

THE GREEK INSCRIPTION FROM TEL ASHDOD: A REVISED READING

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In 'Atiqot 51, Tzaferis (2006) published a Greek inscription uncovered in a salvage excavation at Kibbutz H̄azor, c. 100 m east of Tel Ashdod. A partly destroyed mosaic panel (1.3 × 5.0 m) was all that remained of an ancient building, whose nature could not be ascertained. The only information that could be gleaned concerning the building was from the Greek inscription adorning the mosaic. The inscription (Fig. 1) consists of seven lines, separated by rows of pink tesserae; a horned cross, flanked by ivy leaves, occupies an eighth line at the bottom. The letters (6–9 cm high) are traced in black, as is the round medallion surrounding the inscription (external diam. 1.15 m, internal

diam. 1.1 m); this in turn is encased in a square frame of pink tesserae, measuring 1.24 × 1.29 m. The characters are square, except for the almond-shaped omicron.

The Text

Below is the reading given by Tzaferis, after some minor imperfections have been corrected:

ΧΜΓ
ΕΠΙΤΟΥΘΕΟΦΙΑΣΑΒ
ΒΑ...ΑΝΠΡΕCΒSK
4 ΗΓ...ΕΓΕΝΕΤΟΕΚΘΕΜΕ
ΗΛΗΝΟCΣΥΝΤWΜΟΝΑCΤC
ΕΓΡΑΦΗΜΗΝΙΔΕCΙW
ΓΙΝΑCΙΕΤΟΥCΑΤ



Fig. 1. The inscription.

X(ριστός) M(αρίας) γ(έννα)
 Ἐπὶ τοῦ θεοφιλ(εστάτου) ἀβ-
 βᾶ [Ἰω]άν(νου), πρεσβ(υτέρου) κ(αὶ)
 4 ἡγ[ου]μένου], ἐγένετο ἐκ θεμε(λίων)
 ἡ ληνὸς σὺν τῷ μοναστ(ηρίῳ).
 Ἐγράφη μηνὶ Δεσίῳ
 γ', ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος) ι', ἔτους λτ'.

Christ Son of Maria

In the time of the God-beloved Abba Joannes, priest and hegumen, was done from the foundation the winepress together with the monastery. Written in month Daesius 3, indiction 10, year 330.

As to the majuscule copy, it should be noted that the *epsilon* at the end of l. 4 is small and floating above the *mu*; the abbreviations indicated with a *stigma*, except for those in ll. 5 and 7, are in fact inverted S-signs; and the author missed an identical, smaller mark attached at the lower tip of the *kappa* at the end of l. 3. But most importantly, the photo of the inscription in Tzaferis 2006: Fig. 1 clearly shows three momentous errors in ll. 3 and 7: (1) The first letter after the gap in l. 3, preceding the *alpha*, is a *mu*; (2) The first letter of l. 7 is not a *gamma* but a *kappa* surmounted by a horizontal line, which marks it as a figure—it is followed by the abbreviation INΔ, marked with a shallow *stigma*, after which comes the figure of the indiction, unmarked; (3) The indiction is not *iota* but an inverted *zeta*, a not uncommon error in Byzantine inscriptions in our region.

Here follows a corrected copy of the inscription, carefully checked against the mosaic itself (presently in the storerooms of the Israel Antiquities Authority at the Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem):

haedera + XMG + haedera
 ΕΠΙΤΟΥΘΕΟΦΙΛ₂ AB
 BA...MANΠΡΕCΒ₂ K₂
 4 ΗΓΟ...ΕΓΕΝΕΤΟΕΚΘΕΜ^E
 ΗΛΗΝΟCCΥNTWMONACTS
 ΕΓΡΑΦΗΜΗΝΙΑΔΕCΙW
 KINΔSZETOYCAT
 haedera + haedera

Another difference in my reading comes as a matter of interpretation. In the first line, the well-known abbreviation or siglon XMG has been interpreted in many different ways, some of which referring to “Christ son of Mary” (Χριστὸν Μαρία γεννᾶ, Χριστὸς ὁ ἐκ Μαρίας γεννηθείς and also Χριστὸς Μαρίας γέννα, as suggested by Tzaferis), others to X(ριστός) M(ιχαήλ) Γ(αβριήλ), “Christ, Michael, Gabriel”, X(ριστός) M(έ)γ(ας), “Christ (is) great”. Another popular interpretation of XMG is as an *isopsephon*, that is, a figure representing the numerical value of a word or sequence of words. XMG corresponds to 643, which is the numerical value of Θεός βοηθός, “God helps”, ἅγιός ὁ Θεός, “God is holy” (the first words of the Trisagion hymn), and of other religious expressions.¹ As an abbreviation, but especially as an *isopsephon*, XMG had clearly an apotropaic function, which made it an apt opening for a building inscription. In the present case I would rather view the formula as an *isopsephon*, following the opinion expressed by Perdrietz (1904:357–360) more than a century ago.

Here follows my reading of the inscription:

χμγ
 Ἐπὶ τοῦ θεοφιλ(εστάτου) ἀβ-
 βᾶ [Γερ]μαν(οῦ) πρεσβ(υτέρου) κ(αὶ)
 4 ἡγ[ου]μ(ένου)] ἐγένετο ἐκ θεμε(λίων)
 ἡ ληνὸς σὺν τῷ μοναστ(ηρίῳ).
 Ἐγράφη μηνὶ Δεσίῳ
 κ', ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος) ζ', ἔτους λτ'.

643 (cryptogram of “God helps” or a similar apotropaic formula). Under the most God-loving Abba [Γερ]manus, priest and abbot, the winepress was built from the foundations, together with the monastery. It was written on the 20th of the month Daesius of the 7th indiction, in the year 330.

The inscription must have adorned the entrance of a winepress attached to a monastery, not of the monastery itself or of its church, as suggested by S. Gudovitch in the archaeological

report (Gudovitch 2006:2*, 233). Winepresses and oil presses have been discovered in many monasteries throughout the country, and the large dimensions of their vats indicate that they produced more than could be consumed by any monastic community (Hirschfeld 1992:106–109, 204–205). The sale of surplus wine was probably an important source of income for Abba Germanus' monastery, as for other monasteries located in fertile areas; hence the commemoration of the building of the winepress by an inscription. In a similar way, the members of a monastery at el-Kufr in the Hauran commemorated the building of a wine cellar (οἶνοθήκη) "by the care of Abba Hedylos" by engraving a Greek inscription on the lintel above its entrance (Ewing 1895:276, No. 152).

The Date of the Inscription

Tzaferis suggested four possible ways of calculating the date: by the era of Azotus, by "Pompeian" eras of Ascalon or Gaza, or by the era of Eleutheropolis. Considering the location of the ruins at the very foot of the tell on which ancient Ashdod was located, the era of Azotus would be the most likely choice. According to Tzaferis, the era of Azotus was established by Gabinus (unfortunately transformed into "Galba" in the English summary) in 57 BCE;² by this reckoning, year 330 would give 273 CE (really 274, for the month Daesius fell in the summer, in the second half of the year). However, Tzaferis rejects this date, as unsuitable for the building of a monastery; moreover, he maintains that in the Roman period Azotus lost its status as *polis* and ceased to use its urban era. Accordingly, Tzaferis rightly excludes the use of the era of Azotus in this inscription. His arguments, however, require some comments. First and foremost, the so-called era of Gabinus, differently calculated by various scholars according to the chronological problems they were discussing, is a myth. The city issued no coins, nor is there any epigraphic evidence of the use of such an era.³ On the other hand, in the Late Roman period Azotus certainly had

city status, as a bishop was established there already in the early fourth century, although his see was most likely based in the harbour town, Azotus Paralios, which now overshadowed the old inland center.⁴ Had Azotus had an era of its own, it would certainly have been used in our inscription, but the resulting date, 274 CE, invalidates this assumption, not only because it is too early for the founding of a monastery, but more importantly because the indiction system was only introduced under Constantine, and does not appear in inscriptions before the late fifth century.

Next Tzaferis considers the era of Ascalon, which he fixes at 61 BCE. By this reckoning the inscription would be dated 269 CE (again, the mention of Daesius would put the date in the summer of 270), which is, again, too early. By the same token he also rejects the era of Gaza, also fixed to 61 BCE. However, it should be noted that Ascalon did not have a "Pompeian" era. The era of Ascalon started in 104 BCE, and its "year 330" would have fallen in 226/7 CE. In any case, both the eras of Ascalon and of Gaza are non-starters in our quest for identification of the chronological system represented in this inscription.

The fourth era suggested by Tzaferis is that of Eleutheropolis, which would have been inaugurated in 200/1 CE, when the important village of Bet Govrin was granted city status and renamed Eleutheropolis on the occasion of Septimius Severus' visit. By this era the date of the inscription would be $330 + 200/1 = 530/1$, which would coincide with the tenth indiction mentioned in the inscription, according to Tzaferis' reading. Now, while I cannot but agree on the choice of the era of Eleutheropolis as the chronological system by which the date of this inscription must be converted, Tzaferis' whole argument is vitiated by a number of errors. First, the era of Eleutheropolis started not in 200/1 but either on January 1, 200 or, more likely, in the autumn of 199.⁵ Second, even starting from 200/1, year 330 would correspond to 529/30 ($200/1 + 330 - 1$), which did not fall in the tenth indiction. Third, also year 530/1, as

calculated by Tzaferis, did not fall in the tenth indiction, but in the ninth, from September 1, 530 to August 31, 531. Last but not least, the reading ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος) ι' in l. 7 is undoubtedly a mistake. The indiction figure is Ζ, that is, "7th". Year 330 of the era of Eleutheropolis, starting in the autumn of 199, corresponds to 528/9, which fell in the seventh indiction. By the calendar of Eleutheropolis, the full date of the inscription would be June 9, 529; if the calendar employed was that of nearby Ascalon, July 14, 529. The date does not change if the epoch of Eleutheropolis is fixed at January 1, 200 or even at the once accepted date of March 22, 200.

The use of the era of Eleutheropolis is significant. It cannot be doubted that the monastery stood within the boundaries of the bishopric of Azotus, which surely included both the harbor town and inland Azotus.⁶ Only about 5 km to the east, the mosaic pavements of the church of Ḥazor Ashdod bear a date by the era of Ascalon and the name of a well-known bishop of Ascalon, Anthony (Ovadia and Ovadia 1987:67–69, No. 93). The nearby village of Asor, whose name is preserved in the Arabic toponym Yasur, is said by Eusebius to be in the territory of Ascalon (Eusebius, *Onomasticon*, Klostermann 1904:20; Tsafir, Di Segni and Green 1994:70). The era of Ascalon was a popular one; not only was it used for a long time, at least until the seventh century, but it even appears outside the boundaries of

the mother city.⁷ However, the abbot of the monastery at Tel Ashdod, who in all likelihood dictated the inscription, chose to employ the era of the farther-removed urban center, Eleutheropolis, whose territory did not even border that of Azotus. This seems to indicate a wish to differentiate between the monastery and the neighbouring bishopric. It may have been just a way of stressing the hierarchic and economic subordination of the monastery to a bishop rather than to another authority, or it may hint to a different, subtler kind of loyalty. Anthony was bishop of Ascalon in 529, when our inscription was set in the mosaic pavement. He was a faithful disciple of St. Sabas, and as such, a stout supporter of the Chalcedonian creed, even in the first years of his episcopate, the last years of Emperor Anastasius, who supported Monophysism and tried to delegitimize the Chalcedonian bishops. In 518, immediately after Anastasius' death, a council convened in Constantinople reaffirmed the Chalcedonian creed, and a synod of the Palestinian bishops met in Jerusalem and promptly ratified its resolutions.⁸ But no bishop of Azotus attended this synod. It is not an unlikely hypothesis that the incumbent bishop held Monophysite views and stayed away in order not to be forced to deny his beliefs.⁹ If so, the pointed choice of a non-local era in the monastery of Tel Ashdod may hint to a wish on the abbot's part to symbolically mark the border between himself and his foundation, and the catholic bishop of Ascalon.

NOTES

¹ Avi-Yonah 1940:111. However, the particular phrase chosen by Tzaferis is not among the choices offered by Avi-Yonah, based on previous research.

² Gabinius, governor of Syria in 57–55 BCE, is supposed to have rebuilt several cities in Palestine, carrying out Pompey's orders. This view is based on a (probably mistaken) interpretation of Josephus' evidence (*Jewish Antiquities* XIV:75–76, 88; *Jewish*

War I:155–156, 166); for a revision, see Isaac 1990:336–340.

³ Stein (1990:95–97, 106–109) rejects the possibility that Gabinius may have carried out any actions leading to the adoption of new city eras; she does not include Azotus among the coastal cities with a numismatically attested era. Meimaris, a firm believer in the era of Gabinius, which he fixes at 59

BCE, invokes it time and again as a key of conversion for dates of inscriptions from the coastal region, but he cannot produce a single convincing instance of its use. See Meimaris 1992:72–74, 117–118, 134–135; for a revision of the single cases, see Di Segni 1997:33–34; 353–354, No. 88; 434–435, No. 121; 470–472, No. 135.

⁴ For the list of bishops of Azotus, see Fedalto 1988:1017. A clear illustration of the relative importance of Azotus on the sea and inland Azotus in the Byzantine period is provided by the representation of the two in the Madaba map. The vignette of Azotus Paralios shows a large city with a colonnaded street and at least three churches, while inland Azotus is represented as a village, although it too has one or two churches. Cf. Donner 1992:64.

⁵ Stein 1990:147–150; Di Segni 1997:21–23. On the other hand, Meimaris accepts the conclusion of Kubitschek (1916:21–22), who set the starting point of the era of Eleutheropolis on March 22, 200 (Meimaris 1992:307–308). However, this view is no longer tenable, based on the new epigraphic data now available.

⁶ This is now confirmed by an inscription lately discovered at Khirbat Barqa (Gan Yavne), which indicates that this site too, located northeast of Tel Ashdod, was included in the diocese of Azotus. The

inscription, still unpublished, is dated by the era of Ascalon.

⁷ Di Segni 1997:7–8. In addition to the territory of the city, the era of Ascalon is used in one instance at Hebron, in the boundaries of Eleutheropolis: Di Segni 1997:670–671, No. 227 = *SEG* 39, No. 1625.

⁸ On the events of the last years of Anastasius, and the ecclesiastical resolutions after his death, see Perrone 1980:151–179. Anthony was consecrated bishop of Ascalon some time between 508 and 512, through the influence of the holy monk Sabas, whom his family had long supported. He still occupied his see in 531–532 when he was charged by Emperor Justinian with appraising the damages of the Samaritan revolt. See Cyril of Scythopolis. *Life of Sabas*, Chs. 37, 64, 73 (Schwartz 1939:127, 165, 176–177).

⁹ Monophysism was particularly strong in southern Palestine, especially along the coast. It is worth mentioning that the Monophysite leader Peter the Iberian was warmly received in Azotus Paralios in 490, the year before his death. He took residence there and only left because of ill health, which forced him to accept the comforts of the royal stewards' hospitality in the imperial estate of Iamnia. See *Vita Petri Iberi* (Raabe 1895:113–114; Syriac text:121–122).

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