The Innovative Instructor

Pedagogy

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What this is

The Innovative Instructor is an article series (https://ctei.jhu.edu/ii) and a blog (https://ii.library.jhu.edu) related to teaching excellence at Johns Hopkins

Article categories

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Pedagogy

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Technology

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The Center for Teaching Excellence and Innovation partners with faculty, postdocs, and graduate students to extend instructional impact by connecting innovative teaching strategies and instructional technologies

CENTER for **TEACHING EXCELLENCE** & **INNOVATION**

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Digital Labs: Drawing Ancient Inscriptions

Kyle McCarter, Professor, Near Eastern Studies Department

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.

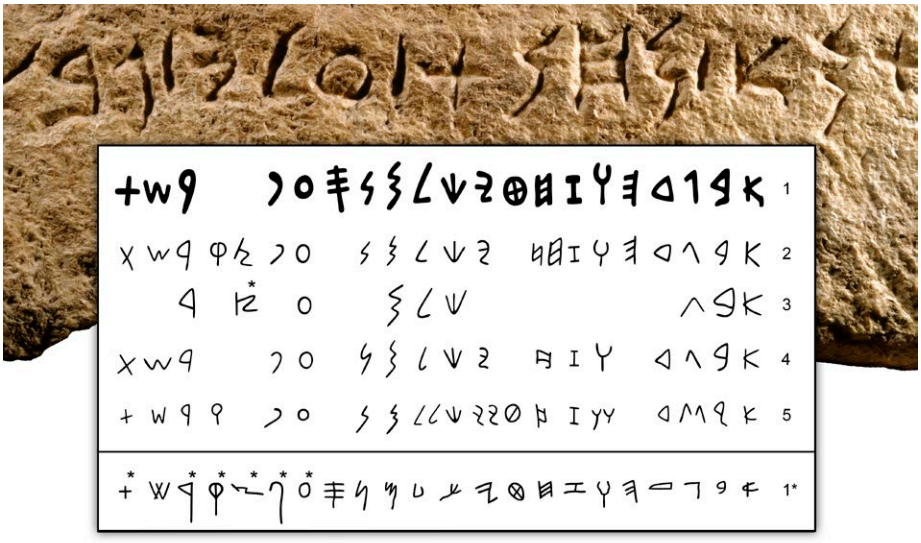
A document's appearance is affected not only by the ancient method used to create it and the state of preservation of the inscribed artifact, but also by the modern technologies employed in recording and preserving its image, such as the photographic techniques used to create the image and the computer 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 shows 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



Script chart example with one of its sources

gives us the resources we need to focus on the second aspect of technology that comes into play, namely the drawing itself. Drawing technology has changed dramatically since the days I was taught to draw inscriptions using a light table, tracing paper, and India ink.

Last year, in the first semester of my year-long epigraphy course, we began to teach systematically with Adobe Illustrator for the first time. With Illustrator, the number and variety of editing tools available, along with the high degree of control they afford, provide a stark contrast to the unforgiving method of tracing with ink. The program has numerous other advantages. For example, it greatly simplifies an essential, but painstaking, part of our work in epigraphy: the creation of script charts. Script charts display the forms of the letters of inscriptions from various time periods, providing a graphic illustration of the evolution of ancient scripts. Working within Illustrator, an epigrapher can produce a script chart very quickly by cutting and pasting letter forms from previously drawn inscriptions and using basic editing tools to arrange the results to show typological development.

For a number of years, I've been designating part of the epigraphy seminar as a laboratory. During the three-hour class the first two hours focus on the reading and interpretation of inscriptions, while the last hour is devoted to technical study of the ancient scripts through drawing, now specifically using Illustrator.

Training in the use of Illustrator is necessary, since the program is new to most of our students. Soon after the start of the fall semester Reid Sczerba from the Center for Educational Resources conducted a hands-on workshop to introduce the program to the students. Teaching assistant, Heather Parker, who had primary responsibility for the lab portion of the class, continued to explain and reinforce the techniques.

Results

As the class reached an increasingly sophisticated level of comprehension of the epigraphs, reinforced by the use of technology and practice in the lab, the students began to combine what they were learning about the writing and spelling of ancient texts with skills and tools learned in language classes. The goal was to give them facility in the decipherment, translation and interpretation of ancient written materials.

Only a small number of our graduate students will go on to become epigraphers, but all of them must be familiar with inscriptions and the methods used to study them. With the training we give them, we expect that they will be able to make effective use of the publications of the specialists. They will have the tools for understanding what is being said, and they will know the limitations of epigraphic interpretation.

Other Thoughts

When teaching undergraduates about the ancient Near East, I'm aware that most of the class will not become professionals in the subject matter. I ask myself what is valuable to them about what I'm teaching. I know that ultimately it will not be the specific data, as much as the general historical principles at work and the larger cultural ideas that the material illustrates. To some extent the same is true for graduate students, though, in their case, they must retain a lot of the data as well.

Since most of my teaching is about things that have been important to people for millennia, I feel a special obligation to convey to students a sense of what has proved to be of enduring importance in human culture and perhaps even to prompt them to ask themselves why these things acquired such importance in the first place.

Author's Background

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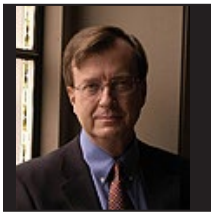

For over twenty-five years, Kyle McCarter has taught Johns Hopkins graduate and undergraduate students, focusing on the ancient world, the part of it that gave us the Bible and the alphabet. His published work is mostly philological, with an interest in material culture. He combines these interests by serving as epigrapher to a number of excavation projects. Why does he find it exciting to decipher ancient inscriptions? It's as if a telephone has been ringing unanswered for 3,000 years, and you pick up the receiver, and there's a connection.