

Ludwig D. Morenz

The ‘He’ Tribe from Serabit el Khadim and the Invention of Alphabetic Writing: Can the Subaltern ... Write?

Abstract: Alphabetic writing was originally not just a logocentric *evolution of simplicity* but was also combined with *conspicuous communication*. We can detect various cultural elements characteristic for its place of origin: the mining area of Serabit el Khadim in south-west Sinai around 1900 BCE. In a global perspective, this product of an *evolution of simplicity* turned out to be highly attractive for various users with very different cultural backgrounds. The detachment from its original socio-cultural context in south-west Sinai eventually turned alphabetic writing into more of a technical tool for simply encoding language phonetically, but I am going to focus in my paper on its original socio-cultural context and, thus, the combination of an *evolution of simplicity* with *conspicuous communication*.

Analysing the origin of alphabetic writing in a perspective of an archaeology of media, I focus on the fertility of cross-cultural contacts between Egyptians and Canaanites 4000 years ago. This novel way of writing was originally not just a logocentric *evolution of simplicity* but was also combined with *conspicuous communication* within the sphere of visual culture.¹ This new simplicity in the writing system was combined with explorations of the figurativity (the figurative shape of signs and aspects of layout) of writing,² while we can also detect an iconic motivation in the choice of some specific alphabetic signs. Accordingly, we can detect various cultural elements characteristic of its place of origin: the mining area of Serabit el Khadim in south-west Sinai around 1900 BCE (Figs 1a–b).

1 For the concept of ‘evolution of simplicity’ in archaeology, see Wengrow 2001; and Yoffee 2001. It seems profitable to consider it in the context of an archaeology of media.

2 Morenz 2022, 84–135.



a



b

Fig. 1a–b: Mountainous landscape around Serabit el Khadim; photo Morenz, November 2022.

The genesis of alphabetic writing in the early second millennium BCE can be considered the most significant media development of the Near Eastern Middle Bronze Age.³ What has turned out to be incredibly successful over a period of 4000 years and is used today in all continents of the world might, however, have started simply as a distinctly provincial simplification of the complex Egyptian phono-semantic hieroglyphic writing system. Within a global perspective, this product of an *evolution of simplicity (Occam's razor)*⁴ turned out to be highly attractive for various users with very different cultural backgrounds. The detachment from its specific use in south-west Sinai eventually turned alphabetic writing into more of a technical tool (and medium) for simply encoding language phonetically,⁵ but here I am going to focus on its original socio-cultural context and, thus, the combination of an *evolution of simplicity* with *conspicuous communication*.

In contrast to phono-semantic hieroglyphic writing,⁶ alphabetic writing is structurally new, in the sense that its function is purely phonocentric. It is based on the simple graphonetic equation: one sign represents one sound, nothing more, nothing less.

This new type of writing was developed by Canaanites in south-west Sinai around 1900 BCE. The individual names of the inventors are lost to us, but we can pin down the place of origin with a rather surprising precision: the sacrotope (= sacral domain) of the Egyptian goddess Hathor in the mountainous area of the south-west Sinai. Resuming 'international' economic activities after a break of some decades, Egyptian mining expeditions went to Serabit to bring back turquoise and copper from the early twelfth dynasty onwards.⁷ That process is documented by various hieroglyphic lists containing titles and names of participants⁸ monumentalised on stelae erected in front of the sanctuary of the goddess Hathor (Fig. 2).⁹

3 Herbert Donner called it 'ein Jahrhundertproblem' (Donner 1967, 273).

4 For the term and its history, see Hübener 1983.

5 However, there always remained a figurative dimension in written communication, Vachek 1973; Vachek and Luelsdorf 1989.

6 Schenkel 2003; Vernus 2003; for the various types of signs used in the Egyptian hieroglyphic system, see Polis and Rosmorduc 2015.

7 Inscriptions in Ayn Soukhna prove that Egyptian expeditions for turquoise had already restarted in the eleventh dynasty under Menthu-hotep II (Abd el-Raziq et al. 2002, 40, 41, fig. 10).

8 Seyfried 1981; Tallet 2016–2017.

9 Valbelle and Bonnet 1996, 95, 96.



Fig. 2: Row of twelfth dynasty stelae in front of the sanctuary; photo Morenz, November 2022.

These stelae express a distinct corporate identity shared by these Egyptian expeditions to the mountains of Sinai, and they imply a certain sacralisation in relation to the goddess Hathor beyond traditional levels of decorum seen in contemporary examples from the Nile Valley.¹⁰

South-west Sinai was a rather foreign area to the Egyptians, who generally left the Nile Valley only temporarily and for very specific economic reasons. Thus, a multigraphic graffito of the twelfth dynasty in Rod el Air (Fig. 3) shows the Egyptian Gebu in a scene expressing sacralisation (offering of turquoise ‘bread’¹¹) and dominance (grabbing the horns of the gazelle combined with a hunting scene: dogs).¹²

¹⁰ The concept of decorum was introduced into Egyptology by John Baines, see Baines 1990.

¹¹ Discussion of this Serabitian iconographic motive in Morenz 2019a, 59.

¹² Discussion in Morenz 2019a, 58–59, figs 17 and 18. According to Roland Enmarch (personal communication), this is vaguely reminiscent of Hatnub graffito 52 (Anthes 1928, 78–80), now apparently destroyed, which also seems to juxtapose hunting with sacral (mortuary) activity. The inscription was already badly damaged in the early twentieth century.



Fig. 3: Carved multigraphic graffito of the Egyptian Gebu, Rod el Air (image + inscription of Gebu); drawing by David Sabel.

The Middle Kingdom Egyptians transformed what was not home, something which was completely different from the Nile Valley, into an Egyptianising autotope (domain of Egyptian cultural identity; this is the opposite to a *heterotope* discussed by Michel Foucault and others) through religious conceptualisation and its monumentalisation in visual culture. Thus, the cultural identity of the Egyptian expeditions was enforced by a new and distinct type of *religion of expeditions* focusing on 'Hathor, mistress of turquoise' (*ḥw.t-ḥr nb.t mfkꜣ.t*).¹³ This mining area in south-west Sinai was sacralised particularly by Egyptians building the temple of Hathor (Fig. 4).

This rather intensive building activity, although just a side product of the Egyptian's mining activity, was not only a sacral effort but also an economic one. Egyptian expeditions invested quite an amount of workforce and time in stabilising Egyptian cultural identity in the distant mountains of south-west Sinai. By sacralising the area, the Egyptians culturally transformed a foreign, exotic territory into an Egyptian autotope (i.e. a domain of Egyptian cultural identity).¹⁴

¹³ Morenz 2009.

¹⁴ The archaeological literature on landscape is vast; for an overview, see e.g. Bender 1999; Tilley and Cameron-Daum 2017.



Fig. 4: Temple of Hathor in Serabit; photo Morenz, November 2022.

This Hathoric ‘house of the sistrum’ is the largest Egyptian temple outside the Nile Valley, with a building history spanning nearly 1000 years – providing a kind of sacral monumentality, but one that was a work in progress and open to various additions.¹⁵ In architectural semantics, this temple was conceptualized as a turquoise mine (Fig. 5) from which the goddess ‘Hathor, mistress of turquoise’ appeared precisely as turquoise (*mḥkꜣ.t*).¹⁶ This new Egyptian expedition theology of ‘Hathor, mistress of turquoise’ was specifically designed for the socio-economic situation of the Egyptian expeditions to south-west Sinai.

Compared with the Early Dynastic period or the Old Kingdom, we can detect a remarkable paradigm shift in Egyptian perceptions and depictions of the Canaanites in south-west Sinai, indicating a completely different scenario of socio-cultural interaction.¹⁷ Egyptian monumental representation shifted from the iconic scene of *Smiting the Enemy* to cooperation based on intercultural contacts and contracts during the Middle Kingdom (Fig. 6).¹⁸

¹⁵ An overview is provided by Valbelle and Bonnet 1996.

¹⁶ Morenz 2014, 84–140.

¹⁷ Morenz 2011, 75–78.

¹⁸ Morenz 2019a, 121–123, 207–215, 249–263, 268–269.

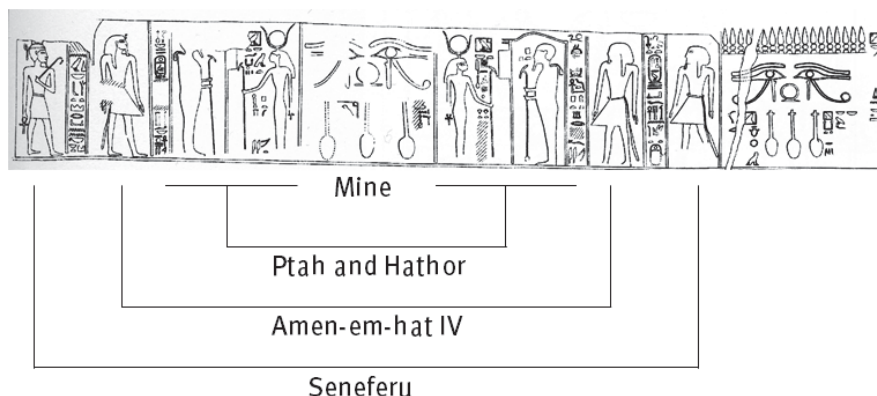


Fig. 5: Relief S 124 showing the Serabitan theology of turquoise.

Changes in the relationship Egyptians-Canaanites

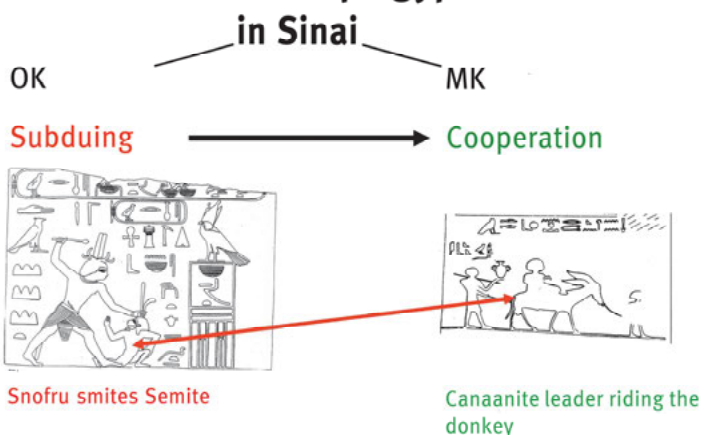


Fig. 6: From subjugation to cooperation, changes in Egyptian depictions of Canaanites in Serabit.

Within this context of a changing political iconography, Canaanite leaders, such as the 'brother of the ruler of Retjenu Khabi-dadum'¹⁹ (Fig. 7), are shown riding the donkey.

¹⁹ Černý 1935.

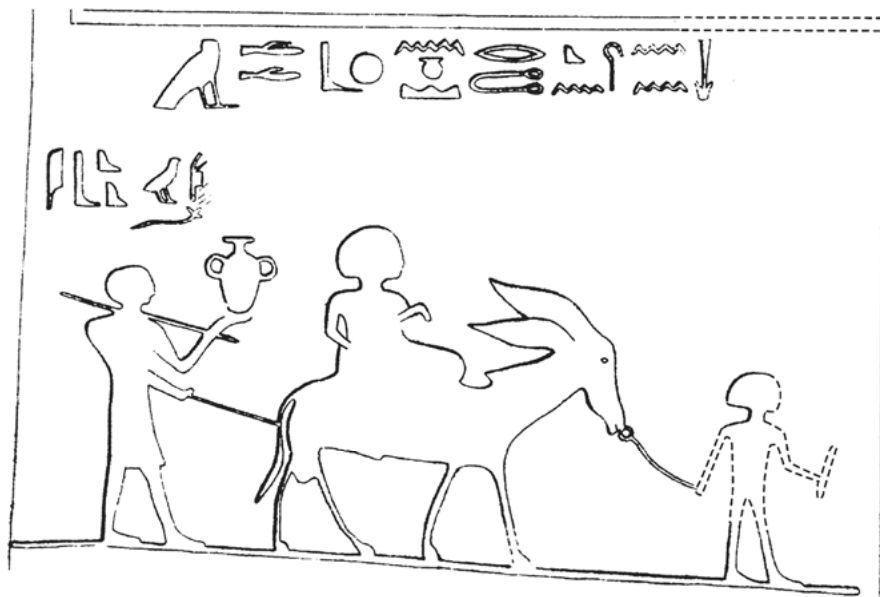


Fig. 7: Khabi-dadum; lower part from the stela S 112; adopted from the drawing IS, vol. 1, pl. XXXVII.

Within a Canaanite and more broadly West-Semitic context, this iconography of riding the donkey implies high social status, specifically respected and honoured by the Egyptians,²⁰ and points to a scenario of cooperation based on contracts.²¹

Furthermore, the cooperation between the Egyptians and the Canaanites generated intercultural equations of gods, and that is, indeed, a remarkable product of cross-cultural interaction during the early second millennium.²² These Canaanites living in south-west Sinai equated their god El with the Egyptian god Ptah.²³ A rock stela on the *Canaanite* mine L in the area of Serabit²⁴ depicts El in the Egyptian iconography of Ptah, while the alphabetic inscription labels him as El (S 351, Fig. 8).

²⁰ Morenz 2019a, 60–62.

²¹ For inscriptions reflecting ‘contracts’, see Morenz 2019a, 248–263.

²² Morenz 2019a.

²³ Morenz 2023.

²⁴ This mine is numbered as L = XIII. Here, we find various Canaanite alphabetic inscriptions but no Egyptian ones. So, it seems likely that Canaanites worked here probably alone.



Fig. 9: Fragmentary rock stela S 355; drawing by David Sabel.

The image implies a remarkable knowledge of the Egyptian iconography of the god Ptah, while stylistic analysis shows some rather non-Egyptian features. The figure of the god was probably drawn from memory since there was no Egyptian representation of Ptah visible at mine L or in its vicinity. Thus, the iconography in Canaanite practice on this stela indicates a remarkably high degree of famili-

arity with Egyptian visual culture by this anonymous Canaanite scribe, and that holds true for the Hathoric face on stela S 355 (Fig. 9) too.²⁵

We can detect two Egypto-Canaanite equations of gods with the Egyptian god Ptah related to Canaanite El and the Egyptian Hathor related to Canaanite Ba'alat. Religion mattered. Such an intercultural sacral equation concerned the core of cultural identity. It implies significant dynamics in culture. However, these equations seem to have been of relevance only for the Canaanites, while the Egyptians seem to have paid no attention. Imagery and writing on this rock stela at the entrance to the *Canaanite* mine L appears as a fascinating cultural hybrid in-between the Old Canaanite and the Egyptian culture in south-west Sinai. These Canaanites adopted Egyptian prototypes quite closely, but in order to express their own cultural identity.


The equation of the Canaanite goddess Ba'alat with the Egyptian Hathor was of particularly high importance for the relations between the Egyptians and the Canaanites during the Middle Kingdom (respectively the Middle Bronze Age in Levantine terminology) in Serabit. Thus, the bilingual sphinx from the temple of Hathor (Figs 10a–b) mentions in Egyptian hieroglyphs 'Hathor, mistress of turquoise' (*ḥw.t-ḥr nb.t mfkꜣ.t*), while the Canaanite alphabetic inscriptions refer to Ba'alat.



Fig. 10: Canaanised sphinx S 345, BM EA 41748; photos David Sabel.

²⁵ Morenz 2021, 61–62. Here, we can interpret the two signs below the Hathoric head as alphabetic letters *pe* + *naḥaš* reading *pn* – ‘face’ – which stands in close intermedial correspondence with the Hathoric face depicted.

We can assume the Egyptian universe of media and especially its visual culture – hieroglyphic writing and images²⁶ – to have been highly attractive for the Middle Bronze Age Canaanites, who lacked such sophisticated graphic tools of *high culture*. This might be particularly true for the Bedouins in south-west Sinai, in contrast to the Middle Bronze Age Levantine city states, where various images were created²⁷ and some examples are known of the use of hieroglyphic and hieratic writing.²⁸ That attraction of Egyptian media-technology and the Egypto-Canaanite process of equating gods,²⁹ and especially the combination of both, triggered the genesis of alphabetic writing in south-west Sinai around 1900 BCE.

Based on less than thirty letters, alphabetic writing is an enormous simplification of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing. This functional simplification does not mean writing straightforwardly turned into a *cold*³⁰ media-technology, but that it also generated and expressed cultural identity. The origin of alphabetic writing in the Hathoric sacrotope of Serabit el Khadim left its distinct cultural impression in the letter *alef* –  , a cow head – which implies a reference to the Egypto-Canaanite goddess Hathor-Ba'alat who was shown in various temple reliefs and on stelae or at the entrance of mines in the typical Egyptian iconography with the horns of a cow.³¹ Thus, the first letter of Canaanite alphabetic writing in its original cultural context shows a strong sacral imprint with a distinct reference to the Egypto-Canaanite goddess Hathor-Ba'alat.

The figurativity of some signs and especially the *alef* mattered for the Canaanite inventors and early users of alphabetic writing in the Serabit area around 1900 BCE. Not only the letters but sometimes even the layout of this early alphabetic writing generated meaning and fostered conspicuous communication. The early alphabetic dichotomy of the purely phonographic usage of letters versus figurative encoding of meaning might seem counterintuitive, but it clearly demonstrates the origin of alphabetic writing not to have been just an economic simplification. We can detect two different trends by contextualization, economic simplification and semiotic encoding of meaning. Indeed, we find not an administrative but a distinctly sacral and commemorative usage of early alphabetic writing.

²⁶ Baines 2007.

²⁷ For an overview, see Keel and Uehlinger 2010.

²⁸ Na'aman 2020.

²⁹ Morenz 2019b; for further reading, see Assmann 1996.

³⁰ For the dichotomy *cold* versus *hot* cultures, cf. Lévi-Strauss 1964.

³¹ Morenz 2019b; for the cow head representing esp. the letter *alef*, see Wimmer 2022.

The scribe's interest in expressing cultural meaning had an impact on the layout of these early alphabetic inscriptions. This led to the earliest *carmina figurata*: a highly figurative textual format we know neither from Egyptian hieroglyphs nor Mesopotamian cuneiform, at least not *stricto sensu*.³² The layout of rock inscription S 358 inside mine L, for instance, is formatted into the shape of a cow's head (Fig. 11), which is, thus, reminiscent of the letter *alef* and the Egypto-Canaanite goddess Hathor-Ba'alat.³³

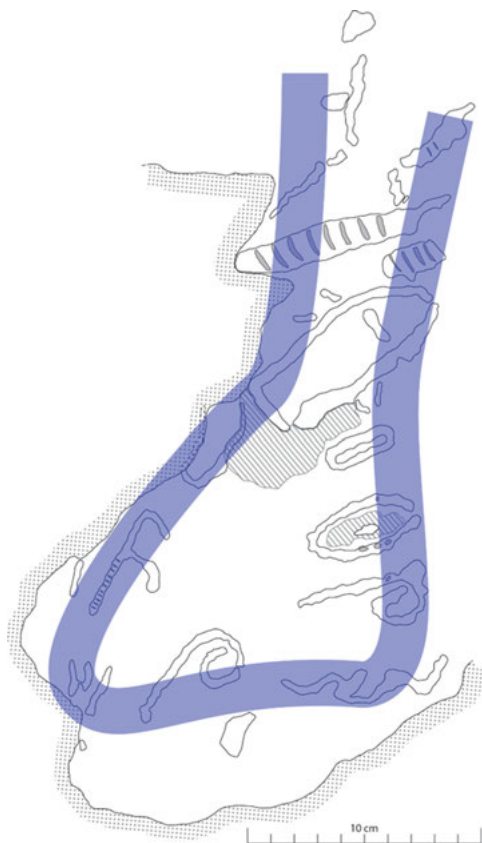


Fig. 11: Alphabetic inscription S 358; drawing by David Sabel.

³² Morenz 2008.

³³ Discussion in Morenz 2022, 48–49. Here, a discussion of the inscription S 377 and its layout in the shape of a cow's head is included.

We find further examples of this sacral poetics generating supplementary meaning to the plain text (especially inscriptions S 345 and S 365) among the early alphabetic inscriptions.³⁴ We can describe these early Canaanite scribes using alphabetic writing more as *priests* or *poets* than as *merchants*, but these terms are deliberate oversimplifications. These *carmina figurata* are intellectual products of graphic poetry, and they seem to have a distinct affinity to alphabetic writing, probably because the figurative and iconic potential of signs is somehow far too prominent in the hieroglyphic or the cuneiform scripts to allow this other type of figurativity concentrating on the layout.³⁵

In their original context of Serabit el Khadim, some of these early alphabetic letters incorporate and express various facets of cultural identity. This figurative motivation works not only for the *alef* and its reference to the Egypto-Canaanite goddess Hathor-Ba'alat but also, among others, for the letter *resh*. Acrophonically derived from the common Semitic word *rash/resh*, the consonant *r* (+ an indistinct vowel)³⁶ is represented by the image of a human head.³⁷ There is nothing special about a head, one might think, but our new epigraphic recording show it is rewarding to look at the hairstyle. Some of the early *resh* signs from the Old Canaanite inscriptions in Serabit show a mushroom-shaped head (Figs 12a–c).³⁸

The Egyptian depiction of a Canaanite man from Maghara (S 24A) also shows a mushroom-shaped head (Figs 13a–b). Furthermore, he holds an *ʿm* stick in his hand. Taken not just as an object but as a hieroglyph, he is, thus, characterised as an *ʿm* Asiatic.³⁹

³⁴ Discussion in Morenz 2022, 86–108, 117–135.

³⁵ An inscription of Gudea of Lagash (third millennium) compares the cuneiform signs on a tablet with the stars in the sky. This metaphor implies visual-poetic thinking and we know various examples of poetic elements in cuneiform writing (Cancik-Kirschbaum and Kahl 2017, 322–329) and Egyptian hieroglyphs (Morenz 2008).

³⁶ These vowels might have been clear to the native speakers or have been learned in an oral tradition combined with the written text. Thus, a specific Samaritan tradition of reading is quite well-known for the Hebrew Bible; Schorch 2004. Furthermore, we know of early attempts for encoding vowels, as in the Ugaritic cuneiform alphabet; Loretz 1998.

³⁷ Hamilton 2006, 221–230.

³⁸ For a more detailed discussion, see Morenz 2021, 98–102.

³⁹ Morenz 2021, 98.

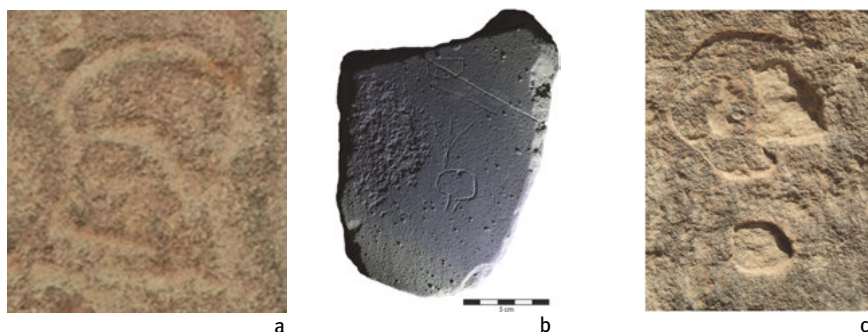


Fig. 12a–c: Early forms of the letter *resh* from inscriptions S 349 (a), 364 (b) and 385 (c); photos by David Sabel.



Fig. 13a–b: Depiction of a Canaanite man from Maghara (rock inscription S 24A; from IS, vol. 1, pl. XI).

In Middle Bronze Age iconography, the mushroom-shaped head is a rather distinct iconographic marker of the Canaanite elite, which we know from various pictorial representations including monumental statues from Tell el-Dab'a in the eastern delta of the Nile.⁴⁰ This conspicuous hairstyle is an iconographic marker representing elite-status in the Middle Bronze Age Levantine context.⁴¹ Therefore, the distinctly mushroom-shaped head in the sign of the letter *resh* follows Levantine elite iconography of the Middle Bronze Age with people such as Khabi-dadum mentioned earlier.

⁴⁰ Arnold 2010.

⁴¹ For an overview, see Burke 2013.

I have spoken so far more generally about Canaanites in the area of Middle Kingdom Serabit, but it seems worthwhile to distinguish between those Levantines coming from afar to cooperate with the Egyptians, such as Khabi-dadum and his people, on the one hand, and more or less local Bedouins, on the other hand. The following discussion is an attempt at media-archaeological rediscovery of the local Canaanite ‘He’ tribe of the early second millennium BCE.⁴² In recovering this ‘lost tribe’, we can use Egyptian and Canaanite sources from the nineteenth century BCE. The Egyptian material consists of pictorial and written material and allows us to distinguish between local Sinaitic Canaanites and Levantine Canaanites in Middle Kingdom Serabit. Thus, the lower part of the Egyptian Middle Kingdom stela S 87 from the temple of Hathor shows a row of Canaanites also iconographically differentiated by dress and hairstyle (Fig. 14).

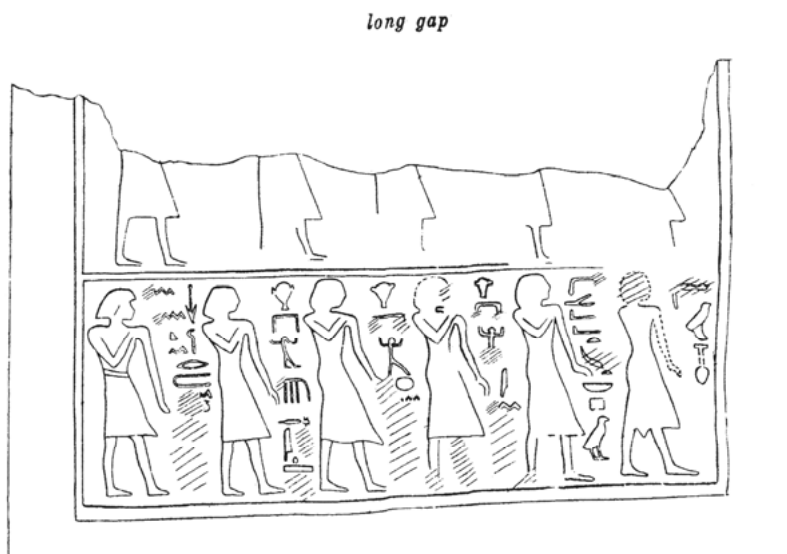











Fig. 14: Middle Kingdom stela S 87, lower part.

The last man bears the title ‘brother of the ruler of Retjenu’ and we might even consider reconstructing the name Khabi-dadum for the damaged part. Similar to the forms of the *resh* sign, he is characterised by his mushroom-shaped head. Each of the three men standing before this ‘brother of the ruler of Retjenu’ is

⁴² More extensive discussion in Morenz 2021, 31–43.

called *hrj pr* + semogram STANDING MAN WITH RAISED ARMS. Here and in various other inscriptions from Serabit, this title refers to the local Bedouins.⁴³ Hence this stela shows local Canaanites (among them a man with the Egyptian name Khenti-khety-hetep) and a Levantine side by side. The same individual *hrj pr* + semogram STANDING MAN WITH RAISED ARMS with the Egyptian name Khenti-khety-hetep is also shown on stela S 90⁴⁴. Therefore, we can assume him to have been a leader of the local Sinaitic Bedouins with whom the Egyptian expeditions were in regular contact.

The Egyptian hieroglyph  is used in these inscriptions as a semogram to designate the local Serabitian tribe 'the highlanders'. More specific information is provided by the stela S 114, similar to S 87, also from the time of King Amenemhet III (Figs 15a–b). This hieroglyphic inscription mentions two *hrj pr* + semogram STANDING MAN WITH RAISED ARMS and the lower part provides additional information. That microtext is formatted in imitation of an administrative list.⁴⁵ Two different local tribes are distinguished graphically in the second column, the  versus the . The specific meaning of the distinction between the two forms STANDING MAN WITH RAISED ARMS versus KNEELING MAN is hard to pin down precisely. The hieroglyphic form  resembles the hieroglyph *sign-list A 7* () and this hieroglyph is used to determine words referring to weakness, subduing or settling down (*wrd*, *bꜥꜥj*, *nnj*, *hs*, *srf*). Thus, we can think of a designation as either 'weak ones', 'subdued ones' or 'the ones who settled down', in the sense of locals. From its context and its use in parallel to  – 'the highlanders' – I would opt for locals living in the lower areas of south-west Sinai, but this specific guess remains highly speculative.

The Egyptian hieroglyph  designating the local tribe of Serabit was adopted into alphabetic writing⁴⁶ as  /  and here, it encodes the sound *h* (+ *unmarked vowel*). Within the set of alphabetic letters, the *he* is the single sign depicting a full human figure.⁴⁷ In parallel to the symbolic significance of letters such as the *alef* or the *resh*, we can assume that the letter *he* also implied symbolic significance in the socio-cultural context of Middle Kingdom / Middle Bronze Serabit. It seems to indicate a reference to the local Canaanite tribe in south-west Sinai around 1900 BCE.

⁴³ Morenz 2021, 35.

⁴⁴ Morenz 2021, 33, figs 4 and 5.

⁴⁵ Eyre 2013, 5–13, 43–47.

⁴⁶ Already suggested in IS, vol. 2, 67, n. 1, furthermore: Goldwasser 2006, 137–138; most recent discussion in Morenz 2021, 31–43.

⁴⁷ Most recent discussion of the inventory of alphabetic letters in Morenz 2019a, 87–90.

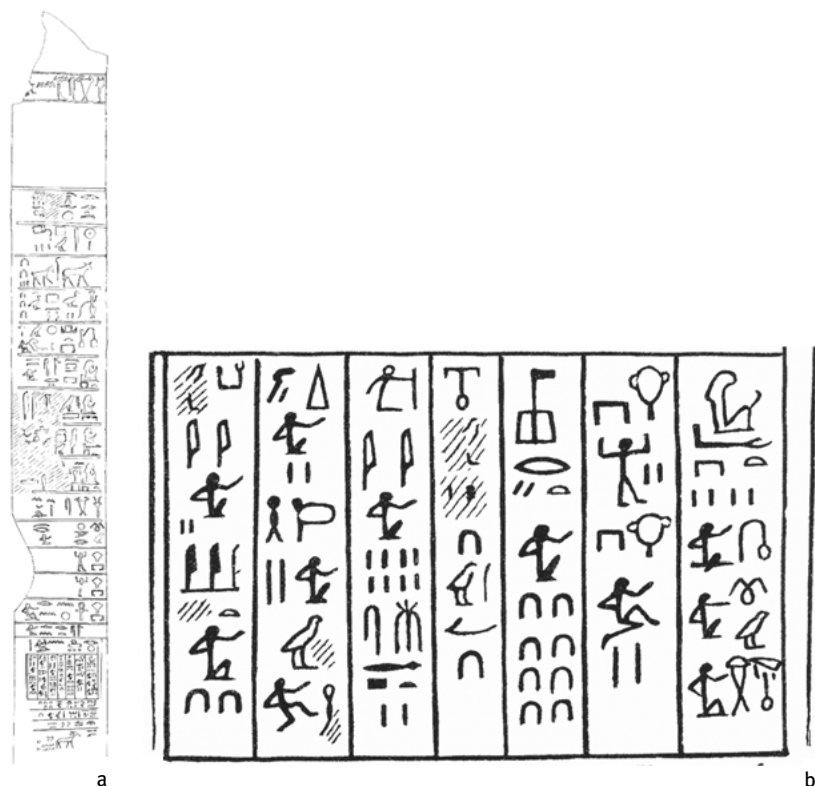


Fig. 15a–b: Stela S 114, south edge; drawing from IS, vol. 2, pl. XXXVIII and XXXVI (a); part of Middle Kingdom stela S 114 (b).

Let us now look at the Egyptian hieroglyphic stela S 100 from the time of King Amenemhet III. It was erected in front of the sanctuary of Hathor. In the lower part, we can recognise a kneeling figure, and below it, is another sign which is much smaller and closely resembles the Canaanite letter *he* (Fig. 16). A Canaanite leader and his followers are depicted on some other Middle Kingdom stelae in Serabit, such as S 112. We can expect a structural analogy, but while the person riding the donkey on the stela S 112 is a Levantine, the kneeling person on the stela S 100 represents a local Canaanite.

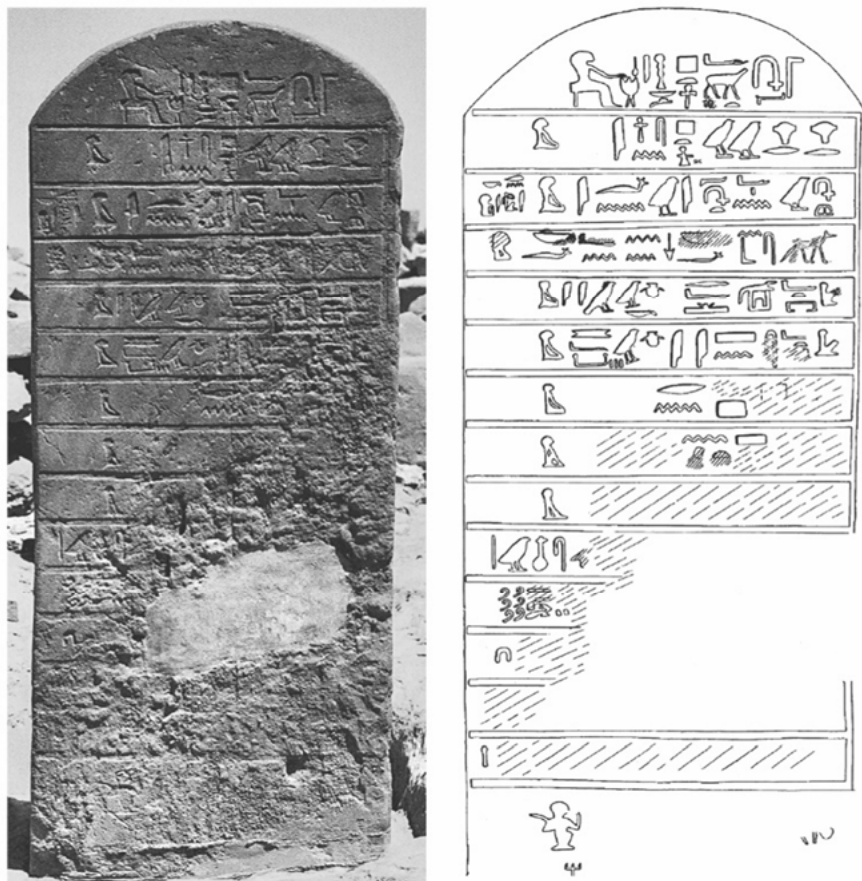



Fig. 16: Middle Kingdom stela S 100, lowest part; photo Morenz, November 2022.

Looking at the layout of the stela, we can imagine a reference to a contract ceremony between the Egyptian expedition and the local Canaanites, represented by the kneeling man. This cross-cultural contact is expressed by the relation of the Egyptian leader of the expedition on top of the stela and the Canaanite representative of the He tribe at the bottom.⁴⁸ The small sign below the kneeling figure can be identified as the form of the letter *he*. Furthermore, it closely resembles the Egyptian hieroglyph , designating the local Canaanite tribe from

⁴⁸ Discussion of the evidence and plausibility of contracts between the Egyptians and the Canaanites in Middle Kingdom Serabit: Morenz 2019a, 121–123, 207–215, 248–263, 267–269.

Serabit. However, it depicts the seated and not the standing man and, therefore, we can prefer an understanding as the Canaanite letter *he*. It certainly looks like an alphabetic letter. It is not used here as alphabetic writing proper but more in the sense of a semogram or an icon. This sign specifies the depiction above it and refers to the local tribe in the area of Serabit.

Similar to the goddess Ba'alat in the letter *alef* and the Levantine elite in the letter *resh*, the local Bedouin tribe of the Serabit area is represented in the letter *he* 𐤅 / 𐤆. Alphabetic writing in Serabit was full of cultural meaning in origin and that strong symbolism combined with the purely phonographic usage was specifically expressed by letters such as *alef*, *he* or *resh*. The Canaanites who created this new writing system inscribed themselves into it and that symbolic presence in the alphabet seems highly remarkable.

Against traditional assumptions, these Canaanites are better visible in the sources and they were internally more differentiated. We should consider them not just as 'slaves or uneducated workers' but people deliberately cooperating with the Egyptian expeditions following their own agenda, exploring agency in the cross-cultural contact and, in doing so, created a writing system from which we still benefit today.

Acknowledgements

Graphics and photographs were provided by the Bonn Mission to Serabit, mostly by our epigraphist David Sabel. I am grateful to Roland Enmarch (University of Liverpool) for his comments on an earlier draft. Starting in 2011, our Bonn Egyptological team has managed to record anew the early alphabetic inscriptions in south-west Sinai and the Nile Valley.⁴⁹ This essay expands on the presentation of material and ideas in Morenz 2019a and 2021.

Abbreviation

IS = Alan Gardiner and Thomas Peet, *The Inscriptions of Sinai*, 2nd edn [revised and augmented by Jaroslav Černý], 2 vols (Mémorial of the Egypt Exploration Society, 36, 45), London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1952, 1955.

⁴⁹ Morenz 2019a.

References

- Abd el-Raziq, Mahmud, Georges Castel, Pierre Tallet and Victor Ghica (eds) (2002), *Les inscriptions d'Ayn Soukhna* (Mémoires / Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 122), Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale.
- Anthes, Rudolf (1928), *Die Felseninschriften von Hatnub: nach den Aufnahmen Georg Möllers* (Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Altertumskunde Aegyptens, 9), Leipzig: Heinrichs.
- Arnold, Dorothea (2010), 'Image and Identity: Egypt's Eastern Neighbours, East Delta People and the Hyksos', *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta*, 192: 183–221.
- Assmann, Jan (1996), 'Translating Gods: Religion as a Factor of Cultural (Un)Translatability', in Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (eds), *The Translatability of Cultures: Figurations of the Space Between*, Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 25–36.
- Baines, John (1990), 'Restricted Knowledge, Hierarchy and Decorum', *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, 27: 1–23.
- Baines, John (2007), *Visual and Written Culture in Ancient Egypt*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bender, Barbara (1999), 'Subverting the Western Gaze: Mapping Alternative Worlds', in Robert Layton and Peter Ucko (eds), *The Archaeology and Anthropology of Landscape: Shaping Your Landscape*, London: Allen & Unwin.
- Burke, Aaron A. (2013), 'Introduction to the Levant During the Middle Bronze Age', in Ann E Killbrew and Margreet Steiner (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant: c. 8000–332 BCE*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 402–413.
- Cancik-Kirschbaum, Eva-Christiane and Jochem Kahl (eds) (2017), *Erste Philologien: Archäologie einer Disziplin vom Tigris bis zum Nil*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Černý, Jaroslav (1935), 'Semites in Egyptian Mining Expeditions to Sinai', *Archív Orientální*, 7/3: 384–389.
- Donner, Herbert (1967), 'Recension of: William Foxwell Albright (ed.), *The Protosinaitic Inscriptions and their decipherment*, London: Oxford University Press, 1966', *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 12/2: 273–281.
- Eyre, Christopher (2013), *The Use of Documents in Pharaonic Egypt* (Oxford Studies in Ancient Documents), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goldwasser, Orly (2006), 'Canaanites Reading Hieroglyphs: Horus is Hathor? — The Invention of the Alphabet in Sinai', *Ägypten und Levante*, 16: 121–160.
- Hamilton, Gordon James (2006), *The Origin of the West Semitic Alphabet in Egyptian scripts*, Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America.
- Hübener, Wolfgang (1983), 'Occam's Razor Not Mysterious', *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, 27: 73–92.
- Keel, Othmar and Christoph Uehlinger (2010), *Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole: Neue Erkenntnisse zur Religionsgeschichte Kanaans und Israels aufgrund bislang unerschlossener ikonographischer Quellen*, 5th edn, Fribourg: Bibel / Orient Museum [1st edn 1992].
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1964), *Mythologiques I: Le cru et le cuit*, Paris: Plon.
- Loretz, Oswald (1998), 'Die prägriechische Vokalisierung des Alphabets in Ugarit', in *Die Geschichte der hellenischen Sprache und Schrift vom 2. zum 1. Jahrtausend vor Chr.: Kontinuität oder Bruch?*, Altenburg: DZA Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 387–405.
- Morenz, Ludwig D. (2008), *Sinn und Spiel der Zeichen: Visuelle Poesie im Alten Ägypten* (Pictura et Poesis, 21), Cologne: Böhlau.

- Morenz, Ludwig D. (2009), 'Der Türkis und seine Herrin. Die Schöpfung einer besonderen Expeditionsreligion im Mittleren Reich', *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur*, 38: 195–209.
- Morenz, Ludwig D. (2011), *Die Genese der Alphabetschrift: Ein Markstein ägyptisch-kanaanäischer Kulturkontakte* (Wahrnehmungen und Spuren Altägyptens, 3), Würzburg: Ergon.
- Morenz, Ludwig D. (2014), *Das Hochplateau von Serabit el-Chadim: Landschaftsarchäologie und Kulturpoetik* (Studia Sinaitica, 1), Berlin: EB-Verlag.
- Morenz, Ludwig D. (2019a), *Sinai und Alphabetschrift: Die frühesten Inschriften und ihr kanaanäisch-ägyptischer Entstehungshorizont im Zweiten Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (Studia Sinaitica, 3), Berlin: EB-Verlag.
- Morenz, Ludwig D. (2019b), *Ein Trigger für „unsere“ Alphabetschrift: Die kanaanäisch-ägyptischen Göttergleichungen El-Ptah und Ba'alat-Hathor*, Berlin: EB-Verlag.
- Morenz, Ludwig D. (2021), *Mediensarchäologische Sondagen zum Ursprung „unseres“ Alphabets vor 4000 Jahren: Auf den Spuren des sinaitischen „He-Stammes“, der levantinischen Kanaanäer und der Ägypter im SW-Sinai des Mittleren Reiches* (Studia Sinaitica, 4), Berlin: EB-Verlag.
- Morenz, Ludwig D. (2022), *Kultur-Poetik in der Mittelbronzezeit: Aspekte der frühesten Alphabetschrift im kulturellen Schnittfeld Ägypter-Kanaanäer* (Studia Sinaitica, 5), Berlin: EB-Verlag.
- Morenz, Ludwig D. (2023), *GOTT – Zum Ursprung von El im mittelbronzezeitlichen Serabit el Chadim* (Hans-Bonnet-Studien zur Ägyptischen Religion, 1), Berlin: EB-Verlag.
- Na'aman, Nadav (2020), 'Egyptian Centres and the Distribution of the Alphabet in the Levant', *Tel Aviv: Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University*, 47/1: 29–54.
- Polis, Stéphane and Serge Rosmorduc (2015), 'The Hieroglyphic Sign Functions. Suggestions for an Revised Taxonomy', in Hans Amstutz, Andreas Dorn, Matthias Müller, Miriam Ronsdorf and Sami Uljas (eds), *Fuzzy Boundaries: Festschrift für Antonio Loprieno*, vol. 1, Hamburg: Widmaier, 149–174.
- Schenkel, Wolfgang (2003), *Die hieroglyphische Schriftlehre und die Realität der hieroglyphischen Graphien* (Sitzungsberichte der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Philologisch-Historische Klasse, 138/5), Leipzig: Verlag der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Schorch, Stefan (2004), *Die Vokale des Gesetzes: Die samaritanische Lesetradition als Textzeugin der Tora*, PhD Thesis, Kirchliche Hochschule Bethel.
- Seyfried, Karl-Joachim (1981), *Beiträge zu den Expeditionen des Mittleren Reiches in die Ostwüste* (Hildesheimer Ägyptologische Beiträge, 15), Hildesheim: Gerstenberg.
- Tallet, Pierre (2016–2017), 'D'Ayn Soukna à la péninsule du Sinaï: le mode opératoire des expéditions égyptiennes à la fin de la XIIe dynastie', *Cahiers de Recherche de l'Institut de Papyrologie et d'Égyptologie de Lille*, 31: 179–198.
- Tilley, Christopher and Kate Cameron-Daum (2017), *An Anthropology of Landscape: The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*, London: UCL Press.
- Vachek, Josef (1973), *Written Language: General Problems and Problems of English*, The Hague: Mouton.
- Vachek, Josef and Philip Allan Luelsdorf (eds) (1989), *Written Language Revisited*, Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Valbelle, Dominique and Charles Bonnet (1996), *Le sanctuaire d'Hathor, maîtresse de la turquoise: Sérabit El-Khadim au Moyen-Empire*, Paris: Picard.

- Vernus, Pascal (2003), 'Idéogramme et phonogramme à l'épreuve de la figurativité: les intermittences de l'homophonie', in Carla Bazzanella and Lucia Morra (eds), *Philosophers and Hieroglyphs*, Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier.
- Wengrow, David (2001), 'The Evolution of Simplicity: Aesthetic Labour and Social Change in the Neolithic Near East', *World Archaeology*, 33/2: 168–188.
- Wimmer, Stefan Jakob (2022), 'Warum Alef?', in Ludwig David Morenz (ed.), *Kultur-Poetik in der Mittelbronzezeit: Aspekte der frühesten Alphabetschrift im kulturellen Schnittfeld Ägypter-Kanaanäer*, Berlin: EB-Verlag, 109–116.
- Yoffee, Norman (2001), 'The Evolution of Simplicity. Recension of: James C. Scott (ed.), *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998', *Current Anthropology*, 42/5: 765–767.

