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Greek Inscriptions from the Byzantine-Period Monastery at Ḥura

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Five mosaic inscriptions adorned the halls of the Byzantine-period monastery at Ḥura, four of them in Greek and one is bilingual. One inscription belongs to an early phase of the building, from the late fourth or early fifth century CE, while the other inscriptions belong to the monastery of the sixth century CE. Two of the latter inscriptions contain dates within the last quarter of the sixth century CE.

Keywords: northern Negev, Byzantine period, Christianity, mosaic, art, inscriptions, Greek, epigraphy

Introduction

Five inscriptions were incorporated in four different mosaic carpets that adorned the halls of the Byzantine-period monastery at Ḥura (see Varga and Talgam, this volume). Four inscriptions are in Greek, while one inscription is bilingual, with a short Aramaic text following the main script in Greek. One inscription was inlaid in a mosaic floor dated to an early phase of the building, from the late fourth or early fifth century CE, while the other inscriptions belong to the monastery of the sixth century CE; two of these inscriptions contain dates, both within the last quarter of the sixth century CE.

Inscription 1: Service Room 63

This inscription is part of an early mosaic floor, dated based on its style to the late fourth or early fifth century CE (Fig. 1; see Varga and Talgam, this volume: Fig. 6). The elegant round alphabet was common during this period and appears in several contemporary mosaic inscriptions, for instance in the baptistery at Shillo (Di Segni 2012a:213, No. 5), in the chapel at Beit Saḥur (Tzaferis 1975) and in the church at 'Evron (Tzaferis 1987:42, No. 5 [442/3 CE]). The script is surrounded by a double frame, and its lines are separated by rows of red tesserae.

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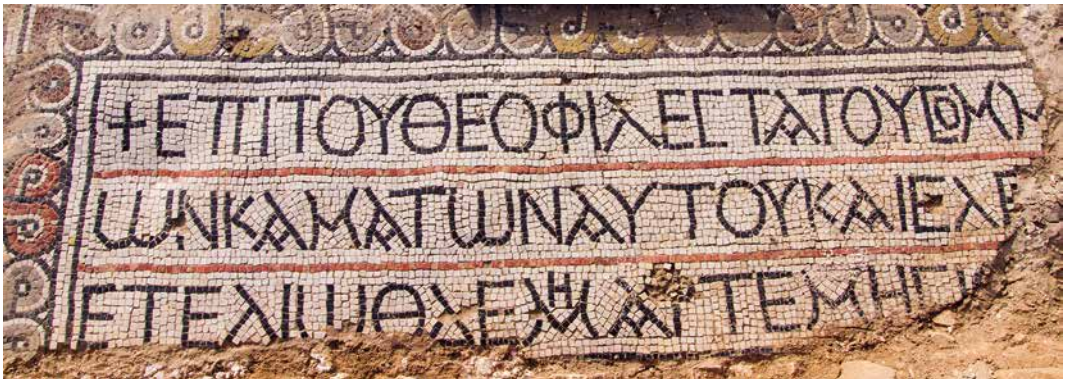

Fig. 1. Inscription 1.

+ΕΠΙΤΟΥΘΕΟΦΙΛΕΣΤΑΤΟΥΣΟΜΜ…
ΩΝΚΑΜΑΤΩΝΑΥΤΟΥΚΑΙΕΛ…
Η
ΕΤΕΛΙΩΘΔΕΜΑΡΤΕΜΗΣΙΟ

ἐπὶ τοῦ θεοφιλεστάτου Σομμ[…
ῶ]ν καμάτων αὐτοῦ καὶ…
ἐτελιώθ(η) δὲ μη(νὶ) Ἀρτεμησίο[υ…

Under the most god-loving Somm...
by his labors…
was completed in the month of Artemisios…

Here, the partially preserved word Somm… could be either Sommaseos, a name mentioned in a dedication from Philadelphia (*SEG* 38, No. 1660 [550–560 CE]), or Sommos, a name mentioned on a tombstone from Hauran (*IGLSyr* 21.5.1.83)

Inscription 2: Prayer Hall 8

This inscription is part of the mosaic pavement in the monastery's prayer hall (L8; see Varga and Talgam, this volume: Fig. 4). It is set within a *tabula ansata* (3.2 × 0.5 m; Fig. 2). The fine and evenly spaced characters were inlaid by an experienced mosaicist. The script begins with a cross and ends with a palm branch. As with many Byzantine-period inscriptions, the *stigma* is used as an abbreviation mark (Avi-Yonah 1940:37). The uncommon monogrammatic ligature AY occurs thrice; its reading is certain due to the word αὐτοῦ in the second line.[2]

[2] For ligatures in Byzantine-period inscriptions from Palestine, see Meimaris and Kritikakou-Nikolaropoulou 2005–2008:1, No, 72; 2, No. 51.

Fig. 2. Inscription 2.

The text features no irregularities, apart from the addition of a person's name at the end of the script, after the date, presumably an individual associated with the construction of the monastery. The text reads:

+ ΕΠΙΤΩΝΘΕΟΦΙḂΗΛΙΟΥΚΕΝΟΝΝΟΥΚΕΣΕΛΑΥΜΩΝΟΣΔΙΑΚΟΝΟΥ
ΕΓΕΝΕΤΟΤΟΕΡΓΟΝΤΟΥΤΟsΚΗΟΙΚΟΔΟΜΗΠΑΣΑΥΤΟΥΜΟΝΑΣΤΗΡΙΟΥ
ΕΝΜΗΝΙΔΙΣΙΟΥΙΝΔsΟΓΔΟΗΣΕΤΟΥΣΤΗΣΠΟΛsTOϛΚΕΒΑΡΑΥΧΟΥ (palm branch)

ἐπὶ τῶν θεοφιλ(εστάτων) Ἠλίου κὲ Νόννου κὲ Σελαυμώνος διακόνου
ἐγένετο τὸ ἔργον τοῦτο κ' ἡ οἰκοδομὴ πᾶσ(α) αὐτοῦ μοναστηρίου
ἐν μηνὶ Δισίου ἰνδ(ικτιόνος) ὀγδόης ἔτους τῆς πόλ(εως) τοῦ κὲ Βαραύχου

Under the most god-loving Elias and Nonnos and Selaumon the deacon this work was done and the entire building of this monastery in the month of Daisios in the eighth indiction, year 376 of the era of the polis, and Barauchos.

In this inscription, the era is indicated as that of Eleutheropolis, starting on January 1, 199.[3] The year is therefore 575 CE. As the month of Daisios started on May 21, the date falls within the eighth year of the indiction, as specified in the inscription. Thus, the date of the inscription is May–June 575 CE.

As for the names appearing in the inscription, Elias and Nonnon are quite common in Byzantine-period inscriptions in the region. Selaumon is a Semitic name that has no exact parallels. A similar name, Σελαμάνος, is mentioned on two tombstones at Sobata (*SEG* 31, Nos. 1428 [646 CE]; 1443 [679 CE]). Two other possible parallels are from inscriptions on mosaic floors in the church complex at Jabaliyah near Gaza, in which Σαλαηανος appears together with the name of a priest and hegumen Σαλα(ω)ν (*SEG* 50, Nos. 1495 [528 CE], 1492 [594 CE]). Tubout, in his lemmata in *SEG*, suggests that the latter was a previously unattested Semitic name, and that Σαλαηανος stands for Σαλαμάνος. At Reḥovot-in-the-Negev, the name Σαλ(αμων) or Σαλ(αμανος) occurs on a tombstone (*SEG* 38, No. 1217

[3] For the use of the era of Eleutheropolis in the Negev inscriptions, see Di Segni 2006–2007:121.

[513 CE]), and Σολ[…], perhaps Σολομών, is one of the dedicators of the Central Church (*SEG* 38, No. 1597 [550s CE]). The name Σελαμανις appears in an invocation from Abu Sha'ar, Egypt (*SEG* No. 1434 [fourth–sixth centuries CE]). Wuthnow (1930:103–114, 171) regards various names, such as Σαλμανος, Σαλμανης, Σαλμων, Σαλαμωνος, Σαλμανος etc., as deriving from שלם (in fact, they could also be connected with Arabic Salam); Σαλαμων, Σαλαμαος, Σολωμων and Σολομων as being linked to שלמה; and Σελομανος and Σαλαμανος, to שלמן.

The name Barauchos, is also of a Semitic origin and has no exact parallels. The name Βάραχος occurs in a mosaic inscription at Nahariyya (*SEG* 37, No. 1514 [442/3 CE]); Βαράχων appears in an inscription commemorating an offering in the above-mentioned church complex near Gaza (*SEG* 50, No. 1482[442/3 CE]); Βαραχεος is a deacon in an inscription from a church at Ptolemais (*SEG* 42, No. 1462 [sixth century CE]), and a priest in a mid-sixth century CE inscription from the church at Khirbat 'Anab el-Kabir in Judea (Di Segni 2012b: No. 112); Βαρώχιος is one of the three names inscribed on a liturgical vessel from Attarothi northern Syria (*SEG* 48 No. 1850 [late sixth–early seventh centuries CE]). All these forms, as well as Βαραχος, Βαριχος etc., derive from the Hebrew word ברך (Wuthnow 1930:33).

Inscriptions 3 and 4: Refectory Hall 4

Inscription 3 is set within an intricate square frame, in the center of an elaborate mosaic carpet, decorating the refectory (Fig. 3; see Varga and Talgam, this volume: Fig. 5). Inscription 4 is inserted in a medallion (Fig. 4), incorporated in the frame enclosing the script: ΦΩΣ ΖΩΗ, φῶς ζωή (light life), its letters arranged in the shape of a cross. The reading of Inscription 3 is as follows:

ΕΠΙΤΟΥΘΕΟΦΙΛs
ΗΛΙΑΠΡΕΣΒsΚΑΙ
ΗΓΟΥΜΕΝΟΥΕΤΕΛΙΟ
ΘΗΤΟΥΤΟΤΟΕΡΓΟΝ
ΕΝΜsΓΟΡΠΕΟΥ
ΚZ̄ΙΝΔsĀΕΥΞsΥ
ΠΕΡΑΝΑΣΤΑΣΙΟΥΨΙs

ἐπὶ τοῦ θεοφιλ(εστάτου)
Ἠλία πρεσβ(υτέρου) καὶ
ἡγουμένου ἐτελιό-
θη τοῦτο τὸ ἔργον
ἐν μ(ηνὶ) Γορπέου
κζ ἰνδ(ικτιόνος) ά εὐξ(άμενος) ὑ-
πὲρ Ἀναστασίου ψι(χῆς)

Fig. 3. Inscription 3.

Fig. 4. Inscription 4.

Under the most god-loving Elias the priest and abbot this work was completed on the 27th of the month of Gorpiaios, in the first indiction, by a vow, for Anastasios' soul.

The date of this inscription is Gorpaios 27, that is, September 14. The script contains a number of spelling errors, which are a common phenomenon in Byzantine-period inscriptions: ἐτελιόθη instead of ἐτελιώθη, Γορπέου instead of Γορπιαίου and ψι(χῆς) instead of ψυ(χῆς).

A hegumen was the superior of a monastery. Beginning in the fifth century CE, it became customary for hegumens to be presbyters, and the two terms often refer to the same person in the inscriptions from

monasteries in Palestine (Meimaris 1986:239–240, Nos. 1204, 1205, 1213, 1215–1218, 1220–1222, 1226–1232).

The phrase ὑπὲρ Ἀναστασίου ψι(χῆς) refers to the consecration of a contribution toward the salvation of Anastasios' soul. In Byzantine-period inscriptions from the Near East, the expression ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας, 'for the salvation,' is followed by the names of living or dead people, sometimes explicitly indicating whether the named individuals are living or deceased, as for instance in the basilica at Ḥorbat Be'er Shema' (*SEG* 46, Nos. 2004; 2006; Madden 2014:43–45). The souls are usually referred to in funerary contexts (e.g., *SEG* 37, No. 1484; 43, No. 1020; 53 No. 1856; 56, Nos. 1978–1979; 57, No. 1816), but in some cases the term ψυχαί is used to denote the souls of the living, as for instance in the mosaic inscriptions from Ḥorbat Ḥadat (*SEG* 37, No. 1497 [fifth–sixth century CE]) and Khirbat ed-Deir (*SEG* 37, No. 1496 [sixth century CE]; Hirschfeld 1999). Several inscriptions from Syria, including ones appearing on mosaic panels in churches, commemorate contributions 'for the resting of the soul:' ὑπὲρ ἀναπαύσεος ψυχῆς (*SEG* 60, Nos. 1652 [fourth/mid-fifth CE]; 1678 [seventh century CE]). A noteworthy parallel for the Ḥura inscription is a mosaic medallion in one of the 'cells of Choziba,' a religious recluse adjacent to the coenobium of St. Georges' monastery at Wadi el-Qilt, founded in the fifth century CE. The Wadi el-Qilt inscription refers to 'the salvation and deliverance' (ὑπὲρ σωτ[ηρία]ς καὶ ἀν[αλή]μψεως) of 'donors and past-donors' (τῶν καρ[ποφο]ρησάντων κα[ὶ καρ]ποφο[ρο]ύν[των]), whose names 'the Lord knows' (Patrich 1990:216, Fig. 14), while its decorated frame contains the words φῶς ζωής, 'the light of life.' This text presumably relates to both deceased and living donors.

It can thus be deduced that Inscription 3 refers to a contribution for the construction of the monastery, made either by Anastasios, anxious about the salvation of his soul when still alive, or another person concerned with Anastasios' soul after his demise.

A parallel for the phrase ὑπὲρ … ψυχῆς, for [a person's name] soul, is found in an inscription from a Christian basilica in Macedonia (*SEG* 33, No. 508 [fifth–sixth centuries CE]): ὑπὲρ τῆς ψυχῆς Ἀρτεμίας ἐποίησεν Θεόδωρος.

Inscription 5: Narthex 7

This bilingual, Greek and Aramaic, inscription is set within a rectangular frame (2.50 × 0.65 m); both the script and the frame are traced in black tesserae, set against a white background (Fig. 5; see Varga and Talgam, this volume: Fig. 3). The Aramaic, Syro-Palestinian part of the inscription has been published previously (Vainstub, Sokoloff and Varga 2016). The script begins with the Greek text, followed by the Aramaic. Such an order is known from a number of other bilingual inscriptions from Palestine (Schick 1995:12; Di Segni and Naveh 1996; Puech 2003:323, No. 4), a noteworthy example of which is a Syriac inscription discovered at Tel Masos (Aharoni, Fritz and Kampinski 1975:1). In other inscriptions, the order of languages is reversed (e.g., Puech 2003:321, No. 3).

The Greek part was executed in two styles, with a transition in the word ΘΕΟΣEBs: the characters at the beginning of the script are twice as thick as those at its end; the second E

Fig. 5. Inscription 5.

of the word θεοσεβ(εστάτου) is square, in contrast to the lunate E and Σ of the rest of the inscription, and the form of B is also irregular, with part of the upper loop thicker than the rest of the letter; the characters in the first line are spaced much more loosely than in the second, and especially the third, lines. There are 21 characters in the first line, 30 in the second, and 13 in the short Greek beginning of the third line.

This inscription was inlaid by a professional, using reasonably fine characters at its beginning, and a fairly good level of Greek. The impression is that the mosaicist began his work planning to have at his disposal the entire panel, and eventually had to crowd part of the script into less space half-way through the work. A similar ad hoc modification, though on a much smaller scale, is notable in the peculiar addition of a name after the date in Inscription 2 in the monastery's prayer hall (see above).

ΕΓΕΝΕΤΟΤΟΕΡΓΟΝΤΟΥΤΩΕΠΙ
Η
ΤΟΥΘΕΟΣΕΒsΙΛΑΡΙΩΝΟΣΗΓΟΥΜΑΠΕΛs
ΙΝΔsΪΕΕΤΟΥ$\overline{\text{ΤϘΖ}}$

ἐγένετο τὸ ἔργον τοῦτω ἐπὶ
τοῦ θεοσεβ(εστάτου) Ἱλαριῶνος ἡγου(μένου) μη(νὸς) Ἀπελ(λαίου)
ἰνδ(ικτιόνος) ιε΄ ἔτου(ς) τϘζ΄

This work was done under the most god-fearing Hilarion the abbot, in the month of Apellaios, indiction 15, year 397.

The date of this inscription includes an indication of the month, Apellaios, which began on November 17. The year is reckoned by the Eleutheropolitan era, that is 596 CE, which fits the fifteenth year of indiction. A spelling irregularity, τοῦτω instead of τοῦτο, is quite common in contemporary inscriptions. The use of the Aramaic in a monastery where several officials bear Jewish names attests to a high proportion of Aramaic-speaking Jewish converts in the Christian community of the Negev.[4]

Conclusions

Among the five inscriptions uncovered in the Ḥura monastery, the one from the prayer hall explicitly refers to the complex as a monastery and mentions a deacon (*diakonos* in Greek), while another, found in the refectory, commemorates the work of a priest (*presbuteros*) and an abbot (*hegoumenos*). Some of the names occurring in the inscriptions are Semitic, while others are Greek; the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual composition of the dwellers of the coenobium at Ḥura is perhaps reflected in the decision to render one of the inscriptions in two languages, Greek and Syriac. The earliest inscription from the building can be dated by its script and style to the late fourth–fifth century CE, and the two later inscriptions provide precise dates, 575 and 596 CE.

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[4] For the use of Aramaic in the monasteries of Arabia and Palaestina Tertia, see Hamarneh 2012:282; for the international character of monasticism in Palestine, see Hirschfeld 2006:402); on the conversion of Jews to Christianity in the sixth century CE, see Stemberger 2006.

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