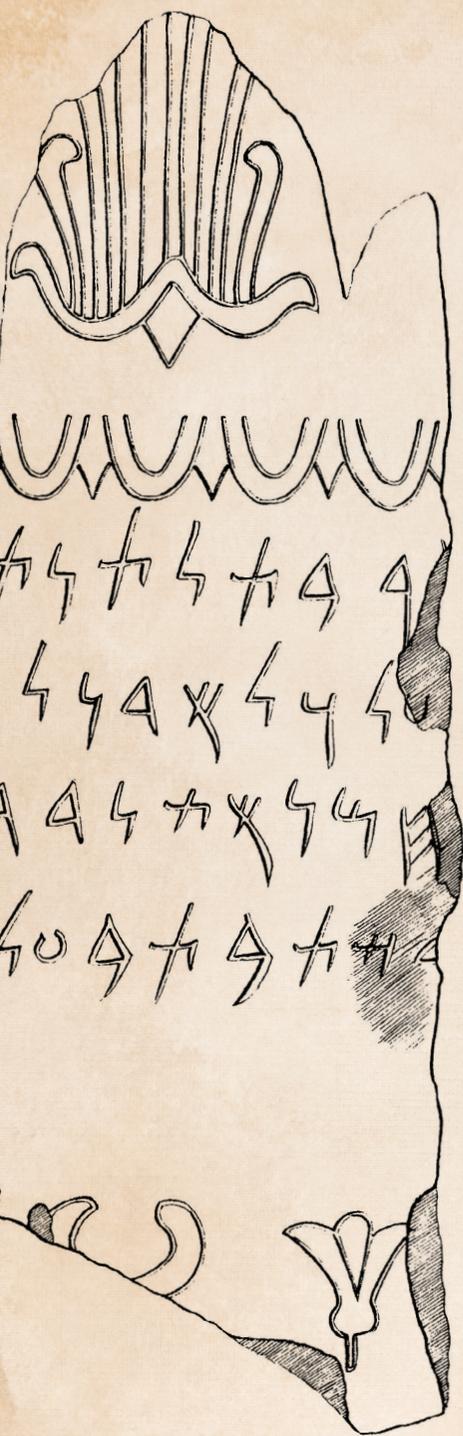


Identifying an Ancient Script

By Stephen Lang, Lyons Keeper of Collections, Asian Section

ONE OF THE ONGOING PROJECTS in the Asian Section is an attempt to identify, transcribe, and translate any text found on an object in the collection. This is a challenge given the diversity of languages and scripts in Asia as well as the large number of objects in the Section, close to 30,000. It was in this context that the stele fragment featured here caught my eye—I was pulling an object from storage for a class and needed to move a piece out of the way to get to the back of the drawer. When I picked it up, I noticed that it had writing on it that was completely foreign to me. Curious, I decided to investigate and noted that it had come in from the collection of Maxwell Sommerville. In the Asian Section, most of the Sommerville material came from either Japan or India. I knew the text wasn't Japanese so I figured it must be Indian in origin, however, after consulting some reference books and colleagues, it didn't seem to match any script from the region. It was a bit of a mystery.

The mottling of the stone made it hard to read the characters, so I scanned in the inscription with a NextEngine scanner to get a better sense of all the characters present. With the scan in hand, I opened up the search to all languages and scripts, starting with ones that would have some kind of early alphabet. After a little digging I settled on a likely identification of Punic or Phoenician. After finding some similar examples on the British Museum's website, I sent my findings to the Mediterranean section to see if it looked familiar to them. The object eventually found its way to Jean Turfa's desk, and she was able to confirm my early suspicions and took the lead on tracking down the origins of the piece. It now resides safely in the Mediterranean Section, where it can be used by scholars and students alike.



An illustration of a stele with Punic inscription in the British Museum's Collection helped Keeper Steve Lang identify the Penn Museum stela. From Davis, N. 1861. *Carthage and her remains: being an account of the excavations and researches on the site of the Phoenician metropolis in Africa, and other adjacent places*. Conducted under the auspices of Her Majesty's government. New York: Harper & Brothers. Pl. VII no. 19.



The inscribed Punic stele 29-130-155 being scanned, and the scanned image.