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A GREEK MAGICAL(?) OSTRAKON FROM ELOUSA (HALUZA)

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The site of ancient Elousa (Haluzā in Hebrew, Khalasa in Arabic) lies about 20 km south-west of modern Beer-Sheva. The city was presumably founded in the third-second century BC as a caravanserai on the spice route between Petra and Gaza, and was most likely the administrative centre of the Negev during the late Roman and Byzantine periods. In the course of the late sixth and the seventh centuries AD Elousa was gradually deserted and its ruins were largely covered by sand.²

In the summers of 1997 and 1998 the Archaeology Division of the Ben-Gurion University of Beer-Sheva resumed excavations in Haluzā.³ During the first season - under the direction of Haim Goldfus and Peter Fabian - a Byzantine kiln workshop at the south-east fringe of the site was excavated, and part of the small theatre was exposed. During the 1998 season - now under the direction of Haim Goldfus and Benny Arubas - the work in the theatre continued, and the eastern part of the so-called East Church was excavated. In the course of these two seasons more than twenty ostraka were found, primarily in the Byzantine pottery workshop, in an archaeological context datable to the fifth to early seventh century AD. Most contain only a few letters, written either with charcoal or with black or red ink, often scarcely legible. Some twelve ostraka, however, consist of several letters or lines. One ostrakon will be discussed here. It was found with some four others in a layer of pottery wasters, and probably thrown there when the pottery kiln next to it was cleaned.

The ostrakon (inv. no. Area K/L.715/B.3055) is a sherd of a wine jar, some 7,3 x 6,5 cm, written on both sides with red ink. On the convex side five lines of each four to six letters are written; on the concave side eight figures are drawn, possibly a probatio penna. The letters are clumsily written capitals, which are palaeographically difficult to date, but according to Peter van Minnen the shape of the K might match a date in the fifth-seventh centuries AD.

Ro

- 1 KCBK
 CKBBC
 CBKBK
 AOPHO
 5 OOAΔ



¹ We would like to thank Prof. Willy Clarysse and Dr. Peter van Minnen for their valuable suggestions.

² For a summary of the history and archaeology of Elousa, cf. NEGEV, Avraham, *Elusa*, in STERN, Ephraim e.a. (ed.), *The new encyclopedia of archaeological excavations in the Holy Land. I*, Jerusalem e.a., 1993, p. 379-383.

³ Further reports about these excavations, including the full publication of the ostraka, are forthcoming. Since not all the material has yet been studied, the number of ostraka found is only approximate.

The reading of the dotted letters is based upon the third hypothesis, as explained below.

- l. 1 The last letter is apparently written with three strokes, and is therefore no I, but perhaps a misshapen N or - as suggested by Peter van Minnen - a K.
- l. 2 The last letter is slightly curved and was perhaps not a I, but a C.
- l. 3 The first letter might be a misshapen C or an O; the second letter is a B, rather than a Θ. Above the first K, the second B and the second C a little dot is added; such a dot is often used to delete a letter, but it is not clear whether it has a similar meaning here.
- l. 4 The first letter might be a Λ or a misshapen K; the fourth letter might be an H or perhaps a M; the last O, which seems to be separated from the first four letters, is formed irregularly, and might also be a misshapen C.
- l. 5 The first sign might be an O or a black dot; the two last letters do not resemble the P of l. 4, and are most likely to be read as Δ; the two central letters seem to be grouped.

Vo



No text, but only some figures are drawn: five loop-shaped dashes of the pen, which each seem to be written in a single stroke each; an indefinite figure on the right, which is possibly formed in four strokes; a curved line with an additional stroke; a small sign below the latter.

Since the meaning of the text is not clear, there are three theoretical possibilities for its interpretation. First, the letters and the signs are not meant to be read, but are all part of a writing exercise or probatio pennaе of the potter(?), who for one reason or another wanted to exercise the capitals K (5 examples?), C (5?), B (5?), O (4?), Δ (2?), Λ (1?) P (1), H (1?). The presence of the scabbles on the verso of the ostrakon might confirm such a hypothesis.

Secondly, the letters might be abbreviations, so that KCB in l. 1 e.g. might be read as K(ύριε) σ(ωτήρ), β(οήθει), ‘Lord saviour, help (us)’, as suggested by Leah Di Segni.⁴ Without any further clues, however, it is difficult to convincingly ‘solve’ the whole text this way, and it has to be stressed that no abbreviation marks are written.

Thirdly, (some of) the letters might have a numerical value, which can give the following table:

l. 1	20 - 200 - 2 - 20?	222 - 20
	200 - 20 - 2 - 2 - 200?	222 - 202
	200? - 2? - 20 - 2 - 20 - 200	222 - 222
	30? (20?) - 70 - 100 - 8? (40?) - 70 (200?)	
l. 5	70? - 70 - 4? - 4?	70 - 74 - 4

⁴ Cf. the inscription KYPBTΔΠAY - Kύριε, βοήθει τ(ῶ) δ(ούλω) Παύ(λω) mentioned in DORNSEIFF, Franz, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie. Zweite Auflage (Stoicheia. Studien zur Geschichte des antiken Weltbildes und der griechischen Wissenschaft, 7)*, Leipzig, 1975 (= 1925), p. 111 (see also AVI-YONAH, 1940 in OIKONOMIDES, Al. N. (ed.), *Abbreviations in Greek inscriptions, papyri, manuscripts and early printed books*, Chicago, 1974, p. 33.73.99).

The repetition of the figure 222 (σκβ) is remarkable: it is written in four different ways (κσβ, σκβ, σβκ, βκσ) and the three dotted letters in l. 3 (κβσ) add again up to 222; also the last letters of l. 2 and l. 1 possibly add up to 222 (βσικ), which leaves none of the six possible combinations for the figure 222 unattested.⁵ The figure 74 (οδ), one third of 222, occurs perhaps twice, in a symmetrical disposition (?), in l. 5. Only l. 4 does not match this numerical scheme, and maybe a word (λορη 70, κορυ 200? λορης, κορης, λορμo, κορμo?) or an abbreviation is written.⁶ Even if the text on the ostrakon is magical, as this numerical repetition and the use of red ink⁷ might suggest, the interpretation of this figure 222 is not evident. Four times 222 (twelve times 74) is 888, which is the numerical value of the name Jesus (Ἰησοῦς = 10 + 8 + 200 + 70 + 400 + 200), as already noticed in ecclesiastical literature from the second century AD.⁸ Three times 222 (nine times 74) is 666, ‘the number of the beast’ in the *Apocalypse* (13, 18),⁹ in which case the ostrakon might be supposed to protect against such a demon.

It is difficult to offer more than an hypothesis about the contents of this ostrakon from Elousa, but if it is indeed more than some potter’s writing exercise, a religious or magical interpretation seems likely. Its exact meaning, however, can only be confirmed by new related finds.

Leuven
Beer-Sheva

Herbert Verreth
Haim Goldfus

⁵ This numerical play with the figure 222 has a possible parallel on a black-glazed lamp of the fourth century BC from the Athenian agora, with the inscription σκβκβσκ (? 222 - 20? - 222); cf. LONG, Mabel, *The Athenian agora. Results of excavations conducted by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. XXI. Graffiti and dipinti*, Princeton (New Jersey), 1976, p. 6-7 and pl. 1, no. A6; she reads σκβγβσκ, but the middle figure rather looks like a κ. The text is followed by the line ‘αβγδ’ and ‘should probably be regarded as an alphabetic exercise, perhaps with magical significance, rather than as an abecedarium’.

⁶ One might also think of a case of reduced isopsephism, in which each letter stands for a numerical value reduced to one unit (e.g.: 30+70+100+8+70 = 3+7+1+8+7 = 26 = 8) (cf. VERHELST, Stéphane, *L’isopséphie “réduite” à ‘Ain Fattir et l’Hérodon (église-nord): une hypothèse vérifiée*, in *Revue biblique*, 104, 2, 1997, p. 223-236), but it is difficult to find a reading that matches the figures 222 or 74; anyway, this interpretation would also imply an unlikely switch from an ‘ordinary’ numerical system in l. 1-3.5 to a ‘reduced’ one in l. 4.

⁷ For the use of red ink in magical papyri, cf. MONTEVECCHI, Orsolina, *La papirologia. Ristampa riveduta e corretta, con addenda (Trattati e manuali)*, Milano, 1988, p. 16; for the use of red ink in papyri in general, cf. *Les archives de Marcus Lucretius Diogenes et textes apparentés. Textes édités par Paul Schubert (Papyrologische Texte und Abhandlungen, 39)*, Bonn, 1990, p. 34-39. Red ink is also often used in dipinti on vessels to indicate their contents (e.g. O.Medinet Madi 12; 15; 18).

⁸ Cf. DORNSEIFF, 1925, p. 131.

⁹ Cf. DORNSEIFF, 1925, p. 106-108.