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The Inventors of the Alphabet — Erudite Scribes or Unlettered Miners

According to Orly Goldwasser's analysis of the evidence, the alphabet was invented around 1840 BCE by illiterate Canaanite mining experts working in the Sinai site of Serabit el-Khadem. This conclusion is based on a painstaking comparative analysis of the paleography of the Middle Kingdom hieroglyphs in the Egyptian temple on the site and the so-called "Proto-Sinaitic" inscriptions that were discovered primarily in and around the neighboring mines.

The inventors of the alphabet were inspired by the highly pictorial hieroglyphs around them, but they used them only as hardware for their new script in an innovative, distinctly un-Egyptian manner.

The graphemes of the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions represent mono-consonants (letters), and the pictorial meaning of each sign should always be discarded in order to reach the correct reading.

Two related issues have often been raised in response to her theory. First, how could illiterate, "simple" people accomplish such an intellectual leap without prior education? Second, is it not evident that erudite scribes would have had the necessary experience and culture to adopt the idea of mono-consonants from the ancient Egyptian script that they knew so well?



Orly Goldwasser is an Israeli Egyptologist, professor of Egyptology at the Hebrew University. She received her B.A. at Tel Aviv University, continued studying at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where she was awarded her M.A. and PhD degrees. She occupies the chair of Egyptology at the Hebrew University, and is a Honorary Professor at the University of Göttingen, she was guest professor at the University of Göttingen, Harvard University and at the Collège de France. Her main interests are the semiotics of the hieroglyphic script, intercultural relations: Egypt and the Levant, metaphors and literary images in ancient Egyptian literature and the origin of the alphabet. She is the discoverer of the classification system in the hieroglyphic script.