

Digital Labs: Drawing Ancient Inscriptions

Kyle McCarter, Professor, Near Eastern Studies Department

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The Issue

In an epigraphy course students learn to decipher and analyze inscriptions and manuscripts using traditional philological tools. The ultimate goals are to translate and interpret texts, but before they can begin to do those things, students need to become familiar with the physical characteristics of the ancient documents we study, especially the shape and other features of the writing itself. So our first job is to enhance the students' ability simply to "see" ancient writing, and this can be a challenge when using traditional tools.



Drawing an inscription with Illustrator

Why does it matter

When you examine an ancient inscription, a number of variables affect your ability to interpret what you're looking at, such as the condition of the surface of the object, the darkness of the ink, or the depth of the incisions in stone or clay.

A document's appearance is affected not only by the ancient method used to create it and the state of preservation of the inscribed artifact, but also by the modern technologies employed in recording and preserving its image, such as the photographic techniques used to create the image and the computer programs used to manipulate it. All these factors affect the way modern scholars, including epigraphy students, understand ancient inscriptions. When students are familiar with both the ancient and the modern technologies at play in the creation and reproduction of epigraphs, they're better able to see the written characters and recognize what the ancient scribe intended.

Drawing an inscription most effectively connects the technical activity of seeing an inscribed object with the correct interpretation of its text. The publication of a newly discovered inscription should include not only one or several excellent photographs, but also a drawing. This drawing is not (or should not be) an object of study for other

scholars, who should work from the photographs if not the original artifact. Instead, the drawing permits the epigrapher who is publishing an inscription to show other scholars how he or she sees the inscription. At the most basic level, the drawing indicates which lines, in the epigrapher's opinion, are part of the inscription and which are the result of surface damage. But a good drawing also conveys a lot of sophisticated paleographic information, much of which is difficult to express adequately in a written description alone. So one of the most important things we teach epigraphy students is how to draw what they see when they examine an ancient inscription.

Faculty Solution

When epigraphy students are learning to draw inscriptions, technology comes into play in two principal ways. The first is through photography. Ideally, the epigrapher works from the object itself, but since this is often not possible, the creation of high quality photographic images is extremely important.

We are fortunate at Hopkins to be able to work closely with other research groups in this country and overseas where first-class epigraphic images are being created. This

