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Some Unpublished Coptic Inscriptions in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology*

Abstract

This paper presents an edition of three previously unpublished Coptic epitaphs in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology. Two of these inscriptions are written in the Sahidic dialect while the third may have Faiyumic influences. Though the catalogue records for these inscriptions note that their provenance is unknown, in the case of two of the inscriptions the provenance can be established with some degree of certainty owing to textual and stylistic parallels that they share with other inscriptions with a known provenance.

INTRODUCTION

In February of 2015 I had the opportunity to briefly work at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology. While the primary purpose of the visit was to edit some unpublished Greek papyri in the collection, during the course of my work I also examined some Coptic inscriptions. Though most of the inscriptions that I inspected had already been published, a group of three inscriptions, of which the catalogue records indicate that their provenance is unknown, had not. I offer here for the first time an edition of these three unpublished pieces and argue that the provenance of two of the inscriptions can be ascertained with some degree of certainty given that they share distinct parallels with certain Coptic inscriptions from known locales.

NO. 1. EPITAPH FOR THE PRIEST THOMAS (FIG. 1)

The first inscription bears the inventory number UC 32762 and measures 30.5 × 19.5 × 7.5 cm (H × W × D).[1] The text is comprised of eleven lines of Coptic in the Sahidic dialect and is inscribed on one side of a rectangular sandstone block; the inscribed text is painted red throughout. Average line height for the inscription is 2.2 cm and on average lines range between eight and thirteen letters. The text of the inscription is regular and clear, suggesting the work of a practiced stonecutter, and aside from a few phonetic spellings the orthography is consistent. The first line of text is prefaced by a small cross and the inscription concludes with a larger cross

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1 UC = University College (London).

centered in the middle of the stone underneath the text with forked endings (cross "fourchée");[2] this cross is bordered on either side by what appear to be pillars that seemingly support the text of the inscription. Besides these elements there are no other decorations in the inscription.

While the catalogue records indicate that the provenance of the text is unknown, a compelling case can be made that the inscription comes from Abydos and dates somewhere between the eighth and tenth centuries CE.[3] The inscription contains the phrases ⲓ(ⲏⲥⲟⲩ)ⲥ ⲭ(ⲣⲓⲥⲧⲟ)ⲥ ⲭⲁⲣⲓⲥ ⲑⲉⲟⲩ "Jesus Christ, grace of God" (l. 1) and ⲡⲉϩⲟⲟⲩ ⲙⲡⲣⲡⲙⲉⲉⲩⲉ "the day of remembrance" (ll. 2–3) that otherwise occur in Coptic funerary stelae from a cemetery that adjoined a monastery dedicated to Apa Moses at Abydos.[4]

+ ⲓ(ⲏⲥⲟⲩ)ⲥ ⲭ(ⲣⲓⲥⲧⲟ)ⲥ ⲭⲁⲣⲓⲥ ⲑⲉⲟⲩ
ⲡⲉϩⲟⲟⲩ ⲙⲡⲣⲡⲙⲉ-
ⲉⲩⲉ ⲙ̄ⲡⲉⲛⲙⲁⲕⲁⲣⲓ-
ⲟⲥ ⲛ̄ⲥⲟⲛ ⲑⲱⲙⲁⲥ
5. ⲡⲉⲡⲣ<ⲉ>ⲥⲃⲩⲧⲉⲣⲟⲥ
ⲛ̄ⲧⲁϥ ⲙⲧⲟⲛ ⲙ̄-
ⲙⲟϥ ⲙⲏ(ⲛⲓ) ⲭⲓⲁⲕ
ⲕ̅ⲍ̅ ⲉⲛⲇⲓⲕⲧⲓ-
ⲱⲛⲟⲥ ⲡⲣⲟⲧⲩ
10. ⲁ
+

Translation

+ Jesus Christ, grace of God. The day of remembrance of our blessed brother Thomas, the priest. He went to rest on the 26th of the month Choiak during the first indiction, the 1st. +

Commentary

1. ⲓ(ⲏⲥⲟⲩ)ⲥ ⲭ(ⲣⲓⲥⲧⲟ)ⲥ ⲭⲁⲣⲓⲥ ⲑⲉⲟⲩ: on this formula see Schaten, 1993: 401–410; Tudor, 2011: 295; cf. Derda, 1992: 135–152.

2–3. ⲡⲉϩⲟⲟⲩ ⲙⲡⲣⲡⲙⲉ|ⲉⲩⲉ: on this formula see Schaten, 1993: 403–404, 409; Tudor, 2011: 289.

6–7. ⲛ̄ⲧⲁϥ ⲙⲧⲟⲛ ⲙ̄|ⲙⲟϥ: this is a widespread formula in Coptic epitaphs and most often serves to introduce the date of death that immediately follows. The use of the second perfect appears most frequently and is used to highlight the significance of the date of death, see Van der Vliet, 2011: 195–197.

2 See Dijkstra, 2012: 81.

3 Tudor, 2011: 91 (n. 647), cf. pp. 284, 289, includes this inscription in her list of inscriptions from Abydos dated to the eighth to tenth centuries and notes (p. 295) that this inscription is unpublished.

4 On this monastery see Grossmann, 2002: 223; Tudor, 2011: 90–91.

7. ⲙⲏ(ⲛⲓ) ϫⲓⲁⲕ: for the common abbreviation of the month written with a ⲙ and an ⲏ above it, see Avi-Yonah, 1940: 85; McLean, 2002: 53. The month Choiak is clearly intended notwithstanding the unusual spelling ϫⲓⲁⲕ, which is elsewhere attested in *SB Kopt.* I 744.7 (913 CE; provenance unknown). On the bottom diagonal leg of the ⲕ there is an intersecting stroke, which normally serves to indicate an abbreviation though this cannot be the case here.

8–10. ⲉⲛⲇⲓⲕⲧⲓ|ⲱⲛⲟⲥ ⲡⲣⲟⲧⲩ | ⲁ: for ⲉⲛⲇⲓⲕⲧⲓⲱⲛⲟⲥ read ⲓⲛⲇⲓⲕⲧⲓⲱⲛⲟⲥ. On the interchange of the ⲉ and ⲓ, see Kahle, 1950: 77–78; Gignac, 1976: 251–256. The ⲓ at the end of l. 8 has an elongated stroke signaling that it is the last letter on the line. The year is typically written after the reference to the indiction and is most often written in numbers though it is occasionally spelled out as ordinals: Dijkstra and Van der Vliet, 2012: 191; cf. Lefebvre, 1907: 14 (no. 63.10–11; fourth/fifth century; Hermopolis Parva): ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος) τέσσαρες [δε]κάτη[ς]; Lefebvre, 1907: 16 (no. 68.6–7; uncertain date; Old Cairo?): ἰνδικτιῶ̣νος ἑνάτης. The spelling ⲡⲣⲟⲧⲩ should be taken as a rendering of Greek πρώτου; on the interchange of ⲟ and ⲱ see Kahle, 1950: 90; Gignac, 1976: 275–278. The ⲁ in l. 10 repeats the ordinal. There are occasional examples in Coptic epitaphs where the inscriber both spells out the indiction year and writes it as a numeral, see e.g. *SB Kopt.* I 749.12–13 (date and provenance unknown) and 794.8–9 (8th century?), which has the same formulae as our text and may also come from Abydos.

NO. 2: EPITAPH FOR JOHN AND HIS SON (FIG. 2)

This inscription bears the inventory number UC 16850 and is written on a limestone slab. The rectangular inscription measures 18.0 × 24.5 × 5.0 cm (H × W × D) and contains a six-line inscription written in the Sahidic dialect. The lines of the inscription have been scored and average line height is approximately 2.2 cm. The script is regular but at times is a little shaky and the left margin of the text lacks uniformity as lines begin at different places on the stone. The ⲁ is consistently written with a broken crossbar; the ⲉ is written in lunate form; and ⲩ's is written differently throughout the inscription. Overall the orthography is fairly regular but there are a few phonetic spellings.

The inscription is an epitaph for an individual identified as ⲡⲁϣ|ⲟⲛ ⲓⲱϩⲁⲛⲏⲥ "my brother John" (ll. 4–5) and ⲡ|ⲉϥϣⲏⲣⲉ "his son" (ll. 5–6), and thus it commemorates the deaths of two individuals. It begins with a Trinitarian invocation (ll. 1–3) and employs the common Coptic funerary phrase ⲁⲣⲓ ⲟⲩⲛⲁ ⲙⲛ ⲧⲉⲯⲩⲭⲏ "give mercy to the soul of" (ll. 3–4), after which the deceased are mentioned.

Dating this inscription is difficult. Paleographically there is nothing especially distinct about the letterforms to indicate a specific date. The use of the Trinitarian invocation at the start of the epitaph and the use of the ⲁⲣⲓ ⲟⲩⲛⲁ-formula suggest that the inscription is no earlier than the sixth century when this formula is first attested, and a seventh-century date seems likely.[5] While this prayer is attested in inscriptions from Saqqara, Akoris, Antinoopolis, and Bawit, it is especially prominent in epitaphs from the monastery of Apa Jeremias in

5 Tudor, 2011: 178–181.

Saqqara between the eighth and early ninth centuries.[6] Overall this inscription is quite similar in terms of its phraseology and form to *SB Kopt.* I 477 (date and provenance unknown).

ⲡⲓⲱⲧ ⲡϣⲏⲣⲉ
ⲡⲉⲡⲛⲉⲩⲙⲁ ⲉ-
ⲧⲟⲩⲁⲃ ⲁⲣⲓ ⲟⲩⲛⲁ
ⲙⲛ ⲧⲉϥⲏⲭⲏ ⲡⲁϩ-
5. ⲟⲛ ⲓⲱϩⲁⲛⲛⲥ ⲙⲛ ⲡ-
ⲉϥϣⲏⲣⲉ

Translation

Father, Son, (and) Holy Spirit. Have mercy on the soul of my brother John and his son.

Commentary

1–3. ⲡⲓⲱⲧ ⲡϣⲏⲣⲉ ⲡⲉⲡⲛⲉⲩⲙⲁ ⲉ|ⲧⲟⲩⲁⲃ: the spelling ⲡⲓⲱⲧ instead of ⲡⲉⲓⲱⲧ is widely attested; so, too, is the spelling ⲉⲧⲟⲩⲁⲃ instead of ⲉⲧⲟⲩⲁⲁⲃ. Trinitarian invocations are widespread in Coptic epitaphs from Egypt and Nubia, cf. Wietheger, 1992: 132; Tudor, 2011: 193–96.

3. ⲁⲣⲓ ⲟⲩⲛⲁ: on this funerary formula see Tudor, 2011: 178–181 and 301–303.

4. ⲧⲉϥⲏⲭⲏ: read ⲧⲉϥⲩⲭⲏ. On the interchange of ⲩ and ⲏ see Gignac, 1976: 262–264. This spelling is attested elsewhere: *SB Kopt.* I 461.2–3 (date unknown; Antinoopolis?); *SB Kopt.* I 767.3 (date unknown; Antinoopolis?); *SB Kopt.* II 1121.6 (date and provenance unknown); *SB Kopt.* II 1139.5 (date unknown; Saqqara?); *SB Kopt.* III 1591.2–3 (date unknown; Faiyum); *SB Kopt*. IV 1958.8 (sixth to eighth centuries; Manqabad).

NO. 3. EPITAPH FOR PLEMSHOOS (FIG. 3)

The third inscription bears the inventory number UC 16625 and is inscribed on sandstone. It measures 31.5 × 25.5 × 4.5 cm (H × W × D) and contains only two lines of text; the first line contains the name of the deceased and the second line two crosses. While it is not typical, Coptic funerary inscriptions where only the name of the deceased is listed are attested. The inscription may come from Armant (Hermonthis) based on artistic parallels with other Coptic epitaphs from this area.[7] The inscription is surmounted by pedimented *aediculae* that have floral arrangements: the central pediment is inscribed with a fig leaf and on the sides there are two half rosettes.[8] The form of the pedimented *aediculae* is remarkably similar to certain other Coptic inscriptions from

6 Tudor, 2011: 179–180.

7 Tudor, 2011: 100–102 discusses general iconographic and stylistic characteristics of epitaphs from Hermonthis and mentions the present inscription in her analysis (p. 101 [n. 755]).

8 On branch/leaf imagery in Coptic inscriptions see Kamel, 1987: 18.

Armant.[9] The two crosses in l. 2 take the form of the cross "potent" that has four equal limbs, each of which is shaped like the letter "T."[10] It has been noted that sandstone inscriptions from Armant represented a funerary development that began to occur in the sixth century, hence the date of this inscription is unlikely to be any earlier than the sixth century and may date as late as the seventh or possibly eighth century.[11]

The most noteworthy feature of the inscription is the name of the deceased, Plemshos (ⲡⲗⲏⲙϣⲱⲥ), because it is not otherwise attested and represents an *addendum onomasticis*. While the etymology of this rather unusual name is not entirely certain, it seems that a potential meaning for the name could be something like "the man from Shoos" (for further discussion see below). If this etymology is correct, it seems that a Faiyumic origin might ultimately lie behind the name even if the stela comes from Armant.

ⲡⲗⲏⲙϣⲱⲥ
\+ +

Translation

Plemshos + +

Commentary

1. ⲡⲗⲏⲙϣⲱⲥ: the start of the name appears to be constructed of ⲡ + ⲗⲏⲙ, which could be taken as the Faiyumic form ⲡ + ⲗⲉⲙ "the man from" (cf. Sahidic ⲡⲣⲙ-; see Crum, 1939: 295). If our interpretation is correct, the name would mean "the man from Shos." On toponyms that contain the element ϣⲱⲥ, see Crum, 1939, 589b; Roquet, 1973: 19 (no. 169).

9 Crum, 1902: 94 (no. 8417; Pl. III); 101 (no. 8448; Pl. IX); 103 (no. 8462; Pl. XII); 103–104 (no. 8465; Pl. XIII); 106 (no. 8481; Pl. XV); 128 (no. 8608; Pl. XXXVI); 135 (no. 8651; Pl. XLIII).

10 Kamel, 1987: 23–24, 36; Dijkstra, 2012: 81.

11 Tudor, 2011: 102 makes the observation that earlier Coptic inscriptions from Armant tend to be made of clay while sandstone represented a development that occurred in the sixth and seventh centuries.

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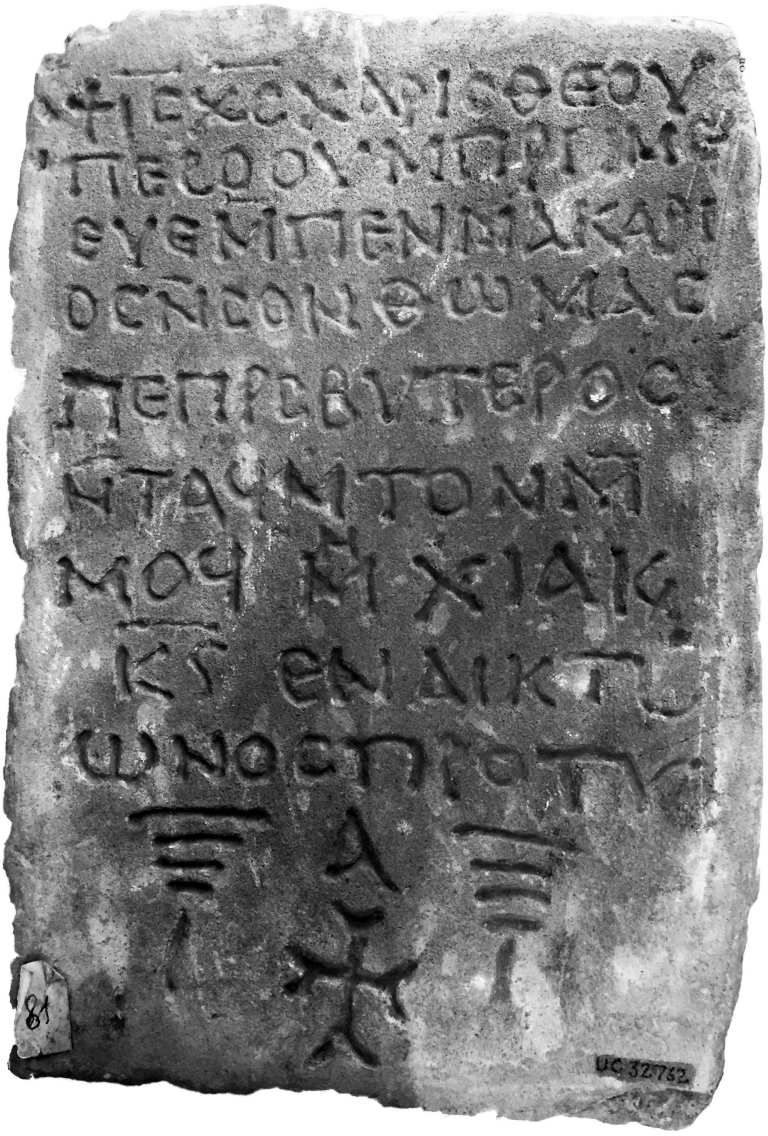

Figure 1. Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, inv. UC 32762.

Figure 2. Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, inv. UC 16850.

Figure 3. Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, inv. UC 16625.