The Oldest Phoenician Inscription from Sardinia: The Fragmentary Stele from Nora

[1987]

In 1974 I published a brief paper on the archaic Phoenician inscription (CIS 1, 145) found on a fragment of a large stele from Nora.1 The Nora Fragment had hitherto attracted little scholarly attention in the present century. W. F. Albright contributed a few lines on the text in his paper “New Light on the Early History of Phoenician Colonization”;2 Maria G. G. Amadasi in her catalogue gives brief notes and a new photograph;3 and Père Jean Ferron contributed a study and photograph.4 In my paper I observed that the inscription had been published upside down by A. della Marmora in 1840, and again later in the Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum, leading to confusion which prevented recognition of its antiquity and its proper decipherment. Moreover, the inscription was written in the multidirectional style (in this case boustrophedon) which flourished in Old Canaanite and Early Linear Phoenician, but died out before the end of the eleventh century BCE.

My decipherment was based on new knowledge of the evolution of Old Canaanite and Early Linear Phoenician derived from recent rich discoveries of epigraphs of the late thirteenth to the early tenth century BCE, most of them found in the past thirty years. Particularly important in this series are the five 'El-Ḥaḍr arrowheads from ca. 1100 BCE, the era of transition from pictograph to linear script.5 Today more than thirty arrowheads are known, published and unpublished, all stemming from the era between c. 1100 and 975 BCE.6 In addition, some sixteen additional inscriptions, on pottery, bronze, and stone, belong to the corpus of Old Canaanite and Early Linear inscriptions dating from the twelfth to the beginning of the tenth century BCE. Particularly noteworthy is the inscription from Lachish written in boustrophedon style.7 Many of these inscriptions are closely dated from controlled archaeological contexts, or from the typology of the pottery or weapons upon which they were found. All together, these materials yield a controlled typological sequence for the palaeographer. In this sequence the Nora Fragment fits neatly into the eleventh century BCE.

My palaeographical analysis of the Nora Fragment has been attacked recently by Wolfgang Röllig.8 I have responded in detail, concluding that his palaeographical arguments are weak, and at several points demonstrably false.9

The purpose of the present paper is not to rehearse the discussion in the papers cited above. Rather, I wish to

3. Amadasi: 87f. and Pl. 28.
present new evidence, based on a study of the inscription during a trip to Sardinia.  

The Nora Fragment once belonged to a stele of monumental proportions before being broken up and reused as a building stone. The fragment now measures 46 cm. in height, 61 cm. in breadth, and its letters are larger and more deeply engraved than those of the Nora Stone (CIS I, 144).

The drawing in Fig. 37.2 is based on drawings and notes taken in the Cagliari Museum as well as tracings from new photographs [see Fig. 37.1]. We have ignored the rubrication which defaces the letters and which has led to misreadings.

Line 1 reads from right to left:
\[ \text{?n}. \ p\text{f} \]

Line 2 reads from left to right:
\[ \text{lt}. \ h\text{fr} \]

10. I traveled to Sardinia in September, 1984, as a member of an expedition to survey remains or evidence of Phoenician harbors and maritime activity in Sardinia. The expedition, directed by Elisha Linder in cooperation with Ferruccio Barreca, Director of Antiquities for Cagliari and Ostian, and Fulvia Lo Schiavo, Director of Antiquities for Sassari and Nuoro, was a joint venture of the Center for Maritime Studies of the University of Haifa and the Harvard Semitic Museum. I am particularly indebted to the late Professor Barreca for his hospitality and aid in studying the Phoenician inscriptions in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale. I am indebted also to Richard J. Scheuer for his excellent photographs of the Nora inscriptions.

11. The Nora Stone too has been retouched with color (red and blue) to make the letters stand out. Particularly misleading is the rubrication of the \text{mem} in line 4.

Observing the word divider, the first line could be read \text{?en p\text{d}l}, the frequent combination of \text{?en} with a participle, ‘there is no one to make (do, or perform)’, or the second word could be po\text{d}l, ‘there is no work or deed (like?)’. One may compare biblical \text{?yn m\text{sp}h} (Qohelet 9:10). The second line has two broken words which could be reconstructed in several ways. Actually the sequence does appear in Proverbs 24:9 (\text{\textquoteleft}wlt h\text{tr}'); but with a meaning unlikely to be used on a stele. The second word (after the word divider) in the line easily could be h\text{tr} which is found in Phoenician. See, for example, h\text{tr} m\text{sp}th, ‘the scepter of his rule’ in curses of the A\text{hiram Inscription}.

A crucial letter in the analysis of the inscription is the \text{lamed} of line 2. The letter is clearly an angular, eleventh-century \text{lamed} in left-to-right stance. The two lines of the letter are deeply engraved. The rubricator has erred only in coloring a chipped place near the top of the letter. \text{Lamed} in this stance puzzled earlier interpreters. Now it is familiar from the Gerb\text{a}l Arrowhead (eleventh century), the \text{?El-\text{Ha}dr} arrowheads (I, II, III, V, ca. 1100) in more rounded form as well as in earlier Old Canaanite dextrograde \text{lamed}. Indeed, dextrograde stances of letters abound in eleventh-century scripts: \text{alep, bet, dalet, mem, nun, pe, ren} all appear in “reversed,” that is, dextrograde, stances in extant eleventh-century inscriptions. It is a familiar phenomenon of the stage of multidirectional writing.

12. \text{KAI: 1: 2.}