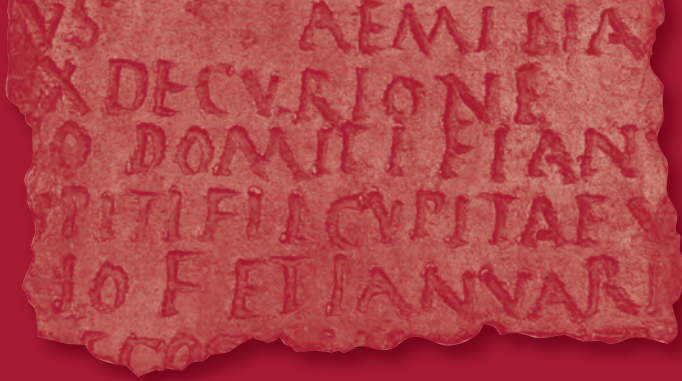
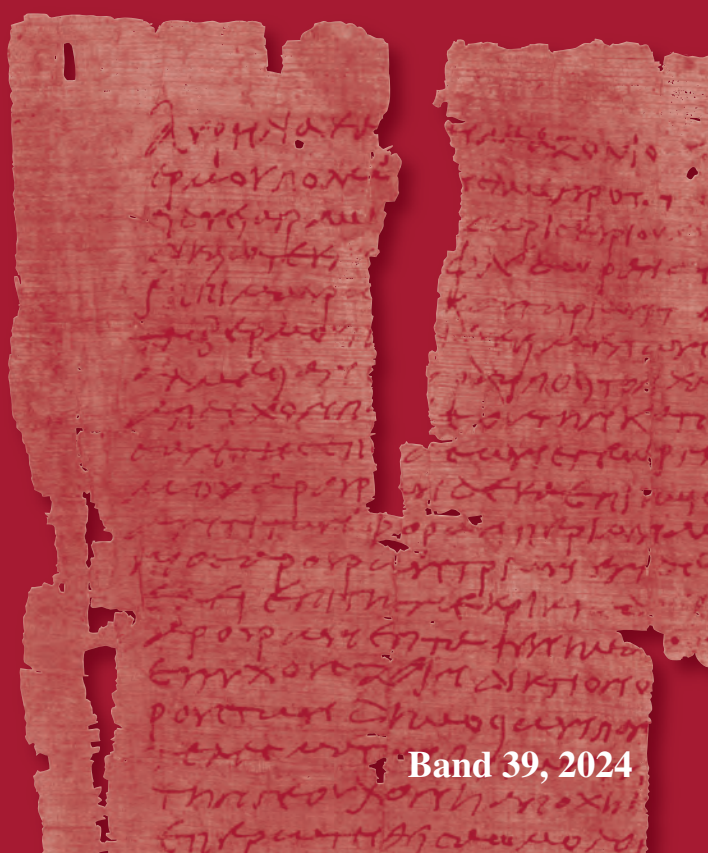




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LINCOLN H. BLUMELL — KERRY HULL

A Greek Christian Epitaph of Egypt in the San Antonio Museum of Art*

Plate 2

The San Antonio Museum of Art (SAMA) has in its possession a small collection of Greek and Latin inscriptions that span the Hellenistic through the Byzantine period and come from diverse regions in the Mediterranean World.¹ One unpublished piece in the collection is a Christian grave stele from Egypt that was acquired by SAMA in 2000.² The limestone epitaph contains a one-line inscription carved along the rounded top edge of the stone for a woman named Rachel and is decorated with elaborate iconography. The central iconographic image is an eagle, wings outstretched and bearing a *bullā* on its chest, that is positioned between two pilasters supporting a plinth and tympanum.³ At each edge of the plinth is a cross pattée. The pilasters with palmette capitals are torsaded on the upper portion, trilobed with floral ornamentation in the center, and

* We would like to thank Jessica Powers, Interim Chief Curator at the San Antonio Museum of Art, for permission to publish this piece as well as for providing us with important information regarding its acquisition when we visited the Museum in 2023.

¹ These texts may be searched and viewed via the SAMA website: <https://www.samuseum.org> (last viewed on 08/04/2025). The various pieces in this collection were acquired at different times since the SAMA opened in 1981.

² This inscription was acquired through Sotheby's in New York; the acquisition record is dated 14 June 2000. It now bears the SAMA object number 2000.12.

³ For comparable round-topped stelae with a central eagle between pilasters see: Fig. 15 of J. van der Vliet, *Christian Epitaphs from Egypt and Nubia at the Museo Egizio, Turin: A Dossier*, *Rivista del Museo Egizio* 5 (2021), presumably from Esna (Latopolis); Stèle de Taïam in the Louvre (E 26832), dated to between A.D. 500–630, provenance unknown within Egypt: <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010048364> (last viewed on 08/04/2025); two grave stelae in the British Museum: EA 680 and EA 1850. EA 680 (=I.Chr. Egypt 521) comes from Armant (Hermonthis) and is dated A.D. VI/VII: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA680 (last viewed on 08/04/2025). EA 1850 comes from Esna (Latopolis) and is dated A.D. VII–VIII: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA1850 (last viewed on 08/04/2025).

decorated with dual rosettes at their base.⁴ Inside the tympanum is a pediment with symmetrically placed vine leaves on both upper sides and similar foliation within.⁵

The Greek inscription that surmounts the piece runs around the upper edge and measures just over 2 cm in height throughout.⁶ The text is upright, lacks adornment, and contains traces of red paint. At the very top of the stone the text breaks and is written on either side of a bifurcating element atop the pediment and is flanked at beginning and end by two crosses. The execution of the letters at times lacks precision, but this might be the result of the fact that the letters were cut in a narrow section that borders the outer edge of the gravestone and the interior iconography. While the orthography is a little shaky, as there is a case of metathesis/inversion and the interchange of a couple of letters (ο > ω and η > ε), the meaning of the text is not affected. The terse epitaph begins with the well-attested funerary acclamation formula εἰς θεὸς ὁ βοηθός (*vel sim.*) and is followed by the name of the deceased, a woman named Rachel.⁷

The origin of the inscription within Egypt is unknown, but given that it shares striking parallels — both textual and iconographic — with Christian funerary stelae from Armant (Hermonthis) and Esna (Latopolis), it seems likely that it originated in this region.⁸ The acclamation formula preserved in the epitaph followed by the name of the deceased, though attested in various regions of Egypt, seems to have been especially popular in Armant and Esna.⁹ Iconographically, the closest parallels to this

⁴ For other examples of round-topped funerary stelae with torsaded pilasters see Plate 97, nos. 621, 1326, 1327, and 1337 of H. R. Hall, *Coptic and Greek texts of the Christian period from Ostraka, Stelae, etc. in the British Museum*, London 1905.

⁵ For comparable foliate elements see Plate 94, no. 1255, and Plate 95, no. 1257 in Hall, *Coptic and Greek texts* (s. n. 4).

⁶ When we visited the museum, we were able to examine the piece up close; however, we were not permitted to remove it from the case in which it was on display. Therefore, we were unable to view the backside of the piece. The sides of the inscription are unworked and contain no iconography or text.

⁷ On the acclamation formula εἰς θεός, see most recently C. Gers-Uphaus, *Paganer Monotheismus anhand der Θεός Ὑμνοτος und Εἰς Θεός-Inschriften*, JAC 60 (2017) 52–76. Gers-Uphaus notes that there are about 450 attestations of this formula with the majority coming from the regions of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt (p. 52). He also notes (p. 53) that the Egyptian evidence for this formula is almost exclusively confined to Christian epitaphs.

⁸ Armant and Esna were both situated on the west side of the Nile about 30 km from each other in Upper Egypt. For the Christian inscriptional remains of Armant and Esna, see most recently the useful discussion and analysis in B. Tudor, *Christian Funerary Stelae of the Byzantine and Arab periods from Egypt*, Marburg 2011, 372–373.

⁹ Tudor, *Christian Funerary Stelae* (s. n. 8) 165–166. Textually the present text is remarkably similar to six inscriptions that come from Armant: I.Chr. Egypt 519–523, 527; for the texts of these six inscriptions see n. 1 in *Notes* section below. For the use of εἰς θεὸς ὁ βοηθός (*vel sim.*) at Esna, see E. Peterson, *Eis theos: epigraphische, formgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, Göttingen 1926, 70–73; for texts in the updated edition, see C. Marksches, *Heis theos: epigraphische, formgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur antiken „Ein-Gott“-Akklamation*, Würzburg 2012, 498–508.

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