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MARTYRS WHO RECEIVED TWO CROWNS

IN AN ARTICLE PUBLISHED IN THIS JOURNAL IN 1999, we have studied a Greek Christian inscription, *SB IV 7315*.¹ It surely originates from Egypt, though its exact provenance is unknown. It commemorates three men, otherwise unknown, who suffered martyrdom during the persecution of A.D. 303. It states that these martyrs went to heaven having two crowns each. Presumably one of the two crowns is the crown of martyrdom, the other that of asceticism, for these martyrs are called “virgins”. We argued that the idea of asceticism being equal to martyrdom and therefore deserving the crown of victory cannot be as early as the beginning of the 4th century but must have arisen some decades later. We concluded that the inscription *SB IV 7315* could not have come into existence in A.D. 303 and must be a product of a later time, probably of the turn of 4th to 5th century: it is not an epitaph in the proper meaning of the word, but a commemorative inscription, possibly connected with the cult of the three martyrs.

In that article we cited two hagiographic texts mentioning martyrs rewarded with more than one crown: the *Acts* of Paese and Thecla, where the

¹ A. ŁAJTAR – E. WIPSYCKA, “*SB IV 7315*, texte mentionnant des martyrs qui ont reçu «deux couronnes»: la plus ancienne inscription chrétienne d’Égypte?”, *JfJP* 29 (1999), pp. 67-73.



Fig. 1. St Menas. After E. A. W. Budge, *Texts Relating to Saint Mēna* (cit. n. 2), fol. 10a.

three martyrs Paese, Thecla and Paul receive three crowns each, and the *Acts of St Claudius of Antioch*, mentioning ten crowns for two young unnamed martyrs.

We can now add yet other examples.

First, the Martyrdom of Saint Menas. The relevant passage is preserved only in an Ethiopic version, which is possibly a translation of an (unknown) Arabic source. The oldest known copy of the Ethiopic version is the manuscript *BM Oriental 689*, which is attributed to the 15th century.²

According to this story Menas was a soldier but left the army because he did not want to obey the imperial edict that ordered to sacrifice to the gods; “he departed to the desert, and he lived there and worked like a peasant”, toiling hard. “And after a time the grace of God lighted upon him, and

² The Ethiopic text and an English translation are printed in: E. A. W. BUDGE, *Texts Relating to Saint Mēna of Egypt and Canons of Nicaea in a Nubian Dialect, with Facsimile*, London 1909, p. 62-73 (text) and 44-58 (translation).

he saw heaven open, and the interior thereof was filled with angels of light who were carrying crowns of light, and laying them upon the heads of those who had consummated their martyrdoms. And the angels were making them to ascend into heaven with great splendour, and were shining like the sun. And Saint Minâs longed to become a martyr for the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. – And as he was meditating upon this matter, a voice from heaven cried out and said unto him, «Blessed art thou, Minâs, for thou hast been called, and the fair beauty of thy mind hath made itself manifest from thy youth until this day. And thou shalt receive crowns incorruptible, like [those of] the Holy Trinity, O thou who art the firstborn of their love: one for thy virginity, and one for thy patient endurance, and one for thy martyrdom».³ After hearing that Menas goes to a neighbouring city where he finds martyrdom.

What is particularly interesting for us in this passage is that out of the three crowns Menas is going to receive, one is for his martyrdom and one for his virginity, the very merits that are ascribed to the martyrs commemorated by the inscription *SB IV 7315*.

The textual tradition of the Martyrdom of St Menas is very complicated. This work, like many other works concerning famous saints, had different versions. The original was undoubtedly Greek. It was probably written in the sanctuary of St Menas and for the needs of its clergy. (We have evidence showing that other martyrological works were read in the church during the feast of the given saint and were used by the clergy for preaching). It may also be assumed that the work was written at the time when St Menas' sanctuary was quickly developing, that is either towards the end of the 4th or at the beginning of the 5th century. Nothing has survived of the Greek text. We cannot guess when the Coptic version was made. Some fragments of it are preserved; the most extensive is that in a codex that was discovered at Hamuli and then bought by the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. This fragment contains, besides parts of the Martyrdom, also *Miracula* and an encomium. The colophon gives the date of the manuscript: 892/893. Unfortunately the fragmentary condition of the manuscript does not enable us to tell whether the passage concerning the three crowns was present in the Coptic version. As to the Ethiopic version we cannot tell

³ *Ibidem*, p. 47.

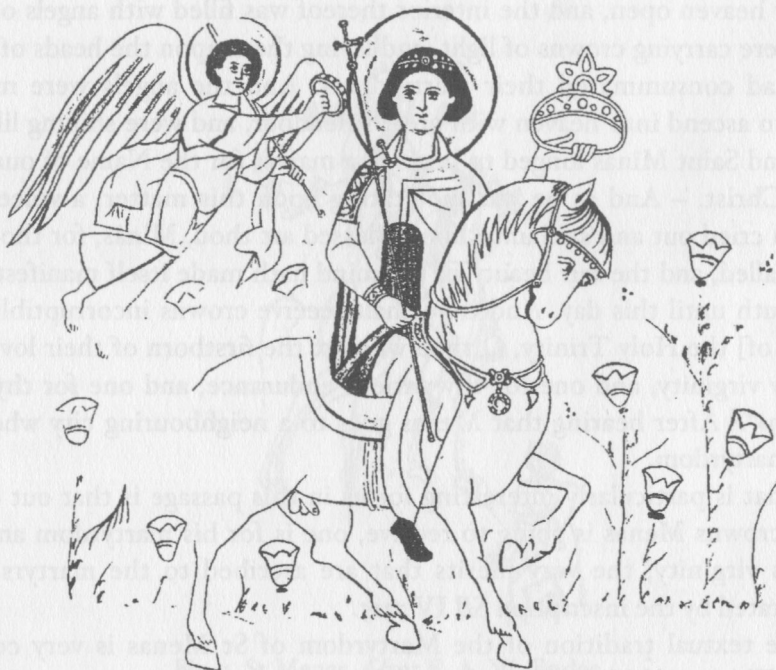


Fig. 2. Bawit. St Phoibammon riding and holding a shaft.

After Nabil Selim Atalla, *Coptic Art. Wall Paintings* (with parallel French text), Cairo 1989, p. 150.

whether it was made from the Greek text or from the Coptic version – or perhaps from an Arabic version of which we know nothing.

The story of the three crowns of St Menas was present to the mind of the scribe who copied the *Miracula* of St Menas in Old Nubian on the the most extensive and most beautiful of all Nubian manuscripts, i.e. *BM Oriental 6805* (written around A.D. 1000).⁴ To the text of the Miracle, which occupies pages 1 to 17 (= fol. 1b–9b) he added on page 18 (= fol. 10a) a picture of the saint riding to the right with a spear in his right hand. Above the head of the saint three crowns are visible. They are represented in the form

⁴ For a complete facsimile edition see Budge, *op. cit.* (n. 2). The latest and best edition of the text is G. M. BROWNE, *The Old Nubian Miracle of Saint Menas* [= *Beiträge zur Sudanforschung*, Beiheft 7], Wien-Mödling 1994.



Fig. 3. Esna. St Claudius Stratelates.
After Nabil Selim Atalla, *Coptic Art. Wall Paintings*,
Cairo 1989, p. 124.

characteristic of crowns of Medieval rulers, and not as ancient *στέφανοι*. The picture is all the more interesting as it has no direct connection with the text.

Iconography gives us some more evidence concerning saints who received more than one crown. At Bawit, in one of the small houses that usually were inhabited by one monk, an oratory with frescoes has been discovered. They have been attributed to the 6th-7th centuries.⁵ One of the paintings represents St Phoibammon riding and holding in his right hand a shaft terminating in a cross. He wears a crown around his head and holds

⁵ J. CLÉDAT, *Le monastère et la nécropole de Baouit*, Le Caire 1906 (in the series: *Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'IFAO*), chapelle XVII, paroi Ouest, p. 80-81, tables LIII (photograph) and LIV (water-colour copy).

another one in his left hand; a third crown is offered him by an angel. Two of the crowns – that in the hand of the saint and that brought by the angel – have an unusual shape as compared with crowns known to us from the art of Late Antiquity. Their front side is much wider than the rest and is adorned with jewels or gems. In particular, the crown in the hand of the saint has a kind of rosette (?).

In the Monastery of the Martyrs at Esna (11th-12th centuries) one of the frescoes⁶ represents St Claudius riding, holding a spear that terminates in a cross, and wearing a crown not very dissimilar from those of St Phoibamon at Bawit; from above, on the right and on the left, two hands hold out to him a crown each; they correspond to the pattern of the *manus divina*, usual in Late Antiquity, only that here there are two hands, not one.

Another military saint, namely St. Theodore the Oriental, was represented in the same manner. A decorated frontispiece from a 10th cent. codex once belonging to the famous library of the monastery of St. Michael at Khamouli (Fayum), now in the Pierpont Morgan Library, inv. M 613,⁷ shows him riding to the right and stabbing an androcephalous serpent designated as “daemonic” with a lance. Two hands appearing from heaven hold a crown each.

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⁶ M. CAPUANI, *Christian Egypt. Coptic Art and Monuments Through Two Millennia*, Cairo 2002, p. 247.

⁷ For A good photograph, see the catalogue of the exhibition: *L'art copte en Égypte. 2000 ans de christianisme. Exposition présentée à l'Institut du monde arabe, Paris du 15. mai au 3 septembre 2000 et au musée de l'Épiphèbe au Cap d'Agde du 30 Septembre 2000 au janvier 2001*, p. 75, no. 52.