

## PALEOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE GEORGIAN TOMBSTONE FROM KHIRBAT UMM LEISUN, JERUSALEM

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A new inscription has been added to the corpus of Georgian epigraphy, an epitaph on a tombstone found at the monastery of Umm Leisun (see Seligman, this volume: Fig. 9). The inscription, which terminates with an equal-armed cross, is written in the Georgian *Asomt'avruli*<sup>1</sup> (uncial) script and reads as follows:

ᲒᲒᲒ ᲑᲘᲗᲘᲗᲗᲗᲗᲗ	“ESE SAMARXOY
ᲒᲒᲒᲘᲘᲘᲘᲘ ᲙᲒᲗᲗᲗ	IOHANE P’UYR
ᲑᲘᲘᲘᲘᲘ ᲒᲒᲒᲒᲑᲒᲗᲗᲗ	TAVEL EPISKOPO
ᲑᲒᲑᲘᲘᲘ ᲗᲘᲗᲗᲗᲗᲗᲗ	SISAY K’ART’VE
ᲒᲑᲒᲘᲘᲘ Თ	LISAY †”

“This is the grave of Iohane bishop of P’urtavi, a Georgian †.”

The mason who carved the inscription used only the central part of the large stone slab (205 × 83 cm), and divided the inscription, which measures 81 × 49 cm, into five lines. The height of the largest letter is 9.7 cm, and of the smallest, 5.5 cm. The mason tried to keep lines of equal length while observing both the standard Georgian spelling and the rules of dividing words into syllables. For instance, the word *episkoposisaj* (of the bishop) is divided on the fourth syllable—*episkopo*—causing the grapheme *o* to extend slightly beyond the notional frame of the inscription. Similar division of the word *k’art’velisaj* results in the fourth line being shorter than the ones above it. Mention should also be made of the division of the word *p’uyrtavel*: the first four letters, *p’uyr*, form one syllable on the second line, and the last part, *tavel*, is on the third line.

The words of the inscription are all written in full and are not separated from one another, i.e., there is no use of either abbreviations or word-separation signs. These features point to the antiquity of the inscription. The archaic character of the inscription is also attested to by the outline of the approximately equal-sized graphemes: they are placed within a two-line grid and have a low ductus. Twenty-one letters of the Georgian alphabet were used in the inscription.

The grapheme Ი (A) is used seven times. Its outline—a semicircle pendent from a horizontal line—has parallels in Georgian inscriptions of the fifth–sixth centuries. It reveals special affinity with the corresponding letter used in the fifth century inscription of “Bakur and Griormizd” at Bir el-Qatt (Tsereteli 1960:29, Pls. V, XI); the fifth-century inscription of “Parnevan and Azarukht” at Bolnisi (Silogava 1994:27, Figs. 12, 72, Table 12); and the sixth century Balitchi sarcophagus (Shanidze 1972:142; Shoshiasvili 1980:149–150).

The length of the vertical descending on the left side of the letters Გ (E), ᲒᲗ (V), ᲒᲑ (L) and ᲒᲗ (H) extends halfway down the body of the letter, and, in some cases, even farther down (see the grapheme ᲒᲗ (V) in the third line). The heads of these letters are rectangular in the first, second and fifth lines, i.e., the vertical and horizontal lines form a right angle. This is characteristic of the early *Asomt'avruli* (uncial) script, and indicates again an early date for the inscription, in spite of the three occasions of the grapheme Გ (E) and two of the grapheme ᲒᲗ (V) with a rounded head in the third and

fourth lines. Graphemes with rounded heads appear in inscriptions of the sixth–seventh centuries, as is the case with the grapheme  $\sqcap$  (E) in the inscription of Kobul-Stephanos in the Jvari church at Mtskheta, which dates between the sixth and seventh centuries (Shoshiasvili 1980:162, Fig. 81a); and the graphemes  $\sqcap$  (V) and  $\sqcap$  (L) on the Martwetsi stone cross from the end of the sixth century at the monastery of St. John the Baptist (Shoshiasvili 1980:115). Nevertheless, we cannot date the inscription from Umm Leisun to the sixth–seventh centuries, because its overall aspect indicates an earlier period.

The arc of the letter  $\sqcup$  (T), which exceeds a semicircle, and the horizontal line protruding from the center of the vertical, are a typical feature of the paleography of the fifth–seventh centuries. The letter  $\sqcup$  (T) with this outline is found in the fifth-century inscriptions of Bolnisi (Silogava 1994: Tables 10, 16); the fifth–sixth-centuries inscription of Ukangory (Shoshiasvili 1980:89–90, Fig. 26); the sixth-century Antony Abay inscription at Bir el-Qatt (Tsereteli 1960:17, Tables 3, 9); and other inscriptions of earlier periods.

The grapheme  $\sqcap$  (I) is used four times in the inscription. The variant used in the third line—a short horizontal line extending left of the vertical body—is reminiscent of the grapheme  $\sqcap$  used in the inscription of Bishop David in the Bolnisi Sioni cathedral (Silogava 1994: Table 10).

The  $\sqcap$  (K)—written as a medium-sized circle with a tall vertical attached to its left side and a short leg on the right—is attested to in the earliest epigraphic monuments, as for example, the Bolnisi Sioni cathedral (Silogava 1994: Table 10). The  $\sqcap$  (M) and  $\sqcap$  (N) are also within the norms of the paleography of the early period.

The arc of the  $\sqcap$  (Y) is open on the left side, and has a vertical line on top, which is longer than usual; it is reminiscent of the analogous graphemes of Bir el-Qatt (Tsereteli 1960: Table III) and even more, of the sixth-century Balitchi sarcophagus (Shandize 1972:142).

The regular-circle outline of the letter  $\sqcap$  (O) has a hooked leg on the right side which slants upward; a similar grapheme is found in the sixth-century inscription of Antony Abay at Bir el-Qatt (Tsereteli 1960: Table 3). The configurations of  $\sqcup$  (P),  $\sqcap$  (R),  $\sqcap$  (S),  $\sqcap$  (T) and  $\sqcap$  (X) are also reminiscent of an early period. The letter  $\sqcap$  (R), with the lower hook and the loop extending from the body to the right, has its analogues in the inscriptions of Bir el-Qatt (Tsereteli 1960: Table 5). So has the head of the letter  $\sqcap$ , which is smaller in comparison with its body; its analogous graphemes can be seen in the inscriptions of Bir el-Qatt (Tsereteli 1960: Table 3) and Bolnisi (Silogava 1994: Tables 12, 16).

The head of the letter  $\sqcap$  (W), which, in combination with  $\sqcap$  (O), denotes the letter  $\sqcap$  (U), is closed, like the ancient specimens of Georgian writing.

The  $\sqcap$  (P) grapheme is used only once in the inscription, it consists of a medium-sized vertical and two semicircles joined to a circle, and extends slightly beyond the two-line grid. It differs from the analogous letters that date to the transit between the sixth and seventh centuries, indicating a tendency for the graphemes to become longer with time (see the inscriptions of the Jvari church in Mtskheta; Shoshiasvili 1980:97, Fig. 30; 160, Fig. 50; 166, Fig. 84).

The letter  $\sqcap$  (K') resembles a cross, and is characterized by a low ductus. The equal arms of the letter are characteristic of fifth–sixth-centuries Georgian inscriptions, such as the one from Bolnisi (Silogava 1994: Tables 12, 16), and others.

Thus, the paleographic analysis of the Georgian inscription from Umm Leisun gives every reason to place it in the rank of the early Georgian inscriptions. The squat proportions of its graphemes—nearing a square in outline—and their stylistic features, differ from the letters of the donor inscriptions in the Jvari church at Mtskheta, which date to the transition between the sixth and seventh centuries and already show a tendency to lengthening the graphemes. In the outline of its letters, the Umm Leisun

inscription resembles those of Bolnisi, Bir el-Qatt and Balitchi, and may be dated to the end of the fifth century or, more likely, to the first half of the sixth century.

I am acquainted with only one example similar to the tombstone from Umm Leisun—the sarcophagus, which has already been mentioned, in the village of Balitchi in southern Georgia. The trough of the sarcophagus is hewn from a single stone. A rather big, equal-armed cross is carved on the triangular side of its pitched lid, which faced east (Shandize 1972:142), while on the south-facing, sloping face, there is a long relief inscription in the Georgian *Asomt'avruli* (uncial) script: “Christ pray for Jesse’s soul”.

According to paleographic analysis, this inscription dates to the sixth century (Japaridze 1972:124–136), and the sarcophagus seems to have belonged to some dignitary. Originally, like many other sarcophagi of the early Middle Ages, it stood on the ground.

Undoubtedly, the Umm Leisun Monastery was a Georgian cloister, otherwise using the Georgian language for the epitaph of Iohane, Bishop of Purtavi, would have been incomprehensible. This can be demonstrated by the inscription on the tombstone of Samuel, the Bishop of the Iberians (currently in the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem, Inventory N 34, 879), which was written in Greek, in the style of the fifth–seventh centuries.

The ethnonym “K’art’veli”—“Georgian”—used in the Umm Leisun inscription, corresponds to the old Greek “Iberian” and denotes a person living in the eastern region of Georgia (the inhabitants of western Georgia were called the Laz by the Greeks, and Megreli in Georgian).

Today the term “K’art’veli” refers to the autochthonic population of Georgia as a whole. Originally, however, it seems to have denoted an inhabitant of the province of K’art’li (today called “Kartleli”), in the same way that the terms Megrelian and Kakhetian referred to Georgians living in the provinces of Samegrelo and Kakheti respectively.

According to the accepted viewpoint in scholarly literature, the ancient form of the ethnonym “K’art’veli” would have been “K’art’ueli” (Muskhelishvili 1993:338–339), derived from the root “K’art’u”. The Umm Leisun inscription is so far the earliest testimony to this ethnonym, and yet, the term is used in the form “K’art’veli” and not “K’art’ueli”.

In my opinion, the word “K’art’veli” in the epitaph refers to the country of origin of Bishop Iohane (K’art’li/Iberia, i.e., eastern Georgia), and is not used as an ethnonym. It would be unnecessary to emphasize the bishop being Georgian in a Georgian monastery, but specifying his place of origin distinguishes him from representatives of other Georgian tribes among the monks, e.g., the Laz and others.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Georgian alphabet has three scripts: *Asomt'avruli* (uncial), *Nuskhakhutsuri* (angular) and *Mkhedruli* (secular, knightly, modern). This last is in use today. *Asomt'avruli* (uncial) was usually used for epigraphs and ancient manuscripts. The old

Georgian alphabet consists of 38 letters, as opposed to the 33 letters in the modern one.

<sup>2</sup> The vowel *u* is expressed by the letters *o* and *y*, according to the rule in *Asomt'avruli*.

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