TODD M. HICKEY

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 6th 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 ἀδέλφικης (l. 1), the omicron of περσοίνης (l. 2), and the first iota of κνδης (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 Γεροντίας). 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 Φοιβόμμωνος); 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 5th - 7th 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, 1541). 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. 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 ἐκελέουσατε (l. 3, the subject’s antecedent being Gerontios) strongly suggests that ὑμὴτερος (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 ἀδέλφικος (l. 1) signals Gerontios’ membership in the Christengemeinde. Though one can only hypothesize, I suspect that this membership went beyond the congregation and into the Church hierarchy; the reference to Gerontios’ ἐνακοί (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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1 But Schubart, Pal., 92, writes: “Ich finde keinen Strich, der nicht ebenso in Ägypten hätte ausgefallen können.”

2 On the scholastikoi, see Axel Claus, ὍΣΧΟΛΑΣΤΙΚΟΣ (diss. Cologne 1965).

3 See P.Köln III 165, note to l. 3.
scholastikoi served as persönliche Ratgeber “in theologischen wie verwaltungsmäßigen Fragen” for the Alexandrian Patriarch Theophilos (Archbishop from 384, † 15 October 412).4 “Wir können sie uns als Sekretäre des Patriarchen vorstellen,” he writes, “die die Verbindungen zwischen dem Kirchenfürsten und den Bischöfen herstellen.”5 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 π(αρά), and put Phoibammôn’s name in the genitive case.6

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,7 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.8 Nor should it suggest anything about Phoibammôn’s ability to read Greek (or memorize sacred texts),9 or about his proficiency in Coptic (which was very probably his first language).10

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 εξ ἑθος ἐγένετο προσφοράν to the monastery of the village of Berky,11 or with the Gerontios who received 50 artabas of wheat from the Flavii Apianos by way of philotimia.12 (In truth, these two individuals may be one-and-the-same person.)13 Phoibammôn might be the bishop of Theodosioupolis attested in the recently published

4 [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.]
6 The preposition παρά strongly suggests that the second writer began the address with ἐπὶ δος; the presence of this preposition without said verb (or similar) would be very irregular.
11 PSI VII 786 (probably 3.i.581, BL VIII 401), l. 11f. quoted. This Gerontios = Gerontius 2 in PLRE IIIA.
12 P.Oxy. XVI 1913.56. This Gerontios = Gerontius 1 in PLRE IIIA.
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P. Sorb. II 69, 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. Chronologically (and linguistically?) more likely is ἀπα Φοιβαμμός ἐπίσκοπος Νεττίος πόλις ἡμών τῆς Ντέκαρ Θέρη Νικημέ, 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), during whose exile he presumably served as diadochos.

On a lexical level, OIM 17245 generates interest with the word γλυπτήρ (l. 2). Both LSJ 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. Although Friedrich Preisigke, L.R. Palmer, and Emil Kießling present the agent noun of the verb γλύφω as γλύφτης, the -της suffix may, in fact, have been in regular use in Byzantine Egypt. The -της suffix does not occur in any papyrus; until now, the agent noun of γλύφω has never appeared in anything but an abbreviated form.

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. Sometime thereafter, Mr. Rubens took his acquisitions to the British Museum, where the “bits of papyrus” were mounted, and the “papyrus, cylinder seals, and clay tablets were all interpreted.” 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.

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. These descripta are anonymous, but were clearly written by someone who had done significant work with documentary papyri; J.D. Thomas

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

15 On these dates, see Gascou, Un codex, 15ff.

16 Walter Till, Koptische Heiligen- und Märtyrerlegenden (Rome 1935) 169, l. 3f.

17 [Dates after Grumel, La chronologie (Paris 1958) 444.]

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

19 S.v., citing Anthologia Palatina VI 68 (Julianos = Iulianus 11 in PLRE IIIA).


21 WB I, s.v.

22 Palmer, Gram., 112.

23 WB IV.2, s.v.

24 As does LSJ (s.v.), citing Anthologia Planudea IV 142 and 145, and Stud.Pal. XX 260.9 (citation in Supplement).

25 Statements based upon results of WB and DDBDP. Results: PSI VIII 956.46: γλύπτης(φ); Stud.Pal. XX 260.9: γλύπτης(ων); Stud.Pal. X 84.1 + BL I 418: γλυφτ(ων ?).


27 Letter, Pauline M. Rubens to T. George Allen, 6 August 1948.


30 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. 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.

By the prayers of your brotherly Gloriousness… the sculptor of the persea-wood door… to them the two knidia as you ordered and…

Back: … brother Gerontios scholastikos, from Phoibammon, 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 ἀδελφικής λαμ[πρας παιδεύσεως: cf. P.Oxy. VIII 1165.1, where it is an epithet of a scholastikos.


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 άρας. This misunderstanding was reinforced by the existence of περσούνος < περσινόνος (cf. P.Ness. 81.6),33 “of last year,” an adjective which fits the substantive άρα as quite well [cf. Demosthenes, Κάτα Διονυσοδόρου (= Or. 56) 3, ἐν τῇ πέρσιν άρας]. I owe the correct reading to the mention of a “door” in the anonymous descriptum.

περσούνης: The substitution of an omicron for the second epsilon in περσείνος is well-attested; cf. P.Panop.Beatty 2.211 and App. I,8, as well as P.Vindob.Bosw. 14.5 + BL V, 59.34

31 Personal communication, 21 June 1995.
32 WB I gives this citation s. “περσείνον,” with the curious statement, “Bedeutung unklar.”
33 For περσινόνος → περσούνος, see Stylianos G. Kapsomenakis, Voruntersuchungen zu einer Grammatik der Papyri der nachchristlichen Zeit (Munich 1938) 64f. (on the syncope) and Gignac, Gram. I, 272 (1 > οτ). T.C. Skeat, P.Panop.Beatty, App. I, note to l. 8, writes: “The fact that περσούνος 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 περσείνον… The Wörterbuch quotes περσέινος for C. P. Herm. (i.e., Stud.Pal. V) 7.iii. 13, but in fact the papyrus reads περ[υ·]νος, and on the basis of the present texts περ[σό]νος would be an equally probable restoration.”

With regard to the carving of the persea, Theophrastos’ description in *Περὶ φυτῶν ιστορία* (IV.ii.5) is relevant: ἔχει δὲ καὶ ξύλον ἱσχυρόν καὶ καλὸν τῇ ὁψί τελέαν, ὁ λωτός, ἡ οὖ καὶ τὰ ὀγκύματα καὶ τὰ κλίνια καὶ τραπεζία καὶ τὰλλα τοιαύτα ποιοῦσιν. As for doors, Rutschowscaya’s Louvre *Catalogue* provides the only well-documented sample; and among these four pieces (doors or known door parts), there are none which are persea wood (154ff.). Rutschowscaya 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 persea wood.

Given the value of a living persea (cf. *P.Ant.* I 35 + note to *P.Panop.Beatty* 2.211; *P.Oxy.* XLI 2969), the apparent rarity of its wood, 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.

καλὰ: Frequency suggests that καλέι (or καλὀμενον, etc.) should be read here, but a verb based on καλός also seems appropriate for someone who engages in artistic endeavors.

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.

The strokes preceding ἐδέλφῳ might be those of ο (omicron with superscript upsilon); if so, the beginning of this line would probably read μα καὶ ἐδέλφῳ.

I owe the reading of σχολοτικῷ 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 theirs 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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35 Cf. A. Lucas and J.R. Harris, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries* (London 1965, 4th ed.) 445: “I found that it (sc. persea 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.”

36 Only 18 of the 621 specimens in Rutschowscaya, *Catalogue*, are persea wood.