Ludwig D. Morenz

EL(-GOD) AS "FATHER IN REGALNESS". MINE M IN SERABIT EL KHADIM AS A MIDDLE-BRONZE-AGE (C. 1900 BC) WORKING SPACE SACRALISED BY EARLY ALEFBETIC WRITING

UNIVERSITÄT BONN

BONN CENTER FOR DEPENDENCY AND SLAVERY STUDIES

Ludwig D. Morenz
Institute for Archaeology and Cultural Anthropology, Department of Egyptology, University of Bonn

El(-GOD) as "Father in Regalness". Mine M in Serabit el Khadim as a Middle-Bronze-Age (c. 1900 BC) Working Space sacralised by Early Alefbetic Writing

Abstract

This paper grew out of an archaeological field season conducted in southwestern Sinai by the Department of Egyptology at the University of Bonn during November and December 2022. It specifically discusses the social and cultural relations between Egyptians and Canaanites in southwestern Sinai during the Middle Bronze Age (the first half of the second millennium BC), focussing on the inscription S 357 which was carved into the rock face inside a large copper and turquoise mine. By invoking the god El, the inscription sacralized the workspace. This paper seeks to understand mine and inscription within a cultural-historical polygon made up of landscape, ethnicity, economy, religion, and media.

Die folgenden Überlegungen basieren auf einer archäologischen Feldkampagne der Abteilung für Ägyptologie an der Universität Bonn vom November und Dezember 2022 in den Süd-West-Sinai. Konkret werden die Sozial- und Kulturbeziehungen zwischen Ägyptern und Kanaanäern im mittelbrontzezeitlichen Süd-West-Sinai (erste Hälfte 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr.) diskutiert. Im Zentrum steht die Inschrift S 357, die im Inneren einer großen Kupfer- und Türkismine in die Felswand gemeißelt wurde. Mit der Anrufung des Gottes El wurde der Arbeitsbereich sakralisiert. Mine und Inschrift werden im kulturgeschichtlichen Fünfeck von Landschaft, Ethnizität, Ökonomie, Religion und Medien zu verstehen gesucht.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction

<div align="right">

Du mußt es dreimal sagen

Mephistopheles to Faust,

Faust I, V.1531

</div>

This essay is the result of our epigraphic field campaign in Serabit el Khadim in November/December 2022. Participants from the University of Bonn included myself, Sherouk Shehada and David Sabel, as well as Mohammed Nur ed Din, inspector of the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities – a wonderful team, whom I would like to thank for the inspiring experience of working together. David Sabel produced a photogrammetric 3D image of the interior spaces of mines L and M, which after its final edit, will be freely available on the open-access homepage of the Department of Egyptology at the University of Bonn. I would like to thank Yannick Wiechmann, who read several versions of this text, as well as Joachim Quack and Udo Rüterswörden for their comments on earlier drafts. My thanks are also due to David Sabel for his epigraphic recording and redrawing of the inscription S 357. Furthermore, I'm grateful to Imogen Herrad for the translation from German and to Adam Fagbore for proofreading. For some idiosyncracies such as *alefbetic* writing I take responsibility.

Our campaign was funded by the *Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies* (BCDSS). The key question in terms of dependency was the scaling of dependencies, and we found a remarkably high degree of agency for the Canaanites of the first half of the second millennium at Serabit, who in Semitic and Egyptological scholarship have long been thought of as slaves, or at best highly dependent. They benefitted economically from their work, and emphasized their own cultural identity – something that is particularly evident in the inscription S 357.

This essay is dedicated to my friends and colleagues in Cairo: Mamdouh Eldamaty, Mohamed Sherif Ali, Nasser Mekawy and Tarek Tawfik.

Rooted in a deeper layer of the history of human sciences is the problematic issue of finding a plausible and practicable name for the script, which in its time was both new, and indeed a novel development in terms of the history of communication. William Foxwell Albright coined the term *Proto-Sinaitic*, which is still quite widely used today. However, the script is not a direct ancestor of the Sinaitic 'Nabataean' (which Albright understood as 'Sinaitic' at the time, although it is, typologically speaking, a late Aramaic script). This renders the term meaningless.[1] In contrast, it seems to me that, depending on research questions and constellations of interests, there are three potentially suitable designations:

---

[1] William Foxwell Albright, "Notes on the Early Hebrew and Aramaic Orthography," *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 6 (1926): 75–102 (Albright himself regarded the term, initially at least, as one of convenience), see my critique in Ludwig Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift. Die frühesten alphabetischen Inschriften und ihr kanaanäisch-ägyptischer Entstehungshorizont im Zweiten Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2019): 83–84 (These 1).

- *Pictographic Canaanite Alef-Bet script* (this refers especially to sign forms borrowed from hieroglyphic models – as opposed to Linear Canaanite, which is also known as Proto-Canaanite;[2] an analogous misnomer in the Albrightian tradition)
- *Early (or earliest) Alef-Bet script* (this refers especially to its position in the history of communication)
- *Sinaitic* (or, more specifically, *Serabitic*) *Alef-Bet script* (this refers to its place of origin).

In this terminology, Alef-Bet script is intended to emphasize its purely consonantal character[3] in comparison with an alphabetic script such as Greek. Perhaps none of these three designation varieties should be exclusively prioritized, as each stresses a different aspect (sign-forms, position in the history of writing, place of origin).

A further terminological question concerns the term 'Canaanites'. The issue of ethnicity resonates in a term such as 'Canaanites' (such as current linguistic usage, which is diametrically different in Egypt and Israel, but also the perspectives in the Hebrew Bible and various other sources), as do associated questions of hybridity. The focus here is not on biological but rather on cultural ethnicity. Where Canaanites are mentioned in what follows, the term designates the more or less local, Semitic-speaking inhabitants in the Sinai, who linguistically can certainly be described as Northwest Semitic speakers and so as Old Canaanites. Historically, the term is reasonably well documented from the Late Bronze Age onwards.[4]

However, we do as yet not know how these people designated or perceived themselves, nor how they situated themselves in their environment. Alternatively, we might think of them as Amorites, and there is a certain overlap of those two terms. This methodologically complex – and correspondingly challenging – problem can only be touched on here; given our only very partial source base, it is impossible to solve.

In the Middle Bronze Age, the Canaanites centred on the south-western region of Syria-Palestine, but here again terminological boundaries are blurred, and ethnically 'clean' (whatever that might mean in our age of hybridity) attributions are often impossible. For southwestern Sinai, at least, we have simply not enough data to make more precise ethnic classifications and specifications. In what follows, the term 'Canaanite' will be employed predominantly in its linguistic meaning.[5]

---

[2] Frank Moore Cross, "The Evolution of the Proto-Canaanite Alphabet," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 134 (1954): 15–24.

[3] In practical terms, this script functioned as a pure consonant script, whereas typologically it could also be analyzed as a consonant plus an unspecified vowel according to Ignace Gelb's classification (*A Study of Writing. The Foundations of Grammatology* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952]), see the discussion in Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 20–21 with nn. 12 and 95 (These 15).

[4] Anson F. Rainey, "Who is a Canaanite? A Review of the Textual Evidence," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 304 (1996): 1–15.

[5] See the discussion in Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 28–29.

II. Egyptians and Canaanites in Southwestern Sinai: Two Radically Different Relationship Patterns in the Fourth and Third Millennia Compared to the Second Millennium

From a hypothetical Pharaonic-Egyptian perspective, southwestern Sinai was socio-culturally on the periphery of Egyptian culture in the fourth to the second millennia, but its mineral resources (turquoise and copper) made it extremely attractive economically.[6] These were not simply acquired through trade, but extracted directly by Egyptian expeditions which travelled to southwestern Sinai at irregular intervals that we are unable to determine precisely.[7] Egyptian imagery from the fourth and third millennia depicts the complete and violent subjugation of the local populations – particularly drastically in the iconic motif of 'Smiting the enemies'.[8] We know these scenes as reliefs with rock inscriptions from Wadi Maghara, where they were typically placed especially above the copper and turquoise mines (such as in S 4 and S 10, Figs. 1a and b).[9]
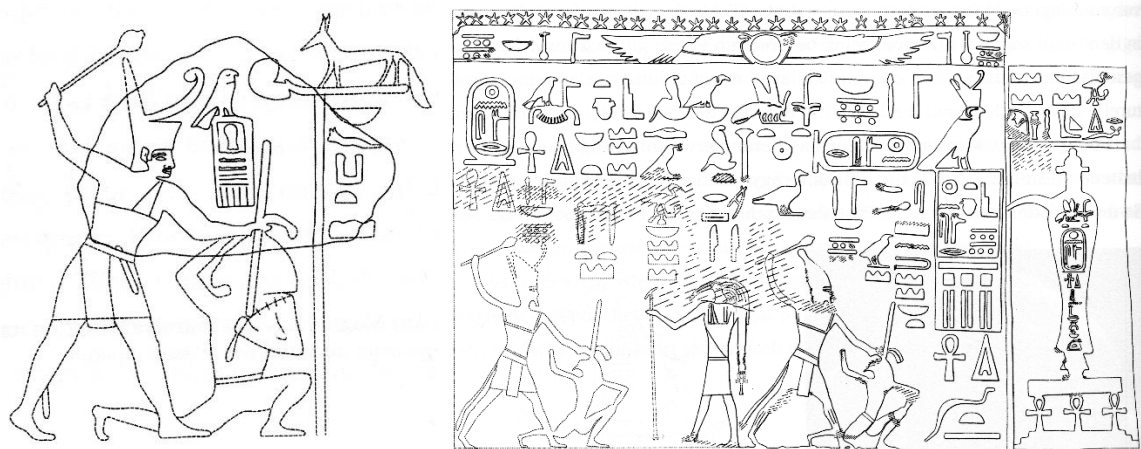

Fig. 1a and b: Iconic scene of 'Smiting the enemies' in Maghara; examples of kings Sa-nakht (S 4) and Ni-user-re (S 10); partial reconstruction by David Sabel.

At the beginning of this imagery in Wadi Maghara – a great mining site for turquoise and copper in the Sinai during the third millennium – with its claim to radical Egyptian dominance over people and landscape, stand two parallel rock-cut relief sculptures of the first-dynasty

---

[6] Ludwig Morenz and Tobias Gutmann, "Wertschätzung und Bedarf. Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Kupfer und Türkis," in *Materialien einer Gusswerkstatt von der Qubbet el-Hawa*, ed. Martin Fitzenreiter, Frank Willer and Johannes Auenmüller (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2016): 45–51.

[7] On the Egyptian expeditions see Karl-Joachim Seyfried, *Beiträge zu den Expeditionen des Mittleren Reiches in die Ostwüste* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981); Eckhard Eichler, *Untersuchungen zum Expeditionswesen des ägyptischen Alten Reiches* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993).

[8] Comprehensive overviews in Sylvia Schoske, "Das Erschlagen der Feinde: Ikonographie und Stilistik der Feindvernichtung im alten Ägypten" (PhD-diss., Universität Heidelberg, 1982); Emma Swan Hall, *The Pharaoh Smites His Enemies. A Comparative Study* (München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1986).

[9] For depictions of smiting scenes in Maghara from Semer-khet (first dynasty) to Pepi (sixth dynasty), see inscriptions S 1–16; this reconstruction by David Sabel has been taken from Ludwig Morenz, *Das Hochplateau von Serabit el-Chadim. Landschaftsarchäologie und Kulturpoetik* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2014).

king Semer-khet, situated at the top of the mountain. In this location they dominate the valley and are visible from a distance (Fig. 2).[10]
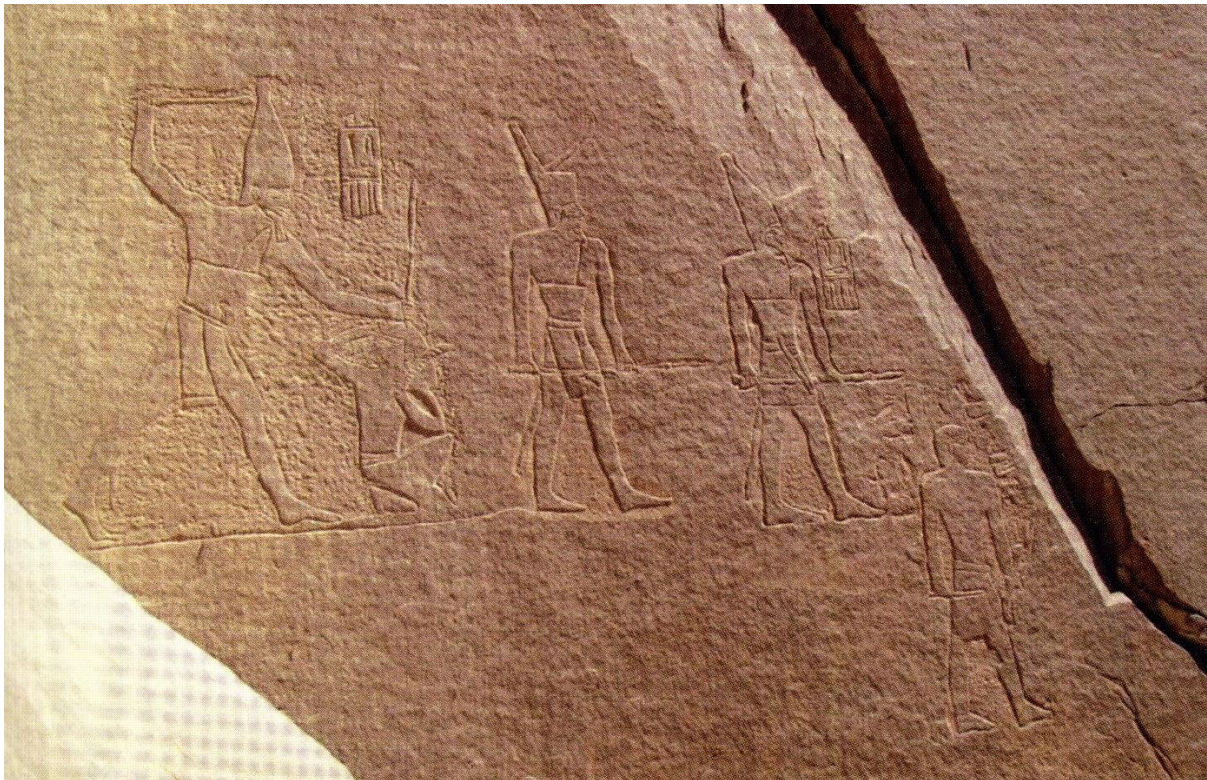

Fig. 2: Rock-cut relief of king Semer-khet in Wadi Maghara.

Older still by a few decades is a rock-cut relief in Wadi Ameyra in southwestern Sinai which, although stylistically much simpler, conveys a similar message.[11] It already depicts the protodynastic king named 'Hor'[12] in a scene that is of historical interest, especially in terms of how it displays royal ideology (Fig. 3).

---

[10] See the discussion in Ludwig Morenz, "Von offener und verborgener Sichtbarkeit. Altägyptische Einschreibungen in den Raum des Wadi Maghara (Sinai)," in *Verborgen, unsichtbar, unlesbar. Zur Problematik restringierter Schriftpräsenz*, ed. Tobias Frese, Wilfried E. Keil and Kristina Krüger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014): 53–57.

[11] The rock tableau with inscriptions from the protodynastic era to the second dynasty has been published in Pierre Tallet and Damien Laisney, "Iry-Hor et Narmer au Sud-Sinaï (Ouadi 'Ameyra), un complément à la chronologie des expéditios minière égyptiene," *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire* 112 (2012): 381–98; Pierre Tallet, *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinaï II. Catalogue complémentaire des inscriptions du Sinaï* (Kairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 2015).

[12] For this ruler and a new suggested reading see Ludwig Morenz, *VerLautungen von Macht. Entwicklung von Schrift-Bildlichkeit und Bild-Schriftlichkeit im Niltal des vierten Jahrtausends* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2020): 31–58. For the most recent argument in favour of the traditional reading see Andréas Stauder, "*Iri-Hor*: Elaborations of an Early Royal Name," *Göttinger Miszellen: Beiträge zur ägyptologischen Diskussion* 262 (2020): 201–8. The conventions of hieroglyphic writing only gradually developed in the later fourth millennium, making it impossible to arrive at a secure decision in favour of one of the two alternative readings: simple Hor and extended Iri-Hor, see Ludwig Morenz, Andréas Stauder and Beryl Büma, eds., *Wege zur frühen Schrift. Niltal und Zweistromland* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2022).
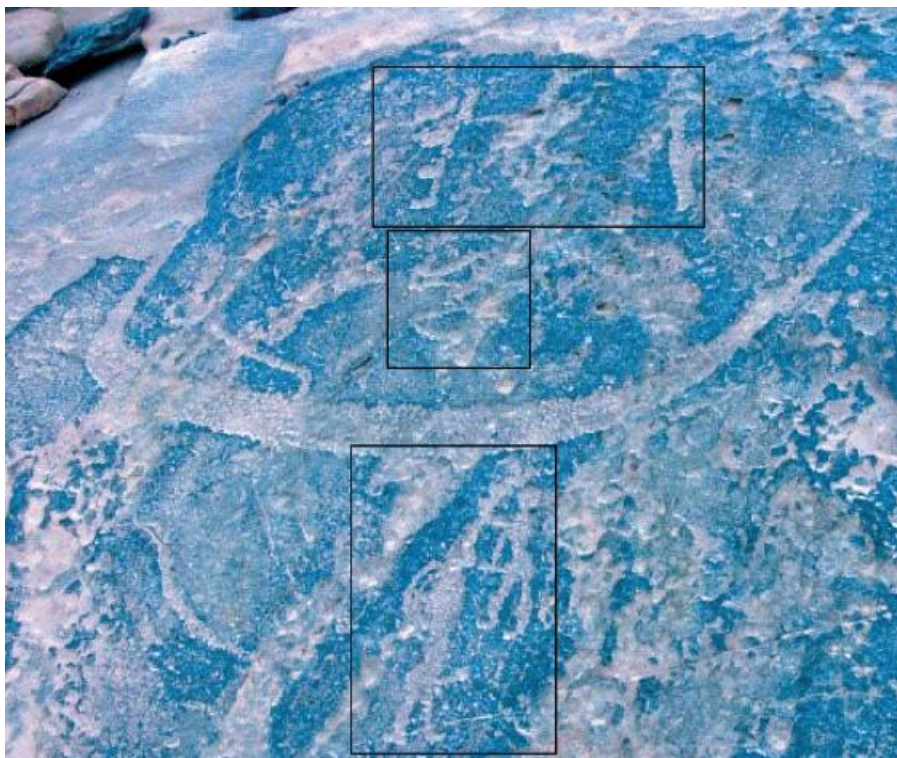
Fig. 3: Rock-cut relief and inscription of the protodynastic king 'Hor' in Wadi Ameyra; photograph: Morenz 2012.

In this combination of image and script we can, in my opinion, distinguish three closely related elements which are arranged vertically (from bottom to top):

    a) image: smiting scene   (+ royal boat)

    b) name: FALCON + phonogram *r* = royal name 'Hor' (*ḥr*)

    c) accompanying inscription: *ḥḏ jnbw* = 'Smiting the (walled) settlement'; or perhaps rather

        more personalised: 'Smiting the (people of the) wall'.

While the royal name of FALCON + MOUTH (regardless of whether the precise reading is Hor or Iri-Hor) seems unproblematic, the accompanying inscription requires a short discussion.[13]

In the rock inscription in Wadi Ameyra, the symbol shows a fortress that is decidedly open (i.e. open according to the conventions of iconography, in the sense of having been conquered or destroyed), and we can compare this with a rock inscription of king Djer with the place name *Pš* (Fig. 4b). Although the locality may be the same, the older inscription lacks an inscriptional designation of the king. It does however demonstrate a creative use of the pictogram, given the high formal plasticity of hieroglyphic writing, and a play with the

---

[13] When it was first published, it was initially understood to be the toponym *jnbw ḥḏ*, see Tallet and Laisney, "Iry-Hor et Narmer au Sud-Sinaï (Ouadi 'Ameyra)": 385–87; Tallet, *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinaï II*. In fact, however, it seems debatable whether this could have been the name of the royal seat of the territorial state, especially as our sources cannot tell us with certainty that it existed at that time.

pictogram's figurative dimension. In addition, the MACE corresponds to the large scene of smiting the enemy on the Nar-meher Palette,[14] and, interpictorially, with the smiting scene depicted under the boat. So we can read *ḥḏ jnbw* – 'Smiting the (walled) settlement / the people of the wall'. As a generic term, the toponym (settlement) or anthroponym (people of the wall) *jnbw* – '(walled) settlement' or, personalized, 'people of the wall' – presumably referred to the local population in the Sinai, with whom the Egyptians had to deal in some form during their expeditions into the distant mountain desert of southwestern Sinai. So here, too, there is a claim to dominance analogous to the smiting scene depicted under the boat, in this case expressed through the medium of writing. The smiting scene, and especially the mace in materially concrete terms, can be understood as a symbolic embodiment of the royal power potential and correspondingly as a pledge of a kind of post-war order. According to Egyptian ideology, the conquest was conducted on behalf and in the name of the king 'Hor', or literally *by* him. Thus, the interplay of image and writing in this rock inscription from Wadi Ameyra creates a particularly early, bimedial text with a coherent representation of royal ideology. The inscription *ḥḏ jnbw* – 'Smiting the (walled) settlement / the people of the wall' – has been recorded in purely semographic terms, while the hieroglyph MOUTH unambiguously expresses the royal name Hor phonographically. In the cultural periphery of southwestern Sinai, members of these Egyptian expeditions employed the novel media dynamics at the time to showcase their king and their claim to control over this area. In the mountainous desert of the Sinai, remote from the Nile, they thus crafted a concept of rulership that was wholly modern in the fourth millennium, perhaps to generate and visually display a 'homeland' for themselves in this cultural periphery/alien environment.

Since we first encountered the iconographic motif 'opened fortress wall' in the sense of 'conquest' in the time of King Hor in the Wadi Ameyra rock inscription discussed above, and then again on the Nar-meher Palette, we can assume that this pictorial motif was created in a royal environment, perhaps even around one of those very kings (Fig. 4), possibly precisely during the reign of the protodynastic King Hor.

---

[14] Ludwig Morenz, *Anfänge der ägyptischen Kunst. Eine problemgeschichtliche Einführung in ägyptologische Bild-Anthropologie* (Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014): 112–20.

GEÖFFNETE FESTUNGSMAUER

Königsnahe Bildlichkeit

Felsbild des Horus
im Wadi Ameyra

Nar-meher-Palette

Felsbild des Djer
im Wadi Ameyra

Jahresname De(we)n
(Täfelchen des Hema-ka, BM/EA32650)

Fig. 4: The pictorial sign OPENED FORTRESS in the proto dynastic and early dynastic periods.

A rock carving, again from Wadi Ameyra in the Sinai (Fig. 5), shows King Djer (first dynasty), identified by an inscribed personified falcon *serekh*, wielding a mace and smiting a man in a posture of submission.

Fig. 5a-c: Rock carving of King Djer in Wadi Ameyra; details: the two inscriptions, transcribed by S. Kroschel.

Near this emblematic scene stands a group of hieroglyphs (Fig. 5b), which can very probably be identified as the toponym *Pš*.[15] Due to the location of the hieroglyphs, we can assume that this refers to a region in southwestern Sinai, or perhaps even more specifically to a settlement (this is indicated by the (partially left open) wall; see Fig. 4). Comparable examples such as the BROKEN-OPEN FORTRESS on the Nar-meher Palette and the rock carving of King Hor from Wadi Ameyra (Fig. 3), infer that the right-hand side of the WALL that encloses the two hieroglyphs *p+š* was deliberately depicted as *broken open*. This was intended to express the fact that the Egyptians had conquered this region (see also Fig. 4).

In addition to the reading of the hieroglyphs in the inscription Fig. 5b as *Pš* I will here suggest a specific reading for the inscription Fig. 5c. In his commendable first edition of it, Pierre Tallet suggested *sp3.wt jmn.tw* – 'districts of the west' – but in view of the local situation, a different reading appears to be at least possible. In a semographic writing, FALCON ON STANDARD could stand here for God/King/Lord – perhaps Egyptian *nṯr* or *nb*?[16] –, while the signs underneath can simply be read as three water ripples (*mw*). Specifically in our situation, however, this word in this rock inscription is unlikely simply to have meant 'water' in general: in view of the geographical situation of the Egyptian expeditions travelling across the *Red Sea*, it will rather have functioned in a more locally specific manner as a designation for '(Red) Sea',[17] i.e. 'God/ Lord of the WATER (= (Red) Sea)'[18]. Thus, an Egyptian claim to rulership was being expressed in a very short, wholly semographic notation. It is probable that this very simple inscription was designed on site, while both the figurative representation of the subjugated man in the hieroglyphic *bdš* posture (hieroglyph form: 𓀉, *sign list* A 7) and the writing in the OPEN WALL (see Fig. 4) suggests a pictorial knowledge of Egyptian *HIGH CULTURE*.

In correspondence with the royal submission scene discussed, there is also a depiction of pacification. This is the figure of a small, squatting man, carved at much less depth, with something like a *ḥtp* mat in front of him (Fig. 6). In terms of iconography, it is not the depiction of an Egyptian, but of a Canaanite, albeit in the Egyptian style, and presumably by an Egyptian scribe or painter. Read according to the Egyptian code, whether as *dj ḥtp* or *s:ḥtp*, the *ḥtp* mat indicates a 'pacification' of the local Canaanite population, and precisely this depiction complements the ruler's triumphal image. As an alternative to *ḥtp* mat we might think of a barren of copper. This figure may have been added in a secondary step – for which the much shallower depth of the engraving gives a material indication.

---

[15] First suggested in Tallet and Laisney, "Iry-Hor et Narmer au Sud-Sinaï (Ouadi 'Ameyra)": 387–89, subsequently in Tallet, *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinaï II*.

[16] The sign *Falcon on standard* has been attested as an ideographic spelling, probably for *nṯr,* since Djer (Jochem Kahl, *Frühägyptisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 2 [Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003]: 257).

[17] It seems that over the centuries, Egyptian expeditions to southwestern Sinai used both the land route with stopping points such as Ain Sokhna, and the sea route via the Red Sea. We have little concrete evidence for the proto-dynastic and early dynastic periods, but this inscription in particular provides an interesting indication of the importance of the sea.

[18] We might assume a reference to a god as the divine authority of Egyptian domination. In the iconic scene *pharaoh smiting the enemy* a reference to a god is regularly added (e.g. on the ceremonial palette of king Nar-meher but also in the OK reliefs from Maghara).

Fig. 6: Egyptian depiction of a 'pacified' Canaanite: a small, squatting man who presents the *ḥtp* mat or a barren of copper (the iconography is not sufficiently distinct).

In these proto-dynastic and early Egyptian rock carvings in southwestern Sinai, we see a clearly colonial perspective of the pharaonic culture, according to which the local inhabitants of the peninsula had no agency, but were either killed or at least subjugated and subservient. This was 'pharaonic' ideology of superiority, while our lack of sources means that we have very little knowledge of social practice, and of any possibly 'softer' cooperations on the ground. It is certainly remarkable that the local inhabitants of southwestern Sinai did not damage or destroy these Egyptian triumphal images during the long periods when the Egyptian expeditions were absent. (They can have been present for hardly more than three months a year, and by no means every year.) We can only speculate about the effect these monumental Egyptian images had on the Canaanite nomads, but it is probable that this monumental imagery made a strong impression. The ethical questions raised by these scenes of absolute violence have been underdiscussed, even under the current aegis of global heritage;[19] and that which is not 'beautiful' or even 'good' seems more complicated, even in the sense of a global culture of conversation, its patterns and interests, and not to be had cheaply. In his Seventh Thesis in 'On the Concept of History' (1940), Walter Benjamin provided a possible motto:

> Es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur ohne zugleich eines der Barbarei zu sein.
> There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.[20]

The way Egyptian relations with the Canaanites in southwestern Sinai were depicted changed dramatically in the early second millennium. In comparison 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 southwestern Sinai, attesting to a completely different

---

[19] For some beginnings see Morenz, *Anfänge der ägyptischen Kunst*; Kara Cooney, *The Good Kings. Absolute Power in Ancient Egypt and the Modern World* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2021).

[20] 'Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried in the procession. They are called 'cultural treasures,' and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For in every case these treasures have a lineage which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another.' Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4: 1939–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009): 391–92.

scenario of socio-cultural interaction.[21] In the Middle Kingdom, Egyptian monumental representations shifted from the iconic scene of *Smiting the Enemy* to cooperation based on intercultural contacts and contracts (Fig. 7).[22]

Changes in the relationship Egyptians-Canaanites in Sinai

OK

MK

subduing → Cooperation

Snofru smites Semite

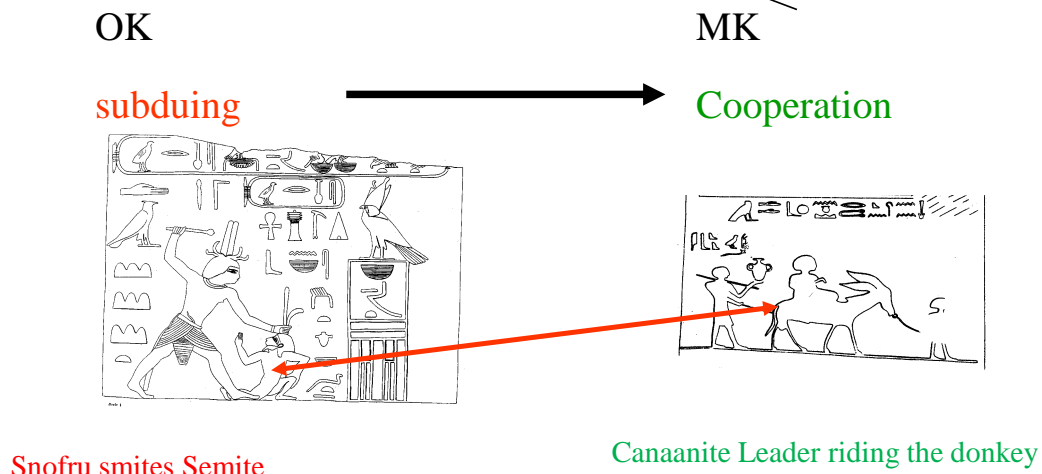Canaanite Leader riding the donkey

Fig. 7: From subjugation to cooperation, changes in Egyptian depictions of Canaanites in Serabit; transcribed from IS: S 5 and S 112 (lower part).

Within this context of changing political iconography, Canaanite leaders such as the 'brother of the ruler of Retjenu Khabi-dadum'[23] (Fig. 8) are shown riding donkeys.

---

[21] Ludwig Morenz, *Die Genese der Alphabetschrift. Ein Markstein ägyptisch-kanaanäischer Kulturkontakte* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2011):75–78.

[22] Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 121–23, 207–15, 249–63, 268–69; Ludwig Morenz, *Polyglotte kanaanäische Schreiber zwischen früher Alef-Bet-Schrift, "Ägyptogrammen" und Hieroglyphenschrift* (in preparation).

[23] Jaroslav Černý, "Semites in Egyptian Mining Expeditions," *Archív orientální* 7, no. 3 (1935): 384–89. This man is known especially from a depiction on an Egyptian stele, S 112, which shows him riding a donkey and refers to him as 'brother of the Prince of Retjenu' (*sn n ḥḳȝ n rṯnw*; Fig. 4 in Černý), as well as from other Egyptian hieroglyphic sources (written names are attested both with and without mimation). There are no known instances of his name in Alefbetic writing (which may simply be due to the contingencies of transmission); see Ludwig Morenz, *Medienarchäologische Sondagen zum Ursprung "unseres" Alphabets vor 4000 Jahren* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2021): 21 with nn. 12 and 69, Fig. 39. The title of 'brother' is probably due to diplomatic linguistic usage – in the sense of authorised representative – and need not mean biological kinship. Our sources do not seem to permit a more precise definition.

Fig. 8: Khabi-dadum; lower part of stele S 112; photograph: Morenz, 2022.

Within a Canaanite, and more broadly West-Semitic, context, this iconography of riding a donkey implied high social status; it was specifically respected and honored by the Egyptians.[24] For the twelfth dynasty, we can observe an intense socio-cultural circulation of poetic energy in Serabit that seems also to have affected the Canaanites who were cooperating with the Egyptian expeditions, directly as well as indirectly. It was in this socio-cultural sphere of culture contact that the Canaanites created the Alef-Bet script which, starting from its original period of creation in southwestern Sinai in the nineteenth century BC, has long since literally filled our present in north and south, east and west.[25]

What follows aims to be a close and concrete reading of a Middle Bronze Age mine inscription from Serabit el-Khadim in the semiotic quadrangle of

ethnicity – work environment – religion – script.

---

[24] Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 60–62.
[25] Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*; Morenz, *Polyglotte kanaanäische Schreiber*.

III. On the Inscription S 357 – Attempt at a *Close Reading* from Epigraphy and Philology to Social and Religious History

The mineral resources turquoise and copper ore were extracted in the mines of southwestern Sinai from the fourth millennium onwards,[26] including during the Middle Bronze Age which is of interest here. The L and M mine complexes on the plateau of Serabit el-Khadim[27] (Fig. 9) are closely related in spatial, labour-economic and conceptual terms. Together with the Egyptian temple of Hathor and the ensemble of Canaanite statuettes found there (the sphinx, S 345; the statuette S 346, and busts S 347 and S 347A; they were probably originally put up during the Middle Kingdom in a Canaanite cult room[28]), it formed the hub of the then new Canaanite Alef-Bet script: certainly most of the extant early Hathorite inscriptions (S 349, 350, 351 etc.) originated there. In the vicinity of the copper and turquoise mines, there are also distinct traces of several structures which most likely were workers' huts.[29] The Canaanite miners appear to have lived seasonally near their places of work. While previous scholarship has tended to discuss the inscriptions in isolation, this context seems to me to be socially and culturally important – not least for the question central to this essay, i.e. the sacralisation of the workspace by means of writing, specifically of the early Alef-Bet script.

---

[26] These raw materials were the objectives of Egyptian expeditions to southwestern Sinai from the fourth and third millennia onwards (Morenz and Gutmann, "Wertschätzung und Bedarf"); it was in this context of mineral extraction that the Egyptians and Canaanites of southwestern Sinai came into closer cultural contact in the Middle Bronze Age (at Serabit el-Khadim, but also at Maghara), see Morenz, *Polyglotte kanaanäische Schreiber*.

[27] For more precise insights an archaeological investigation of Mine M would be necessary, something that seems to me to be desirable at least in the medium term.

[28] Ludwig Morenz, *GOTT – Zum Ursprung von El im mittelbronzezeitlichen Serabit el Chadim* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2023): 37–38.

[29] A more detailed documentation is still pending, a photographic survey was begun in November/December 2022. Overall, the cluster of worker habitations in the mining area of the southwestern Sinai is still somewhat under-researched, especially beyond existing deliberations on Wadi Maghara (W.M. Flinders Petrie, *Researches in Sinai* [London: Dutton, 1906]; Maryvonne Chartier-Raymond, "Notes sur Maghara," *Cahier de recherches de l'Institut de papyrologie et d'égyptologie de Lille* 10 [1988]: 13–22; Tallet, *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinaï I*: 23–25, and Figs. 2.6 und 2.7). A Master's dissertation at Bonn by V. Schmitz is in the process of exploring these questions. For the socio-economic context see also I. Beit Arieh, "Investigations in Mine L," *Tel Aviv. Journal of the Tel Aviv University Institute of Archaeology* 5 (1978): 175–78.

Fig. 9: The L and M mine complexes, photograph: Morenz, December 2022.

The two inscriptions S 357 and 358 were put up in the interior of the two mines L (S 358) and M (S 357), which were presumably closely connected through the work processes. They are still *in situ*, while the large cluster on the outer wall of mine L (inscriptions S 349ff) was removed to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo in the last century.[30] Even in Petrie's time at the beginning of the twentieth century, the inscribed tablets near the entrance to Mine L had mostly fallen off the rock face,[31] but we can see from examples such as Sinai 354 and 355 (Fig. 10) that they formed a dense cluster. We should accordingly expect a close intertextuality in these inscriptions,[32] such as is very evident, in terms of content, in inscriptions S 357, 358, 351, or 349. The semantic web is tightly woven around the twin topics of the world of work (they key word is *nqb* – 'mine') and the world of the sacred (key words *ʾl* – '[god] El' – and *bˁlt* – '[goddess] Baˁalat').

---

[30] Flinders Petrie, *Researches in Sinai*; the same applies for the later finds made by the Harvard Expedition, Romain F. Butin, "The Serabit Expeditions of 1930. The Protosinaitic Inscriptions," *Harvard Theological Review* 25 (1930): 130–203.

[31] Flinders Petrie, *Researches in Sinai*: 130.

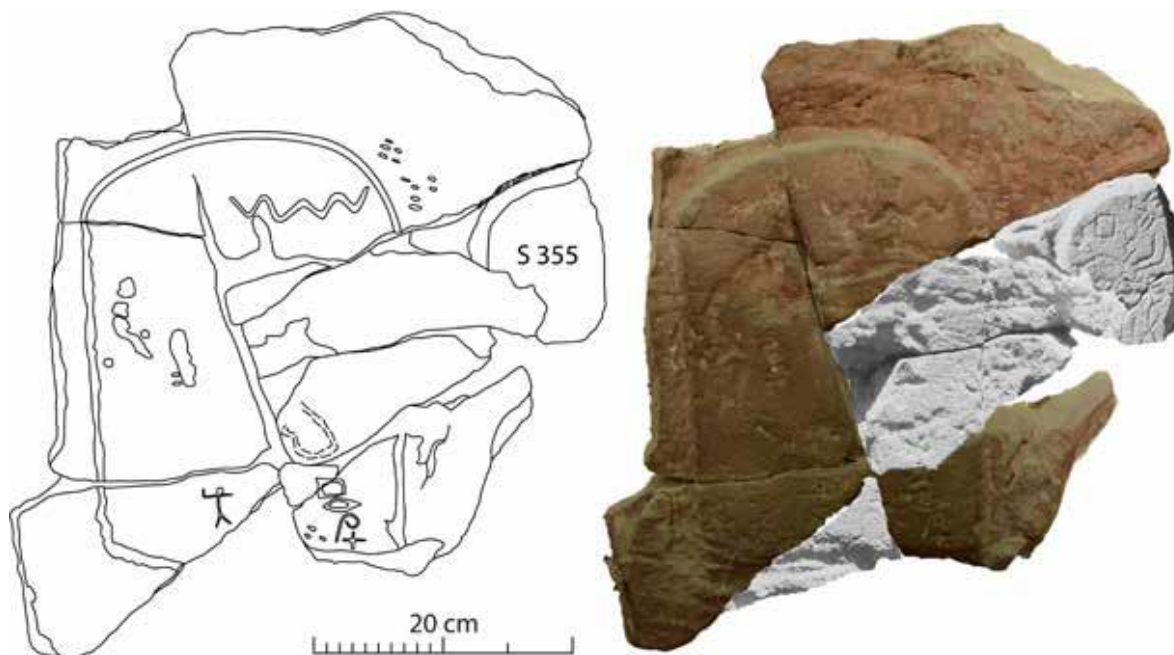[32] Morenz, *Polyglotte kanaanäische Schreiber*.

Fig. 10: Rock inscriptions S 354 and 355; photograph of the fragments (S 354) are from the Cairo Museum, with missing parts supplemented after photos taken by Petrie (drawing and photomontage by David Sabel)

Excursus 1: The Use of Writing - A School in the L and M Mine Complex?

Every script needs to be learned. We know nothing as yet about the teaching and learning traditions for the early Alef-Bet script, and our sources are very thin on the ground. However, some clues can be gleaned from the L and M mine complex finds.

As discussed above, the Canaanite miners apparently lived near the mine, and they may have learned the Alef-Bet script there, too. In the discussion below, 'school' always refers to the institution, never to a specific building. In the vicinity of the Canaanite mine complex L and M there was a hub of Alef-Bet writing, which can be observed not only in the rock inscriptions, but also on smaller carriers of writing. These include rock fragment S 375C, inscribed with what is presumably a name, *j-ᶜ-n*;[33] a rock fragment with (pseudo) hieroglyphs written presumably by a Canaanite,[34] and a pictorial ostracon which contains the images of a man (= El) and a cow (= Baᶜalat).[35] In addition, there are smaller fragments with incised characters which may also belong within the horizon of the Alef-Bet script.[36] A stone tablet (S 375A) was found here which not only carries an inscription in the Alef-Bet script, but also one in very cursive Egyptian hieroglyphics with the occupational designation *mt̠nw* – 'pathfinder, guide'.[37] It, too, was probably written by a Canaanite, and testifies to a certain degree of knowledge of Egyptian writing. In this context we should also recall the Egyptograms in the two rock inscriptions, S 350 and 355.[38]

---

[33] See the discussion in Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 50–52.
[34] See the discussion in Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 102–3.
[35] Morenz, *GOTT*.
[36] Morenz, *Polyglotte kanaanäische Schreiber*.
[37] Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 207–14; see most recently Morenz, *Polyglotte kanaanäische Schreiber*.
[38] Morenz, *Polyglotte kanaanäische Schreiber*.

The idea of a school in this mine complex is supported not only by the quantity of inscriptions, but also by the fact that different carriers of writing were employed, ranging from the rock face to stone fragments ("ostraca"); and that very different degrees of literacy can be observed, from artistic writing (such as in inscription S 354[39]) to marginalia and semi-literacy.[40]

Based on these observations, I would differentiate the following aspects in the sense of a historical sociology of writing:

a) the development by Canaanites of the Alef-Bet script under the strong and direct influence of Egyptian hieroglyphic script as its model, in the vicinity of the Egyptian temple of Hathor and specifically the temple workshop,[41] while the temple of Hathor simultaneously served as a cultic space for the Canaanites, in which they put up statuettes inscribed in the Alef-Bet script.[42]

b) continuation/transmission of the Alef-Bet script, especially in the mine complex L and M, perhaps in connection with a 'school'.

c) some further mines (especially H) show evidence of the Alef-Bet script, but a complete absence of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing; they presumably also were workspaces of the Canaanites; closely connected with this is the question of the socio-cultural network of the Canaanite miners on the high plateau of Serabit.

End of excursus

Inscription S 357, which has been scratched into the rock at Serabit el Khadim (Fig. 11),[43] is one of the longest of all extant early Alefbetic texts (cf. also S 349, also from this mine, which also concerns the subject of sacrifice).[44] It is arranged in an unusual layout, in one long vertical line or column, and one horizontal line. We cannot be wholly certain that both were written by the same person, because the line could be a continuation of the column. However, both parts are closely related and form one text; and it is at least sufficiently plausible that both were written at the same time. Moreover, in view of the remarkably high tolerance for variation of sign forms within any given inscription from Serabit el-Khadim, there is no objection to this assumption on palaeographic grounds.

Excursus 2: Hermeneutic Problems and Hopes

The corpus of early Alefbetic inscriptions is still extremely small, even though some short texts have been added to it in recent years.[45] I see in particular the following areas of concern:

---

[39] Ludwig Morenz, *Kultur-Poetik in der Mittelbronzezeit* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2022): 95–98.

[40] Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 241–44.

[41] Ludwig Morenz, *Schriftentwicklung im Kulturkontakt. Das erste Jahrtausend der Alphabetschrift* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2012): 52–65.

[42] Morenz, *Polyglotte kanaanäische Schreiber*.

[43] The inscription has been discussed with relative frequency by scholars (see recently, e.g., Aren Max Wilson-Wright, "Sinai 357: A Northwest Semitic Votive Inscription to Teššob," *Journal of American Oriental Society* 136 [2016]: 247–63), but interpretations have been made on an often problematic epigraphic basis, which has sometimes lead to wrongly identified sign forms. A new epigraphic basis is now the drawing made by David Sabel from a tin foil squeeze taken from the rock face (2014), printed in Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: plate II.

[44] For the complete corpus see Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*.

[45] For a reappraisal of the corpus see Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*.

a) The shortness of the various inscriptions (S 357, which is being discussed in the present essay, and S 349 are among the longest inscriptions in the corpus)

b) Precise identification of language (Canaanite or Aramaic?); or perhaps rather the existence of a certain hybridity,[46] especially if we take into account the fact that in Serabit there lived and worked, and presumably also wrote, local Canaanites side by side with those who had come there from the Levant.[47]

c) More precise dating of the individual inscriptions.

d) Word division (there are sometimes different options, at least at first glance)

e) Haplography (in S 357 presumably at the initial Alef); perhaps also dittography (there are two successive Bet signs in the column, but presumably both should be read)[48]

f) Concrete identification of signs, combined with the question of norm and tolerance for variation[49]

g) Potential individual readings, and scribal creativity (including possible inexperience)

h) Potential spelling mistakes

i) … .

As difficult as our starting position appears to be, we have correctives in the parallels that occur the inscriptions (some of which are formulaic). Contemporary texts from Serabit should be considered preferentially, because we can expect them to exhibit a homogeneous scribal layer of meaning. In addition, I regard coherence within the cultural and semantic frame of reference to be hermeneutically valid, especially in view of the following two aspects:

a) the Serabitic pair of deities El and Ba^calat (as the Canaanite equivalent to Egyptian Ptah and Hathor)   and

b) reference to mining work (such as the root *nqb*, which has been attested several times: S 346, 349, 350, 351, 352).

As small as our corpus of early Alefbetic inscriptions from Serabit still is,[50] the early Alefbetic texts can thus be both read and translated – with the usual uncertainties, of course –, and always with the intention to 'fail better' (Samuel Beckett).

End of excursus

The vertical column and horizontal line were intended to circumscribe – and thereby mark as sacred – space inside the mine. We can at least assume that sacrifices were indeed made to the god El (cf. inscription S 350: 'El inside the mine'[51]), in accordance with the description in

---

[46] On this problem see Anson F. Rainey, *Canaanite in the Amarna Tablets. A Linguistic Analysis of the Mixed Dialect Used by Scribes from Canaan* (Leiden: Brill, 1996). The question is above all (as J. Quack reminds me) to which degree the Northwest Semitic languages had diverged by the early second millennium. We lack the evidence to give a more precise answer.

[47] Morenz, *Polyglotte kanaanäische Schreiber*.

[48] While haplography is well attested in the Alefbetic inscriptions, especially to make connections across word boundaries (such as *mꜣhb bᶜlt*), dittography has not yet been securely attested.

[49] Palaeographic analysis for alef by David Sabel, "Das Alef – Paläographische Beobachtungen," in *Sinai und Alphabetschrift. Die frühesten alphabetischen Inschriften und ihr kanaanäisch-ägyptischer Entstehungshorizont im Zweiten Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, auth. Ludwig Morenz (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2019): 231–39.

[50] Recent additions have come from the tableaus at Gebel Lihyan and Rod el-Air, and from the mines; for an overview see Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*.

[51] Morenz, *GOTT*: 42–44.

the text of S 357. This new reading and interpretation – which are based on epigraphic observations, but also with a view to the socio-cultural context – permit an insight into Canaanite sacrificial practice and its underlying sacrificial logic during the Middle Bronze Age.
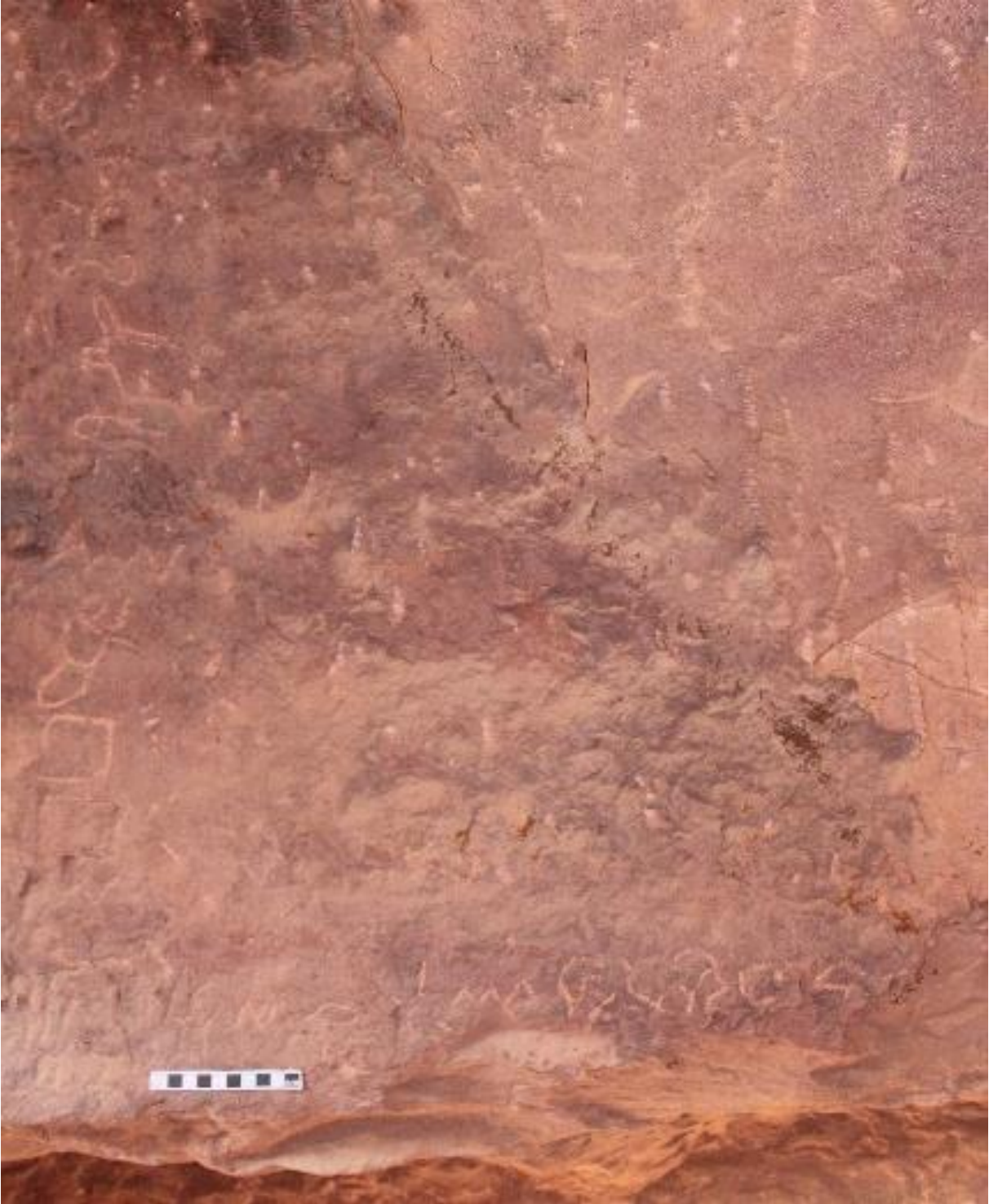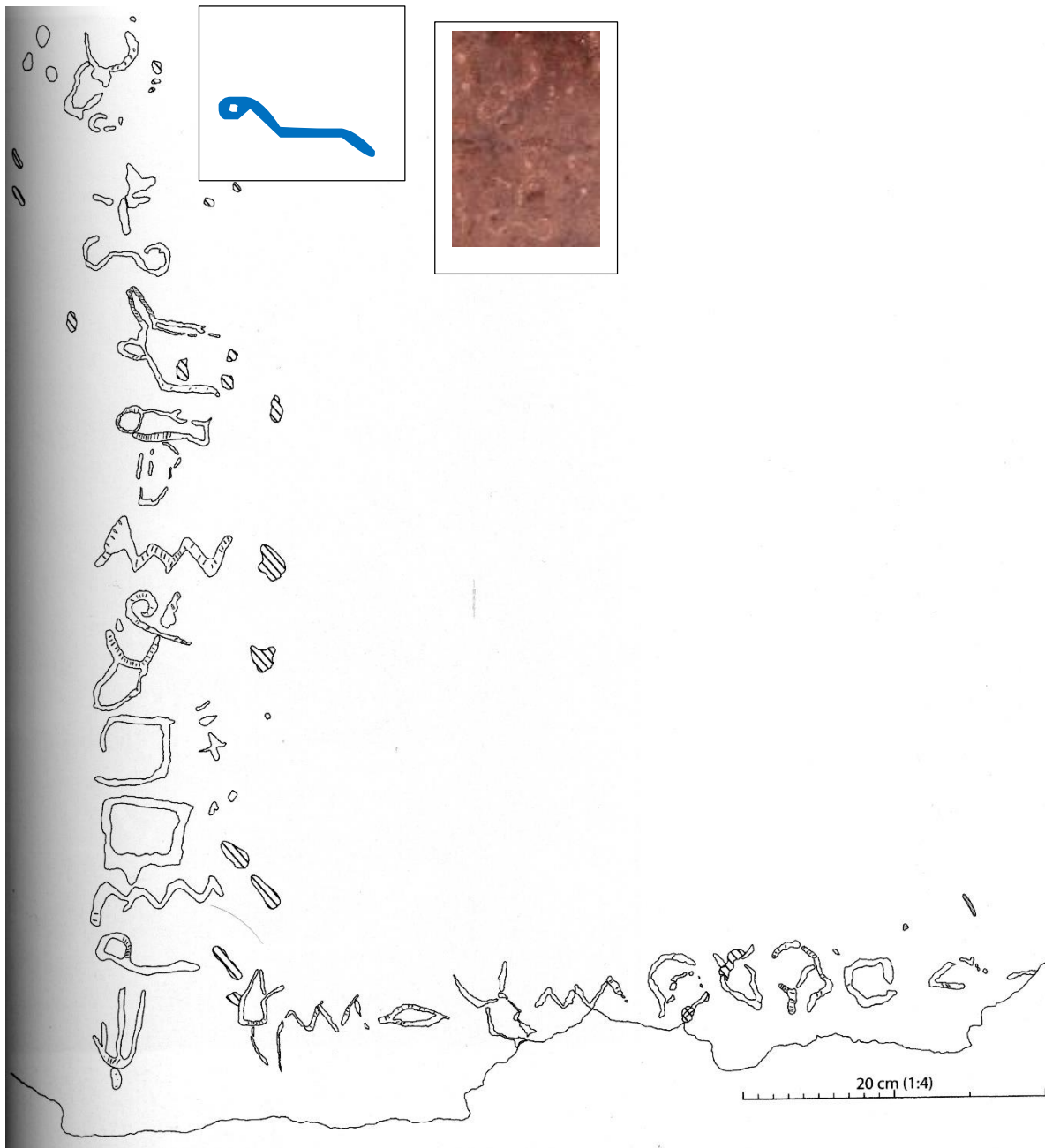
Fig. 11: Inscription S 357, photo and transcription: David Sabel.

The beginning of the column shows an epigraphically unconventional design which has so far escaped scholarly attention, possibly due to its somewhat problematic state of preservation, whose discovery may have required multiple autopsies.[52] In contrast to previous approaches, the name of the god El (𐤀𐤋 = *ʾl*) becomes legible with the initial Luwy (later renamed Lamed), which has so far not received scholarly attention. Mention of the god's name at the beginning of the inscription corresponds exactly to the high profile enjoyed by the god El, especially in the mine complex L+M; initial mention of El also occurs on the rock stelae, S 350 and S 352,

---

[52] These observations are based on the epigraphic survey by the Bonn Department of Egyptology at Serabit el-Khadim in November and December 2022, and specifically on multiple autopsies of this inscription by Sabel and Morenz.

near the entrance of mine L.[53] Before we continue with the translation, we need to discuss some further epigraphic questions.

Compared with the Alef ox head, the letter Luwy is very small, but still clearly recognisable.[54] To the right of it, there is a prominent natural fault line in the stone, which looks like the letter Naḥaš (Fig. 12). Researchers have in fact incorrectly ignored the existing Luwy and instead posited a Naḥaš[55] – probably rightly so, as the scribe will have integrated the naturally occurring line into the inscription. The Naḥaš is easily legible to the observer, even though it is not man-made. Looking at a – hypothetical – inscription scenario, we can assume that the small size of the Luwy was due to the fact that this letter was to be placed between the preceding Alef, which had already been inscribed, and the naturally occurring Naḥaš, which the writer may only have 'discovered' during the process of writing. Even though this SNAKING letter was not man-made, it formed a concrete part of the inscription as an unwritten but legible letter[56] – recalling to us the words in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's 1893 lyric drama 'Death and the Fool' ('Der Tor und der Tod'):

> was nie geschrieben wurde lesen
> what was never writ, they read.[57]

> (From Death's closing speech).

---

[53] In rock inscription S 350, the Alefbetic name ☌℮ is followed by an Egyptoglyph, so that we can read El-PTAH (Morenz, *GOTT*: 42–44). In this way the intercultural equation of the gods was also expressed in specific graphic terms. We can assume a more personal dimension in inscription S 352, since it addresses 'El of mercy', Morenz, *GOTT*: 68–69.

[54] In Morenz*, Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 188, I had assumed this to be a snake's head as *pars pro toto* for the ﹏ snake. We know this well from Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, but not at all from the Alef-Bet script. Moreover, the 'head' is not closed. The sign's shape looks like a Luwy and, read as Luwy, actually makes sense here.

[55] For a copy see Arieh, "Investigations in Mine L."

[56] Reproductions of the inscription give a Naḥaš, without discussing this epigraphically important detail (see, e.g., Arieh, "Investigations in Mine L"; there is also a still incorrect, traditional explanation despite the better drawing in Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 188), while the Luwy/Lamed had simply not yet been identified/recognized.

[57] Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Death and the Fool: A Drama in One Act*, trans. Elisabeth Walker (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1914): 45.
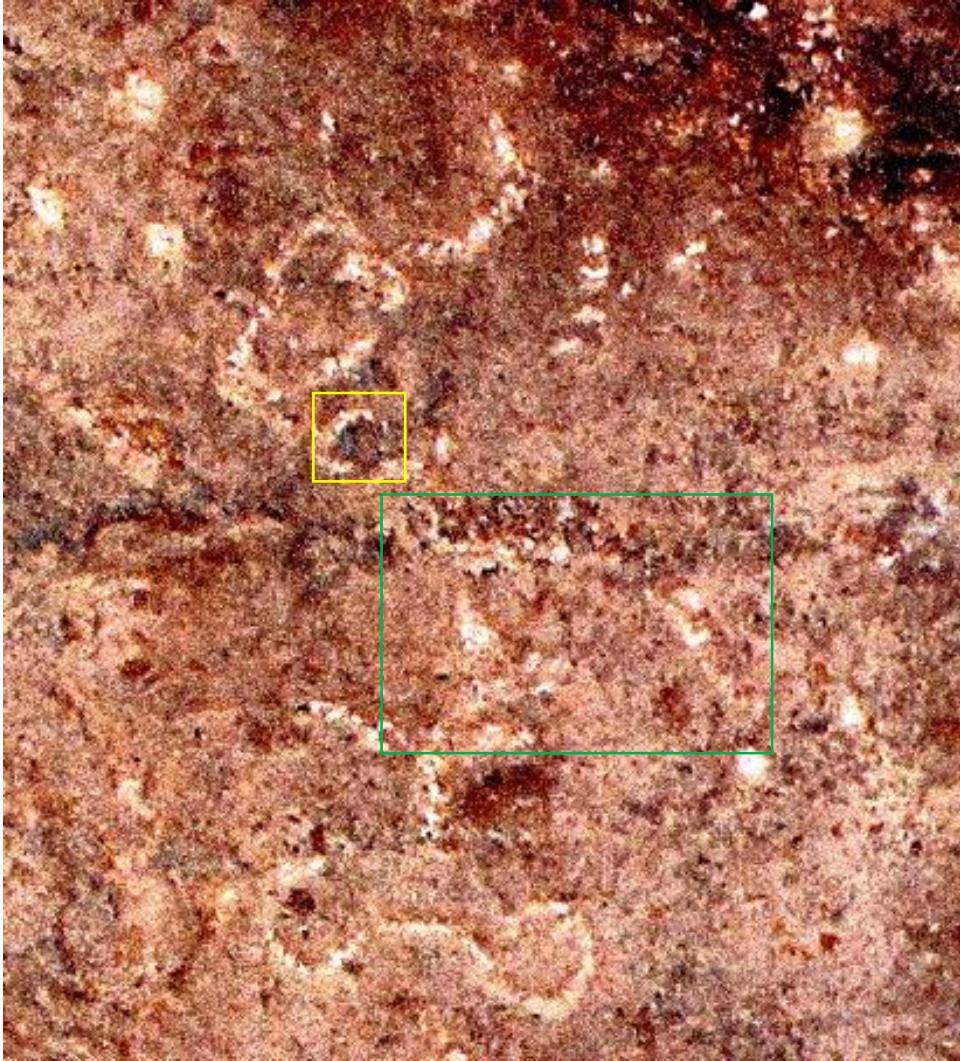
Fig. 12: Beginning of inscription S 357; inside the lines see the small Luwy and the 'naturally occurring' Naḥaš.

We can further assume that the Alef ox head at the beginning of the inscription functions as a doubly valent sign, intertextually standing for the god's name El, and simultaneously for the pronoun *ꜣnt* – 'you' (Fig. 13). We know such double usage in two words of a singly written letter from other early Alefbetic inscriptions: in one case as concrete haplography in phrases such as *mꜣhb bꜥlt*, in which the letter Bet can occur only once;[58] or in inscription S 358 in the neighbouring mine L (for the Mem in *mlk* and in *ꜥlm*).[59] In this case, the words were also connected by the graphic coincidence of initial and final letters. In addition, rock inscription S 377 at Gebel Lihyan shows the double use of the Alef ox head – in this case as in S 357 it is the inital – which can be read both as *ꜣl* – 'El' – and as *ꜣm* – 'mother'.[60] In inscription S 380, the Alef ox head similarly occurs only once but should be read twice, both as *ꜣl* and as *ꜣb* – 'El' and 'father' –; and perhaps this way of writing with the doubly valent Alef ox head was practiced particularly often given the potentially particularly high supplementary semantic content (iconic recourse to the cow-headed goddess) that lay dormant in this letter. In any case, a

---

[58] For collected references see Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 240–41.
[59] Morenz, *GOTT*: 61–65.
[60] Morenz, *GOTT*: 49–51.

doubly-linked Alef – both as *ʾl* and as *ʾnt* – can also be read at the beginning of inscription S 357:

ʾ
l
nt.
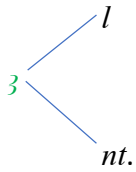
And in fact this truncated spelling serves to save neither time nor space, but rather creates a semantic relationship, by linking, in written language, the Alef of the god's name, El, with the Alef of the human invocator (be the pronoun *ʾnt* – 'you' or *ʾnk* – 'I'). The written text may even contain an additional, visual-supplementary flash of the goddess Baᶜalat (cow-headed Hathor-Baᶜalat) over the Alef ox head. Both the inclusion of the naturally occurring Naḥaš and the haplography of the Alef show a playfully artistic composition of inscription S 357.

Fig. 13: Reading sequence at the beginning of the inscription.

At first glance, the subsequent sign form (Fig. 14) appears strange. However, some apparent lines in the stone do not in fact belong to the sign forms, but are instead slight obscurations on the rock face. Previous scholarship posited a Taw, usually without any epigraphic discussion

of the problem.[61] In fact, a possible alternative might be a Kap, although the palm of the hand is more clearly visible in the other instances in this inscription (Fig. 15a-c). If we should read a Kap here, it would result in *ʾnk* rather than *ʾnt*; i.e. the pronoun 'I', but I think this is less likely in palaeographic terms. There is at any rate a certain degree of formal variance between the two more unambiguous Kap signs in the column.

Fig. 14: Detail of inscription S 357. The reader's eye is deceived by natural lines, damage and discolouration; the transcription gives the intentional and clearly recognisable lines as observed on the spot in 2022.

Fig. 15a-c: Comparison of characters with the two Kap signs in the column.

Like S 357, inscription S 349 also opens with the pronoun 'you' (*ʾnt*); it addresses one who sacrifices (*tꜥ*) and simultaneously a 'great one among the miners' (*rb nqbnm*). Sacrificing represents, unsurprisingly, an important subject in these inscriptions.

Overall, the vertical column of inscription S 357 can be read as follows (taking into account the initial Alef, which must be read twice):

ℰ℧

℧⌒✕ᴜⱱᴸⱱ⌒

⊶Ψ⁓ℰ℧ᗡ ᗡ ⁓ℰΨ

ʾl

ʾ[62]nt t̠(/š)pn

---

[61] See for example Anson F. Rainey, "Notes on Some Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions," *Israel Exploration Journal* 25 (1975): 106–16; Benjamin Sass, *The Genesis of the Alphabet and its Development in the Second Millennium BC* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988); see also Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*.
[62] Haplography.

dk(y)-m[63] *l ʒb b*[64] *mlk*

I)   Invocation of god

El![65]

II)   Sacrificial ritual
- actor

You *rock hyrax* (metaphor for the priest-miner being addressed here),[66]

- action

Pound/crush (copper ore)[67] for the *Father in regalness* (= El).[68]
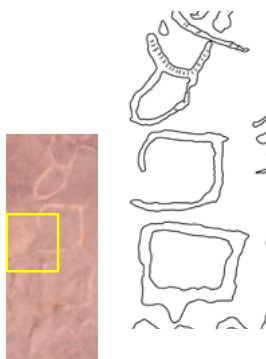

Fig. 16: Detail of inscription S 357; the first Bet is obscured by a bump in the rock face (inside yellow lines) – dittography or two intentionally successive Bet signs?

---

[63] We might think of *dkk* or *dky*, see Rainey, "Notes on Some Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions": 113; Rainey, "Some Minor Points in Two Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions," *Israel Exploration Journal* 31 (1981): 93. The enclitic *m* indicates the imperative case. It does, however, *contra* Rainey, not refer to *ʒb* (which Rainey read as 'enemy', but which should be better understood as an epithet of the god El), but rather to the act of sacrifice with the raw materials extracted from the mine.

[64] The second Bet can potentially be regarded as a dittography (see Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 188) but it can also be easily integrated into the reading.

[65] As already mentioned, inscriptions S 350 or S 352 also begin with the name of the god El, and we can identify this as a formulaic opening with the naming/invocation of the god El.

[66] See the discussion in Morenz, *GOTT*; we should not expect the Canaanites in Serabit to have had a highly educated and professionalised priesthood, and for this reason can also expect a metaphorical use of language. As a metaphor, the designation 'rock hyrax' is an excellent fit for the men who worked in the mountain. Let me re-draw attention to inscription S 349, where line 1 addresses 'one who sacrifices', who is subsequently apostrophized as 'great one among the miners'. Both S 357 and S 349 originate from the same mine complex, and we can expect an intertextual interplay without having to assume a direct and specifically intended intertextuality (without, however, being able to rule it out).

[67] The material itself is not being mentioned, but can be assumed to be contextually (self-)evident.

[68] Intratextually, the two roots *ʒb* and *mlk* reconnect back to the initial invocation of the god El. The designation of El as 'king' (*mlk*) is paralleled in inscription S 358, namely 'father' (*ʒb*) in S 381 (*ʒl w ʒb* – 'the father, who is [the god] El', see Morenz, *GOTT*: 46). Here, again, a coherent picture emerges from the different inscriptions. If the two successive Bet signs in S 357 should be read only once, it would give us *ʒb mlk* = '... for the father, the king.'

This is about El as the divine lord of the mine (cf. especially inscriptions S 350 and S 351).[69]

Looking at the three definable text blocks of the column, the initial invocation of El has been shifted left, and the letters Alef+Luwy stand very closely together. This makes the name of the god appear very compact in visual terms (Fig. 17).[70]
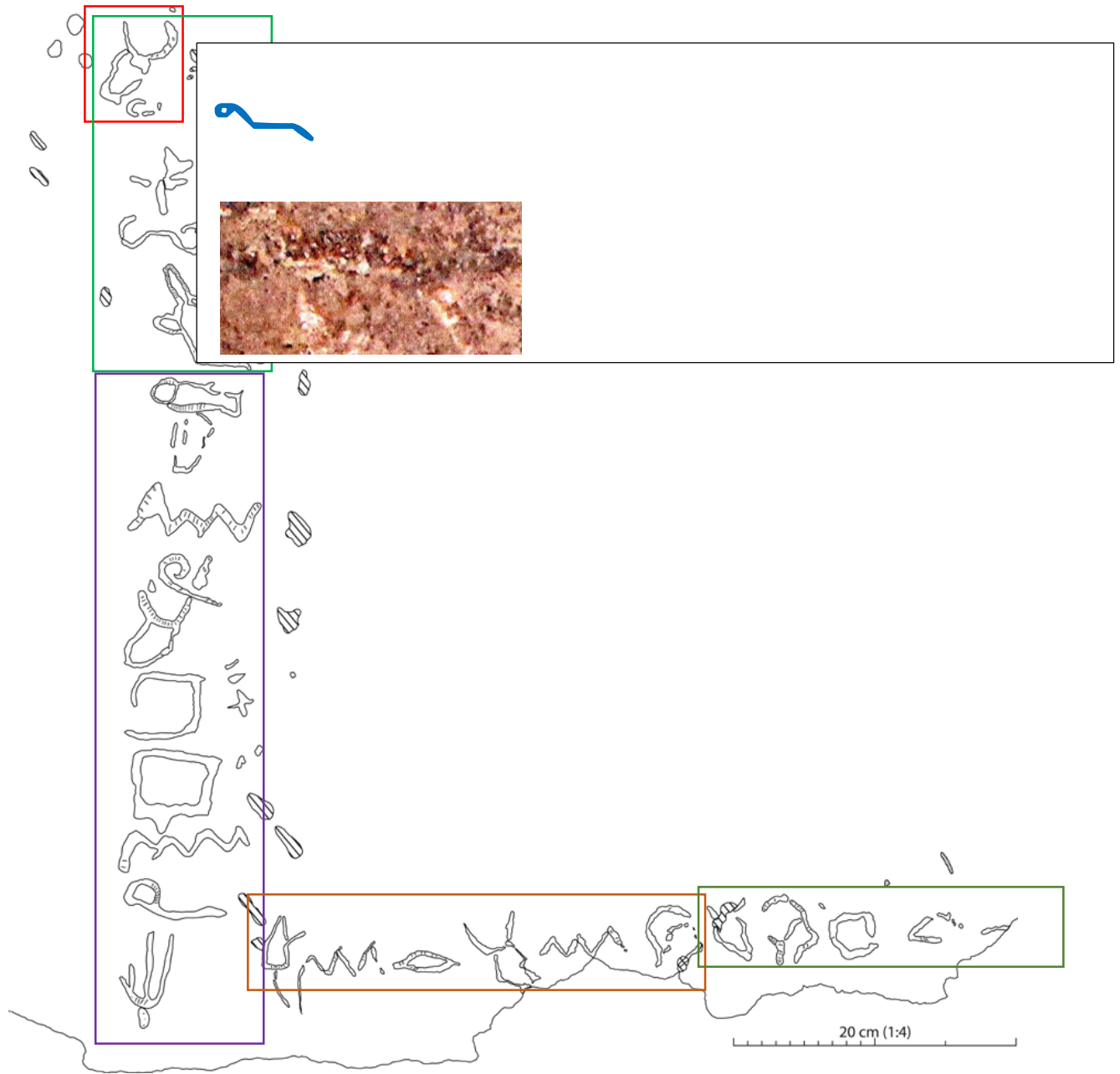

Fig. 17: Five Text blocks of inscription S 357.

There is an intratextual association, insofar as the mention of the god's name 'El' at the beginning of the column and 'father in regalness' as an epithet of El at its end (Fig. 18) interact

---

[69] Morenz, *GOTT*.

[70] Unlike in the photographs, there are no distortions in this drawing. It was copied directly from the wall with thin foil, from which a drawing was then made.

closely, thus marking an intratextual association, in which the two Alef ox heads correspond visually and semantically.
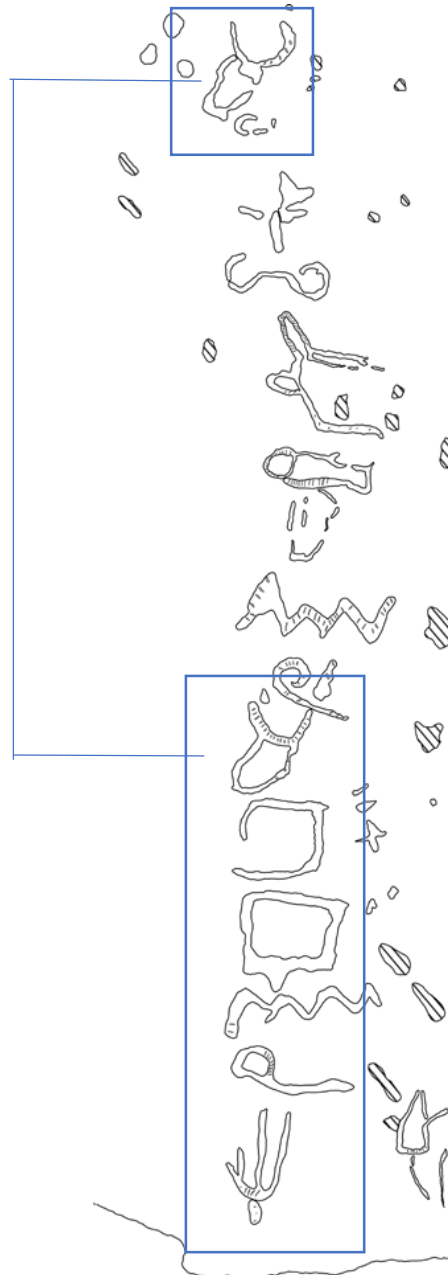

Fig. 18: Intratextual connection between the god's name and epithet in inscription S 357.

The two small signs in approximately the middle of the column to the right of the Bet are more difficult to identify (Fig. 19). They can be read as $\underline{d}t$ – 'this'. We could view this as a paratextual marginal note closely connected with the inscription.[71] Alternatively, the signs could simply have functioned to mark the space for the inscription; or, again, be a trace of later reception: 'this' could simply be a reference to that which was given in the sacrifice. A more precise

---

[71] See, e.g., Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 188.

identification seems to me neither possible nor essential for a basic understanding of this inscription at the present time.
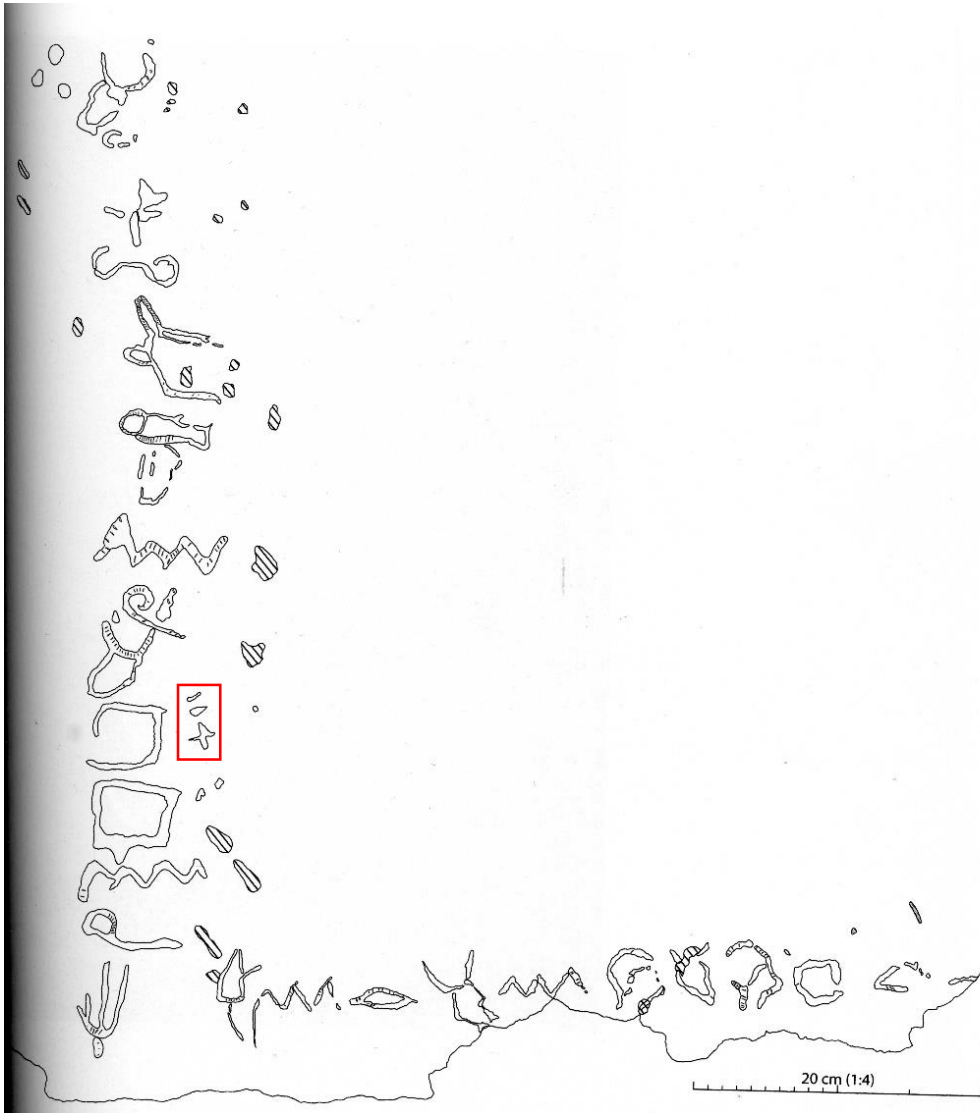
Fig. 19: The two small signs to the right of the column.

The horizontal line which continues on from the column should be read from left to right. The sign forms (in particular the second Alef) are rendered very uneven by the rock surface on which they have been inscribed:

ᛘᚳᚦ ᚨᚱᚨ

ᚨᚱ ᚳᚢᚩᛖ ✕ ///

šm^ʿ ꜣmr   sacramental

28

ꜣr bˁl [t]⁷² ///⁷³   interpretation

Hear the utterance⁷⁴:

The light of Baˁalat⁷⁵ ///⁷⁶.

ꜣr bˁl [t] – '*light of Baˁalat*' – can be understood as a metaphor referring to the coveted minerals extracted from the mine (turquoise/copper), which were conceived of as *luminous*. We are familiar with this pictorial world from the Egyptian metaphor of turquoise in Serabit el-Khadim, where Hathor was said *to appear in/as turquoise* (*ḫꜣj m mfkꜣ.t*).⁷⁷

Excursus 3: On the Form of Sign Ꙍ and two different 'Shin' Sounds in this Inscription?⁷⁸

Of phonological interest in the Alef-Bet script are not only the differentiation of various *h*-sounds (*h, ḥ, ḫ*) and of the two *d*-sounds (*d, ḏ*), but also the graphic differentiation of the *s*-sounds. In addition to the ∽ (*Shin₁*, both *š* and *th*), which frequently occurs in the Serabit inscriptions, there is also the sign Ꙍ, which was probably named *Shawt* ('thorn bush')⁷⁹ or alternatively *Shin₂* ('mountain').⁸⁰ As a matter of fact the Alefbetic form of sign Ꙍ is only attested in inscription S 357. What is strange in graphic terms is the right-hand stroke of Ꙍ, but it does seem to be part of the form of this sign. Nevertheless, we might perhaps read it rather as MOUNTAIN than THORN BUSH. The inscription dates from a time when the phonologically relevant character inventory was still being developed in the early phase of the Alef-Bet script, and this sign Ꙍ may be known to us only because of a coincidence of

---

⁷² Rudiments of the Luwy can still be discerned, to which a Taw may plausibly be added.

⁷³ We are unable to say whether the presumed Taw was followed by more letters.

⁷⁴ We are familiar with the word *šmˁ* from the Hebrew Bible, while the word *ꜣmr* is attested several times in the early first millennium BC, such as in the Khirbet Qeiyafa ostracon, see Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 188 with n. 622.

⁷⁵ Adding the divine name of Baˁalat seems to me to be very plausible now, because the remains of the supposed Luwy as the third letter are clearly recognisable. In Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 188, I had still preferred to divide up the words differently and read the numeral term *ꜣrbˁ* – 'four'.

⁷⁶ An alternative translation variant is, 'Hearken, said the *light of Baˁalat.*' A difficulty for any interpretation is the fact that the end of the inscription is no longer extant.

⁷⁷ So for example in what is presumably a cult hymn to Hathor from Serabit el-Khadim from the early Middle Kingdom, see most recently Ludwig Morenz, *Medienarchäologische Sondagen*: 55–56 with n. 18. Whether or not this was a deliberate parallel formation can be left undecided.

⁷⁸ This excursus has been largely inspired by a discussion with Yannick Wiechmann.

⁷⁹ Gordon Hamilton, *The Origins of the West Semitic Alphabet in Egyptian Scripts* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2006): 123–26, 373–74.

⁸⁰ Manfred Krebernik, "Buchstabennamen, Lautwerte und Alphabetgeschichte," in *Getrennte Welten? Kommunikation, Raum und Wahrnehmung in der Alten Welt*, ed. Robert Rollinger, Andreas Luther and Josef Wiesehöfer (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Antike, 2007): 159. Hieroglyph M 44 (THORN) could certainly have functioned as a model, with Hamilton, *The of Origins the West Semitic Alphabet*: 123–26; but it may also have been reinterpreted in the context of the Canaanite takeover.

transmission from this one inscription; it did not in any case become a part of the later alphabetic script.

Accordingly, we may be able to distinguish between š₁ and š₂ in the early Alefbetic inventory of signs in the Serabit inscriptions, and so catch a glimpse of the conceptual process of how signs were classified phonologically. Š₁ is likely to have been the predecessor of the 'ordinary' š (= Hebrew, Aramaic and Ugaritic š and Arabic s), while š₂ is that Hebrew š which is being posited as Proto-Semitic ṯ, which has been preserved in this form in Ugaritic and Arabic (becoming t in Aramaic).[81] The sign (Shawt/)Shin (𐤔) probably represents the 'ordinary' š in S 357, bearing in mind that we know little about the concrete realities of pronunciation in southwestern Sinai in the first half of the second millennium BC (the problem of phonetics versus phonology). In addition, local Canaanites lived side by side with their compatriots who had travelled from the Levant, so that we should expect the coexistence of groups of people with different linguistic and, above all, phonetic traditions.[82] Above all, we must take into account that this was still an experimental phase of what was then new Alefbetic literacy, during which the phonologically relevant phonographic inventory was in a process of differentiation.

Then there is the additional problem of the history of writing and phonology, namely that in the Semitic Alef-Bet scripts ś shares the same letter with š.[83] The phonologically 'real' articulation of š (i.e. š < ṯ) will probably still have been s at the time.[84] It is unclear whether the word špn originated from ṯ, š or ś, because in fact all three sounds should be rendered with Shin in Canaanite.[85] In the case of šmʿ there is a Proto-Semitic š, which was probably actually pronounced 'sh' (rendered š in Ugaritic, Akkadian, Aramaic and Egyptian). Then 𐤔 – Shawt/Shin₂ – here could indicate that what was in fact meant was 'sh', while Shin₁ (𐤎) could also stand for any sibilant.

In terms of phonological history, it seems questionable whether 𐤎 (= Shin₁) necessarily only represents a transmitted Proto-Semitic ṯ, since a transmitted ś could also be a possible reference. Some uncertainty remains for the time being, but one possibility seems to be the existence of differing traditions of writing and pronunciation, of which one voiced Shin₁ (𐤎) as 'ṯ' 's' and Shawt/Shin₂ (𐤔) as 'sh', while the other used Shin₁ (š) for 'ṯ' 's' and 's'. Shawt/Schin₂ (𐤔) appears to be semantically marked, insofar as it is attested to date only in inscription S 357, and has not entered the tradition. Perhaps it is even an attempt at sound differentiation by the author of this inscription? By contrast, 𐤎 was used more frequently in the Serabit inscriptions; it also prevailed in the history of writing, which (unless we have been deceived by the coincidence of transmission) was then compensated for in the Late-Bronze-Age Levant by a Linear Canaanite script reform which introduced the letter Samekh. This reform also affected the differentiation of the *t*-sounds into Taw v. Tet (in the Serabit script

---

[81] For a discussion of phonetic values see Krebernik, "Buchstabennamen, Lautwerte und Alphabetgeschichte."

[82] Morenz, *Polyglotte kanaanäische Schreiber*.

[83] In Hebrew, a distinction happened at some point between sin and shin – with shin, however, probably remaining secondary; Phoenician š was probably never pronounced 'sh'.

[84] Thus Egyptian renders šr/lg = 'snow' (cognate with Arab. ثلج, Syr. ܬܠܓܐ, Ug. *ṯlg (contra James E. Hoch, *Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period* [Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1994]: not glṯ!) and Akk. šalgum) as slq; alternatively the rendering of Egyptian s by the Hittites as š, which however needs to be s, especially since as this s is being rendered in Hittite names in Ugarit as ṯ – even in Akk. šarrum.

[85] It is only the letter that is being handed down; and all later distinctions of ṯ, š or ś are secondary.

only Taw: ✗), and the discontinuation of certain characters (such as ══ and ⵣ, as well as ⵏ).[86] Most Semitic-Alefbetic scripts then employed Shin for 'sh' and Samekh for 's', whereas Hebrew additionally split Shin into Shin and Sin, which was similarly continued in Arabic with the discontinuation of Samekh. Phoenician and Aramaic-Syrian, on the other hand, never split the Shin, and so have only a single letter or phonetic tradition.

While the evidence may seem thin, it is remarkably concrete. As such it ought to be, in its very concreteness, interesting for the phonological-historical development models of Semitic studies.

End of Excursus

Inscription S 357 from mine M describes a place of cult for the god El, corresponding with inscription S 351 on the outer rock face of the L and M mine complex in which El is invoked as the god 'inside the mine' (*b tk nqb*).[87] There is close overall intertextuality with the early Alefbetic inscription cluster on the outer wall of this Canaanite mine complex L and M. No Egyptian inscriptions have been found at all, the distribution of the inscriptions outside and inside the mine complex means we can assume a sharp separation of the work spaces of Egyptians and Canaanites on the plateau of Serabit el-Khadim.[88] These inscriptions aim to sacralise the space of strenuous work outside and inside the mine, specifically imprinting it with a Canaanite cultural identity.

In contrast to the temple of Hathor with the statuettes for Baᶜalat with their early Alefbetic inscriptions, one gains the impression that in the mining area the god El was even more important than the goddess Baᶜalat, who is however also clearly present (by name, but also, for example, in the Hathor-Baᶜalat face on the rock stele S 355, see above Fig. 10). In Serabit, at least, El and Baᶜalat were a divine pair, while we know of no other deities of the Canaanites in Serabit. Just as the inscription S 357 apostrophizes El as 'father' (*ꜣb*; so also in S 381 and perhaps in S 359 and 380), we know *ꜣm* – 'mother' – as a complementary designation for Baᶜalat (S 377). We can here catch a glimpse of the mythological kernel of a Canaanite religion in Middle-Bronze-Age Serabit el-Khadim.[89]

El and Baᶜalat can be understood both as concrete deities and as generic terms (el = 'god', baᶜalat = 'mistress, lady'); slippage may also have occurred between concept and proper name.[90] The sources for El in the Ugaritic texts of the Late Bronze Age are somewhat richer in

---

[86] Morenz, *Schriftentwicklung im Kulturkontakt*: 144–53. Even if the phonologically relevant phonetic inventory in the Middle Bronze Age stage of writing as evidenced by the Serabit inscriptions should have been greater or otherwise different, this does not necessarily mean that separate letters existed for each of these phonetic values. In this respect, we can expect a dynamic development of writing within the framework of a basic inventory of characters (see the discussion in Morenz, *Medienarchäologische Sondagen*). However, the corpus is too small to make definitive statements about phonetic representations missing from the script.

[87] Morenz, *GOTT*: 42–45.

[88] Morenz, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*: 264–66.

[89] Morenz, *GOTT*: 79–80.

[90] Morenz, *GOTT*.

mythological terms,[91] while the oldest evidence for El comes precisely from Serabit el-Khadim.[92]

The inscription S 357 designates a place of cult for the god El in mine M. We might see this sacralisation of the workspace in analogy to the Egyptian temple of Hathor – at its symbolic core a turquoise mine, within which and from which Hathor appeared as the 'Lady of Turquoise'.[93] Bronze tools and casting moulds from the New Kingdom were found in mine L.[94] But this does not necessarily imply a dating of the mine complex L+M and the miners' activities to the New Kingdom – in fact the site where tools were produced is unlikely to have been located within the dust of mining. It is more likely that it dates from a time when mining was no longer carried out here, but elsewhere in other mines.

[91] Ingo Kottsieper, "El," Das wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet, 2013, https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/fileadmin/buh_bibelmodul/media/wibi/pdf/El__2018-09-20_06_20.pdf [accessed 11.08.2023].

[92] Morenz, *GOTT*.

[93] See most recently Morenz, *Medienarchäologische Sondagen*: 55–56.

[94] Arieh, "Investigations in Mine L."

VI. Outlook

The working and sacral complex of mines L and M still requires further archaeological exploration. In 2022, I discovered in passing another inscription fragment outside mine L. It had been completely unfinished, showing only the outline of the stele (Fig. 20), as we have seen it in inscriptions S 354 and 355 (see above Fig. 10).

Fig. 20: Rock fragment in front of mine L: lines for an inscription in progress.

In a way that is simultaneously paradigmatic and coincidental, this reveals a potential for further work, which we will pursue systematically in the years to come.

Bibliography

Albright, William Foxwell. "Notes on the Early Hebrew and Aramaic Epigraphy," *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 6 (1926): 75–102.

Arieh, I. Beit. "Investigations in Mine L," *Tel Aviv. Journal of the Tel Aviv University Institute of Archaeology* 5 (1978): 175–78.

Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, *1939–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

Butin, Romain F. "The Serabit Expeditions of 1930. The Protosinaitic Inscriptions," *Harvard Theological Review* 25 (1930): 130–203.

Černý, Jaroslav. "Semites in Egyptian Mining Expeditions," *Archív orientální* 7, no. 3 (1935): 384–89.

Chartier-Raymond, Maryvonne. "Notes sur Maghara," *Cahier de recherches de l'Institut de papyrologie et d'égyptologie de Lille* 10 (1988): 13–22.

Cooney, Kara. *The Good Kings. Absolute Power in Ancient Egypt and the Modern World* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2021).

Cross, Frank Moore. "The Evolution of the Protocanaanite Alphabet," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 134 (1954): 15–24.

Eichler, Eckhard. *Untersuchungen zum Expeditionswesen des ägyptischen Alten Reiches* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1993).

Gelb, Ignace. *A Study of Writing. The Foundations of Grammatology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

Hamilton, Gordon. *The Origins of the West Semitic Alphabet in Egyptian Scripts* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2006).

Hoch, James E. *Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period* (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1994).

Hofmannsthal, Hugo von. *Death and the Fool: A Drama in One Act*, trans. Elisabeth Walker (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1914).

Kahl, Jochem. *Frühägyptisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 2 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003).

Kottsieper, Ingo, "El," Das wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet, 2013, https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/fileadmin/buh_bibelmodul/media/wibi/pdf/El_20 18-09-20_06_20.pdf [accessed 11.08.2023].

Krebernik, Manfred. "Buchstabennamen, Lautwerte und Alphabetgeschichte," in *Getrennte Welten? Kommunikation, Raum und Wahrnehmung in der Alten Welt*, ed. Robert Rollinger, Andreas Luther and Josef Wiesehöfer (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Antike, 2007): 108–75.

Morenz, Ludwig. *Die Genese der Alphabetschrift. Ein Markstein ägyptisch-kanaanäischer Kulturkontakte* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2011).

Morenz, Ludwig. *Schriftentwicklung im Kulturkontakt. Das erste Jahrtausend der Alphabetschrift* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2012).

Morenz, Ludwig. *Das Hochplateau von Serabit el-Chadim. Landschaftsarchäologie und Kulturpoetik* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2014).

Morenz, Ludwig. "Von offener und verborgener Sichtbarkeit. Altägyptische Einschreibungen in den Raum des Wadi Maghara (Sinai)," in *Verborgen, unsichtbar, unlesbar. Zur Problematik restringierter Schriftpräsenz*, ed. Tobias Frese, Wilfried E. Keil and Kristina Krüger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

Morenz, Ludwig. *Anfänge der ägyptischen Kunst. Eine problemgeschichtliche Einführung in ägyptologische Bild-Anthropologie* (Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

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

Morenz, Ludwig. *VerLautungen von Macht. Entwicklung von Schrift-Bildlichkeit und Bild-Schriftlichkeit im Niltal des vierten Jahrtausends* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2020).

Morenz, Ludwig. *Medienarchäologische Sondagen zum Ursprung "unseres" Alphabets vor 4000 Jahren* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2021).

Morenz, Ludwig. *Kultur-Poetik in der Mittelbronzezeit* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2022).

Morenz, Ludwig. *GOTT – Zum Ursprung von El im mittelbronzezeitlichen Serabit el Chadim* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2023).

Morenz, Ludwig. *Polyglotte kanaanäische Schreiber zwischen früher Alef-Bet-Schrift, "Ägyptogrammen" und Hieroglyphenschrift* (in preparation).

Morenz, Ludwig, and Tobias Gutmann. "Wertschätzung und Bedarf. Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Kupfer und Türkis," in *Materialien einer Gusswerkstatt von der Qubbet el-Hawa*, ed. Martin Fitzenreiter, Frank Willer and Johannes Auenmüller (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2016): 45–51.

Morenz, Ludwig, Andréas Stauder and Beryl Büma, eds. *Wege zur frühen Schrift. Niltal und Zweistromland* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2022).

Petrie, W.M. Flinders. *Researches in Sinai* (London: Dutton, 1906).

Rainey, Anson F. "Notes on Some Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions," *Israel Exploration Journal* 25 (1975): 106–16.

Rainey, Anson F. "Some Minor Points in Two Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions," *Israel Exploration Journal* 31 (1981): 92–94.

Rainey, Anson F. *Canaanite in the Amarna Tablets. A Linguistic Analysis of the Mixed Dialect Used by Scribes from Canaan* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

Rainey, Anson F. "Who is a Canaanite? A Review of the Textual Evidence," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 304 (1996): 1–15.

Sabel, David. "Das Alef – Paläographische Beobachtungen," in *Sinai und Alphabetschrift. Die frühesten alphabetischen Inschriften und ihr kanaanäisch-ägyptischer Entstehungshorizont im Zweiten Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, auth. Ludwig Morenz (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2019): 231–39.

Sass, Benjamin. *The Genesis of the Alphabet and its Development in the Second Millennium BC* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988).

Schoske, Sylvia. "Das Erschlagen der Feinde: Ikonographie und Stilistik der Feindvernichtung im alten Ägypten" (PhD-diss., Universität Heidelberg, 1982).

Seyfried, Karl-Joachim. *Beiträge zu den Expeditionen des Mittleren Reiches in die Ostwüste* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981).

Stauder, Andréas. "Iri-Hor: Elaborations of an Early Royal Name," *Göttinger Miszellen: Beiträge zur ägyptologischen Diskussion* 262 (2020): 201–8.

Swan Hall, Emma. *The Pharaoh Smites His Enemies. A Comparative Study* (München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1986).

Tallet, Pierre. *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinaï I. Catalogue complémentaire des inscriptions du Sinaï* (Kairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 2012).

Tallet, Pierre. *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinaï II. Catalogue complémentaire des inscriptions du Sinaï* (Kairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 2015).

Tallet, Pierre, and Damien Laisney. "Iry-Hor et Narmer au Sud-Sinaï (Ouadi 'Ameyra), un complément à la chronologie des expéditios minière égyptiene," *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire* 112 (2012): 381–98.

Wilson-Wright, Aren Max. "Sinai 357: A Northwest Semitic Votive Inscription to Teššob," *Journal of American Oriental Society* 136 (2016): 247–63.

For further titles see: https://www.dependency.uni-bonn.de/en/publications