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A GREEK METRICAL GRAVE INSCRIPTION FROM ISRAEL

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On the campus of Bar Ilan University in Ramat Gan, Israel, a number of large ancient stone artifacts are distributed in a grassy area, otherwise unused, behind the main library. They were lent to the university by the Israel Department of Antiquities, which considered them of small archaeological value since there was no documentation indicating their provenance. Among these artifacts, a few meters northwest of the main library, is a basalt cylinder, 62 cm in height and 57 cm in diameter, the lower part of which contains a Greek inscription within a tabula ansata 27.8 cm in height and 39.5 cm in width (Pl. XIV). The position of the inscription, practically at the bottom of the cylinder, makes it clear that the cylinder was not originally free-standing, and it presumably formed part of a column.

In the absence of any testimony about its history, little can be said about its original provenance: it surely is not in its original place, nor does it have any relationship to the other artifacts on the campus, few of which are of similar stone. Basalt in modern Israel is found chiefly in the Golan heights and the Jordan valley: these areas are the most likely original places of the stone, though of course the stone might have been inscribed and set up elsewhere. Nor, for that matter, can we be certain that it comes from within the present boundaries of Israel: in an area where boundaries are fluid we cannot tell for certain at what period, and over what distance, it may have been carted. Its weight, however, is such that it is not likely to have been moved much before the age when its archaeological interest would have made it worth transporting: it is not the sort of thing that a tourist could slip into his suitcase, or even his trunk.

The lettering is regular and nicely done, obviously the work of a professional mason. The letters are generally rounded, with rounded epsilon and lunate sigma the rule from which, however, there are a few exceptions. All omegas are rounded. The letter spaces are very regular, 25 mm in height and 20 mm in width. Iota takes half a space, while mu generally, omega always, and the one occurrence of pi occupy a space and a half. Omega reaches about half the height of the other letters. These details, of course, can define the inscription’s age only in the broadest way. My search for parallels has found few things comparable from the Near East; the most similar lettering I could find in a dated inscription was IGLS 9005, from Bostra, which can be dated securely to 133/4 CE.

Although the lettering gives an immediate impression of legibility, the letters become less clear towards the ends of the lines, and throughout the rough surface of the stone makes it difficult actually to read the words accurately. In many cases it was only by running my finger over the surface that I could distinguish among theta and omega, epsilon and sigma, or eta, mu, and nu. I also made a squeeze, which was of middling quality at best but often helpful (Pl. XIV).

There are eleven lines of inscribed text, which correspond to six lines of verse:

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ei θέλετε γρώμα τίς ὁ κείμενος

ν.3 νοσ. ἀνδρεῖς ὀδείται,
ἐνθάδε, μή ἡ νομία τὸν νέον

4 κυνή οὔτα ἐπερωτήσατε· φεύ, νέον
ος οὐκός, ὅς ἡμαίσασαι, ἀνθρώπινος
ἐμαίτε· ἀνθρούπος, ὡς ρόδον· Ἐρμῆς(ε)}
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The inscription begins with two hexameters and follows with two elegiac couplets:
Men who pass by, if you want to know who is the person lying here, don’t ask him, since he is a corpse. 
Alas! He was young, one who reached his peak, an ornament of bloom, like a rose; we called him Hermes.
For when he had finished the allotted time of the Fates as a mortal man, twenty-two years old, he went to Hades.

A few literary and linguistic comments suggest themselves:
1 eij qevlete gnw'nai: A common enough formula for introducing information on epitaphs, but our poet has added his own twist by pointing out that the dead man cannot supply the information.
2 oJdei'tai for oJdi'tai: The confusion of ei and i is common only in Roman times in Athens, and there is no reason to presume an earlier date for our inscription.
3 'nom≥a for onoma: The prodelision is remarkable. In Attic inscriptions, prodelision is rare, and most cases may be seen as crasis. This is not the case here: I have been unable to find any examples of crasis of h with o, and even if that were possible the two letters probably would not combine to eta.
4 'n≥ta ejperw≥t≥: An epitaph from Ilium, on the other hand, represents the dead young man as speaking because “even when dead, I have no small wit.”
5 f≥eu': The empty space at the end of line 7, and the fact that the word ajnhvr at the end of line 9 is spaced more broadly than the rest of the inscription, suggest that the mason intended to have each verse of poetry end a line of the inscription. But unfortunately he had divided his space into eleven lines, not twelve, so he had to start the new line here in order to squeeze the following couplet into three lines.
6 Cf., e. g., Georg Kaibel, Epigrammata Graeca (Berlin, 1878, repr. Hildesheim 1965) 301, 340, 408, 530, 718.
8 Peter Frisch, Die Inschriften von Ilion (= Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien 3) 176 = CIG 3627 = Kaibel, Epigrammata Graeca 334, line 5.
10 Either would, of course, be common enough: for authorial infelicities see the comments of O. J. Todd, An Inelegant Greek Verse, CQ 34 (1939), 163-5, and for masons’ slips compare P. A. Hansen, loc. cit., 287, who also cites Todd’s words approvingly.

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ou|to", must be construed in past tense; and ως in the following line dangles uncomfortably. Perhaps φεύ (δ’· ἐθανεν) νέος οὗτος: the mason will then have skipped from the e of φεύ to the εν of ἐθανεν and then, realizing his mistake, tried to save the situation by adding the ν as a ligature at the beginning of the nu and omitting the word ως. This would give us better sense (“But alas! He died young, at his prime . . . like a rose”), particularly if the author had originally written ου|to" ήκμασεν, a text which will have been corrected – by the mason? – when it no longer made sense (νέος οὗτος δ’· ήκμασεν). None of the possible solutions for the hiatus – φεύ γ’, φεύ δ’, or simply leaving φεύ ἐθανεν with hiatus – would be totally unparalleled, but none of them is common or elegant. A less violent solution, ως, (νεκρος) νέος οὗτος, solves none of the problems of sense and introduces its own infelicities.

5 ἀνθήματα: The only place where the mason does not observe syllable division. It may be due either to his own faulty syllabification or to the pressure to squeeze his lines into too small a space, as noted above, l. 4.

ἀνθήματα: ἀνάθημα appears from Homer onward with the meaning of “delight, ornament” (LSJ s.v. 2). This meaning has apparently not hitherto been attested for ἀνάθημα or ἄνθημα, but it seems certain here. The use of the plural for a single person also seems odd; could it have been influenced, this far east, by deliciae?

6 ὡς ὀδόων: Whether or not we add the word ἐθανεν in line 3, the meaning must be that like a rose, he died at the height of his beauty – a common conceit in epitaphs.10 Ἐρμης: Ἐρμῆς, not Ἐρμίας. Both are common enough personal names in the east, but both the anomalous eta and the use of ε rather than ι or ιει seem decisive for the first possibility. The author has lengthened the final vowel into two, a license already taken for the god’s name by Callimachus, Hymn to Artemis 69, 143 and by others afterward. The omission of the iota may even be intentional (though unmetrical), to avoid mispronunciation.

9 φθοτός: The normal meaning of this word is dead, and it is usually used in the plural. Aristotle’s use (on one occasion)11 of τὸ φθοτόν for “what can be diminished” is not really a precedent; but adjectives in -τός meaning -able are common enough for the author to have been able to imagine it himself, particularly when φθοτός means “imperishable”.12 The normal word, θητός, did not fit the meter. I cannot say whether our author forgot the word βροτός or spurned it.

The pillar was obviously set up over a grave, under which the deceased Hermes lay. The expression ἀνδρεὶς οδεῖται need not mean that the grave was not in a cemetery; the address to passersby had been a commonplace at least since Thermopylae. We are not told who it was who set up the inscription or what their relationship to the deceased may have been, beyond the fact that they (note the plural in line 7) called him Hermeies. Nothing indicates his national, local, or religious affiliation: the stone is empty except for the tabula with its inscription. The name Hermes and the references to the Moirai and Hades obviously suggest a pagan origin, though in fact each can be paralleled from Jewish inscriptions.13 The two initial hexameters are ill-fitted to the rest of the inscription both by meter and by content: the question they implicitly pose – if we are not to ask the dead man what his name is, who will tell us? – is never answered, for the “speaker” does not identify himself. One might have suspected that they are

10 Richmond Lattimore, Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1942, 195–8).
11 Physica 201a 13.
12 Hesychius, in fact, offers θητοι as a gloss on φθοτοί.
13 On pagan theophoric names among Jews see the preface to CIJ, p. LXVII; inscription 684 there includes the mun- mission of a Hermas who would thereby become, by rabbinic law, a Jew. For Moirai and Hades see Louis Robert, Hellenica I (1940), p. 22, note 8.
commonplace verses of the sort that are often copied from place to place in funeral inscriptions, but I have not been able to find any parallels.

14 Thomas Drew-Bear, A Metrical Epitaph from Phrygia, in Glen W. Bowersock, Walter Burkert, and Michael C. J. Putnam, eds., Arktouros: Hellenic Studies presented to Bernard M. W. Knox on the occasion of his 65th birthday (de Gruyter, Berlin, 1979), 308-16, cites eighteen inscriptions bearing versions of more or less the same couplet, “found at places as far apart as Karystos and Boubon, and carved at dates which range from the early Hellenistic period to the reign of Gallienus” (315). The phenomenon, of course, has not died: see Mark Twain’s words on “Post-Mortem Poetry” in The $30,000 Bequest and Other Stories, or any store’s selection of greeting cards.

15 On the contrary, the common pretense is for the deceased himself to address the way-farer, as in practically all the cases quoted by Lattimore, op. cit., 230–4.
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