

Item BarCode: 33433003576158

Item Title: To Hell?nikon : studies in honor of Speros Vryonis, Jr.

Item Author:

Item Call Number: JFL 94-464

Item Vol/Part:

Article Title: New Greek inscription from South Yemen

Article Author: Bowersock, Glen

Art Vol/Part: ,

Beg Page: 3

End Page: 8 + tp

Total Pages: 0

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 Ḥaḍramawt 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:

[Εἰ]ς θεὸς ὁ βοαθῶν (sic) Κοσ[μῶ]
[Κ]αὶ ὁ ἅγιος τόπος τοῦ |---
[σ]υνοδία γίνη μοι ἡ ---
[π]λοτὰ ἡ ναί (sic), ἀπάγητ[αι ---]
5 [ἔ]ργα καὶ|| . . . M ---

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 suggests 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]υνοδία in line three seems beyond question. The secure bases for interpreting this document thus lie in the significant phrases [εἰ]ς θεὸς ὁ βοαθῶν (representing βοηθῶν, but at this date not to be corrected—ω and ο sounded the same), and ὁ ἅγιος τόπος. The former phrase 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 ἅγιος τόπος.

In his *VDI* publication Vinogradov provided only four examples of ὁ ἅγιος τόπος in Christian texts.³ 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 ἅγιος τόπος in relation to a synagogue: *Μογυ указать лишь один случай употребления ἅγιος τόπος по отношению к синагоге — в надписи конца III века н.э. из Стоб в Македонии.*⁴

Yet, as Lifshitz remarked in 1967, ἅγιος τόπος was "la désignation courante de la synagogue."⁵ Examples abound:⁶

τῷ ἁγίῳ τόπῳ Stobi (L no. 10)

τοῦ ἁγίου τόπου Gaza (L no. 72, F 966)

[τῷ ἁγιωτ(άτῳ) τόπῳ Gaza (L no. 73a, F 867)

ἁγιο[τάτῳ] τόπῳ Gerasa (L no. 78)

τῷ ἁγ[ίῳ τόπῳ] Egypt (L no. 88, F 1435)

τῷ ἁγίῳ [τόπῳ] Egypt (L no. 89, F 1436)

τῷ ἁγίῳ τό[πῳ] Egypt (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 ἅγιος 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 θεὸς 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 θεὸς ὡ βοειθῶν (not to be corrected, as in Lifshitz, to ὁ βοειθῶν) 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 (οικοδομήσας 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 σύνοδος, 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 προεστῶτι . . . ὑποχείριον εἶναι τὴν συνοδίαν, and other Christian examples in Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* s.v.; also PG 40, 1224

(Evagrius of Scitis), ἐν κοινοβίοις ἢ συνοδαίαις. For Jewish θιασεῖται 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 Ḥaḍramawt 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'ūdî reports a revealing comment from the emperor at Byzantium to a petitioner from Yemen:

أنتم يهود والحبشة 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 Ḥaḍramawt at the time of the visit of the Christian missionary Theophilus of India: p. 34, line 8, ἡ δὲ τῶν Ἰουδαίων οἰκεία ἐπίνοια before a lacuna, but cf. p. 34, lines 27 - 28 (Martyrdom of Arethas, derived from Philostorgius): τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἀνθισταμένων καὶ ἀναπειθόντων τὸν βάρβαρον μὴ προχείρως οὕτω ξένον εἰς τὴν πολιτείαν εἰσδέξασθαι μηδὲ περὶ τὰ θεῖα 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 Shahîd'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.

1. Y. Vinogradov and A. V. Sedov, Греческая надпись из южной Аравии, *Vestnik drevnei istorii* (1989) 2, 162–69 (hereafter *VDI*).

2. Sedov, with appendix by Vinogradov, “New Archaeological and Epigraphical Material from Qana (South Arabia),” *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 3 (1992), 110–37.

3. Rhodes: *Archaiologikon deltion* 26 (1971), *Chron.* II, 553 (a Christian basilica), known to Vinogradov from J. and L. Robert, *Bulletin épigraphique* 1977.322 (where the page reference to the *Chron.* appears erroneously as 582); Commagene: *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, ed. P. Roussel et al. (Leiden, 1923–), 28.1324 (dated 447); ‘Ammân in Jordan: *ibid.*, 34.1516 (second half of the 6th century).

4. *VDI*, 166, n. 26.

5. B. Lifshitz, *Donateurs et fondateurs dans les synagogues juives*, Cahiers de la *Revue biblique* 7 (Paris, 1967), 33.

6. The abbreviation L refers to the volume by Lifshitz cited in the foregoing note, and F designates the collection of J.-B. Frey, *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum*, vol. II (Rome, 1952).

7. On this text see further L. Robert, *Revue de philologie* (1958), 43, n. 4 (repr. in *Opera Minora Selecta*, vol. V, p. 183, n. 4).

8. Joyce Reynolds and Robert Tannenbaum, *Jews and Godfearers at Aphrodisias* (Cambridge, 1987).

9. R. Brünnow and A. von Domaszewski, *Die Provincia Arabia*, vol. III (Strasbourg, 1909), p. 207, no. 37 (L no. 61, F 848). Cf. B. Lifshitz, *Prolegomenon* to the reprint of Frey (note 6 above), the two volumes together (New York, 1975), p. 75.

10. L no. 31, p. 33.

11. See Jacques Ryckmans, *L'institution monarchique en Arabie méridionale avant l'Islam* (Louvain, 1951), 318. Cf. P. Costa, *The Pre-Islamic Antiquities at the Yemen National Museum* (Rome, 1978), 15: "the ruler and a large part of the population appear to have embraced Judaism."

12. Mas'ûdî, *Murûj adh-dhahab*, III.162, p. 203 in the Beirut edition of 1966 by B. de Meynard, P. de Courteille, and C. Pellat. For the possibility of a comparison with earlier events, see Ryckmans, op. cit., pp. 308–9 (discussing a suggestion by C. Conti Rossini).

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

14. I. Shahîd, in *Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. I (1970), p. 14.

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