

A BYZANTINE GREEK INSCRIPTION FROM QAŞR AR-RABBA (KARAK DISTRICT)

Tommaso Gnoli

The text of this unpublished inscription was submitted to me by Dr. Jacqueline Gysens-Calzini, director of the Italian archaeological campaign (University of Perugia and Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente) on the site of ar-Rabba (الربيه), in Jordan, the Roman Aeropolis, the ancient Rabbathmoab, capital of Moab and therefore an administrative centre of the Province of Arabia, seat of the conventus of that same province’s governor, as testified by some recent and important papyri (Yadin and Greenfield 1989).

The *tabula ansata* with Greek text arranged on five lines is currently placed above an architrave of a ruined dwelling in a village, 5km to the north of the centre of the town (Fig. 1). The stone stands in a vertical position with its right side down. It is most probable that the abrasion affecting the whole left side of the epigraphic field, making it almost unreadable, is due to atmospheric conditions, particularly to the washing away produced by rainwater (Fig. 2). No signs appear, neither from the mould nor from the photographs, proving intentional damage to the stone itself.

The inscription is clearly a late text, whose date may be approximately placed in the fifth-sixth century AD, as confirmed by the shape of the letters

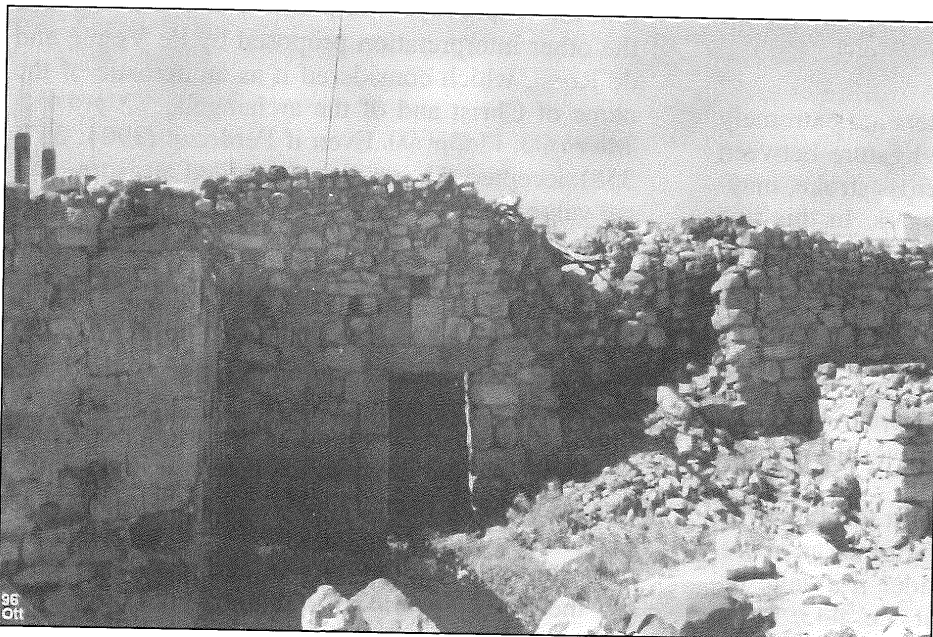
and the interpretation of the last three letters of line 5, which I consider certain.

My reading of the text, which is almost exclusively based on the pictures — as no useful indication could be deduced from the mould — runs as follows:

- 1 ΤΟΥΤΟΤΟ
- 2 [± 5]ϚΘΟΝΕΠΙΟ
- 3 [- - - - -] ΑΙΟΥ
- 4 [- - - - -] Λ [± 1]
- 5 [- - -] ΙΥΠ [] Ϛ [.]ΥΜΓ

Line 1: this line’s text certainly renders the character of the inscription. It is surely a memorial text of some building, whose type is absolutely undefinable. Expressions like τούτο τὸ τόπον or μνημ(ε)ιον are extremely conventional in the epigraphy from the Ḥawrān and more generally from the Syrian area; but on the basis of what results from line 5, I would incline to accept the second hypothesis: cf. line 2.

Line 2: the beginning of this line should have reported the type of the commemorated building, if ‘a (sacred) site’, τόπον, or a tomb, μνημ(ε)ιον. It is sure on the contrary, that the last three letters repre-



1. Current location of the inscription.



2. The inscription.

sent the beginning of the verb ποιέω, usually in aorist tense, third person singular: ἐποίησεν and followed by the name of the dedicating person. Very attracting appears the hypothesis to read the term εὐχαριστῶν (= εὐχαριστῶν, 'in gratitude') in the middle of the line on the basis of IGLS 1857, from Ma'arrat ash-Shūr, southeast of the Jabal 'Alā's area. In the latter case the type of the commemorated building would be indicated in the following line. Before the omikron some traces of a square have been checked, which would make the reading of the word almost impossible, if we were to consider it like a *theta*. However it is possible to maintain, that it actually does not represent a single letter, but — for instance — a group EI, where the central stroke of E has disappeared during the centuries. If so, I would not be able to risk any reconstructing hypothesis of the text.

Line 3: almost unreadable. All letters are extremely uncertain, but a small omikron in ligature between two vertical strokes and before a cross stroke, maybe the right side of an *alpha*, appears. In this line the name of the dedicating person was certainly written.

Line 4: completely unreadable.

Line 5: the last three letters are certain and they permit us to determine, in an univocal way, the character of the whole text.

The letters' succession ΥΜΓ at the end of the line can only be interpreted as a figure or an abbreviation. There is no way to consider it a date, because the figure resulting from it, i.e. 443, is too

early for the appearance of the inscription: in that area the adoption of the era of Bostra (AD 106), the only one giving a plausible result matching the palaeographic data, must be excluded.

Indeed in this case we are certainly in the presence of Christian symbols. The well-known Christian cryptogram ΧΜΓ is very diffused in all Syria and it is to be found at the end of ecclesiastical inscriptions from the period we are dealing with. This is so true that Leclercq (1907: col. 182) was able to affirm that "Le sigle ΥΜΓ paraît avoir été d'un usage général en Syrie du IIIe au VIIe siècle". There is no identity either in the interpretation of the nature (abbreviation or cryptogram?) or on the explanation of this series of letters. Leclercq (1907: 180-182) supposed this formula was an abbreviation for Χ(ριστός) Μ(αρίας) γ(εννηθείς), against the other interpretation proposed by de Vogüé and de Rossi, which considered it as an acrostic of the name of Christ and of the archangels, Χ(ριστός) Μ(ιχαήλ) Γ(αβριήλ). Even if Perdrizet (1904: 357-358) accepted this reading, he added an isopsephical value to it: ΧΜΓ = 643 = 1 (α') + 3 (γ') + 5 (ε') + 10 (ι') + 70 (ο') + 200 (σ') + 70 (ο') + 9 (θ') + 5 (ε') + 70 (ο') + 200 (σ') = Ἁγείος ὁ Θεός, 'Holy (is) God': the beginning of the trisagion. Tjäder (1970) came back to the subject always agreeing with Leclercq with a clear analysis of all the interpretations given so far. We read on p. 163: "Χ(ριστός) Μ(αρία) γ(εννηθῆ) renders the original meaning of ΧΜΓ. All the three words included in the interpretation have been reliably certified in an adequate context", as the explanation of a strange abbreviation discovered only in eleven Latin graffiti by the *Paedagogium* on Palatino, VDN, seems to

confirm. On the contrary, Solin (1966) had read it before as an abbreviation for *vestiarius domini nostri, veteranus domini nostri, verna domini nostri*. Nevertheless Tjäder proposes at p. 164 the equivalence between *VDN* and $\chi\mu\Gamma$: *v(irgine) d(ominus) n(atus)*. Following Tjäder's hypothesis, Blanchard (1975) believed he could bring to perfection the reading of some sixth century Egyptian papyri. Tjäder's position is very feeble, however, at least where it induces to maintain the two formulas *VDN* and $\chi\mu\Gamma$ as equivalent, because it is evident that the order of the terms appears as twisted, without any reason why. Moreover, there is no criterion for the dating of these graffiti, thus it seems much better to distinguish the two problems. In the end, Gostoli (1983) also came back to the topic, proposing, on the basis of *POxy. VIII 116*, to consider the formula as abbreviations of the *nomen sacrum* $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$, of the substantive $\mu\acute{\alpha}\rho\tau\upsilon\varsigma$ and of a part of the verb $\gamma\acute{\iota}\gamma\nu\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$. As far as the meaning of the formulae is concerned, Gostoli is uncertain among 1) may Christ be the witness for the truthfulness of what I wrote or anyway for my feelings towards the addressee; 2) may Christ be the witness for the truthfulness of my profession of the Christian faith (in these cases the explanation would be $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$ $\mu\acute{\alpha}\rho\tau\upsilon\varsigma$ $\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\eta\tau\alpha\iota$ (or $\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omicron\iota\tau\omicron$); 3) I am witness to God (in this case $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\upsilon$ $\mu\acute{\alpha}\rho\tau\upsilon\varsigma$ $\gamma\acute{\epsilon}\gamma\omicron\nu\alpha$).

Just on the basis of our inscription and of another one about which I will report later, it seems to me that the isopsephical significance of this sequence of symbols should be preferred. I do not mean that one interpretation excludes the other one, i.e. that a numerical value did not recall — and was not interpreted — also as initials; nevertheless the example in *IGLS 1403*, in many ways similar to it, seems convincing.

In our inscription the reading of an *ypsilon* before the group $\mu\Gamma$ connecting this text to the cases treated above, is absolutely certain. The sequence $\Upsilon\mu\Gamma$ is to be found in a well-known inscription coming from Shnān, Jabal Zāwya, in the area of Apamea: *IGLS 1403*. This inscription has been the object of discussion just in relation to the evident affinity with those, where the formula $\chi\mu\Gamma$ is to be found. At the end of each of the first eight lines the inscription actually shows the formulæ $\Upsilon\mu\Gamma$. Described and annotated for the first time by Prentice (1902: 95 nr. 15; 1908: 12 e p. 215 nr. 215), and at last in Prentice 1906: 148, the inscription was thus interpreted by Leclercq (1907b: col. c): “‘B (ou Θ) $\Upsilon\mu\Gamma$. Les quatre lettres qui se lisent à la fin de chaque ligne ne nous paraissent laisser que peu de place à l'hésitation entre B et Θ [but Prentice had no hesitation!]. Outre la confusion facile à faire en-

tre deux caractères si peu différents lorsqu'on les relève sur une pierre qui a eu à subir l'action de quinze siècles, l'interprétation des sigle $\Theta\Upsilon\mu\Gamma$ se trouve si aisée et si naturelle en Syrie, où une partie de cette formule était acclimatée, qu'elle ne semble pas donner lieu d'admettre une autre leçon que celle-là et son développement se trouve être: $\Theta(\epsilon\omicron\upsilon)$ $\upsilon(\acute{\iota}\omicron\varsigma)$ $M(\alpha\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha\varsigma)$ $\gamma(\epsilon\nu\eta\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma)$, ‘le Fils de Dieu, engendré de Marie’. Formule apparentée au $\chi\mu\Gamma$ ”. The remark by Leclercq was supinely accepted by Perdrizet, who does not mention the chance to read B instead Θ (Perdrizet 1904: 358). Yet Prentice had read the stone not only in a different and univocal way, but he had given it a well-defined significance: Prentice (1906: 148): “ $\beta\Upsilon\mu\Gamma = 2443 = 10 (\iota') + 8 (\eta') + 200 (\sigma') + 70 (\omicron') + 400 (\upsilon') + 200 (\sigma') + 70 (\omicron') + 600 (\chi') + 100 (\rho') + 5 (\epsilon') + 10 (\iota') + 200 (\sigma') + 300 (\tau') + 70 (\omicron') + 200 (\sigma') = \text{Ἰησοῦς ὁ Χρῆστὸς}$ ” an explanation perfectly matching to the context of this inscription, where the expression Ἰησοῦς ὁ Χρῆστὸς is obsessively repeated four times, every other line. Thus it is obvious, that in 1955 when the inscription was included in vol. IV of *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie* by L. Jalabert, R. Mouterde and C. Mondésert, the reading doubt expressed by Leclercq was abandoned with certainty: *IGLS IV: 116*: “A dr. dans une seconde colonne, en face des huit premières li., le groupe $\beta\upsilon\mu\gamma'$, qui suivant sa valeur numérique 2443 est isopsephique au refrain Ἰησοῦς ὁ Χρῆστὸς . Ce groupe peut avoir, outre sa valeur numérique, un sens cryptographique, v. g. $\beta(\omicron\eta\theta\iota)$, $\Upsilon(\acute{\iota}\epsilon)$ ($\acute{\epsilon}\kappa$) $M(\alpha\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha\varsigma)$ $\gamma(\epsilon\nu\eta\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma)$, ‘Aide(-nous), Fils (de Dieu), né de Marie’”. Once ascertained that *IGLS 1403* surely comes from a funerary monument, it seems to me that the explanation of B with the imperative of the verb $\beta\omicron\eta\theta\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ has to be particularly recommended (on the frequency of the verb, cf. Prentice (1906: 145): “On my first visit there (in Syria) I found $\beta\omicron\eta\theta\epsilon\iota$ or $\beta\omicron\eta\theta\eta\sigma\omicron\nu$ some twenty times, and almost always on lintels, generally of houses”).

It is in consideration of *IGLS 1403* that the completely abraded letter preceding the group $\Upsilon\mu\Gamma$ shall be interpreted as a B here as well. This inscription would therefore enrich the rare epigraphic evidences of this cryptoformula belonging to the Syrian Christianity in the late antiquity.

The obviously very hypothetical restoration and the sense of this short text will thus be:

$\tau\omicron\upsilon\tau\omicron$ $\tau\omicron$ $\tau\omicron\pi\omicron\nu$ (\omicron $\mu\eta\mu\eta\mu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$ $\alpha\upsilon\tau$ $\sigma\iota\mu\iota\lambda\iota\alpha$)
 $C\Theta\omicron\Nu$ $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\epsilon$ [$\acute{\omicron}$ $\delta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\omicron\varsigma$ $\tau\omicron\upsilon$ $\delta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu\omicron\upsilon$] — traces of letters on two lines — $\beta\upsilon\mu\gamma'$

“[Mr. So and So, son of So and So] built this tomb (?) 2443 (= Jesus Christ, and after its cryptographi-

cal meaning 'help us Son (of God), born of Mary')."

T. Gnoli
Dipartimento di Storie e Metodi
per la Conservazione dei Beni Culturali
Università di Bologna
Sede di Ravenna
via degli Ariani 1
48100 Ravenna ITALY
e-mail: gnolito@alma.unibo.it

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