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SOME CHRISTIAN EPITAPHS IN GREEK
IN THE MAGAZINE AT FUSTÂT (OLD CAIRO)

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SOME CHRISTIAN EPITAPHS IN GREEK IN THE MAGAZINE AT FUSTÂT (OLD CAIRO)

In the Fall of 2019 maintenance and routine cleaning were undertaken at the storage magazine operated by the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities in Fustât (Old Cairo).¹ During the course of the work a hitherto uncatalogued collection of inscriptions was uncovered in the basement. The small collection consists of about 20 pieces that range from fully intact inscriptions to fragments that are badly effaced and only preserve a handful of letters. Most of the inscribed pieces are Greek, but two are written in Coptic (Sahidic) and one is inscribed in Greek and Coptic.² Since the pieces were never catalogued when they arrived at the magazine, their date of acquisition and provenance are unknown.³ Upon further examination, however, we discovered that one of the two Coptic pieces in this group was previously published and was part of a collection of five inscriptions that came from Manqabâd (Lykopolite Nome) and were excavated in 1976.⁴ Whether the other texts in this recently rediscovered group were found at approximately the same time or region cannot be determined.⁵

While the type and function of every inscription in this newfound group is uncertain, about half of the pieces can be readily identified as Christian epitaphs as they contain terminology and phraseology typical of funerary monuments and display distinct Christian features. We therefore present here editions of seven Greek epitaphs, five that are complete (or nearly so) and two that are partial fragments, since they represent important contributions to Christian funerary epigraphy in late antique Egypt.⁶

Inscription No. 1: Epitaph for Blessed Victor

Inv. no.: no number given

w 61 × h 35 cm

7 March A.D. 680

Provenance Unknown

Fig. 1

This limestone inscription contains seven lines of text. The stone has a diagonal break across the top left corner; nevertheless, the lost text can be mostly restored. Where the stone is also broken off at the bottom, about halfway through the line, the lost text cannot be confidently restored. Letters are inscribed consistently and legibly and give the impression that the work was cut by a competent inscriber. Lines range between about 24–28 letters per line with an average line height of 4.8 cm. Letters generally lack much ornamentation, but notable letter forms include the alpha that is inscribed with a broken crossbar that intersects and forms a distinct X-shape in the middle base of the letter and the upsilon that fluctuates between a Y-shape and a V-shape. The inscriber abbreviates select words with the use of a supralinear letter and/or oblique stroke, marks numerals with a supralinear stroke, and rather curiously puts a supralinear stroke over numbers that are spelled out in full. A dark brown paint patina is still extant on certain letters.

¹ This was carried out under the direction of the chief of committee for inventory at the magazine.

² We recently published the one Coptic piece that was hitherto unpublished and the Greek and Coptic bilingual piece: A. El Mesiry and L. H. Blumell, Two Christian Funerary Stelae in the Magazine at Fustât (Old Cairo), *CdE* 98 (2023), 326–333.

³ A catalogue of these and other pieces found at the time of the maintenance and cleaning in the Fall of 2019 was undertaken by the co-author, Amer El Mesiry, in 2020.

⁴ It was originally published in A.-R. Abdal-Tawab, A. H. al-Mansub Ibrahim, and S. Schaten, Coptic stelae from Manqabâd, *BSAC* 40 (2001), 56–57 (no. 3 = KSB 4.1960). The article reports that these five inscriptions were stored in the Fustât Magazine and that they did not have inventory numbers at the time of publication.

⁵ It may be noted that the lone published text (see n. 4 above) is unlike any other text in the group, either Coptic or Greek, although it is an epitaph. Furthermore, it is not inconceivable that it got separated from the four other texts from Manqabâd and over the years ended up being stored within an entirely different group of inscriptions. As the Fustât Magazine has traditionally been a repository of artifacts from all over Egypt, and not just finds unearthed in close geographic proximity to the magazine, it cannot be assumed that the inscriptions in this group were found at a nearby locale.

⁶ Amer El Mesiry reports that these pieces are scheduled to be moved to the Islamic Museum in Cairo.

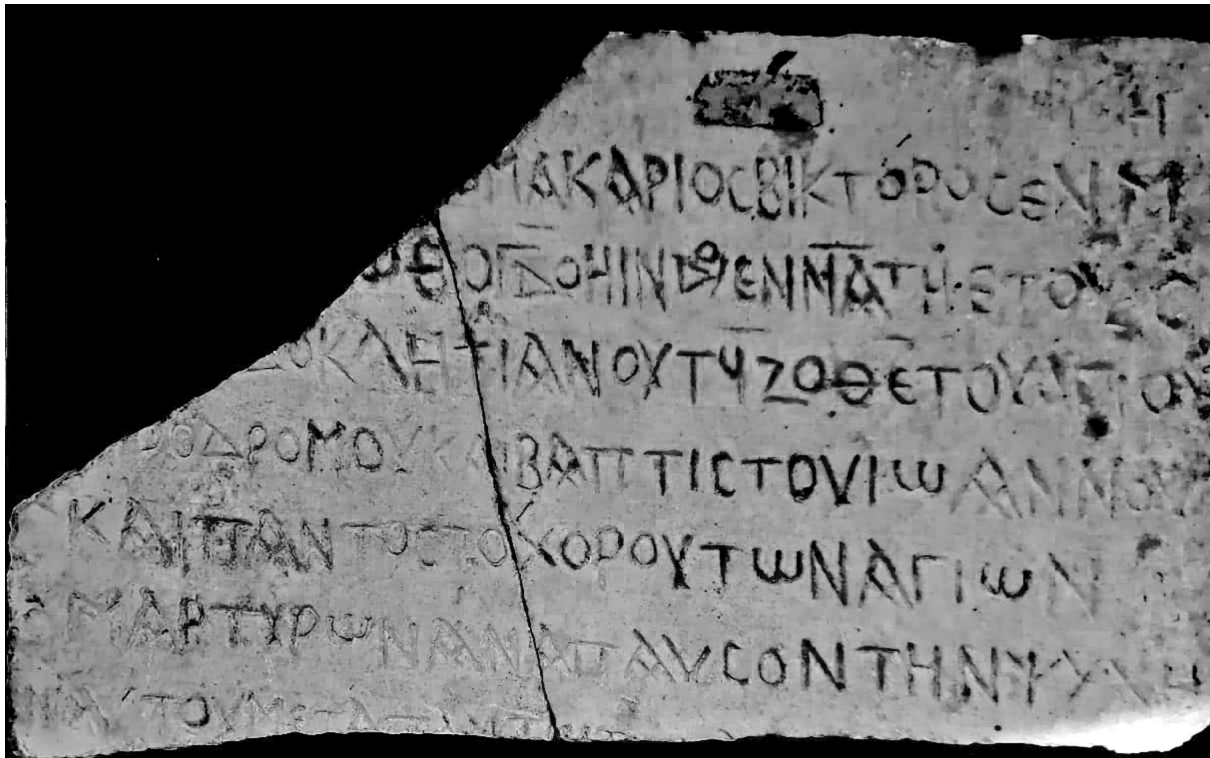


Fig. 1. Inscription no. 1

While the first word of the inscription is entirely lost due to a break in the text, it can be confidently restored since it fits the spacing of the break and the extant text that follows is indicative of the “sleep formula” as the name of the deceased is given followed by the date of death. Given the prevalence of the use of the cross at the beginning of inscriptions, it likely prefaced the first line. In addition to the typical month and indiction year reference, this inscription also includes a reference to the Era of Diocletian so that the death being commemorated can be dated to 4 March A.D. 680. Following the date, the inscription concludes with the well-attested “rest formula” where God is invoked to give the soul rest.

- [+ ἐκοιμήθη] ὁ μακάριος Βίκτορος ἐν μηνί
 [Φαμεν]ῳθ ὀγδόῃ ἰνδ(ικτί)ο(νος) ἐννάτῃ ἔτους
 [. .] Διοκλητιανοῦ τϞζ. ὁ θε(ε)ὸς τοῦ ἁγίου
 προδρόμου καὶ βαπτιστοῦ Ἰωάννου
 5 καὶ παντὸς τοῦ χοροῦ τῶν ἁγίων
 μαρτύρων ἀνάπαυσον τὴν ψυχὴν
 αὐτοῦ μετὰ πάντων [±8]

1 *l.* Βίκτωρ *inscr.* μⁿ 2 *inscr.* ογδοῇ | ινδ^ο, | ἐννάτῃ *l.* ἐνάτης 3 *l.* θεός 5 *inscr.* τοῦ χοροῦ

Translation

The blessed Victor fell asleep in the month of Phamenoth on the eighth, in the ninth indiction, year 397 of Diocletian. The God of Saint John the Forerunner and Baptist and of the whole chorus of the holy martyrs give rest to his soul with all

Notes

- 1 [+ ἐκοιμήθη]. As a euphemism for death, κοιμάω is employed periodically in the New Testament: Matt. 27:52, 28:13; John 11:11–12; Acts 7:60, 13:36; 1 Cor. 7:39, 11:30, 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thess. 4:13–15; 2 Pet. 3:4. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the use of “sleeping” or “resting” vocabulary (κοίμησις, ἀνάπαυσις, *dormitio*, *requiescere*, *pausare*) for death occurs throughout Jewish, Christian, and Pagan antiquity. See M. B. Ogle, *The Sleep of Death*, *MAAR* 11 (1933), 81–117 who provides considerable documentation for the metaphorical use of “sleep”. On the different uses and meanings of κοιμάω in epitaphs, see P. W. van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs: An Introductory Survey of a Millenium of Jewish Funerary Epigraphy (300 BCE–700 CE)* (Kampen, 1991) 115–24; cf. I. Kajanto, *The Hereafter in Ancient Christian Epigraphy and Poetry*, *Arctos* 12 (1978), 27–53. For the use of the “sleep formula” in epitaphs from Egypt specifically, see B. Tudor, *Christian Funerary Stelae of the Byzantine and Arab Periods from Egypt* (Marburg, 2011), 161–62.
- ὁ μακάριος Βίκτορος. The epithet μακάριος is widespread in Christian inscriptions from Egypt and appears especially in epitaphs; thus, it was used mostly for the deceased. See L. Dinneen, *Titles of Address in Christian Greek Epistolography to 527 A.D.* (Washington, D.C., 1929), 81–83. For papyrological usage see J. O’Callaghan, *Epítetos de trato en la correspondencia cristiana del siglo VI*, *StudPap* 3 (1964), 79–105 (pp. 88f.).
- The Latin name Victor became quite common between the fifth and seventh centuries based on epigraphic and papyrological remains; see TM Name 8930. The rendering Βίκτορος is the mistaken genitive ending for Βίκτωρ; the same kind of grammatical error also occurs in Inscription No. 3 below.
- 2 ὁ γδὲ ἡμέρη (ἡμέρη) ὁ (ἡμέρη) ἐννάτη. It is most common for the day of the month to be rendered in the dative, as it is here, and for the year of the indiction to be in the genitive: thus, ἐνάτης not ἐννάτη. The spelling ἐννάτη instead of ἐνάτη with double -vv- is well attested; for v > vv see F. T. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods*. Volume I, *Phonology* (Milan, 1976), 158.
- Curiously, the inscriber places a supralinear stoke over each numeral although it is spelled out. While rare, this practice does find parallels elsewhere: e.g. P.Laur. 3.79.12–13 (A.D. late III/early IV; Oxyrhynchus): νομίσματα | ὄδο; for discussion, see J.-L. Fournet, *Les signes diacritiques dans les papyrus documentaires grecs*, in N. Carlig et al. (eds.), *Signes dans les textes: Continuités et ruptures des pratiques scribales en Égypte pharaonique, gréco-romaine et byzantine* (Liège, 2020), 155, 164.
- 2–3 ἔτους | [. . .] Διοκλητιανοῦ τῷ ζ'. The right oblique and base of the delta are extant on the inscription immediately before the break at the beginning of l. 3. Based on a comparison with the surrounding lines three letters seem to have been lost. However, the phrase ἔτους Διοκλητιανοῦ is expected based on parallels and otherwise suggests that nothing is lost in the break. While there are a few different formulae for the writing of the Era of Diocletian (see F. Mitthof, *Ein neues Formular für die Diokletianische Ära*, *Tyche* 21 [2006], 169–71), none readily lend themselves to the extant text. The phrases ἔτους ἀπὸ Διοκλητιανοῦ or ἔτους τοῦ Διοκλητιανοῦ would fit the lacuna, but both are unattested; the attested phrase ἔτους τῶν χρόνων Διοκλητιανοῦ is far too long for the break. For a useful discussion of the Era of Diocletian, see R. S. Bagnall and K. A. Worp, *Chronological Systems of Byzantine Egypt* (2nd ed.; Leiden and Boston, 2004), 63–82.
- 3–7 ὁ θε(ε) τοῦ ἁγίου | προδρόμου καὶ βαπτιστοῦ Ἰωάννου | καὶ παντὸς τοῦ χοροῦ τῶν ἁγίων | μαρτύρων ἀνάπαυσον τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ. The rest formula ὁ θεός ... ἀνάπαυσον (*vel sim.*) is well attested in Greek epitaphs from Egypt between the fifth and ninth centuries. On this formula see Tudor, *Christian Funerary Stelae*, 152–54; see also A. Łajtar, *Bemerkungen zu drei kürzlich veröffentlichten griechischen Inschriften aus der Spätantike*, *ZPE* 114 (1996), 144; J. Hammerstaedt, *Griechische Anaphorenfragmente aus Ägypten und Nubien* (Pap.Colon. XXVIII; Opladen/Wiesbaden, 1999), 28 n. 11–12. It is typical in this formula when the verbal form is ἀνάπαυσον for θεός to be in the nominative case; we have not been able to find a single instance where God is in the vocative in this formula. We are therefore inclined to read ὁ θεός instead of ὦ θεέ. On the interchange of ω with ο, see Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri*, 275–78.
- τοῦ ἁγίου | προδρόμου καὶ βαπτιστοῦ Ἰωάννου | καὶ παντὸς τοῦ χοροῦ τῶν ἁγίων | μαρτύρων. The reference to “Saint John the Forerunner and Baptist” finds few parallels in Christian epitaphs from Egypt: e.g.