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Roger S. Bagnall

Christianity in the Smyrna Graffiti

When I gave the first, preliminary account of the graffiti in the Basilica in the agora of ancient Smyrna, in my 2005 Sather Lectures (published in 2011), I provided a date range for the basement space in which they were inscribed on the basis of information provided in 2003 by the architect who was working with the excavation, Didier Laroche.¹ Because the excavation had not been conducted stratigraphically, there was no direct evidence for the dates of construction, modification, and reconstruction of the Basilica. Crucial to the chronology was evidence for hasty reconstruction after severe damage in an earthquake, which was quite reasonably taken by Laroche to be the famous one of 177 CE, from which we know that Smyrna rebuilt very rapidly. The basement thus appeared “to have become from our perspective something of a closed time capsule dating from the later first (or early second) century to the third quarter of the second century,” as I put it. Such a date was very striking, because some of the graffiti appeared to me to be unmistakably Christian in character, and such a date would be very early for Christian inscriptions.²

A full publication of the graffiti has now appeared,³ with a detailed discussion of the phases of the architecture of the Basilica by Burak Yolaçan, based on his dissertation on the building and its history. Despite the

1 R.S. Bagnall, *Everyday Writing in the Graeco-Roman East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 7–8. References are given there to published accounts of the excavation.

2 See S. Destephen, “La christianisation de l’Asie Mineure jusqu’à Constantin: Le témoignage de l’épigraphie,” in *Le problème de la christianisation du monde antique*, ed. H. Inglebert, S. Destephen, and B. Dumézil (Paris: Picard, 2010), 159–194, for a detailed list and discussion of the pre-Constantinian epigraphic evidence for Christianity in Asia Minor. As he remarks, “La datation des inscriptions chrétiennes antérieures au règne de Constantin constitue l’un des problèmes les plus ardues en épigraphie” (175). What is perhaps more telling is his remark that of 276 early Christian inscriptions in Asia Minor, all but two are funerary (164 with n. 18).

3 R.S. Bagnall, R. Casagrande-Kim, A. Ersoy, C. Tanriver, and B. Yolaçan, *Graffiti from the Basilica in the Agora of Smyrna* (New York: New York University Press, 2016). Full documentation is provided there for the statements made in this brief note.

handicaps provided by the lack of stratigraphic evidence, he shows conclusively that the added supports that were originally taken to belong to the reconstruction after the earthquake of 177 cannot be attributed to that episode, because they contain spolia dating later than 177. This reconstruction must in fact belong to a late antique rebuilding, not to that under Marcus Aurelius. The plaster on which the graffiti are scratched or (in the case of the ink ones) written covers the construction that Yolaçan dates to 178–179, and is in turn obscured in places by the late antique construction. Consequently, the rebuilding under Marcus is a *terminus post quem*, not a *terminus ante quem*, for the graffiti.

To these observations (the reader is referred to the volume for a full discussion) may be added some of an epigraphic nature. (1) In the preliminary discussion, a date read as year 210 in one graffito was taken to refer to the Era of Sulla, placing it in 125/126, rather than the Era of Actium (which would equate to 179/180). A more detailed investigation of the use of the eras in the province of Asia shows that there is not enough evidence to support any strong preference for one era or the other. The Era of Actium date would, of course, coincide with the period just after the reconstruction. (2) A graffito read subsequent to the preliminary study contains a reference to the κύριοι, “lords,” certainly with reference to emperors.⁴ Such usage seems limited to references to two jointly reigning emperors, and it therefore cannot antedate the reign of Marcus and Verus, from 161 on. In the immediate aftermath of the rebuilding, such a reference would most naturally refer to Marcus and Commodus (although Severan co-rulers in the early third century cannot be excluded). (3) The claims in various of the graffiti to be “first of Asia” also point to a date later than Marcus.

Although stylistic considerations are inherently much more imprecise than the arguments presented so far, both the palaeography of the graffiti and the style of the many drawings found in the Basilica are consistent with a late second to third century date. There are a handful of items that we would place a bit later, in the early fourth century, but nothing after that. The amounts of money referred to in some fragmentary graffiti are also consistent with a pre-Diocletianic date.

One other point is worth noting, which is that the incised graffiti and drawings, which are largely concentrated on the pillars rather than in the bays, seem to me and to Roberta Casagrande-Kim, the art historian who publishes the pictorial graffiti, to be somewhat earlier than most of the ink drawings and inscriptions. This is, again, an impression that cannot be

⁴ This is graffito T 13.1 (p. 167 in the volume).

pushed too far. But it is significant in the present context because the single most important graffito from the point of view of Christianity, that giving the isopsephistic equivalence (800) of κύριος and πίστις (TP 100.3 in the volume), is among the incised texts and thus probably relatively early. Indeed, it is important to note that the graffito on Pier 100 was written on a layer of plaster lower than the final one. If it is correct, as Yolaçan argues, that all of the surviving plaster layers date from after the restoration following the earthquake, that will provide a date no later than about 180 for this layer and for the graffito.

Even on the dating of the graffiti which I have presented here, it is remarkable to find archaeological evidence for Christianity in the agora of Smyrna in the later second century or beginning of the third. Most of the possibly Christian texts are presented in the preliminary description and are fully published in the volume; I do not need to describe them again here. Readers will make up their own minds about which, if any, they find convincing. But it is worth calling readers' attention to evidence not discussed in the preliminary account. This is the possibility that the occurrences of ζωή (both times spelled ζοή) in T 40.1 and TP 63, may reflect Christian presence. If we take this as a personal name Ζώη, it could refer to Eve, as the Septuagint text of Gen 3:20 translated the name Εὐα: καὶ ἐκάλεσεν Ἀδὰμ τὸ ὄνομα τῆς γυναικὸς αὐτοῦ Ζώη, ὅτι αὐτὴ μήτηρ πάντων τῶν ζώντων. These would then connect with the occurrence of Εὐή in TP 71.1 as all referring to Eve. On the other hand, the name Zoe is not uncommon outside Christian contexts, with ten attestations before the fourth century in the *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names* (vol. 5A). But a Christian use still seems likely; the appearance of ζωή in an incised graffito in the shape of a cross at Aphrodisias is interpreted by Angelos Chaniotis as "a Christian declaration of faith and hope in eternal life."⁵ Although we do not have the cruciform presentation in either of our examples, it seems generally likely that these are to be seen as Christian.

To summarize: We now have a considerably better sense of the chronology of the Basilica and the graffiti than was possible before the renewed work on the building in the past five years, which led to the discovery of additional texts, improvements in those already seen, and a more reliable chronology for the building phases. In the light of the new evidence, a date after the reconstruction at the end of the reign of Marcus Aurelius seems likely for all of the inscriptions, and a date very soon after the recon-

5 A. Chaniotis, "Graffiti and Social History of Aphrodisias," *The Australian Archaeological Institute at Athens Bulletin* 10 (2014), 16–21, here 20–21.

struction seems probable for some of those incised on plaster. The ink texts may be somewhat later, with their period stretching into the first half of the third century. Even such a date, however, remains relatively early for epigraphic attestation of Christians in Asia Minor.

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