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## Two Coptic inscriptions from the Monastery of Jeremiah at Saqqara

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Maarten Horn

**TWO COPTIC INSCRIPTIONS  
FROM THE MONASTERY OF JEREMIAH  
AT SAQQARA\***

THE TWO COPTIC INSCRIPTIONS published in this article were found in the forecourt of the tomb of Meryneith/Meryre, located in the New Kingdom necropolis in Saqqara to the south of the Unas-causeway (Plate IA). The New Kingdom tomb of Meryneith/Meryre was discovered in 2001, during excavations by the National Museum of Antiquities of Leyden, and the Department of Egyptology at the University of Leyden, under the supervision of Dr. M. J. Raven and Dr. R. van Walsem.<sup>1</sup> The two limestone blocks with Coptic inscriptions were discovered during the 2003 season, in which the author participated as a field assistant, when the forecourt of the tomb was cleared of sand.

The first block was discovered above the entrance to the forecourt, while the second one was discovered above the east wall of the forecourt

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\* I would like to thank Dr. M. J. RAVEN and Dr. R. van WALSEM for authorizing me to publish the two blocks and Drs. W. BEECH for providing me with the maps that are included in this article. I am also much obliged to Dr. J. VAN DER VLIET and Dr. B. P. MUHS for their support and assistance.

<sup>1</sup> For the preliminary reports on the seasons of 2001 and 2002 see M. J. RAVEN, R. VAN WALSEM & al., “Preliminary Report on the Leiden Excavations at Saqqara, Season 2001: The Tomb of Meryneith” and “Preliminary Report on the Leiden Excavations at Saqqara, Season 2002: The Tomb of Meryneith”, *Jaarbericht van het Vooraziatisch-Egyptisch Genootschap Ex Oriente Lux* 37 (2003), pp. 71–110.

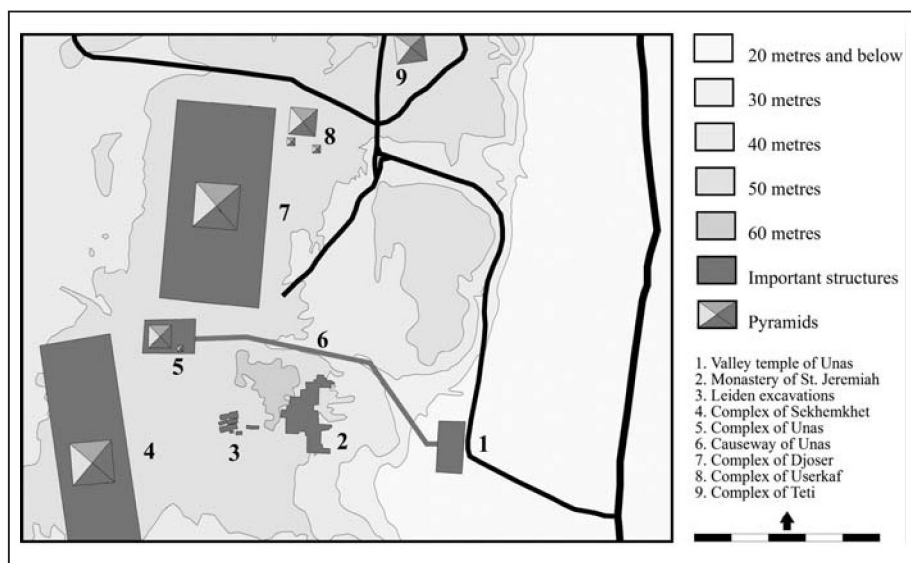


Fig. 1. General map of Saqqara showing the location of the New Kingdom necropolis in relation to the Monastery of Jeremiah (made by Drs. W. BEEX). The rectangular shape situated in the east of the New Kingdom necropolis represents the tomb of Meryneith

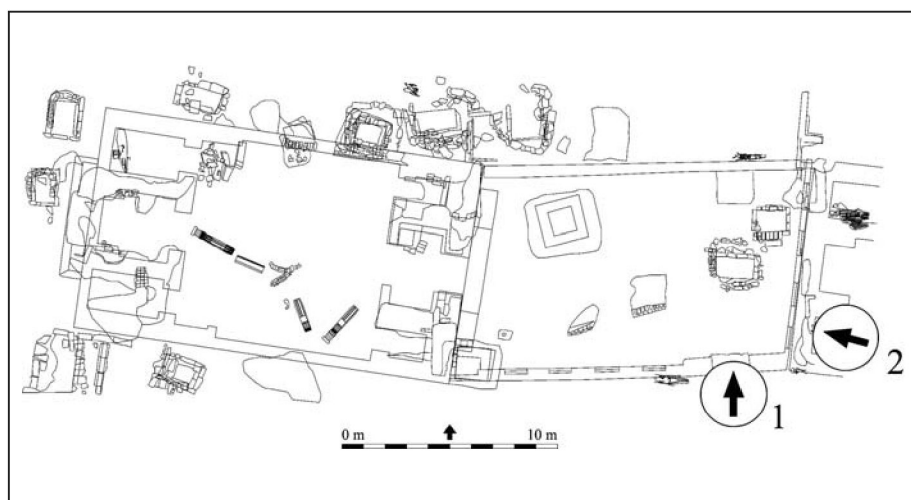


Fig. 2. Plan of the tomb of Meryneith, showing the findspots of the Coptic blocks (made by Drs. W. BEEX). The numbers on the plan represent the numbers of the two blocks

next to a Coptic mud-brick construction (feature-number 2003/3), that ran north-south above the east wall of the forecourt (Plate IB). The context in which these blocks were found suggests reuse and internal textual evidence points to an origin in or around the Monastery of Jeremiah. The dialect of the inscriptions, as far as can be ascertained, appears to be Sahidic.

No official photos were taken of these two blocks; the ones reproduced here were made by the author (fig. 3 and 4).

1. TOMBSTONE  
FOR A DECEASED WOMAN CALLED MARY

Date: 7th–9th century A.D.<sup>2</sup>

Registration number: SAK 2003/R31.

Measurements: Height 23 cm, width 17 cm, depth 4.5 cm. The top and right edges of the text appear to be preserved, while the left and bottom edges are broken away. Following the reconstruction of the text proposed below, approximately half of the original width is missing on the left side. As it is unknown how much more text would have followed, one can not say anything about the original height of the tombstone.

Site of discovery: West of the Monastery of Jeremiah, above the entrance to the forecourt of the New Kingdom tomb of Meryneith.

Place of storage: Storehouse near the New Kingdom tomb of Meryneith/Meryre.

Bibliography: Unpublished.

*Text*

[† ΠΩΤ Π]ΩΗΡΕ ΠΕ-  
[ΠΝΔ ΕΤΟΥ]ΔΔΒ ΔΠΑ  
[ΙΕΡΗΜΙΑΣ Δ]ΠΑ ΕΝΩ-  
4 [Χ ΔΜΑ ΣΙΒ]ΥΛΛΑ Θ-  
[ΔΓΙΑ ΜΔΡ]ΙΑ ΔΡΙ Π-  
[ΜΕΕΥΕ Μ]ΜΔΡΙΑ Τ-

<sup>2</sup> Following the criteria of C. WIETHEGER. See *Das Jeremias-Kloster zu Saqqara unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Inschriften*, Altenberge 1992, pp. 200–201.



Fig. 3. Photograph of block no. 1 (taken by the author)



Fig. 4. Photograph of block no. 2 (taken by the author)

[ . . . . . ] Ⲛⲧⲉⲡⲛⲟ-  
 8 [ΥⲦⲉ † Ⲙ]ⲧⲞⲚ ⲛⲁ[ϸ]

*Translation*

[+ Oh Father,] Son (and)  
 [Holy Spirit]! Apa  
 [Jeremiah, A]pa Eno-  
 4 [ch, Ama Sib]ylla, the  
 [Holy Mar]y! Re-  
 [member] Mary, the  
 [...] That G[od may  
 8 give her r]est!

*Commentary*

The inscription on this tombstone is incomplete because the slab has been broken in different fragments of which we have found only one. To my knowledge no other fragments of this tombstone have yet been found. The inscription consists of letters of the ‘rustic capital’ type<sup>3</sup> with a ruling incised beneath them. The lacunae in the standard lines of this inscription and the inscription on the second block were filled in with the help of other inscriptions that were found in and around the Monastery of Jeremiah.<sup>4</sup> The lacuna of line 7<sup>5</sup> has probably contained a title, filiation or profession of the deceased, called Mary.<sup>6</sup> Of this only the definite article τ- has survived in line 6. This inscription can be called a grave-inscription because of its contents. According to Wietheger there are three main categories within the grave-inscriptions: a short version, a standard

<sup>3</sup> Term used by WIETHEGER. See WIETHEGER, *Das Jeremias-Kloster* (cit. n. 3), pp. 108–109.

<sup>4</sup> This was done with the help of the catalogue of Coptic inscriptions in: WIETHEGER, *Das Jeremias-Kloster* (cit. n. 3), pp. 291–474. See also H. GHALY, “Koptische Grabsteine aus dem Gebiet des Jeremias-Kloster zu Saqqara”, *BSAC* 40 (Cairo 2001), pp. 117–123.

<sup>5</sup> Compared to the other lines there are probably six or seven characters missing here.

<sup>6</sup> Other persons named Mary are also known from Saqqara. See WIETHEGER, *Das Jeremias-Kloster* (cit. n. 3), p. 264.

text and a long version.<sup>7</sup> This inscription appears to represent the long version containing respectively, using Wietheger's abbreviations:<sup>8</sup> the Christian symbol of the cross (S<sub>5</sub>); a standard formula, which calls upon the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (F<sub>1</sub>); a litany addressing four holy persons (L: 4, 5, 6 and 3); the appeal-formula (Bf); a prayer (Gb); the remainder is missing. The holy persons include "the triad of Saqqara"<sup>9</sup> and the Holy Mary. Sadly, the end of this text is missing but it will at least have contained a date (D), giving the day of death.<sup>10</sup>

One is tempted to allocate the block to the Monastery of Jeremiah on the east of the New Kingdom tomb because of its proximity. However, the name of a woman appears on this block who could not have been a member of the Monastery of Jeremiah. The appearance of a single female name on a tombstone is not uncommon<sup>11</sup> and perhaps a convent was situated in the vicinity of the Jeremiah-monastery.<sup>12</sup> Wietheger also mentions a tombstone bearing the inscription Ama Sousanna, the mother of the great monastery. According to Wietheger, this could very well be an indication for the existence of a convent.<sup>13</sup> However, she unnecessarily corrects ΜΟΝΗ into ΜΟΝΑΧΤΗΡΙΟΝ. ΜΟΝΗ is the Coptic transliteration of

<sup>7</sup> WIETHEGER, *Das Jeremias-Kloster* (cit. n. 3), p. 140.

<sup>8</sup> WIETHEGER, *Das Jeremias-Kloster* (cit. n. 3), p. 302. The abbreviations of Wietheger are given between brackets.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. T. VIVIAN, "Ama Sibylla of Saqqara: Prioress or Prophet? Monastic, or Mythological Being?", *Bulletin of Saint Shenouda the Archimandrite Coptic Society* 5 (1998), pp. 1–7. This gives an opinion on the identification of Ama Sibylla. On the identification of Apa Enoch, see B. A. Pearson, "Enoch in Egypt", [in:] R. A. ARGALL & al. (ed.), *For a Later Generation: The Transformation of Tradition in Israel, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity (Festschrift G. Nickelsburg)*, Harrisburg 2000, pp. 216–231.

<sup>10</sup> WIETHEGER, *Das Jeremias-Kloster* (cit. n. 3), pp. 140 and 154–155.

<sup>11</sup> WIETHEGER, *Das Jeremias-Kloster* (cit. n. 3), pp. 263–265.

<sup>12</sup> For WIETHEGER'S ideas on deceased females: WIETHEGER, *Das Jeremias-Kloster* (cit. n. 3), pp. 143–145. For a different opinion: E. WIPSYCYKA, "L'ascétisme féminin dans l'Égypte de l'Antiquité tardive: topoi littéraires et formes d'ascèse", [in:] H. MELAERTS & L. MOOREN, *Le rôle et le statut de la femme en Égypte hellénistique, romaine et byzantine: actes du colloque international, Brussels – Leuven 27–29 November 1997 (= Studia Hellenistica 37)*, Leuven 2002, pp. 372–373.

<sup>13</sup> WIETHEGER, *Das Jeremias-Kloster* (cit. n. 3), pp. 143 and 334.

the Greek word *μονή*, which can be translated as residence, but also as monastery or convent.<sup>14</sup>

Still, the question remains whether those two separate monasteries were in existence at the same time. When one compares the inscription on the tombstone of Mary with the inscription on a tombstone of a male person, such as the tombstone of a man called Jeremiah,<sup>15</sup> it can be seen that it is built up in the same manner. This similarity could very well indicate that the two monasteries were in existence at the same time. If so, they could have been parallel or associated institutions. An explanation for the fact that male and female tombstones are being found together is that the two monasteries could have used the same place for their burials.

## 2. DOOR LINTEL

Date: 7th–9th Century A.D.

Registration number: SAK 2003/R30.

Measurements: Height 12 cm, width 52 cm, depth 17 cm. The top bottom and left edges of the text appear to be preserved, while the right edge is broken away. Because of the fact that the text is interrupted with crosses, it is hard to estimate how much is missing from the width of the original lintel on the right side.

Site of discovery: West of the Monastery of Jeremiah. From the east side of 2003/3 (Coptic wall) which forms the top level of the east wall of the forecourt of Meryneith.

Place of storage: Storehouse near the New Kingdom tomb of Meryneith/Meryre.

Bibliography: Unpublished.

### *Text*

† ΠΩΤ ΠΩΗ[ΡΕ ΠΕΠΝΑ ΕΤΟΥΔΔΒ]  
ΔΠΑ Ι- † [ΕΡΗΜΙΑΔΣ...]

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Sir HERBERT THOMPSON in J. E. QUIBELL & al., *Excavations at Saqqara III*, Cairo 1909, p. 37 no. 7.

<sup>15</sup> WIETHEGER, *Das Jeremias-Kloster* (cit. n. 3), pp. 374–375, no. 187.



*Translation*

1. + Oh Father, So[n (and) Holy Spirit]!
2. Apa J[eremiah ...]

*Commentary*

This block has been broken and it is therefore impossible to complete the gaps in the inscription. The inscription contains, using Wietheger's abbreviations: the Christian symbol of the cross (S<sub>5</sub>); a standard formula (F<sub>1</sub>); a litany containing at least 1 holy person (L: 4); the remainder is missing. The letters are again of the "rustic capital" type and an incised ruling is still visible beneath them. Because of the rectangular shape of this block, one can conclude that it served as a door lintel from an unknown building somewhere in the Monastery of Jeremiah or perhaps in the convent discussed in the commentary of block no.1.<sup>16</sup> The somewhat lower left end of the block is the place where it rested on the door jamb.

It can be seen on the photo that a cross is incised in sunk relief to the left side of the inscription. A smaller, less visible cross is incised in sunk relief under the letters πω of the first line of the inscription. With the help of the inscriptions and the two crosses inscribed on the lintel, the occupant of the building to which the lintel belonged, placed himself and the building under the blessing and protection of God and the local saints. In other words, the inscriptions and the crosses give the door lintel an apotropaic character.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For a similar example see Chr. ZIEGLER & al., "La mission archéologique du musée du Louvre à Saqqara. Résultats de quatre campagnes de fouilles de 1993 à 1996", *BIFAO* 97 (1997), p. 286, fig. 4. For interpreting these finds, see M. ÉTIENNE & G. LECUYOT, "Les fouilles du musée du Louvre à Saqqara", [in:] *Études coptes VIII, Cahiers de la Bibliothèque Copte* 13 (Lille – Paris 2003) pp. 147–162.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. J. ENGEMANN, "Zur Verbreitung magischer Übelabwehr in der nichtchristlichen und christlichen Spätantike", *JbAC* 18 (1975), pp. 42–43; G. ROQUET, "Linteaux commémoratifs en dialecte fayoumique", *BIFAO* 78 (1978), p. 344; S. SCHATEN, "Inschriften auf Türstürzen", [in:] *Θεμέλια. Spätantike und koptologische Studien Peter Grossmann zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. M. KRAUSE & S. SCHATEN (= *Sprachen und Kulturen des christlichen Orients* 3), Wiesbaden 1998, p. 307.

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CONCLUSION

The two limestone blocks discussed in this article contribute to the epigraphic material found in and around the Monastery of Jeremiah and may help to provide an image of the monastery itself. The inscription and incised crosses on the door lintel indicate some of the ways the inhabitants tried to repel evil influences. The inscription on the tombstone adds further evidence for the possible existence of a convent next to the Monastery of Jeremiah at Saqqara.

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