

PHILIP MAYERSON

κπάτιον/κπάθιον – A WINESKIN

aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 121 (1998) 226–228

© Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH, Bonn

σπάτιον/σπάθιον — A WINESKIN

The word σπάτιον, generally corrected to or cited as σπάθιον, appears in a considerable number of documents concerning wine. In translating the word, editors, not knowing what kind of measure or container they were dealing with, transliterate it as *spathion* or *spathia* in the plural. One of the difficulties in determining the meaning of the word is that an etymology is lacking and that σπάθη, closest in appearance, has no connection with a container or a measure.¹

There is evidence at hand, however, to demonstrate that the word means a container known as a wineskin. The primary evidence comes from Epiphanius (A.D. IV), born in Eleutheropolis in Palestine and noted for his work on heresies (*Panarion*), who composed a treatise on weights and measures occurring in the Bible (*de mensuris et ponderibus*). The text survives in two versions, Syriac and Greek.² Of the two, the Syriac provides a fuller description of two vessels having to do with wine; the Greek text only has a line or two summary of the Syriac. The following is the Syriac text in translation and the Greek epitomes regarding two vessels known as the *sabitha* (1) and the *nēvel*. (2).

(1) "The *shāfithā*. This is a Syriac term which occurs as a measure among the people of Gaza and Ashkelon and the rest of the coast called the *Shefelah*. Hence in Gaza and Ashkelon they called the jar which is the *shāfithā* the *sapation*, which is translated 'the drawing vessel of the wine press', for with the measure they draw out and carry wine. But among the people of Ashkelon it consists of 22 *xestai*, among those of Azotus 18 *xestai*, and among those of Gaza 14 *xestai* " (pp. 55f, § 41).

Σαβιθά. τοῦτο Συριατικόν ἐστὶ τὸ ὄνομα ὃ ἐρμηνεύεται ληνιαῖον ἀντλημα, παρὰ Ἀσκαλωνίταις ξεστών κβ'. "Sabitha. This word is Syriac; it means a winepress vessel, among the Ascalonites it holds 22 *xestai*." (line 766).

(2) "The *nēvel* of wine. The *nēvel* is a measure that is put into two wineskins, (a measure) which consists of 150 *xestai*, which makes 3 liquid *seahs*, for the *seah* is 50 *xestai*. Further, this means a 'taking up', that which a man, after filling, would draw up by manpower from the pit of the winepress. But the *nēvel* is interpreted as 'something to be carried', which is a load of wine" (pp. 50-51, § 32).

Νέβελ οἴνου, ὅπερ ἐστὶ μέτρον ξεστών ρν' ὃ ποιεῖ ὑγρὰ κάτα γ'. τὸ γὰρ ὑγρὸν κάτον ν' ξεστών ὑπάρχει. "The *nēvel* of wine; this is a measure of 150 *xestai*, the equivalent of 3 liquid *seahs*. The liquid *seah* is 50 *xestai*." (lines 749-50).

The Syriac versions of Epiphanius' text give a clear description of two vessels, one a jar the other a (wine) skin, that were used to decant the must (i.e. the new unfermented wine) from the collection pit or basin of a winepress.³ The *sabitha* was a clay jar capable of holding a substantial amount of new wine which was transferred to storage jars to complete the process of fermentation. It was not only a jar but also a specific liquid measure, and in the major wine producing centers of Palestine it must have been used to calculate the production of a winepress.⁴ The word σαβιθά is found in the Egyptian documents in a nasalized form as κάμβαθον, κάμφατον, and κάμαθον. It is clear from the documents that it was a

¹ See P. Chatraïne, *Dict. etym. grecq.*, s.v.; H. Frisk, *Gr. etym. Wb.* s.v.

² J. E. Dean (ed.), *Epiphanius' Treatise on Weights and Measures - The Syriac Version*, Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization II (Chicago 1935). E. Moutsoulas, (ed.), "Τὸ περὶ μέτρων καὶ σταθμῶν ἔργον Ἐπιφανίου τοῦ Σαλαμῖνος", *Θεολογία* 44 (1973) 157-198.

³ The Greek word ἀντλημα and its cognates feature a related action: baling out or drawing out (e.g. water), draining, emptying, drawing up, or the instrument for that purpose (e.g. a bucket).

⁴ See my article, "Another Unreported Ascalonian Jar: The *Sabitha/Sapation*", *Israel Exploration Journal* 46 (1996) 258-261.

good-sized jar that was used for wine and for other things such as myriads of drachmas, pickled mullet, oil, and cheese.⁵

The *nēvel*, described in detail in the Syriac, associates two words that spell out a container known as a wineskin. In the Syriac text "the wine is poured into two sacks." The word for "sack" is *zq'*, the equivalent of Greek κάκκος and "sack" in many other languages.⁶ The word *nēvel* (נבל in Hebrew) has as its basic meaning an empty area as in a container. It acquires the meaning of an empty area enclosed by skin/leather that could be used in fashioning a container for liquids or an acoustical chamber (a sound box) for a musical instrument. By metonymy it became associated with an instrument such as a harp or lyre.⁷ However, putting *nēvel* and *zq'* together and we have a sack made out of skin/leather ("a skin") usually used as a container for wine and known as a "wineskin".

There remains the Syriac word translated by the editor as *sapation* which Epiphanius says was used in Gaza and Ascalon in place of *sabitha*. It is true that these two words represent the same vocables, a Hellenized variant of Syriac *šapītā* and Palestinian-Aramaic *šepīyātā* (pl.).⁸ However, in the Syriac text *sapation* is given unvocalized as *špyt'* which is phonetically consistent with Greek σπατιον/σπαθιον. Both *sabitha* and *sapation* are said to be related to the Aramaic root ܣܦܫܬܐ, ܦܫܬܐ, "to incline, tilt, pour out slowly" (above [n. 2], p. 55, n. 378). Hence, the two words in Syriac are related to their function of pouring out (the contents of a container), and as such the word *sapation* can apply to either a jar or a wineskin. In Egypt, however, σπάτιον designated a wineskin, whereas κάμβαθον represented a clay jar. In both instances they represent containers and not, as Epiphanius indicates, specific liquid measures.⁹

Turning to the documents, σπάτιον/σπάθιον appear often in isolated contexts which give no hint as to its character as a container. As a result, editors will, for any better meaning, translate σπάθια as "jars" (*P. Oxy.* 1.155 and 56.3875) or "measures" (*P. Abinn.* 7). In contexts in which the word appears along with other well known containers made of clay, we can recognize its special character as a different kind of container. In *P. Abinn.* 75, issues of wine are made in terms of κέραμια and σπάθια. The same distinction between the two containers is made in *P. Col.* 8.239, *P. Oxy.* 48.3425, and in *SB* 14.1193. In *P. Laur.* 8.17 σπάθια are cited along with κνίδια, διπλᾶ and δίχωρα of wine.¹⁰

I have saved for last two Oxyrhynchus documents, *P. Oxy.* 34.2728 and 2729, which, in a sense, brings us back to Epiphanius' κάβιθά and *sapation*. In 2728, Capitolinus writes to a fellow monk concerning business transactions having to do with a number of σπ(άθια) of wine (lines 17-19). He then asks to have some items sent to him, one of which is (line 33) "a *sambathon* of pickled mullet (κάμβαθον βωριδίων). In 2729, Dioscurides writes to Aquileus, a fellow monk, to receive from a sailor of their bishop's ship (line 9) "one *sambathon* containing 2,700 myriads (of drachmae), and to purchase (30 and

⁵ See my article, "Epiphanius' Sabitha in Egypt," forthcoming.

⁶ In Palmyrene Aramaic the word *zq* is defined as "skin (as container), *bzqyn*, wine in skins." See *Palmyrene Aramaic Texts*, Hillers and E. Cussini, eds., 1996, 362.

⁷ See "Music and Musical Instruments: Chordophones", *Anchor Biblical Dictionary*, IV.937 and my forthcoming article "A Note on *O. Mich.* I.249, IV. 937". The Semitic word *nbl* leads in a number of directions. J. Levy, *Wörterbuch über die Talmudim und Midraschim*, III.327 gives its first meaning as "Schlauch" derived from *nb*, "hervorragend, bauchig sein." Cf. Hultsch, *Griech. u. Röm. Metrologie*, 452, n. 4, who considers *nēbel* as "lagena fictilis, testacea."

In the Hebrew Bible, *I Sam* 1.24, 10.3, 25.18, *nbl* is "a skin (of wine)"; in 10.5 it is a "lyre" (LXX νόβλα). In *The Complete Hebrew Dictionary*, R. Alcalay ed., the *nbl* is cited as meaning "leather bottle (bag), vessel, pitcher, harp, Lyra (astr.), Aeolian harp." Less satisfying is the entry in Brockelmann's *Lexicon Syriacum* which only has *instrumentum musicum* and cites Epiphanius' measure of 150 *xestai*. See also νόβλα in LSJ and Frisk (above, n. 1) and νόβλα in Chantraine (above n. 1).

⁸ Above (n. 4), pp. 259-260 and n. 7. I am indebted to Prof. B. Levine who graciously guided me through the Syriac and provided the transliterations for the Syriac and the Aramaic.

⁹ In the literary sources there is, of course, no reference to σπάτιον/σπάθιον, but there is σπατίλη. This word crops up in Aristophanes' *Peace*. In two *scholia* (W. Koster, *Scholia in Pacem* 48, p. 16), it is explained as shreds or waste of leather (cf. σπάτος and σπατολειαστής in LSJ and esp. Chantraine and Frisk [above, n. 1]). It may not belong to the present context.

¹⁰ Container for other liquids: see *P. Abinn.* 4.5 for oil; *P. Oslo* 3.5 and *P. Oxy.* 34.2729.38 for fish sauce.

35) a variety of containers, among others, a number of *σπάτια* (*sic*). He then concludes asking Aquileus to send him (38) "a wineskin of fish sauce (*σπάτιον γάρου*) and a jar of pickled fish (*κεράμιον ἀ'ταριχῶν*)."

To conclude, there is sound evidence from the Syriac text of Epiphanius' treatise on weights and measures to support the meaning of *σπάτιον/σπάθιον* in the Egyptian documents as a "wineskin" or as a "skin (of wine, oil, or fish sauce)." This much appears clear, but what is less so is the reason why, as a sounding of the PHI Documentary Texts (CD Rom #7) reveals, *σπάτιον/σπάθιον* is cited only in the documents of the Roman period, almost entirely within the fourth and fifth centuries. It does not appear in the Ptolemaic nor in the ostraca of both periods. Is it possible that *σπάτιον/σπάθιον* was introduced into Egypt by the merchants who frequented the Palestinian wine producing centers of Gaza and Ascalon which, as the *Expositio totius mundi et gentium* (mid IV) informs us, exported a wine of excellent quality to all Syria and Egypt?¹¹

New York University

Philip Mayerson

¹¹ J. Rougé (ed.) in *Sources chrétiennes*, 124, XXIX, p.162. On the widespread popularity of the wines of Gaza and Ascalon, see my articles in *Israel Exploration Journal* (1993), 169-173 and *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 257 (1985), 75-80. What is more puzzling is that the word for a wineskin (*ἀσκός*) in the literary sources (LSJ) appears only in a few Ptolemaic and early Roman documents connected with oil (*P. Customs* 425.5; *P. Wisc.* 2.80.67, 84, 88, 117, 155); not one specifically mentions wine. Preisigke, *WB I* defines *ἀσκός* as "Lederzeug (für Gespanne u dgl)", and "für Schuhe", Kießling (in IV) adds "Lederschlauch" und Flüssigkeitsbehälter".