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THE WORDS τονάχτιον AND γονάχτιον IN THE EGYPTIAN PAPYRI

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The Words τονάχιον and γονάχιον in the Egyptian Papyri

In a forthcoming ZPE article on the Saracens in the papyri this writer stumbled across the word τονάχιον in two documents (BGU II 366. 14.18; 403.6). Preisigke's Wörterbuch gave no clue to its meaning, stating: "(Sinn unklar). Sollte... γονάχιον zu lesen sein?" Under γονάχιον Preisigke offers "Gebetsteppich der Muhammedaner" and four citations from the seventh and eighth centuries. This definition is clearly owed to the interpretation of the editor of P. Lond. 1414 whose note to line 12 reads: γονάχιον; γονάχια; 'Pulvinus qui genubus substernit,' Ducange. Perhaps a prayer-carpet such as is used in Mohammedan countries." What the editor of P. Lond. had expressed as a possibility or a conjecture was taken as a fact by Preisigke and by the editor of P. Apoll. 49 and 50, dated to 703-715, who viewed the two documents as a "Demande de tapis de prière."

Although it is tempting to see in these several documents the earliest mention of the use of prayer rugs among Muslims—and I pursued it as such—a closer investigation shows that γονάχιον cannot mean a prayer rug. There is no evidence that prayer rugs were in general use in the early years of Islam, not before the ninth century (see art. Sadjdjada in Enc. of Islam). More compelling is the fact that the entry of γονάχιον in Du Cange's Glossarium is quite confused and gives no specific citation for a prayer rug. His definition (Pulvinus qui genubus substernit) appears to have been influenced by the Greek word γόνα. Apart from some completely unrelated meanings, Du Cange cites only τάπιον and πάλιον.

Even more compelling is the citation of γονάχιον in Lampe, Patr. Greek Lex. in which reference is made to the Vita Sancti Ioannis Eleemosynarii of Leontius Neapolitanus (d. 620/630, ed. H. Gelzer, SAQ 5 [1893]). In the ninth century, the life was translated into Latin by Athanasius. Leontius relates that when a certain wealthy man observed that John was covered with a torn and threadbare γονάχιον, he sent for a γονάχιον worth 36 solidi (p. 38.9-10). When John begins to consider this gift in terms of the poverty of his fellow monks, he refers to it with the word (p. 38.17) παλλάν (= παλλάιον). The word γονάχιον is mentioned once again with its price (p. 39.14). Athanasius accordingly translates these words with Latin operatorium, coopertorium, pallium, and coopertorium (PG 93: col. 1631). It is obvious that in the above contexts, the word γονάχιον means a covering, a cloak, or a blanket-like wrap; it may be a "rug" in the sense of a thick piece of cloth that is used as a wrap or a coverlet.²

1 See also Ar. ḥayk in R. Dozy, ed., Supplément aux dictionnaire arabes (Beirut 1968) I, 345: "Afrique, grand manteau de laine ordinairement blanc, qui sert de vêtement pendant la jour et de couverture pendant la nuit."

2 Although Leontius uses the word παλλάιον in place of γονάχιον without any change in meaning, the scribe of P. Lond. 1414 does make a distinction between the two words. In line 112, he cites the cash equivalent (ἀπαργυμῷ) of 4 γονάχια at 2 1/3 solidi each and one παλλάιον at 2 solidi. What the precise difference is between the two is unclear, unless the material of a
But if the word γονάχιον means a wrap or a cloak or a cover of some sort, how did it get its meaning? It is apparent that the word is not rooted in Greek. I inquired of specialists in Arabic, Persian and Coptic but they reported that the word had no connection with these languages. It was a Semitist, Professor J. Greenfield of Hebrew University, who provided the answer. In an informal note, which I have edited slightly, he states as follows:

More fitting (than another word) is a word that is recorded twice in the Targum (Aramaic translation to the Minor Prophets). For "and she covered him with a blanket" (Heb. šemīkā), the Targum has gunkha. In 2 Kings 8, 15 "and he took a makhber and dipped it in water and spread it over his face and he died," the Targum has gunkha. The meaning of makhber is not known but it may be a net, a blanket, etc. Now J. Levy, Chaldäisches Wörterbuch über die Targumim (Leipzig 1867) 149 compared Latin gaunaca, gaunaces. The word appears in Syriac. C. Brockelmann, Lexicon Syriacum (Halle 1928), 109 records two occurrences, but does not translate, but compares Greek gaunakes. There is a Late Babylonian word gunaku, a cloth or a garment, which is compared by the lexica with Greek kaunakes and Aramaic gunkha (which for all one knows should be vocalized gunkka). I should add that gunkha is taken by Rav Hai Gaon (939-1038) to be a robe or a blanket made of wool, with tufts and fringes and rather thick.

With this statement in hand, the resolution to the meaning and source of γονάχιον becomes crystal clear. Derived from the Semitic, it is an orthographic variant of Greek γαυνάκης or καυνάκης. Citations and related compounds of these words are well supported in Preisigke and in Greek and Latin dictionaries as early as the third century B.C. The editor of P. Cair. Masp. 67288.5 adds that the word καυνάκης is frequently found in the Coptic papyri (Crum, Copt. Dict. 824a s.v. cœwac).

There remains the question of a connection between γονάχιον and τονάχιον. For this we turn to BGU II 366 (arab), a guarantee regarding the delivery (lines 12-14) "... for the account of the Saracens one τονάχιον and three ετρώματα according to Saracen specifications." Because of the heavy penalty (3 solidi for each ετρώμα and 6 for the τονάχιον) in the event of failure to deliver on the due date, I originally believed (ZPE forthcoming) that the ετρώματα (mattresses or bed rolls) might have been something like "saddle blankets" and that τονάχιον had a connection with an Arab mount. However, in light of the clarification in the meaning of γονάχιον, and the close association of ετρώμα with τονάχιον, the word τονάχιον is clearly a misspelling (if not a misreading) of γονάχιον, and like the latter means a cloak or a wrap that can either serve as an article of clothing or as a blanket.

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γονάχιον is heavier and thicker (v. infra) than a παλλίον. As for their function, both items can serve as a garment, a blanket, or a cover.

3 Since Aramaic was one of the two official languages of the Achaemenid empire, there is no need for the widely accepted derivation from Iranian *gauna-ka; see B. Hemmerdinger, Glotta 48 (1970) 50f.