

Inscribed Bull Stele

3rd Century B.C. to 1st Century A.D.

Yemen

Alabaster

H: 36.2 cm

Trapezoidal in form, carved in very high relief, with the form of a bull's head with ribbed brows and a rounded snout. The horns now missing. Inserted onto a rectangular alabaster base upon which is a Qatabanian inscription, which reads: ʾlʿm S¹flyn – the name of a man.

These carved bull stelae are almost certainly ritual objects. The name of a man possibly indicates a funerary intent, with the deceased name recorded. The bull, however, was sacred in ancient South Arabia and is a commonly occurring religious motif and could therefore indicate that this sculpture once adorned a temple.

It is reputed to have come from Hayd ibn 'Aqil, the necropolis of ancient Timna', located a little to the north of the city. Timna' was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Qataban, one of the richest kingdoms of ancient South Arabia, whose wealth derived largely from its strategic position along the Incense Route, as a trading point for merchants dealing in spices, most importantly frankincense, myrrh and cinnamon. According to the Roman author Pliny the Elder, who died in 79 A.D., Timna' was a

bustling city with some sixty-five temples. Excavations suggest a major fire forced its inhabitants to abandon the city sometime in the first century A.D

Sir Antonin Besse, Tony Besse's father, gifted a collection of South Arabian sculptures to the British Museum in the 50s, amongst which were three carved bull stelae – one of which was similarly inscribed with the name of a man, Ab'am Hazr, and was also reputed to have come from Beihan.

Literature:

Christie's, London, December 16th, 1982, no. 111, illus.