An Egyptian Birthplace for ABC's

Scientists have discovered two limestone inscriptions in the Egyptian desert that set the invention of the alphabet back centuries and place it in Egypt rather than in Semitic lands as had been believed.

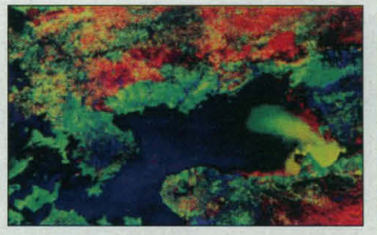
The alphabet was the product of a mix of two cultures—invented by Semitic people living in Egypt as mercenaries, merchants, and miners to express their own language. A team led by John Coleman Darnell, an Egyptologist at Yale University, came upon the inscriptions in a dry riverbed called Wadi el-Hol while mapping ancient caravan routes in the desert west of Thebes, the ancient Egyptian capital. Until now, the earliest use of the alphabet had been traced to Semites in Sinai, who left writing on the walls of a turquoise mine sometime between 1700 B.C. and 1500 B.C.

Limestone inscription (inset shows lettering).

The two inscriptions of about a dozen characters each were found among Egyptian inscriptions of the same era, between 1800 and 1900 B.C. Scholars are now huddling to try to decode the inscriptions.

The discovery, first announced in *The New York Times*, "allows us to revise amazingly a lot" about how the first alphabet evolved, says Chip Dobbs-Alsop, a Semitist at Princeton Theological Seminary. He says it demonstrates how alphabet letters were derived from the hieroglyphics: "aliph" (the fifth sign from the left in picture), which meant "ox," became the letter A, for example; the zigzag hieroglyph meaning water (fifth from right) became today's "M."

Portrait of an Invader



"Its rubbery vines and leaves formed thick tangles of vegetation that adhered to the river banks and clogged up waterways. It grew fast, faster than men could destroy it. ... to them it was another enemy." So novelist V. S. Naipaul described water hyacinth, an invasive aquatic weed, in *A Bend in the River*, his 1979 tale of life in a Ugandan town.

Twenty years later, the water hyacinth remains one of the most aggressive invaders on the continent. Now, researchers are getting a clearer picture of why the South American native is flourishing in the world's second-largest lake, Victoria. A satellite image released this month by the International Center for Research in Agroforestry in Nairobi, Kenya, shows three feeder rivers injecting an immense, nutrient-rich plume of sediment far into Lake Victoria, where the weeds now choke most of the shoreline shared by Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. Besides making life miserable for fishing boats, the vegetation mats threaten native species. The new plume portrait will help scientists track the nutrients back to their sources and pinpoint which regions should step up tree-planting and other erosion-control measures.

CITATIONS OF U.K. SCIENTISTS 1990–99

Name	Affiliation	Citations
Top 5 in Biomedical Sciences		
1. Salvador Moncada	University College London	30,081
2. David P. Lane	University of Dundee	16,857
3. Philip Cohen	University of Dundee	14,208
4. Richard S. J. Frackowiak	Institute of Neurology	13,932
5. Peter J. Barnes	Imperial College	13,507
Top 5 in Physical Sciences		
1. Richard H. Friend	University of Cambridge	7,204
2. Andrew B. Holmes	University of Cambridge	6,427
3. Donal D. C. Bradley	University of Sheffield	5,612
4. J. Fraser Stoddart	University of Birmingham	5,295
5. Andrew C. Fabian	University of Cambridge	5,184

U.K.'s Heavy Hitters

Nitric oxide researcher Salvador Moncada easily trumps the competition in a tally of citation rates this decade among researchers in the United Kingdom. One paper alone—a 1991 report with Richard M. J. Palmer—has been cited 6500 times, according to the Institute for Scientific Information in Philadelphia. In physical sciences, the most cited is Richard Friend, who does research on light-emitting polymers.

Plant Patent Killed

A festering source of North-South friction has been removed with a decision on 3 November by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (PTO) to withdraw a 13-year-old patent on an Amazon plant.

A patent on a strain of ayahuasca (*Banisteriopsis caapi*), the source of a hallucinogenic potion used by shamans for centuries, had been acquired by Loren Miller, a Palo Alto, California–based plant researcher, who claimed to have cultivated a unique pink-flowered specimen that he intended to exploit for "medicinal" purposes.

Now the ayahuasca once again belongs to the people. In response to a petition from the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) in Washington, D.C., on behalf of a coalition of Amazon Indians, the PTO has nullified the patent on the grounds that a specimen like Miller's was on display at Chicago's Field Museum at least a year before he applied for a patent in 1984.

Thus ends an issue that had caused rancor between U.S. ethnobotanists and South American activists, who claimed Miller was trying to convert a sacred plant into his private property. According to CIEL lawyer Glenn Wiser, the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA) had declared Miller persona non grata in South America, and Miller in turn persuaded the government of Ecuador to label COICA a terrorist group. Wiser says the dispute made other North American commercial plant prospectors feel unwelcome in the South.

Miller, who has 60 days to appeal, had no comment.

CREDITS: (TOP TO BOTTOM) B. ZUCKERMAN AND M. LUNDBERG/WEST SEMITIC RESEARCH; M. WALSH, ICRAF