

An early Alphabetic Ostrakon from the Stables in Qantir (Egypt)

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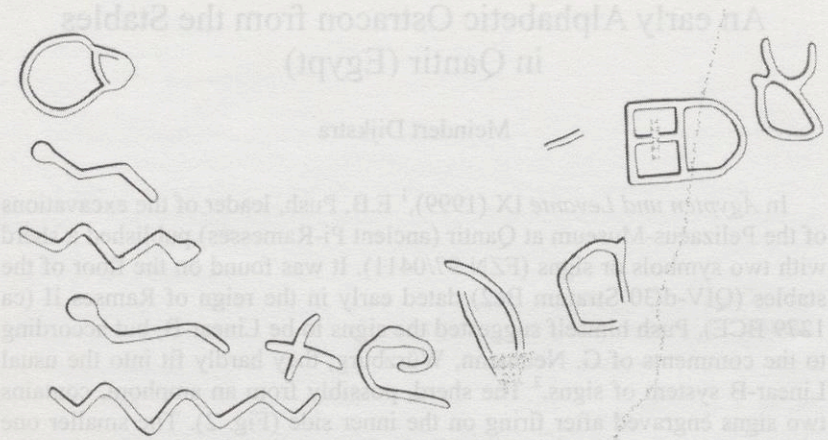
In *Ägypten und Levante* IX (1999),¹ E.B. Push, leader of the excavations of the Pelizaeus-Museum at Qantir (ancient Pi-Ramesses) published a sherd with two symbols or signs (FZN 97/0411). It was found on the floor of the stables (QIV-d/30 Stratum Bc2) dated early in the reign of Ramses II (ca 1279 BCE). Push himself suggested the signs to be Linear-B, but according to the comments of G. Neumann, Würzburg, they hardly fit into the usual Linear-B system of signs.² The sherd, possibly from an amphora, contains two signs engraved after firing on the inner side (Fig. 2). The smaller one looks like a animal head and the larger second one is clear cut triangle with an inner T-cross. Despite the look of it the latter cannot be the well known female symbol often used to denote Canaanite fertility goddesses.³ Though Push himself speaks about the smaller sign as an 'unverkennbaren Equidenkopf' (also suggested by the context of the stables) the possibility of a cow-head should also be considered. Several of the many Proto-Sinaitic cow-signs are close in form and detail to this sign. What struck me most, however was the resemblance to a similar combination of these two signs found by B. Sass in Serabit el-Khadim Mine G (Fig. 1 on the right).⁴ The main difference is the pointed form of the triangle on the Qantir sherd, whereas the Serabit sign has a rounded top. Also the direction of writing is different, but that is not unusual in this type of writing. Because no symbol of the female genitals seems to be intended, one could think (with Push) of the ground-plan of a house. Among the signs of Serabit el-Khadim and Wadi Intash, a few oblong or square signs with inner (T)-cross have been attested.

¹ Pusch, Vorbericht 29.30 Abb.3.

² Pusch, Vorbericht 29.

³ Keel / Uehlinger, Göttingen 60-61; also the Sumerian-Babylonian sign for MUNUS/SAL, Labat / Malbran-Labat, Manuel 229 No.554.

⁴ Sass, Inscriptions 183-187; this drawing (Christine Dijkstra) will appear in my *Corpus of Proto-Sinaitic Inscriptions* (forthcoming).



Serabit el-Khadim Inscription Sass 2 (drawing: Christine Dijkstra)

If the resemblance be accepted, one can only speculate about the meaning and use of the potsherd. It is reminiscent of the many sherds and stones found everywhere in Egypt and the Levant featuring one or two signs, the so-called ‘potter-marks’ which may have once fulfilled a role in an administrative system whose application and purpose still eludes us. If an example of early alphabetic writing, the find is more significant because of its archaeologically well documented context of discovery, than because of its meaning or function. It increases the small corpus of early alphabetic texts found in Egypt like the Farina ostrakon, the Kahun tool⁵ and especially the two ‘proto-Sinaitic’ Wadi el-Hol inscriptions found by John and Deborah Darnell in the 1994/5 Farsuth season.⁶ This discovery sparked off a new discussion about the date of the Proto-Sinaitic script.⁷ Darnell’s initial suggestion to date these inscriptions in consonance with the dated Egyptian inscriptions of the late 12th Dynasty and inscriptions of the 13th Dynasty (*inter*

⁵ Dijkstra, *Ahitûb*-inscription 103-105.

⁶ Darnell / Darnell, *Doors* 24-26, esp. 25, Darnell / Darnell, *Institute* 46-47; Darnell, *Text* 85-100. I again thank Vivian Davies, curator of the Egyptian section of the British Museum, who brought the find to my attention in summer 1996 and provided me with a copy of the Annual Report; see also S.E., A-B-C 12; Wimmer / Wimmer *Dweikat*, *Alphabet* 107-111; Man, *Alpha*; Altschuler, *Gloss* 201-204.

⁷ Fine photographs and drawings are available on http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/wsrp/information/wadi_el_hol

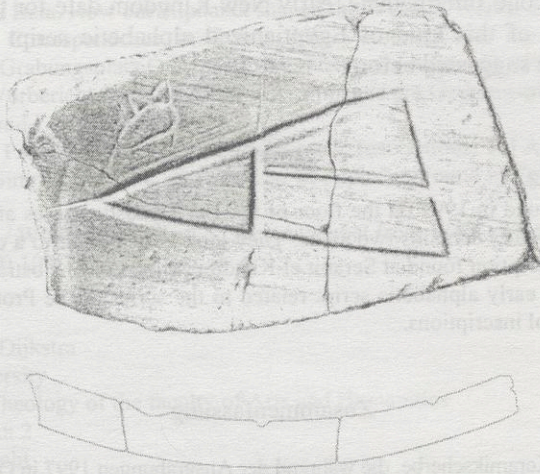


Abb. 3: Amphorenwandscherben mit Ritzung eines Pferdekopfes und eines Dreieckes; FZN 97/0411, Q IV-d/30, Stratum Bc2, Stallraum IV auf Fußboden aufliegend; Linear-B-Zeichen?, M 1:1; Zeichnung: J. SCHÖTTKE.

alii Sobek-hotep III) in their immediate surroundings,⁸ seems obvious, but is not conclusively proven. Now the recorded inscriptions from Gebel Tjauti and Wadi el-Hol have been published,⁹ it appears that they range from the Old Kingdom period up to the New Kingdom (officials of Thutmosis III and Rameses II are in evidence), not to mention some Coptic inscriptions. In short, the Wadi el-Hol road was followed in all periods of Egyptian history. The similarity with the roads and expeditions to Maghara and Serabit el-Khadim in Sinai is suggestive. When applying the general archaeological rule that in a range of possible dates usually the latest plausible date prevails as a *terminus ante quem*,¹⁰ that is here basically the end of the Second Intermediate Period, the suggested Middle Kingdom date is not so decisive at second thoughts. Accordingly, the well established archaeological context

⁸ Darnell / Darnell, Report 46-47; Man, Alpha 69ff; later reports revealed an increasingly number of later inscriptions up to the 17th Dynasty and even the New Kingdom.

⁹ Darnell u.a., Road as already had become clear from the preliminary annual reports of six seasons in The Oriental Institute Annual Report 1993-1998.

¹⁰ Of course, a plausible dating excludes inscriptions from the 1st Millennium BCE up to Late Antiquity.

of the ostrakon at Qantir in the 19th Dynasty (13th Century BCE) in turn might support a Second Intermediate, early New Kingdom date for the origin and development of this kind of Egyptianized alphabetic script as numerous scholars have suggested before.

Summary

A sherd found in 1997 on the floor of the 19th Dynasty stables at Qantir, Egypt (13th Century BCE) contains two signs. They look very similar to a combination of signs in an inscription found at Serabit el-Khadim (Mine G). The ostrakon is perhaps a specimen of early alphabetic script related to the script of the Proto-Sinaitic and the Wadi el-Hol inscriptions.

Zusammenfassung

Auf einer Keramikscherbe, die während der Ausgrabungen 1997 in Qantir, Ägypten, auf dem Fussboden der Stallen der 19. Dynastie (13. Jh. v.Chr.) angetroffen ist, sind zwei Zeichen ersichtlich. Diese sind einer Zusammenstellung von Zeichen einer in Serabit el-Khadim (Bergwerk G) gefundenen Inschrift sehr ähnlich. Die Zeichen auf dem Ostrakon könnten ein Beispiel sein von früh-alphabetischer Schrift, die mit der Schrift proto-sinaitischer Inschriften und der Inschriften des Wadi el-Hol zusammenhängt.

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