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The Painted Garden of Coptos

A century ago, two Greek inscriptions of the early third century of our era were found in Coptos. The better preserved of them found its way to the Cairo Museum ⁽¹⁾; the more fragmentary was found by Flinders Petrie during his excavations of Coptos and published by D.G. Hogarth as part of Petrie's excavation report ⁽²⁾. The connection of the two was quickly realized ⁽³⁾, and they have been republished together in works like *IGRR I* 1179-1180 and André Bernand's *Les portes du désert* (Paris 1984) nos. 86-87 (where full lemmas can be found) ⁽⁴⁾. The more complete of these texts (*I.Portes* 86) recorded the reconstruction and painting of a κῆπος, the fragment (*I.Portes* 87) the (re?)construction and painting of a ναός ⁽⁵⁾. The dedicant was one Marcus Aurelius Apollonios, *beneficiarius*; the date AD 219, under the prefect Geminius Chrestus and the *praefectus montis* Valerius Apolinarius ⁽⁶⁾. The portions of the inscriptions concerning the objects of work are as follows:

(1) Nothing is said in the publications about how it was acquired.

(2) *Koptos* (London 1896) 35 no. XI and pl. XXVIII, 11. No information is given about the place of finding; as the report mixes together artifacts found in excavation, those seen in houses, and those bought in the town, nothing can be concluded about how Petrie came to have the inscription, which is now in the Petrie Museum, University College London, under no. 14766. I am grateful to John Tait for taking the photograph reproduced here and to the Petrie Museum for permission to publish it.

(3) By Pierre Jouguet, according to S. de Ricci, *APF* 2 (1903) 449.

(4) The lemma to 87 (p. 243), however, gives the plate number in Petrie's report incorrectly as XVIII. Bernand apparently did not see the actual inscription, nor did he give any reproduction of it except the facsimile of Hogarth. As the reading of the prefect's name will come into question below, I think it useful to print a photograph of the inscription.

(5) And of another item, τὴν [ca 10] ἰθὺν, for which no editor has proposed any supplement and for which I also cannot offer any restoration. The lacuna indeed makes it unclear if this is the object of ἐξωγράφησεν, of ἐποίησεν, or something lost; it is an easy but unverifiable conjecture that the composer or lapicide, by no means infallible (as we shall see), has made some error.

(6) Presumably the latter was mentioned because Coptos stood at the terminus of routes into the desert and Apollonios had served in the military force attached to the region under the *praefectus montis*. His name is given in 87, as we shall see, as Claudius Apolinarius. This is a fairly common combination of names at the equestrian level and in the papyri generally, where Valerius Apolinarius is very rare. But the man himself is not demonstrably attested elsewhere.

I.Portes 86.9-11

τὸν κῆπον ἐκ θεμελίου ἀνω-
κοδόμησεν καὶ ἐξωγράφησεν σὺν τοῖς
φυτοῖς, ἐποίησεν ἐκ τοῦ ἰδίου.

I.Portes 87.3-5

τὸν ναὸν οἰκο[δόμησεν καὶ]
ἐξωγράφησεν τὴν - - - - -
θιν, ἐποίησεν ἐκ τοῦ [ἰδίου].

The question of what a κῆπος meant in this context was soon raised, by A. Reinach and R. Weill⁽⁷⁾. Commenting on the word κηπίον in another inscription (now *I.Portes 74*), they wrote, “Il s’agit apparemment d’une cour ou salle portant ce nom parce que les plantes étaient sculptées ou peintes sur les murs formant au dieu un jardin impérissable comme lui (on pense à celui de Thotmès III à Karnak). C’est peut-être le même jardin que, en 219, M. Aurelius Apollônios se vante d’avoir entièrement reconstruit et décoré”.

André Bernand, however, preferred a more literal understanding of the text; as a result, he displayed some discomfort with the vocabulary of the inscription: “On la [ἐκ θεμελίου ἀνωκοδόμησεν] trouve surtout utilisée quand il s’agit de bâtiments que l’on reconstruit depuis les fondations. Mais il peut s’agir d’un jardin construit en terrasses ou protégé par des murs ou des digues. L’expression peut également s’appliquer à des travaux de terrassement”. More problematic still was ἐξωγράφησεν, as the notion of painting seemed applicable to gardens and plants only with some difficulty. Bernand was driven to suppose that the verb had to be “pris dans le sens général d’‘orner’”. Jean Bingen, in reviewing the volume of Bernand, raised a point similar to that of Reinach and Weill; he wondered if κῆπος “ne désignerait-il pas un enclos dont les murs ont été décorés de plantes peintes⁽⁸⁾”.

The problem of how to interpret the reconstruction and painting of a garden was brought back into view a decade later by Bernard Boyaval in a recent article⁽⁹⁾. Boyaval, following Reinach, Weill, and Bingen, argues that we should understand the “garden” as a wall bearing a representation

(7) “Parthénios fils de Paminis, ‘Prostatès d’Isis à Koptos’”, *ASAE* 12 (1912) 1-24 at 23 n.2.

(8) *CE* 59 (1984) 367.

(9) “Un ‘jardin’ d’Égypte”, *CE* 69 (1994) 147-51.



I. Portes 87 (University College London, Petrie Museum, inv. 14766).

Photograph courtesy of W.J. Tait.

of a garden, and that the crucial phrase should be translated “a reconstruit (le mur) depuis ses fondations et (y) a peint le jardin, avec ses végétations”.

We must, I think, recognize Boyaval’s merit in his insistence on facing the problem posed by ἐξωγράφησεν and in his decision to construe it straightforwardly; one does not “paint” a garden by planting colorful trees or flowers. But much of the rest of the argumentation by which he reaches his ultimate conclusion appears to me to be ill-founded or in direct contradiction to what we know about gardens in Roman Egypt. I propose, therefore, to examine those arguments and to see if it is possible to find an interpretation of the inscriptions that takes account of all of the evidence.

(1) There are not very many κῆποι mentioned in the Greek documents of Egypt, says Boyaval, basing himself on works by G. Husson⁽¹⁰⁾ and M. Carroll-Spillecke⁽¹¹⁾. Moreover, almost all of the mentions come from the Fayum, and none is certainly urban. Egyptian cities were too closely packed to allow gardens inside them. Now it is certainly true that evidence for gardens inside the cities of Roman Egypt is very limited, but it is very misleading to suggest that gardens were in general few⁽¹²⁾. References in the papyri to κῆποι and παράδεισοι (and to other terms designating more specific varieties of these) are very numerous. And even city gardens, although not perhaps common, did exist. The “grammarian’s complaint” (*P.Oxy.* XLVII 3366 = *P.Coll.Youtie* II 66) mentions in lines 63-64 that the grammarian had been given for his support κῆπον τῆς πόλεως ἔνδον τ’ ἐ[ι]χῶν ὄντα καλούμενον Παράδ’ ἐΐσον Δικτύου σὺν τοῖς ὄψις’ [[ἄλλοις]] φυτοῖς καὶ [τ]ῷ πρὸς ἀρδείαν ὕδ[α]τι. Whether ἔνδον τ’ ἐ[ι]χῶν means “inside the walls” (sc. of Oxyrhynchos) or “walled” does not much matter for our purposes, as it was a city garden in either case⁽¹³⁾. This was, to be sure, a valuable property (2400 dr. a year income), and one would not wish to suggest that such things were commonplace. But they were not impossible for someone capable of paying for the construction of a chapel. In any case, the question here is what was possible in a temple, not in a residential district.

(2) Boyaval proceeds to deny the possibility that the garden in question was outside the city proper in the surrounding countryside. Here he notes the connection of this inscription with that of the *naos* and the likelihood (universally admitted by commentators) that they belonged to a single complex. “Or, il est évident que cette chapelle n’avait pas été construite dans une zone inondable. Il fallait qu’elle fût accessible, en tous temps, à

(10) *Oikía* (Paris 1983).

(11) *Kῆπος, der antike griechische Garten* (Munich 1989).

(12) And Husson does not say this, despite Boyaval’s claims; she says only (147) that there are few mentions of them *in connection with houses*: “Cependant si les termes κῆπος, κηπίον, παράδεισος ont de nombreuses attestations papyrologiques, nous n’avons que trois textes, tous du III^e siècle av. J.-C., mentionnant explicitement un jardin comme rattaché à une habitation”.

(13) Boyaval indeed denies, as we shall see, that gardens were normally walled; this papyrus can thus be either, as one chooses, the refutation only of his point about urban gardens or also that of the point about walls (below, point 3). The editor of the papyrus, although far from confident about the choice, leans slightly in his translation (“within (the?) walls”) and note (“But gardens within the city limits were presumably rarer and more profitable”, *P.Coll.Youtie* II 66.63n.) toward taking the phrase as meaning inside the walls of the city.

pieds secs". It would follow from this reasoning that no temple had a garden. But this is not the case. The longest chapter of Jean-Claude Hugonot's study of Egyptian gardens in antiquity ⁽¹⁴⁾ concerns temples, and there is abundant evidence to show that temples did indeed have gardens, dry feet or no. Boyaval's point actually seems to rest on a fundamental misconception about the nature of Egyptian gardens:

(3) "En effet, comment imaginer que, dans cette vallée du Nil où les terres basses sont les plus appréciées parce qu'elles sont les plus accessibles aux eaux de la crue, un jardinier de Coptos ait édifié "terrasses", "murs" ou "digues", qui auraient justement barré la route à l'inondation?" If the garden were a wheat field, this objection would perhaps be significant, although even for arable land the Egyptians tried to control the Nile's flood. But gardens were not on inundated basin land; they were on higher land, particularly on levees, and required artificial watering ⁽¹⁵⁾: hence the universal references in leases of such properties to cisterns, wells, waterwheels, and more generally to means of irrigation, just as in the grammarian's garden. Such vineyards and orchards were capital-intensive operations, requiring security both for the valuable crops and for capital improvements to the land like waterwheels. They were indeed commonly walled, usually with mud-brick or mud walls, just as they are today; any visitor to rural Egypt will have seen numerous such installations, often with a reed palisade above the mud. The walls not only provided security but helped where necessary to keep out wind-blown sand. Such walling is attested at least as early as Dynasty 3 ⁽¹⁶⁾.

It is ironic that Boyaval objects — quite correctly — to Bernand's attempt to avoid the literal meaning of ζωγραφέω ⁽¹⁷⁾, only to fall himself into insisting on a non-literal meaning for κήπος and φυτό. Nor does he discuss the supposed use of ζωγραφέω to refer to something *of which* an image is painted, rather than the physical object ⁽¹⁸⁾. Such usage is

(14) *Le jardin dans l'Égypte ancienne* (Europäische Hochschulschriften, ser. 38, Bd. 27, Frankfurt 1989). Temples are dealt with in chapter 2, pp. 21-85.

(15) Cf. most recently J.G. Manning, "Irrigation Terminology in the Hauswaldt Papyri", *Les problèmes institutionnels de l'eau en Égypte ancienne et dans l'Antiquité méditerranéenne* (Colloque AIDEA Vogüé 1992), éd. B. Menu (Bibliothèque d'Étude 110, Cairo 1995) 261-71 at 263-64.

(16) Cf. Manning, *op. cit.*, 264-65.

(17) This inscription is, significantly, the only attestation cited by *LSJ* s.v. ζωγραφέω for a meaning "adorn".

(18) It is worth pointing out that neither Bingen nor Reinach and Weill made such a claim, for they both suppose the painting of an enclosure, and it is the enclosure, and not the image on it, to which κήπος refers in their view.

common enough in literature, but the verb's usage in building inscriptions, commonly paired with some verb of construction, refers to the physical object, usually a building, the walls of which have been painted with images. This usage is consistent over more than a thousand years. An inscription from the early Roman period from Berenike in Cyrenaica, for example, reads ἐκονίασεν τοῦ ἀνφιθεάτρου τ[ὸ] ἔδ]αφος καὶ τοῦ[ς] τοίχους ἐξωγράφησεν⁽¹⁹⁾. Six centuries later the same usage occurs in an underground chamber at Sidon: ἐκονεάθη καὶ ἐξωγραφήθη ὁ τόπος οὗ[τος]⁽²⁰⁾. The chamber in fact was just as the inscription said; the editor reports, "In eius [the chamber's] parietibus pavimento candido inductis et figurae variae rubrica pictae visuntur et titulus". And six centuries later still, in 1244/5, a church in the Argolid ἀνεκτίσ(θη) ἐκ βάθρων καὶ ἀνεξωγραφή(θη)⁽²¹⁾. The idiom is found at least as late as 1332⁽²²⁾. The other verb used by Apollonios, ἀνοικοδομέω, is even more closely tied to buildings. Boyaval's rendering of it is still more implausible, because it requires a vast elision of sense, resulting in the tell-tale insertion of parenthetical words into his translation.

The vocabulary of Apollonios' inscription thus stands in a long tradition of building inscriptions and cannot be arbitrarily severed from this series. Neither Bernand's attempts to avoid ζωγραφέω nor Boyaval's to avoid ἀνοικοδομέω, κῆπος and φυτά, then, seem satisfactory. An interpretation that takes all of the evidence seriously must start from the generally accepted point that we have two inscriptions, put up at the same time and as part of the same complex, reconstructed at the expense of the same individual⁽²³⁾. It had two parts, a ναός and a κῆπος with φυτά;

(19) G. Lüderitz, *Corpus jüdischer Zeugnisse aus der Cyrenaica* (Wiesbaden 1983) 149 no. 70, line 11; similarly in line 24, τὸ ἐδ]α[φ]ος ἐκονίασεν καὶ τὸ ἀμφιθέατρον καὶ ἐξωγράφησεν τοῖς ἰδίοις δαπανήμασιν. The text is reproduced from J. Reynolds in J.A. Lloyd, ed., *Excavations at Sidi Khrebish Benghazi (Berenike)* 1 (Suppl. to *Libya Antiqua* 5, 1977) 245-47 no. 18.

(20) *CIG* IV 9153, omitting the brackets used by Kirchoff to indicate letters where the copy showed traces but was defective.

(21) *Travaux et Mémoires* 9 (1985) 311 no. 54 (Kranidion, Church of the Holy Trinity).

(22) In 1329 a church in the province of Lecce: ἀνοικ[οδομήθη] καὶ [ἐξωγ]ραφίθη ὁ πάνσεπτος ναός, *RendLinc* 8 ser. 37 (1983) 55-58. And in 1332 the chapel of the archangels Michael and Gabriel in Desphine (south slopes of Parnassus): ἀνακαινίσθη ἐκ βάθρων καὶ ἐξωγραφίθη ὁ πάνσεπτος ναός οὗτος, in *Δελτίον τῆς Χριστιανικῆς Ἀρχαιολογικῆς Ἑταιρείας* 4 ser. 3 (1962-63 [1964]) 176-77.

(23) This point seems secure enough, given the similarities of names, the title *beneficiarius* (abbreviated in both by a beta with a diagonal stroke through it), the verbs, the use of ἐκ τοῦ ἰδίου, the similarity of overall format, and the ivy leaves flanking the text ἐπ' ἀγαθῶ in the last line. But there are some differences between the inscriptions worth

despite Boyaval's remarks to the contrary, the latter term almost certainly refers mainly to (fruit) trees in such a context, just as it does in the grammarian's complaint ⁽²⁴⁾. And the work on the complex could be summarized with two verbs, (ἀν)οικοδομέω and ζωγραφέω. The garden must be an item of construction. The logical question for us is, what sort of a garden, if any, might an Egyptian temple of the Roman period have?

The answer may be found in the work of Hugonot mentioned earlier. Egyptian sanctuaries of the Graeco-Roman period followed architectural patterns originating in much earlier periods, and the use of plantings in them is also consistent from pharaonic times through the Roman-era temples. Apart from the use of trees to line the processional dromos, or to flank a facade (neither of which, perhaps, deserves the term "garden"), gardens in the temples were found in one of two principal locations, around the sacred lake and in courtyards placed between a pylon and a sanctuary ⁽²⁵⁾. Although larger sanctuaries certainly had sacred lakes, entrance courts were virtually universal ⁽²⁶⁾. Hugonot gives descriptions and plans of two such temples in use in the Roman period, the Ramesside chapels at Medinet Habu and the temple of Chnum at Elephantine ⁽²⁷⁾. The latter is particularly striking for our purposes; the pylon led to a courtyard, surrounded on all sides by columned porticoes, and itself ending in the door into the temple proper. The courtyard had two rows of trees flanking the route from pylon to temple, growing through openings in the pavement, and the remains of a date palm have been found in one of these slots. One hardly needs an inundation to maintain a dozen date-palms in such a courtyard. I can see no reason that Apollonios should

pointing out. (1) In *I.Portes* 87 the dedicant adds to the names M. Aurelius Apollonis the name Σε[ουήρος]. (2) The ἐπίτροπος ὄρου in 86 is named Valerius Apolinarius. In 87, A. Bernand "corrected" the unanimous reading of Hogarth, de Ricci, and those who copied them, for the first name of this man, ΛΑΡΔΙΩ, to ΑΛΕΞΙΩ, on the basis of 86. But the original actually reads ΙΛΑΥΔΙΩ; the upsilon is perfectly clear although damaged at the top. The prefect is thus Κ[λ]αυδίω Ἀπολ[ινάριω]. (Before his name presumably print καὶ, not ἐπὶ, as in 86.) (3) The drafter or lapicide of 87 omitted the prefix ἀν- with οἰκοδόμησεν. All of these do not, in my view, add up to enough to call Jouguet's connection of the two into doubt, but they are not trivial.

(24) Cf. Parsons' translation, "plants (trees)".

(25) There may also have been gardens for medicinal herbs and other substances useful for the work of the temple.

(26) Cf. also the plantings shown on the reconstructions of Upper Egyptian temples in S. Aufrère, J.-Cl. Golvin, and J.-Cl. Goyon, *L'Égypte restituée 1: Sites et temples de Haute Égypte* (Paris 1991) 222, 236-37, 261.

(27) Hugonot, *op. cit.*, 53-54. Hugonot notes (53) that this type of arrangement goes back at least to the Middle Kingdom.

not have referred to this courtyard as a κῆπος, planted with its φυτά, the date-palms ⁽²⁸⁾. There were other courtyards with trees inside some of the larger sanctuaries (Hugonot, *op. cit.*, 55-58), but these are less standard and predictable in a smaller chapel than the entrance court.

Probably Apollonios' chapel was a humbler affair than these, but its courtyard will certainly have been walled, and it is hard to quarrel with the appropriateness of ἀνοικοδομέω ἐκ θεμελίου for such a garden; the walls were part of the garden, an essential part of it. But what of painting? To this there are two answers. First (and more likely) Egyptian temples were extensively painted in antiquity, even though only small patches of this paint are still visible today. Portico ceilings were painted with stars, reliefs were painted, hieroglyphic inscriptions were painted, column capitals were painted, doorways were painted ⁽²⁹⁾, and so forth. The *naos* rebuilt by Apollonios was painted, and most likely the pylon and courtyard or garden enclosure were painted to match. It is likely enough that the painting was not new, and that what Apollonios paid for was repainting of existing reliefs and inscriptions ⁽³⁰⁾.

Secondly, it is indeed possible that there were paintings of trees and plants on some of the walls of the enclosure. Such painting is well known in Egypt, and the most detailed paintings of plants at Amarna were precisely in the chambers adjacent to actual gardens ⁽³¹⁾. That the effects of the actual plantings and the represented plantings could be mutually reinforcing should hardly surprise us. To be sure, representations could substitute for the actual thing when necessary (in Theban tombs this is normal), but it was because of necessity, not desire, when such substitution took place. In a temple courtyard, there was no reason not to have actual palm trees.

In sum, Apollonios' κῆπος was probably a courtyard of the chapel he rebuilt, and it is likely to have been both planted with fruit trees and at least partly painted, just as the chapel to which it gave access was painted.

Roger S. BAGNALL

(28) These are not the only possible trees, of course; dum-palms and sycomores are equally possible. But date-palms are probably the most successful and remunerative of these.

(29) Cf. Reinach and Weill, *op. cit.*, 17-18, on a painted doorway at Coptos.

(30) Reinach and Weill (*op. cit.*, 23 n.2) do in fact speculate that this was the same garden as that of *I.Portes* 74, some three-quarters of a century earlier.

(31) Hugonot, *op. cit.*, 94-103.