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THE READER'S VOICE IN A HOROSCOPE FROM ABYDOS
(Perdrizet and Lefebvre, n. 641)

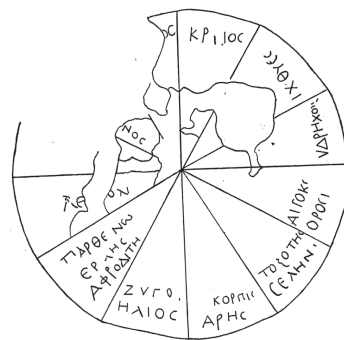
aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 130 (2000) 149–150

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The mortuary temple of Seti I at Abydos had a long and interesting history. It was at various stages a pilgrimage centre, a destination for tourists, an oracle, a sanatorium and military barracks. The Greeks knew it as the Memnonion; in the Hellenistic period it is chiefly associated with Sarapis; and in the Roman period, it was reinterpreted as a temple of the god Bes. Numerous graffiti attest different forms of visitation.¹

Among the Roman graffiti from Abydos is one with the horoscope (n. 641). Beneath the writer writes his name and a prayer (n. 641).



ΑΡΤΕΜΙΔΩΡΟC
ΥΓΕΙΑΝ
ΝΗΤΟΝ ΒΗCΑΝ ΟΥ ΜΗ ΕΞΑΛΕΙΨΩ

αρτεμιδαρος
υγιαν
νη του βησαν ου μη εξαλειψω

Artemidorus was probably a pilgrim, though there is no parallel for a pilgrim leaving a horoscope. Artemidorus may have been put in mind to leave a horoscope by the ceiling of the temple, with exposition of Egyptian cosmological speculations, written up also in papyri from the 2nd century CE.²

On the basis of the astronomical observations reported, the horoscope has been dated by Neugebauer and van Hoesen to September 21–2 of 353 CE.³ The date is interesting, because according to Ammianus Marcellinus (19.12), the Roman Emperor Constantinus II closed the oracle in 359 CE because he was offended by people asking the oracle about the imperial succession. Since the horoscope

¹ P. Perdrizet and G. Lefebvre, *Inscriptiones Graecae Aegypti* III (Paris, 1919); reproduced in Daremberg–Saglio, *Dict.* 5, p. 1053, fig. 7593.

² P. Carlsberg 1 and 9 in O. Neugebauer and R. A. Parker, *Egyptian Astronomical Texts* (London, 1960) 1, 36ff.

³ O. Neugebauer and H. B. van Hoesen, *Greek Horoscopes* (Philadelphia, 1959) [Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society, v. 48], n. 353, p. 69.

is presumably that date of the writer's birth, it probably comes from between 370 and say 410 CE, some time after the supposed shut-down. That is not implausible, because there must have been some functioning as later as the 5th century, when we hear that it was again closed by Apa Moses (text in his life, in coptic, edited by Till).⁴

Neugebauer and van Hoesen take it that the horoscope ends with an apotropaic prayer: "may I not be wiped out". So they take the horoscope as negative. They say that that might have been because the Horoscopos, the rising point of the ecliptic, is a house of Saturn, i.e. Capricorn, and Saturn is baleful.

But that seems to be a misunderstanding. The final formula more likely amounts to something like: "do not wipe this out". The verb normally found in these contexts is ἀπαλείφω. The formula

μηδεις ἀπαλιψάτω τὸ προσκύνημα

occurs in five graffiti from Abydos (Perdrizet and Lefebvre 492, 495, 500.9 etc., 504, 560).⁵ We find ἐξαλείφω in a formula found twice at Philai (IPhil 190.1 and 191):

ὁ ἐξαλίψων ταῦτα τὰ γράμματα, ἐξαλίψουσι τὸ γένος αὐτοῦ

The same verb is found in a poorly preserved curse at the end of a recently published graffito from Ain Labakha,⁶ and in a much more elaborate one from Maharraka (Hiera Sukaminos) = SB4116:

καὶ μ' ἐξαλείψας ἐπὶ σ' ἐξαλείψας ἐξαλειφθῆναι αὐτῷ τὸ ζῆν.

In this graffito, as in the ones from Philai, the "wiping out" of the inscription is correlated with the metaphorical "wiping out" of the hypothetical vandal's life or family. To that extent, Neugebauer and van Hoesen's interpretation is not completely implausible, but the primary "wiping out" referred to is always the literal one of the inscription.

In P-L 641, it seems likely that ἐξαλείψω is a first singular future indicative; none of the alternative analyses seems plausible.⁷ It is designed to be read aloud by future visitors, who in reading the inscription commit themselves to an oath not to wipe out the horoscope. No other Egyptian graffito known to me is in the voice of the reader. It be may noticed, however, that many graffiti show awareness of the future reader; in many, including some from Abydos, the list of persons who are included in the proskynema includes, and finishes with, ὁ ἀναγιγνώσκων.⁸

It follows that the horoscope could be good after all. It is remarkable for the conjunction of Mercury and Venus in Virgo, where Mercury's effect would be increased, but it is not clear what that means.⁹ I leave the detailed interpretation to experts in ancient astronomy.

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⁴ W. Till, *Koptische Heiligen- und Märtyrerlegenden 2* (Rome, 1936) [= *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*] p. 46ff.

⁵ See G. Geraci, *Ricerche sul proskynema, Aegyptus* 51 (1971), 3ff., 53.

⁶ Wagner, *ZPE* 111 (1996) 108: ἐὰν δέ τις ἐξαλείψῃ τίσεται αὐτῷ. ὅ . . . ρισάτω.

⁷ Two alternatives worth mentioning are these: a) we might interpret ἐξαλείψω as a singular aorist middle imperative, although the middle of this verb is not usual. But the middle means "anoint", as at Sappho 94.20; b) Is it an attempt at a first person singular passive? Perhaps he meant to write ἐξαλειφῶ. Or perhaps we should read ἐξαλειψῶμαι. For the idea of the inscription itself as the first person, compare the graffito from Maharraka cited above, and also 404 Perdrizet and Lefebvre: Ναυκράτης μ' ἔγραψε . . . and 424 Perdrizet and Lefebvre: [Στασί]οικος μ' ἔγραφεν ὁ Σελαμίνιος.

⁸ P/L 580 and 617; also the Maharraka inscription above; the formula is particularly well attested at Kalabsha/Talmis. Geraci (above, n. 5) 148, n. 3-4. Some of these references seem to refer to the presence of the reader on the day the προσκύνημα is made, but others are probably more open-ended.

⁹ Mercury and Venus: Tetrabiblos 357, III.13; Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis* 6.26: si Venus et Mercurius in eodem signo positi aequabili societatis postestate iungantur, grata homines venustate condecorant, et tales efficiunt qui omnia quae desiderant facillime consequantur, sed quorum animum ad multarum mulierum consortium prona mentis cupiditas impellat.