

## NOTES

### A CHRISTIAN SEPULCHRAL STELE FROM TANAGRA

A sepulchral stele discovered in September 1936 by Mr. Nicholas Platon, Curator of the Museum at Heracleion, Crete, has already aroused a good deal of interest.<sup>1</sup> Removed from the wall of a mediaeval tower (and now in the Tanagra Museum), it was found to have a curious inscription of forty lines in Homeric hexameters. At the bottom, in the space below the text, are three plain monogrammatic crosses of the closed-*rho* type ( $\rho$ );<sup>2</sup> below these, three vine-tendrils, each ending in a single leaf, rise from a common stem.<sup>3</sup> Mr. Platon would date the inscription to the latter part of the fourth century; Prof. Calder of Edinburgh, who has also inspected the stele, suggested that the letters could be dated to about the year A.D. 400 or later. From the point of view of content, however, it could very well belong to the middle of the fifth century.

Although perhaps only a few lines of the long poem may be of interest to theologians, it may be useful to give the English translation in full:

(Philo)menes<sup>4</sup> commands that these instructions be fulfilled by mortals yet to come:

If any man, not of our own race, from a land afar off, become lord of this place, he should perform the proper rites, first<sup>5</sup> by singing a hymn to God the mighty, and next by bringing on the sixth day to the precinct sacred to the Trinity that ruleth all, gifts pleasing unto Christ (our) God—on behalf of deceased brothers

<sup>1</sup> See N. Platon in *Ἀρχαιολογικὴ Ἐφημερίς*, C (1937), 655–67, with a drawing; the text was re-edited by Prof. W. A. Calder in *Class. Rev.*, LXII (1948), 8–11. See also the remarks of H. G. Blomfield, *Class. Rev.*, LXII, 168 f.; and J. and L. Robert, *R.E.G.*, LXII (1949), 119, n. 75. I have had the advantage of discussing the inscription with Mr. R. L. P. Milburn, whose article was to appear in *The Journ. of Theol. Studies*, Sept. 1950.

<sup>2</sup> See V. Gardthausen, *Das alte Monogramm* (Leipzig, 1924), tables n. 185; and cf. Creaghan-Raubitschek, "Early Christian Epitaphs from Athens," *Hesperia*, XVIII (1947), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Although Prof. Calder is probably right in suggesting that the vine branches refer to the Trinity, I should hesitate to extend this symbolism (as he does) to the three crosses. Three monograms of this nature are an obvious way of filling in the space.

<sup>4</sup> So Prof. Calder; but the supplements Zelomenes, Eidomenes, and Kleimenes would appear to be also possible.

<sup>5</sup> ὁμῆν ἢ μὲν πρῶτιστα Θεὸν μέγαν, εἶτα κομίζῃ  
παρ τέμενος ζάθεον Τριάδει πάντων μεδεύσῃ  
ἕκτω ἐν ἡματι δῶρα Θεῷ περιλαμένα Χριστῷ. (11.4–6)

and sisters, parents and children, husbands and wives and in-laws of old—twelve round loaves<sup>6</sup> and pleasant wine, like unto the rays of the sun or to flakes of snow. For 'tis necessary to accomplish these things with readiness and perform those rites which are pleasing to the dead.

Look after the near-by graves of the departed, lest the whitened bones beneath, of those who have passed away, come to grievous harm because of the pouring of the winter's rain.

Of these have fear, and with your eye upon the great woe to come, keep their habitations secure and unharmed. Grant them the favour of a light at night. For this is the meed of the dead.

And drawing from your present means, give forthwith to the poor what is sufficient: for this is indeed their due.

Watch and guard the high-leaved trees, lest time, by its attrition (?), reduce the edifice to a wretched plight with the returning years, by reason of the severe frosts under a baleful gale, as the rain-drop falls stealthily upon the house.

Perform these duties holily and pass your life in piety: for to the wise and well-disposed man comes many a blessing after toil and his good name shall never be blotted out.

But if now or in future some lord of the land, full of idle speech, go astray in purpose through overweening confidence, and in his folly deliberately circumvent our instructions, then may his life never be secure; may he reap woe upon woe. Worn in spirit with sorrows and destructive battles, he shall be taken into slavery by pitiless force. And besides the many other evils that God has fashioned for men by fate,<sup>7</sup> may he never come beneath the earth—he, who does not respect the rights of the dead. May he become a beggar on both sides of the grave (?), though eager to sate himself with food and drink. May dogs rend him utterly, flesh and bones, and may he experience a cruel destruction. And after suffering an ignoble death, may he pay the bitter penalty—he and all his family—before the eternal King.

Philomenes (as we shall call him) is apparently a landowner, the "lord" of the property on which are located the Shrine of Hagia Triada, as well as the graves of the deceased members of his family. Oddly enough, there is no mention of priest or clergy in this somewhat pagan poem, and there is really no cogent reason for thinking that Philomenes himself was an ecclesiastic, as Mr. Platon and Prof. Calder suggest.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> ἄρτους δισκοφανείς δυοκ(αί)δεκα κ(αί) μέθυ λαρόν  
ἀκτίσιν ἢ νιφάδεσσιν εἰκοῦτα. (11. 9–10)

<sup>7</sup> ὅππῃσα τ' ἄλλα τέτυκται βρότοις ὑπὸ δαίμονος αἴσῃ. In this curious line (partially inspired by *Odyssey* 11.61), the Daimon is the Christian God and the author would appear to be thinking, however confusedly, of the doctrine of predestination—or at least of a divine providence by which the evil are duly punished.

<sup>8</sup> The shrine may have merely been a small, private one with an icon representing the Trinity, such as one finds in Greece today. For instances of laymen as managers of church property, see, e.g., E. R. Hardy, *The Large Estates of Byzantine Egypt* (New York,

Philomenes' own family undoubtedly needed no instruction in what was most likely a hereditary custom. But any future owner of the property, not a member of the family, is urgently entreated to continue the tradition and perform a special Friday ritual on behalf of the souls of the departed. Philomenes was perhaps the last of his line and left this inscription as part of his last will and testament. In any case, the detailed nature of the prescriptions would lead one to suspect that the family had pledged themselves to carry them out, perhaps by a kind of vow.

On the whole it would appear more probable from the context that the twelve loaves and the wine refer to the Eucharist—and not to some food-offering reminiscent of pagan times. They were perhaps the family's traditional offering to the clergy who officiated at the shrine from time to time. Why the number twelve is chosen, I cannot say: Prof. Calder has referred to the twelve baskets of Matt. 14:20; another obvious possibility is the number of the Apostles. But it may well be that the number is purely arbitrary—simply a "round" number chosen in excess of what was necessary—and whatever was not used at the Friday Eucharistic sacrifice in honour of the departed, could be used on another occasion or perhaps distributed to the poor.

It may be mentioned in this connection that the lines on almsgiving as well as the exhortation to a life of piety suggest that the composer made use of a popular (Byzantine) manual of *ὑποθήκαι*, in the manner of the gnomic hexameter poem written (most probably) by a Jew and falsely attributed at one time to Phocylides.

In any case, it would appear that the author, in his elaborate conclusion, drew upon earlier pagan or Christian curse-inscriptions.<sup>9</sup> And in the last two lines, which undoubtedly refer to the Judgement, he delivers what Prof. Calder has well called "the *coup de grâce* from the Christian arsenal." Although the inscription raises few difficulties, it is nonetheless an interesting commentary on the faith of the common people of Greece in the fourth or fifth century of the Christian era.

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1931), p. 144 f.; and L. C. West and A. C. Johnson, *Byzantine Egypt* (Princeton Studies, 1949), p. 69 f.

<sup>9</sup> For other Christian curse-inscriptions, see N. A. Bees, *Corpus der griech.-christl. Inschriften von Hellas*, I, 1 (Athens, 1941), n. 15 and p. 32 ff. For similar Christian curses in the papyri, see G. Björck, *Der Fluch des Christen Sabinus* (Uppsala, 1938). In this papyrus, probably intended to be buried with him, Sabinus, a Christian of the sixth century, calls down the wrath of the Son of God upon his daughter Severine and a certain Didymus. "May their bodies wither away upon their bed," he prays, "as you saw mine wither. . . . May they come before the judgment seat, where thou art judge. . . . Wreak vengeance in exchange for the toils I have suffered. . . . Avenge, Emmanuel, avenge!"