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A GREEK CHRISTIAN EPITAPH IN UTRECHT

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In January 1992 the Rijksmuseum “Het Catharijneconvent” (State Museum St. Catharine’s Convent) at Utrecht, which contains a rich collection of mostly Roman-Catholic religious art, obtained from a private collector the permanent loan of a tombstone bearing a Greek inscription (inv. nr. RMCC b. 150). Mr. H. Defoer, the museum’s director, kindly granted the authors permission to publish the inscription. Nothing was known with certainty about its provenance when the museum obtained the stone, apart from the fact that the owner bought it from an antique-dealer who asserted that it came from Rome.

Further research confirmed this assertion, since it turned out that the stone was found in 1912/13 in a catacomb of the so-called *Coemeterium ad decimum* (i.e., the cemetery at the tenth milestone) on the Via Latina between Rome and Tusculum. F. Grossi Gondi published it in 1914, and it was republished by A. Ferrua in *ICUR VI* (1975) and, most recently, in the posthumous edition of *IGCVO* (1989) by C. Wessel.¹ Apparently the stone was stolen from the catacomb, as happened to several others from the same site, both in 1970 and in 1990, as Werner Eck revealed some years ago.² There are two reasons for republication of the inscription. Firstly, all previous editions report the stone as broken but indicate that the small piece broken off at the left side was still preserved. The Utrecht stone, however, consists only of the large right part, whereas the small left part now seems to be lost. We will present here what has been left of the stone in its present location. Secondly, the interpretation of some words and phrases in the inscription is still very uncertain and debated. We will try to make a contribution to the solution of these riddles.

The rectangular marble slab has a light-brown colour and is 3 cms thick and 29.5 cms high, whereas its width now varies from 49.5 to 65.5 cms, since a part of it has broken off on the left side. Because the single word of line 1 and the two of line 4 have apparently been placed in centred arrangement, the size of the missing part can be roughly estimated. The original width of the stone may be figured to have been between 75 and 80 cms. And indeed, according to Ferrua (n. 1), the original width was 77 cm.

The size of the letters, which have all been filled in with red paint, is rather irregular, their height ranging from 4.5 to 5.5 cms, their breadth from 2.5 to 5.0 cms. Most letters have serifs. The shape of E and Σ is semicircular. Word-dividers of a “guillemet” shape have been inserted, but inconsistently.

¹ F. Grossi Gondi, Catacombe tusculane, *Roma e l’Oriente* 7 (1914) 298; A. Ferrua, *Inscriptiones Graecae Urbis Romae* VI, Rome 1975, no. 15755; C. Wessel, *Inscriptiones Graecae Christianae Veteres Occidentis*, edd. A. Ferrua et C. Carletti, Bari 1989, no. 801. Grossi Gondi’s photograph of the stone was reproduced by L. Jalabert & R. Mouterde in their article “Inscriptions grecques chrétiennes” in the *Dictionnaire d’archéologie chrétienne* VII.1, Paris 1926, 640. Part of the text was also reproduced in P. Testini, *Archeologia cristiana*, Bari 1980, 395.

² See W. Eck, Nachtrag zur Publikation von P. J. Sijpesteijn, *ZPE* 90 (1992) 197–198.

The date of the inscription is hard to fix precisely, the letter forms in combination with its Christian character indicating only that most probably it was cut in a period ranging from the 3rd to the 5th centuries CE.³ Grossi Gondi dates the inscription to the 4th century, Jalabert to the end of the 3rd (see n. 1). The catacomb where the stone was found was constructed in the 3rd cent. CE.

At the end of line 1 there is a modern graffito, scratched in with the point of a knife or a nail, and reading MAI.

Transliteration:

ΕΥΨΥΧΙ
..]ΟΥΣΕΝΑ<ΙΡΗΝΗ
...]**ΣΗΨΥΧΗ**<ΑΘΑΝΑΤΟΣ
ΠΑΡΑΧΡΗΣΤΩ<
....]**ΝΗΑ**<ΑΝΔΡΟΣ<ΕΘΗΕ
....]**ΩΣΟΥΣΑΝ**<<ΚΒ

Modern transcription:

εύψυχ^ει
Μ]ούσενα ^ειρήνη
ή] σὴ ψυχὴ ἀθάνατος
παρὰ Χρηστῷ
....]νηα ἀνδρὸς ἔθη^κει
....]ως οὐδαν κβ'

4 Χρηστῷ *lege* Χριστῷ.

Translation:

"Keep courage, Mousena, peace. Your soul is immortal with Christ [in the me]mory (?) of (your) husband. He has buried you (?) at about the age of 22."

Commentary:

Line 1: *εὐψύχει* is a frequently occurring imperative in epitaphs, whether Pagan, Jewish or Christian.⁴ It alternates with similar encouragements such as *θάρσει*, *εὐθύμει* and *εὐφρόνει*, and its purpose is to encourage the deceased who now has entered an unknown

³ See H. Ziliacus, *Sylloge inscriptionum christianarum veterum Musei Vaticani*, 2 vols., Helsinki 1963, II 230–247.

⁴ For references to instances from Rome see I. Kajanto, *A Study of the Greek Epitaphs of Rome*, Helsinki 1963, 16–17.

fase of (after-)life.⁵ It is often followed by οὐδεὶς ἀθάνατος. Christian examples of this combination occur also in Rome,⁶ which is of importance for the discussion of line 3 ἡ σὴ ψυχὴ ἀθάνατος.

Line 2: Μούσενα apparently is the deceased woman's name. The initial M is certain because it is clearly legible on reproductions of the lost part of the stone. Besides, we have not been able to find any other name ending in -ousena or -ousaina.⁷ This name is not attested elsewhere: Μούσαινα would be the feminine counterpart of Μούσων⁸ or Μουσάων⁹. Ferrua proposed a metathesis of εν and α which yields: Μοῦσα ἐν εἰρήνῃ. Though not impossible, this would seem to be unnecessary and too farfetched. Jalabert pointed out in this connection that in Asia Minor, especially in Lycia, one finds more or less similar names such as Μουζηνός, Μωσανώς, Μουσανός.

Εἰρήνη in the nominative as a greeting-form occurs sometimes in Jewish epitaphs, going back to the Hebrew greeting *shalom*, "peace".¹⁰ It is also found in Christian epitaphs, but there the formula (κεῖται) ἐν εἰρήνῃ is more common.¹¹ Jalabert takes εἰρήνη to be the name Irene, which yields the double-name Mousena Irene. This is a possibility as well, though not strictly necessary in view of the Christian use of εἰρήνη (in the nominative) just mentioned. If εἰρήνη is to be taken as a wish (or greeting), we have here a rare case of a personal name flanked by two asyndetical wishes.

Line 3: On the photograph of the lost part of the stone the H before ΣΗ is clearly visible. In view of the fact that the imperative εὐψύχει implies that the deceased woman is being addressed, "your soul" fits in well here. The word ἀθάνατος as an epithet of the soul is very common in religious and philosophical literature, but in epitaphs it is relatively rare (e.g.,

⁵ For references see R. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs*, Urbana 1942, 243; G. Pfohl, Grabinschrift I (griechisch), *RAC* 12 (1983) 482; P. W. van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs*, Kampen 1991, 52–53.

⁶ *ICUR* 1858, 3990, 4038, 7244, 12858, 26153.

⁷ See F. Dornseiff, B. Hansen & L. Zgusta, *Reverse Lexicon of Greek Proper Names. Rückläufiges Wörterbuch der griechischen Eigennamen*, Chicago 1978; P. Kretschmer, E. Locker & G. Kissel, *Rückläufiges Wörterbuch der griechischen Sprache*, Göttingen 1963 (2. Aufl.); Dornseiff-Hansen (p. 35) does contain an Egyptian name Κουσέννα. There are, to be sure, masculine names ending in -usenus; see H. Solin & O. Salomies, *Repertorium nominum gentilium et cognominum latinorum*, Hildesheim 1988, 282.

⁸ P. M. Fraser & E. Matthews, *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names*, vol. I, Oxford 1987, 321b (Rhodes).

⁹ Fraser & Matthews, *Lexicon*, vol. II, Oxford 1994, 322a (Athens).

¹⁰ See the indexes of J.-B. Frey, *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum. Recueil des inscriptions juives qui vont du IIIe siècle avant Jésus-Christ au VIIe siècle de notre ère*, 2 vols., Rome 1936–1952 (rev. ed. of vol. 1 by B. Lifshitz, New York 1975) and of W. Horbury & D. Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Graeco-Roman Egypt. With an Index of the Jewish Inscriptions of Egypt and Cyrenaica*, Cambridge 1992; D. Noy, *Jewish Inscriptions of Western Europe*, vol. 1, Cambridge 1993.

¹¹ For instances of ἐν εἰρήνῃ and *in pace* see H. Ziliacus, *SICV* (note 3), *passim*; O. Marucchi, *Christian Epigraphy. An Elementary Treatise with a Collection of Ancient Christian Inscriptions Mainly of Roman Origin*, transl. by J. A. Willis, Chicago 1974 (=1911), esp. ch. 7; F. Grossi Gondi, *Trattato di epigrafia cristiana*, Rome 1968 (= 1920). Many others are quoted in E. Dinkler, Schalom – Irene – Pax: Jüdische Sepulkralinschriften und ihr Verhältnis zum frühen Christentum, *Rivista di Archeologia Cristiana* 50 (1974) 121–144. Cf. also the indexes of the new series *Inscriptiones Christianae Urbis Romae* (*ICUR*), edd. A. Silvagni and A. Ferrua (10 volumes to date).

IGUR III 1288). One finds more frequently, however, οὐδεὶς ἀθάνατος, even in Christian epitaphs,¹² although it has to be added that the idea of the soul's immortality is expressed more often in Christian than in Pagan epitaphs (albeit frequently without the term ἀθάνατος).¹³ Since in Pagan and sometimes even in Christian epitaphs εὐψύχει (see line 1) is often followed by οὐδεὶς ἀθάνατος, it would seem that the words “your soul is immortal” have here been phrased in purposeful opposition to that well-known formula (even though εὐψύχει, οὐδεὶς ἀθάνατος does occur in Christian epitaphs; see the note on line 1, above).

Line 4: παρὰ Χρηστῷ: for the collocation of ἀθάνατος and παρὰ Χριστῷ¹⁴ we have found no parallel.¹⁵ The soul of the deceased is said to be “immortal with Christ”, the underlying idea probably being that Christ guarantees the believer's immortality.

Line 5: This line is the most problematic one.¹⁶ What is visible on the reproductions of the lost left part of the stone, can be read as the upper part of an O or Θ, or a rounded E or Σ, followed probably by the left upper stroke of an Y, X or N: ΣΥ, ΟΥ, ΕΝ are all possible. Then there is a lacuna of at most one letter, to which]νηα could be the sequel: μνεῖα (μνῖα, μνῆα) would be a good possibility. Grossi Gondi (see note 1) proposed εὔνοια, which does not seem very likely because it does not yield a satisfactory sense. Jalabert proposed Θυνήα *pro* Θυνία, “l'ethnique, au féminin, de la peuplade thrace des Θυνοί, fixée en Asie Mineure, employé aussi pour désigner les Bythiniens (. . .). Ici ce serait un nom de provenance, analogue à Βιθύς, si fréquent comme nom d'esclave.” He then also takes ἀνδρός to be either the name of the island Andros or that of a city in Galatia. Quite apart from the fact that Θυνήα is too short for the lacuna, this whole reading is very improbable as part of an epitaph. Ferrua calls it “vix credibiliter”, but his own proposal, “*potes supplere συγγένεια vel εὐμένεια*”, is likewise not so convincing because the lacuna does not admit so many letters. From a palaeographical point of view it would seem that ἐν μνείᾳ is the most likely reading: ‘Your soul is immortal with Christ (and) in the memory of your husband’, which we take to mean: ‘Your soul is immortal with Christ (and you are/it is) in the memory of your husband.’ We do realize, however, that this construction is rather unusual.¹⁷

The word εθηε is also difficult. It may be taken as a misspelling of ζθηκε, as in our tentative translation, τίθημι being a verb frequently used in epitaphs to refer either to the

¹² Pfohl, *RAC* 12 (note 5) 501; M. Simon, Θάρσει, οὐδεὶς ἀθάνατος, in his *Le christianisme antique et son contexte religieux* I, Tübingen 1981, 63–81. G. Lefebvre, *Inscriptiones Graecae Aegypti*, V: *Inscriptiones christianaæ Aegypti. Recueil des inscriptions grecques-chrétiennes d'Égypte*, Cairo 1907, p. XXX, notes many instances of the typically Christian variation οὐδεὶς ἀθάνατος ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ τούτῳ.

¹³ For references (some wrong) Pfohl, *RAC* 12 (note 5) 505.

¹⁴ On the frequently occurring spelling Χρηστός instead of Χριστός see the useful survey in E. Gibson, *The “Christians for Christians” Inscriptions of Phrygia*, Montana 1978, 15–17.

¹⁵ Cf., though, no. 1856 in G. Kaibel, *Epigrammata Graeca* (Berlin 1878): χαῖρε παρὰ θεοῖς, and, from Rome, *IGUR* II no. 1042 εὐψύχι μετὰ τοῦ Ὀσείριδος.

¹⁶ Ferrua speaks in this connection of a “*difficultas vix superabilis*”.

¹⁷ One might perhaps also consider the somewhat unlikely conjecture to read ΣΥ MNHA as σῇ μνείᾳ and to take ἀνδρός as a mistake for ἀνήρ, which would yield: ‘(your) husband set up (this stone) for your memory’.

erection of a tombstone or to the interment of the dead body. The grammatical subject would then have to be supplied from ἀνδρός. It might also be taken as a misspelling of ἔτη,¹⁸ but in that case the number κβ in line 6 has been placed rather far away from the word ἔτη, and the final ε remains unexplained. It would seem to be far more likely to see the word as a misspelling of ἔθηκε, the implication being that in the lacuna at the beginning of line 6 probably σε has to be read.

Line 6: . . .]ωσουσαν is hard to explain. One would expect an aorist of a verb ‘to live’ like ζώσασαν, ζήσασαν or βιώσασαν, not a form which looks like a future participle (e.g., Ferrua reads βιώσουσαν). Since one needs here a verbal form meaning ‘having lived’, we have decided to read the line tentatively as ως ούσαν κβ’, “being (= having lived) about 22 (years)”, possibly connected with a preceding ἔτη or ἔτῶν, for which there would be enough space in the gap at the beginning of the line; in that case the lacuna could not contain σε so that the object of ἔθηκε would have to be supplied *e mente*. Another Roman instance of this use of ὥν in age indications is *IGUR* II no. 333 ὅντι ἔτη κη’ (and cf. *IG* IV 54 from Aegina). The woman is said to have died at the age of 22, which is only slightly below the average age at death¹⁹ for women in the later Roman Empire.²⁰

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¹⁸ For spellings with θ instead of τ and the other way round see F. T. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods*, vol. 1, Milano 1976, 134–138. Spellings like ἐνθάδε χῆθε (= ἐνθάδε κεῖται) occur rather frequently, not only in Egypt.

¹⁹ For discussion and references to literature on age at death see van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs* (n. 5) 73–84.

²⁰ We owe many thanks to Dr. Leonard V. Rutgers (Utrecht), Dr. Johan H. M. Strubbe (Leiden), Dr. Klaas A. Worp (Amsterdam), and Dr. Denis Feissel (Paris) for their invaluable help, suggestions and references in their critical comments on an earlier draft of this article.