

## A DECORATED CHRISTIAN TOMB-CHAMBER NEAR JOUSSEF PASHA

BY

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A little outside the village of Joussef Pasha, as you go in a westerly direction up the local *wadi*, is an extensive necropolis much robbed-out but displaying elaborate *hypogaea* cut out of the bed-rock. One fine example has five 'oven-type' cubicles (one of them double). Another has a spacious vestibule of some four metres square with *arcosolia* opening out on three sides. Each *arcosolium* has five sarcophagi picked out of the living rock, two sets of two sarcophagi, with a narrow passageway between the sets giving access to a fifth at right angles to the other four along the back-wall of each *arcosolium*.<sup>1</sup> Lids have all been smashed or removed and there has been much disturbance of the human remains. It is immediately visible that the whole complex was once covered with stucco and decorated in red: much of this decoration has fallen away except for small patches of rubrication suggesting that decorative swirls adorned the outside arches of the *arcosolia*.<sup>2</sup>

The fourth side, the entrance into the tomb, has been better protected against weathering and there the stucco and paintwork have fared a little better, though water seeping through the porous limestone has meant that the stucco has tended to swell, flake and deliquesce. It is in a very fragile condition.

Over the inside doorway, to the left, the outline traces of at least three letters are visible but the colour having gone, it is extremely difficult to decipher them. The traces are consistent with ]OYÇ, perhaps ʿT]OYÇ followed by a year number, but there is no certainty.

On the wall to the right inside of the doorway have been traced out in red in the stucco a number of crude figures and symbols. A rough outline sketch of a skiff with lengthy rudder is discernible with a bank of oars or benches at the prow.<sup>3</sup> A *crux decussata* has been drawn above the prow, at the keel [encircled, inside a net(?), over the side], in the boat itself towards the stern, and an *anteconstantinianum* cross is at the end of the rudder.<sup>4</sup> A stick figure stands where we might expect

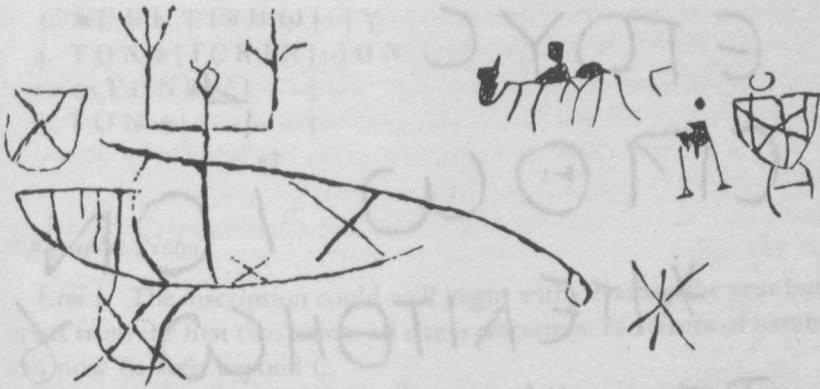


Fig. 1.

the mast, the yardarm being converted into arms held up in the gesture of an *orant*, each arm ending in three fingers. See Pl. 11a and Fig. 1. As likely as not this is intended to be a symbol of the soul sailing towards paradise, the heaven-haven, as so frequently in Christian contexts. In the many parallel instances, however, the boat is always depicted as sailing to the *right* (= the East, the source of light).<sup>5</sup> I have not located an instance where the boat (as here) sails towards the *left*. I incline to wonder, therefore, whether we may not rather have a depiction of that potent image, of Christ standing up in the boat calming the tempest, displaying powers over the ills that beset mankind, the ship's mast being regarded, from the mid-second century onwards, as a natural symbol of Christ crucified.<sup>6</sup> The triple-forked arms, in a context where crosses with triple-forked arms were common, thus gain stronger resonance.<sup>7</sup>

Above the rudder appears to be a very naive drawing of a figure riding a donkey. There is no indication of divinity. Given the context, could this conceivably be a further symbol of entering paradise, the heavenly Jerusalem? Compare the bronze repoussé plaque found in Tomb 39A at Pella—with a rider on a donkey: the reverse shows that entry into Jerusalem is being depicted. It was considered a suitable image for leaving with the dead<sup>8</sup> and Christ on his ass is found in fact on a number of Christian sarcophagi.<sup>9</sup>

Further rubricated symbols can be discerned: an *anteconstantinianum* cross set in a shield-shaped medaillon with what appears to be a *theta* (= *θεός* [God]?) attached below and a crescent moon(?) above. The faded rubrication makes decipherment hazardous beyond the

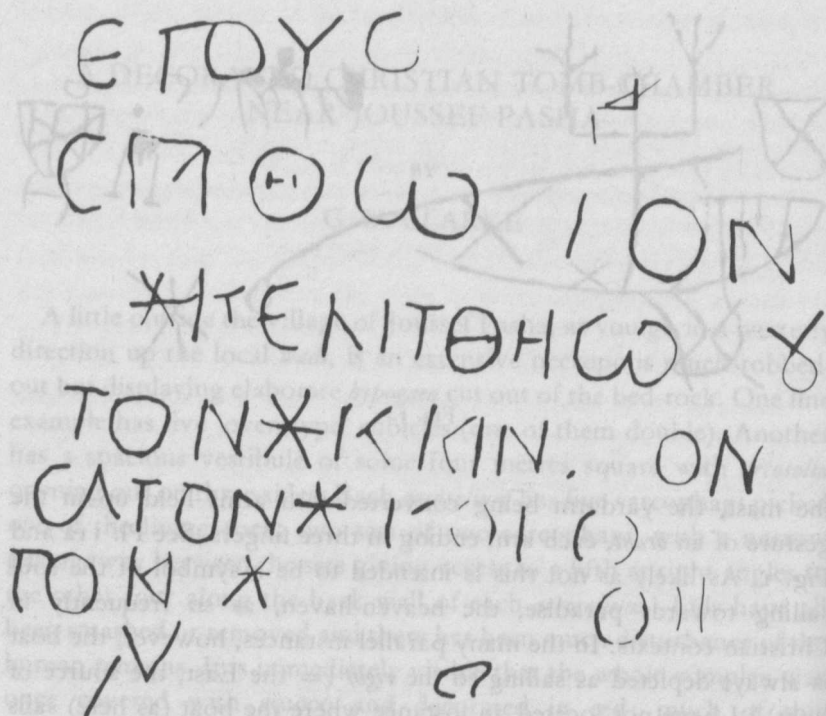


Fig. 2.

assumption, reasonable in the context, that some form of Christogram is intended. I have not found a parallel for this particular monogram. To its left are further traces of red including three downstrokes but damage is too severe to allow detailed interpretation. We should be left in little doubt, however, that Christians were users of this tomb.

To the left inside of the doorway can be seen traces of six lines of Greek lettering. Where there has been water damage (at the top) or weathering (by the entrance), the rubrication has disappeared and the outline of the letters in the stucco can only be discerned with great difficulty: this is also the case where the lines have been covered by floor débris<sup>10</sup> (especially in the right half of lines 4 and 5 and almost the entire length of line 6). The fragile nature of the stucco does not allow the taking of a squeeze. See Pl. 11b and 12 and Fig. 2. I hazard the following transcription, which must be regarded as tentative only:

1. ETOYC [---]
2. CITOCCATON

3. \*I' E K T I Θ H Ω [-] Υ

4. T O N \* [ I C K I N [-] O N

5. ∪ T O N \* I ' [---]

6. T O N \* [ - - - - ]

∩

### Epigraphic Notes:

*Line 1.* The inscription could well begin with detailing the year but apart from the first two letters all else is uncertain. No traces of letters can now be seen beyond C.

*Line 2.* The second and third letter could form *pi* with a numeration sign within the letter (= 80) or they might conceivably be a *mu* with a numeration sign across the top (= 40). If the preceding lunate *sigma* forms part of the numeral, the figures become 280 and 240 respectively. The following letter appears to be a rather sophisticated form of *theta*: *omicron* is therefore more convincing. What follows might be *omega*—but what is there is consistent also with double *sigma*. There are traces of one or two letters legible between this double *sigma* (or *omega*) and the following *omicron*; a downstroke seems clearly visible towards the *omicron*. The final *nu* is uncertain apart from the first downstroke.

*Line 3.* What is normally the sign for *denaria* appears at the opening of the line here and the same sign is also found in lines 4, 5 and 6.<sup>11</sup> *Tau* plus *iota* is far from certain; a *pi* is possible—or *rbo* plus *iota*. The *omega* has highly curving arms and might conceivably be an *alpha* of the type with which line 5 opens (see below).

*Line 4.* It is possible that a numeral follows the “*denaria*” sign (I') but the reading could rather be ICKIN. A letter between the second *nu* and *omicron* is illegible.

*Line 5.* The line opens with a late-shaped *alpha*.<sup>12</sup> Only the merest outline of letters is visible after what would appear to be a numeral (I').

*Line 6.* The traces of the opening letters are consistent with *tau omicron nu* (as occurs before at least two of the other “*denaria*” signs and could be there for the third).

### Some features:

(i) There are some 34 signs one can read with greater or less certainty over 6 lines.

(ii) There are four “*denaria*” signs, three possibly followed by a numeral (the letters after the fourth being lost).

(iii) TON appears to precede the “*denaria*” signs. Could this be intended for TΩN and indicates a genitive of price?

(iv) I do not detect any obvious signs for indicating personal relationships (father, mother, son daughter, etc.) nor words for tomb, memorial, sarcophagus or the like. Reference to God, etc., also seems to be lacking.

*Some preliminary suggestions:*

We might have a common type of inscription which inveighs against the removal (εκτιθη, line 3) or disturbance (κιν-, line 4) of the bodies buried in the chamber. But one would rather expect threats of the anger of God than mere fines (the “*denaria*” signs) by the likely (late) date of this piece. Could we, therefore, have simply the record of names of those buried introduced by \* as a marker (in that case they appear to be names terminating in -ON)? Another possibility is that we have here a list of personal names along with the payments they have made which established their rights to use the *loculi* in the tomb-chamber.<sup>13</sup> That would be consistent with other known examples of tomb-sharing in Syria.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See A. Grabar, *Martyrium. Recherches sur le culte des reliques et l'art chrétien antique*, 2 vols. and *Album*, Paris, 1946 (repr. 1972), 1.165 ff on this common type of mausoleum with triple *arcosolium*.

<sup>2</sup> Geographically, the nearest example of similar sepulchral wall decoration known to me is at Homs in a funerary chapel: see A. Grabar, *op. cit.*, 2.279 (citing another example at Kasr-el-Benât).

<sup>3</sup> For simply sketched boats in a Christian oratory see S. Sauneron, J. Jacquet *et al.*, *Les ermitages chrétiens du désert d'Esna*, 2 vols., Cairo, 1972, I. 78 (citing parallels from other Christian monuments in Egypt); cf. L. Ennabli, *Les inscriptions funéraires chrétiennes de Carthage. II. La Basilique de Meidfa*, Paris, 1982, p. 239 + fig. 316 (Basilica Majorum in Carthage).

<sup>4</sup> On the *crux decussata* note Isid. *Orig.* 1.3.11 ed. Lindsay: *Latini autem numeros ad litteras non computant, sed sola verba componunt, excepto I et X littera, quae et figura cruceum significat et in numero decem demonstrat* and see M. Sulzberger, *Le symbole de la Croix et les Monogrammes de Jésus chez les premiers chrétiens*, *Byzantion* 2 (1925), 367, 416; on the *antecostantinianum* see Sulzberger, *op. cit.*, 393 ff, 445 ff. These crosses decorate the field not unlike the stars found on many a funerary monument especially from these parts: see F. Cumont, *Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire des Romains*, 1942, repr. Paris, 1966, 204 ff.

<sup>5</sup> For a rich assembly of evidence (and reference to other literature) A.C. Rush, *Death and Burial in Christian Antiquity*, Washington, 1941, 54 ff esp. 66 ff and cf.

F. J. Dölger, *Sol Salutis. Gebet und Gesang im christlichen Altertum*, Münster in Westf., 1925, 272ff. (Das Schiff der Kirche auf der Fahrt gen Sonnenaufgang); for another example N. Firatli and L. Robert, *Les stèles funéraires de Byzance gréco-romaine*, Paris, 1964, 124 and Planche LIX. There are 'several crude black outline drawings of ships' in Tomb A vi.7 at the Necropolis of Anemurium, E. Alföldi-Rosenbaum, *Anamur Nekropolü. The Necropolis of Anemurium*, Ankara, 1971, 154f with Pl. XXXIII.3 (cf. 165f on Tomb A vii.28 with 'traces of a design in black lines representing a ship'). For ship-imagery in Syriac piety see R. Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, Cambridge, 1975, 249ff.

<sup>6</sup> Already in Just. *Apol.* 1.55 and see my commentary on Minucius Felix *Oct.* 29.8 in *Ancient Christian Writers* 39 (1974), 331f. for parallels and secondary references. There is a Byzantine sealstone on display in the Damascus National Museum with a stick figure similar to the Joussef Pasha *orant* with outstretched arms ending with a *crux decussata* and with an inverted *alpha* (not detailed in the *Catalogue du Musée National de Damas*, Damascus, 1976).

Note the description of Gregory Thaumaturgus at prayer in Greg. Nyssa, *Vit. Greg. Thaum* PG 46.948Bf: he is depicted as standing fixed and erect (mistaken by his pursuers for a tree), arms outstretched, hands outspread, gaze fixed heavenwards—in other words, as an *orant*.

<sup>7</sup> The simple explanation for the left-orientation of the image might well still be that whilst in this tomb-chamber we have Greek writing—from left to right—the natural visual movement of the eye was nevertheless from right to left for the Syrian 'artist'. Compare the iconographic reversals that take place in Etruscan art: Greek exemplars are realigned in reverse order—from right to left, the preferred direction of Etruscan writing.

<sup>8</sup> *Pella in Jordan*, A. McNicoll, R. H. Smith, B. Hennessy, vol. 1, Canberra, 1982, 100 and Pl. 27a (dated to fourth-century).

<sup>9</sup> For some examples see *D.A.C.L.* 1.2 (1907) *s.v.* Ane 2062ff [H. Leclercq]. For the frequent use of the piquant juxtaposition of Christ's earthly *adventus* on an ass along with an image of entry into the glory of Paradise see A. Grabar, *L'art paléochrétien et l'art byzantin*, London, 1979, 75ff (= *Deux portails sculptés paléochrétiens d'Égypte et d'Asie Mineure et les portails romans*) and other literature there cited.

<sup>10</sup> In moving the débris from against the inscription, the fragmentary remains of several skeletons were disturbed along with items of jewellery (bronze rings, a glass-drop earring, a gaming-piece) and a number of coffin-nails—still to be examined in detail. The tomb-chamber would appear to have served as a charnel-house.

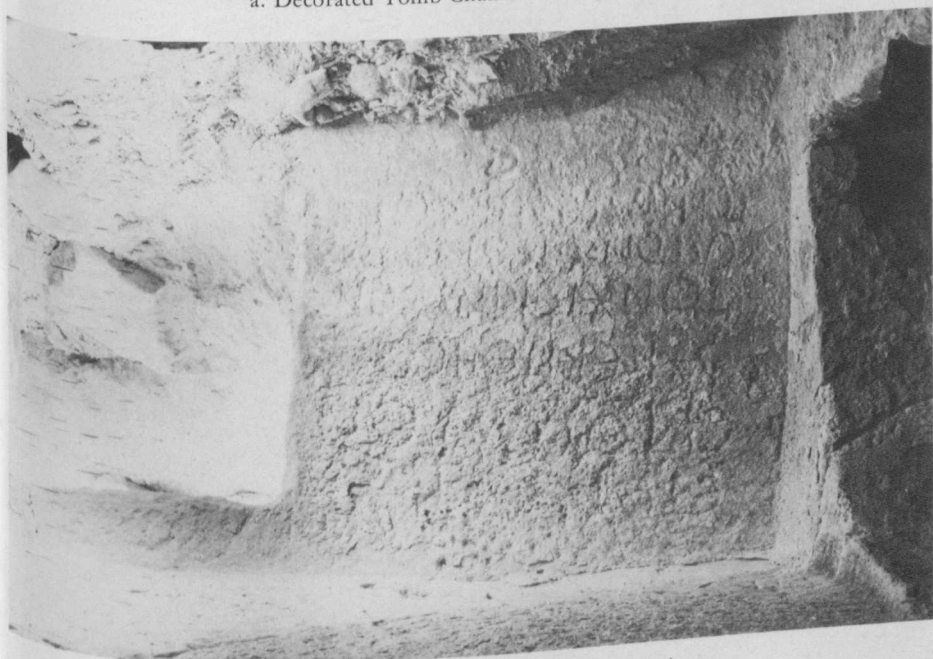
<sup>11</sup> This sign is also occasionally found as a Christogram (cf. M. Black, *The Chi-Rho sign—Christogram and/or Staurogram*, in *Apostolic History and the Gospel. Biblical and Historical Essays presented to F. F. Bruce on his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. W. W. Gasque and R. P. Martin, Exeter, 1970, 319ff) but that does not seem likely and numerals might follow in three of the four instances here.

<sup>12</sup> For clear examples of this shaped alpha (Α) see R. Mouterde and A. Poidebard, *Le 'Limes' de Chalcis, organisation de la steppe en haute Syrie romaine*, Paris, 1945, vol. 2 (Atlas), Planche CXVII, of Justinianic date [from nearby Hierapolis].

<sup>13</sup> See *I.G.L.S.* 4 (1955) 1510-1522 [Häss] for a sepulchral complex where ownership of the sarcophagi is specified ("the upper part on the right belongs to ... the lower part on the right towards the north [containing] two places belongs to ..." etc.). Compare *I.G.L.S.* 4 (1955) 1547 [Mo'arret en-No'mân] which records that whilst certain positions are to be a hereditary family preserve, other places have been sold, eight belonging to one Domnos. Further examples of Syrian tomb-sharing or division are listed in *I.G.L.S.* 6 (1967) no. 2985 (p. 234 n. 1) adding *I.G.L.S.* 7 (1970) no. 4047 *bis* (Safita). On such collective tombs (with further western examples) see K. Hopkins, *Death and Renewal*, Cambridge, 1983, 211ff.



a. Decorated Tomb Chamber Wall-paintings



b. Decorated Tomb Chamber Greek Inscription.

