 1997. (ISBN 0-520-06287-6)

[Dru95]   Johanna Drucker. *The Alphabetic Labyrinth.* Thames and Hudson, 1995.

[Fir93]   Richard A. Firmage. *The Alphabet Abecedarium.* David R. Goodine, 1993.

[GMS94]   Michel Goossens, Frank Mittelbach, and Alexander Samarin. *The LaTeX Companion.* Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994.

[Hea90]   John F. Healey. *Reading the Past: The Early Alphabet.* University of California Press/British Museum, 1990. (ISBN 0-520-07309-6)

Index

Numbers written in italic refer to the page where the corresponding entry is described; numbers underlined refer to the code line of the definition; numbers in roman refer to the code lines where the entry is used.