'Atiqot 110, 2023

A Greek Inscription from the Villa at Herẓliyya Bet

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A Greek dedicatory inscription uncovered in the mosaic floor of a *triclinium* in a villa at Herẓliyya was dated based on the shape of its letters to the Byzantine period, in the fifth century CE. The inscription seems to have been written by the mosaicists, who ask for the mercy of a certain sovereign power, herein identified as God.

Keywords: Byzantine period, monastery, Samaritan, Jewish, Christian, Greek, epigraphy

Introduction

A Greek inscription was uncovered in the mosaic floor of the *triclinium* of the villa at Herẓliyya Bet (see Elad, this volume: Plan 1, Fig.7). The inscription, executed in black tesserae on a white background, was set in a rectangular panel (0.45 × 1.10 m; Fig. 1) in front of the entrance to the room. The characters, 4–6 cm high, belong to the Byzantine round alphabet. Their shape indicates a date in the fifth century CE. Contrary to the prevailing

Fig. 1. The Greek inscription in the *triclinium* mosaic.

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practice of that time, there are no crosses at the beginning or at the end of the text, and a decorative element appears at the end of Line 2. The absence of crosses raises questions regarding the religious affiliation of the author of the inscription or of the villa residents, whether they were of Samaritan or Jewish origin, rather than Christian.

THE INSCRIPTION

The inscription reads:

ΗΜΟΝΑΡΧΙΚΗΕΞΟΥCΙΑ
2 ΕΛΕΗCΗΤΑΠΙΝΟΥC
ΚΑΙΕΛΑΙΕΙΝΟΥCΚΑΜΟ
4 ΤΑCΕΝΤΩΔΕΤΩΟΙΚΩ

Ἡ μοναρχικὴ ἐξουσία
2 ἐλεήσῃ ταπ(ε)ινοὺς
καὶ ἐλ‹ε›εινοὺς καμό(ν)-
4 τας ἐν τῷδε τῷ οἴκῳ.

Translation:
May the sovereign power have mercy upon the lowly and miserable men who have labored in this house.

The verb ἐλεήσῃ is an aorist subjunctive used in an optative sense, not unusual in the Byzantine period when the use of the optative grammatical mood died out and the optative was usually superseded by future, subjunctive or imperative, particularly in inscriptions.

The reading of the inscription is not in question, but its interpretation requires an explanation: whose power is invoked, and who are the men asking for mercy? The phrase μοναρχικὴ ἐξουσία, "sovereign power," can be taken in its literal sense to signify the person who has this kind of power: a king or an emperor. Examples of this metonymy appear the writings of both pagan and Christian authors; however, the expression also appears in Christian religious contexts as a reference to the deity.[2] The latter is certainly its meaning here, as a prayer for mercy could only be addressed to God. The persons requiring mercy describe themselves as καμόντες ἐν τῷδε τῷ οἴκῳ, "those who have labored in this house," undoubtedly refering to the physical work of the builders or the mosaicists. This use of the verb κάμνειν in dedicatory inscriptions is well-known, as is the corresponding noun,

[2] For this use of the term, see, e.g., Eusebius, *De ecclesiastica theologia* I, 11, 3, eds. Hansen and Klostermann 1972:72; Idem., *Comm. in Isaiam* II, 36, ed. Ziegler. 1975:284; Idem., *Vita Constantini* I, 5, 1, ed. Winkelmann 2013:182. Although the Jewish and Samaritan Greek writings of this period are, unfortunately, not as numerous as the Christian Greek writings available to us, there is little doubt that the rhetorical language that they all used was interchangeable.

κάματος, "toil." At Bet Alpha, in the mosaic pavement of the synagogue, we find the inscription: Μνισθοῦσιν ὑ τεχνῖτε ὑ κάμνοντες τὼ ἔργον τοῦτω, Μαριανὸς καὶ Ἀνίνας ὑός, "May be remembered the craftsmen who labor at this work, Marianos and his son Aninas;"[3] at Umm er-Rasas, an inscription in the mosaic pavement of the Church of Bishop Sergius (dated by another inscription to 587 CE) reads: Κ(ύριο)ε ὁ θ(εό)ς, βοήθησον τοὺς καμόντας τὸ ψήφειν τοῦτο, ‹ὧ›ν ὁ Κ(ύριο)ς γινώσκει τὰ ὀνόματα, "Lord God, help those who have labored at this mosaic, whose names the Lord knows."[4] In the dedicatory inscription of a family mausoleum in the region of Apamea in Syria, dated to 349 CE, the builder, probably the head of the family, mentions his son and his household servants as his collaborators in the building (συνκαμόντες).[5]

In all the aforementioned cases the verb κάμνειν applies to the physical work of the men who laid a mosaic or erected a building, and could rightly be translated as "who made", referring to the mosaic or the building. But κάμνειν sometimes applies to the person who commissioned, supervised or funded the work rather than the individual who carried it out by the toil of his hands. We see this, for instance, in one of the inscriptions set up in the bathhouse of Ḥammat Gader by Mucius Alexander, governor of Second Palestine under Emperor Anastasius (481–518 CE). The text consists of two iambic trimeters and is translated: "Alexander of Caesarea is the maker of this building (τὸν οἶκον ποεῖ), he who built the tholos (ὁ τὴν - - - θόλον καμών) of the lukewarm pool that is named after him."[6] The two verbs, ποιεῖν and κάμνειν, are synonymous here, and both refer not to the physical toil but to the act of commissioning the work. An inscription in the pavement of a synagogue at Ras el-Bassit (ancient Poseideion in Laodicene) mentions a large donation by the head of the communal council (gerusiarch) and his family in memory of the gerusiarch's wife: πολλὰ καμούσης εἰς τὸ κτίσμα τοῦ ἀναγογίου, "who greatly exerted herself for the building of the upper story (the matroneum?)."[7] In this case, the woman's activity described by the verb may have been soliciting money gifts for the building, the cost of which was finally made up by a "large donation" from her widower.

The noun κάματος has a double meaning. It can refer to the work of the builder or the mosaicist. For instance, in St. George's Church at Khirbat el-Mekhayyat on Mount Nebo an inscription in front of the steps of the bema reads: Ἅγιε Γεώργιε, πρόσδηξαι τὴν προσφορὰν κ(αὶ) τὸν κάματον τοὺς ἀνθρόπους (sic!) τῆ(ς) κόμη(ς) ταύτη(ς), "Saint George, accept the offering and the labor of the people of this village".[8] It seems clear that the villagers gave both money (or the equivalent) and labor toward the erection and adornment of the church.

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[3] *SEG* 8, No. 93; Roth-Gerson 1987:29–32, No. 4. The Aramaic inscription in the same pavement (Naveh 1978:72–74, No. 43) dates it to the reign of either Emperor Justin I (518–527 CE) or Justin II (565–578 CE).

[4] *SEG* 37, Nos. 1536, 1537; Piccirillo 1994:258–260, Nos. 14, 15.

[5] *IGLS* 4, No. 1539.

[6] *SEG* 32, No. 1503; Di Segni 1997:235–236, No. 52.

[7] *SEG* 61, No. 1399.

[8] *IGLJ* 2, No. 100.

But in other cases, when the formulas ἐκ καμάτων, ἐκ or διὰ σπουδῆς καὶ καμάτων, "by the efforts", "by the zeal and the efforts", appear in dedicatory inscriptions of churches in Palestine and Arabia, accompanied by the name of a priest or another member of the clergy, it is most unlikely that these men actually carried out the work; rather, they were probably in charge of the project and supervised its execution.[9] We also find the phrase ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων καμάτων, "by his own efforts," both in churches and in non-cultic buildings (although we cannot always deduce the function of a building from the contents of its inscriptions): this phrase echoes the common epigraphic formula ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων, "at his own expenses," and is sometimes followed by a sum of money, which makes it clear that the "efforts" are an euphemism for "expenses." For instance, an inscription from Imtan in southern Syria, dated to 485/6 CE, attests that two brothers built a tower, ἐκ ἰδίων καμάτων, which was paid for by 60 gold solidi; the master builder who actually carried out the work is also named underneath.[10] At Khirbat Makkus near Ascalon some unknown benefactors (their names would have been mentioned in the first part of the inscription, which was not preserved) financed the paving of the nave(?) and the bema of a church with a mosaic: ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων καμάτων.[11] Accordingly, one may suspect that even in church inscriptions in which ἐκ καμάτων is accompanied by the name of a member of the clergy, the word κάματος may have involved paying—at least in part—for the job: so, for instance, in an inscription from the southeastern room of the church at Khirbat el-Beyudat, Luke the priest prays to God so that He will remember him, "for (this room) was paved with mosaic," ἐκ τῶν καμάτων αὐτοῦ, "by *his* efforts."[12]

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusion from the evidence presented above is that κάμνειν in dedicatory inscriptions is always connected with building activity, and most often with the laying of mosaic pavements, although it can apply both to the craftsman who actually executed the work and to the person who commissioned it and paid for it.[13] Given the location of the present inscription, in front of the entrance to the only room of the villa complex that is adorned with a high-quality mosaic, there is no doubt that the people who ask for God's mercy are the mosaicists themselves.

A different interpretation of the word καμό(ν)τας in this inscription was proposed by Vassilios Tzaferis (pers. comm.). He was the first to decipher the inscription, translating καμό(ν)τας as "the sick", based on another meaning of the verb κάμνειν besides 'to labour',

[9] See for instance *SEG* 40, No. 1476 (Kh. Beiyudat, north of Jericho); *SEG* 27, No. 1003 (Amman), 30, No. 1713 and 32, No. 1557 (Rihab).
[10] *SEG* 7, No. 1184.
[11] *SEG* 48, No. 1889.
[12] *SEG* 40, No. 1476.
[13] This is also the conclusion reached by Donderer 2008; cf. *SEG* 58, No. 1914.

to toil': 'to be weary' or 'worn out' and 'to be sick'. Based on this interpretation, he suggested that the house was a hospital, possibly a leprosarium. However, this interpretation would have required the participle of κάμνειν to be in the present tense, κάμ(ν)ο(ν)τας, rather than in the aorist καμό(ν)τας. While it is true that the reading καμό(ν)-τας requires supplementing a missing *nu* at the end of Line 3, the omission of a letter at the end of a line is easily explained and not at all rare; it would be much more difficult to account for the omission of two letters, one of them in the middle of a line. Possibly Tzaferis' interpretation was influenced by the two adjectives that accompany the participle: ταπεινοὺς καὶ ἐλεεινούς, especially the latter, which means "piteous." Ταπεινός literally means "low," hence "lowly," "humble" in a positive sense, and "base," "mean," in a negative sense; but, in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, this adjective translates a wide range of Hebrew terms, from "deep" and "low" to "poor", "humble" and "oppressed" (שפל, מך, עני, רש, ענו, דך),[14] and the corresponding verb, ταπεινόω, and nouns, ταπεινότης, ταπείνωσις, translate as "to afflict" (לענות) and "affliction" (עֹנִי).[15] Accordingly, the adjectives may convey a sense of misery and affliction of sick human beings; indeed, they may even appear together to represent the wretched and pitiful condition of a person in distress.[16] However, in the usage of the Byzantine period, both in literature and in inscriptions, ταπεινός and ταπεινότης very often refer to the virtue of humility, and are also used as terms of self-abasement. So, for instance, Epiphanius and Gregory of Nazianzos refer to themselves as "our lowliness."[17] In two inscriptions in the Church of Prophet Elijah at Madaba, dated to 607/8 CE, the inhabitants refer to their city as the "humble city" (ταπεινὸν ἄστυ, ταπεινὴ πόλις);[18] in an inscription from Kellia in Egypt a priest refers to himself as "the lowly presbyter (τῷ ταπεινῷ πρεσβυτέρῳ) Nicochares."[19] Also, the word ἐλεεινότης appears as a humble way of referring to oneself, for instance in the baptismal rite of the *Rituale Armenorum* (Conybeare 1905:399). It stands to reason, therefore, that the men described in the present inscription as καμόντας were not sick persons but craftsmen, and ταπεινοὺς καὶ ἐλεεινούς should be understood not as an expression of suffering but as one of self effacement, "the lowly and miserable men who have labored" in this house.

A somewhat different translation of the last phrase of the inscription, ἐν τῷδε τῷ οἴκῳ, could be "in this room" rather than "in this house," with a specific reference to the laying of the mosaic floor in the *triclinium* of the villa.

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[14] See, for instance, Lev. 13:20, 21; 27:8; I Kings (I Sam.) 18:23; Ps 9:39 (MT 10:18); 17 (18):28; 81(82):3, etc.

[15] Gen. 16:11; 29:32; 31:42; Ex. 1:12; Ps. 34 (35):13, etc.

[16] E.g., Gregorius Naz., *In laudem Basilii Magni Or. XLIII*, 57 (PG 36:569), although the same combination of adjectives means "low and miserable" in ps. Epiphanius, *Homilia in Christi resurrectionem* (PG 43:476P) and in Johannes Chrysostom, *Commentarius in Job* 3:16, eds. Hagedorn and Hagedorn 1990:54.

[17] Epiphanius, *Panarion* 49, 3, Holl 1922:244; Gregorius Naz., *In sancta lumina* (PG 36:349).

[18] *IGLJ* 2, Nos. 145–146.

[19] *SEG* 33, No. 1324.

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