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Roger S. Bagnall

## THE LAST DONKEY SACRIFICE AT DEIR EL-BAHARI

THE PROSKYNEMA INSCRIPTIONS of ironworkers from Hermonthis published by Adam Łajtar in 1991<sup>1</sup> have become basic texts in the study of continuing fourth-century pagan cultic activity in Upper Egypt.<sup>2</sup> In studying the fourth niche from the south in the west wall of the upper terrace in the Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahari, Łajtar found nine inscriptions with a high degree of commonality in paleography and form, all written in red ochre. Four of them were well enough preserved for copies and texts to be given, and a fifth was described as very similar in character. The four preserved ones all record the presence at Deir el-Bahari of the πλήθος σιδηρουργῶν Ἑρμώνθεως, the college of ironworkers of Hermonthis, on an occasion that is, as far as we can see, always on the first two days of the month of Tybi (27–28 December in regular years,

<sup>1</sup> “Proskynema Inscriptions of a Corporation of Iron-Workers from Hermonthis in the Temple of Hatshepsut in Deir el-Bahari: New Evidence for Pagan Cults in Egypt in the 4th cent. AD”, *JJP* 21 (1991), pp. 53–70.

<sup>2</sup> See, e. g., D. FRANKFURTER, *Religion in Roman Egypt*, Princeton 1998, p. 64: “Throughout much of the fourth century a small guild of ironworkers sought out the intrinsic holiness of the temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri, a good twenty kilometers from their homes in Hermonthis, to leave their testimonial devotions on the walls and to immolate donkeys as part of the traditional New Year festival of the overcoming of Seth.”

28–29 December in leap years). On this occasion, the inscriptions record, this group sacrificed a donkey “before the god.” Whether this god was one of those venerated in this place earlier in the Roman period, Amenhotep son of Hapu or Imhotep (Imouthes), or instead some other god for whom donkey sacrifices were appropriate, Łajtar leaves open.

Of the four inscriptions published,<sup>3</sup> one (No. 1) has a clear date by the consuls to 27–28 December, 324. Another, no. 2, has a date to Tybi of the “6th new indiction” (5<sup>th</sup> νέας ἱνδικτικῆς τῆς [ο]ν[ο]ς Τυβ[ι]). Łajtar proposes 333–334 and 347–348 as possible 6th indictions. No. 4 has no surviving date. The date of no. 3 is the most difficult. It is printed by Łajtar as follows:

15<sup>th</sup> ἱνδικτίονος. Τυβί α̅ καὶ β̅. [ὕ]πατει[ας]  
τῶν δε[σπ]οτῶν ἡ[μ]ῶν [Κωνσταν]τ[ίου Αὐγ(ούστου) τὸ θ'  
καὶ Ἰουλιανοῦ τοῦ]  
ἐπιφαν[ε]στάτου Καί[σαρος τὸ β'. γε]νόμεθα κτλ.

This is taken, with considerable hesitation, to indicate a date to 27–28 (?) December 357. A date a quarter-century later than the other texts is, as Łajtar himself remarked, inherently rather surprising, as these seem to involve the same people (Hates son of Horion and Theophanes are the two most clearly mentioned individuals; other names are less well preserved but again give the impression of being the same group) and were written in the same handwriting. This tentative date has, however, been not been challenged, and the text risks becoming evidence for post-Constantinian pagan cultic activity in the Theban region.

Despite the absence of challenge, the dating formula cannot stand as printed in the edition. Not only is the continuing appearance over a third of a century (at least) of the same individuals and same writer surprising and demographically implausible, but the printed text is irreconcilably at odds with Łajtar’s published hand-copy of the inscription, reproduced here. Łajtar acknowledges this disparity (61, note to lines 1–3), and indeed

<sup>3</sup> The texts are reprinted as SB xx 14508–14511 (the one under discussion here is 14510) and as SEG 41 (1991) 1612–1615 (our text at 1614). In both cases the editor’s question mark with the date is recorded.

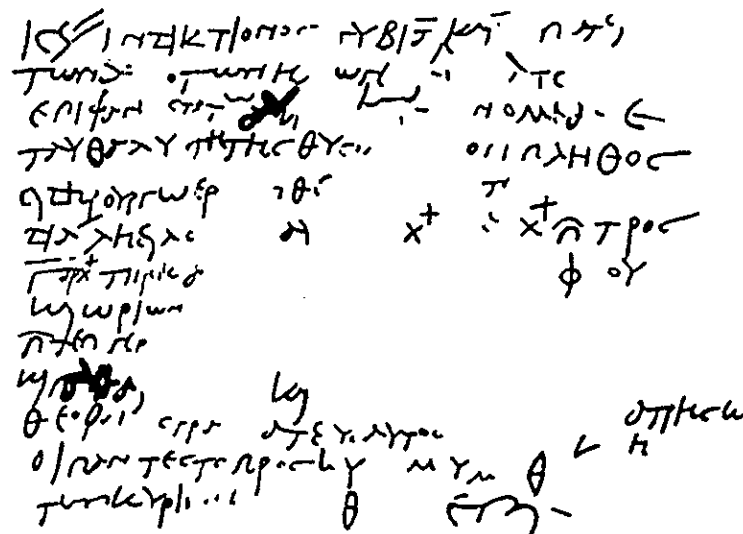


Fig. 1. *Proskynema*-inscription from Deir el-Bahari (Łajtar, JJP 21 [1991], pp. 53–70, fig. 3)

(n. 11) suggests the possibility that there is an error of the writer or that there is a mistake in his hand-copy. That copy, however, is extremely accurate, as I was able to verify by inspection of the inscriptions on February 2, 2004. (I am grateful to Dr. Zbigniew Szafrński, director of the Polish mission at Deir el-Bahari, for facilitating my work.)

The inscription stands, as Łajtar indicated, just inside the doorway of the niche, on a single block which is damaged at upper right to the extent of the loss of a few centimeters of lines 1 and 2. As it is now set in place, there is a gap of 3 cm or so before the beginning of the next block, that on which the unpublished inscription (Łajtar, pp. 54–55, n. 7) stands. There is thus room at the right for only a handful of letters between the end of the preserved text and the end of the available space. The 24+ letters required for Łajtar’s restoration in line 2 (even allowing the abbreviation of Αὐγ(ούστου) and not counting any numeral markings after the iteration number) exceed by 17 letters the space occupied by text and

restorations in lines 1 and 3. That is, such a restoration would exceed by 50 percent the line-width of the inscription and run well into the inscription at its right, which on Łajtar's view would have been in place already. There is no reason for the scribe to have done such a thing and it is improbable that he did. So indeed Łajtar himself remarked in the course of expressing his doubts about his restoration ("Such a reading would make line 2 too long.").

Moreover, it can be seen that the remains of lines 2 and 3 as drawn by Łajtar do not agree with his text. In line 2, the space after ἡ[μ]ῶν is too short for the restoration proposed, and the letter after the surviving *tau* is not *iota* as required, but lunate and surely *omicron*. (I see traces of another somewhat rounded letter after it, perhaps *upsilon* or *sigma*.) In line 3, the drawing shows a raised *omega* abbreviating ἐπιφαν[ε]στατ. One would thus more naturally print ἐπιφαν[ε]στάτω(ν). Again, following this there is space for 7–8 letters at most before [γε]νόμεθα, while the restoration requires 11. Moreover, the traces as drawn do not correspond to the letters just before γε[ν]όμεθα.

The data furnished so far by the hand-copy are the following: (1) we are in the consulate of plural emperors; (2) the plural form of ἐπιφανέστατος would suggest that the consuls were both Caesars; at a minimum, the writer thought that one of them was; (3) the date is Tybi 1–2, thus 27–28 December in a normal year; (4) somehow both emperors' names must fit into line 2, but very little space is available for them; (5) the indiction number is 16.

There is no date at which all of these criteria can be met. All except the last might be met by December 324, in which Crispus and Constantinus Caesars were consuls, both for the third time, provided that the emperors' names were abbreviated and that the iteration numeral (III would have been given just once) was placed at the end after Καισάρων. To this there are, even apart from the fact that the indiction numeral would be 13 rather than 16 (= 1 of a new cycle; the reading of 16, 15, is certain), two objections. One is that the pertinent inscription of this group from 324 is extant, no. 1. It is not obvious why it would be duplicated. The other is that although at a pinch the traces might be compatible with [Κ]ρί[σ]του (the left side of the pi would be very difficult), and space might then be found for καί, the entirety of Κωνσταντίνου, however

abbreviated, would then have to be fitted in where other lines have already ended. Why would the scribe not instead begin the name on the next line? And of course the article τῶν would have to have been omitted before the epithet, even though the same writer included it in no. 1 (where, indeed, this pair of consuls receives the additional epithet εὐγε-νεστάτων). One might suppose that the name of the second consul was simply omitted, but we then have supposed two errors, and omission of the name of the second consul opens up other possible years.

In the 16th indiction itself we would be in December, 327. The consuls of 327, Fl. Constantius and Valerius Maximus, were not emperors, δεσπότες, nor Caesars. Even if their names could be fitted into line 2 (Κωνσταντίου καὶ Μαξίμου τῶν at 24 letters is about 10 letters too long), we would have to accept a blunder on the part of the writer which the name Constantius is hardly enough to excuse. The copy also does not make this an easy reading to fit into the surviving traces. A date to 327 would thus require a more complex error. Nor would the supposition that the date was a few days later in Tybi, in January, 328, help matters, as the consuls of that year also were private persons and were not yet known in the early part of January even in the Arsinoite, cf. CSBE<sup>2</sup> 181 s. a. 328. The same problem arises if we suppose that the Hermionites were using the peculiar reckoning known from the first years of this indiction cycle in the Hermopolite, in which indiction 16 was equated to indiction 2, which would again give us a date in 328 (cf. CSBE<sup>2</sup> 16–17).

The next 16th indiction brings us to 342, where we do in fact have a pair of imperial consuls, Constantius Aug. III and Constans Aug. II. At this point we must observe that despite the presumption created by ἐπιφανέστατος as an epithet, the traces immediately following it do not clearly indicate a reading of Καισάρων, as indeed Łajtar's dotting of the first three letters and bracketing of the rest shows. The hand-copy correctly shows a heavy over-writing with what might well be an alpha seemingly the sign of a correction by the writer. What follows looks compatible with either υγ or αι; that is, we might have Καισάρων (or an abbreviated form of same) corrected to Αὐγούστων (again, perhaps abbreviated). Could the writer have erroneously first described Constantius and Constans as Caesars (which they had been until 337), then corrected this to Augusti without deleting the epithet usual with the lower rank? This

solution has some attractions, but it remains difficult to square with the need to get *Κωνσταντίου τὸ γ' καὶ Κώνσταντος τὸ β'*, 32 letters plus numeral markers, into a space suitable for half that. This solution also, to be sure, requires an error for which I cannot cite any parallel. Of course, if one once grants the possibility of Caesars corrected to Augusti, 327 may also come back into play if one can swallow an error of emperors for private persons.

The objections to 357 have already been set out above. That year is as difficult to reconcile with the remains as any of the above and has in addition the liability of a significantly greater time lag in which the inscription's "team" must be kept together.

One of the consistent findings of chronological studies in documents from late antique and Byzantine Egypt over the last quarter-century has been the greater reliability of the indiction number than any other single indicator. But so far pursuing it in the present case has led us to no solution that does not require significant errors on the part of a writer who in no. 1 seemed able to handle a consular date with competence. We are constrained, of course, by the fact that there could not have been a 16th indiction before the first year of the second cycle, or 327; and we should try to use the rule of economy in dating this dossier so as to make it occupy no larger a time-span than necessary. Even if the numeral 16 is not precise, it should not be greatly mistaken. Moreover, other consulates with two imperial consuls leave us in the same quandary as those already discussed. They give us much too long a text in line 2, where two names must stand. Indiction 3 (329), Constantinus Aug. VIII and Constantinus Caesar IV, thus has no greater attractions than those we have already considered. The next imperial consulate is in 339, Constantius Aug. II and Constantinus Aug. I, in an indiction 13. The difficulties of this consulate are similar to those already seen for other years.

We seem to face a problem to which it is impossible to offer any solution not involving significant error on the part of the writer of the inscription. It appears, in particular, that we must assume that the writer omitted one of the consuls entirely from line 2. There just is not space on any hypothesis for any plausible pair to be written there, and we have no warrant for assuming very drastic abbreviation. Furthermore, the correction in line 3 indicates that the writer did realize at some point that he

had made an error about the appropriate terminology for the status of the consul(s). The unity of this little corpus surely suggests that no. 2 belongs to December, 332, and the 16th indiction of no. 3 ought to be 327–328. If so, we will be driven to accept that the blunder the scribe made concerned the imperial status ascribed to the first consul, Fl. Constantius.<sup>4</sup> From the remarks above, the depth of confusion involved in this hypothesis is clear. But no other year offers any lesser degree of error. That is not a comforting conclusion, but I have been unable to find any reading that offers any greater conformity to normal usage.

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