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A SECOND CENTURY CHRISTIAN BURIAL AT TELL EL-MASKHUTA?

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The natural delight of the archaeologist and historian at finding the earliest example of something often unfortunately leads to seeing as new, striking, and early what is in fact well-known, unremarkable, and not particularly early. It was therefore with some normal suspicion that I read the preliminary publication of a burial from the Roman cemetery excavated by the Wadi Tumilat Project¹ which was claimed to be from the mid-second century A.D. and Christian. The burial in question was found in a jar, more precisely in a "top-shaped" amphora. It was dated to the second century, and probably not later than 150, by the pottery; and it was identified as Christian by an inscription on the pot, claimed to be Coptic and partially transcribed (by R.J. Williams) as MOTN ΜΠ✠, which is translated as "at rest in the Christ" (pp. 41-42). The chi-rho monogram is found here, according to the excavator, for the first time.

Coptic in the first half of the second century certainly would be surprising.² It was therefore to be expected that an archaeologist would challenge the date of the pot, and indeed D.M. Bailey has argued that the "dating of the 'top-shaped' amphora is not established at all closely;" Bailey thinks the range for this shape extends from the late first century to the early fourth century.³ On that basis, he remarks, "I cannot see any justification for placing them with certainty before the early Antonine period. If the Tell el-Maskhuta jars could, as seems likely, fall within a period from the second to the early fourth century, then the arguments for a second century chi-rho in the early Christian burial should be reconsidered."

These doubts seem to me reasonable. But there is in fact a more serious problem: there is no Coptic and no chi-rho on the pot. The inscription (visible on Pl. XXXVIII, fig. 62 of the

¹ John S. Holladay, Jr., *Cities of the Delta III: Tell el-Maskhuta, Preliminary Report on the Wadi Tumilat Project 1978-1979*, ARCE Reports 6, Malibu 1982.

² Cf. the careful distinctions of J. Quaegebeur, "De la préhistoire de l'écriture copte," *OLP* 13 (1982) 125-36, esp. 132-33, arguing for limiting even the term "Old Coptic" to texts which have an elaborated and coherent system of writing. Coptic proper is not expected before the third century. See also H. Satzinger, "Die altkoptischen Texte als Zeugnisse der Beziehungen zwischen Ägyptern und Griechen," *Graeco-Coptica. Griechen und Kopten im byzantini-schen Ägypten*, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, Wissenschaftliche Beiträge 1984/48 [I 29] (Halle 1984) 137-46, with an enumeration. To see the text from the Wadi Tumilat as true Coptic before 150 would require a major rethinking of the history of the language.

³ Review of Holladay's book in *JEA* 71 (1985) Suppl. 54-55.

report) has two parts, each with two lines. At left is a blotted and cursive text, with two letters or so on each of two lines. What Williams reads in the first line as MO seems to be a mu with a small blot, which could be omicron, above it;⁴ the traces after it I do not think are significant. In the second line perhaps κε, but no great confidence can be placed in this reading. At right are again two lines, written in clear, discrete Greek letters. They do not seem to be in the same hand as the inscription at left, and I cannot tell if there is any connection at all. They read

τνγ
πβ

These are readily recognizable as numbers: "353" and "82".⁵ Numbers are often found on pot inscriptions, and commonly without indication of what they refer to. The supposed chi-rho monogram (claimed to occur twice) is in the first line a gamma, in the second a beta.⁶ The confusion is more understandable in the second case, but the reading is certain.

There is thus no evidence that we are dealing with a Christian burial; indeed, there is no reason to suppose that the inscription has anything to do with the burial rather than a prior use of the pot for some other purpose. There is also no second-century Coptic.

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⁴ This could conceivably stand for μó(δίοι) (in whatever case and number), but in the absence of any context, that is speculation.

⁵ It is just possible that the gamma might be an epsilon, though it is much less likely; but that would change nothing of substance.

⁶ It should be pointed out that Williams' text uses the first line of the left text and the second line of the right text, with no indication of any intervening unread letters. That alone is sufficient to show that his continuous text is impossible.