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# Can the Subaltern . . . Write? Rediscovering the “He”-tribe from Serabit el Khadim and the Invention of Alphabetic Writing 4000 years ago

When we leave our modern Post-Babel<sup>1</sup> behind, even the humanities gradually turn monoglot. This postmodern *evolution of simplicity* might seem inevitable, and on balance, it promises more gains than losses. In this paper I am going to discuss the origin of alphabetic writing – a great simplification of graphic communication we still benefit from today. This process happened in the cultural periphery of South-Western Sinai within a sphere of cross-cultural contacts, and here we'll pay special attention to socio-economic aspects in an early *evolution of simplicity*. Thus, my specific question will be: Can the “subaltern” (not only speak but) write?

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1 While in Biblical tradition the mythological motive of a Babylonian language confusion is considered disastrous (esp. Genesis 11:1–9; Christoph Uehlinger, *Weltreich und “eine Rede”: Eine neue Deutung der sogenannten Turmbauerkündigung (Genesis 11, 1–9)* [Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg, 1990], see also Christoph Uehlinger, “Babel, Pflingsten – und Rassentheorien: religiöse Bewertungen von Sprachenvielfalt und ihre Nachwirkungen,” in *Sprache(n) verstehen*, eds. Elvira Glaser, Agnes Kolmer, Martin Meyer, and Elisabeth Stark [Zurich: vdf Hochschulverlag, 2014]: 151–78), others point to the benefits of variety in languages, e.g., Georg Steiner, *After Babel*, 3rd ed. (1975; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). The motive of separation of languages can be traced back in Egypt to the time of Pharaoh Amen-hotep III (Jaroslav Černý, “Thot as Creator of Languages,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 34 [1948]: 121–22; Serge Sauneron, “La Différenciation des Langues d’après la Tradition Égyptienne,” *Le Bulletin de l’Institut français d’Archéologie Orientale* 60 [1960]: 31–41), probably reflecting the inter-nationalization in this period; see e.g., Raymond Cohen and Raymond Westbrook, eds., *Amarna Diplomacy: The Beginnings of International Relations* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). In Ancient Mesopotamia the tradition of this mythological motive is older, more complex, and probably original (Manfred Krebern timer, “Zur Entwicklung des Sprachbewusstseins im Alten Orient,” in *Das geistige Erfassen der Welt im Alten Orient*, ed. Claus Wilcke [Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007]: 39–61; Catherine Mittermayer, *Enmer-kara und der Herr von Arata: Ein ungleicher Wettstreit* [Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg, 2009]). It corresponds with a rather polyglot environment (Sumerian, Akkadian, various other Semitic languages, and Elamite as well as Hurritic, while during the second millennium Indo-European Hittite and other languages also became relevant) from the fourth millennium onwards (Pascal Attinger and Markus Wäfler, eds., *Mesopotamien. Späturuk-Zeit und Frühdynastische Zeit*, vol. 1, *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 160 [Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg, 1998]).

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**Note:** Graphics and photographs by the Bonn Mission to Serabit, mostly by our epigraphist David Sabel. I am grateful to Roland Enmarch (University of Liverpool) for comments on an earlier draft.

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In this paper, I employ some new terms like “sacrotope”, with a meaning I consider self-evident. For clarity, however, the term sacrotope designates a sacral domain. In our context, it refers to the plateau of Serabit el Khadim, which was culturally formed as the sacral area of the Egyptian gods Hathor and Ptah and their Canaanite counterparts Baʿalat and El. Within this interdisciplinary context, I avoid discussing chronological issues. For general understanding, it might be sufficient to state that the Egyptological term “Middle Kingdom” roughly equals the Near Eastern “middle bronze age”. We are dealing with the first half of the second millennium BCE which might be considered a beginning of a modernity, at least from a perspective of an archaeology of media.

Analyzing the origin of alphabetic writing from a perspective of an archaeology of media and an archaeology of mentality, I focus on the fertility of cross-cultural contacts between Egyptians and Canaanites 4.000 years ago. Contrary to expectation, this new 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.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, 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 (Fig. 1a–d).



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Fig. 1a–d: Mountainous landscape around Serabit el Khadim.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig David Morenz, *Kultur-Poetik in der Mittelbronzezeit. Aspekte der frühesten Alphabetschrift im kulturellen Schnittfeld Ägypter-Kanaanäer*, Studia Sinaitica 5 (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2022).



Since it started in 2011, our Bonn Egyptological team has managed to record all the early alphabetic inscriptions in South-West Sinai and the Nile Valley anew.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> It eventually brought sociocultural benefits highly relevant even today in our modern world: East and West, North and South.<sup>5</sup> The connection between the ancient and modern worlds is shown here in a highly simplified graph concentrated on the letter Semitic Alef, which is equivalent to the Greek Alpha (Fig. 2).

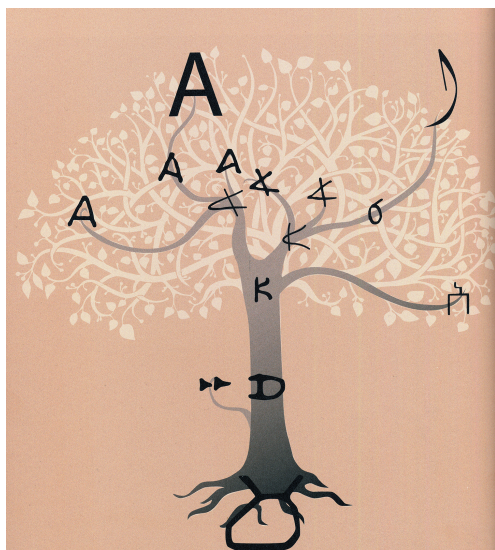


Fig. 2: Deep history of the letter A. Taken from Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 6.

What turned out to be incredibly successful over a period of 4.000 years and is used today on all continents of the world might, however, have started simply as a dis-

3 Ludwig David Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift. Die frühesten Inschriften und ihr kanaanäisch-ägyptischer Entstehungshorizont im Zweiten Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, Studia Sinaitica 3 (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2019).

4 Herbert Donner called it ‘ein Jahrhundertproblem’; Herbert Donner, review of *The Protosinaitic Inscriptions and their Decipherment*, by ed. William Foxwell Albright, *Journal of Semitic Studies* 12, no. 2 (1967): 273.

5 For an overview see e.g., William Bright and Peter T. Daniels, eds. *The World’s Writing Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). Still worth reading is Ignace Jay Gelb, *A Study of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), as well as Johannes Friedrich, *Geschichte der Schrift* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1966). For overviews on early alphabetic writing, see Joseph Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982); Reinhard G. Lehmann, “Alphabet,” *Das wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet*, 2006, <http://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/10112/> [accessed 11.03.2024].

tinctly provincial simplification of the complex Egyptian phono-semantic hieroglyphic writing system. From a global perspective, this product of an *evolution of simplicity*<sup>6</sup> (i.e., *Occam's razor*<sup>7</sup> in social practice<sup>8</sup>) turned out to be highly attractive to users with varying cultural backgrounds. The detachment from its original sociocultural context in South-West Sinai eventually turned alphabetic writing into a technical tool (and medium) for simply encoding language phonetically.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, here I will focus on its original sociocultural context and, thus, the combination of an *evolution of simplicity* with *conspicuous communication*.

In contrast to phono-semantic hieroglyphic writing,<sup>10</sup> alphabetic writing is structurally new in the sense that its function is purely phonocentric. It is based on the simple gra-phonetic equation: one sign (graphic) represents one sound (phonetic), 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 surprising precision: the sacrotope of the Egyptian goddess Hathor in the mountainous area of the South-West Sinai. Resuming "international" socio-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.<sup>11</sup>

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6 For the concept of "evolution of simplicity" in archaeology, see David Wengrow, "The Evolution of Simplicity: Aesthetic Labour and Social Change in the Neolithic Near East," *World Archaeology* 33, no. 2 (2001): 168–88; Norman Yoffee, "The Evolution of Simplicity," review of *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, by ed. James C. Scott, *Current Anthropology* 42, no. 5 (2001): 765–67. It is also interesting to consider it in the context of an archaeology of media.

7 For the term and its history: Wolfgang Hübener, "Occam's Razor not Mysterious," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 27 (1983): 73–92.

8 This aspect was rather important in the anthropologist's Jack Goody's *Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

9 However, there always remained a figurative dimension in written communication, see Josef Vachek, *Written Language: General Problems and Problems of English*, *Janua Linguarum. Series Critica* 14 (The Hague: Mouton, 1973); Josef Vachek and Philip A. Luelsdorff, eds., *Written Language Revisited* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Pub. Co., 1989).

10 Wolfgang Schenkel, *Die hieroglyphische Schriftlehre und die Realität der hieroglyphischen Graphien*, vol. 5, *Sitzungsberichte der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig, Philologisch-Historische Klasse* 138 (Leipzig: Verlag der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2003); Pascal Vernus, "Idéogramme et Phonogramme à l'épreuve de la Figurativité: Les Intermittences de l'Homophonie," in *Philosophers and Hieroglyphs*, eds. Carla Bazzanella and Lucia Morra (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 2003); for the various types of signs used in the Egyptian hieroglyphic system, see Stéphane Polis and Serge Rosmorduc, "The Hieroglyphic Sign Functions. Suggestions for a Revised Taxonomy," in *Fuzzy Boundaries. Festschrift für Antonio Loprieno*, vol. 1, eds. Hans Amstutz, Andreas Dorn, Matthias Müller, Miriam Ronsdorf, and Sami Uljas (Hamburg: Widmaier Verlag, 2015): 149–74.

11 Inscriptions in Ayn Soukhna prove the Egyptian expeditions for turquoise to have restarted already in the eleventh dynasty under Menhu-hotep II (Mahmud Abd el-Raziq, Georges Castel, Pierre Tallet, and Victor Ghica, eds., *Les Inscriptions d'Ayn Soukhna*, *Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* 122 [Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 2002]).

That socio-economic process is documented by various lists containing titles and names of participants<sup>12</sup> monumentalized on stelae erected in front of the sanctuary of the goddess Hathor (Fig. 3a, b).<sup>13</sup>



Fig. 3a, b: Middle Kingdom stela S 112 and row of twelfth dynasty stelae in front of the sanctuary.

These stelae express a distinct corporate identity shared by these Egyptian expeditions to the mountains of Sinai. They also imply a certain sacralization in relation to the goddess Hathor beyond known levels of decorum seen in contemporary examples from the Nile Valley.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Karl-Joachim Seyfried, *Beiträge zu den Expeditionen des Mittleren Reiches in die Ostwüste*, Hildesheimer Ägyptologische Beiträge 15 (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg Verlag, 1981); Pierre Tallet, “D’Ayn Soukna à la péninsule du Sinaï: le mode opératoire des expéditions égyptiennes à la fin de la XII<sup>e</sup> dynastie,” *Cahiers de Recherche de l’Institut de Papyrologie et d’Égyptologie de Lille* 31 (2016–2017): 179–98.

<sup>13</sup> Dominique Valbelle and Charles Bonnet, *Le Sanctuaire d’Hathor, Maîtresse de la Turquoise. Sérabit El-Khadim au Moyen-Empire* (Paris: Édition A&J Picard, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> The concept of decorum was introduced into Egyptology by John Baines, “Restricted Knowledge, Hierarchy and Decorum,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 27 (1990): 1–23.

South-West Sinai was a rather foreign area to the Egyptians, who generally left the Nile Valley only temporarily and for specific economic reasons.<sup>15</sup> Thus, a rock picture of the twelfth dynasty in Rod el Air (Fig. 4) shows the Egyptian Gebu in a scene expressing sacralization (i.e., the offering of turquoise-“bread”<sup>16</sup>) and dominance (grabbing the horns of the gazelle combined with a hunting scene, which is evidenced by the depiction of dogs).<sup>17</sup>

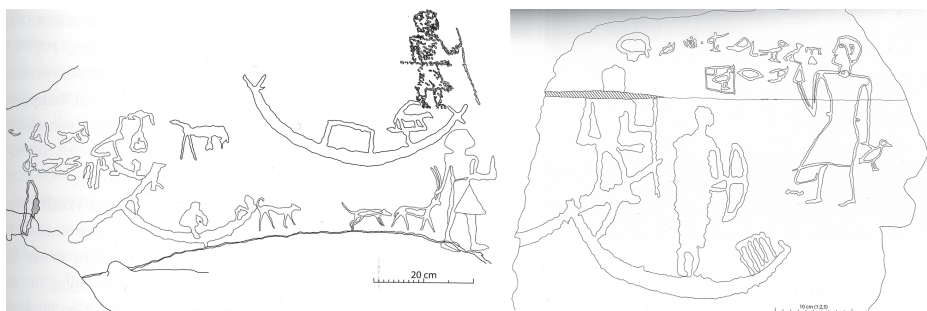


Fig. 4: Rock picture of the Egyptian Gebu, Rod el Air (+ inscription to the left).

Through religious conceptualization and its monumentalization in visual culture, the Middle Kingdom Egyptians transformed what was not home, a place completely different from the Nile Valley, into some kind of Egyptianizing autotope.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the cultural identity of the Egyptian expeditions was enforced by a new type of *religion of expeditions* focusing on “Hathor, mistress of turquoise”.<sup>19</sup> For example, the mining area in Serabit, South-West Sinai, was sacralized by the Egyptians, who built the temple of Hathor there (Fig. 5).

15 In the words of Ptah-wer (hieroglyphic rock stela S 54, twelfth dynasty; Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 58 and fig. 16) it reads: ‘who reaches the borders of the mountainous / foreign lands with his feet, who travels through the secret wadis, who reaches the back-end of the unknown.’

16 Discussion of this Serabitian iconographic motive in Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 59.

17 Discussion in Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 58–59, Figs. 17 and 18. According to Roland Enmarch (personal communication) this is vaguely reminiscent of Hatnub graffito 52 (Rudolf Anthes, *Die Felseninschriften von Hatnub: Nach den Aufnahmen Georg Möllers*, Untersuchungen zur Geschichte und Altertumskunde Ägyptens 9 [Leipzig: Heinrichs, 1928]: 78–80), now apparently destroyed, which seems also to juxtapose hunting with sacral (mortuary) activity. The inscription was already badly damaged in the early twentieth century.

18 This is the opposite to a *heterotope* discussed by Michel Foucault and others.

19 Discussion in Ludwig David Morenz, “Der Türkis und seine Herrin. Die Schöpfung einer besonderen Expeditionsreligion im Mittleren Reich,” *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 38 (2009): 195–209.





Fig. 5: Temple of Hathor in Serabit.

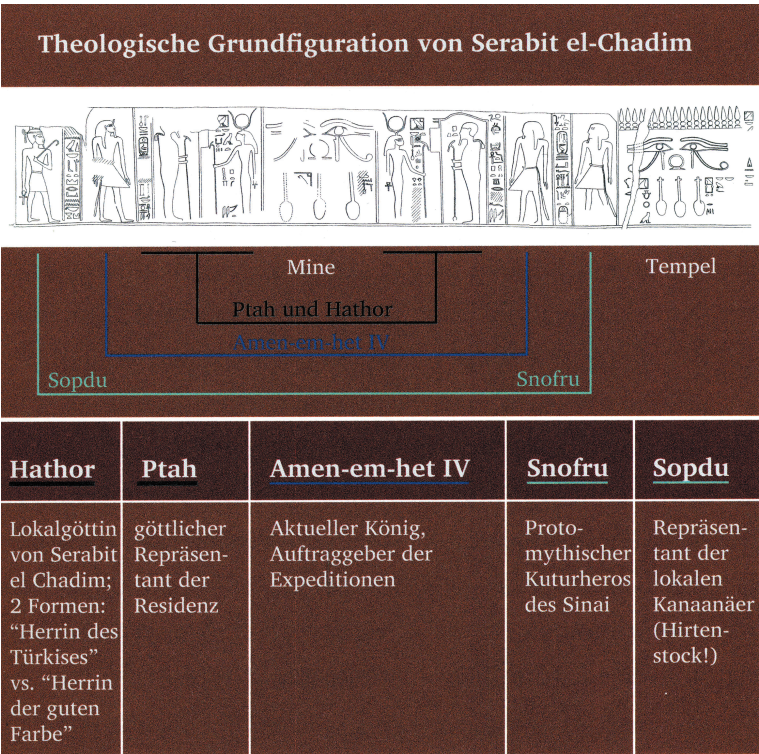
This rather intensive building activity, although just a side-product of the Egyptian's mining activity, was not only an intellectual effort but also an economic one. Egyptian expeditions invested a significant workforce and time in stabilizing Egyptian cultural identity in the distant mountains of South-West Sinai. Technically speaking, the Egyptians culturally transformed a foreign, exotic territory into an Egyptian autotope primarily by sacralizing the area.<sup>20</sup>

This Hathoric “house of the sistrum” is the largest Egyptian temple outside the Nile Valley, with a building history spanning nearly 1.000 years – providing a kind of sacral monumentality, but one that was a work in progress and open to various additions.<sup>21</sup> In architectural semantics, this temple was conceptualized as a mine of turquoise (Fig. 6) from which the goddess “Hathor, mistress of turquoise” appeared precisely as turquoise.<sup>22</sup> 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.

20 The archaeological literature on landscape is vast, for an overview see e.g., Barbara Bender, “Subverting the Western Gaze: Mapping Alternative Worlds,” in *The Archaeology and Anthropology of Landscape: Shaping Your Landscape*, eds. Robert Layton and Peter Ucko (London: Routledge, 1999): 31–46; Christopher Tilley and Kate Cameron-Daum, *An Anthropology of Landscape. The Extraordinary in the Ordinary* (London: UCL Press, 2017).

21 An overview is provided by Valbelle and Bonnet, *Le Sanctuaire d'Hathor*.

22 Ludwig David Morenz, *Das Hochplateau von Serabit el-Chadim. Landschaftsarchäologie und Kulturpoetik*, *Studia Sinaitica* 1 (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2014): 84–140.



**Fig. 6:** Relief S 124 showing the Serabitan theology of turquoise.

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.<sup>23</sup> During the Middle Kingdom, Egyptian monumental representation shifted from the iconic scene of *Smiting the Enemy* to cooperation based on intercultural contacts and contracts (Fig. 7).<sup>24</sup>

Within this context of changing political iconography, Canaanite leaders such as the 'brother of the ruler of Retjenu Khabi-dadum'<sup>25</sup> (Fig. 8) are shown riding the donkey.

<sup>23</sup> Ludwig David Morenz, *Die Genese der Alphabetschrift. Ein Markstein ägyptisch-kanaanäischer Kulturkontakte*, Kulturgeschichtliche Beiträge zur Ägyptologie 3 (Würzburg: Ergon, 2011): 75–78.

<sup>24</sup> Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 121–23, 207–15, 249–63, 268–69.

<sup>25</sup> Jaroslav Černý, "Semites in Egyptian Mining Expeditions in Sinai," *Archiv Orientální* 7, no. 3 (1935): 384–89.

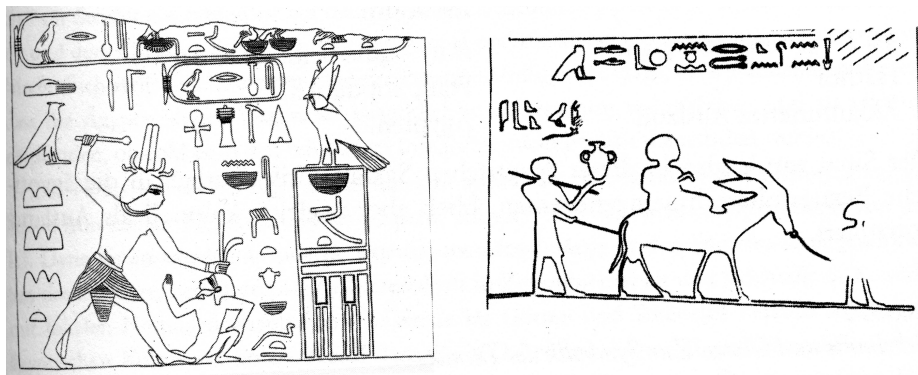


Fig. 7: From subjugation to cooperation, changes in Egyptian depictions of Canaanites in Serabit.

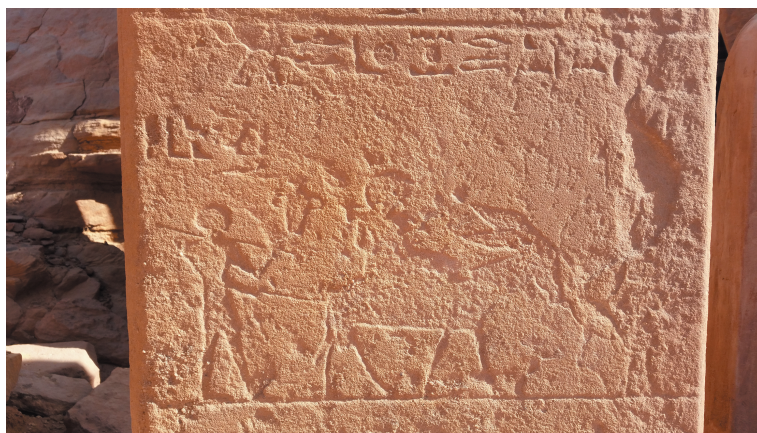


Fig. 8: Khabidadum; lower part from the stela S 112.

Within a Canaanite and, more broadly West Semitic context, the riding of a donkey, when depicted in iconography, implies high social status that was particularly respected by the Egyptians:<sup>26</sup> it points to a scenario of cooperation based on contracts. During our work, the Bonn Archeological Team discovered some of these contracts written on the rocks of Rod el Air.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, the cooperation between the Egyptians and the Canaanites generated intercultural equations of gods, which is indeed a remarkable product of cross-cultural interaction during the early second millennium.<sup>28</sup> Figure 9 shows that some Canaanites

<sup>26</sup> Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 60–62.

<sup>27</sup> Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 248–63.

<sup>28</sup> Ludwig David Morenz, *Ein Trigger für “unsere” Alphabetschrift. Die kanaanäisch-ägyptischen Göttergleichungen El-Ptah und Bacalat-Hathor* (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2019).



living in South-West Sinai equated their god El with the Egyptian god Ptah.<sup>29</sup> A rock stela on the *Canaanite* mine L in the area of Serabit<sup>30</sup> depicts El in the Egyptian iconography of Ptah, while the alphabetic inscription labels him as El (S 351, Fig. 9).



Fig. 9: Rock stela S 351.

The image implies a remarkable knowledge of the Egyptian iconography of the god Ptah, while stylistic analysis shows some rather non-Egyptian features. At mine L and in its vicinity, there was no Egyptian representation of Ptah visible, so the figure of the god was probably drawn from memory. Thus, iconography in Canaanite practice on this stela indicates a remarkably high degree of familiarity with Egyptian visual culture by this anonymous Canaanite scribe. That assertion also holds for the Hathoric face on the stela S 355 (Fig. 10).<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ludwig David Morenz, *GOTT – Zum Ursprung von El im mittelbronzezeitlichen Serabit el Chadim*, Hans-Bonnet-Studien zur Ägyptischen Religion 1 (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2023).

<sup>30</sup> 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 on their own.

<sup>31</sup> Ludwig David Morenz, *Medienarchäologische 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, 2021): 61–62. Here we



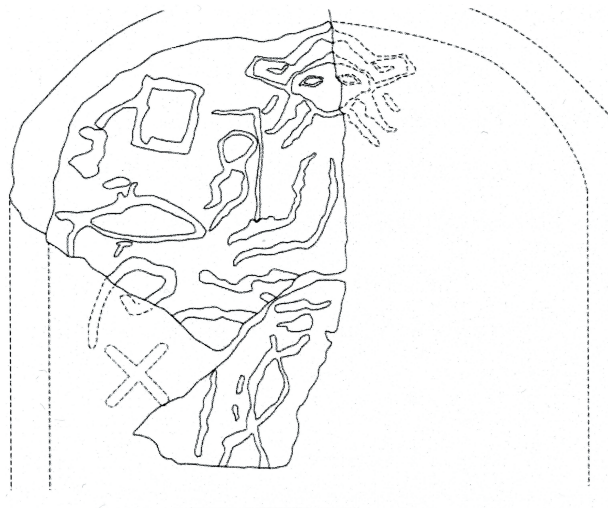


Fig. 10: Fragmentary rock stela S 355.

Based on the relationship between the Egyptian god Ptah and the Canaanite El, along with that between the Egyptian Hathor and the Canaanite Ba<sup>c</sup>alat, we can detect two Egypto-Canaanite equations of gods. Religion mattered. Such an intercultural sacrificial 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 to them. The attraction of culture and media was in favour of the Egyptians. There might have also been a degree of dependency and imbalance in the socio-economic sphere, but the poetics of culture (Stephen Greenblatt) seem to indicate intensive dynamics in negotiating dependency.

Imagery, and the writing on the rock stela at the entrance to the *Canaanite* mine L, appear as a fascinating cultural hybrid between the Old Canaanite and the Egyptian culture in South-West Sinai. These Canaanites adopted Egyptian prototypes quite closely. However, they did so to express their own cultural identity. For modelling the underlying cultural negotiation process that may have taken place, we might adopt (post-)modern post-colonial models / theories such as Homi K. Bhabha's *Hybridity* or Édouard Glissant's *Creolization*.<sup>32</sup>

The equation of the Canaanite goddess Ba<sup>c</sup>alat with the Egyptian Hathor was particularly important for the relations between the Egyptians and the Canaanites during

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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 depicted Hathoric face.

32 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Édouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation: Poésie en Étendue* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2009).

Middle Kingdom (middle bronze age in Levantine terminology) in Serabit. Thus, the bilingual sphinx from the temple of Hathor (Fig. 11a, b) mentions in Egyptian hieroglyphs “Hathor, mistress of turquoise” (*hw.t-ḥr nb.t mfk3.t*) while the Canaanite alphabetic inscriptions refer to Ba<sup>c</sup>alat.

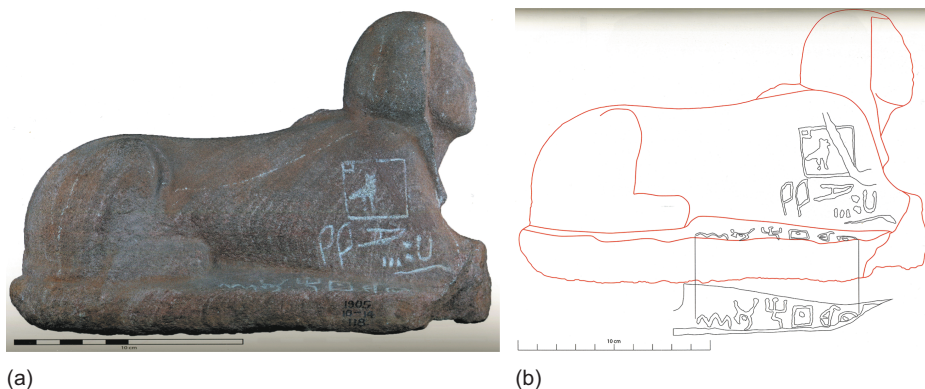


Fig. 11a, b: Canaanized Sphinx S 345, BM EA 41748.

We can assume that the Egyptian universe of media, especially its visual culture – hieroglyphic writing and images – was highly attractive to the middle bronze Canaanites, who lacked such sophisticated graphic tools of *High Culture*. Egyptian media might have been particularly attractive to the Bedouins in South-West Sinai. Yet, its influence is also apparent in the middle bronze Levantine city-states. In the middle bronze Levantine, various images were created,<sup>33</sup> and some examples are known of the use of hieroglyphic as well as hieratic writing.<sup>34</sup> This attraction to Egyptian media technology as well as the Egypto-Canaanite process of equating gods,<sup>35</sup> and especially the combination of both, triggered the genesis of alphabetic writing in South-West Sinai around 1900 BCE.

Based on less than 30 letters, alphabetic writing is an enormous simplification of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing. This functional simplification does not mean writing

33 For an overview, see Othmar Keel, Christoph Uehlinger and Florian Lippke, *Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole. Neue Erkenntnisse zur Religionsgeschichte Kanaans und Israels aufgrund bislang unerschlossener ikonographischer Quellen*, 5th ed. (1992; repr., Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg, 2010).

34 Nadav Na'aman, “Egyptian Centres and the Distribution of the Alphabet in the Levant,” *Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University* 47, no. 1 (2020): 29–54.

35 Morenz, *Ein Trigger für “unsere” Alphabetschrift*; for further reading, see Jan Assmann, “Translating Gods: Religion as a Factor of Cultural (Un)Translatability,” in *The Translatability of Cultures. Figurations of the Space Between*, eds. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1996): 25–36.

simply turned into a *cold*<sup>36</sup> media technology: 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 – א, a cow head – which implies a reference to the Egypto-Canaanite goddess Hathor-Ba<sup>c</sup>alat. The goddess was depicted in various temple reliefs, on stelae, or at the entrance of mines with cow horns, which was typical of Egyptian iconography.<sup>37</sup> 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<sup>c</sup>alat.

The figurativeness of some signs, 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 between the purely phonographic usage of letters and the figurative encoding of meaning might seem counterintuitive, but it demonstrates that the origin of alphabetic writing was not merely an economic simplification. It had an additional function. Through the contextualization of alphabetic development, we can detect two different trends: a) economic simplification, and b) the semiotic encoding of meaning. Consequently, there was indeed not only an administrative but also a distinctly sacral and commemorative usage of early alphabetic writing.

The scribe’s interest in expressing cultural meaning had an impact on the layout of these early alphabetic inscriptions. This interest in expressing cultural meaning led to the earliest *carmina figurata*: a textual format that did not arise either from Egyptian hieroglyphs or Mesopotamian cuneiform, at least not *stricto sensu*.<sup>38</sup> For instance, the layout of rock inscription S 358 inside mine L is formatted into the shape of a cow’s head (Fig. 12), which is thus reminiscent of the letter Alef as well as the Egypto-Canaanite goddess Hathor-Ba<sup>c</sup>alat.<sup>39</sup>

Among the early alphabetic inscriptions, we find further examples in which sacro-graphic poetics generates supplementary meaning to the plain text (esp. Inscr. S 354).<sup>40</sup> In terms of historical sociology, we can describe the early Canaanite scribes

36 For the dichotomy *cold* versus *hot* cultures, cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Cru et le Cuit*, Mythologiques 1 (Paris: Plon, 1964).

37 Morenz, *Ein Trigger für “unsere” Alphabetschrift*; for the cow’s head representing esp. the letter Alef, see Stefan Jakob Wimmer, “Warum Alef?” in *Kultur-Poetik in der Mittelbronzezeit. Aspekte der frühesten Alphabetschrift im kulturellen Schnittfeld Ägypter-Kanaanäer*, ed. Ludwig David Morenz (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2022): 109–16.

38 Ludwig David Morenz, *Sinn und Spiel der Zeichen. Visuelle Poesie im Alten Ägypten*, *Pictura et Poesis* 21 (Cologne: Böhlau, 2008).

39 Discussion in Morenz, *Medienarchäologische Sondagen*: 48–49; and Ludwig David Morenz, *Kultur-Poetik in der Mittelbronzezeit. Aspekte der frühesten Alphabetschrift im kulturellen Schnittfeld Ägypter-Kanaanäer*, *Studia Sinaitica* 5 (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2022): 118–22. Here a discussion of the inscription S 377 and its layout in the shape of a cow’s head is included.

40 Discussion in Morenz, *Kulturpoetik in der Mittelbronzezeit*: 94–98.

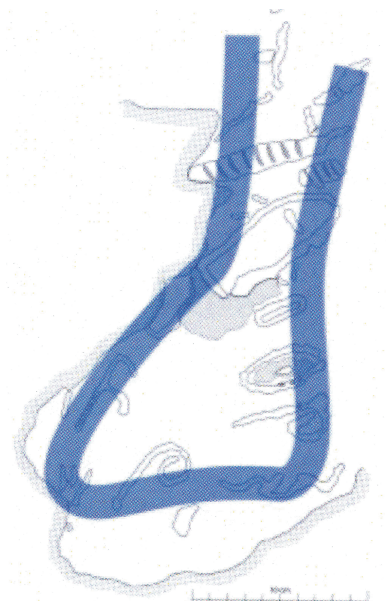


Fig. 12: Alphabetic inscription S 358.

who used 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. They seem to have a distinct affinity with alphabetic writing, probably because the figurative and iconic potential of signs is somehow too prominent in the hieroglyphic or the cuneiform scripts to allow for the preferred type of figurativeness that concentrates on the layout.<sup>41</sup>

In their original context of Serabit el Khadim, some early alphabetic letters incorporate and express various facets of cultural identity. This figurative explanation thus works not only for the Alef and its reference to the Egypto-Canaanite goddess Hathor-Baʿalat but, among others, also for the letter Resh. Acrophonically (acrophony means only the first letter counts) derived from the common “West Semitic” word Rash / Resh, the consonant *r* (+ an indistinct vowel<sup>42</sup>) is represented by the image of a

<sup>41</sup> An inscription of Gudea of Lagash (third millennium) compares the cuneiform signs on a tablet with the stars in the sky. This metaphor implies grapho-poetic thinking, and we know various examples of poetic elements in cuneiform writing (Eva-Christiane Cancik-Kirschbaum and Jochem Kahl, eds., *Erste Philologien. Archäologie einer Disziplin vom Tigris bis zum Nil* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017]) as well as in Egyptian hieroglyphs (Morenz, *Sinn und Spiel der Zeichen*).

<sup>42</sup> These vowels might have been clear to the native speakers, or they might 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 (Stefan Schorch, “Die Vokale des Gesetzes: Die samaritanische Lesetradition als Textzeugin der Tora” [PhD diss., Kirchliche Hochschule Bethel, 2003]). Furthermore, we know of early attempts to encode vowels as in the Ugaritic cuneiform alphabet (Oswald Loretz, “Die prägriechische Vokalisierung des Alphabets in Ugarit,” in *Die Geschichte der hellenischen Sprache und*



human head.<sup>43</sup> One might think there is nothing special about a head, but our new epigraphic recordings show that it is rewarding to look at the hairstyle. For example, some early Resh-signs from the Old Canaanite inscriptions in Serabit show a mushroom-shaped head (Fig. 13a–c).<sup>44</sup>

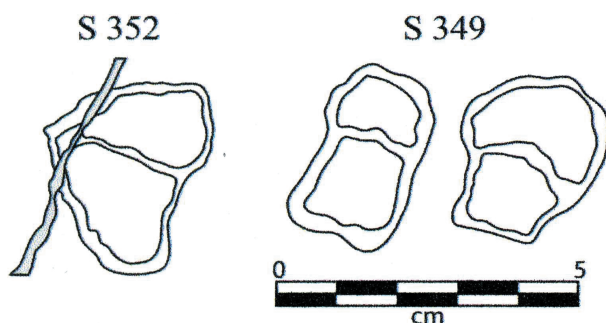


Fig. 13: Early forms of the letter Resh; from inscriptions S 349, 364, 385.

The Egyptian depiction of a Canaanite man from Maghara (inscription S 24A) also shows a mushroom-shaped head (Fig. 14a, b). Furthermore, he holds an aAm-stick in

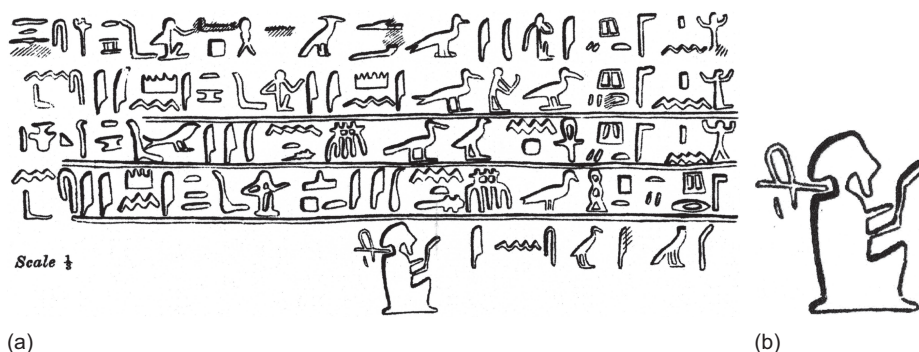


Fig. 14a, b: Depiction of a Canaanite man from Maghara (rock inscription S 24A).

Schrift: Vom 2. zum 1. Jahrtausend vor Chr.: Kontinuität oder Bruch? 03.–06. Oktober 1996, ed. Verein zur Förderung der Aufarbeitung der Hellenischen Geschichte [Altenburg: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 1998]: 387–405).

<sup>43</sup> Gordon James Hamilton, *The Origin of the West Semitic Alphabet in Egyptian Scripts* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 2006).

<sup>44</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Morenz, *Medienarchäologische Sondagen*: 98–102.

his hand. Viewed not just as an object but as a hieroglyph, he is thus characterized as an *ʿm*-“asiatic”.<sup>45</sup>

In middle bronze age iconography, the mushroom-shaped head is a rather distinct iconographic marker of the Canaanite elite. We know this from various pictorial representations, including monumental statues from Tell ed Daba in the Eastern Delta of the Nile.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, this conspicuous hairstyle is an iconographic marker of elite status in the middle bronze Levantine context.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, we can deduce that the iconographically marked mushroom-shaped head in the sign of the letter Resh expresses Levantine elite iconography of the middle bronze, much like the depiction of Khabadum shown in Fig. 8.

So far, I have written generally about Canaanites in the area of Middle Kingdom Serabit. However, it seems worthwhile to distinguish between Levantines like Khabadum (West Semitic personal name of a leader) and his people, who came from afar to cooperate with the Egyptians, and more or less local Bedouins. The following discussion attempts a media-archaeological rediscovery of the local Canaanite “He”-tribe of the early second millennium BCE.<sup>48</sup> In recovering this “lost tribe”, we can use Egyptian and Canaanite sources from the nineteenth century BCE. The Egyptian material consists of pictorial as well as written material: it allows us to distinguish between local Sinaitic Canaanites versus 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 iconographically differentiated by both dress and hairstyle (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15: Middle Kingdom stela S 87, lower part.

<sup>45</sup> Morenz, *Medienarchäologische Sondagen*: 98.

<sup>46</sup> Dorothea Arnold, “Image and Identity: Egypt’s Eastern Neighbours, East Delta People and the Hyksos,” in *The Second Intermediate Period (thirteenth–seventeenth Dynasties): Current Research, Future Prospects*, ed. Marcel Marée, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 192 (Leuven: Peeters, 2010).

<sup>47</sup> For an overview, see Aaron A. Burke, “Introduction to the Levant During the Middle Bronze Age,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant: c. 8000–332 BCE*, eds. Ann E. Killbrew and Margreet Steiner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 402–13.

<sup>48</sup> For a more extensive discussion, see Morenz, *Medienarchäologische Sondagen*: 31–43.

The last man in the figure bears the title “brother of the ruler of Retjenu”. For the damaged part, we might even consider reconstructing the name Khabi-dadum. As with the forms of the Resh sign, the man is characterized by his mushroom-shaped head. Each of the three men standing before this “brother of the ruler of Retjenu” is called *hrj pr* + semogram (= sign encoding meaning) STANDING MAN WITH RAISED ARMS. Here as well as in various other inscriptions from Serabit, this title refers to the local Bedouins.<sup>49</sup> 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 90.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, we can assume that he was a leader of the local Sinaitic Bedouins with whom the Egyptian expeditions were in regular contact.

The Egyptian hieroglyph  $\text{𓆎}$  is used in these inscriptions as a semogram to designate the local Serabitian tribe, i.e., “the highlanders”. More specific information is provided by the stela S 114, which also dates from the time of King Amenemhet III (Fig. 16a, b).

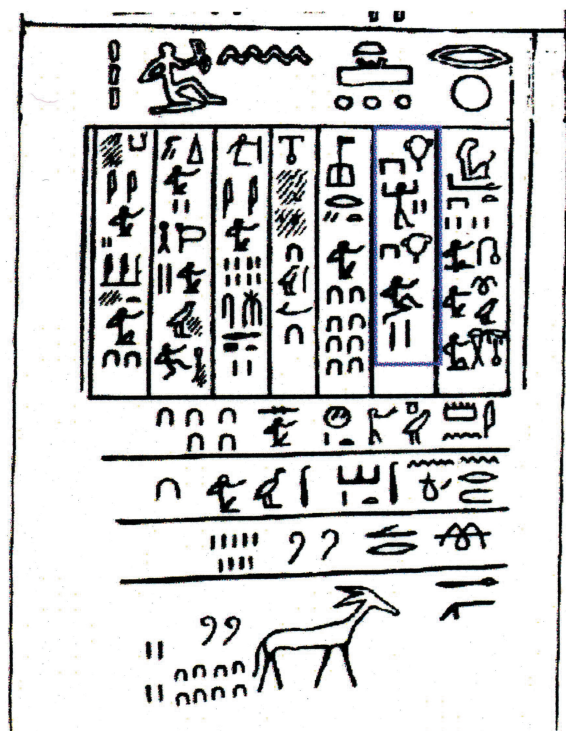










Fig. 16: Middle Kingdom stela S 114.

<sup>49</sup> Morenz, *Medienarchäologische Sondagen*: 35.

<sup>50</sup> Morenz, *Medienarchäologische Sondagen*: 33, Figs. 4 and 5.

This hieroglyphic inscription mentions two *hrj pr* + semogram STANDING MAN WITH RAISED ARMS: the lower portion also provides additional information. The micro text on the stela is formatted in imitation of an administrative list.<sup>51</sup> In the second column, two different local tribes are graphically distinguished via the  versus the . The specific meaning of the distinction between the two forms STANDING MAN WITH RAISED ARMS versus KNEELING MAN, is difficult to pin down precisely. The hieroglyphic form  resembles the hieroglyph *sign-list* A7 (): this hieroglyph is used to determine words referring to weakness, subduing or settling down (*wrd*, *b3gj*, *nnj*, *hs*, *srj*). Thus, we can either consider it a designation of a group as “weak ones”, “subdued ones”, or “the ones who settled down”, i.e., locals. From its context and use parallel to  – “the highlanders” – I would suggest that it refers to locals inhabiting 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 writing as  / .<sup>52</sup> In this context, it encodes the sound *h* (+ *unmarked vowel*). Within the set of alphabetic letters, the *He* is the only sign depicting a full human figure.<sup>53</sup> Like the symbolic importance of letters such as the Alef or the Resh, we can assume that the letter *He* also implied symbolic significance in the sociocultural context of Middle Kingdom / middle bronze Serabit. It seems to indicate a reference to the Canaanite local tribe in South-West Sinai around 1900 BCE.

Let us now look at the Egyptian hieroglyphic stela S 100 from the time of King Amenemhet III. (Fig. 17). It was erected in front of the sanctuary of Hathor. In the lower part, we can recognize a kneeling figure and below it is another sign which is much smaller and closely resembles the Canaanite letter *He*. Some other Middle Kingdom stelae in Serabit, including S 112, depict a Canaanite leader and his followers. We can expect a structural analogy, but while the person riding the donkey on stela S 112 is a Levantine, the kneeling person on stela S 100 represents a local Canaanite.

By examining 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. The relationship between the Egyptian leader of the expedition on

<sup>51</sup> Christopher Eyre, *The Use of Documents in Pharaonic Egypt*, Oxford Studies in Ancient Documents (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>52</sup> Already suggested in Alan H. Gardiner and T. Eric Peet, *Inscriptions of Sinai*, vol. 2, ed. and compl. by Jaroslav Černý (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955): 67, n. 1; furthermore: Orly Goldwasser, “Canaanites Reading Hieroglyphs: Horus is Hathor? – The Invention of the Alphabet in Sinai,” *Ägypten und Levante* 16 (2006): 121–60; Orly Goldwasser, “How the Alphabet Was Born from Hieroglyphs,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 36, no. 2 (2010): 36–50; most recent discussion in Morenz, *Medienarchäologische Sondagen*.



<sup>53</sup> Most recent discussion of the inventory of alphabetic letters in Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 87–90.





**Fig. 17:** Lower part of Middle Kingdom stela S 100: photo (Morenz, 2022).

the top of the stela and the Canaanite representative of the He-tribe at the bottom expresses this cross-cultural contact.<sup>54</sup>

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 Serabit. However, it depicts the seated rather than the standing man. Therefore, we can read it as the Canaanite letter *He*. The sign  certainly looks like an alphabetic letter. Nevertheless, it is not used here as alphabetic writing proper. Instead, it is employed more as a semogram or an icon. The sign thus specifies the depiction above it and refers to the local tribe of Serabit.

<sup>54</sup> Discussion of the evidence and plausibility of contracts between the Egyptians and the Canaanites in Middle Kingdom Serabit: Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 121–23, 207–15, 248–63, 267–69.

Just as the goddess Ba<sup>c</sup>alat is represented in the letter Alef and the Levantine elite are depicted in the letter Resh, the local Beduin tribe of the Serabit area is represented in the letter He 𐤅 / 𐤆. Originally, alphabetic writing in Serabit was full of cultural meaning. Strong symbolism combined with purely phonographic usage is exemplified by letters such as Alef, He, or Resh. The Canaanites who created this new writing system inscribed themselves into it, and their symbolic presence in the alphabet seems remarkable in light of scholarly understandings of their culture.

These sources problematize traditional assumptions. By visualizing the Canaanites, we can see they were more internally differentiated than we previously thought. Furthermore, we should consider that they were not just “slaves or uneducated workers” but people deliberately cooperating with the Egyptian expeditions and following their own agenda. They were exploring agency in the midst of cross-cultural contact. In doing so, they created a writing system from which we still benefit today. The “subaltern” did not only learn how to write but they invented their own writing system marked by a distinct *evolution of simplicity* and expressing their own cultural identity.

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