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A CHRISTIAN EPITAPH FROM OXYRHYNCHUS

IN 2022 A CHRISTIAN EPITAPH WAS UNCOVERED in the vicinity of al-Bahnasa (Oxyrhynchus) and was transferred to a regional storage magazine where it was subsequently processed.¹ The epitaph is inscribed on a piece of limestone that has a distinct u-shape. It consists of six lines of text written along the interior concave portion of the stone with matching symbols on the two front faces and some additional iconography on the left face. The text is clear, consistent, lacks ornamentation, and contains traces of a dark brown paint on certain letters. There are between 13–19 characters per line with an average line height of 2.25 cm. On the two front faces of the monument on either side of the inscription are two large ankhs (*crux ansata*) that are carefully inscribed on the stone and

¹ Amer al-Mesiry was consulted on the epitaph in early 2023 when it was processed at the storage magazine in Beni Suef. It was reported to him that the inscription was found in the vicinity of al-Bahnasa but that its exact findspot was unknown. It was not part of an archaeological dig and was brought to the storage magazine after authorities were apprised of its discovery.

For the Greek epigraphic history of Oxyrhynchus and its environs, see C. PIEDRAFITA, ‘Revisió de l’epigrafia grega d’Oxirrinc a l’any 2017. Una recopilació dels textos més importants publicats’, *Nilus. Butlletí de la Societat Catalana d’Egiptologia* 26 (2017), pp. 21–25, who lists 33 items in Greek. For more recent epigraphical publications, post 2017, see n. 9 below.

above the one on the left is a single olive branch.² As the top right corner of the monument is broken off a symmetrically placed olive branch may have also been inscribed on the upper right face.

The inscription begins with the well-attested Christian funerary formula ἐν εἰρήνῃ followed by the names of four individuals, three females and a male. Structurally, the closest parallel to this epitaph is *IGChrEg* 72 (Sadmant, unknown date) as it also begins with the phrase ἐν εἰρήνῃ and is followed by a list of names in the nominative case. Three of the names of the deceased are Egyptian, Soueris, Thermous, and Horion, while the other is the Semitic Maria.³ In the case of Maria, she is identified as both a 'sister' (ἀδελφή) and a 'virgin' (παρθένος). Given that the inscription contains mixed genders, mentions children, and one of the names of the deceased is modified with a patronym ('Horion son of Hatres'), it is likely commemorating an extended family. Thus, the identifier 'sister' is probably best understood literally as opposed to fictively. In the case of 'virgin', although it might connote 'ascetic' or 'nun' and have a monastic meaning, it might simply carry the secular usage 'unmarried'.⁴

Notwithstanding the generally skilled execution and presentation of the text and iconography, the inscriber had a challenging time with Greek orthography and grammar. The inscription attests a phonetic misspelling

² For similarly drawn olive branches on Christian funerary stelae, see examples at Gustav-Lübcke-Museum in Hamm: *Ägypten, Schätze aus dem Wüstensand: Kunst und Kultur der Christen am Nil*, Wiesbaden 1996, inv. 4708 (Christian funerary stela from Akoris) and inv. 4727 (Christian funerary stela from Luxor). For a similar olive branch accompanying *crux ansata*, see N. SEMENOV, 'Sculpture in the Coptic collection of the State Hermitage Museum: a review', *Journal of Coptic Studies* 15 (2013), fig. 25.

³ All of the names are otherwise attested in inscriptions or papyri from Oxyrhynchus and its environs; see relevant cases in TM People.

⁴ For the range of the meaning of παρθένος in Christian discourse, see G. W. H. LAMPE, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford 1961–68, s.v. The Latin equivalent *virgo* carries both meanings, religious and secular, and can simply mean *innupta*. 'unmarried', or take on specific religious overtones; see G. F. SNYDER, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine*, Macon 2003, p. 233. For the usage of παρθένος, where it simply connotes an unmarried state apart from any religious connotations, see *IEgVers* 84 (Leontopolis, 2nd cent. BC – 2nd cent. AD), ll. 2–3: παρθένον ἀκμαίην, 'virgin ripe for marriage'.

(l. 1) and on multiple occasions an initial letter is overcut and replaced with another (l. 1, 2, and 4). In terms of grammar, the inscriber had difficulty with case endings. While the inscription contains no verb and after the initial ἐν ἐιρήνῃ contains a list of names, as inscribed the first name is in the dative, the second name and modifier ‘virgin’ is in the nominative while the modifier ‘sister’ is in the accusative, the third name is in the genitive, and the fourth and final name is in the nominative. The intended case of all the names is the nominative, as is also found in the closely paralleled inscription *IGChrEg* 72 (see above).⁵ As the names in the dative and genitive only require a terminal *sigma* to make them nominatives, there is an additional economy in supposing that all the names should be taken in the nominative.⁶ Given the challenges that Greek cases posed the inscriber, one gets the impression they were not adept in Greek. The declension mistakes in the epitaph are reminiscent of the kinds of errors attested in documents of Egyptian scribes writing in Greek.⁷ It therefore seems possible that the inscriber was not a native Greek speaker.

The provenance of this piece is Oxyrhynchus, but whether it comes from somewhere in the city, its necropolis, or just outside the city, is unknown to us.⁸ Recent publication of Christian epitaphs from the vicinity of Oxyrhynchus reveal that they come from both the city itself and

⁵ In additional Christian epitaphs, including two that may come from Oxyrhynchus, they begin with the formula ἐν ἐιρήνῃ, and the names of the deceased that follow appear in the nominative: *SEG* XLIV 1447 (Fayum, 4th or 5th cent. AD); XXIX 2318 (Oxyrhynchus?, 4th–6th cent. AD); *SB* X 10514 (Oxyrhynchus?, ‘christliche Zeit’).

⁶ There are examples where names following the opening ἐν ἐιρήνῃ are inscribed in the dative: *SEG* LXV 1900 (Fayum, 5th–7th cent. AD). In another inscription the name takes the genitive: *SEG* LVI 1977 (Fayum, 6th–8th cent. AD), but in this example the editors need to supply the word ‘monument [of NN]’ so that the genitive construction can make sense. See T. DERDA & J. VAN DER VLIET, ‘Four Christian funerary inscriptions from the Fayum (*I. Deir el-‘Azab* 1–4)’, *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 36 (2006), p. 28.

⁷ For a useful discussion of how native Egyptians often had difficulty declining Greek nouns, albeit in an earlier period than the date of this inscription, see M. VIERROS, *Bilingual Notaries in Hellenistic Egypt: A Study of Greek as a Second Language* [= *Collectanea Hellenistica* 5], Brussels 2012, pp. 139–175 (‘Morphosyntax – use of cases’).

⁸ See n. 1 above.

surrounding areas.⁹ The rather unusual u-shape of the stela may provide potential clues about provenance since it suggests the epitaph was cut on a repurposed stone.¹⁰ While the general contours of the monument are reminiscent of a niche that enclosed a funerary portrait, in the present case we are dealing with a different kind of funerary monument altogether.¹¹ One possibility given the unusual shape of the stone is that it was originally a seat back in a theater. From at least the second century AD Oxyrhynchus had a large theater made mostly of limestone, and when it fell

⁹ For recent publication of Christian funerary stelae from Oxyrhynchus, see L. MASCIA & J. J. MARTÍNEZ GARCÍA, 'A new Christian epitaph from Oxyrhynchus', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 218 (2021), pp. 139–141 (from the Upper Necropolis, a single Christian epitaph dated to the 6th–7th centuries AD; see also *CIEN* 9, no. 35); E. SUBÍAS, 'Further reflections on the Byzantine Fortress at Oxyrhynchus: Martyrial and funerary church, monastery and Arab fort', [in:] P. BUZI (ed.), *Coptic Literature in Context (4th–13th Cent.): Cultural Landscape, Literary Production, and Manuscript Archaeology. Proceedings of the Third Conference of the ERC Project 'Tracking Papyrus and Parchment Paths, an Archaeological Atlas of Coptic Literature, Literary Texts in Their Geographical Context' ("PATHs")* [= *PaST – Percorsi, strumenti e temi di archeologia* 5], Rome 2020, pp. 77–92 (two funerary stelae found in a walled complex to the north-west of Oxyrhynchus and dated in the 6th–7th centuries AD; see also *CIEN* 8, no. 17); C. PIEDRAFITA, 'El prior Menas i una inscripció amb l'era de Dioclecí. a Oxirrinc', [in:] N. CASTELLANO *et alii* (eds.), *Ex Aegypto lux et sapientia. Homenatge al professor Josep Padró Parcerisa* [= *Nova studia Aegyptiaca* 9], Barcelona 2015, pp. 455–465 (two funerary stelae that were unearthed in a basilica-type church outside the city; see also *CIEN* 7, nos. 6–7); C. P. CARPENA & J. P. PARCERISA, 'Dues noves inscripcions d'Oxirrinc (Campanya de 2007)', [in:] E. B. VIDAL & P. G. CARDÓ (eds.), *Artes ad humanitatem* I, Barcelona 2010, pp. 265–267 (one of the inscriptions is a Christian epitaph that was found in the Upper Necropolis and is dated in the 5th–7th centuries AD; see also *CIEN* 5, no. 8).

¹⁰ For Christians using repurposed stones with unique architectural features for epitaphs, see L. H. BLUMELL & C. ALIBERTI, 'Two Greek inscriptions from Karanis', *Tyche* 32 (2017), pp. 2–4. In one of the other Christian epitaphs from Oxyrhynchus that also contains a *crux ansata*, it was applied atop a repurposed stone; see T. K. THOMAS, *Late Antique Egyptian Funerary Sculpture: Images for this World and the Next*, Princeton 2000, fig. 70.

¹¹ Besides the fact that our piece is devoid of any portraiture, in those types of funerary monuments the niche is never inscribed, as far as we are aware. A similar styled limestone niche, but with an inscribed figure of a boy and a tympanum, was discovered by Petrie at Oxyrhynchus; see W. M. F. PETRIE, *Tombs of the Courtiers and Oxyrhynchos*, London 1925, pl. XLV. See also the similarly styled niche from Oxyrhynchus in THOMAS, *Late Antique Egyptian Funerary Sculpture* (cit. n. 10), fig. 68.

into disuse it served as a stone quarry with the result that much of it was dismantled and repurposed.¹² If this limestone piece did come from the theater, it may have marked a grave not too far away.

Assigning a date to the inscription is challenging, as the graphic features of the text do not point to a specific period. They share some specific parallels to SEG XLI 1672 (Arsinoites or Heracleopolites?), but since that text is dated broadly to the ‘Byzantine period’ it does not help to narrow the date of the present inscription.¹³ The use of the opening ἐν ἐῖρήνῃ formula adds little by way of dating the text, as it was widespread and appears in inscriptions from the fourth through ninth centuries AD.¹⁴ The use of the *crux ansata* may provide some clues regarding the date of the piece since it is first used in Christian contexts in the fourth century and sees more use in the fifth through seventh centuries.¹⁵ All things considered, a date falling somewhere between the fifth and seventh centuries for the inscription seems reasonable.

¹² On the theatre of Oxyrhynchus, see PETRIE, *Tombs of the Courtiers* (cit. n. 11), pp. 14–16. The first words of Petrie about the theater: ‘The great theatre of Oxyrhynchos has been known as a quarry for stone long ago’. For a more recent discussion of the theater of Oxyrhynchus, see D. M. BAILEY, ‘The great theatre’, [in:] A. K. BOWMAN *et alii* (eds.), *Oxyrhynchus: A City and Its Texts* [= *Graeco-Roman Memoirs* 93], London 2007, pp. 70–90.

The stela is c. 31 cm wide (= 12.2 inches), which would be rather narrow for a seat backing. In Petrie’s precise measurements of the theatre – which he measured in inches and not feet! – he believed that seats in the theatre were 15 inches wide. See PETRIE, *Tombs of the Courtiers* (cit. n. 11), p. 14, and BAILEY, ‘The great theatre’ (cit. n. 12), p. 87. Cf. Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, 5.6.3, who recommended that seats in a theater should not be less than two feet in width.

¹³ For an image of the inscription, see G. D. GIRGIS & I. KAMEL, *Coptic Funerary Stelae* [= *Catalogue général des antiquités du Musée copte*, nos. 1–253], Cairo 1987, pl. xi.

¹⁴ In the study of B. TUDOR, *Christian Funerary Stelae of the Byzantine and Arab Periods from Egypt*, Marburg 2011, she frequently references this formula (*vel sim.*), as it has diverse chronological and geographical attestations.

¹⁵ For the use of the *crux ansata* in Christian funerary stelae in Egypt, see M. CRAMER, *Das altägyptische Lebenszeichen im christlichen (koptischen) Ägypten*, Wiesbaden 1955, pp. 7–34. See also N. CARLIG, ‘Les symboles chrétiens dans les papyrus littéraires et documentaires grecs: forme, disposition et fonction (III^e–VII^e/VIII^e siècles)’, [in:] N. CARLIG *et alii* (eds.), *Signes dans les textes. Continuités et ruptures des pratiques sribales en Égypte pharaonique, gréco-romaine et byzantine: actes du colloque international de Liège (2–4 juin 2016)* [= *Papyrologica Leodiensia* 9], Liège 2020, p. 276. See also discussion about the *crux ansata* and dating in G. E. BOWEN, ‘The

Oxyrhynchus
and its environs

19 × 31 cm

5th–7th cent. AD

ἐν ἱρήνῃ· Σουήρι
καὶ τὴν ἀδελφὴν
αὐτῆς Μαρία παρθέ-
4 νος Θερμοῦ σὺν τέκνοις
αὐτῆς καὶ Ὠρίων Ἀτρῆ.

1. ἱρηνη inscr., final η corr. ex ε; 1. εἰρήνη; 1. Σουήρις ||
2. τ corr. ex α; 1. ἡ ἀδελφὴ || 4. θ corr. ex τ.; 1. Θερμοῦς

In peace. Soueris and her sister Maria the virgin, Thermous with her children, and Horion son of Hatres.

1. ἐν ἱρήνῃ· Σουήρι. Given the correction from ε to η at the end of ἱρηνη, one wonders if the inscriber was anticipating the name Ἑσουήρις, for which Σουήρις is a variant.

The misspelling ἱρηνη for εἰρηνη is widely attested in both inscriptions and papyri. The funerary formula ἐν εἰρήνῃ is widespread in Christian epitaphs from Egypt; for inscriptions of this type see: A. Łajtar, 'Bemerkungen zu griechischen christlichen Inschriften aus dem Koptischen Museum in Kairo', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 97 (1993), pp. 230–231.

2. καὶ τὴν ἀδελφὴν. The τ in τὴν is corrected from α and may suggest that the inscriber was anticipating ἀδελφ-.

4–5. Θερμοῦ σὺν τέκνοις αὐτῆς. It appears that as in line 1, where the transcriber failed to inscribe the terminal *sigma* on the name, the same happened here with Θερμοῦ; alternatively, given that the preposition σὺν immediately follows, it might also be a case of haplography where the name was properly spelled with a terminal *sigma*, but then the *sigma* is missing on the preposition. We are inclined to the former possibility, and have articulated the text as such, given that the loss of the terminal *sigma* on the name on line 1 cannot be attributed to haplography.

crux ansata in early Christian iconography: Evidence from Dakhleh and Kharga Oases', [in:] G. TALLET & C. ZIVIE-COCHE (eds.), *Le myrte et la rose: Mélanges offerts à Françoise Dunand par ses élèves, collègues et amis* [= *Cahiers Égypte nilotique et méditerranéenne* 9], Montpellier 2014, pp. 291–303. The only other Christian epitaph from Oxyrhynchus that contains a *crux ansata* is not dated. See GIRGIS & KAMEL, *Coptic Funerary Stelae* (cit. n. 13), no. 189 and pl. LXXXIX.



Fig. 1. Epitaph of Soueris and Maria (photo Amer al-Mesiry)

5. Ὠρίων Ἀτρῶν. At present no individual bearing this name and patronym is attested in a text from Oxyrhynchus, although this name and patronym are attested elsewhere: e.g. *P. Lips.* I 65 (Hermopolis, AD 390), l. 17.

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