

An Early Byzantine Inscription Found Near Ajlun

By

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During the late summer 1970 the Department of Antiquities uncovered a mosaic floor in Maqati', a small village about six kilometers north of Ajlun. Mr. Mohammed Morshed of the Department directed this excavation. In this floor was a complete Greek inscription (Plate I) which is the subject of this article. A special word of appreciation is expressed to Mr. Yacoub Oweis, Director-General of the Department of Antiquities, for his cooperation

and assistance in making this inscription available for publication.

The inscription is surrounded by a circular border which is 12 cm. wide. The outside circle of the border is 120 cm. in diameter. The inscription consists of eleven lines. The letters are irregular in shape and size, but the text is very legible.

The text reads:

ΧΜΓ

ΕΠΙ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟ-

ΣΕΒ' ΑΙΩΝΟΣ ΠΡΕΣ

ΚΑΙ ΒΑΡΑΧΩΝΟΣ ΚΑΙ

5 ΜΑΓΝΟΥ ΕΥΛΑΒ Β

ΔΙΑΚ^ΟΚ^Ο ΚΑΙ ΜΑΚΕΔΟ-

ΝΙΟΥ ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΟΥ ΕΓΕ-

ΝΕΤΟ Η ΨΙΦΩΣΕΙΣ

ΑΠΟ ΠΡΟΣΦΟΡΑΣ ΤΗΣ

10 ΚΩΜΗΣ ΤΩ ΕΜΦ

ΕΤΕΙ ΧΡΟ^Σ ΙΝΔ

Χ(ριστὸς) Μ(αρίας) Γ(έννα)

ἐπὶ τοῦ θεο-

σεβ(εστάτου) Αἰῶνος πρεσ(βυτέρου)

καὶ Βαραχῶνος καὶ

5 Μάγνου εὐλαβ(εστάτων)

διακ(όνων) καὶ Μακεδο-

νίου οἰκονόμου ἐγέ-

νετο ἡ ψιφῶσεις

ἀπὸ προσφορᾶς τῆς

10 κώμης. τῷ ἐμφ

ἔτει χρό(νου) Ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος)

Translation:

«Christ, the offspring of Mary In the time of the most God-fearing Aion, the elder, and Barachon and Magnos, most devout deacons, and Makedonios, the steward, the mosaic floor was laid from the offering of the village, in the year 545 at the time of the sixth indiction.»

Commentary

Line 1: ΧΜΓ — This monogram is found in Christian inscriptions from Turkey, Egypt, and Syria and has been rather extensively discussed and variously interpreted by scholars (1) In his collection of early Christian inscriptions from Moab, R. Canova reports only one inscription with this monogram (2) Although a variety of constructions have been supplied with the letters, most interpreters consider the X to represent some form of the name Χριστός, the M, some form of the name Μαρία and the Γ, some form of the verb γεννάω («to bear, give birth»). Thus the thought alluded to the birth of Christ from Mary and undoubtedly emphasized the virgin birth. The present writer is proposing the following reading for this monogram: Χ(ριστός) Μ(αρία) Γ(έννα) (3) — «Christ, the offspring (or son) of Mary.»

Line 2: The text begins with the usual formula of ἐπὶ followed by the genitive: in the time of....»

Line 3: The usual abbreviation sign is found at the end of line 3. A similar but

somewhat smaller sign is found at the end of line 5. In line 3 the broken line after the third letter also functions as an abbreviation sign.

Line 5: The doubling of letters at the end of line 5 indicates the plural of an abbreviation. (4) In line 5 the adjective εὐλαβεῖσθαι is abbreviated (the abbreviation is indicated by the sign at the end of the line and the plural number by the doubling of the last consonant of the abbreviation).

Line 6: The first five letters in line 6 represent the plural διακόων. The abbreviation sign in this case is the short diagonal line at the foot of the fourth and fifth letters (the same abbreviation sign is found at the foot of the sixth and the last letters in line 11). The small omicrons above the kappa's in line 6 appear to represent the omicron in διακόων (similarly, the raised omicron in line 11).

Line 7: Makedonios is identified as an οἰκονομος «steward, treasurer.» This position seems to be a functional title for the local ecclesiastical official who had charge of revenues and administered the property of the church. S. Saller observes that this office «must have existed from the beginning of the church, but the term can be traced only to the fourth century.» (5)

Line 8: The word ψυχῶσεις shows double itacism: the iota instead of eta in the first syllable and the diphthong ει

1. A bibliography can be found in M. Avi-Yonah, *Abbreviations in Greek Inscriptions*, Supplement to Vol. IX, *Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine* (1940), p. 111. A summary discussion of the various interpretations can be found in J. N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, *De Oud-christelijke Monumenten van Ephesus* (The Hague, 1923), pp. 96-100.
2. *Iscrizioni e Monumenti Protocristiani del Paese di Moab* (Rome, 1954), p. 96, no. 82 (from

Kerak).

3. Γέννα is a noun meaning «origin, offspring, son» LSJ9, s. v.).
4. This phenomenon of doubling the last letter of an abbreviation to indicate a plural was borrowed from the Latin. Avi-Yonah has collected 35 examples (*op. cit.*, p. 41). Canova has an example from el Mote, near Kerak (*op. cit.*, p. 298, no. 314).
5. *The Town of Nebo* (Jerusalem, 1949), p. 261.

for the *iota* in the last syllable. The normal spelling of the word is $\psi\eta\rho\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$

Line 10: Apparently the offering or contribution of the local village provided funds for the construction of the floor. Unfortunately, the name of the village is not given.

Lines 10 and 11: The date-line gives the year number as 545 and the indiction as 6. These two elements can be synchronized, if one uses the Era of the Decapolis (also called the Era of Pompey). Thus, the date is A. D. 482 (Indiction 6 began on September 1, A. D. 482).⁽⁶⁾

Concluding Observations

This well-preserved inscription reveals some important facets of the Christian church in Transjordan. The use of the Monogram $\chi\rho\iota$ in this inscription indicates some aspects of the theology and faith of this church.

The four names found in the inscription are of Greek, Roman, and Semitic origin.⁽⁷⁾ The offices they hold are significant — elder, deacon, and steward. To find the last office in combination with the more standard first two suggests some interesting features of church organization and polity of this period.

Dating this inscription in the late fifth century⁽⁸⁾ comports generally with the style and workmanship of the mosaic itself which correspond to other mosaics in Madaba and more recently in Masuh, north of Madaba. However, this is one of the earliest dated mosaic inscriptions in Transjordan.⁽⁹⁾

Apparently, this church was located in a Christian village. At least, the contribution of the village to the church suggests a close tie between the two. In addition, the elaborate and decorative structure seems to imply a wealthy and prosperous Christian community.

The discovery of a Christian church at Maqati' has added another page to the history of early Christianity in Transjordan.⁽¹⁰⁾ As more and more Christian churches are identified in Transjordan, the extent of Byzantine Christianity becomes more and more impressive.

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6. An unusual feature of the year number is the ascending order from the units to the hundreds (E for 5, M for 40, and for 500). G. E. Kirk finds that date-lines using the Era of Provincia Arabia consistently employ the descending order (JPOS 17 (1937), p. 214). It is significant that computing the A.D. date according to the Era of Provincia Arabia does not synchronize with the Indiction number in the inscription under study. Kirk proposes that the few inscriptions from southern Palestine which have the ascending order should be dated according to the Era of Gaza. However, in the present case such a date will not synchronize with the Indiction number. Hence, the only workable era for this inscription is the Era of the Decapolis.

7. Saller (*op. cit.*, p. 262) reports that the name Makedonios is attested in a few other inscriptions in Transjordan (e.g., Jerash, el Quweisme).

8. The method of indicating a plural in an abbreviation used in this inscription is attested in the fourth and fifth centuries (Avi-Yonah, *op. cit.*, p. 41).

9. Regarding the dating of mosaic pavements, Saller writes: «In Palestine we do not have even one mosaic before the sixth century which is dated by means of an inscription....» (*op. cit.*, p. 132). The present inscription apparently contradicts this statement.

10. A report of the excavation and description of the architecture of the church will be forthcoming.