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The New Greek Inscription from South Yemen*

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In 1988 the Soviet-Yemeni archaeological expedition to the port city of Qana on the coast of the Hadramawt uncovered a building complex, for which a graffito on plaster suggested a sacral character. The text is in Greek. It may well be the southernmost Greek inscription ever found. Its importance for the history of South Arabia in the early Byzantine period is considerable, if not quite in the way that the authors of the editio princeps imagined. The distinguished epigraphist Yuri Vinogradov first published the text with Russian commentary in the Vestnik drevnei istorii (=VDI) of 1989, together with a valuable archaeological commentary by A. V. Sedov on the building complex.1 Both Vinogradov and Sedov have summarized their findings in an English-language survey published in 1992 in Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy.2

The text, as constituted by Vinogradov, runs as follows:

[Vinogradov's transcription]

Vinogradov translates this tentatively in the following way: “Almighty, helping Kosmas (?), and this Holy place is . . . let my caravan be kept safe . . . let it (the sea?) be safe for a ship, let him lead (?) . . . the matters and . . .”
The inscription is plausibly ascribed to the second half of the fourth century A.D. (although it could be a little later), largely on the basis of the dating of the building complex as argued by Sedov. The letter-forms are utterly inconclusive but would certainly be consistent with this dating. Vinogradov, in the two publications of the text, concludes that this is a Christian document although it bears no Christian symbols, and he suggest that it “gives rise to a number of questions connected with land- and sea-trade in the region as well as with the spread of Christianity to South Arabia.”

The second half of the third line and all of the fourth are exceedingly difficult to read. Vinogradov’s text cannot yet be judged definitive, and his constitution of line four seems influenced by his interpretation of line three. But lines one and two are clear as far as they go, and [σ]υνόδια in line three seems beyond question. The secure bases for interpreting this document thus lie in the significant phrases [ε]τς θεός ὁ βοσθὼν (representing βοηθὼν, but at this date not to be corrected—ω and ο sounded the same), and ὁ ἄγιος τόπος. The former phase is well attested in Christian epigraphy, and Vinogradov documented it in the VDI with a few appropriate examples. But he was evidently unacquainted with the mass of material gathered by Erik Peterson in his still important study Εἰς Θεός: Epigraphische, formgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen (Göttingen, 1926). There he would have observed a substantial chapter (pp. 276–99) on “Die jüdische Ableitung der Εἰς Θεός – Formel.” This topic becomes pertinent to the new Yemeni inscription when one considers the implication of the expression ὁ ἄγιος τόπος.

In his VDI publication Vinogradov provided only four examples of ὁ ἄγιος τόπος in Christian texts. All are relatively late (mid-5th century or beyond), and all are mosaic texts. In a footnote toward the end of his commentary Vinogradov alluded to the famous Stobi synagogue inscription as providing one instance of ἄγιος τόπος in relation to a synagogue: Μογυ ὑказать лишь один случай употребления ἄγιος τόπος по отношению к синагоге — в надписи конца III века н.э. из Стоб в Македонии.

Yet, as Lifshitz remarked in 1967, ἄγιος τόπος was “la désignation courante de la synagogue.” Examples abound.
The New Greek Inscription from South Yemen

τῷ ἀγίῳ τόπῳ Στοβί (L no. 10)
toū ἀγίου τοποῦ Γαζά (L no. 72, F 966)
[τ]ῷ ἀγιωτ(ά)γῳ τόπῳ Γαζά (L no. 73a, F 867)
ἀγιο[τά]γῳ τόπῳ Γερασά (L no. 78)
tῷ ἀγ[ίῳ τόπῳ] Εγγύ (L no. 88, F 1435)
tῷ ἀγίῳ τόπῳ Εγγύ (L no. 89, F 1436)
tῷ ἀγίῳ τόπῳ Εγγύ (L no. 90, F 1437).7

This designation for a synagogue matches the Aramaic 'trh qdyšh in the three (probably four) inscriptions of Noarah (F 1199, 1203, 1204, and, with restoration, 1205). It is already apparent in the Greek of 2 Maccabees 1:29, 2:18, and 8:17.

Such compelling testimony for ὁ ἀγίος τόπος in a Jewish context means that Peterson’s review of the “jüdische Ableitung” of the expression εἰς θεός must be taken seriously here. In the last decade a particularly striking instance of the phrase θεός βοηθός has turned up in a major Jewish inscription at Aphrodisias in Caria.8 This large text contains lists of names of Jews, proselytes, and friends of Jews. Although the precise role of these persons is still unclear, they would appear to be donors or supporters of some building (the Aphrodisias synagogue perhaps) or enterprise (an eleemosynary project, as proposed in the original publication). The whole phrase Εἰς θεός ὁ βοηθὼν (not to be corrected, as in Lifshitz, to ὁ βοηθῶν) appears in a Jewish inscription of Dmeir in Syria from the fifth or sixth century.9

The weight of probability shifts, therefore, from a Christian to a Jewish context for the new Yemeni text. Even the word συνοδία, undoubtedly a correct word for a caravan, must be reconsidered in this new context. An inscription from Nysa in the Maeander Valley records the construction of a synagogue (οἰκοδομήσας τὸν τόπον) for the Jewish community (τῷ λαῷ) and for the religious association (τῇ συνόδῳ, “thiase” in Lifshitz) presided over by Dositheus, son of Theogenes.10 The use of συνοδία, as opposed to συνόδος, with reference to a religious association poses no problem since the word συνοδία is well attested as a designation for such groups: for example, Basil, in J.-P. Migne, Patrologia Graeca (=PG) 31, 876 B (Ascet. 1.3), προσήκει... τῷ προστάτῳ... ύποχείριον ἔναι τὴν συνοδίαν, and other Christian examples in Lampe, A Patristic Greek Lexicon s.v.; also PG 40, 1224
(Evagrius of Scitis), ἐν κοινοβίοις ἐν συνοδίαις. For Jewish ἑιασία at Tanaïs, see the group of inscriptions in Corpus Inscriptionum Regni Bosporani 1261–75, with the comments in J. and L. Robert, Bulletin épigraphique 1959.274.

More important, obviously, would be the significance of a group of Jews at Qana in the second half of the fourth century. As it happens, the history of the Ḥadramawt at this time provides a far better background for the Jewish interpretation of the new Greek text than for the Christian one. After the termination of the Christian Ethiopian occupation of the region no later than 378, the new local king (of what is often called the second Himyarite dynasty), Abkarib As‘ad, is said by the Arabic sources to have converted to Judaism.11 Subsequently the region was viewed in Byzantium as a Jewish kingdom. The Arab historian Mas‘ūdī reports a revealing comment from the emperor at Byzantium to a petitioner from Yemen:

أنتم يهود والجحشة نصارى وليس في الديانة أن ننصر المخالف على الموافق

“You are Jews, and the Ethiopians are Christians. It is not possible in our religion to help the opponents against those who believe as we do.” The date of this response seems to be in the sixth century, but the episode recounted here may reflect diplomacy in the fourth.12 In any case, the Byzantine view of Yemen as a Jewish kingdom is important.

According to Philostorgius, there was already a noticeable Jewish community in the Ḥadramawt at the time of the visit of the Christian missionary Theophilus of India: p. 34, line 8, ἡ δὲ τῶν Ἰουδαίων οἰκεία ἐπίθεα before a lacuna, but cf. p. 34, lines 27 - 28 (Martyrdom of Arethas, derived from Philostorgius): τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἀνθισταμένων καὶ ἀνατείθοντων τῶν βάρβαρον μὴ προχείρως οὔτε ξένου εἰς τὴν πολιτείαν εἰσδέξασθαι μηδὲ περὶ τὰ θέα νεωτερίζειν.13 This community was presumably the one that Abkarib As‘ad joined. His act had manifestly political consequences in representing a repudiation of the ousted Ethiopian overlords. Irfan Shahîd has identified with characteristic elegance “a competition between the two religions of the Old and the New Testaments which might be described as ‘the struggle for Arabia.’ ” He goes on to observe: “The south was naturally more dis-
posed toward Judaism, since Christianity was associated with its two traditional enemies, Byzantium and Ethiopia."14

The monotheism proclaimed in the remarkable Greek text from Qana, on the southern coast of the Arabian peninsula, admirably illustrates Shahid's generalization and fits well into the Arabic tradition concerning the later Himyarite kingdom. We should not fail to notice the continued use of the Greek language among persons of non-Hellenic origin in a place so far removed from the Greek world. Greek is seen once again as the lingua franca of alien cultures and religions.15

As for the building complex in which this inscription was found, it is impossible to say whether part of it was used as a synagogue. A vestibule at the entrance is suggestive. In view of the range of designs in diaspora synagogues, the possibility exists, pending further excavation. But one thing can be said with certainty: the plan published by Sedov in the VDI shows that the building complex bears no resemblance whatever to a Christian church or chapel.

NOTES

*This article is offered to Speros Vryonis with profound respect and affection.


10. L no. 31, p. 33.


13. Philostorgius is cited from the third edition of Bidez-Winkelmann in the series *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller*.


15. For this theme, see G. W. Bowersock, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor and Cambridge, 1990).