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A HOMERIC PUN FROM ABU SIMBEL (*Meiggs & Lewis 7A*)

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(Meiggs & Lewis 7a)

The Greeks first came into contact with Egypt in the Mycenaean age, but it was the re-establishment of Greek contact with Egypt in the archaic and classical periods which led to profound Egyptian influences on Greek culture. Greeks settled in Egypt from the seventh century onwards. They played an important role as traders at Naukratis; this was a mercantile centre with specific privileges, and merchants from all over the Greek world who had come to Egypt in search of profit gathered here, and some of these merchants settled permanently in Naukratis (Hdt. ii 178–179). Egypt was also a ‘tourist’ destination: Solon visited during his ten year absence from Athens after 594, and the best known Greek tourist is, of course, Herodotos, who fills Book Two of his *Histories* with an account of the history and customs of the Egyptians.¹

There was another group of Greeks in Egypt: mercenaries. Herodotos records that shipwrecked Ionians and Carians were first employed as mercenaries by the Egyptian Psammetichos in his successful bid for the Egyptian throne (Hdt. ii 152.3–5; Psammetichos I: 654–617). Their services were retained and they were allowed a permanent settlement at a place called ‘The Camps’ in the Delta, but Amasis later moved them to Memphis (Hdt. ii 154.1, cf. 163, 169.1). These Greeks proved important as a buttress to imperial power, and served in Egyptian foreign expeditions.² There was also a Greek settlement at the ‘Islands of the Blessed’, an oasis seven days’ journey across the desert from Thebes (Hdt. iii 26.1), which may well have been made up of retired mercenaries.

At the time of the expedition of Psammetichos II (594–89) into Ethiopia in 591 (Hdt. ii 161), Greek soldiers serving with the king carved their names onto the legs of the colossal statues of Ramesses II at his funerary complex at Abu Simbel. These inscriptions are collected as Meiggs & Lewis 7. These soldiers are usually referred to as mercenaries by modern scholars, on the basis of what is known about Greek mercenaries in Egypt from Herodotos. Gabriel Herman, however, has argued that the soldier Psammetichos, son of Theokles, in one of these inscriptions (Meiggs & Lewis 7a) was not a mercenary but the son of a *xenos* (guest-friend) of Psammetichos I, who ‘in conformity with the custom of name exchange, called his son after the Egyptian ruler’, and that Psammetichos II called upon the Greek Psammetichos as his hereditary *xenos* for his campaign against Nubia.³ This might well explain the presence of Psammetichos the son of Theokles, but not that of the other soldiers. The varied ethnic origin of some of the other soldiers, in fact, strongly implies that they at least are mercenaries.

Many of the graffiti of the Greek soldiers at Abu Simbel are simply names with ethnics or patronymics, such as Helesibios the Teian (Meiggs & Lewis 7b) or Python, son of Amoibichos (Meiggs & Lewis 7d). When the soldiers’ ethnics are given, they include Ialysos (on Rhodes), Teos, and Kolophon. These soldiers presumably either came directly from these places or, less probably, were descendants of Greeks in Egypt who still employed these ethnics even though they were born in Egypt. Some of the soldiers who carved their names did not include ethnics; it is possible, as Jeffery suggests, that those without ethnics are Egyptian-born descendants of Greek mercenaries who had settled in Egypt.⁴

¹ Solon: Solon *fr.* 28 (Plut. *Sol.* 26.1): ‘So first he went to Egypt and spent time there, as he himself says: “At the Nile’s outpourings, near the Canopic shore”’; Herodotos: T. S. Brown, Herodotus in Egypt, *Anc. World* 17 (1988) 77–98.

² See H. W. Parke, *Greek mercenary soldiers* (Oxford 1933) 4–6; M. M. Austin, *Greece and Egypt in the archaic age* (Berkeley 1970) 16–22.

³ G. Herman, *Ritualised friendship and the Greek city* (Cambridge 1987) 101–02.

⁴ L. H. Jeffery, *The local scripts of archaic Greece* (Oxford 1961, revised edition 1990) 355, henceforth *LSAG*.

The longest inscription (Meiggs & Lewis 7a) records something of the military activities of these soldiers (this like most of the other inscriptions is on the left leg of one of the statues of Ramesses):⁵

βασιλέος ἐλθόντος ἐς Ἐλεφαντίναν Ψαμματίχο,
ταῦτα ἔγραψαν τοὶ σὺν Ψαμματίχοι τῷ Θεοκλῶς
ἔπλεον, ἦλθον δὲ Κέρκιος κατ' ὕπερθε, υἱὸς ὁ πόταμος
ἀνήη· ἀλογλόσος δ' ἦχε Ποτασιμτο, Αἰγυπτίος δὲ Ἴαμασις·
ἔγραφε δ' ἀμὲ Ἴαρχον Ἰαμοιβίχο καὶ Πέλεκος Οὐδάμο.

When King Psammetichos came to Elephantine
This was written by those who, with Psammetichos son of Theokles,
Sailed and came above Kirkis, as far as the river permitted;
Potasimto commanded the non-native speakers, and Amasis the Egyptians;
Archon son of Amoibichos⁶ wrote us and Pelekos son of Oudamos.⁷

The dialect of the inscription is Doric, probably Rhodian, in largely Ionian script.⁸ It might seem strange that two individuals are described as having carved the inscription, but the claim of dual authorship, even when the inscription is by a single hand, is evidenced by two other inscriptions. The first of these reads: --- καὶ Κριθίς ἔγρα(ψ)αν ἐμ[έ]. Here the inscription speaks to the reader: --- and Krithis wrote me. Another inscription reads: Πάβις ὁ Φολοφόνιος σὺν Ψαμματᾶ (Pa(m)bi(o)s of Colophon, with Psammatas).⁹

The interest in Meiggs & Lewis 7a lies in the last name, Pelekos son of Oudamos, the second of the two authors of the inscription. The names of the soldiers in the graffiti at Abu Simbel have been discussed by Bernard and Masson, who sought parallels for the various names and patronymics. Bernard and Masson described Archon son of Amoibichos as Pelekos' "camarade grecque".¹⁰ In this particular inscription, parallels for the name Archon son of Amoibichos presented no problems: Archon and Amoibichos occur as names in other contexts. Bernard and Masson sought parallels for Pelekos, and for Oudamos. They preferred to see Pelekos as meaning literally an "axe" in the same way as other names formed from the instruments of war, such as Θώραξ (breastplate) and Σκέπαρνος (axe). But there are no firm instances of the use of Pelekos as a personal name. Oudamos is more difficult, and it has been

⁵ The main inscription and the other graffiti are edited by R. Meiggs & D. Lewis, *A selection of Greek historical inscriptions* (Oxford 1969, revised edition 1988) no. 7, henceforth Meiggs & Lewis; some previous editions: F. Blass, *Zu den griechischen Inschriften*, *Hermes* 13 (1878) 381–382; F. Bechtel, *Sammlung der griechischen Dialektinschriften* (Göttingen 1886) nos 4109, 5261; C. Michel, *Recueil d'inscriptions grecques* (Paris 1900) no. 1315; E. L. Hicks & G. F. Hill, *A manual of Greek historical inscriptions*² (Oxford 1901) 4–5, no. 3; G. Dittenberger, *Sylloge inscriptionum graecarum* i³ (Hildesheim 1915) no. 1; E. Schwyzer, *Dialectorum Graecarum exempla epigraphica potiora* (Leipzig 1923) no. 301; M. N. Tod, *A selection of Greek historical inscriptions to the end of the fifth century BC*² (Oxford 1946) no. 4, henceforth Tod *GHI*²; C. D. Buck, *Greek dialects*² (Chicago 1955) 299–300, no. 104; Jeffery *LSAG* 38, 48, 314, 340, 344, 348, 355, 356, 358; pl. 66 no. 56, 58, pl. 67, no. 4, 69, no. 48; J. Boardman, *The Greeks overseas*² (London 1980), translation, line drawing and discussion at 116–17; note especially the edition and commentary of A. Bernard & O. Masson, *Les inscriptions grecques d'Abou-Simbel*, *REG* 70 (1957) 1–20, transcription and text of main inscription at 5, no. 1; see also O. Masson, *La grande inscription grecque d'Abou-Simbel*, *Studi Micenei ed Egeo-Anatolici* 34 (1994) [1995] 137–140.

⁶ Python, the son of Amoibichos in Meiggs & Lewis 7d = Bernard & Masson, *Les inscriptions grecques d'Abou-Simbel* 17, no. 5, may well be Archon's brother: Bernard & Masson 8.

⁷ The translation is modified from M. P. J. Dillon & L. Garland, *Ancient Greece* (London & New York 1994) 26; see also the translations of H. R. Hall, *The restoration of Egypt*, in J. B. Bury et al. (eds), *The Cambridge ancient history iii: the Assyrian empire* (Cambridge 1925) 301; C. W. Fornara, *Archaic times to the end of the Peloponnesian war* (Baltimore 1970) 28–29, no. 24; T. F. R. G. Braun, *The Greeks in Egypt*, in *Cambridge ancient history iii.3: The expansion of the Greek world, eighth to sixth centuries BC*² (Cambridge 1982) 50 & fig. 6.

⁸ Jeffery *LSAG* 356; Buck *Greek dialects*² 300; Bernard & Masson, *Les inscriptions grecques d'Abou-Simbel* 5.

⁹ Bernard & Masson no. 6 (Meiggs & Lewis 7e), and Bernard & Masson no. 6 bis respectively.

¹⁰ Bernard & Masson 8–9; cf. Jeffery *LSAG* 48: two Doric Greek mercenaries.

suggested that it should be read as Eudamos (i.e. Eudemos),¹¹ of which there are many occurrences.¹² But is it necessary to convert Oudamos to Eudamos simply to explain the patronymic in terms of a well attested name?

Given that there are no parallels for Pelekos as a personal name, nor for Oudamos (leaving aside the possibility that this is the equivalent of Eudamos), it is possible that Pelekos son of Oudamos might not be a name and patronymic at all. Pelekos, literally, means an axe or short blade, while oudamos means ‘none’. When the inscription states that Archon son of Amoibichos and Pelekos son of Oudamos wrote ‘us’ (the letters), we can translate instead as ‘Archon son of Amoibichos wrote us and Axe, son of Nobody’.¹³ This is clearly intended as a joke: Amoibichos carved the letters with the aid of a pelekos: an axe or blade, perhaps even his sword? To carve letters into the leg of one of the Ramesses’ colossi with a pelekos would in fact be possible, and indeed Jeffery has described the letters as “hacked out with some military weapon”, and the transcription easily supports this observation.¹⁴

This possibility, however, has been largely ignored: scholars, legitimately pre-occupied with dialects, ethnics, names and patronymics, have overlooked the most interesting aspect of this inscription: the fact that it contains, in its last line, a pun, and a pun which is probably the first instance of humour in a Greek inscription. To make Oudamos into Eudamos is clearly to ignore what the writer of the inscription intended as a joke: he carved the inscription with the aid of his pelekos.

And it is possible that we can go one step further, though with less confidence. Pelekos is the “son of Nobody”, Oudamos, and a related name can perhaps be suggested as a guide to understanding this patronymic, for there is a very famous ‘Nobody’ in Greek literature. Odysseus, to conceal his identity from the cyclops Polyphemos, tells him that his name is *Outis*, “Nobody” (Hom. *Od.* ix 366, 369, 408, 455, 460). Admittedly, the correlation is not precise, but did Archon, son of Amoibichos, have this story in mind as he carved his pun? The Greeks took their myths and literature with them when they went to Egypt; it can be noted that there was a community of Greeks, mentioned above, who lived at an oasis settlement called the ‘Islands of the Blessed’ (Hdt. iii 26.1: Μακάρων νῆσοι). Homer, in fact, mentions Egypt. Menelaos’ encounter with Proteus is set in Egypt, and Odysseus invents a story about having been on a raid there. Clearly, especially for the author of the *Odyssey* and his audience, there was an interest in Egypt.¹⁵ The Greeks who settled in Egypt adopted many Egyptian customs, but they also retained their Greek cultural background.

It seems almost certain that the last line of the inscription is a pun on two words which are phrased as a name and a patronymic, referring to the axe with which the letters were carved. As such it was the first Greek pun on words to be inscribed on stone,¹⁶ and possibly by a mercenary who knew the *Odyssey*.

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¹¹ Blass, *Zu den griechischen Inschriften* 382; cf. Tod *GHI*² 7.

¹² E.g. P. M. Fraser & E. Matthews, *A lexicon of Greek personal names* i (Oxford 1987) 173.

¹³ As had been suggested by E. Harrison in a brief discussion reported in *CR* 40 (1926) 140, and by Hall, *The restoration of Egypt 301*; this suggestion has been ignored by nearly all subsequent commentators; Tod, *GHI*² 7 prefers to render Oudamos as a personal name; Fornara, *Archaic times to the end of the Peloponnesian war* 29 mentions Hall’s suggestion.

¹⁴ Jeffery, *LSAG* 48.

¹⁵ Menelaos and Proteus: *Od.* iv 349–584 (cf. iii 300); Odysseus in Egypt: *Od.* xiv 246–86, 424–48 (as noted by A. Heubeck & A. Hoekstra, *A commentary on Homer’s Odyssey* ii (Oxford 1989) 210 n. ad 246–72, this has been taken as reflecting attacks on Egypt in the reign of Merneptah and Ramesses III, but this can be doubted as Odysseus was not a member of a large group of attackers of different ethnic origins). *Il.* ix 382 has a reference to Egyptian Thebes in conjunction with Orchomenos in Boeotia; it is possible that originally this line would have referred to Boeotian Thebes. The addition of ‘Egyptian’ to Thebes would stress the picture of great wealth which Achilles is presenting (cf. B. Hainsworth, *The Iliad: a commentary* iii (Cambridge 1993) 112–13 ad 381–84).

¹⁶ Compare Meiggs & Lewis 1, ‘Nestor’s Cup’.