Willy Clarysse & Marc Huys

A Verse Inscription From the Temple of Ain Labakha


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In ZPE 111 (1996), pp. 98-101 G.Wagner publishes a series of graffiti and three votive inscriptions from the temple of the divinised Piyris. The most interesting is a large stele of 74 cm high with a verse inscription. It is written in an unattractive and irregular script and has been reconstructed from at least three non-joining fragments. It is not surprising that the Greek and the metre should sometimes be erroneous, but a few unusual errors nearly render the text incomprehensible and arouse suspicion about the reading and interpretation.

Our point of departure is the strange expression σφόστρον | ὅ[πει]λω[ν] ἔσοιμι ἄνέθηκεν μᾶκαρ in ll. 3-5. At the beginning of a votive inscription the group ΣΟΙΜΑΝΕ strongly suggests σοι μ᾽ ἄνέθηκεν: the inscription (με) is addressed to the god (σοι) and tells him why it has been dedicated. This would eliminate the irregular future optative ἔσοιμι without ὀν. This solution is of course excluded if the next line starts with δέλτα, as the editor thinks, but this δέλτα is on a separate fragment, which has in our opinion been wrongly placed. By putting this fragment one line lower, we obtain a more normal and meaningful text, which runs as follows:

1-2. The editor read [E]ὐξάμις[ε]νος με- and translates “je rends grâce et je chante”. But in a dedicatory inscription eὐξάμενος refers to the promise made by the faithful: the inscription has been set up to show that a prayer was granted by the god. See for instance the prose dedication on Ain Labakha Stèle III (published by Wagner on p.101): ἄνεθηκαν ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας εὐξάμενον ἐπ᾽ ἀγαθόθε, where the three elements of our text recur. For the same use of εὐξάμενος/ένη
in verse-inscriptions, see e.g. G. Kaibel, Epigrammata Graecae ex lapidibus conlecta, Berolini, 1878, Epigrammata dedicatoria 803.2; E. Cougny, Epigrammatum Anthologia Palatina cum Planaudeis et appendice nova ..., III, Parisiis, 1927, dedicat. 294.4; CEG I 345.1; II 863.1 (εν ευμνημον μ’ ἀνήθησα). In the two last examples the participle is also the Incipit of the poem. The dative then refers to the god and may go with the lost word in l. 4 or stand by itself. For μεγάλῳ as an epithet of Pyiris, compare with μεγίστῳ in the dedications on Stele IV and Inscr. Graff. 9, 12, 16 and μεγίστόν in Inscr. Graff. 5. The phrase μ’ ἀνήθησα with the name of the person who offered the dedication constructed as the subject and με referring to the personified monument, is a standard introductory formula in votive epigrams: see e.g. Kaibel, Epigrammata dedicatoria 756, 794b, 926, ..., and numerous other examples quoted in M. Burzaccheci, Oggetti parlanti nelle epigrafi greche, Epigraphica 24 (1962), p. 3-54.

Aμιμόνως is unmetrical, in that the iota is treated as a long syllable. It is not exceptional, however, for this common proper name to have an irregular scansion: cf. Bernad, p. 627 n.1; see also W. Peek, Griescheische Vers-Inscritzen I. Grab-Epigramme, Berlin, 1955, Nr. 1157.3. The same applies to Νικόλαος cf. Bernad, p. 265.

3. According to LSI the singular οὖστρον or οὖστρον is only attested in App., BC 4.62, but we have found it also in Herodianus, Epin. 1.30.11 and in several Byzantine texts. The term is very regular, as it refers in several inscriptions (see e.g. IG 14.967 a1, b1) to thank-offerings to Asklepios, another healing god, and is closely followed here by the imperative of the verb σοφεύειν from which it is derived.

4. [. . .] ιώτα: we would expect a dative referring to the god, but the last letter looks like σιγνια, and cannot possibly be a iota. Therefore we suggest [νυστι]ι[I]η[ι][α]. For the genitive in the corresponding sedes of the hexameter, see Hes., Op. 618, 649, A.P. 1.16, Theocr. 13.27 (ναυτιλίς), Opp., Hal. 5.343, Nonnos 23.123. For a dedication of a σώστρον after a successful voyage, see Ach. Tat. 1.1.2: εκ πολλοῦ σωμάτων σώστρα ἔθων ἐμοῦ τήν τῶν Φοινίκων. The use of the genitive νοοτήλις with σώστρον or σώστρα is unparalleled, but one should compare A.P. 6.245 (Diodorus), where a votive object, probably a cloak, speaks of its dedication to the Boeotian Kabeiroi by someone who has survived a stormy voyage: (3-5) ενέξεκτο κήρα φυγάν, Βοῦστις, οί με, Καβέμε / δέποτα, χειμερίς ἄθνημα ναυτιλίς / άρθρειν. On the genitive, see The Greek Anthology. The Garland of Philip and some Contemporary Epigrams, edited by A.S.F. Gow and D.L. Page, II, Cambridge 1968, p.268.

5. Μόνορ may be used as an acclamation for a god, but since Pyiris is in fact a divinised mortal, the epithet is more fitting. Compare with its use as an epithet of Asklepios in the hymnic verse inscription Kaibel 1027.33, 43 and of Christ in Kaibel 1060.2. Here it may even be a Greek poetic rendering of Egyptian ḫsȝn, which elsewhere is transcribed as θής or perhaps as θι in the graffito published by Wagner on p.104. For divinised persons in Egypt and for the notion of ḫsȝn, see J. Quaegebeur, Les saints Égyptiens préchétiens, Orient. Lovan. Periodica 8 (1977), pp. 127-143.

6. Since Wagner’s γυνητής is nowhere attested, γυνητής is probably meant here with the meaning of ‘sister’: cf. Nicaen. 1.9, Nonnos 3.313. Compare with γυναῖς meaning ‘brother’ in another local verse inscription MAMA VII 230.2. This interpretation implies that Philos and Polybios are the sons of Ammonios’ sister, who is then named herself at the end in l. 12.

We had also envisaged a correction to γυναῖσις, a general indication of ‘his relatives, his acquaintances’ (cf. Ilias 3.174, Cougny, sepulcr. 415.2 = Peek, 781.2), which would be specified in the following lines: his two sons, his ποιῆς and his sister. However, the spelling ηιας instead of οι would be a strange error (F.T. Gignac, A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods I, 1976, p. 217).

7. Here the wrong placing of the fragments lead to the addendum lexici υψόφρον (for the Pindaric hapax υψόφρον). Πινυότροφον on the other hand is a standard epithet in late poetry, attested for the first time in Simmias, A.P. 7.22.

8. Since there are two sons Φίλος must be a proper name. The name is in fact very rare in Egypt, but seems unavoidable here (the Latin Φίλος is in Egypt only attested in P.Oxy. III 653). Most examples listed in the onomastica of Preisigke and Faraboschi were eliminated by Hagedorn, ZPE 65 (1986), p. 87, but there remains a banker Philos in BGU II 415 = Mitt. Chrest. 178.12, a doubtful graffito from Silsile and the inscription SB I 1739. Four examples outside Egypt are listed in the first two volumes of Fraser’s collection. Φιλον is unmetrical, but calls to mind the Homeric usage of placing the vocative φίλα at the head of a hexameter: see e.g. II. 4.155.

Πολύβηγος is a poetic form, metri causa, of Πολύβηγος, a rare name in Egypt. The lexica give only four examples, of which only two are certain: P. Oxy. Hels. 1.40 (3rd century B.C.), SB III 6612 (4th century A.D.).

9. The first word of this line must be a qualifying noun for the two brothers, probably ἀστήρως: for the use of the term in this sedes, cf. A.P. 7.64.4, 7.85.4, 9.25.2. The word ἀστήρ is used metaphorically for an illustrious person in A.P. 1.7.8 and in SEG 39.972, the plural stands for illustrious or admirable persons in A.P. 7.373.6, 16.315.1.

9-11. Χρυσογένεια is a rare name. We could only find one doubtful example from third century Rome (cf. H. Solin, Die griechischen Personenamen in Rom, I, 1982, p. 172; Solin also gives an example for the masculine equivalent Χρυσογένης). The example listed in Preisigke is based on an erroneous reading: see SB XIV 11993. In Greek literature the name only occurs in Paus. 9.36.1, 4, where it is set in the royal dynasty of Orchomenos. It is not clear if ποῖς here indicates that she is a daughter or a slave of Ammonios.

11-12. ἁδραλή: as an epic variant of ἁδρελή, ἁδραληθείη occurs e.g. in Call., Aitia fr.43.1, Peek 564.3, Q.S. 1.30.

Τιμοὶθής is rare and typical of the oasis. We find it again in two graffiti published by Wagner on p.100 and 104, in a funerary stele published by G.Wagner, Les oasis d’Egypte, Bibl. d’Etude 100 (1987), p.75 and in P.Grenf. II 71, all from the same area. Our family is therefore seemingly of local origin.
14. The editor here wondered if Nikolaos, the father of the dedicant Ammonios, had a second Egyptian name. This time indeed, the first person singular pronoun can only refer to Ammonios. Another votive epigram where the speaking person changes in the course of the poem, is Kaibel, *Epigrammata dedicatoria* 926: in Παντακλής υ’ ἀνέθηκε (l. 1a) "me" refers to the monument but subsequently the speaking person switches to Pantakles himself (l. 1b: ἀδέλφης εἰμὶ δ’ ἐκεῖνος), and at the end of the poem still another person is speaking. Likewise in Kaibel, *Epigrammata sepulcralia* 679 opens with Μαρκελλής τάφος εἰμί, but in the second distich Marcella’s mother is speaking (ἀυτὴ ἦ γεννήσασα ... ἐπέγραθα). Clearly, the self-presentation of the monument at the beginning of the epigram was a topos, but was not necessarily maintained in the rest of the poem. A good illustration of the stereotyped character of this self-presentation is the formula ὁ δείνα υ’ ἀνέθηκε τὸδ’ ἀγαλμα, found in some verse inscriptions. It is a contamination of ὁ δείνα υ’ ἀνέθηκε with the non-personifying formula ὁ δείνα ἀνέθηκε τὸδ’ ἀγαλμα (see Burzachechi, p. 53 n. 2), and shows that the personification inherent in υ’ ἀνέθηκε was no longer understood.

For ἐμεῖο πατήρ in an epigrammatic pentameter, see Cougny, sepulcr. 316.6. After ἐμεῖο πατήρ Wagner read Ἴναρω, but gives no parallels for this name. Perhaps ηνιω? The traces of the letter following on ηνιω suggest at first sight an alpha or delta, but a jota is certainly possible. For the use of ηνιω in an Egyptian verse-inscription, see Peek, Nr. 1302.6 (= Bernand, no. 8.6). In that case the subsequent letters should be read as the name, the ethnic or the function of Nikolaos’ father or the grandfather of Ammonios. For another epigram closing with an explicit mention of the father’s function, see e.g. Bernand, 100.4. The function and the ethnic origin of the person who has dedicated a verse inscription are stock ingredients of the genre: cf. Bernand, p. 19-22.

As a result of the preceding analysis, we obtain the following three distichs:

2. σοῦστρον λ [ναυτί]ης σοι υ’ ἀνέθηκε μάκαιρ.
4. Φίλον Πουλύβιον τ’ [ά]στερας ἀμφοτέρους,
5. παῦδα τε Χρυσογένειαν, ἀδέλφην τε Τ[ι]μοθύν. λ
6. ἦςτι δ’ ἐμεῖο πατήρ ἵν[ ]οοσπ[ ]�[ ]μ[ ]ος.

“After prayer Ammonios son of Nikolaos has dedicated me to you the great god as a thank offering for a sea voyage (?), o blessed one. Save him and the two wise sons of his sister, Philos and Polybios, stars both of them, and his child Chrysogeneia and his sister Timouthis. My father is [the son of (?)... ].”

The Greek of this epigram, then, is much better than Wagner believed. The construction of the poem is perfectly in accordance with the traditional characteristics of the genre, words as πινυτόρφον and ἀδέλφην reflect the poetic language of the period, and the alliteration in ll. 2-3 gives evidence of stylistic refinement. The elegiac distichs are metrically sound, except for the proper names in l. 1 (’Αμμόνιος Νικολάου) and 4 (Φίλον), but this is commonly tolerated in such inscriptions.

Leuven
Willy Clarysse
Marc Huys