

ADAM ŁAJTAR

NOTES ON GREEK CHRISTIAN INSCRIPTIONS FROM THE NILE VALLEY

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NOTES ON GREEK CHRISTIAN INSCRIPTIONS FROM THE NILE VALLEY

I. A Greek Christian inscription from the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw was published by J. Kubińska in 1981¹. Below I present my text of this inscription which differs from that of Kubińska in some details

	† Ἐλέησόν με, ὁ θεός, κατὰ
	τὸ μέγα σοῦ ἔλεος καὶ κα-
	τὰ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν ἰκ-
4	τειρμῶν σου· ἐξάλισο(ν)
	τὰς ἀνομίας μου καὶ
	τὰ παραπτώματά
	μου. Μὴ ἀπορίψις με
8	διὰ τὰς ἀνομίας μου
	μήτε εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα
	μηνήσις τηρήσις τὰ
	κακά μου. Ἐγὼ γὰρ
12	Κολλοῦθος Ἄντε-
	[..ο]υ ἐκοιμήθη μη-
	[νὶ Θωθ] γ', ἰνδ(ικτί) `ο'(νος) ἱε' †
	†

3-4. οἰκτιρμῶν; 4. ἐξάλειψον; 7. ἀπορρίψης; 10. μηνίσης; τηρήσης;

9-11: This is a quotation from the so-called *Oratio Manassis*, the prayer composed in Hellenistic Jewish milieu and then included into many Early Christian liturgies: ἄνες μοι, κύριε, ἄνες μοι, καὶ μὴ συναπολέσης με ταῖς ἀνομίαις μου, μεδὲ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα μηνίσας τηρήσης τὰ κακά μοι, μηδὲ καταδικάσης με ἐν τοῖς κατωτάτοις τῆς γῆς². No doubt, μηνίσας has been changed into μηνίσης by the redactor of the inscription by analogy to other subjunctives of aorist active.

13-14: μη|Γ ινδ Ἰ(ησοῦ)ς † Kubińska, together with the translation: "je me suis endormi dans le mois... 3^e, indiction 6: Jesus".

¹ J. Kubińska, Une pierre funéraire chrétienne au Musée National de Varsovie, Rev. arch. 1981, pp. 74–76. The inscription entered the National Museum in Warsaw in 1947 as part of the epigraphical collection of Lyceum Hosianum in Braunsberg (Braniewo); for this collection, see J. Kubińska, op. cit., p. 74. Unfortunately, we have no information on how the inscription got to Lyceum Hosianum.

² Didascalia II 14 (ed. F. X. Funk, Didascalia et Constitutiones Apostolorum I, Paderborn 1905, p.87).

On the grounds of the photograph published by Kubińska, the exact reading of line 14 was already recognised by H. W. Pleket, SEG XXXI 1981, 1562. What he takes, however, for *alpha* and *omega* on both sides of INΔ are in fact *trema* above *iota* on the left side and *omikron*, suspended to mark an abbreviation in the word ἰνδικτίονος, on the right side.

ἔκοιμήθη μηνί + month's name with a numeral is a normal construction in Greek Christian inscriptions from the Nile valley. If we accept this reading, we have a small lacuna at the beginning of line 14 which only a very short name of a month can suit; practically, Θῶθ is the only possibility in this place.

According to Kubińska, the origin of the inscription may be a matter of discussion³. She remarks, that the composition of the inscription, which she calls "composite", is typical of Syria and Asia Minor, but the name Κολλοῦθος borne by the deceased person would suggest Egypt. In Lefebvre's corpus of Greek Christian inscriptions from Egypt, however, she could not find such a "composite" inscriptions like the one from the National Museum in Warsaw.

This statement from the editor is not entirely true for in this same Lefebvre's corpus, under the number 663, we find an inscription which is similar to the Warsaw monument to a degree. I reproduce its text here after Lefebvre with only minor corrections and my punctuation.

	‡ Ἐν ὀνόματι [το-]
	ὑ πατρὸς καὶ το[ῦ]
	υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου [π-]
4	νεύματος. Κύριε, [ἀ-]
	νάπαυσον τὴν ψυχή-
	ν τῆ δούλη σου Θεοδ-
	ότη τῆς μακαρίας, ἐλέ-
8	ησον αὐτῆς κατὰ τὸ μέ-
	γα ἔλεώς σου, ὁ θεός,
	καὶ κατὰ τὸ πλῆθος τῶ-
	ν{v} ἰκτιρμῶν σου ἐξάλ-
12	ιψον τὸ ἀνόμιον αὐτῆ-
	ς, καὶ ἐλέησον αὐτῆς
	ἀπὸ τῶν χειρῶν σου κ-
	αὶ στίσον αὐτῆς ἐκ δε-
16	ξίας σου ἐπὶ θρόνον δικ-
	αιοσύνης, καὶ πόδισο-
	ν αὐτῆς ἐπὶ ὕδαδο-
	ς ἀναπαύσεως. Ἐκ-
20	ημήθη ἐν κυρίῳ, ἀμ-
	ήν. Χριστου Μαρία γ-
	εννα, ἀμήν. Ἡ πρώτη
	ἡ ἡμέρα ἀπόθανο-

³ J. Kubińska, op. cit., p. 76.

24	ν τῆς αὐτῆς Φαμεν- ὠθ' ἰα', ἡμέρα γ' ἐπὶ τ- ὰς ζ' ἡμέρας, κατὰ σε-
28	λήνη κς', ε' ἰν(δικτίονος), ἐν ἐρήνῃ, ✠Θ.

6. τῆς δούλης; Θεοδότης; 9. ἔλεος; θεός; 11. οἰκτιρῶν; ἐξάλειψον; 14. χειρῶν; 15. στήσον; 16. θρόνον; 17. πότισον; 18. ὕδατος; 19-20. ἐκοιμήθη; 21-22. Χριστὸ(ν) Μαρία γεννᾷ or Χριστὸ(ς) Μαρία(ς) γεννα?; 22. πρώτη; ἀπέθανον or ἀποθανών?; 27-28. σελήνην; εἰρήνη

As we see, the prayers for the dead from both inscriptions show many common traits. They are composed in a similar supplicatory manner modelled upon the Psalms, with particular requests being always expressed by the imperative of aorist active, and they frequently use quotations from the Psalms⁴. What is more, the initial parts of the prayers are in both inscriptions identical, being a quotation from Psalm 50, 3⁵. It would be going too far to see in one of these inscriptions a direct model for the other, but the similarities between them demonstrated above seem to suggest that there existed a kind of tradition in composing funerary prayers similar to these two. We may assume that it was this tradition which dictated the beginning of the prayer with Psalm 50, 3 and then its continuation in the manner proper to Psalms.

The inscription Lefebvre 663 was published in 1883 by E. Miller, as being of unknown provenance⁶. Lefebvre in his *Recueil* classified it as "Nubie, provenance douteuse". Now, eighty–odd years after the publication of Lefebvre's classical book, Nubian origin of the stone may be proven with all certainty. In lines 21–27 of its text, the date of demise of the stela's owner Theodote is given according to various calendar systems, including lunar calendar. The use of lunar dates is a specifically Nubian phenomenon, very rarely attested elsewhere⁷. In documents from Nubia (inscriptions and manuscripts), lunar dates start to appear at the end of the VIIIth century and continue until the end of Mediaeval Nubian civilization in the XIVth century⁸. On the

⁴ As far as funerary epigraphy is concerned, this manner of composing prayers was not so common as one may suppose. For example, it is not to be found in Syria and Asia Minor, while having many attestations in Egypt and Nubia.

⁵ Ἐλέησον με, ὁ θεός, κατὰ τὸ μέγα ἔλεός σου, καὶ κατὰ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν οἰκτιρῶν σου ἐξάλειψον τὸ ἀνόμημά μου.

⁶ E. Miller, *Inscriptions grecques découvertes en Egypte*, Rev.arch. 1883, p. 203. The inscription was originally kept in the Museum of Boulaq. In 1891, together with the entire collection of this museum it was transported to Giza and then, in 1902, it became part of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo: W. E. Crum, *Coptic Monuments* (= *Catalogue Général des antiquités égyptiennes du Musée du Caire*), Le Caire 1902, no. 8397. To the bibliography gathered in Lefebvre add C. M. Kaufman, *Handbuch der altchristlichen Epigraphik*, p. 75 and M. Guarducci, *Epigrafia greca*, vol. IV, pp. 459-461 (with the date "V secolo", nonsensical in case of Nubia).

⁷ For this custom, see the recent discussion in R. S. Bagnall, K. A. Worp, *Dating by the moon in Nubian inscriptions*, CdE LXI, fasc. 122 (1986), pp. 347-357; cf also G. Alföldy, *Eine frühchristliche Inschrift aus Rom*, *Archeologoski vestnik* 28, 1977, 455–461, who gathers the material from beyond Nubia.

⁸ The earliest Nubian attestation for the dating by the moon is in the funerary stele of Stephanus from Old Dongola (died April 14th, A.D. 797), the latest one in a dipinto of a historical nature in the Monastery of St. Simeon near Asuan, written in debased Greek (April 7th, A.D. 1322). For this dipinto, see F. Ll. Griffith, *Christian Documents from Nubia*, Proc.Brit.Acad. XIV, 1928, p. 137. The stele of Stephanus remains unpublished; cf. preliminarily S. Jakobielski, A. Ostrasz, *Polish Excavations at Old Dongola, Second Season, December 1965 February 1966*, KUSH XV, 1967–68, p. 133(B).

grounds of coincidence: Phamenoth 11th, lunar month 26th, 5th indiction, 3rd day of the week, R. S. Bagnall and K. A. Worp date this inscription to March 7th, A.D. 1217(?)⁹.

Summing up our deductions we may state that the inscription from the National Museum in Warsaw, due to its similarity with the inscription Lefebvre 663, surely comes from the Nile valley, and most probably from Nubia¹⁰.

II. a) The epigraphical crop of British excavations carried out in Soba, the capital of the Mediaeval Nubian Kingdom of Alwa, has been published recently by S. Jakobielski¹¹. It comprises a Greek funerary inscription with the prayer for the dead of the Euchologion Mega type, some minor Greek inscriptions incised on stone-blocks as well as several ostraca and numerous graffiti on pottery. To the last group belongs a fragmentarily preserved inscription (Jakobielski supposes a little under one third of letters has been preserved) written around the rim of a bowl. The text of the inscription has been presented by the editor thus, without any attempt at its reconstruction¹²:

† ἐν [...(+/-25)....] τα το πληθος τω
 † ἐι [...(+/-25)....] ὄνομημα μου
 † ἐτ [...(+/-27)....] αν †

Jakobielski assumes that this is a dedication formula. In fact what we have here in lines 1–2 is undoubtedly Psalm 50, 3: ἐλέησόν με, ὁ θεός, κατὰ τὸ μέγα ἔλεός σου, καὶ κατὰ τὸ πληθος τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν σου ἐξάλειψον τὸ ἀνόμημά μου. On the grounds of the copy, the inscription may be reconstructed as follows:

† ἐλέ[ησον με, ὁ θεός, κατὰ τὸ μέγα ἔλεός σου, καὶ κα]τὰ το πληθος τῶ[v]
 † εἰ[κτιρμῶν σου ἐξάλειψον τὸ] ἀνόμημά μου.
 † ETI [-.....] AN [.] X [...]

1.2. read οἰ[κτιρμῶν]

⁹ R. S. Bagnall, K. A. Worp, *op. cit.*, p. 352sq. This date is apparently too high. After the Xth/XIth century the prayer of the Euchologion Mega type was in almost exclusive use in Nubian funerary epigraphy in Greek (for this prayer, see H. Junker, *Die christlichen Grabsteine Nubiens*, ZÄS 60, 1925, pp. 124–125); also the use of an indiction among various dating systems is an evidence for much earlier date (by XIth cent. at the very latest). Most probably, we have to consider one of the dates given in Lefebvre 663 as erroneous and to date this inscription to IXth/Xth cent.

¹⁰ Thus, the present inscription would be the second one from Nubia which had found its way into Lyceum Hosianum in Braunsberg. The first is a Greek epitaph of Iesu son of Mariame from Faras, dated to A.D. 1173; cf. J. Kubińska, *Inscriptions grecques chrétiennes (= Faras IV)*, Varsovie 1974, p. 51sq., no. II = SB I 5716.

The kind of stone and the external appearance of the monument do not contradict its Nubian origin. The stele is made of marmor; it lacks any decoration. Though not so often as sandstone, marmor was used by Nubian masons to produce funerary stela; a simple stela deprived of any ornamentation is the commonest form of Nubian gravestones; for this matter, see generally H. Junker, *Die christlichen Grabsteine Nubiens*, ZÄS 60, 1925, p. 122sq.

¹¹ D. A. Welsby, C. M. Daniels, *Soba. Archaeological Research at a Mediaeval Capital on the Blue Nile*, London 1991; inscriptions by S. Jakobielski, pp. 274–296.

¹² S. Jakobielski, *op. cit.*, p. 293, no. 157 together with a copy on p. 287.

In line 3 of the inscription the text of Psalm 50, 3 may continue with its verse 4: ἐπὶ πλεῖον πλῦνόν με ἀπὸ τῆς ἀνομίας μου, καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς ἁμαρτίας μου καθάρισον με. This is, however, not self evident for this line is too damaged to permit a certain reconstruction. Originally, the inscription could have been either the initial part of Psalm 50 written *in extenso*, or a prayer the beginning of which constituted a quotation from Psalm 50, 3. Such a prayer would have been similar to the prayer for the dead contained in inscription Lefebvre 663 and the inscription from the National Museum in Warsaw¹³.

b) In the same collection, another graffito on pottery has been presented by S. Jakobielski thus¹⁴:

]ητος κ(υριο)ς ο θ(εο)ς

This should be reconstructed:

[† εὐλογ]ητὸς κ(ύριο)ς ὁ θ(εός) †

The text is a quotation from the Holy Scriptures. Its original version reads εὐλογητὸς κύριος ὁ θεὸς τοῦ Ἰσραήλ and is to be found in 3 Kings 1, 48, 2 Chronicles 2, 12 and 6, 4, Psalm 71, 18 as well as in Lucas 1, 68. It is also attested in Greek epigraphy¹⁵.

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¹³ Cf. *supra*.

¹⁴ S. Jakobielski, *op. cit.*, p. 293, no. 158, and a copy on p. 287.

¹⁵ Cf. for example Le Bas-Wadd. 2185, funerary inscription from Nemara (Syria): † Εὐλογ[ητὸς ὁ] | Κύριος κτλ.