

Alphabets And The Mystery Traditions

The Origins Of Letters In The Earth, The Underworld And The Heavens⁰

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Judith Dillon has a degree in Near Eastern languages and anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley. She is reported to be familiar with many traditions and to have studied the relationships between early alphabets and mystery traditions for more than 40 years prior to publication. It has to be said that she must have been very young when these studies commenced. It would also be of interest to know **which** Near Eastern languages Dillon studied as an undergraduate

There have been few scholarly reviews of Dillon's works. Various positive reviews are cited, but these are provided by the authors of earlier non-mainstream, often 'esoteric' works on the language of 'sacred sounds', mystical interpretations of hieroglyphs, gematria, etc (including Elephas Levi), or else by modern writers qualified in other disciplines but apparently not in linguistics. See for instance:

"Nothing excites me more than the origins and magic of the early alphabets. The alchemy and mystery of language, of vibration, or image from above, below, and around the world contains the story of consciousness. Here is a compendium of magic and mystery. Judith Dillon has made a masterful assemblage of languages, including the heka (or magic) of each language and the power of word vibration. Heavens! What a book!" (Rev. Normandi Ellis, author of *Hieroglyphic Words of Power*)²

And, despite Dillon's academic background, many of her claims, in this as in her other publications, are announced without adequate evidence; they appear speculative in themselves and grounded in often speculative underlying non-linguistic beliefs. Indeed, she sometimes introduces crucial claims with expressions such as 'I believe ...'. Other claims are referenced only to older, often less-than-expert and/or highly controversial sources. (This pattern is not uncommon when a scholar's views shift in a non-mainstream direction.)

Indeed, Dillon's shorter publications¹ are all located in an 'esoteric' framework as applied to ancient thought and language. One striking piece, 'Mythic History Of Ogham'³ involves the Ogam/Ogham script which was mainly used to write Irish Gaelic but which has frequently been identified (dubiously, to say the least) in other cultural contexts in support of hyper-diffusionist historical narratives. In another of her works, 'X Marks The Spot - A Return To The Circle', she 'explores the revival [?] of ancient symbols and connections in mathematics and astronomy, focusing on the significance of the Plus sign and its associations with various cultures including Hebrew, Phoenician, Greek, and Celtic traditions' – which she perceives as 'representing the cyclical nature of life, death, and rebirth, particularly through the lens of the Phoenix mythos and the astronomical phenomena of the Precession of the Equinoxes'. (I may review this latter work in due course. There are also various works by other authors, in a similar vein, which might warrant attention.) In this present work Dillon returns to the speculative interpretation of ancient astronomical ideas and their purported connections with writing systems, particularly as used in calendars (which are admittedly typically associated with observed astronomical patterns.)

Dillon appears concerned to exaggerate the status of the Phoenician and Hebrew consonantal alphabets (abjads), in which she has a particular interest. For example, she states as a fact the highly speculative notion that the Phoenician abjad was a major input to the development of the Brahmi script used in India before the familiar Devanagari script as used to write Sanskrit, Hindi, etc.

In her works on scripts, Dillon very typically foregrounds (often from the outset; often without justificatory preambles) the use or alleged use of scripts in incantations and other aspects of esoteric culture. She actually commences the body of her work with speculation as to the origin of 'our alphabet' (see below) as a (star-guided) calendar of rituals and indeed as a spell. Indeed, one of her main interests is in the ritual significance of alphabetical order. At the very outset of her book she compares "the alphabet" with the Roman Catholic rosary as used in prayer. She proclaims that this use of near-phonemic spelling systems dates back to the 'almost forgotten era of the Earth mothers' – an obviously feminist interpretation of early history, along the lines of controversial authors such as Marija Gimbutas, The archaeological evidence for the existence of such a period - or indeed of alleged later female-dominated societies such as some believe flourished in Bronze Age Mediterranean cultures in Crete and elsewhere - is equivocal; and the period in question here would predate all known writing, alphabetic or other.

Dillon proceeds to relate features of alphabetic writing to words with esoteric significance used to describe representations of earth goddesses. Some of these involve highly speculative etymologies. And of course individual words used in this domain are probably much later in origin than the relevant belief-systems. Some such words, indeed, have established etymologies whose relevance to Dillon's notions is not apparent.

Dillon would have done better to focus first upon what is known or believed about alphabets on the basis of empirical evidence. The extent of her 'mainstream' linguistic and anthropological expertise is unclear. For example, she uses some linguistic terms, e.g. *translation*, idiosyncratically. More specifically, she displays too little systematic awareness of the typology of writing systems - logographies, syllabaries, abugidas, abjads, alphabets - and of what is known about the origins of each such type and their historical inter-connections. It is well established that alphabetic writing developed out of scripts of the other kinds listed here. And the conventional ordering of alphabets clearly owes much to the ordering of the relevant earlier scripts. But Dillon's own derivation of alphabetical order from spells and such is obviously liable to conflict with the known features of these pre-alphabetic scripts, many of them used by peoples with rather different religious and esoteric beliefs.

Dillon does not deal coherently with changes over time in the membership and especially the ordering of alphabets or abjads as learned and recited. For example, some modern versions of the Roman Alphabet have more letters than the version used for English with its 26 letters (e.g. Swedish) or fewer (e.g. Italian); and at one stage G was the third letter of the Roman Alphabet, later to be replaced by C. These considerations are enormously problematic for numerologists (a major factor in the scholarly rejection of numerology as a principle) but they are also potentially damaging for any theory (even if applied mainly to one alphabet) in which the membership and/or the ordering of these sets of symbols are said to be of vast importance.

Indeed, Dillon sometimes speaks of 'THE alphabet' as if all alphabetic and abjad scripts can usefully be regarded as essentially one. Even if, as may well be the case, they all have a common ancestor, thus overstates their later connectedness.

With a non-specialist readership in mind, there seems little point in rehearsing the details of Dillon's letter-specific claims and critiques thereof. Professional linguists will not take this book seriously; there may not be an audience for more extended, more scholarly treatment of Dillon's ideas. Some of the works by other authors, in a similar vein, which I mentioned above, may be of more interest in this respect.

However, I will exemplify with Dillon's comments on one specific letter. Rather than attempting to select a letter in some well-motivated but inevitably contentious way, I choose the first letter, which is of course Roman A (Greek alpha, Hebrew aleph, etc). As for all the letters, Dillon commences with a

list of the corresponding (or putatively corresponding) letters in various non-Roman systems, including Ogham, Runic and Hieroglyphic, and of the letter's claimed significance in Tarot and palmistry. Because A is the first letter, she describes it as 'A Guide At The Gateway'. She goes on to suggest that in combination with the final letter of the version of the alphabet in question this aspect of A leads into 'the world of time' and implies an eventual return home (?). Next she lists the supposed specific meanings of A and associated first letters, with references to ancient sources speculatively interpreted. It must be remembered throughout that in their manifestations as alphabetic letters these symbols are by definition individually meaningless phonological items, no longer possessing even non-esoteric meanings as many of them did in earlier, partly logographic phases (for example, the ancestor of A apparently meant 'ox').

In a somewhat more sophisticated vein, Dillon discusses the shifts in the actual forms of aleph in the Phoenician abjad (the source for the Greek alphabet) and the Hebrew abjad; but again her account of the rationale behind such shifts is speculative, ranging widely through supposedly connected motifs involving astronomy, Tarot, palmistry, calendars and extraneous cultures and languages including China, India, pre-Christian Ireland (Ogham), and Runic. The 'evidence' for these connections is very largely impressionistic and the claims are untested; many appear untestable.

All in all, Dillon's ideas on these matters cannot be taken at face-value. It is likely that most of her ideas are mistaken.

REFERENCES

0 [Alphabets and the Mystery Traditions: The Origins of Letters in the Earth, the Underworld, and the Heavens by Judith Dillon | Goodreads](#)

1 See <https://berkeley.academia.edu/JudithDillon>

2 <https://www.simonandschuster.co.uk/books/Alphabets-and-the-Mystery-Traditions/Judith-Dillon/9781644116654>

3 [\(82\) MYTHIC HISTORY OF OGHAM](#)