

Egyptologists find the earliest known examples of ABC's Scientists say recently discovered limestone inscriptions hold clue to the origin of the alphabet.

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 the 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.

Replaces hieroglyphics

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 such writing systems as Egyptian hieroglyphics, or idea picture, had to be mastered.

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

Darnell and his wife, Deborah, doctoral student in Egyptology, made the find while conducting a survey of ancient travel routes in the desert of southern Egypt, across from the royal city of Thebes 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."

The Darnells returned to the wadi with several specialists in early writing. A report on their findings will be given on Nov. 22 at a meeting in Boston 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," 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 photo-interpretation techniques.

"Because of the early date of the two inscriptions and the place they were found," said 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."

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

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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, which had been occupied by the ancient Canaanites.

These examples, known as Proto-Sinaitic and Proto-Canaanite alphabetic inscriptions, were the basis for scholar's assumption that Semites had developed the alphabet by borrowing and simplifying Egyptian hieroglyphics, but doing this in their own lands and not in Egypt itself.