

HERBERT VERRETH

A COASTAL ROAD IN THE NORTHERN SINAI IN P.OXY. XLII 3011?

aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 126 (1999) 223–224

© Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH, Bonn

A COASTAL ROAD IN THE NORTHERN SINAI IN P.OXY. XLII 3011?

The contents of the fragmentary and clumsily written P.Oxy. XLII 3011¹, considered part of a novel or a 'Königsnovelle' and palaeographically dated to the third century AD, is rather puzzling. The 'brother' (l. 9) of a certain Amenophis(?) (l. 21) describes a road which takes three days to go and has a width of two cubits (ca. 1 m), while the water there is up to the knees (l. 3-8). This road, which eventually seems to lead to Memphis (?) (l. 2), is apparently situated in the neighbourhood of the Mediterranean (l. 12) and is said to be used by Hermes and Isis in search of the body of Osiris (l. 15-21):

[..]ουφ[...][...]......[...]. πρὸς τὴν Μεμφε[ῖδα(?)] αὕτη δὲ ἔχει ἡμε[ρῶν] τριῶν πόρον. τὸ | [δὲ] πλάτος τῆς ὁδοῦ | [ἔσ]τιν πηχῶν δύο. | τὸ δὲ ὕδωρ ἐστὶν μέλρι τῶν γονάτων. | [λ]οιπὸν οὖν, ἄδελφε, | ἀνδραγάθησον, ἐπίθου με καὶ διαπέρασον τὴν θάλασ(σ)αν, | πάντα εὐθέως ἐλιθ[ῶ]ν ὡς ἂν σοι λέγω. | αὕτη δὲ τῆ ὁδῶ ὁ μέγας θεὸς Ἑρμῆς καὶ ἡ μυριώνυμος θεὰ | Εἴσιν πλάνωμένη | ε..[...][...].ση ζητοῦσα τὸν β[ασι]λέα τῶν | θεῶν Ὀ[σιρι]ν. ὁ δὲ Ἀμελνωφεῖν(?) [τα]ῦτα ἀκούσας μεγάλ[ως] ἐχάρη.

"... towards Memphis (?). This (road) involves a journey of three days (?). The width of the road is two cubits (ca. 1 m). The water is up to the knees. Therefore, brother, be a man, put me on (your shoulders) (?) and cross the sea, in all things advancing (?) at once as soon as I will tell you. By this road the great god Hermes and the thousand-named goddess Isis [went?], when she was wandering in search of the king of the gods, Osiris." Amennophin(?) (Amenophis?), hearing this, rejoiced greatly.'

Although the identification of the road in question remains hypothetical, one automatically recalls the μικρὰ δίοδος mentioned by Strabon², 'the small passage' between lake Serbonis and the Mediterranean, which - coming from the east - leads up to the Ekregma, which was probably situated somewhat east of mount Kasion. Modern accounts of travellers indeed mention that the strip of land along the present-day Sabkhat Bardawil, which extends for more than 80 km between Mahammediya in the west and el-Felusiyat in the east, is often only a few meters wide, and that one sometimes has to wade through an inlet or 'boghaz'. In the Roman and Byzantine periods it was possible to cover the distance between Rinokoloura in the east and Pelousion in the west in three days, but because the track along the strip of land apparently made heavy going, the three days mentioned in the papyrus might cover only part of that distance. One gets the impression that Amenophis(?) wants to return from Syria to Egypt, but that the usual road south of lake Serbonis for some reason is not accessible. Someone recommends the alternative road north of the lake, although it does not seem evident to take this narrow and flooded track. The fact, however, that the gods Hermes and Isis have used it with success in ancient times,

¹ Cf. PARSONS, P. J., P.Oxy. XLII 1974, p. 41-43 and pl. 5, no. 3011; THISSEN, Heinz-Josef, s.v. Graeco-ägyptische Literatur, in *LÄ*, II, 1977, col. 876 and 878, n. 40; QUAEGBEUR, Jan, *Aménophis, nom royal et nom divin. Questions méthodologiques*, in *RdE*, 37, 1986, p. 101; KUSSEL, Rolf, *Papyrusfragmente griechischer Romane. Ausgewählte Untersuchungen (Classica Monacensia, 2)*, Tübingen, 1991, p. 7.178-179; *Ancient Greek novels. The fragments. Introduction, text, translation, and commentary. Edited by Susan A. STEPHENS and John J. WINKLER*, Princeton (New Jersey), 1995, p. 470; *Leuven database of ancient books*, 1998, 4855; MORGAN, J. R., *On the fringes of the canon. Work on the fragments of ancient Greek fiction 1936-1994 (ANRW, 2.34.4)*, Berlin - New York, 1998, p. 3385. I would like to thank Willy Clarysse, who brought this text to my attention and made some valuable suggestions. Because the name Αμενο[] or Αμενο[] also occurs in P.Freib. IV 47, 10, this very fragmentary literary text has been linked with P.Oxy. XLII 3011, but the identification is not certain at all.

² Strabon, 16, 2, 32 (C 760). For the strip of land between the lake and the sea, cf. VERRETH, Herbert, *Lake Serbonis and Sabkhat Bardawil in the northern Sinai*, in MOOREN, Leon (ed.), *Proceedings of the International Colloquium 'Administration and society in the Greek and Roman world. Structure and change', held in Bertinoro (Italia), 21-23 July 1997 (forthcoming)*.

proves that the road is safe, and so Amenophis(?) is reassured. The exact meaning of the clause 'put me on (your shoulders) and cross the sea' (l. 10-12), on the other hand, is difficult to understand.

Some other elements in the text might perhaps confirm a location in the northern Sinai. If the name of the person addressed to in the papyrus is correctly read as Amenophis, he may be mentioned in some other Greek texts with an Egyptian background. In documentary sources and possibly also in the literary text of 'The oracle of the potter' the Greek transcription Amenophis reflects the Egyptian name Imn-(m-)Ipt (Amenemope, 'Amon in Ipet'), which occurs as a personal name, as the name of a king of the 21st dynasty and as the name of a god. In the work of Manethon, however, the name Amenophis incorrectly renders the Egyptian name Imn-ḥtp (Amenhotep - Amenotes, 'Amon is pleased'), apparently referring to the kings Amenhotep of the 18th dynasty and to the prophet Amenhotep son of Hapou, who lived under Amenhotep III³. If the name Amenophis in the papyrus in fact stands for Amenhotep, one might refer to a story of Manethon, found in Flavius Iosephos⁴. A king Amenophis (Amenhotep III?) granted the Delta city of Auaris to the lepers of Egypt; they called in the shepherds, who had been expelled from Egypt to Jerusalem and now invaded the country again. Amenophis crossed the Nile with a large army, according to Iosephos in the neighbourhood of Pelousion, but as soon as he met the enemy, he returned to Memphis and fled to Ethiopia⁵. The story, however, does not tell whether the king waited for the enemy near Pelousion or in southern Palestine. Having returned from Ethiopia thirteen years later, Amenophis defeated the shepherds and the lepers, and pursued the remainder of their army to the Syrian frontier⁶. If the papyrus alludes to one of these expeditions, the sudden retreat to Memphis may be referred to.

According to the text of the papyrus the road has been used by the gods Hermes (Thoth) and Isis in search of the body of Osiris. Also the magical P.Oxy. VI 886, dated to the third century AD, mentions Isis being joined by Hermes on this journey, but the text does not provide any geographical information⁷. According to Ploutarchos Isis went from Egypt to Byblos, where she found Osiris' coffin, but no further itinerary is given⁸. According to one of the versions of the story, she apparently returned to Egypt by sea and founded the city of Pelousion, which might provide a mythological link with the northern Sinai⁹. In the so-called Invocation of Isis (P.Oxy. XI 1380, 73-76.93) Isis is also linked with Pelousion, mount Kasion, the Ekregma of lake Serbonis and Rinokoloura, but is difficult to assess why Isis is said to be worshipped at those places.

The general description in the papyrus, therefore, seems to match the situation of the northern Sinai, and the road mentioned in P.Oxy. XLII 3011 may well refer to the track along the strip of land between lake Serbonis and the Mediterranean. We can only hope that new fragments of the same account will confirm this hypothesis.

Leuven

Herbert Verreth

³ Cf. QUAEGBEUR, 1986, p. 97-106.

⁴ Manethon (FGrHist 609, F 10a; *Manetho. With an English translation by W. G. WADDELL (Loeb classical library)*, London - Cambridge (Mass.), 1980 (= 1940), F 54); Flavius Iosephos, *Contra Apionem*, 1, 26-31 (227-287). For a similar account, see also Chairemon of Alexandria (FGrHist 618, F 1) in Flavius Iosephos, *Contra Apionem*, 1, 32-33 (288-303).

⁵ Flavius Iosephos, *Contra Apionem*, 1, 26 (245) and 1, 29 (274).

⁶ Flavius Iosephos, *Contra Apionem*, 1, 27 (251), 1, 28 (266) and 1, 29 (277).

⁷ P.Oxy. VI 886, 5-10 (= PGM II, XXIVa, 5-10: ὁ δὲ τρόπος ἐστὶν τὰ περ[ὶ] τὰ γράμματα καθ' ἃ δι' ὧν ὁ Ἑρμῆς καὶ ἡ Ἴσις ἠζητοῦσα ἑαυτῆς τὸν ἀδελφὸν καὶ ἄνδρα Ἰσιρεῖν. - 'The method is concerned with the 29 letters used by Hermes and Isis when searching for her brother and husband Osiris'); cf. RUSCH, Adolf, s.v. Thoth, in *RE*, VI A 1, 1936, col. 371 and KURTH, Dieter, s.v. Thot, in *LÄ*, VI, 1986, col. 520, n. 192.

⁸ Ploutarchos, *De Iside et Osiride*, 15 (357A); cf. *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride. Edited with an introduction, translation and commentary by John Gwyn GRIFFITHS*, Cambridge, 1970, p. 319-322.

⁹ Ploutarchos, *De Iside et Osiride*, 17 (357E); cf. GRIFFITHS, 1970, p. 334-335.