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A FRAGMENT OF A LETTER FROM A BISHOP TO A *SCHOLASTIKOS*

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A FRAGMENT OF A LETTER FROM A BISHOP TO A *SCHOLASTIKOS*\*

OIM 17245

16 x 7 cm

6<sup>th</sup> century

Provenance Unknown

Plate II

This light brown papyrus appears to have suffered somewhat from exposure to moisture. On the front of the document, an area to the right of a line running through the delta of ἀδελφικῆς (l. 1), the omicron of περσοίνης (l. 2), and the first iota of κνίδια (l. 3), has darkened; on the back, significant darkening has occurred in a band running parallel to (and directly beneath) the address (up to the omega of Γερωντίῳ). In addition, two nearly identical, oval-shaped spots of a black, powdery substance (probably mold) lie one above the other on the back (the first about .5 cm beneath the nu of Φοιβάμμωνος); these ovals show through to the front of the papyrus.

The upper, lower, and left margins of the front of the text, a short letter, are intact. The tear or break that forms the right edge of the papyrus probably occurred along a vertical line at which the letter was folded. The six creases running horizontally across the papyrus suggest that the document was folded into a narrow strip (upon which only the address was visible) for sending. Most of the papyrus' holes and cracks have formed along these creases.

As is the case with many other letters of the 5<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, the text on the front is written against the fibers; that of the back, with them. The practiced script on the front of the papyrus compares favorably with that of *P.Cair.Masp.* II 67126, pl. 1 (= Schubart, *Pal.*, Abb. 59; Constantinople,<sup>1</sup> 541). For the writing on the back, see below.

Although quite incomplete (and thus enigmatic), this text is nonetheless notable in several respects. Of these, the nature of the relationship of the two correspondents is perhaps most interesting. The author of the letter is Phoibammôn, a bishop; the recipient, Gerontios, a *scholastikos*.<sup>2</sup> When one speculates about possible relationships between two such individuals, one generally expects the *scholastikos* to be in a subordinate position. Yet in OIM 17245 this is clearly not the case: The jussive force of ὡς ἐκελεύσατε (l. 3, the subject's antecedent being Gerontios) strongly suggests that ὑμέτερος (l. 1) is charged with something more than courtesy or Byzantine formality. But what sort of position would give Gerontios authority over Bishop Phoibammôn?

The word ἀδελφικός (l. 1) signals Gerontios' membership in the *Christengemeinde*.<sup>3</sup> Though one can only hypothesize, I suspect that this membership went beyond the congregation and into the Church hierarchy; the reference to Gerontios' εὐχαί (l. 1) hints, I believe, at this, as does Phoibammôn's mention of the carving of a persea-wood door (l. 2), a door which very probably was that of a church. (See notes to l. 2 below.) The power to give orders to a bishop suggests a connection with a patriarchate, and Axel Claus has posited that a certain group of

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\* I would like to thank Professor William M. Sumner, Director of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, and Dr. Karen L. Wilson, Curator of the Oriental Institute Museum, for granting me permission to publish this papyrus. I am also grateful to Dr. Raymond Tindel, the Museum's Associate Curator and Registrar, for providing me with a working environment conducive to fruitful study and assisting me with the Museum's accession files; and to Professors Roger S. Bagnall (Columbia University), J. David Thomas (Durham University), and, especially, James G. Keenan (Loyola University of Chicago), for their comments and suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> But Schubart, *Pal.*, 92, writes: "Ich finde keinen Strich, der nicht ebenso in Ägypten hätte ausfallen können."

<sup>2</sup> On the *scholastikoi*, see Axel Claus, Ὁ ΣΧΟΛΑΣΤΙΚΟΣ (diss. Cologne 1965).

<sup>3</sup> See *P.Köln* III 165, note to l. 3.

*scholastikoi* served as *persönliche Ratgeber* “in theologischen wie verwaltungsmäßigen Fragen” for the Alexandrian Patriarch Theophilus (Archbishop from 384, † 15 October 412).<sup>4</sup> “Wir können sie uns als Sekretäre des Patriarchen vorstellen,” he writes, “die die Verbindungen zwischen dem Kirchenfürsten und den Bischöfen herstellen.”<sup>5</sup> It is just such a rôle that I surmise Gerontios played.

Also of interest is the address on the back of OIM 17245. Said address is the product of two individuals: a proficient writer, capable of cursive, whose letters are smaller and well formed; and Bishop Phoibammôn, whose writing is quite labored. I believe that the latter was the first to take up the pen, writing the recipient Gerontios’ name and (short) title (in the dative case), then a cross, and then his own name (in the nominative case). A more skilled writer then filled in the rest of the address. Despite the fact that the bishop’s effort was grammatically and formulaically correct, this person changed the cross into a  $\pi(\alpha\rho\acute{\alpha})$ , and put Phoibammôn’s name in the genitive case.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that Bishop Phoibammôn wrote clumsily should not be too alarming: One need only remember that the Emperor Justinian I still saw the need to promulgate *novellae* which barred a bishop from consecrating anyone who was illiterate,<sup>7</sup> and that Reinhold Merkelbach’s examination of the *Aktenstücke* of the Council of Constantinople in 536 has revealed monastic *hêgoumenoi* who either could not write at all, or could only write their own names.<sup>8</sup> Nor should it suggest anything about Phoibammôn’s ability to *read* Greek (or memorize sacred texts),<sup>9</sup> or about his proficiency in Coptic (which was very probably his first language).<sup>10</sup>

The scant information that OIM 17245 provides about Gerontios and Phoibammôn is insufficient to link either man securely to identically titled homonyms in the papyri and literary sources; their onomastics are simply too common. It is entirely possible that Gerontios is identical with the Gerontios *scholastikos* whose heirs paid τὴν ἐξ ἔθους ἀγίαν προσφοράν to the monastery of the village of Berky,<sup>11</sup> or with the Gerontios who received 50 artabas of wheat from the Flavii Apiones by way of *philotimia*.<sup>12</sup> (In truth, *these* two individuals may be one-and-the-same person.)<sup>13</sup> Phoibammôn might be the bishop of Theodosiupolis attested in the recently published

<sup>4</sup> [Dates after Venance Grumel, *La chronologie* (Paris 1958) 443; the first is contra Agostino Favale, *Teofilo d’Alessandria (345 c. - 412): Scritti, vita e doctrina* (Turin 1958) 48ff., where 385 is argued.]

<sup>5</sup> Claus, Ὁ ΣΧΟΛΑΣΤΙΚΟΣ, 131 (on Synesios, *Ep.* 105). Cf. Denis Roques, *Synésios de Cyrène et la Cyrénaïque du Bas-Empire* (Paris 1987) 346: “Les σχολαστικοί appartenaient donc sans doute à la chancellerie archiépiscope ...”

<sup>6</sup> The preposition  $\pi\alpha\rho\acute{\alpha}$  strongly suggests that the second writer began the address with ἐπίδος; the presence of this preposition without said verb (or similar) would be very irregular.

<sup>7</sup> Hans-Georg Beck, “Bildung und Theologie im frühmittelalterlichen Byzanz,” in *Polychronion: Festschrift Franz Dölger zum 75. Geburtstag*, ed. Peter Wirth (Heidelberg 1966) 72.

<sup>8</sup> “Analphabetische Klostervorsteher in Konstantinopel und Chalkedon,” *ZPE* 39 (1980) 291-94.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Robin Lane Fox, “Literacy and Power in Early Christianity,” in *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World*, ed. Alan K. Bowman and Greg Woolf (Cambridge 1994) 143ff.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. James G. Keenan, “On Language and Literacy in Byzantine Aphrodito,” *Proc. XVIII Congr.*, 161-67.

<sup>11</sup> *PSI* VII 786 (probably 3.i.581, *BL* VIII 401), l. 11f. quoted. This Gerontios = Gerontius 2 in *PLRE* IIIA.

<sup>12</sup> *P.Oxy.* XVI 1913.56. This Gerontios = Gerontius 1 in *PLRE* IIIA.

<sup>13</sup> So *PLRE* IIIA, 534, s. Gerontius 2, and Claus, Ὁ ΣΧΟΛΑΣΤΙΚΟΣ, 92. For a recent list of Gerontii see W. J. Cherf, “What’s in a Name? The Gerontii of the Later Roman Empire,” *ZPE* 100 (1994) 151ff.

*P.Sorb.* II 69,<sup>14</sup> though the hand of OIM 17245 seems perhaps too far removed from the dates (618/9 or 633/4) that Jean Gascou has argued for that codex.<sup>15</sup> Chronologically (and linguistically?) more likely is ΔΠΑ ΦΟΙΒΑΜΜΟΝ ΠΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΣ ΝΤΠΟΛΙΣ ΩΜΙΝ ΔΥΩ ΠΑΙΔΤΟΧΟΣ ΝΤΕΧΩΡΑ ΤΗΡC ΝΚΗΜΕ,<sup>16</sup> Apa Phoibammon, *episkopos* of the *polis* of Shmin (i.e., Panopolis) and *diadochos* of the entire *chora* of Egypt. This individual, who is only known from the *enkômion* of St. Kollouthos that is ascribed to him, was a protégé of the Patriarch Theodosios I (535-66),<sup>17</sup> during whose exile he presumably served as *diadochos*.<sup>18</sup>

On a lexical level, OIM 17245 generates interest with the word γλυπτήρ (l. 2). Both *LSJ*<sup>19</sup> and an anonymous *descriptum* (see below) give the meaning of this word as “graving tool, chisel.” I believe, however, that the sense of the present papyrus is better served by the agent noun “sculptor, carver”; such a meaning is found in Modern Greek.<sup>20</sup> Although Friedrich Preisigke,<sup>21</sup> L.R. Palmer,<sup>22</sup> and Emil Kießling<sup>23</sup> present the agent noun of the verb γλύφω as γλύπτης,<sup>24</sup> γλυπτήρ may, in fact, have been in regular use in Byzantine Egypt. The -της suffix does not occur in any papyri; until now, the agent noun of γλύφω has never appeared in anything but an abbreviated form.<sup>25</sup>

Notable as well is the “history” of OIM 17245: It was purchased, along with a host of other antiquities, by a Mr. Charles Rubens during a trip through Egypt, Syria, and Turkey.<sup>26</sup> Sometime thereafter, Mr. Rubens took his acquisitions to the British Museum, where the “bits of papyrus” were mounted,<sup>27</sup> and the “papyrus, cylinder seals, and clay tablets were all interpreted.”<sup>28</sup> The antiquities remained in Mr. Rubens’ private collection until his death, after which (in 1937), his widow Pauline donated the entire purchase to the Oriental Institute.<sup>29</sup>

A single typewritten sheet in the accession files of the Oriental Institute preserves what appears to be the British Museum “interpretation” of OIM 17245 and OIM 17244 (= *P.Coll.Youtie* II 68), the two Greek papyri in the Rubens donation.<sup>30</sup> These *descripta* are anonymous, but were clearly written by someone who had done significant work with documentary papyri; J.D. Thomas

<sup>14</sup> = Jean Gascou, *Un codex fiscal hermopolite* (*P.Sorb. II 69*), (Atlanta 1994). Said Phoibammôn appears on codex pp. 18 and 20, ll. 7 and 37, respectively.

<sup>15</sup> On these dates, see Gascou, *Un codex*, 15ff.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Till, *Koptische Heiligen- und Märtyrerlegenden* (Rome 1935) 169, l. 3f.

<sup>17</sup> [Dates after Grumel, *La chronologie* (Paris 1958) 444.]

<sup>18</sup> So Walter E. Crum, “Colluthus, the Martyr and His Name,” *BZ* 30 (1929-30) 326.

<sup>19</sup> S.v., citing *Anthologia Palatina* VI 68 (Julianos = Iulianus 11 in *PLRE* IIIA).

<sup>20</sup> Skarlatos D. Byzantinos, *Μέγα λεξικόν τῆς ἑλληνικῆς γλώσσης* (Athens, 1964 ed.) s.v.

<sup>21</sup> *WB* I, s.v.

<sup>22</sup> Palmer, *Gram.*, 112.

<sup>23</sup> *WB* IV.2, s.v.

<sup>24</sup> As does *LSJ*<sub>9</sub> (s.v.), citing *Anthologia Planudea* IV 142 and 145, and *Stud.Pal.* XX 260.9 (citation in Supplement).

<sup>25</sup> Statements based upon searches of *WB* and *DDBDP*. Results: *PSI* VIII 956.46: γλύπτ(ω); *Stud.Pal.* XX 260.9: γλύπτ(ου); *Stud.Pal.* X 84.1 + *BL* I 418: γλυ(πτῶν ?).

<sup>26</sup> Letter, Pauline M. Rubens to T. George Allen (Editorial Secretary of the Oriental Institute), 29 February 1948.

<sup>27</sup> Letter, Pauline M. Rubens to T. George Allen, 6 August 1948.

<sup>28</sup> Letter, Pauline M. Rubens to T. George Allen, 29 February 1948.

<sup>29</sup> Letter, T. George Allen to Mrs. Charles Rubens, 23 February 1948.

<sup>30</sup> It is unclear whether said document is the original or a copy.

has suggested that Sir H.I. Bell, or perhaps T.C. Skeat, was the responsible party.<sup>31</sup> The one pertaining to OIM 17245 reads:

Left half of a letter from the Bishop Phoebammon to a scholasticus named GERONTIUS, concerning a graving tool for the carving of a door. Sixth century.

\* \* \* \* \*

↑ 1 (1 H.) † εὐχαίς τῆς ὑμετέρας ἀδελφικῆς λαμ[πρότητος  
2 ὁ γλυπτὴρ τῆς περσοίνης θύρας καλ[  
3 αὐτοῖς τὰ δύο κνίδια ὡς ἐκελεύσατε καὶ ε[

Back

→ 4 (3 H.) ] ἀδελφ(ῶ) (2 H.) Γεροντίῳ σχο(λαστικῶ) (3 H.) π(αρά) (2 H.)  
Φοιβάμμων- (3 H.) ος ἐλέει θ(εο)ῦ ἐπισκ(όπου)

2 περσοίνης pap., 1. περσεΐνης (but see n. 34) 4 ἀδελφ<sup>1</sup>, σ<sup>ο</sup>, π, θΥ pap., π(αρά) ex + (latter written by 2 H.)

*By the prayers of your brotherly Gloriousness...|the sculptor of the perseawood door...|to them the two knidia as you ordered and...*

Back: ...brother Gerontios scholastikos, from Phoibammôn, bishop by the grace of God.

1 λαμ[πρότητος: This restoration (cf. *P.Alex.* 40.1,6; *P.Köln* III 165.3,7; *P.Oxy.* VI 942.2; *SB* I 5298.1; *SB* III 7036.1) is not the only one possible. One might also read ἀδελφικῆς λαμ- [πρᾶς παιδεύσεως; cf. *P.Oxy.* VIII 1165.1, where it is an epithet of a *scholastikos*.

2 τῆς περσοίνης θύρας: cf. *Stud.Pal.* VIII 950.2, τῆς θύρα(ς) τοῦ περσεΐνου (sc. ξύλου).<sup>32</sup>

The upper loop of the theta in θύρας is filled with ink, and because of this, I initially read theta+upsilon as omega, i.e., θύρας as ὄρας. This misunderstanding was reinforced by the existence of περσοινός < περυσινός (cf. *P.Ness.* 81.6),<sup>33</sup> “of last year,” an adjective which fits the substantive ὄρα quite well [cf. Demosthenes, *Κατὰ Διονυσοδώρου* (= *Or.* 56) 3, ἐν τῇ πέρυσιν ὄρα]. I owe the correct reading to the mention of a “door” in the anonymous *descriptum*.

περσοίνης: The substitution of an omicron for the second epsilon in περσεΐνος is well-attested; cf. *P.Panop.Beatty* 2.211 and App. I.8, as well as *P.Vindob.Bosw.* 14.5 + *BL V*, 59.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Personal communication, 21 June 1995.

<sup>32</sup> *WB* I gives this citation s. “περσεΐνος,” with the curious statement, “Bedeutung unklar.”

<sup>33</sup> For περυσινός → περσοινός, see Stylianos G. Kapsomenakis, *Voruntersuchungen zu einer Grammatik der Papyri der nachchristlichen Zeit* (Munich 1938) 64f. (on the syncope) and Gignac, *Gram.* I, 272 (ι > οι).

<sup>34</sup> T.C. Skeat, *P.Panop.Beatty*, App. I, note to l. 8, writes: “The fact that περσοίνων is the form in all three texts (i.e., the texts that I cite above) suggests that it may be correct, and that it is unnecessary to emend to περσεΐνων... The *Wörterbuch* quotes περσεΐνος for C. P. Herm. (i.e., *Stud.Pal.* V) 7.iii. 13, but in fact the papyrus reads περ[.]ινος, and on the basis of the present texts περ[σό]ϊνος would be an equally probable restoration.”

On the perseae, Coptic  $\omega\theta\gamma\eta(\eta)\beta$ , “bois de la famille des *sapotacées* rapproché de *Mimusops schimperi* et de *Butyrospermum parkii*,” see especially Marie-Hélène Rutschowskaya, *Catalogue des bois de l’Égypte copte* (Paris 1986) 14f., as well as P. van Minnen and K. A. Worp, “Proceedings of the Council of Hermopolis A.D. 322,” *ZPE* 78 (1989) 140f. and references.

With regard to the carving of the perseae, Theophrastos’ description in Περὶ φυτῶν ἱστορία (IV.ii.5) is relevant: ἔχει δὲ καὶ ξύλον ἰσχυρὸν καὶ καλὸν τῇ ὄψει μέλαν,<sup>35</sup> ὥσπερ ὁ λωτός, ἐξ οὗ καὶ τὰ ἀγάλματα καὶ τὰ κλινία καὶ τραπέζια καὶ τὰλλα τοιαῦτα ποιοῦσιν. As for doors, Rutschowskaya’s Louvre *Catalogue* provides the only well-documented sample; and among these four pieces (doors or known door parts), there are none which are perseae wood (154ff.). Rutschowskaya wonders, however, if “certains panneaux et frises sculptés” in the collection were not once part of doors (155); in the *Catalogue*, twelve such objects are perseae wood.

Given the value of a living perseae (cf. *P.Ant.* I 35 + note to *P.Panop.Beatty* 2.211; *P.Oxy.* XLI 2969), the apparent rarity of its wood,<sup>36</sup> the fact that carving was (or was to be) done, and the authorship of OIM 17245, I suspect that the door in question belonged to (or was intended for) a church.

καλ[ι]: Frequency suggests that καλεῖ (or καλούμενος, etc.) should be read here, but a verb based on καλός also seems appropriate for someone who engages in artistic endeavors.

- 3 The capacity of the *knidion* varied between four, five, and eight *sextarii* (1 *sextarius* = .546 liter). The two smaller sizes were known as *knidia mikra*, while the eight *sextarii* variety was called the *knidion mega*. [See L. Casson, “Wine Measures in Byzantine Egypt,” *TAPA* 70 (1939) 6-8.] The *knidia* in question very probably contained wine.
- 4 The strokes preceding ἀδελφῶ might be those of δ (omicron with superscript upsilon); if so, the beginning of this line would probably read μ]ου ἀδελφ(ῶ).

I owe the reading of σχο(λαστικῶ) to the anonymous *descriptum*.

#### ADDENDUM

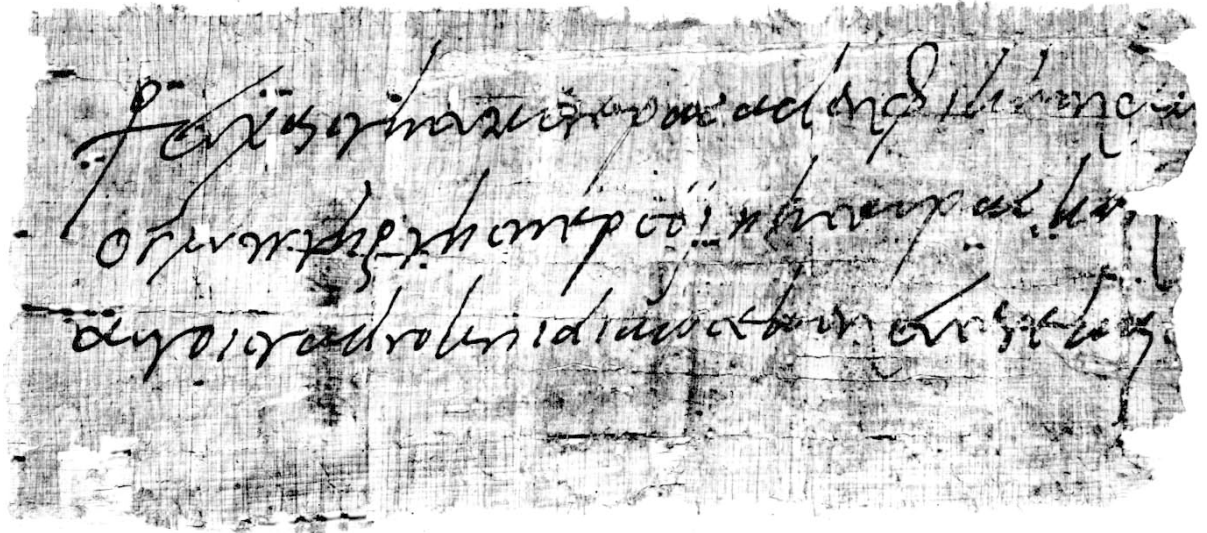
T.C. Skeat believes that it is highly unlikely that the anonymous *descripta* had their origin in the British Museum (letter, 12 July 1995). Despite this, I cannot confidently make any other suggestion as to their source. [I should note here that J.D. Thomas based his comments upon my interpretation of the *descripta*; he did not have an opportunity to inspect them. (Skeat did.)]

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. A. Lucas and J.R. Harris, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries* (London 1965, 4th ed.) 445: “I found that it (sc. perseae wood) was very light brown, almost white, in colour with a very slight yellowish tint, and that, although it darkened a little on exposure, it did not become more than brown.”

<sup>36</sup> Only 18 of the 621 specimens in Rutschowskaya, *Catalogue*, are perseae wood.



Fragment of a papyrus scroll showing three lines of ancient Greek text in cursive script. The text is written on a rectangular strip of papyrus with irregular, torn edges. The ink is dark, and the background is a light, fibrous texture.

OIM 17245 obverse



Fragment of a papyrus scroll showing a single line of ancient Greek text in cursive script. The text is written on a rectangular strip of papyrus with irregular, torn edges. The ink is dark, and the background is a light, fibrous texture.

OIM 17245 reverse