

Anchoring the alphabet in the early second millennium BCE

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Alphabetic writing systems worldwide all trace their origins to monoconsonantal writing systems (*abjad*) of Semitic languages in the Near East in the second and first millennia BCE. The earliest evidence of the *exclusive* use of monoconsonantal signs is thought by many to date from the early second millennium. This evidence consists of (1) a modest corpus of inscriptions found at and around the site of Serabit el-Khadim, in the south of the Sinai peninsula; (2) two very similar inscriptions in the Wadi el-Hol, in the south of Egypt; (3) the attestation of the *halaḥam* alphabetic sequence on a Theban ostrakon of the mid-second millennium BCE. The broad consensus among specialists is that these sources represent an iconic writing system of at least twenty characters that represent single consonants of a West-Semitic language, and a canonic order of these characters.

Two aspects of the writing system thus evidenced deserve our special attention in the context of the present conference. First, which characteristics of this system might be related to other notations current in Egypt and the Near East at the time of its appearance? Second, what exactly was new about the Sinai and related inscriptions?

The dominant writing systems in the early second millennium were Mesopotamian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphic/hieratic. The former was basically syllabic; the latter consonantal, with an important ideographic component. Cuneiform signs were highly stylized; hieroglyphs were highly iconic. Both systems used hundreds of different signs. Since the Sinai and Wadi el-Hol inscriptions also feature iconic signs, and the Sinai texts arguably represent single consonants, Egyptian hieroglyphic would seem to be the most likely source of inspiration, the more so since the relevant inscriptions are located in and near Egypt. But as opposed to Egyptian hieroglyphs, with their intricate combinations of phonetic and ideographic signs, the Sinai inscriptions seem to use phonetic, monoconsonantal signs exclusively.

Sadly, although we understand some of its principles, the script has not been fully deciphered so far (the Wadi el-Hol inscriptions even not at all) and it remains uncertain what exactly was the process that led to the development of this earliest consonantal alphabet, and exactly when it took place. It has been argued that its characters were borrowed straight from Egyptian hieroglyphic for the writing of a non-Egyptian language. But not all characters can safely be derived from Egyptian prototypes. Did they merely assume a pseudo-Egyptian guise, as a condition for the proto-alphabetic script to get anchored? Or did the inspiration go deeper, both graphically and conceptually?