Sinai 357: A Northwest Semitic Votive Inscription to Teššob
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Sinai 357: A Northwest Semitic Votive Inscription to Teššob

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Although Sinai 357 is one of the longest and best-preserved early alphabetic inscriptions from Serabit el-Khadem, these characteristics have not made it any easier to interpret. Most scholars read it as a command from a mining foreman to one of his subordinates, but this reading creates logical and contextual problems. To avoid these problems, I read Sinai 357 as a votive inscription to the Hurrian deity Teššob that employs language similar to first-millennium Northwest Semitic dedicatory inscriptions. Such a reading reflects cultural and linguistic contact between speakers of Egyptian, Hurrian, and a Northwest Semitic language at the site of Serabit el-Khadem.

1. LOCATION AND DATE OF THE INSCRIPTION

At twenty-seven letters, Sinai 357 is one of the longest and best-preserved alphabetic inscriptions from Serabit el-Khadem. Unfortunately, these characteristics have not made it any easier to interpret. Most scholars read it as a command from a mining foreman to his subordinates, but this reading runs into logical and contextual problems. In this article, I offer a new reading that better accounts for the context and genre of this inscription. In particular, I argue that Sinai 357 is a votive inscription that uses language similar to later Northwest Semitic dedicatory inscriptions and reflects the cultural diversity of the Egyptian turquoise mining expeditions in the Sinai Peninsula. Ultimately, Sinai 357 is the product of cultural and linguistic contact between speakers of Egyptian, Hurrian, and a Northwest Semitic language.

Sinai 357 is one of approximately forty early alphabetic inscriptions from the Egyptian mining district at Serabit el-Khadem. It was found in situ at the entrance to Mine L and remains there to this day. Whoever wrote Sinai 357 used a thin metal implement, probably a knife or the tip of a chisel, to scratch the letters into the cave wall. They also prepared the rock face before executing the inscription: there are tool marks both above and alongside the inscription, reminiscent of marks from a round-tip chisel. The text of Sinai 357 descends from the top of the cave wall for fifteen signs, before turning right and continuing horizontally for an additional twelve or so signs. Because the inscription has been exposed to the elements for more than eighty years since its discovery, older pictures may actually provide a more accurate representation of the inscription than more recent autopsies and traces. For this reason, the photographs taken by Romain Butin in 1930 and Blake and Lake in 1935 have been used in this paper (see section 3 below).

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2012 American Oriental Society meeting in Boston. I would like to thank the audience members for their insightful feedback. I would also like to thank John Huehnergard, Na’ama Pat-El, Jo Ann Hackett, Saralyn McKinnon-Crowley, and the three anonymous reviewers for reading earlier drafts of this paper. Any remaining errors are my own.

1. Unfortunately, I have been unable to observe the inscription in person due to the unstable political situation in Egypt and the Sinai.
3. Members of the West Semitic Research Project photographed Kirsopp Blake and William Lake’s negatives in 2000. Digital copies of these photographs are available from InscriptiFact. The originals are housed in the...
The date of Sinai 357 is harder to pinpoint. Based on paleography Gordon Hamilton suggests that it was written between 1700 and 1500 B.C.E., but his methodology is open to question. He assumes—not without reason, of course—that the oldest inscriptions from Serabit el-Khadem are the most pictographic and that later inscriptions became progressively more stylized. This observation allows him to place the Sinaic inscriptions in chronological sequence by working backward from more securely dated early alphabetic inscriptions found elsewhere, such as the Lahun heddle-jack and the Bet Shemesh plaque. None of these early alphabetic texts, however, is dated absolutely. A change in a single date could affect the entire sequence.

Moreover, the Sinaic inscriptions were not subject to the same standardization that characterizes the national scripts of the first millennium. The size, shape, and orientations of the signs vary dramatically, often within the same inscription (see for example Sinai 346). The direction of writing was not fixed either: left-to-right (e.g., Sinai 345), right-to-left (e.g., Sinai 349), vertical (e.g., Sinai 367), boustrophedon (e.g., Sinai 346), and combination (e.g., Sinai 357) orders are all attested. Thus, it is difficult to discern a linear, temporally conditioned development in the welter of different forms at Serabit el-Khadem. The lack of institutional involvement may explain this high degree of variance. As Orly Goldwasser notes, this “is why individual re-creations of the signs differ so widely, even though they always preserved their fundamental iconicity.”

The actual dates that Hamilton assigns to Sinai 357 also prove problematic. Ever since Benjamin Sass demonstrated that Sinai 345, the small sphinx in the British Museum, was consistent with Egyptian statuary from the Middle Kingdom, most scholars have dated the Sinaic inscriptions to the Twelfth dynasty (1985–1773 B.C.E.). But the period 1700–1500 B.C.E. falls after the Twelfth dynasty, when there is little evidence of mining activity at Serabit el-Khadem, except for four inscriptions from the reigns of Ahmose (1550–1525 B.C.E.) and Amenhotep I (1525–1504 B.C.E.). If Hamilton’s dating is correct, then the circumstances surrounding the genesis of Sinai 357, as well as the other inscriptions that he assigns to this period, are left unaccounted for. Who produced these inscriptions, if not members of the royal expeditions? Are they graffiti? Did anyone even travel to the mining districts other than expedition members? Therefore, it is preferable to date the Sinaic inscriptions based on context as Alan Gardiner did and assign all but the most stylized examples (e.g., Sinai 375c) to the reigns of Amenemhat III and Amenemhat IV (1831–1777 B.C.E.).

With twenty-eight known ventures to his credit, Amenemhat III organized more expeditions to the Sinai Peninsula than any other Twelfth-dynasty monarch. So in terms of sheer numbers, the reign of Amenemhat III provides the most likely context for the composition

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5. Ibid., 300.
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Moreover, the numerous Egyptian inscriptions dated to his reign mention Asiatics, men of Reṯenu, foreign dignitaries like Ḥabīdādu(m), brother of the prince of Reṯenu, and at least eight different translators. If we include the reign of Amenemhat IV as well, then this total increases to nine translators. The Middle Kingdom onomasticon from Serabit el-Khadem contains nine non-Egyptian names, five of which correspond to known Semitic names. An additional four names are neither Egyptian nor Semitic (see Table 1).

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Table 1. Non-Egyptian Names Attested in the Middle Kingdom Egyptian Inscriptions from Serabit el-Khadem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Egyptian Transcription</th>
<th>Suggested Normalization</th>
<th>Language of Origin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ḫbdd(m)</td>
<td>*Ḥabidādu(m) ‘The (Divine) uncle hid’</td>
<td>Semitic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ḫši</td>
<td>Ḥrši ‘My desire’</td>
<td>Semitic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ḫpm</td>
<td>*Ripʿim / Rapūʾum ‘Healed’</td>
<td>Semitic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ḫkm</td>
<td>*Ṣakūrum ‘Compensated’</td>
<td>Semitic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ḫn</td>
<td>*Qanna? ‘(DN is) jealous’</td>
<td>Semitic?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ḫsn</td>
<td>*Ar-šenni ‘The (Divine) brother gave’</td>
<td>Hurrian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ṣw</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ṣqbb</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ṣḥn</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

10. Asiatics are mentioned in Sinai 85N, 110W, and 123B; men of Reṯenu in Sinai 114S 23, 115, 120N; foreign dignitaries in Sinai 85 87, 92, and 112; and translators in Sinai 85N 10–11, 92W, 100W 5–6, 105N 1, 112W 9, S 1, and 123b. Egyptian inscriptions from Serabit el-Khadem are cited according to Gardiner, Peet, and Černý, The Inscriptions of Sinai. See also D. Valbelle and C. Bonnet, Le Sanctuaire d’Hathor maîtresse de la turquoise: Serabit el-Khadem au Moyen Empire (Paris: Picard, 1996), 34–35.


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2. PREVIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

Although earlier scholars, like A. E. Cowley and Romain Butin, treated Sinai 357 as a memorial inscription, nearly all later scholars interpret it against the background of the Egyptian turquoise mining operations conducted at Serabit el-Khadem. In his 1966 monograph, W. F. Albright reads: “Thou, O Shapan, collect from Ababa eight minas (of turquoise). Shimea, groom of the chief of the caravaners” (ʾnt ṯpn dkm l-ʾbb mn VIII šmʾ mrʾ rb [prm]). Most subsequent interpreters offer only slight variations on Albright’s interpretation. Anson Rainey, for example, modifies Albright’s reading to “You, Thapan, crush (hammer out) for Ababa from you (i.e., from your ore); (signed) Shimʾaʾ, the squire of the chief of the mi[ners]” (ʾnt ṯpn dkm l-ʾbb mlk šmʾ mrʾ rb nʾr?). Meindert Dijkstra also draws on Albright and Rainey when he reads: “You, superintendent of the pestle, give a full quantity to the gate of the king. Šimʾaʾ, the mayor of the region” (ʾnt šgn dk mlʾ bb mlk šmʾ mrʾ rbʿ ʿ). More recently, William Shea has offered a twist on this “occupational” reading. He argues that Sinai 357 records the dismayed response of a mining crew to an order from King Thutmoses: “We continued mining for [the month of] Abib. The King Thutmose heard and said ‘Four [more months]’ “ (ʾn yṯpn dkm l-ʾbb mlk {ḏtmṯ} šmʾmrʾ rbʾ). All of these interpretations run into linguistic problems. Albright, for example, interprets the consonantal sequence <DK> on the basis of the Old Babylonian verb dekû, which refers to the collection of taxes and should have a third consonant in West Semitic, if it had any cognates there. Albright and others who treat <DK> as a verb must insert an enclitic -mā at the end in order to fit the orthography of the inscription, but they do not specify how this morpheme functions in context or adduce any parallels. Shea derives yaṯapanū from the verb YSP, which contains the wrong fricative. Personal names also present problems for interpreters of Sinai 357. Beit-Arieh interprets the consonantal sequence <ʾBBMLK> as a variant spelling of ʾabīmalku ‘My father is king’, which should not have a second bēt.
Similarly, Rainey treats <ʾBB> as an etymologically opaque and otherwise unattested personal name ʾAbaba. 19

In addition to the linguistic difficulties, it does not make logical sense to treat Sinai 357 as an “inter-office memo.” A mining foreman would not take the time and effort to inscribe his orders in stone any more than an office supervisor today would write her emails in haiku. In a hectic work environment, bosses usually give their orders in the most efficient way possible—in this case, face to face. An inscription would be unnecessary. 20 Such readings also assume that alphabetic literacy was widespread at Serabit el-Khadem, but this assumption can be neither proven nor disproven with the information that is currently available. Nor does context favor an occupational setting. None of the contemporary Egyptian inscriptions record orders and the Semitic inscriptions that can be read are more concerned with securing divine favor than meeting quotas and filling work orders. Sinai 345, for example, declares that “This inscription is for the Lady” (hnḏ wz l-bʾlṭ) and Sinai 363 mentions “the [g]ift which he gave [to] El” ([m]ṭ n ḏ ntn. . . ʾl). 21 For these reasons, a new interpretation of Sinai 357 is needed.

3. PALEOGRAPHICAL CONCERNS

Before offering a new reading, however, it is necessary to discuss the paleography of the inscription. Seven letters deserve comment: signs 2, 3, 8, 15, 23, 26, and 27. 22

Sign 2: Most scholars interpret sign 2 as a nûn, but Hamilton holds out the possibility that it may be a lamed: “The reading of the second letter of the column is uncertain. Only its open head is clear on published photographs. Usually identified as nûn, its open head contrasts with that of the clear ‘one horned viper’ type of n four letters below it. Its body is largely obscured by an imperfection in the semi-prepared rock surface, while its tail may be one of the many chisel marks surrounding this text. If the latter is excluded as not being part of this letter, a reading of l also becomes possible.” 23 Building on Hamilton, I am inclined to read a lamed here. The tail of the nûn seen by some scholars is much darker than most of the actual letters and has the same texture as the tool marks at the top of the inscription. Sign 2 also lacks a horn like the clear nûn later in the line.

Sign 3: Most scholars treat sign three as a tāw. Hamilton, however, includes a third, diagonal stroke as part of the sign and interprets it as a papyrus clump, the precursor of ṣadê. 24 This reading, however, is unlikely. It is difficult to make sense of the consonantal sequence <ʾLṢṮP . . > as a Semitic word or phrase since the roots √ʾLṢ and √ṢṮP are unattested, and ṣ and ṣ do not usually appear in the same word in Semitic languages. 25 Furthermore, Hamilton does not offer an interpretation of this inscription and so his identifications cannot be confirmed by context.

20. See also the cogent comments in Beit-Arieh, “Investigations in Mine L,” 182 n. 7.
22. The miniscule eth and tāw to the right of the first bēr identified by Beit-Arieh and included by Hamilton in his overview of the inscription seem to be imperfections in the rock or stray chisel marks. They are darker than the actual letters like the tool marks at the top of the inscription, and therefore are not factored into this interpretation. See Beit-Arieh, “Investigations in Mine L,” 181; Hamilton, The Origins, 355.
24. Ibid., 356.
Sign 8: The eighth sign is badly effaced. Most interpreters treat it as a *kaf*, but this identification is unlikely given the form of the letter. Unlike the *kaf* in the sixteenth position, sign 8 connects at the top and contains, at most, three vertical strokes as shown in Table 2. The middle stroke is rather faint and may be a natural cleft or a tool mark. Furthermore, the rounding at the top of the sign is reminiscent of the *rēš*’s in the horizontal line, so if the middle vertical line is deliberate, it probably represents the hairline of a face in profile.
Sign 15: This sign could be either a lamed or a nûn. Ultimately, the matter must be decided by context, and here a nûn produces a meaningful Egyptian name (see below).

Sign 23: Almost all previous scholars treat sign 23 as an ʿaleph, but given the uniformity of the inscription as a whole, this seems unlikely. Unlike the three clear ʿaleph’s, sign 23 faces to the left, narrows to a point, and lacks an obvious second horn (see Table 3). The second horn seen by some interpreters seems to be a cleft in the rock face. Thus I treat sign 23 as a diagonally oriented wāw with a shortened “tail.” A similar looking wāw appears in the vertical Wadi el-Ḥôl inscription as shown in Table 4.26

Sign 26: The next problematic letter, sign 26, blends into the rock face, making it hard to identify. It is ovoid in shape, like an ʿayin, but has a single descender coming down from

the middle. 27 Butin’s 1932 photograph also shows a hooked ascender on the left side, which gives the sign a distinctly avian appearance. I suggest therefore that sign 26 is related to the bird pictogram found in Sinai 371 and possibly repeated in Sinai 363 and 375a and that it represents the etymological ejective lateral fricative /ɬ'/ (see Table 5). This identification produces good Semitic words in both Sinai 357 and 371. Sinai 357 contains the common Semitic verb RBṢ́ ‘to rest’, while Sinai 371 refers to a ‘work group’ (ṣ́abaʾ), like many of the contemporary Egyptian inscriptions (e.g., mšꜢ in Sinai 90 15, 114 Sb, 115 N 5). Hieroglyphs and Hieratic furnish several good models for this sign, including the white-fronted goose hieroglyph (Gardiner G38) and the pintail-duck hieroglyph (Gardiner G39). Hieroglyph G39, in particular, occurs frequently in hieroglyphic writing since it appears in the Egyptian word for son, sꜢ.

The new alphabetic sign lacks a sure acrophone. It is tempting to suggest that the acrophone was Semitic *ṣippār ‘bird’ or one of its many variants and that /ɬ'/ had merged with /s'/ in the language of the Sinaitic inscriptions. Such a merger would allow the grapheme for /s'/ to represent /ɬ'/ as well. Hamilton, by contrast, has argued that the papyrus clump pictogram represents /s'/, based on the reconstructed acrophone *ṣappat- ‘reed’. His reconstruc-

tion rests on Akkadian sippatu(m) ‘a kind of reed’, Jewish Babylonian Aramaic and Syriac šeppāṯā ’reed-mat’, and the Ethiopic letter name dappā. It is unclear, however, whether these nouns are cognate. Ethiopic dappā comes from original *ɬ’appā and cannot, therefore, be cognate with Aramaic šeppāṯā, which comes from original *s’ippṭa’. šeppāṯā, on the other hand, looks like an Akkadian loanword into eastern Imperial Aramaic that survived in JBA and Syriac, and—without independent Aramaic evidence—the initial consonant of Akkadian sippatu(m) could reflect any of the proto-Semitic ejective fricatives: /s’, /θ’, and /ɬ’/. Because of this uncertainty, I suggest that the clump of papyrus pictogram stood for etymological /θ’/ (Sinai 364). This identification would leave the bird pictogram free to represent /ɬ’/ > /s’/. A more definite conclusion, however, must await further analysis of Sinai 363, 371, and 527.

Sign 27: Most scholars have suggested that the inscription continues for a few more letters after sign 26 and speculated on what those consonants might be. A few of them even identify the beginnings of a twenty-seventh sign. Butin sees a lamed, while Rainey sees a qôf. I propose reading a nûn here. On Butin’s photograph, the rounded head of the horned viper can be seen along the edge of the rock cleft before the inscription breaks off. The head of this letter is closed, unlike the crook of the Sinaitic lamed and lacks a second, lower loop unlike the Sinaitic qôf (see Table 6). The remains of a horn can also be seen in Butin’s photograph.

4. A NEW READING

With these consonants, I propose reading Sinai 357 as: ʾL TṯP NDR ML ʾBBMN K ŠMʾ ṢR WRBŠN, which can be vocalized as ʾil Tṯp nidr(a) malliʾ(a) Bb-mm kī šamiʾ(a) ʾimrī wa-rabbisānī “Bb-mm fulfilled a vow to Teššob because ‘he heard my utterance and gave me rest.’” The overall linguistic structure of this inscription is similar to Phoenician and Punic votive inscriptions, although the exact lexical content varies. A second-century B.C.E. inscription from Sicily offers a good parallel to my reading of Sinai 357: lʾdn lbʾl ḥmn ʾš ndr ḥnʾ bn ʾdnbʿl bn grʿštrt bn ʾdrbʿl k šmʿ qlʾ ybrkʾ “That which Ḥanno, son of Adonibaal, son of Gerashtart, son of Adarbaal, vowed to the lord, Baal Ḥamon, because he heard his voice.

29. The same merger takes place in Ugaritic with a similar effect on the orthography. One sign stands for etymological /s’/ and /ɬ’/ and another for etymological /θ’/.
30. Ibid., 357.
32. The sandhi writing of <M?HBLT> in Sinai 345, where a single bēt represents the final consonant of /muʾahhib/ and the initial consonant of /baʿlatt(i)/, suggests that case vowels had been lost or were in the process of being lost at least on the head noun in construct chains. For this phenomenon see Wilson-Wright, “Interpreting the Sinaitic Inscriptions,” 143. Hence, final short vowels are marked as optional in my vocalization.
May he bless him” (KAI 63). Both inscriptions—and others like them—follow the same basic order: the divine recipient of the vow is mentioned first, followed by a verb or verb phrase containing ndr, the name of the dedicant, and the motivation clause. These parallels will prove useful in interpreting Sinai 357.

Based on the Phoenician parallels, letters three through five should spell out a divine name. The most likely candidate is Teššob, the head of the Hurrian pantheon and common analog of Semitic Hadad. Normally, Teššob is spelled <TṬB> in alphabetic texts (e.g., Ugaritic artṭb ‘Teššob gave’), but the spelling with <P> is attested in the Ugaritic personal name agṭṭp ‘Teššob brought’ (PRU 2 43:11; CAT 4.320:3). In both cases, the unusual spelling may be a surface rendering of a deeper Hurrian morpho-phonological process. In Hurrian, the genitive suffix –ve and the dative suffix –va assimilate to a preceding labial stop, which triggers devoicing: e.g., nominative Teššob, but genitive Teššop=pe. It is unclear, however, whether the author of Sinai 357 knew enough Hurrian to attach the dative suffix to Teššob following the Semitic directional preposition ʾil or whether the name Teššob was borrowed into the language of the Sinaitic inscriptions with a genitive or dative suffix because this form was more common than the stem alone.

The reference to a Hurrian god at such an early date and in such a southern location is surprising. If the reading <TṬP> is correct, then Sinai 357 is the only reference to Teššob in Egyptian territory outside of New Kingdom transcriptions of Hurrian personal names. Nevertheless, the reference to Teššob makes sense in the context of the Middle Kingdom mining expeditions to Serabit el-Khadem.

A strong case can be made for Hurrian participation in the Sinai expeditions, as part of a larger pattern of contact between Egypt and northern Syria in the Middle Bronze Age. In particular, the men of Rṯnw mentioned in Sinai 114S 23, 115, and 120N may have included speakers of both Hurrian and a West Semitic language, as well individuals who spoke both Hurrian and West Semitic. The reason for this is simple. In the Middle Kingdom, the toponymn Rṯnw described a territory extending northward to the mouth of the Orontes River and including the cities of Alalakh, Qatna, and Tunip, which were home to a significant Hurrian-speaking population.

33. For further Phoenician and Punic examples see KAI 47, 61 A & B, 88, 98, 102, 103, 105, 164, 175. For a possible Aramaic example, see the interpretation of KAI 201 in Jo Ann Hackett and Aren Wilson-Wright, “A Revised Reading of the Melqart Stele (KAI 201),” in a forthcoming Festschrift. These texts range in date from the ninth century (KAI 201) to the second or first century B.C.E. (KAI 175).

34. Contemporary Egyptian inscriptions from Serabit el-Khadem and the surrounding areas do not record any vows, but they are concerned with curryng, securing, and transmitting divine aid.


36. Gernot Wilhelm kindly informs me (email of June 18, 2013) that Teššob may have had an alternative stem with a doubled (and thus devoiced) final consonant.

show significant Hurrian interference consistent with a native Hurrian-speaking population. In many of these texts, a suffix marks the subject of the verb, as in Hurrian, or Hurrian glosses

are provided for Akkadian words. These features suggest that Akkadian was a second (possibly non-spoken) language for the scribes of Alalakh and Qaṭna. Furthermore, Hurrian names make up thirty to fifty percent of the Late Bronze onomasticon in these cities. As inhabitants of this region, the men of Rṯnw probably spoke Hurrian or, at the very least, were familiar with Hurrian deities whose cults they could have brought to Serabit el-Khadem.

A Hurrian individual may even be named in the contemporary Egyptian inscriptions from Serabit el-Khadem. As mentioned above, nine non-Egyptian names occur in the Egyptian inscriptions from Serabit el-Khadem. Of these, five have good Semitic parallels (see Table 1 above). At least one name, however, is unlikely to be Semitic, but has a common Hurrian parallel: ḫšnī. This name appears in Sinai 2, an inscription in Wadi Maghārah dated to the second year of Amenemhat III. The common equivalencies between Egyptian and Semitic yield ẖ-rst-he-n, which on a maximal interpretation can be read as ＇il-šanta ‘God hated’, an unlikely epithet. The other permutations do not form two coordinated Semitic words. Therefore, I suggest reading ḫšnī as Ar-šenni ‘The (Divine) brother gave’, a common Hurrian name that belonged to at least five different individuals at Nuzi.

Even without the direct evidence of personal names, several converging lines of evidence suggest that the flow of people and goods between northern Syria and Egypt in the Middle Kingdom was significant and influenced the material culture of both societies. For one, Egyptian prestige items are particularly abundant in Byblos and Qaṭna—Egypt’s main trading partners in the Middle Kingdom—compared with the southern Levant. Byblos has yielded a gold pectoral of Amenemhat III along with several vases and caskets inscribed with the names of Amenemhat III and Amenemhat IV, while Qaṭna has produced a sphinx in the likeness of Amenemhat II’s daughter. Cylinder seals with Egyptian iconography and symbols are also common in North Syrian glyptic art, suggesting cultural diffusion, if not


41. The consonant correspondences are consistent with later Egyptian transcriptions of Hurrian words and names. In some New Kingdom topographical lists, Egyptian īṛḫḫ transcribes Hurrian Ardupalḫḫ, which shows that Egyptian i (= Sem. ʾ) could stand in for word-initial vowels. Ugaritic and Hebrew employ an identical strategy for representing initial vowels in Hurrian: the Ugaritic personal name ārtb corresponds to Hurrian Ar-Teššob and the Hebrew name ʿārwnā probably corresponds to Hurrian Ēwri-ni. A Sixteenth-dynasty royal scarab dated to the mid-seventeenth century B.C.E. assures the equation of Egyptian ẖ with the Hurrian interdental fricative. This artifact bears the name śmqn, which most scholars interpret as Śimig-eni ‘Śimig is god’. Egyptian i can represent a final /i/-vowel, as in īrỉ = Ārtī above. For Ardupalḫḫ in the topographical lists, see E. Edel, “Neue Identifikationen topographischer Namen in den konventionellen Namenzusammenstellungen des Neuen Reiches,” SAK 3 (1975): 50. For the name Śimig-eni see Schneider, Ausländer in Ägypten, 137–38.

42. At the same time, Egypt may have avoided trading with the southern Levantine cities due to ongoing hostilities, whether real or perceived. The execration texts do not mention any cities north of Ullaza, near modern Tripoli. Whatever the original import of the execration texts, they suggest a tense relationship between Egypt and the southern Levant. See W. Helck, Die Beziehungen Ägyptens zu Vorderasien im 3. und 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr., 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1971), 52.

outright trading. Many of these Egyptianizing seals were produced in workshops in Aleppo and Alalakh.⁴⁴

At the same time, the Middle Kingdom settlement at Tell el-Dab’a (Avaris) followed northern Syrian architectural models, housed northern Syrian imports, and may have been home to a northern Syrian official. The temple and palace at Tell el-Dab’a find their closest parallels in structures from northern Syria. Temple III from phase F-E/2 (early seventeenth century) follows a broad-room and niche plan like temple G3 from Ebla, the “Hurrian” temple from Middle Bronze Age Ugarit, and the stratum IV and VII temples from Alalakh dated to the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. ⁴⁵ The palace from area F/II shares several features with the Late Bronze Age palaces from Qāṭna, Alalakh stratum IV, and Ugarit, including its broad-base construction, use of staircase towers, and lack of a central axis.⁴⁶

Neutron activation analysis of imported pottery found at Tell el-Dab’a points to an origin in the northern Levant.⁴⁷ A ruler of ṭnw (ḥḳꜢ n ṭnw)—related perhaps to the Ḥabīdad mentioned in Egyptian inscriptions from Serabit el-Khadem—may have even maintained a temporary residence at Tell el-Dab’a. Excavators found a Twelfth-dynasty scarab seal bearing the inscription “[the ruler of] ṭewith m-hḥt” in a tomb at Tell el-Dab’a in 1991.⁴⁸ Based on these finds, Manfred Bietak has even suggested that “a substantial number of settlers at Avaris originated most probably in the northern Levant, especially from the region made up today by Lebanon and northern Syria.”⁴⁹ These settlers could have participated in the Egyptian mining expedition and brought their native languages and religious traditions with them to the Sinai Peninsula.

A verb of vowing follows the name of the deity. The author of Sinai 357 ‘fulfilled a vow’ nidr(a) malliʾ(a) to Teššob.⁵⁰ Normally, the root MLʔ refers to ‘filling’ in the literal sense, as in Genesis 21:19 wat-tĕmallēʾ(’) ēt-ha-hēmet mayîm “and she filled the water skin with water.” The more abstract meaning (i.e., fulfilling) is typically reserved for the root ŠLM, as in Job 22:27 taʾfrîr ʾēlāyw wĕ-yišmāʾekā û-nĕdārêkā tĕšallēm “You will pray to him and he will hear you. And you will fulfill your vows.” In general, one fulfills a vow, plan, or

⁴⁴. See, for example, D. Collon, The Seal Impressions from Tell Atchana/Alalakh (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neu-


⁴⁶. Ibid., 153.


⁴⁹. Gardiner, Peet, and Černý have suggested that the Egyptian expeditions to Serabit el-Khadem left from the Delta. If this is true, Semitic officials and laborers from Avaris would have been well positioned to accompany their Egyptian counterparts to the mining districts. They would not have needed to travel overland in order to rendezvous in the Sinai Peninsula. Gardiner, Peet, and Černý, The Inscriptions of Sinaï, 11–13.

⁵⁰. The West Semitic languages contain two roots nearly homophonous meaning ‘to vow’: √NDR corresponding to Hebrew nādar ‘to vow’, Phoenician ndr ‘to vow’, Tigre naddara ‘to vow’, and Soqotri nider ‘to be consecrated’, and √NDR corresponding to Hebrew nāzar ‘to consecrate oneself to a deity’, Arabic naḏara ‘to bind oneself by vow’, Sabaic ndr ‘to vow penance’, and Aramaic ndr ‘to vow’. The etymological connection between these roots—if any—is unclear. The orthography of the Sinaitic inscriptions permits a distinction between the two roots: parallel lines represent <Ḏ> and the fish pictogram represents <D>. In Sinai 357, nidr(a) ‘vow’ is spelled with the fish sign <D>, rather than the parallel lines representing <Ḏ>.
promise using ŠLM in the Northwest Semitic languages, especially in the D-stem. But there are exceptions. In Psalm 20:5, for example, the speaker of the poem tells the king yitten lĕkā kilbābekā wĕ-kol-ʿăṣātĕkā yĕmallē ʾ(‘) “May he [Yahweh] give you your heart’s desire and may he fulfill all your plans” (compare also Gen. 29:28). In Syriac and Ge’ez as well, MLʔ can mean ‘to fulfill’.

Based on the Phoenician parallels, a personal name should follow the verb or verb phrase. Therefore, I suggest that the sequence <BBMN> transcribes an Egyptian personal name Bb-mn meaning ‘Bb endures’. According to Hermann Ranke’s survey of Egyptian personal names, the etymologically opaque noun bb appears frequently in the Middle Kingdom onomasticon. 51 An eighteenth-century graffito from Wadi el-Ḥil, for example, mentions two individuals named Bebi, one of whom was general of the Asiatics. 52 The verbal element mn is less common in Middle Kingdom names, but appears nevertheless. A noblewoman from Thebes is named nū-t-mn-Š ‘Neith endures’. 53 Importantly, the name bb-Šnḥ ‘bb lives’ shows that the noun bb could combine with Egyptian verbs. Within the Sinaïtic corpus the name <BBMN> may appear a second time in S375d; the same individual may have written or commissioned both inscriptions. 54

It is not surprising that the dedicant of Sinai 357 had an Egyptian name. As I have argued elsewhere, at least two groups within the expeditionary forces bore Egyptian names and spoke a Central Semitic language, translators (ʾw) and what others have termed “assimilated” Asiatics (Šm). 55 Many of these individuals lacked the social standing and means to commission hieroglyphic inscriptions and may have adopted the nascent alphabetic script to record their experiences. Translators, in particular, rarely use the more prestigious hieroglyphic script. The two related graffiti from Rōd el-Áir (Sinai 510, 511) are the only hieroglyphic inscriptions produced by translators at Serabit el-Khadem and its environs.

Following the identification of the deity and the dedicant in the vertical line, the horizontal line explains why Bb-mn fulfilled his vow to Teššob: kī šamiʿ(a) ʾimrī wa-rabbiḍanī “he heard my voice and gave me rest.” The sudden switch to the first person in this section is striking, but not unprecedented. The horizontal line may describe Bb-mn’s spoken motivation for fulfilling the vow as in a Punic example from Malta (see below). In this inscription, the dedicants switch between first person and third person, referring to Melqart as “our lord,” but fulfilling the vow “because he heard the sound of their words.”

The use of ʾimr is unusual. In Phoenician and Punic vows, the deity usually harkens to the dedicant’s voice (ql) or words (dbr) or the sound of their words (ql dbr). The noun ʾimr never appears in the motivation clause. Yet ʾimr belongs to the same semantic field as dabar and qāl and easily fits the slot occupied by these words. Lexical replacement occurs commonly enough in inherited formulae and the phrase ndr. . . kī šamiʿ(a) qālī seems to be an inherited Northwest Semitic formula. 56

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54. Some individuals may have been responsible for more than one Sinaïtic inscription. The name <BNθ̣R>, for example, appears in both Sinai 352 and 364.
55. Wilson-Wright, “Interpreting the Sinaïtic Inscriptions,” 9–10. These groups may have overlapped to some extent.
The collocation of the root NDR or NDR and the phrase *ki šamaʾ* occurs frequently in the corpus of Northwest Semitic inscriptions, particularly in the Neo-Punic period. Aramaic and Phoenician examples are attested as well. The ninth-century Bir-Hadad inscription reads *nṣbʾ zy šm br hdd br . . . mlk ʾrm lmlqrt zy nzr lh kšmʾ lqlḥ* “The stele which Bir-Hadad, son of . . . set up for his lord, for Melqart, which he vowed to him because he heard his voice” (*KAI* 201). 57 Similarly, a second-century B.C.E. Punic inscription from Malta states *lʾdnn lmlqrt bʿl ṣr ʾš ndr ʿbdk ʿbdʾsr wʾḥy ʾsršmr šn bn ʾsršmr bn ʿbdʾsr k šmʿ qlm ybrkm* “That which your servants Abd-Osiris and his brother Osiris-Šamor, the two sons of Osiris-Šamor, son of Abd-Osiris, vowed to our lord, Melqart, the lord of Tyre, because he heard their voice. May he bless them!” (*KAI* 47). 58

Similar phrases also occur in the Hebrew Bible. In Job 22:27, Eliphaz tells Job that *taʿtîr ʾēlāyw wĕ-yišmāʿekā ū-nĕdārêkā tĕšallēm* “You will pray to him and he will hear you. And you will pay your vows,” with the understanding that Job will fulfill his vows because Yahweh hears him. 59 Ultimately, the combination of *nadar* or *naḏar* and the phrase *ki šamaʾ* may be an inherited Northwest Semitic formula, which was first used by speakers of early Northwest Semitic in oral vows, and then to be recorded with the advent of alphabetic writing. 60

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR ALPHABETIC ORIGINS

The new reading and context of Sinai 357 proposed here have important implications for the issue of alphabetic origins. In particular, the new reading hints at the purpose and function of the early alphabet and the historical context helps determine where the alphabet was invented.

Recently, several scholars, including Anson Rainey, Orly Goldwasser, and Seth Sanders, have weighed in on the purpose of the early alphabet. In an online discussion, Anson Rainey argued the alphabet was the product of urban sophisticates, literate in both hieroglyphics and hieratic. Referring to his 1975 article on Sinai 357, Rainey writes: “One person signs his name: Šim’a *mur’u*, ’Shim’a the squire.’ A squire was not only the assistant to a chariot warrior, he also had military rank, probably that of a sergeant. It would have been those educated officers who had come to Serabit with the group of mining experts or laborers. Just like their Egyptian counterparts, they would have kept their records (duty rosters, payrolls, etc.) on papyrus that did not survive.” 61 But as I have argued above, an occupational reading of Sinai 357 like Rainey’s is improbable; stone was too cumbersome a medium for transmitting orders. And if my reading of Sinai 357 is correct, *Šim’a* the squire disappears along with much of the evidence for the use of the alphabet in bureaucratic contexts in the Middle Kingdom.

Unlike Rainey, Orly Goldwasser suggests that the alphabet was invented and used primarily for religious purposes. Regarding the conditions at Serabit el-Khadem, she writes: “The isolation, fear, and pressure, and the sudden appreciation of ‘eternalizing the name’ would

57. The name of Bir-Hadad’s father is abraded. See Hackett and Wilson-Wright, “A Revised Reading.”
58. For further Phoenician and Punic examples see *KAI* 61 A & B, 3, 88, 98, 102, 103, 105, 164, 175.
59. See also Jonah 2:3, 10 and Isaiah 19:21.
60. Inherited formula are set phrases that appear in two or more genetically related languages and contain predominately cognate words. See Watkins, *Dragon*, 9–10.
naturally lead the Canaanites to try to write their own calls to their own gods (Baalat and El) in their own languages.”

Seth Sanders expresses a similar sentiment: “the impetus for the invention of the alphabet seems to be spiritual. It was the personal urge to communicate with the gods, pray and eternalize one’s own name in their presence. All early texts known to date are very short and are comprised mainly of names of gods, personal names and titles, and sometimes the word ‘offering.’ There is no sign of institutional involvement” (emphasis his). While the interpretation of Sinai 357 offered here does support Goldwasser and Sanders’s arguments concerning the original purpose of the alphabet, such sweeping statements should wait until all the inscriptions have been successfully interpreted. Even with our limited knowledge of the Sinaitic corpus, it is clear that some of the inscriptions do refer to institutional activities. The reference to a journey (ʾrḫt) in Sinai 353 and 375 parallels similar references found in contemporary Egyptian inscriptions (Sinai 90 W 22, 136, 137, 140, 141, 145), which reflect elite involvement in the mining expeditions.

The location of the alphabet’s invention has also been a source of debate. Goldwasser suggests that the alphabet was invented at Serabit el-Khadem, based on the similarity between hieroglyph O1 in Habidadu(m)’s Egyptian inscriptions and the alphabetic bēt. Darnell et al., by contrast, propose an Egyptian origin because the recently discovered Wadi el-Hôl inscriptions predate the Sinaitic inscriptions according to their chronology. But as I have argued, the reigns of Amenemhat III and IV provide the best context for Sinai 357 and many of the other alphabetic inscriptions at Serabit el-Khadem. Thus, they are nearly contemporary with the two alphabetic inscriptions from Wadi el-Hôl, which Darnell et al. date to the latter half of Amenemhat III’s reign. The presence of near contemporary alphabetic inscriptions at such far-flung sites suggests that the alphabet was invented elsewhere, probably in the Delta or Lahun, where a large number of Asiatics (Ꜣmw) had settled already in the early nineteenth century B.C.E. From there, these individuals could have brought the alphabet to the rest of Egyptian territory as they took part in mining and military operations.

64. Accounting, not religion, usually provides the catalyst for the development of writing systems as chapters 4, 5, 9, and 10 in The First Writing: Script Invention as History and Process, ed. S. D. Houston (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004) show.
67. Ibid., 86–87.
6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Judging from the Egyptian inscriptions at Serabit el-Khadem, the Egyptian mining expeditions to the Sinai Peninsula were a multicultural affair. During the reigns of Amenemhat III and Amenemhat IV, Asiatics (‘mw), men of Reţenu (rtnw), and foreign dignitaries like Ḥabīdadu(m), brother of the prince of Reţenu, all took part in such ventures. These individuals probably came from northern Syria and included speakers of Hurrian and a West Semitic language. The presence of so many foreigners in the expeditionary forces necessitated the use of translators (‘w). It is within this culturally diverse context that the early alphabetic inscriptions at Serabit el-Khadem were most likely produced and Sinai 357 reflects this. In this inscription, someone with an Egyptian name fulfills a vow to a Hurrian god using an inherited Northwest Semitic formula.