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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,¹ 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 width² (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:

εἰ θέλετε γνῶναι τίς ὁ κείμε-
 ν.3 νος, ἄνδρες ὀδεῖται,
 ἐνθάδε, μὴ ἵνομα τὸν νέ-
 4 κυν ὄντα ἐπερωτ(ήσ)ητε· φεῦ, νέ-
 ος οὗτος, ὃς ἤκμασεν, ἀνθ-
 έματ' ἄνθης, ὡς ῥόδον· Ἐρμε(ί)

* Of the many people who have helped me with this inscription, thanks to Aryeh Arzi and David Adan-Bayewitz, and particularly to my students Barbara Dellinger, Shmuel Koenigsbuch, and Nora Peltinovitch – the last two sadly deceased since I first offered this stone as an exercise in an epigraphy seminar.

¹ Since upgraded to the Antiquities Authority.

² These are the internal measurements.

ην τοῦτον ἐφημίσαμεν. ν.2
 8 Μοιρῶν γὰρ τελέεας τακτὸν
 χρόνον ὡς φθιτὸς ἀνήρ
 εἵκοσι καὶ δυ' ἔτων οἴχεται
 ν.4 εἰς Ἀίδην. vac.

- 1 τίς: There is a horizontal bar from the T to the I that looks like a ligature for TH. This may be a mistake or a scratch.
 κείμε: The mu is only a single space, and its rounded sides allow the right bar to form a ligature with the rounded epsilon. All other mus in the inscription have straight sides.
- 2 ἄνδρες: The median bar of the epsilon is only lightly visible.
- 3 ἐνθάδε: Were it not for the context I would read the theta as an omicron. It is possible that a dot is obscured by the roughness, though all other thetas on the stone are barred, not dotted. More likely is that a partial horizontal scratch near the bottom of the letter (at the same level as the cross-bar of the following alpha) is intended as the cross-bar of the theta.
 τὸν: The roof of the tau is clear, the vertical less so, and the beginning of a diagonal at its left side might seem to suggest the top of a sigma. But there is no bottom half to the “sigma”, nor are there any barred sigmas on this stone with horizontal top and bottom lines; and of course the context makes a sigma most unlikely.
- 4 ὄντα: The roof of the tau, if it is there at all, is mostly to the right, so that the traces would accord better with an iota or a gamma. The crossbar of the alpha is dubious, so that one might think of delta or lambda; but none of these possibilities would give acceptable sense.
 ἐπερωτ(ή)ητε: The roof of the first tau is hardly visible, if at all.
 φεῦ: The stone is deeply pitted where the phi should be; some light outlines of a circle are visible, but it is not certain that they are indeed the mason’s work.
 φεῦ, νέ: The upsilon, nu, and epsilon are all joined in a ligature. There is a deep pit at what should be the right prong of the upsilon; perhaps it was caused by the mason himself, who had four separate strokes converging at that point. I think, nevertheless, that all the strokes of the ligature are certain.
- 5 ἦκμαεν: A horizontal scratch in the middle of the sigma might be taken for the crossbar of an epsilon; on the other hand, the crossbar of the epsilon immediately following is very faint.
 ἄνθ: The alpha and nu are a ligature.
- 6 ἄνθης: The final sigma is not clearly visible, but running one’s finger over the stone seems to indicate clearly the presence of a barred sigma – the only one on the stone – with all its bars diagonal. The squeeze supports this reading.
 Ἐρμε(ι): The mu and the second epsilon form a ligature, which reaches the very end of the frame and leaves no room for the iota; but the meter requires the iota.
- 7 τοῦτον: There is a deep indentation, much the deepest in the inscription, between the first omicron and the upsilon; it continues down to the line below where it hits the right wall of the omega. If the indentation was there at all at the time of the inscription it must have been much narrower, since the letter spacing is hardly affected if at all, and the left branch of the upsilon is no longer visible.
- 8 Μοιρῶν γὰρ: The nu of Μοιρῶν forms a ligature with the gamma of γὰρ.
 τελέεας: The first sigma has a deep horizontal cut in the middle, deeper than the letter itself, which might be taken for the crossbar of an epsilon but is more likely simply a mark of damage.
 τακτὸν: At the end of the last letter the frame shows the traces of two diagonals as if the mason had tried to squeeze in the following chi but failed.
- 9 ἀνήρ at the end of the line is spaced rather broadly, presumably to fill the space and begin the next line with a new line of poetry.

The inscription begins with two hexameters and follows with two elegiac couplets:

εἰ θέλετε γινῶναι τίς ὁ κείμε/νος, ἄνδρες ὀδεῖται, /
 ἐνθάδε, μὴ ἵνομα τὸν νέ/κυν ὄντα ἐπερωτ(ήσ)ητε·
 φεῦ, νέ/ος οὗτος, ὃς ἤκμασεν, ἀνθ/έματ' ἀνθης,
 ὡς ῥόδον· Ἑρμε(λ)/ην τοῦτον ἐφημίσαμεν. /
 Μοιρῶν γὰρ τελέσας τακτὸν / χρόνον ὡς φθιτὸς ἀνὴρ /
 εἴκοσι καὶ δυ' ἐτῶν οἴχεται / εἰς Ἀΐδην.

*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 εἰ θέλετε γινῶναι: A common enough formula for introducing information on epitaphs³, but our poet has added his own twist by pointing out that the dead man cannot supply the information.
- 2 ὀδεῖται for ὀδίται: The confusion of εἰ and ἰ is common only in Roman times in Athens,⁴ and there is no reason to presume an earlier date for our inscription.
- 3 ἵνομα for ὄνομα: The prodelision is remarkable. In Attic inscriptions, prodelision is rare, and most cases may be seen as crasis.⁵ 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. νέ/κυν ὄντα: An epitaph from Ilium, on the other hand, represents the dead young man as speaking because “even when dead, I have no small wit.”⁶
- 4 ὄντα ἐπερωτ(ήσ)ητε: The meter requires that the α be elided, but the mason has cut it anyway, despite the fact that he omitted the ο in the previous line. This kind of inconsistency is common even in Athens at all periods.⁷

ἐπερωτ(ήσ)ητε: Since the last η is clear, we must have a subjunctive; and both meter and grammar demand the aorist.

φεῦ: The empty space at the end of line 7, and the fact that the word ἀνὴρ 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.

φεῦ, νέ/ος οὗτος, ὃς ἤκμασεν, ἀνθ/έματ' ἀνθης: A metron is missing from this hexameter. This is hardly likely to be intentional;⁸ but is it the author's error or the mason's?⁹ The verse is clumsy as is: οὗτος, which a reader could perfectly well take for an attributive (“this young man”) must be taken as predicate (“this man was young”) in the absence of a main verb; a nominal sentence, νέος

³ Cf., e. g., Georg Kaibel, *Epigrammata Graeca* (Berlin, 1878, repr. Hildesheim 1965) 301, 340, 408, 530, 718.

⁴ Leslie Threatte, *The Grammar of Attic Inscriptions* (Berlin, 1980–96), I 195–9. The spelling ὀδεῖται itself is found, e.g., in CII 1451.

⁵ Threatte, *op. cit.*, I 426–7.

⁶ Peter Frisch, *Die Inschriften von Ilium (= Inschriften griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien 3)* 176 = CIG 3627 = Kaibel, *Epigrammata Graeca* 334, line 5.

⁷ Threatte, *op. cit.*, I 418–9.

⁸ See P. A. Hansen, *CR* 34 (N.S.) (1984), 286.

⁹ 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.

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

- 5 ἀνθ/έματ’: 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.

ἀνθ/έματ’: 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 ῥόδον: Whether or not we add the word ἔθανεν 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

Ἐρμε(ί)ην: 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 ει 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 φθιτός: 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 φθιτόν 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 ἄφθιτος means “imperishable”.¹² The normal word, θνητός, 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 ἀνδρες ὀδεῖται 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 θνητοί as a gloss on φθιτοί.

¹³ On pagan theophoric names among Jews see the preface to CIJ, p. LXVII; inscription 684 there includes the manumission 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,¹⁴ but I have not been able to find any parallels.¹⁵

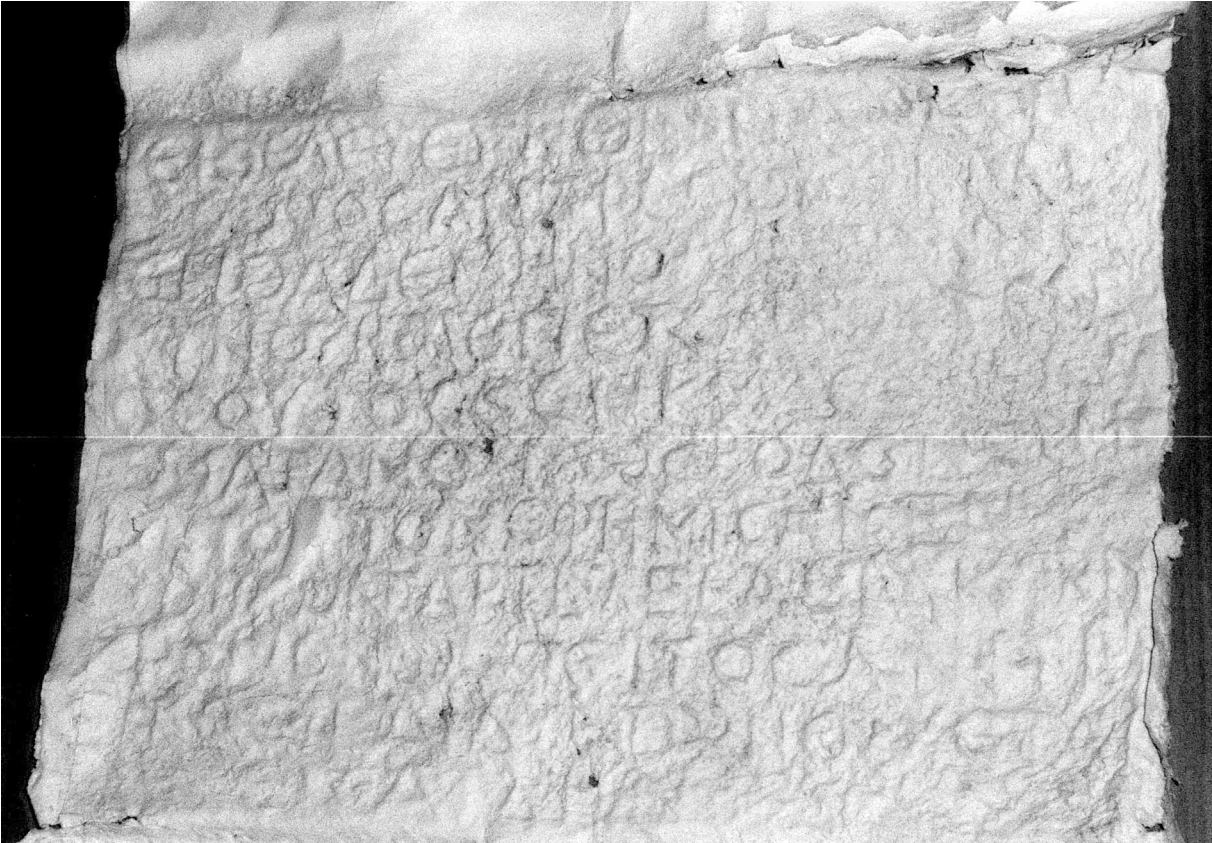
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¹⁴ Thomas Drew-Bear, *A Metrical Epitaph from Phrygia*, in Glen W. Bowersock, Walter Burkert, and Michael C. J. Putnam, eds., *Arktouros: Hellenic Studies presented to Bernard M. W. Knox on the occasion of his 65th birthday* (de Gruyter, Berlin, 1979), 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 Latimore, *op. cit.*, 230-4.

TAFEL XIV



A Greek Metrical Grave Inscription from Israel (Stone and Squeeze); D. M. Schaps, pp. 185–189