

## A FUNERAL STELE IN THE DISTRICT OF MEMBIJ: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

BY

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The village of Joussef Pasha is situated by the western bank of the river Euphrates in the district of Membij (Syrian Hierapolis), about 1 km. northwards from the site of el-Qitar [see preceding excavation report for 1983/4 season]. One of the features of the graveyard in this modern village is (as so often elsewhere) the reuse of stones and objects of unusual shape or size, found in the locality and now functioning as grave-makers or as grave-decoration—lengths of column (mainly limestone, some marble; most, but not all, unfluted), column capitals, pieces of carved architectural stonework, Roman tiles, basalt vessels (grinding bowls, small presses, etc.) and the like. For a general view see Pl. 13a. Several pieces of column have been incised with simple Greek crosses, one (in a circle) being illustrated (Pl. 13b). This suggests that these particular items may come from a period of Christian occupation—perhaps from the time that the local village temple (parts of the foundations of which are still visible in the present-day village itself) either was converted to Christian use or (more realistically) was destroyed and its pagan elements purified and sanctified by marauding Christian zealots.<sup>1</sup> (Further column elements, bases and capitals are to be found about the village—including pieces of white marble with elaborate ‘lolly-stick’ fluting). Still located in the ground (at an angle) in the village cemetery is a statue in severely weathered limestone of a draped seated woman in Hellenistic ‘Membij’ style,<sup>2</sup> left hand on knee, right hand up across right breast. It is now acephalous (see Pl. 14a). (It may come with an inscribed base, still under ground). There are close parallels set out in the town garden of Membij itself and in the courtyard of the museum at Aleppo.<sup>3</sup> There is therefore ample testimony to there once having been a Hellenized presence in the immediate district, and a Christian phase.

Some confirmation of these phases comes from a reused funeral *stèle* in the present village graveyard and now functioning as a grave-marker. It is a large well-weathered yellow limestone block set

upright into the ground, 54 cm. wide at the top, tapering to a slimmer width of 40 cm. at the ground level and standing 128 cm. high. At first sight it appears to be uninscribed but the angle of the first morning light reveals that there is in fact an area 52 cm. in length that has four lines of faint inscription (Pls. 14b and 15).<sup>4</sup> Closer inspection reveals that whilst there are what look to be Arabic symbols on the left half of the top line, the remaining (even fainter) lines all consist certainly of Greek letters, but upside down. The top-heavy tapering shape is now explained. The *stele* originally stood the other way up, broader width at the base. Some original Greek lettering may have been removed to make way for the (?) Arabic carving when the stone was reused: this

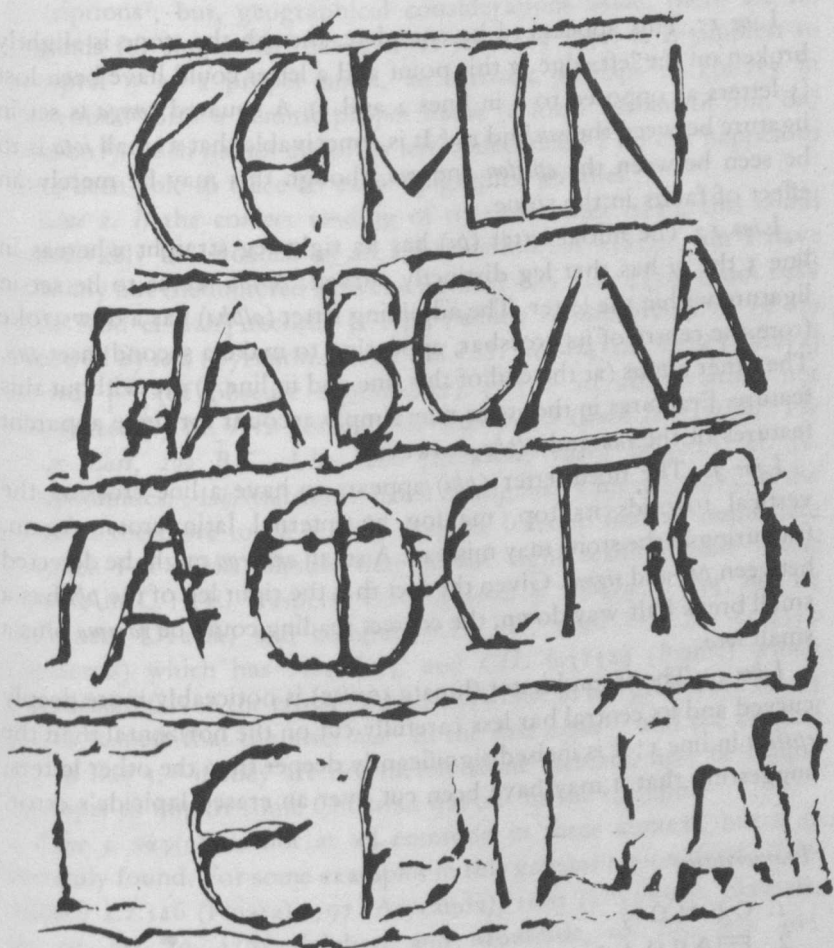


Fig. 1.

is cut on a slightly deeper and noticeably less weathered surface. If so, these Greek letters have been totally effaced. (The inscription was carefully blocked out with a clearly-marked bordering edge and guides drawn between the lines: the border in fact encompasses the (?) Arabic inscription). If the *stèle* was originally headed with any moulding, carving or symbols, they lie at present underground.

The lettering has been executed in fine style (average letter height: a monumental 10 cm.). Characteristic letter shapes (see Fig. 1)<sup>5</sup>: M A, C, E,  $\Omega$ .

### Epigraphic notes

*Line 1*: This appears to be complete, though the stone is slightly broken on the left edge at this point and a letter could have been lost (5 letters as opposed to 6 in lines 2 and 3). A squared *omega* is set in ligature between the *mu* and *nu*.<sup>6</sup> It is conceivable that a small *iota* is to be seen between the *epsilon* and *mu*, though this may be merely an effect of faults in the stone.

*Line 2*: The initial letter (*pi*) has its right leg straight whereas in line 3 the *pi* has that leg distinctly curved. A *tau* seems to be set in ligature within the letter. The adjoining letter (*alpha*) has a dowstroke from the centre of its crossbar, appearing to make a second inset *tau*. The other *alphas* (at the end of this line and in line 3) are without this feature. Fractures in the stone may simply account for these apparent features of the *tau* and *alpha*, however.

*Line 3*: The third letter (*phi*) appears to have a line crossing the vertical towards its top, making an internal latin cross. Again, fracturing in the stone may mislead. A small *omicron* might be detected between *phi* and *sigma*. Given the fact that the right leg of the *phi* has a small break half-way down, the correct reading could be *gamma* plus a small *iota*.

*Line 4*: The second letter (lunate *epsilon*) is noticeably more deeply curved and its central bar less carefully cut on the horizontal than the *epsilon* in line 1; it is incised significantly deeper than the other letters, suggesting that it may have been cut over an erased lapicide's error.

### Transcription

1. C E M  $\Omega$  N

2.  $\overline{\Gamma}$   $\overline{\Delta}$  B O  $\Lambda$  A

3. Τ Α Θ ρ C Π Ο

4. Ι Ε Ι [----]

Σεμων / π(α)τ(ρι) Ἀβολα / ταφος πο / ιει ----

*Translation* (tentative only):

+ Abola makes this tomb + for her father Semon ...

*Commentary*

*Line 1.* σεμων (more frequently σεμων, sometimes also σεμιν, σεμον) is often found as a near-opening word in neo-phrygian inscriptions<sup>7</sup>, but, geographical considerations aside, there are no grounds for supposing that is what we have here. It is simplest to interpret it as a proper noun, an attempt perhaps to convey in Hellenized form a Semitic proper name (a local variant of Šim'ōn/Šem'on?). Such names are often left undeclined.<sup>8</sup> I do not happen to have been able to trace an exact epigraphic parallel.<sup>9</sup>

*Line 2.* If the correct reading of the first letter is  $\overline{\Pi}$ , this could conceivably be intended as an abbreviation for π(α)τ(ρι), but I have certainly not encountered a precise parallel. *I.G.L.S.* 4 (1955) no. 1988 [Tell 'Abd el-'Aziz] records (1.2)  $\overline{\Pi}$  which is interpreted to be *eta* followed by *iota* (Byzantine date). *I.G.L.S.* 5 (1954) no. 2634 [Liftāya] records  $\overline{\Pi}$  (of obscure significance).  $\overline{\Pi}$  is an abbreviation not recognized by M. Avi-Yonah, *Abbreviations in Greek Inscriptions. The Near East, 200 B.C.-A.D. 1100* [London, 1940] in (ed.) Al. N. Oikonomides, *Abbreviations in Greek Inscriptions*, Chicago, 1974. If the name is therefore to be read as Παβολα I do not find an immediate parallel. For *Abola*, should that be the right reading, note Ἀύλος Ἀβολος in C. H. E. Haspels, *The Highlands of Phrygia*, 1.333, no. 92 (Inli near Ovacik) and compare *I.L.C.V.* 3176 = *CIL* 12.4313 (Beaterris) which has *Abolu[s?]*, and *CIL* 6.31324 (Rome) which has *Abulus*. Given the crosses found elsewhere in the graveyard one is led to suspect that the inset *tau*<sup>10</sup> in the first *alpha*<sup>11</sup>, and the crossed *phi* in line 3,<sup>12</sup> if they are not merely stone factures, may be simple attempts to impart some Christian flavour to the epitaph.

*Line 3.* τ(α)φ(ο)ς is not at all common in these context, but it is certainly found. For some examples in this general region *Tituli Asiae Minoris* 2.2.526 (Pınara), 797 (Arycanda), 1062 (Olympus), Haspels, *op. cit.* no. 49, 317f, Jalabert and Mouterde, *op. cit.*, nos. 915 (Antiochia), 1108 (Bityas), H. Grégoire, *Recueil des inscriptions grecque-*



*chrétiennes d'Asie Mineure*, fasc. 1, repr. Amsterdam, 1968, no. 269 (Aphrodisias), G. E. Bean and T. B. Mitford, *Journeys in Rough Cilicia 1964-1968*, Wien, 1970, no. 49 1.18 (Ayasofya). The word is found in the examples cited from Haspels, Jalabart and Mouterde, and Bean and Mitford in metrical compositions. Was it here chosen in order to add a touch of literary class?—an aspiration only to be compromised by the solecism  $\tau\acute{\alpha}\varphi(o)\varsigma$  for  $\tau\acute{\alpha}\varphi(o)\nu!$  (For a useful catalogue of instances of  $\tau\acute{\alpha}\varphi o\varsigma$  in Asia Minor see J. Kubińska, *Les monuments funéraires dans les inscriptions grecques de l'Asie Mineure*, Warsaw, 1968, 23 ff: the word is used for different forms of burial—it is found on sarcophagi and funerary altars as well as funerary stones).

*Line 3/4.* If  $\pi o i e i$  is correct, it suggests by its awkward present tense that we are dealing with an attempt to impart a sophisticated Hellenized air by a clinet who was not basically Greek-speaking. We may have, therefore, a document possibly attesting to a local Syrian family aspiring to display Byzantine levels of culture and Greek literacy. (But the stone-cutter, by a kind of haplography with the preceding lunate *sigma*, may have failed to cut  $\acute{\epsilon}\pi o i e i$ ; all the same, still an unlikely tense).

*Line 4.* There is room in the line for four letters to follow (the stone tapering outwards). We could well expect  $\acute{\epsilon}\tau(\omega\nu)$ , plus a number, for the deceased's age.<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For this movement, in the late fourth century, Libanius, *oratio xxx (Pro Templis)*, A. J. Festugière, *Antioche païenne et chrétienne. Libanius, Chrysostome et les moines de Syrie*, Paris, 1959, 237 ff, J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, *Antioch: City and Imperial Administration in the Later Roman Empire*, Oxford, 1972, 237 ff. Compare for Athens the study by A. Frantz, *From Paganism to Christianity in the Temples of Athens*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 19 (1965), 185 ff. The remarks of Theodoret are apposite in this context, *Graec. affect. cur.* 8.68 (sources chrétiennes 57.2, 335): "The temples of the pagan gods have been so completely destroyed that even their plan and outline have been lost and people today are ignorant of the shape of their altars whilst the building materials from them have been consecrated for the shrines of the martyrs". He goes on to refer to Syrian saints. For further evidence see G. Fowden, *Bishops and temples in the eastern Roman Empire A.D. 320-435*, *Journ. Theol. Stud.* 29 (1978), 53 ff.

<sup>2</sup> See G. Goossens, *Hiérapolis de Syrie. Essai de monographie historique*, Louvain, 1943, 105 f n. 6. For illustration of the style see Fig. 8 in F. Cumont, *La marche de l'empereur Julien d'Antioche à l'Euphrate*, in *Études Syriennes*, Paris, 1917, 1 ff at 25.

<sup>3</sup> Measurements: maximum height (*in situ*) 65 cm.; width across front, 38 cm.; statue thickness at maximum, 45 cm. deep.

<sup>4</sup> First observed by the sharp eyes of the late W. Culican, to whose memory this note is affectionately dedicated. I am grateful to Ms. J. Zimmer for splendid detailed photographs.

<sup>5</sup> Sketch by Ms. M. Mottram.

<sup>6</sup> Compare, for this very common type, inscription no. 50 in J. Lassus, *Inventaire archéologique de la région au nord-est de Hama, Damascus, 1935*, vol. 1, 90 with fig. 100 [Tell El-Amara, dated 566-7 A.D.].

<sup>7</sup> O. Hass, *Die phrygischen Sprachdenkmäler*, Sofia, 1966, 75 ff, M. Lejeune, Notes paléo-phrygiennes, *Rev. études anc.* 71 (1969), 295, adding further neo-phrygian material in C.H.E. Haspels, *The Highlands of Phrygia*, 2 vols., Princeton, 1971, nos. 45, 56, 57 (1.316, 321f), T. Drew-Bear and Cl. Brixche, Un nouveau document néo-phrygien, *Kadmos* 17 (1978), 50f, S. Michell, *Regional Epigraphic Catalogues of Asia Minor 11. The Ankara District. The Inscriptions of North Galatia*, Oxford, 1982, no. 366 (p. 281).

<sup>8</sup> On undeclined names see the remarks in L. Jalabert and R. Mouterde, *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie*, vol. 2, Paris, 1939, no. 268, 149f (with further references cited).

<sup>9</sup> But compare the ŠM'ΩN frequently attested in Palmyrene inscriptions: see J.K. Stark, *Personal Names in Palmyrene Inscriptions*, Oxford, 1971, 52 and H. Ingholt, H. Seyrig, J. Starcky, *Recueil des Tessères de Palmyre*, Paris, 1955, index s.v. ŠM'ΩN (p. 189) with the remarks by A. Caquot, *op. cit.*, Remarques linguistiques sur les inscriptions des tessères de Palmyre, 178. See also the many variants recorded by H. Wuthnow, *Die semitischen Menschennamen in griechischen Inschriften und Papyri des vorderen Orients*, Leipzig, 1930, 172.

<sup>10</sup> On tau as a Christian sign note Tert. *adv. Marc.* 3.226 C.C.s.l. 1.539: *ipsa est enim littera Graecorum Tau, nostra autem T, species crucis* and see in detail M. Guarducci, *I Graffiti sotto la Confessione di san Pietro in Vaticano*, 3 vols., Vatican, 1958, 1.302ff.

<sup>11</sup> There are identical alphas (Α) on the 'prophylactic mosaic' on the floor of the diaconicon in the principal church at Dair Solaib: see J. Mattern, *Villes mortes de Haute Syrie*, 2nd ed., Beirut, 1944, Pl. LX (and 156 ff). The Mosaic probably dates to the end of the fifth century A.D. (See also R. Mouterde and A. Beaulieu in J. Mattern, R. Mouterde and A. Beaulieu, *Dair Solaib 1. Les deux églises. 11. Mosaïque "prophylactique". Le décor*, *Mél., Univ. St. Joseph* 22 [1939], 20ff and commentary in *Inscr. grecq. et lat. de la Syrie* iv [1955] no. 1383). There appears to be another example in *I.G.L.S.* 7 (1970) no. 4047 bis [Safita] with *Planche* XV.3. And in inscription no. 57 of J. Lassus, *Inventaire* (cited in n. 6 above), vol. 1, 103f with fig. 111 [Aṭṣan] a Christian lintel of A.D. 567, there is one alpha of the type Α whilst all others are of the type Α. We should properly conclude that we may merely have a decorative variant.

<sup>12</sup> Phi, that is φῶς, was regarded as a mystic letter, cf. M. Guarducci, *op. cit.*, 1.195 ff. For a similar crossed theta in a Christian inscription, E. Popescu, *Inscriptiile grecești și latine din secolele IV-XIII descoperite în România*, București, 1976, no. 31 (pp. 66f), also in S. Româlior, *Cultura romană în Dacia*, 1980, 160 and fig. 573 (Tomis).

<sup>13</sup> This is intended as a preliminary report. I would be grateful for criticism and comment for incorporation into a fuller description of the environs of el-Qitar (Final Report). I have been particularly helped by observations made by Miss J.M. Reynolds (who must be exonerated of the errors, which are mine).



a. Funeral stele. Village graveyard: general view.

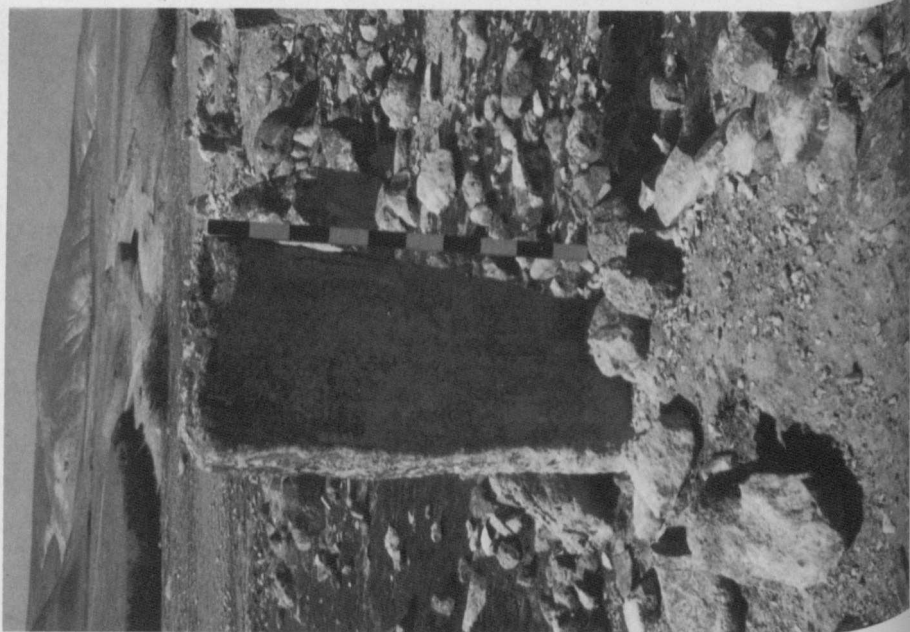


b. Funeral stele. Cross on piece of column in village graveyard.

PLATE 14



a. Funeral Stele. Remains of limestone statue in village graveyard.



b. Funeral stele. Stele in village graveyard.





Funeral Stele. Inscribed area of stele. Photo: J. Zimmer.