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A Greek Inscription from the Church at Ḥorbat Ḥadat

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A three-line Greek inscription was uncovered in the church at Ḥorbat Ḥadat (Fig. 1; see Segal, ʿAd and Shmueli 2017: Fig. 1).[1] It is set in the mosaic pavement of the nave, at the foot of the steps leading up to the *bema* (see ʿAd, Segal, Shmueli and Cohen, this volume: Plan 3). The inscription is enclosed in a rectangular frame made of two rows of black tesserae, situated beyond the eastern margin of the geometric panel that occupies the nave, and separated from it by a red and black band of dentillated triangles. The frame and the steps in front of it are not centered along the axis of the apse, but rather displaced to the north, a clear indication that they belong to the early stage of the chapel. Most of the rectangular frame was preserved (c. 2.2 m long, c. 0.7 m wide); its left side is entirely missing. However, the original length of the frame can be easily estimated, since just three letters are missing at the beginning of each line. As each group of three letters in the inscription is on average 22.5 cm long, and assuming that there was some blank space to the left of the inscription, similar to the space to its right (0.1–0.2 m wide), the full length of the frame can be estimated at about 2.55 m.

Fig. 1. The mosaic inscription.

[1] The inscription was first mentioned by Cohen (1963; *HA* 1963) and Ovadiah (1970:110–111, No. 107). The *editio princeps* (not a re-publication from Cohen 1963, as mistakenly stated in SEG) was a faulty text published by Ovadiah and Ovadiah (1987:93, No. 156), without an illustration, and repeated in SEG 37, No. 1497. My thanks to Uzi ʿAd for inviting me to study the inscription. The photograph was taken by Raled Abu-Diab.

The letters are traced in black tesserae and are about 10 cm high. They belong to the round alphabet, and their shape points to a date in the fifth century CE, most likely in its second half. A christogram composed of a cross ligated with a *rho* appears in the third line. The double mark of the abbreviated *nomen sacrum*, with an underline in addition to the usual horizontal stroke above, is unusual. The text reads:

. . . ΡΟΠΟΝΕΠΙΠΟΘΙΗΕΛΑΦΟϹΕΠΙΤΑϹΠΗ
. . . ΤWΝΥΔΑΤWΝΟΥΤWϹΕΠΙΠΟΘΙΗΨΥ
. . . ΟΥΠΡΟϹϹΕΟΘϹ ⳨ ΒΟΗΘΙΤWΚΤΙϹΤΗ

Transcription:
[Ὃν τ]ρόπον ἐπιποθ(ε)ῖ ἡ ἔλαφος ἐπὶ τὰς πη-
[γὰς] τῶν ὑδάτων, οὕτως ἐπιποθ(ε)ῖ ἡ ψυ-
[χή μ]ου πρὸς σέ, ὁ θ(εό)ς. (Χριστέ), βοήθ(ε)ι τῷ κτίστῃ.

Translation:
As the hart longs for the streams of water, so longs my soul for Thee, O God! Christ, help the founder.

The text is a quotation from Psalms 41:2 in the Septuagint version (42:1 in the Masoretic Text). The nominative ὁ θεός, instead of the required vocative, is common in inscriptions of late antiquity in Palestine, but in this case it is already found in the Septuagint text. The rest of the inscription is an invocation to Christ, whose name is not spelled out but is represented by the christogram, to help the *ktistes*. The literal meaning of the word *ktistes* is 'builder', but it usually refers to the founder of a structure—or even a city—rather than to the person who actually erected it. The central location of the invocation in the pavement of the church clearly indicates that in this case the word refers to the founder of the church—that is, the donor who paid for the construction of the sacred building—rather than to the contractor or the mason, and most certainly not the mosaic artisan, who is referred to as ψηφοθέτης in inscriptions.

This is the only appearance of Psalms 41:2 in an Eastern inscription. Three additional examples come from the Balkan region: one in Greek from Ochrid in Macedonia (ancient Lychnidos in Epirus, late fifth–early sixth centuries CE; Felle 2006:261–262, No. 567); and two in Latin, from Viniçko Kale in Macedonia (ancient Vinica in Thracia, fourth–sixth centuries CE; Felle 2006:245–246, No. 529) and from Solin in Croatia (ancient Salona in Dalmatia, fifth century CE?; Felle 2006:269, No. 582). Interestingly, all three Balkan inscriptions are accompanied by representations of two stags drinking from a stream or a *kantharos*. Two of these inscriptions—at Lychnidos and at Salona—are set in the mosaic pavements of baptisteries. The inscription at Vinica was uncovered in a small church, where it was set, along with its related scene, on a ceramic tile, one of a series of tiles decorated

with biblical subjects accompanied by pertinent scriptural quotations (Felle 2006:245–248, Nos. 528, 530–533).

The motif of the drinking deer often appears in sacred buildings in one of several variants: two fronting stags facing each other as they drink at a stream, a basin, a fountain or the rivers of Paradise; or approaching an amphora, which is sometimes depicted with a vine trellis issuing from it. Even without the accompanying quotation, the representation of the watering deer would have been recognized as a reference to Psalms 42:1; the scene, especially common in the West, may indeed be considered as the equivalent of the inscribed quotation. As it appears in a number of baptisteries in Western Europe and North Africa, it has been suggested that the drinking deer symbolize the catechumens longing for the waters of purification, and that the psalm was chanted as part of the baptismal liturgy (Puech 1949; Saller and Bagatti 1949:97–98; Stern 1957; Daniélou 1958:51–52; Farioli Campanati 1999:174). Indeed, commentaries on this verse by Jerome, Augustine and other Church Fathers compare the hart in this psalm to the catechumen. Augustine even alludes to the chanting of this text, which accompanied the catechumens to the font (Jerome, *In Ps. XLI,* PL 26:949; Augustinus, *Enarratio in Ps. XLI*, 1, PL 36:464). However, in the next paragraphs of his homily Augustine (*Enarratio in Ps. XLI*, 2–5, PL 36:465–466) goes on to say that the hart also symbolizes every baptized Christian wishing to be purified of his sins. Furthermore, Church Fathers often compared the coming of the baptized into the Church to Adam's return to the Garden of Eden. Thus, the motif of the drinking deer, especially when represented as drinking from the rivers of Paradise, is not to be associated with the rite of baptism. Instead, it symbolizes the Christian soul quenching its thirst in the waters of faith.

Some scholars interpret the motif of the drinking deer as an allusion to the Eucharistic liturgy, especially when the motif appears on or near the *bema*, where this liturgy was celebrated; other animals, such as sheep, birds or peacocks, could fulfill the same symbolic role (Saller and Bagatti 1949:103; Underwood 1950; Maguire 1987:36–39; Donceel-Voûte 1988:201; Waliszewski 2001:226; Habas 2005:365–369, 441–443). However, one must keep in mind that the motif appears not only in baptisteries or near the presbytery, but also in aisles, inside chapels or in the narthex. It also occurred in a variety of other contexts, including funerary, as well as in manuscript illustrations and on lamps and other objects. In the East, however, the iconography of the drinking deer is much rarer than in the West, and it is never associated with baptisteries. In Eastern churches this motif is only occasionally located near the *bema*, but is found most often in the narthex, aisles or side chapels. Moreover, the depictions of pairs of stags are not given special emphasis, but are

usually set in panels alongside pairs of various other animals.[2] One depiction of two stags approaching an amphora is found in the mosaic pavement of a synagogue, the so-called House of Leontius at Bet She'an (Foerster 1993:233). This leads us to suspect that the drinking-deer motif did not necessarily have a Christian liturgical significance, but was merely a well-known decorative motif that met with the approval of the community or the individual who paid for the mosaic, chosen for its aesthetic value or for other, personal reasons lost to us.

In the case of Ḥorbat Ḥadat, there is no indication that the chapel ever functioned as a baptistery. While the location of the inscription at the foot of the *bema* may support the hypothesis that it was an allusion to the Eucharistic liturgy, it does not necessarily exclude the possibility that the verse was chosen by the donor—the anonymous *ktistes*—as an expression of his or her intimate religious feelings, with no reference to the liturgy. In fact, it cannot even be proven that the chapel, at least in its early stage, was ever consecrated to allow the rite of the Eucharist to be performed there.[3] Cases in which oratories were constructed and even provided with an altar, but were not consecrated, are well known in Byzantine Palestine. For instance, the holy monk Euthymius and his companion, Theoctistus, established in 410 or 411 CE a church in a cave in Wadi Mukallik (Naḥal Og). The church was obviously not consecrated until it was made accessible by the building of Theoctistus' coenobium several years later (Cyril of Scythopolis, *Vita Euthymii* 8, 9, ed. Schwartz 1939:15, 17). Subsequently, while living as a hermit at Masada, Euthymius built a church, erected in it an altar and then abandoned the place (*Vita Euthymii* 11, ed.

[2] In our region, the iconography of two stags appears as follows: drinking at a source—in the Church of the Apostles at Madaba (Piccirillo 1993: Figs. 89, 95; Michel 2001:325–328, No. 124, Figs. 309, 310) and in the Church of the Martyrs Lot and Procopius at Khirbat Mekhayyat (Piccirillo 1993: Figs. 213, 215; Michel 2001:345–347, No. 127, Fig. 323); in medallions, approaching to drink from a bowl—at Petra, in the church near the Temple of the Winged Lions (Michel 2001:156–161, No. 28, Figs. 110, 112; Waliszewski 2001:310, 316, Fig. 6); flanking an amphora from which a vine trellis issues—in a chapel at el-Maqerqesh near Bet Govrin (Avi-Yonah 1933:147–148, Pl. 57:6; 1993:198), in the narthex of the church of Martyrius' Monastery at Ma'ale Adummim (Magen and Talgam 1990:110–114, Figs. 25, 26, 30, 31) and in the so-called House of Leontius at Bet She'an (Foerster 1993:233).

Other Near Eastern sites where this iconography appears are as follows: Khilde in Lebanon—two stags approaching a fountain so as to drink (Donceel-Voûte 1988:365, 369–370, Fig. 349, Pl. 15); Rayan in Syria—two stags flanking an amphora (Donceel-Voûte 1988:264–266, Pl. 12); and Tayibat el-Imam in Syria—four deer drinking from the rivers of Paradise (Farioli Campanati 1999:173–174; Zaqzuq and Piccirillo 1999:445–446, Plan 1, Pl. VI). Another mosaic from an unknown location in Syria, now at the Louvre, shows two stags drinking from a fountain (Baratte 1978:148–149, Fig. 150). These data were provided by Lihi Habas, to whom I owe the most heartfelt thanks.

[3] Churches and chapels could be erected by individuals as well as by communities, without the sanction of ecclesiastical authority, and parts of the liturgy—reading of the Gospel and chanting of psalms and hymns—could be performed in them. However, the complete liturgy, including the Eucharist, could not be celebrated if the church altar had not been consecrated. The consecration rite could only be performed by a bishop, and was usually accompanied by the deposition of relics.

Schwartz 1939: 22); again, this church could not have been consecrated.[4] Similarly, when Euthymius went on to choose Mishor Adummim as a hermitage site for himself and his disciple, Domitian, and built there a chapel, it was consecrated only some years later, in 428 or 429 CE, when the hermitage grew into a laura (*Vita Euthymii* 14, 16, ed. Schwartz 1939:24, 26). Hence, until the function and early history of the church at Ḥorbat Ḥadat is better known, the quotation from Psalms 41 cannot be taken as evidence that it served to celebrate the Eucharistic liturgy.

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[4] This is obvious because the rite could not be celebrated without a bishop, and a consecrated altar would certainly not have been left unattended. Moreover, Cyril of Scythopolis is very precise in his language, and in a similar case, when he means that the oratory and altar *were* consecrated, he is careful to say so explicitly (*Vita Sabae* 16, ed. Schwartz 1939:100).

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