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West Semitic Research

A stick figure at Wadi el-Hol, which scientists say may be the precursor to the letter H.

Finds in Egypt Date Alphabet In Earlier Era

By JOHN NOBLE WILFORD

On the track of an ancient road in the desert west of the Nile, where soldiers, couriers and traders once traveled from Thebes to Abydos, Egyptologists have found limestone inscriptions that they say are the earliest known examples of alphabetic writing.

Their discovery is expected to help fix the time and place for the origin of the alphabet, one of the foremost innovations of civilization.

Carved in the cliffs of soft stone, the writing, in a Semitic script with Egyptian influences, has been dated to somewhere between 1900 and 1800 B.C., two or three centuries earlier than previously recognized uses of a nascent alphabet. The first experiments with alphabet thus appeared to be the work of Semitic people living deep in Egypt, not in their homelands in the Syria-Palestine region, as had been thought.

Although the two inscriptions have yet to be translated, other evidence at the discovery site supports the idea of the alphabet as an invention by workaday people that simplified and democratized writing, freeing it from the elite hands of official scribes. As such, alphabetic writing was revolutionary in a sense comparable to the invention of the printing press much later.

Alphabetic writing emerged as a kind of shorthand by which fewer than 30 symbols, each one representing a single sound, could be combined to form words for a wide variety of ideas and things. This eventually replaced writing systems like Egyptian hieroglyphics in which hundreds of pictographs, or idea pictures, had to be mastered.

"These are the earliest alphabetic inscriptions, considerably earlier than anyone had thought likely," Dr. John Coleman Darnell, an Egyptologist at Yale University, said last week in an interview about the discovery.

"They seem to provide us with evidence to tell us when the alphabet itself was invented, and just how."

Dr. Darnell and his wife, Deborah, a Ph.D. student in Egyptology, made the find while conducting a survey of ancient travel routes in the desert of

Continued on Page 16

Discovery of Egyptian Inscriptions Indicate

Continued From Page 1

southern Egypt, across from the royal city of Thebes and beyond the pharaohs' tombs in the Valley of the Kings. In the 1993-94 season, they came upon walls of limestone marked with graffiti at the forlorn Wadi el-Hol, roughly translated as Gulch of Terror.

Last summer, the Darnells returned to the wadi with several specialists in early writing. A report on their findings will be given in Boston on Nov. 22 at a meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.

Working in the baking June heat "about as far out in the middle of nowhere as I ever want to be," Dr. Bruce Zuckerman, director of the West Semitic Research Project at the University of Southern California, assisted the investigation by taking detailed pictures of the inscriptions for analysis using computerized photointerpretation techniques. "This is fresh meat for the alphabet people," he said.

"Because of the early date of the two inscriptions and the place they were found," said Dr. P. Kyle McCarter Jr., a professor of Near Eastern studies at Johns Hopkins University. "it forces us to reconsider a lot of questions having to do with the early history of the alphabet. Things I wrote only two years ago I now consider out of date."

Dr. Frank M. Cross, an emeritus professor of Near Eastern languages and culture at Harvard University, who was not a member of the research team but who has examined the evidence, judged the inscriptions "clearly the oldest of alphabetic writing and very important." He said that enough of the symbols in the inscriptions were identical or similar to later Semitic alphabetic writing to conclude that "this belongs to a single evolution of the alphabet."

The previously oldest evidence for an alphabet, dated about 1600 B.C., was found near or in Semitic-speaking territory, in the Sinai Peninsula and farther north in the Syria-Palestine region occupied by the ancient Canaanites. These examples, known as Proto-Sinaitic and Proto-Canaanite alphabetic inscriptions, were the basis for scholars' assuming that Semites developed the alphabet by borrowing and simplifying Egyptian hieroglyphs, but doing this in their own lands and not in Egypt itself.

From other, nonalphabetic writing at the site, the Egyptologists determined that the inscriptions were



Dr. John Coleman Darnell, an Egyptologist at Yale University, directs researchers where he and his wife, Deborah, discovered inscriptions, including those

made during Egypt's Middle Kingdom in the first two centuries of the second millennium B.C. And another discovery in June by the Darnells seemed to establish the presence of Semitic people at the wadi at the time of the inscriptions.

Surveying a few hundred yards from the site, the Darnells found an inscription in nonalphabetic Egyptian that started with the name of a certain Bebi, who called himself "general of the Asiatics." This was a term used for nearly all foreigners, most of whom were Semites, and many of them served as mercenary soldiers for Egyptian rulers at a time of raging civil strife or came as miners and merchants. Another reference to this Bebi has been found in papyrus records.

"This gives us 99.9 percent certainty," Dr. Darnell said of the conclusion that early alphabetic writing was developed by Semitic-speaking people in an Egyptian context. He

'This is fresh meat for the alphabet people.'

surmised that scribes in the troops of mercenaries probably developed the simplified writing along the lines of a semicursive form of Egyptian commonly used in the Middle Kingdom in graffiti. Working with Semitic speakers, the scribes simplified the pictographs of formal writing and modified the symbols into an early form of alphabet.

"It was the accidental genius of these Semitic people who were at first illiterate, living in a very literate society," Dr. McCarter said, interpreting how the alphabet may have arisen. "Only a scribe trained over a lifetime could handle the many different types of signs in the

s an Earlier Date for Origin of the Alphabet



Photographs by West Semitic Research

search operations at Wadi el-Hol, in the Egyptian desert west of the Nile, above, that they say are the earliest known examples of alphabetic writing.

formal writing. So these people adopted a crude system of writing within the Egyptian system, something they could learn in hours, instead of a lifetime. It was a utilitarian invention for soldiers, traders, merchants."

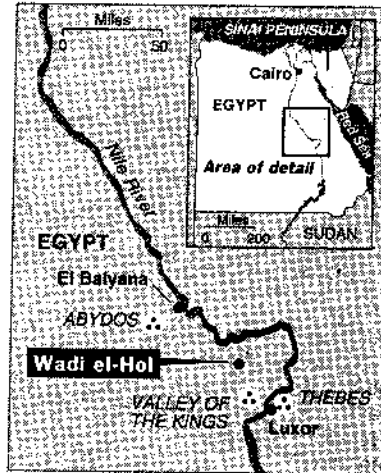
The scholars who have examined the short Wadi el-Hol inscriptions are having trouble deciphering the messages, though they think they are close to understanding some letters and words. "A few of these signs just jump out at you, at anyone familiar with proto-Sinaitic material," said Dr. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, who teaches at the Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey and is a specialist in the languages and history of the Middle East. "They look just like one would expect."

The symbol for M in the inscriptions, for example, is a wavy line derived from the hieroglyphic sign for water and almost identical to the symbol for M in later Semitic writ-

ing. The meaning of some signs is less certain. The figure of a stick man, with arms raised, appears to have developed into an H in the alphabet, for reasons unknown.

Scholars said they could identify shapes of letters that eventually evolved from the image of an ox head into A and from a house, which looks more like a 9 here, into the Semitic B, or bayt. The origins and transitions of A and B are particularly interesting because the Egyptian-influenced Semitic alphabet as further developed by the Phoenicians, latter-day Canaanites, was passed to the Greeks, probably as early as the 12th century B.C. and certainly by the 9th century B.C. From the Greeks the simplified writing system entered Western culture by the name alphabet, a combination word for the Greek A and B, alpha and beta.

The only words in the inscriptions the researchers think they understand are, reading right to left, the



The New York Times

The limestone walls at Wadi el-Hol told a story of early writing.

title for a chief in the beginning and a reference to a god at the end.

If the early date for the inscriptions is correct, this puts the origins of alphabetic writing well before the probable time of the biblical story of Joseph being delivered by his brothers into Egyptian bondage, the scholars said. The Semites involved in the alphabet invention would have been part of an earlier population of alien workers in Egypt.

Although it is still possible that the Semites took the alphabet idea with them to Egypt, Dr. McCarter of Johns Hopkins said that the considerable evidence of Egyptian symbols and the absence of any contemporary writing of a similar nature anywhere in the Syria-Palestine lands made this unlikely.

The other earliest primitive writing, the cuneiform developed by Sumerians in the Tigris and Euphrates Valley of present-day Iraq, remained entirely pictographic until about 1400 B.C. The Sumerians are generally credited with the first invention of writing, around 3200 B.C., but some recent findings at Abydos in Egypt suggest a possibly earlier origin there. The issue is still controversial.

For Dr. Darnell, though, it is exciting enough to learn that in a forsaken place like Wadi el-Hol, along an old desert road, people showed they had taken a major step in written communication. He is returning to the site next month for further exploration.

Watch for colorful Part 2's of The New York Times Magazine.