

## **NQBNM – MINERS’ SUPERVISOR FROM THE 2ND MILLENNIUM BC**

*Ancient Egypt, Proto-Sinaitic writing  
turquoise mine, copper mine, Serabit el-Khadem, Timna,  
the birth of the alphabet, rb nqbnm*

At the beginning of the 20th century, Egyptian inscriptions as well as other inscriptions – a simplified writing system, later called Proto-Sinaitic writing, were discovered on the Sinai Peninsula in mines situated near *Serabit el-Khadem* during an archaeological reconnaissance of the remains of the ancient turquoise mining. After several dozen years Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions were also discovered in the copper mine in Timna in Israel and in Wadi el-Hol near the Egyptian Thebes in 2009. It is currently believed that the Proto-Sinaitic writing used the oldest alphabet which was later adapted to writing the characters used in the Northwest Semitic languages. It was assumed that the writing had been created by Canaanite miners working for Egyptian rulers.

Several references to mining appear in numerous variants of readings of the inscriptions. In case of a few translations, the majority of the results achieved are recognised by scientists. Among the readings of the inscriptions that refer to the subject matter of this article, one refers to the beloved “patron” of the Sinai miners of the time, and reads *For the Lady – lb’t*. This respected Lady is the Egyptian goddess Hathor, who seems to be the patron of the contemporary Sinai miners, presumably irrespective of their ethnic origin. The next reading of another inscription is also intriguing. The inscription mentions “the miners’ boss” – *rb nqbnm*, an entirely lay person.

This hypothesis has now been undermined, as the social status of the workers working in the desert was not associated with the intellectual circles that were capable of creating such a ground-breaking invention in the development of the civilisation as is the alphabet.

The author opposes to such an approach, arguing that conducting mining (and smelting) required a complex organizational structure resembling that of an enterprise, in which poorly skilled workers and slaves were only able to carry out the easiest work. The development of the mines, searching for new deposits, selling the resources, provisioning and other tasks that were necessary to survive in the desert must have been arranged by educated personnel. It is therefore highly probable that indeed those were the people who came up with the idea of an alphabetic writing.