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TWO NOTES ABOUT THE PROTOSINAITIC SCRIPT

Pierre TALLET & Damien LAISNEY*

Since its discovery by W. M. F. Petrie at the beginning of the 20th century, the “protosinaitic” script has called much attention, as being probably the ancestor of much of the alphabetic systems still used nowadays. Unfortunately, the attestations of it are not so numerous, the full corpus currently estimated to about 60 items, mainly found in mining places of the Sinai Peninsula.¹ Every discovery of a new attestation is therefore interesting, mostly for the context in which it is found, for there has long been a huge discussion about the dating of this script.² Here we would like to propose as a hypothesis, a slightly different dating than the one given by their discoverer, John Darnell, for two protosinaitic inscriptions found in 1999 in the Western Desert, on the basis of a new document discovered in Rod el-Air in 2009 which may shed a new light on these documents (**note 1**); and to present briefly a new alphabetic text more recently identified by our mission on the Serabit el-Khadim plateau (**note 2**).

NOTE 1. BEBI IN SINAI: THE WESTERN DESERT CONNECTION?

A very detailed and thorough study was recently devoted by Hope Parker to the protosinaitic script, gathering all the evidence related to it and concluding it was most probably invented during the late Middle Kingdom, a milestone in the development of this new system of writing being the reign of Senusret III.³ We fully agree with the conclusions of this scholar, who examined carefully all

1 There are, to date, 45 protosinaitic inscriptions in Sinai, including the one we are publishing below: cf. the recent inventory of A. S. DALIX, “Notes sur les inscriptions protosinaitiques”, in P. Tallet, *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinai I*, 2 volumes, MIFAO 130, Cairo, 2012, pp. 320-322, adding to the list of B. SASS, *The Genesis of the Alphabet and its Development in the Second Millennium BC*, ÄAT 13, Wiesbaden, 1988, the five new inscriptions we found in Serabit el-Khadim (CCIS 189), Gebel el-Lahian (CCIS 32, 33, 34) and Wadi Kharig (CCIS 27) during the first phase of our survey, between 2006 and 2012. In a recent monograph, L. MORENZ, *Sinai und Aphabet-schrift: die frühesten alphabetischen Inschriften und ihr kanaänisch-ägyptischer Entstehungshorizont im Zweiten Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, *Studia Sinaitica* 3, Berlin, 2019, proposes to identify six more items – four in Rod el-Air and two in Gebel el-Lahian – whose reality is, in our opinion, in most of the cases debatable. Other finds (including the two inscriptions of Wadi el-Hol commented on below) would add nine more attestations.

2 For a presentation of all the possible dates for this script (Middle Kingdom, Hyksos Period, New Kingdom), see Fr. BRIQUEL-CHATONNET, “Les inscriptions proto-sinaitiques”, in D. Valbelle & Ch. Bonnet (eds.), *Le Sinai durant l’Antiquité et le Moyen Âge. 4000 ans d’histoire pour un désert*, Paris, 1998, pp. 56-60, sp. pp. 58-59; see also D. FAROUT, “Les hiéroglyphes et la naissance de l’alphabet”, *Égypte, Afrique & Orient* 46, 2007, pp. 37-48; on the possible origin of this writing system, see O. GOLDWASSER, “The Advantage of Cultural Periphery: the Invention of Alphabet in Sinai (circa 1840 BC)”, in R. Sela-Sheffy & G. Toury (eds.), *Culture Contacts and the Making of Cultures*, Tel Aviv, 2011, pp. 255-322.

3 H. PARKER, “The protosinaitic inscriptions at Serabit el-Khadim in their archaeological context: date and function”, *Ägypten und Levante* 32, 2022, pp. 269-311.

the documents, replacing them each time in their archaeological context. Her remarks on the style of the famous “bilingual” sandstone sphinx, bearing both inscriptions in hieroglyphic and protosinaïtic, as being typical of the Middle Kingdom artefacts found in the Serabit el-Khadim temple of Hathor are conclusive.⁴ She also accurately reckons, as we did in our publication of new inscriptions of Sinai, that protosinaïtic inscriptions are regularly carved nearby official Egyptian commemorative stelae of the Middle Kingdom.⁵ This is the case, for instance, at Bir Nasb (pass of Umm el-Kebeida), where at least five protosinaïtic inscriptions are placed in the vicinity of the official records of an expedition during year 20 of the reign of Amenemhat III in the area, probably to excavate the small turquoise mines we identified above this pass on the top of Gebel Abu Lahian.⁶ Another case is mine IV of the Serabit el-Khadim mining complex, where a “monumental” protosinaïtic text and a crude representation of a man with a feather on his head (maybe a representation of a soldier from the ideogram for *mš*^c, the troop) are associated to a rock stela dated to year 27 of the same king.⁷ Hope Parker also points out that in some protosinaïtic inscriptions the reading of some of the titles showing this Canaanite components of the expeditions are perfectly “in phase” with the nature of the Egyptian expeditions of that time. For example, the translation of the protosinaïtic inscription IS 346 as “on behalf of Naam, head miner”,⁸ makes sense, for the title of this man could be an Asiatic version of the title *jmy-r mš*^c “chief of the troop (of miners)”, one of the most frequent in the Middle Kingdom inscriptions of Sinai.⁹ To sum up this study is indeed a major contribution to the long-term debate about the birth date of the protosinaïtic script.

We would like to insist on another evidence we already pointed out, which could confirm the Late Middle Kingdom date proposed by the author. In 2009, we found several fragments of a stela dated from the reign of Senusret III (CCIS 140) in the area of the ancient camp of Rod el-Air (on the track leading to the plateau of Serabit el-Khadim).¹⁰ The name of the king, *H-kꜣw-r*^c, was clearly readable on the rounded top of the document. Its date is lost, but we proposed that the expedition of this king to Sinai took place before year 13 of his reign. Indeed, it is during this 13th year that a man named Senbebu, son of Sobekre, known in IS 170 as a store-keeper (*jry-t*),¹¹ left a stela in Wadi el-Hudi. In this last document, he holds the higher position of a “trustworthy seal bearer” (*hṯmw kfꜣ-jb*), meaning he was obviously promoted between the

4 *Ibid.*, pp. 271-275.

5 E.g. P. TALLET, *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinai* III. *Les expéditions égyptiennes dans la zone minière du Sud-Sinai du prédynastique à la fin de la XX^e dynastie*, MIFAO 138, Cairo, 2018, p. 42.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 286-292; P. TALLET, *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinai* I, 2012, p. 57-67; A. S. DALIX, “Notes sur les inscriptions protosinaïtiques”, in P. Tallet, *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinai* I, 2012, p. 297-327. Those mines are very small, and could have been mined only once, which would confirm that all the oldest inscriptions of the pass (hieroglyphics and protosinaïtic) are strictly contemporaneous.

7 H. PARKER, *op. cit.*, pp. 292-295.

8 Translation of B. Sass, in O. GOLDWASSER, “The birth of Alphabet from Egyptian hieroglyphs in the Sinai Desert”, in D. Ben Tor (ed.), *Pharaoh in Canaan: The Untold Story*, Jerusalem, 2016, p. 168.

9 H. PARKER, *op. cit.*, pp. 280-281.

10 P. TALLET, *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinai* I, 2012, doc. 140, p. 107-109; see also the database of Mainz university: *Persons and Names of the Middle Kingdom* (<https://pnm.uni-mainz.de/inscription/15894>).

11 A. H. GARDINER, T. E. PEET & J. ČERNÝ, *The Inscriptions of Sinai* II, *ExcMem* 45, London, 1955, no.170, p. 148.

two expeditions to Sinai and Wadi el-Hudi.¹² On this same stela (Wadi el-Hudi 17),¹³ he is also the first, with his colleague – the director of the inner palace Antefoker son of Senankh who left another inscription in the occasion of the same mining operation (Wadi el-Hudi 16)¹⁴ – to mention the goddess Hathor “mistress of the amethyst”. In this case, they were probably part of the diffusion of her cult in the Wadi el-Hudi that develops significantly in those amethyst quarries from the end of the reign of Senusret III onwards,¹⁵ as it seems clear that the officials involved in those desert expeditions were specialists that could be sent successively to different places, sometimes very far from each other.

Coming back to the new stela of Senusret III – which complements four other monuments from the time of this king found in the Serabit el-Khadim area (IS 81, 82, 146 and 170) – it likely bears testimony to the same phenomenon of members of Sinai expeditions being later sent in other desert places. In a fragment of the base of this monument, which originally named several officials involved in this operation, we can read the name of the “[overseer] of the troop Bebi” (*[jmy-r] mš^c Bbj*). The fragment is badly worn, and the beginning of the title is not preserved, but the proposed restitution is almost certain, this title being one of the more frequent in the corpus of sinaitic Middle Kingdom inscriptions.¹⁶ This is the only expedition member in Sinai so far known with this name, but interestingly, there is also a Bebi in the documentation of Wadi el-Hol who bears the similar, slightly more developed title of “overseer of the troop of Asiatics” (*jmy-r mš^c n ʿ3mw*).¹⁷ Moreover, John Darnell convincingly connected him with the two protosinaitic inscriptions he found on another spot of the same Wadi el-Hol site, where most of the inscriptions belong to a broad Late Middle Kingdom context.¹⁸

John Darnell proposed to date the coming of this official to Wadi el-Hol to year 26 of Amenemhat III. If so, the connection with the Bebi of Sinai, would not be very probable, the two inscriptions spanning in that case at least 32 years, and Bebi being also a very well attested name in the Middle Kingdom.¹⁹ But the author comes to this dating very indirectly, through a proposed connection between three different inscriptions. The first one, that of Bebi, names several other persons, including the *wab*-priest of the Lord of the Two Lands Hornebkhasutemsaef, whose

12 D. FRANKE, *Personendaten aus dem Mittleren Reiches (20.-16. Jahrhundert v.Chr.). Dossiers 1-796, ÄgAbb 41*, Wiesbaden, 1984, dossier 639, p. 377; also, most of the mining expeditions of Senusret III seem to take place between the military campaigns led by the king to Nubia in year 10 and year 16: Wadi el-Hudi (year 13), Wadi Hammamat (year 14). Year 11 or 12 of the reign are the most probable for this campaign in Sinai (P. TALLET, *Sésostri III et la fin de la XII^e dynastie*, Paris, 2015, pp. 144-145).

13 K. J. SEYFRIED, *Beiträge zu den Expeditionen des Mittleren Reiches in die Ost-Wüste*, HÄB 15, Hildesheim, 1981, pp. 48-51.

14 *Ibid.*, pp. 44-47, 51.

15 P. TALLET, *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinai III*, 2018, pp. 55-58.

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 218-220.

17 J. C. DARNELL *et al.*, “Two Early Alphabetic Inscriptions from the Site of Wadi el-Hol. New Evidence for the Origin of Alphabet from the Western Desert of Egypt”, *Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 59, 2005, pp. 65-124. For other attestations of this title – also known from El-Lahun – see *Persons and Names of the Middle Kingdom* (<https://pnm.uni-mainz.de/title/1445>).

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 88-90.

19 H. RANKE, *PNI*, 95, 16 and 96, 3; see also a more comprehensive list of the so-far known attestations of this name in *Persons and Names of the Middle Kingdom* (<https://pnm.uni-mainz.de/name/720>).

name is not known elsewhere.²⁰ On the same rock wall, this same official with a peculiar name is mentioned in a second inscription, in columns. Smaller signatures, of the controller of the phyle of Min Saonuris and his son the *wab*-priest Kheperkarê, are engraved immediately below, but this time in lines.²¹

It is true that the proximity between these three inscriptions on the same face of rock may lead one to conclude that they are roughly contemporary. However, the last part of the demonstration does not appear so definitive in our opinion. The *wab*-priest Kheperkarê mentioned in the last inscription is identified as the lector-priest of Hut-Sekhem (*hry-hb n Hwt-sbm*) bearing the same name, in a fourth inscription, this time on a separate, somewhat remote rock wall, and which indeed bears the date of year 26 of Amenemhat III.²² The position is not a strong argument, as inscriptions by the same hand can very well be made on several areas of a same wadi, but the presentation is very different, this last inscription is a commemorative text composed in hieroglyphs, taking the more formal layout of a rock stela. Moreover, the identification of these two Kheperkare-s as being one and the same is not fully certain given that this name is also very frequent during the whole Middle kingdom from the reign of Senusret I onwards.²³ Even if we consider that those two inscriptions are from the same official – which is indeed possible – the discrepancy between the two titles could refer to two different moments of his career, which would explain it.²⁴ This could be suggested by the second inscription itself, where the *wab*-priest Kheperkare appears as the “son of the controller of the phyle of Min Saonuris”. One can hypothesize that he belongs to another generation than the “main characters” (Bebi, Hornebkhasutemsaef and Saonuris) and makes it possible that he came back much later to carve the third inscription. As *Hut-Sekhem*, the place where he was attached by his functions, is closely linked by desert tracks to the Wadi el-Hol area, it would not be surprising if this official had paid several visits to the place during his life.

This would allow us to date the inscription of Bebi earlier in the reign of Amenemhat III, or even at the end of the reign of Senusret III. And indeed, other inscriptions in the Wadi el-Hol provide dates for the last reigns of the 12th dynasty. For instance, several texts are dated to year 2 of Amenemhat III (Insc. 18, 19, 21).²⁵ The last one is associated on the same spot with an inscription of “the soldier (*nh n njwt*) son of Bebi, Mery” (insc. 24).²⁶ Could this last Bebi be identical to the director of the troop of the Asiatics, present in Wadi el-Hol with his son Mery at the very beginning of Amenemhat III’s reign? In this case, with this alternative dating, the “overseer of the troop” Bebi of Rod el-Air could be the missing link between the Western desert protosinaitic texts and the Sinaitic ones. And this official could well have won his qualificative of “director of the Asiatics” in the context of a previous mission in Sinai.

20 J. DARNELL *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-103.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 104-105.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 106.

23 H. RANKE, *PNI*, 269,1; *Persons and Names of the Middle Kingdom* (<https://pnm.uni-mainz.de/name/827>).

24 It is not so sure, however, that a progression from *wab*-priest to lector-priest was really possible, for Forshaw’s dissertation (H. FORSHAW, *The Role of the Lector in Ancient Egyptian Society*, *Archaeopress Egyptology* 5, Oxford, 2014, *passim*), seems to demonstrate that they belonged to quite different worlds.

25 J.C. DARNELL, *Theban Desert Road Survey in the Egyptian Western Desert I*, *OIP* 119, Chicago, 2002, pp. 135-138.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

NOTE 2. A NEW PROTOSINAITIC INSCRIPTION ON THE SERABIT EL-KHADIM

PLATEAU (MINE XX) - CCIS 338²⁷

As we stated before, most of the protosinaitic inscriptions were found on the Serabit el-Khadim plateau. Some of them were already published at the beginning of the 20th century in the first edition of *The Inscriptions of Sinai*, by A. H. Gardiner and T. E. Peet, using the data collected by W. M. F. Petrie during his 1905 campaign on the site.²⁸ The full corpus was later much improved by the work of the Harvard Theological school between the two world wars²⁹ and by the systematic survey by Israeli scholars between 1968 and 1979³⁰. Since that time, and since they were intensely searched for, new discoveries of protosinaitic texts on the plateau – as elsewhere in Sinai – are exceptional.³¹ Most of them were found inside or in the vicinity of turquoise mines nos I, IV, XI, XII, XIII and XIV at Serabit el-Khadim. They were sometimes judiciously carved on places where there was no risk they would be destroyed by future mining operations, such as pillars sustaining the roof of rock-cut rooms. Other protosinaitic inscriptions come from the temple of Hathor, where they could be engraved on votive objects, like the small sandstone sphinx IS 345, which bears the bilingual inscription, or the private statue IS 346.

During the systematic survey of the plateau we undertook between 2006 and 2012, we were able to identify several mining spots that were not recorded so far, and 10 new mines were added to the 17 already known in the general map of the site we published in 2012³² (fig. 1). It is in mine XX that

27 Continuing the Complementary Catalog of the Inscriptions of Sinai (CCIS) published in the three successive volumes we devoted so far to the South-Sinai mining zone (P. TALLET, *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinaï I*, 2012 (CCIS 1-272); ID., *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinaï II. Les inscriptions pré- et protodynastiques du Ouadi 'Ameyra* (CCIS nos 273-335), MIFAO 132, Cairo, 2015; ID., *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinaï III*, 2018 (CCIS 336), with a last addition in P. TALLET & H. HUSSEIN, “Une nouvelle stèle commémorant l'expédition de l'an 8 d'Amenemhat IV à Serabit el-Khadim (CCIS 337)”, *NeHeT* 6, 2018-2022, pp. 175-182.

28 A. H. GARDINER & T. E. PEET, *The Inscriptions of Sinai I*, *EEF Memoir* 36, London, 1917, nos. IS 345-355. For the first decipherment of a sequence of this new script, see the pioneer article by A. H. GARDINER, “The Egyptian Origin of the Semitic Alphabet”, *JEA* 3/1, 1916, pp. 1-16.

29 K. LAKE, R. P. BLAKE & R. F. BUTIN, “The Serabit Inscriptions. The Decipherment and the Significance of the Inscriptions”, *Harvard Theological Review* 21, 1928, pp. 1-67; R. F. BUTIN, “The Serabit Expedition of 1930. The Protosinaitic Inscriptions”, *Harvard Theological Review* 25, 1932, pp. 130-203; ID., *Excavations and Protosinaitic Inscriptions at Serabit el-Khadim. Report of the Expedition of 1935*, *Studies and Documents VI*, London, 1936.

30 I. BEIT-ARIEH, R. GIVEON & B. SASS, “Explorations at Serabit el-Khadim”, *Tel Aviv* 5, 1977, pp. 170-187.

31 We identified a new one in mine IV during our survey of Sinai (P. TALLET, *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinaï I*, 2012, vol. 1, p. 151; vol. 2, pp. 117-118 = CCIS 189) and three others in Umm el-Kebeida / Gebel el-Lahian (*ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 58-68; vol. 2, p. 23 = CCIS 2-34). We regret that the discovery and the *editio princeps* of all those items is not even quoted in the more general synthesis of L. MORENZ, *Sinai und Alphabetschrift*, 2019, who makes systematically a new publication of them without giving his sources.

32 Map of Damien Laisney, in P. TALLET, *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinaï I*, 2012, fig. 8.1, p. 153; this is the reason why we prefer to use the numeric system already adopted by A. BARROIS, “The mines of Sinai, Serabit expedition of 1930”, *Harvard Theological Review* 25, 1930, p. 101-121 – who made the more precise map of the plateau – to identify them, rather than the alphabetic one (mines A to N) originally set up by W. M. F. Petrie. Only 15 mines were recorded at the end of the Israelian survey, the last one (mine XV) being inscribed with a newly discovered commemorative rock stela of Thoutmosis IV (I. BEIT-ARIEH, R. GIVEON & B. SASS, “Explorations at Serabit el-Khadim”, *Tel Aviv* 5, 1977, pp. 170-187); two other mines were identified during a survey by Maryvonne Chartier Raymond, Lille University, in 1991 (M. CHARTIER RAYMOND *et al.*, “Les sites miniers pharaoniques du Sud-Sinaï. Quelques notes et observations de terrain”, *CRIPEL* 16, 1993, fig. 8, p. 48).

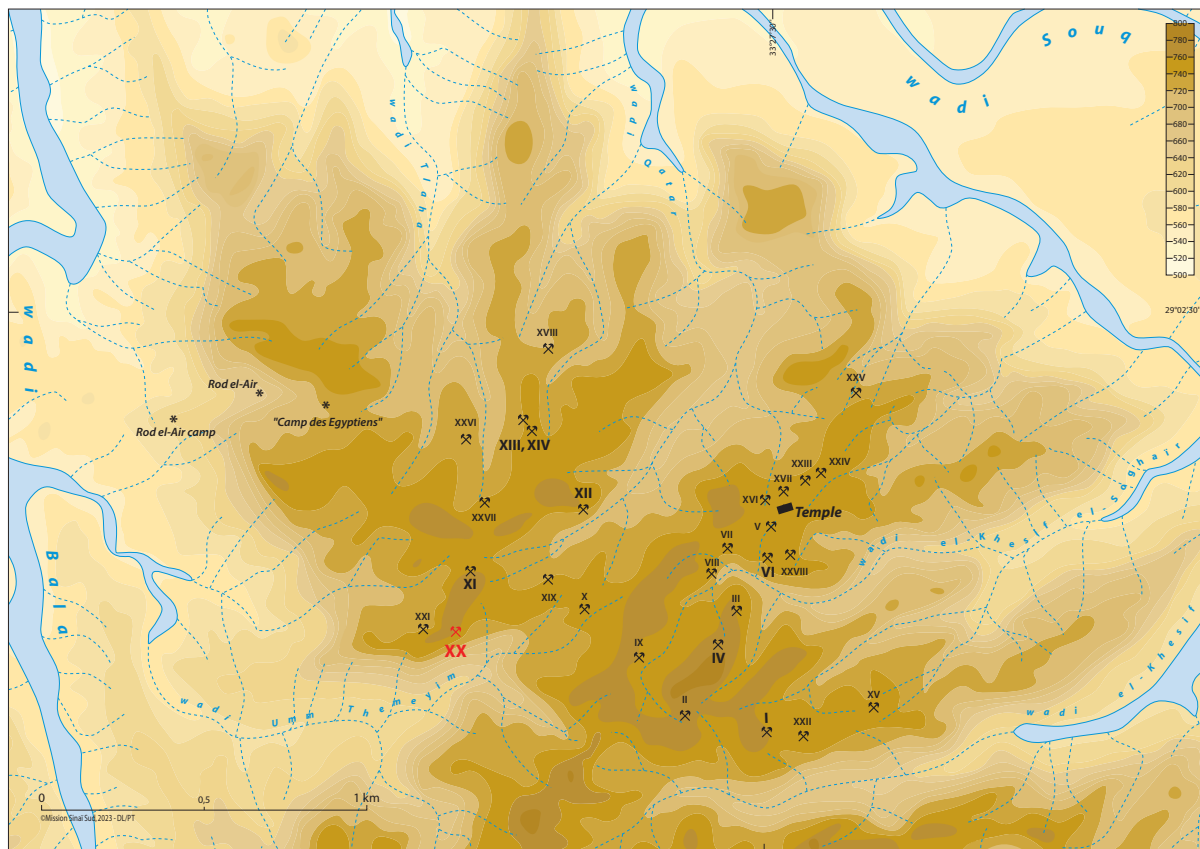


Figure 1. General map of the plateau showing the mines and locating mine XX [© Damien Laisney].

a new protosinaïtic inscription was found in 2010; it was, at this time, poorly documented, but we were able to study it more carefully during our last season in Sinai, in September 2022, after more than 10 years of interruption of this survey for security reasons. The mine itself opens on the southern side of a sandstone mountain, overhanging the wadi Umm Themeyim on the south-western part of the Plateau (fig. 2). No other inscription is known in this whole area, except the stela IS 57, which was found nearby mine XI (about 300 m to the north) and which is dated of year 6 of Amenemhat IV.³³ The main part of this mine is a small cave of 6,5 m long, 3,30 m large and between 1 and 1,5 m ceiling height (fig. 3), where a central pillar still stands, marked by numerous traces of the ancient miners' copper chisels (fig. 4). The inscription is engraved at the top of this pillar; it is much worn and the identification of the signs is at times uncertain (fig. 5-6). There are probably up to ten signs that are very close because of the narrowness of the space available for writing. Many options are possible to reconstitute the reading order. The most probable is, in our opinion, that the signs were first arranged in a column on the right (signs I.1 to I.5), thereafter completed by the addition of a second column on the left, which is slightly divergent from it (signs II.1 to II.5) (fig. 7). It is also possible that part of this inscription is missing because of the rather bad state of preservation of the whole rock face: an isolated vertical stroke is still visible 8 cm to the right of the tau (top of the 1st column) above the much damaged surface of the stone (see fig. 5, right).

³³ We already suggested that IS 57 was placed there to commemorate the opening of mine XI (P. TALLET, *La zone minière pharaonique du Sud-Sinaï II*, 2015, p. 141) and H. PARKER, *op. cit.*, pp. 295-298 uses also the proximity to argue that mines XI, XIII, and XIV were open at this date (*i.e.* year 6 of the reign of Amenemhat IV). This argument, is of course, not definitive to give a precise date to this new protosinaïtic inscription.



Figure 2. General view of mine [© Damien Laisney, Pierre Tallet].

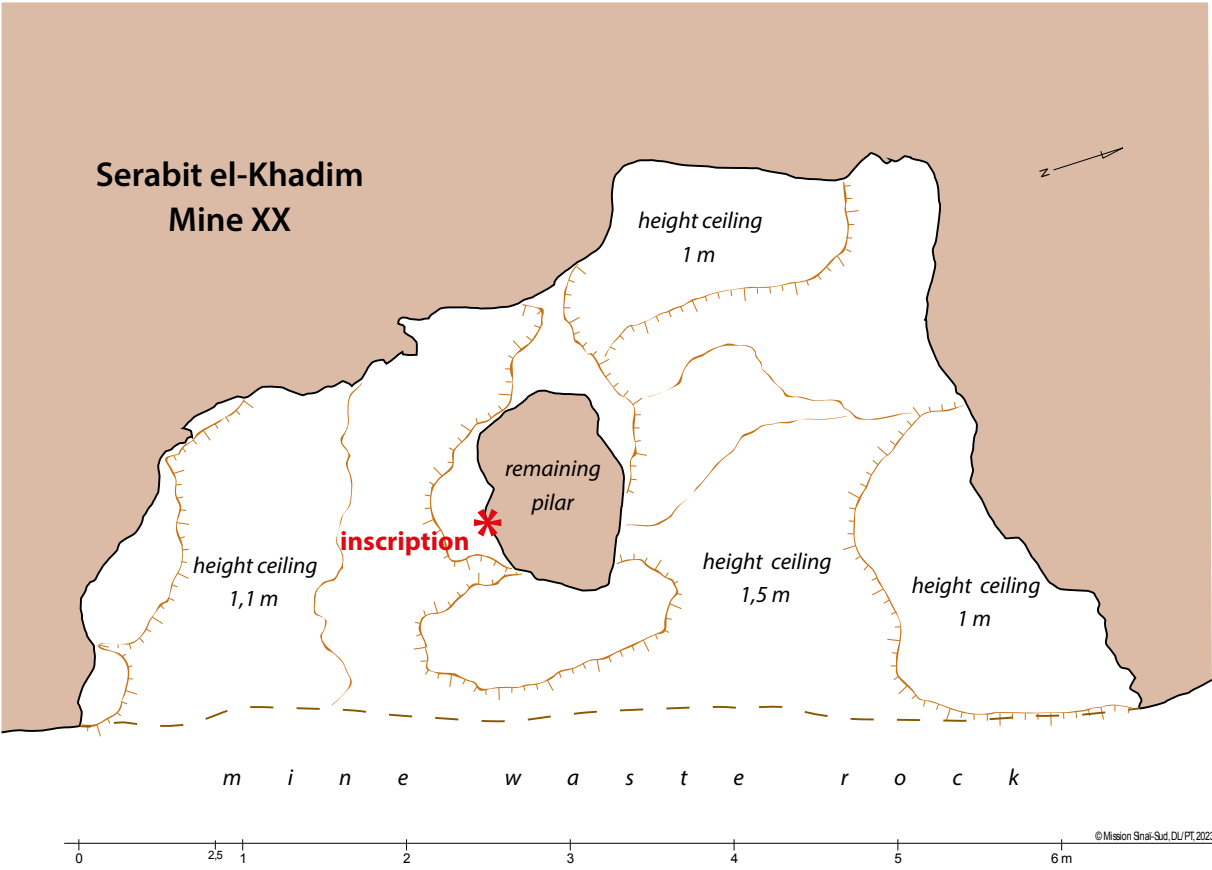


Figure 3. Plan of mine [© Damien Laisney].




Figure 4. Detail of the central pillar in mine
[© Damien Laisney, Pierre Tallet].





Figure 5. Photo of the new protosinaitic inscription
[© Damien Laisney, Pierre Tallet].

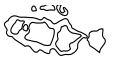
Right column:

I.1  here perfectly clear, is a taw.

I.2  is recognizable as an *aleph*.

I.3 : those two strokes are not connected, and carved in diagonal. They are probably to be identified to the two horizontal strokes that are probably used for [d].

I.4  is much worn but still clearly visible; it would be the *waw*-sign.

I.5 : the last sign of the column is much faded and we are not even sure it really exists (the tail, for instance, is absolutely not certain). If something is written, it would most probably be the fish-sign; an horizontal “linen wick” sign (in this case very different from the one which is carved at the beginning of the 2nd column) would also be possible. A third solution would be to recognize a complex bet-sign, the building being divided in three sections. The eye of the fish (?) seems, however, to be deeply carved. It could spell [d] – but the reading is far from being clear.³⁴

The general layout of the signs allows several restitutions of the phonetic sequence, it depends if ones reads from right to left, or from left to right the signs that are side by side inside the column:

Left to right: $t+w+d+w+d?$; right to left: $t+w+w+d+d?$

³⁴ One of the many mysteries about Protosinaitic is the two signs for <d>: “fish,” presumably for *dag-, and “door” for dalet, the one that finally won out. “Door” dalet may show up on IS 362, 367?, and probably the Lahun heddle jack, but “fish” is used in IS 346a, 352?, 357, 358, 363, and a school of fish on 375. We thank the anonymous reviewer of this article for this remark.

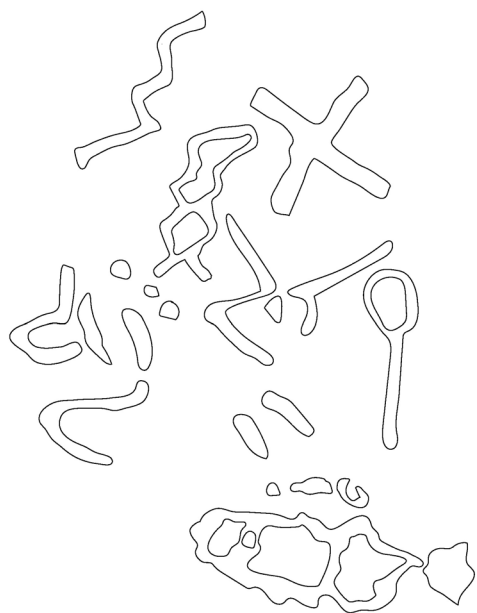


Figure 6. Drawing of the protosinaitic inscription [© Pierre Tallet].

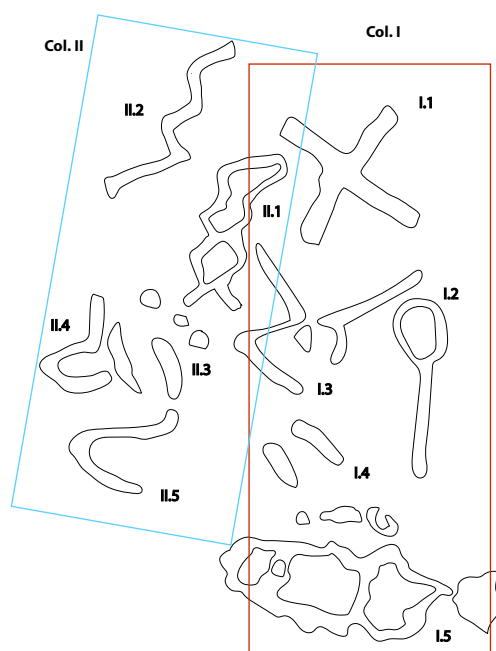









Figure 7. Columns and signs of the protosinaitic inscription [© Pierre Tallet].

Left column:

II,1  : the *mim*, perfectly recognizable, is here written vertically – the only parallel to this orientation of the sign can be seen in the first Wadi el-Hol protosinaitic inscription (J. C. DARNELL *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 78).

II.2  is clearly the *h*-sign – “linen wick” – most of the time it is twisted two times in its protosinaitic version, but there is another clear example of this “three times twisted” writing, which is closer to the Egyptian hieroglyphic sign , in the first Wadi el-Hol protosinaitic inscription (cf. J. C. DARNELL *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 82).

II.3  seems to be an *aleph* again, but is in this case very different than I.2 in the previous column, which seems not logical inside the same inscription. The reading is made difficult by a more recent horizontal engraved line who divides the sign in to halves and artificially connects it to what is at its right. Other possible identifications are the head sign (*resh*), or an axe-sign ( = ) to which is sometimes given the phonetic value [z].

II.4  : the identification of the sign here is uncertain. Should the three dots be connected to the stroke engraved below? If so, a possible interpretation would be to recognize the *kaf*-sign, in a shape which would not be so far from the one which appears on the bilingual sphinx IS 345 (A. H. GARDINER, *JEA* 3, *op. cit.*, pl. II and pl. III).

I.5  : the sign is very superficially carved, and could be a lamed.

Similarly, the order of the signs, depending of the sense of reading, could be both:

left to right : $m+h+\text{?}+k?\text{?}+l$; right to left : $-h+m+k?\text{?}+\text{?}+l$.

As the columns were probably themselves inscribed from the right to the left, this last sense of reading is the most probable in both cases.

Do these two sequences of signs form a single inscription, or are they the signatures of two distinct individuals placed on this pillar almost at the same time? It seems difficult to choose between these two interpretations in the current state of our knowledge of this writing. Even if it is sometimes possible to give a reading for some of the protosinaitic inscriptions – itself often most speculative – our only purpose is here to make this new text available to the other scholars, to feed the debate about the first alphabetic script.

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