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CHELIDO'S BONES: A NEW TOMBSTONE FROM TUNISIA

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An unpublished Roman epitaph was seen by the author in May 1994, lying on its back on the floor of the inner courtyard at 11 bis, rue Zarkoun, in the Medina of Tunis. This complex, known as the Cité Angelo Junes, is an apartment block which also houses a number of artisanal workshops and storage rooms. A layer of dust on the face of the monument suggested that it had lain face-upward in one of these storerooms for some time before being moved into the courtyard, presumably to make room for other items; the monument had not been in the courtyard when I visited the same building a week earlier. Because the workshops and storerooms are only occasionally open, I was unable to inquire who had placed the stone there, or whence it had come. Such information would in any event have been of doubtful reliability, since the monument is less likely to have originated in downtown Tunis than to be the fruit of unauthorized excavations in the countryside¹. Despite the imprecise provenance, the inscription nonetheless offers several features of epigraphic interest.

The support is an oblong block of white limestone, whose base has been disfigured by two diagonal breaks. The face and sides of the stone are straight but (except for the smooth inscribed area) rusticated. A triangular gable surmounts the inscription. The back of the stone has an irregular convex surface, roughly chipped. The total preserved height of the tombstone is 73 cm, of which the gable occupies 21. The width is 35 cm (bottom) to 36 (top); the thickness varies from 16 cm at the edges to 27 in the centre. The epigraphic field is set in a rectangular recess with interior dimensions 22 cm wide by 19.5 high, plus a 1.5 cm bevelled edge all around. The inscription occupies five lines with letter heights as follows: (line 1) 3.8–4.0, (2) 3.6–3.8, (3) 2.9–3.1, (4) 2.5–2.9, (5) 1.7–1.9 cm. In lines 3–5, the words and abbreviations are separated by a crude heder, comprising a triangle with rounded corners and a straight, downward tail, which points to the right in lines 3–4 and to the left in 5. The letter forms include cursive A (with crossbar parallel to the left arm) and II for E. The P has a small, closed loop, T bears a short crossbar with a slight upward flourish on the right, and L ends in a short, descending lower leg. The traits of these three letters suggest a date in the early part of the second century A.D.²

The text reads:

DEXIA
CELIDO
PIA VIXIT
ANIS XX O T B
Q T T L S

¹ I thank Dr. Liliane Ennabli for discussion of the possible provenance of this stone; the conclusion reached is my own.

² See table of letter forms in J.-M. Lassère, *Ant. Afr.* 7, 1973, 46.



Dexia | C(h)elido | pia vixit | an(n)is (viginti), o(ssa) t(ua) b(ene) | q(uiescant), t(ibi) t(erra) l(evis) s(it). “Dexia Chelido, dutiful, lived twenty years. May your bones rest well! May the earth be light on you!”

The nomen Dexius/a is attested chiefly in Italy, but also occurs several times in Africa, as well as in Macedonia and Narbonensis³. The Greek name Chelidon, often truncated to Chelido (with variant spellings Celido, Caelido, Chaelido, Chilido), is found in Italy, Spain, Narbonensis, eastern Europe, and appears twice in Africa⁴. From the frequent use of Greek names among persons of servile origin we may conjecture that our Chelido is very possibly a freedwoman.

The epithet “pius” is characteristic of the first and early second century A.D. I have demonstrated elsewhere how prevalent this adjective and its compounds are among familial epithets in the western provinces, and how the positive degree gives way to the superlative (piissimus / pientissimus) in the course of the second century⁵. The formula “OTBQ TTLS”, while found occasionally in the mid- to late first century, is much commoner in the second and third centuries⁶. The coincidence of both expressions confirms the early second century date suggested by the palaeography. The possibility that Chelido’s age at death has been rounded will occasion no surprise among social historians⁷.

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³ Italian occurrences of Dexius (sometimes spelt Dexsius) are collected in W. Schulze, *Zur Geschichte lateinischer Eigennamen*, Berlin 1904, 272 note 2. Africa: CIL VIII 2858–60 (Lambaesis), 18974 (Thibilis). Elsewhere: XII 1202, 1557; AE 1930, 84; 1931, 72.

⁴ See indices to CIL II, III, V, IX–XII. The name is frequent at Rome: H. Solin, *Die griechischen Personennamen in Rom*, Berlin 1982, 1069–70, to which add AE 1976, 46 and 1977, 63. Africa: VIII 684 (Mactar), 27498 (Hr. Gergûr).

⁵ L. A. Curchin, *Cahiers des Études Anciennes* 14, 1982, 179–182; *Britannia* 14, 1983, 255–256.

⁶ Lassère, art. cit., 53–54.

⁷ See R. P. Duncan-Jones, *Chiron* 7, 1977, 333–353.