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cπάτιον/cπάθιον – A WINESKIN


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The word ἐπάτων, generally corrected to or cited as ἐπάθον, 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 ἐπάθη, 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 nêvel. (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).

Σαβίθα, τοῦτο Συριατικὸν ἐτι τὸ ὄνομα ὃ ἐρμηνεύεται ληνιαίων ἄντλημα, παρὰ Ἄσκαλωνίτων ἔξετῶν κβ′. "Sabitha. This word is Syriac; it means a winepress vessel, among the Ascalonites it holds 22 xestai." (line 766).

(2) "The nêvel of wine. The nêvel 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 nêvel is interpreted as 'something to be carried', which is a load of wine" (pp. 50-51, § 32).

Νέβελ ὁ ὕδωρ, ὅπερ ἐτι μέτρων ἐξετῶν ρβ′ ὁ ποιεὶ ὕγρα κάτω γ′. τὸ γὰρ ὕγρον κάτων νεβίων ὑπάρχει. "The nêvel 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 σαβίθα is found in the Egyptian documents in a nasalized form as ἑπάμβαθον, ἑμφάστον, and ἑμαθόν. It is clear from the documents that it was a

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¹ See P. Chatraine, Dict. etym. grecq. s.v.; H. Frisk, Gr. etym. Wh. s.v.


³ The Greek word ἄντλημα 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).

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

The ñével, 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 κόκκος and "sack" in many other languages.\(^6\) The word ñével ("יֶבֶל 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 ñével 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 ܣܒܝܛܬܐ and Palestinian-Aramaic ܫܡܒܝܡܐ (pl.).\(^8\) However, in the Syriac text sapation is given unvocalized as špyt' which is phonetically consistent with Greek σπάτιον/σπάθιον. Both sabitha and spation are said to be related to the Aramaic root סבלנ, סבלו, "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 spation can apply to either a jar or a wineskin. In Egypt, however, cspátiov designated a wineskin, whereas cámβóthov represented a clay jar. In both instances they represent containers and not, as Epiphanius indicates, specific liquid measures.\(^9\)

Turning to the documents, cspátiov/cspáthov 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 cspáthov 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 κερύμα and cspáthov. 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 cspáthov are cited along with κνίδια, δηλαδά and δήχωρα 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' cámβóthov and spation. In 2728, Capitolinus writes to a fellow monk concerning business transactions having to do with a number of cpáthov, whereas cpáthov represented a clay jar. In 2729, Dioscurides writes to Aquileus, a fellow monk, to receive from a sailor of their bishop's ship (line 9) "a sambathon containing 2,700 myriads (of drachmae), and to purchase (30 and

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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.
8 In the Hebrew Bible, I Sam 1.24, 10.3, 25.18, nbô is "a skin (of wine)"; in 10.5 it is a "lyre" (LXX νοβλα). 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's measure of 150 xestai. See also νοβλα in LSJ and Frisk (above, n. 1) and νοβλα in Chantraine (above n. 1).
9 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.
10 In the literary sources there is, of course, no reference to cpáthov/cpáthov, but there is cpáthov. 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. cpáthov and cpáthov cínci in LSJ and esp. Chatraine and Frisk [above, n. 1]). It may not belong to the present context.

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 γάρρου) and a jar of pickled fish (κεράμιον α’ ταριχζων)."

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

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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 (ἐκκός) 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 ἑκκός as "Lederzeug (für Gespanne u dgl)", and "für Schuhe", Kießling (in IV) adds "Lederschlauch" und Flüssigkeitsbehälter".