

## Sinai 527 - A new Proto-Canaanite Inscription?

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During the Jerusalem Colloquium on Egypt and the Bible Prof. GÖRG brought to my attention E.A. KNAUF's suggestion that Sinai inscription 527 is Proto-Canaanite, reading  $l^{C}nt$ <sup>1</sup>. A few weeks later I received Ugarit-Forschungen 15 where M. DIJKSTRA advances a similar theory<sup>2</sup>. I had examined the original inscription several times in the years 1972-1979 (the photograph, Pl. 1, was taken in August 1973) and considered for a while the possibility of reading the text as alphabetic, but had finally to reject it. Now that the suggestions by KNAUF and DIJKSTRA had been made, I accept with thanks Prof. GÖRG's invitation to express in BN my arguments to the contrary. Needless to say, there is no objection in principle to reading the inscription as Proto-Sinaitic or Proto-Canaanite; the shapes of the letters simply do not fit those of alphabetic letters of any given period.

Sinai inscription 527 is carved on a piece of rock lying in front of the main Roḏ el-C<sup>A</sup>ir cliff. The inscribed surface faces nearly upwards and lies in a location where visitors can hardly avoid stepping on it. This accounts for its worn state, so different from the crisp appearance of many Roḏ el-C<sup>A</sup>ir inscriptions. The five or six signs now preserved are evidently only part of the original text which must have filled the whole frame, unless the inscription is unfinished. The frame, with corniced top, measures 36 x 25 cm and the signs are some 6cm long or high, several times larger than average Proto-Sinaitic letters.

The supposed *lamed* and *nun* resemble Phoenician letters of the 11th-10th centuries, unless one thinks of the C<sup>I</sup>zbet Ṣarṭah *nun*, in itself problem-

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- 1 E.A. KNAUF, Eine altkanaanäische Inschrift aus Rōḏ el-C<sup>A</sup>ir: Sinai 527, GM 70 (1984), 33-36.
  - 2 M. DIJKSTRA, Notes on Some Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions Including an Unrecognized Inscription of Wadi Roḏ el-C<sup>A</sup>ir, UF 15 (1983), 33-38, esp. 37.

atical, as a parallel. The <sup>C</sup>Izbet Šarḥa Ostrakon is usually dated to the 12th century<sup>3</sup>, although an 11th century date is not impossible<sup>4</sup>. In contrast to these relatively late suggested parallels the presumed <sup>C</sup>ayin, with straight base, has its only parallels in Sinai inscriptions 345, 353 and perhaps 357. All other Proto-Sinaitic <sup>C</sup>ayins consist of two curved lines while the Proto-Canaanite ones, with or without "pupil", are circular or nearly so. All told, the identification as Egyptian *t* seems to me reasonable and is certainly less problematic. The sign of the cross appears in Egyptian as well as in Proto-Canaanite and is of no palaeographical or chronological value in either. KNAUF disregards the first and last signs in the right hand column while DIJKSTRA interprets them as word divider and full stop (sic). But while the first sign could have one out of many meanings the last sign, if indeed a sign, could be the Egyptian plural strokes or mineral determinative.

One can hardly interpret as Proto-Sinaitic or Proto-Canaanite (and complete) a very fragmentary text with traces of five or six signs of which two incidentally resemble 11th-10th century Phoenician letters, another one looks like a rare variant of the Proto-Sinaitic <sup>C</sup>ayin or better an Egyptian *t*, yet another has the indeterminate shape of a cross and the one or two remaining lend themselves to various interpretations.

A contribution to the history of turquoise mining in Sinai and to Phoenician foreign relations such as the suggested discovery of Phoenician presence at Šerabiṭ el-Khadem in the 11th or 10th century cannot be founded on this meaningless text fragment of Roḡ el-<sup>C</sup>Air, where virtually nothing post-dates the Middle Kingdom. ČERNÝ's assertion that the text is unintelligible is still to be preferred.

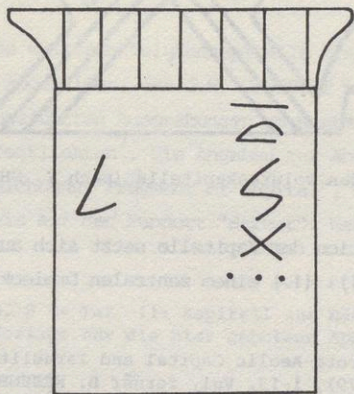
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3 M. KOKHAVI, An Ostrakon of the Period of the Judges from <sup>C</sup>Izbet Šarḥa, Tel Aviv 4 (1977), 12-13.

4 Discussed in my doctoral thesis, being assessed at the time of writing.



Sinai 527 (photo B. SASS)



Sinai 527 (from A.G. GARDINER, T.E. PEET & J. ČERNÝ,  
The Inscriptions of Sinai I, London, 1952, Pl. XCIV)