

## A GREEK INSCRIPTION FROM THE LATE ROMAN PERIOD IN BURIAL CAVE 4 AT BEN SHEMEN

LEAH DI SEGNI<sup>1</sup>

A Greek inscription was found in a rock-hewn arcosolium burial cave excavated in Ben Shemen (see Shmueli, Yanai, Peleg and Nagar, this volume: Plan 4). The inscription consists of four lines painted in red on a plastered section of the cave wall that collapsed from above the eastern arcosolium (Fig. 1). The script was enclosed within a double frame, also traced in red paint. The upper and left-hand sides of the frame are lost, as are the beginnings of all the lines and part of the first line.

Seemingly, an attempt was made to create a kind of *tabula ansata* by painting part of the narrow strip between the two frames in red, and leaving an unpainted triangle where the handle of the *tabula ansata* would have been. Although only the upper and lower right corners of the frame survive, the height of the *tabula* (39 cm) and the number of lines can be established with certainty. The width of the *tabula* in its present state is 58 cm (64 cm with the right-hand handle), and it was probably originally not much wider, for, as we shall see, only one

or two letters are missing at the beginning of lines 1 through 3.

The letters are regularly and elegantly traced, with notable serifs at the base, 5.5–6.5 cm high in lines 2 and 3, and slightly smaller (5–6 cm) in the last line. They belong to the tall and narrow alphabet that was in fashion especially during the second and third centuries CE, and to a lesser extent in the fourth century CE. In the first line there seems to be an abbreviation for καί, consisting of a *kappa* and a vertical, slightly diagonal stroke. This type of abbreviation is well attested in the first through the fourth centuries CE, and is only rarely found later (Avi-Yonah 1940:35–36, 74). Another abbreviation appears at the end of line 2, but this part of the inscription is badly preserved and the characters cannot be identified with certainty: after an *iota*, with a notable serif at the base (from which the paint dripped, forming a kind of tail), is the upper curve of a *sigma*, followed by a small semicircle. The latter may represent an abbreviation mark or, more likely,



Fig. 1. Greek inscription.

a lifted *sigma*. Both a lunate sign and a lifted letter were common abbreviation marks during the first through the fourth centuries CE (Avi-Yonah 1940:29–30, 39, 119–121).

The inscription reads:

. ΨΕΖΑΡΟΣ - - - ΟΚΚ/ΘΕΩ

. ΙΙCΤΑΤΕΥΓΙΕΝΩΝΚΤΙC

. . ΡΑCCEΑΜΑΠΟΜΠΥΛΙΑ

- - - - CΤΟΥΘΕΡΑΠΟΝΤΕC

Line 1: the first preserved letter may be an *omega* or an *omicron*.

[Ι]ωέζαρος [ - c. 5 letters - ]ος κ(αί) Θεω-  
[κ]τίστα τε· Ὑγιένων κτίσ(τη)ς  
[ἐπ]ρασε ἅμα Πομπυλία  
[τοῦ Χρ]ιστοῦ θεράποντες.

Translation:

Ioezer, [ - - ]os and Theo[c]tista; Hygienon,  
builder (of the tomb), made (this) together with  
Pompilia, servants of Christ.

Two different interpretations can be suggested for this text. One interpretation is that all the persons mentioned together were responsible for the hewing and decoration of the tomb. As a rule, the copulative particle τε is placed after a word, indicating that the word be joined to either the preceding or following word. Thus, in this case, it might join Ὑγιένων with the other three names. The singular form of the verb would not necessarily preclude this interpretation, as concordance with the last subject is not rare in inscriptions of this period. However, if Ὑγιένων was the last of a series of names, one would expect a copulative καί between the first and the second names, and another after τε. This is a possible interpretation, since the gap in line 1 may have contained an abbreviated καί, like the κ(αί) at the end of the line. However, no such abbreviation can be identified among the faint and unclear remnants of letters in the gap.

We therefore suggest an alternative interpretation. The first three names might refer to three persons buried in the tomb—probably the first three deceased who were buried in

the cave after it was adopted for burial in the Late Roman period—while Hygienon and Pompilia, in all likelihood a married couple, were responsible for decorating the burial cave and painting the inscription. Κτίστης means ‘founder’ or simply ‘builder’, not in the sense of a professional mason, but rather, as the person who initiated the construction, or, as in this case, the restructuring of the cave.<sup>2</sup> The use of this term, referring specifically to Hygienon, alongside a verb in the singular, favors the latter interpretation. Admittedly, in most epitaphs of the Late Roman and Byzantine periods the name of the deceased is accompanied by a funerary formula; however, simply mentioning the name, a practice common in earlier periods, is not unknown.

Hygienon—Ὑγιένων, Ὑγιαίνων—is a common Greek name (e.g., SEG 28, No. 1404; 30, No. 853; 41, No. 762; 42, No. 995; 44, No. 259; 45, No. 1162; Fraser and Matthews 1987:450; 2005:337; Osborne and Byrne 1994:437), as is Theoctista (usually spelled Θεοκτίστη: SEG 29, No. 1697; 44, No. 724; for the masculine Theoctistos, see SEG 40, No. 1074; 44, Nos. 724, 1663; Fraser and Matthews 1987:216; 1997:204; 2005:165; Osborne and Byrne 1994:218). On the other hand, Pompilia—spelled here with an *ypsilon* instead of an *iota*, a form of *iotacism*—is a Roman name. This is the *nomen* of the *gens Pompilia*, several members of which are known in the Republican period and in the first and second centuries CE.<sup>3</sup> It may have been a family name originating from a forefather, perhaps a Roman soldier who settled in the region.<sup>4</sup> The most surprising name of the series, however, is the first: Ioezer. There is no doubt about the reading Ἰωέζαρ (or Ἰοέζαρ), most likely in the Hellenized form Ἰωέζαρος.

The Jewish name Yo‘ezer or Yeho‘ezer appears in several variants. It appears in Greek as Ἰωαζαρ in the Septuagint (I Chron. 12:7), Ἰωάζαρος in Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* XVII, 164, 339; XVIII, 3, 26; *Life* 29), and as Ἰωεζρος or Ἰοεζρος on ossuaries (Rahmani 1994:240, 243–244, Nos. 793, 799–801; cf.

115, 237, 242, 244–245, Nos. 151, 783, 797, 802, 803). It appears in Hebrew as well, on ossuaries, ostraca and papyri (Ilan 2002:168–170). Popular in the Second Temple period, the name was still in use among Jews in the Late Roman period; a *hazan* called Yo‘ezer appears in an Aramaic dedicatory inscription from the synagogue of Horbat ‘Ammudim (Naveh 1978:40–42, No. 20). Nevertheless, it is surprising to find it in a Christian tomb, albeit an early one. The Lod Shephelah had a dense Jewish population until the Bar Kochba Revolt, after which it declined sharply (Kloner and Zissu 2003:267). The preservation of this name seems to indicate that not all the Jews perished, were deported or fled to other regions. Perhaps some, who had converted to Christianity and did not take part in the revolt, continued to live in the area, preserving family names for generations.

The epithet chosen by the couple Hygiaenon and Pompilia is interesting. The expression ‘servant of the Lord’ or ‘servant of Christ’ is very common in Christian inscriptions of the Byzantine period, but the term universally used is δούλος. The term used here, θεράπων, is more often accompanied by the name of a pagan god. In a Christian context it appears in texts of the third and fourth centuries CE, the latter ones referring most commonly to Constantine. Later on, the term is replaced by δούλος and becomes obsolete. The use of θεράποντες in the inscription indicates that it dates to an early period, when the idioms of Christian devotional formulas had not yet crystallized.<sup>5</sup>

Based on palaeography, the type of abbreviations used in the script, and the epithet θεράποντες τοῦ Χριστοῦ, the inscription in the tomb may be dated to the late third or early fourth centuries CE.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup> For this use of the term, see, for example, *SEG* 16, No. 805 (Adraa, 259/60 CE, building of the city wall by the provincial governor); *SEG* 20, No. 472b (Hulda, fourth–fifth centuries CE, blessing to the builders in a structure first believed to be a Samaritan synagogue, now interpreted as a Jewish [or Samaritan?] winepress: Kloner 2006; Tal 2009:327); *SEG* 37, No. 1487 (Shiqmona, sixth century CE, blessing to the builder of a church); Mittmann 1966 (Gadara, sixth century CE, blessing to the builder of a bathhouse).

<sup>3</sup> For the Pompilii of the Republican period, see Dahlmann 1952; Gundel 1952; Münzer 1952. For the Pompilii of the Imperial period, see Petersen 1966:251–252, I 477; Petersen and Wachtel 1998:304; Wachtel 1999:107–108, R 173. For other Pompilii, see, for instance, *ILS*: Nos. 1111, 1902, 3422 add., 6598, 9237.

<sup>4</sup> As a matter of fact, there is a similar name in Greek which is written with an *ypsilon*: Pompylos. However, only one case is known, in Hellenistic Greece (Ziegler 1952), and a connection with our Pompilia is unlikely.

<sup>5</sup> The anonymous reviewer of this paper suggested that the formula τοῦ Χριστοῦ θεράποντες was chosen instead of the more common δούλοι τοῦ Χριστοῦ because it formed half of a hexameter, while δούλοι had no metrical potential. He therefore argues that one cannot offer an early date for the inscription based on this choice of words. However, two counter-arguments can be made here. First, although metric epitaphs were not uncommon in Palestine in the second through the fourth centuries CE, they later become very rare (see Merkelbach and Stauber 2002: 310–368). Thus, viewing the inscription, or part of it, as an epigram entails postulating an early date. Second, the words indeed form the second half of a hexameter, but the first half is missing (in the preceding words ἔπρασσε ἄμα Πομπυλία, the two *alphas* of ἄμα are short, and the last *alpha* of Πομπυλία is long). Hence, the words τοῦ Χριστοῦ θεράποντες would constitute a metric clause—a practice adopted by the best classical rhetors, but hardly likely to be found in the cultural toolkit of a peasant in late-antiquity Palestine. Furthermore, I cannot recall any example of this practice in Palestinian burial inscriptions, and without the support of such parallels, I find it hard to credit Hygienon with such sophistication of taste.

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