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Self-Donation or Retirement to the Monastery (?): O.NMEC 117

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Introduction

The ostracon published below is part of a seizure collection of 40 Coptic and Greek ostraca, some of them are fake. They are of unknown provenance (most probably Thebes for the majority of them) and are now kept in the NMEC (National Museum of Egyptian Civilization) in Cairo. O.NMEC 117 is one of the most complete Coptic ostracon of this collection. It has a remarkable peculiarity since each of its text lines had been crossed. This is, as far as I know, the only example of such a practice for an ostracon. It seems that for some reason somebody wanted to make the text no longer valid. However the text is still readable and its content, while raising difficulties of interpretation, provides interesting insights on social uses connected with the monastic environment of the Theban region.

The text is actually complete and undamaged, apart from minor surface wear affecting the legibility of the beginning and the ending lines. It consists of 21 lines written in Sahidic Coptic with a few traces of Theban dialect (see the comments on ṭει l. 15 and ὑψι l. 16). The script on the recto is regular and practiced, slightly sloping uncial, typical for documentary hands of the 7th and 8th centuries. The script has a few ligatures reminiscent of the 7th-c. hands. The
use of the superlinear strokes, as preserved, seems regular except in the abbreviation of Jesus Christ (see l. 12). The presence of a long superlinear stroke is also noted on πεινα (l. 12). Trema (diaeresis) is found throughout the entire text on all types of i: simple as in (ποι l. 2), diphthongal as in (κόμω l. 6, πενχοεικ l. 12) or consonantal as in (ιακωβ l. 3); it is also employed in Greek words as in (παιακοαος l. 10), and it resembles two separate dots on the two letters in ιεκ πεξε (l. 12). There seems to be no logical punctuation, except for a raised point after νομος (l. 5). The verso is scarcely legible and written by a different hand. It could be a school exercise, thus an example of reusing or recycling the writing surface.4

The date of the text could be at the beginning of the 7th century, before the Persian invasion,5 during this period, most of the monasteries and churches in that area were destroyed (see below the commentary on the monastery of Apa Samuel mentioned in this ostracon).6 Moreover, the script could fit this period.

The ostracon contains a brief story by a man called Strategios. It explains how he came to sin by having an extramarital affair with a woman who lived with him for one year. Afterwards, he realized that his behaviour was inspired by the devil, so he decided to go to the monastery of Apa Samuel and dwell there in order to obtain God’s forgiveness. As a whole, the document can then be considered as a kind of “narratio”, that is to say a story about what happened in the past and how it encouraged the issuer to make a decision.7 In other words, what one uses to call nowadays a “motivation letter”.

Text and Translation

O.NMEC Inv. 117
22.4 × 8.5 × 0.8 cm
Thebes?
7th century?

Recto

[1] ΑΝΟΚ ΣΤΡΑΤΕΥΟΣ
[2] † ΠΟΙΙ ΝΠΜΑΚΑΡΙΟΣ
[3] ΙΑΚΩΒ ΜΝ ΑΘΕΝΑΙ ΕΤΟΥΗΣ
[4] ΣΝ ΠΙΕΝΕΙΤΡ ΕΡΕΚΗΤ Ο

4 Due to its illegibility and since there is no connection between its content and the text of the recto, the verso of O.NMEC 117 and other pieces of school texts from the Coptic ostraca of NMEC will be the subject of another article.
I Strategios, the son of the late Jacob and Athenai who are living in Pshenhôr, Kêbt being their Nome, it happened to me when I became old in age that some bad thoughts entered my mind because of an old woman, and I went and joined myself together with her and after the devil led my heart astray, I spent one year with her. My lord Jesus Christ had mercy on me He opened my eyes. I saw as every man did I would examine that either today or tomorrow I would die while being outside the number of the Christians. Having The merciful God opened my heart, I decided in my mind to go to the holy monastery of apa Samuel and settle there. God will forgive you the madness you went through.
Commentary

1. 1-3. The names στρατηγός and ἰωκωβ were quite common in Thebes. They are attested many times in the Coptic documentary texts. στρατηγός (Στράτηγος) is well attested from the 3rd century bc to the 8th century AD, especially in Fayoum and Thebes. 8 στρατηγός is typical for late antique Egyptian anthroponomy. 9 As for ἀδελφή, it could be a female variant for the Greek name (Ἀδελφή), well attested in the Greek texts from the 4th century bc to the 6th century AD, especially in middle Egypt.10

1. 2. ⦿ the cross should be in the beginning of the first line. It looks as if, for some reasons, the first line had been added later.

1. 4. ποιησωρ and κηβτ: Pshenhôr (Arabic شهور, شهور)11 is well attested in Coptic sources as a village in the Nome of Coptos (κηβτ). It is mentioned several times in the archive of Bishop Pisenthius of Coptos, as well as in documents from Jeme and the Monastery of Epiphanius. As a main city or a district on the east bank, Qift (Coptos/Kêbt) gained its significance from the fact that it was the exit point of the desert routes to the Red sea and to the quarries in the desert area.12

1. 6-8. νοει ἐν θυγκίλα and οὐγαλλο: perhaps these expressions emphasise that στρατηγός had no excuse to sin because he was old enough to be able to avoid this kind of deeds. Moreover, he had a relation with an old woman, not even a young girl. What is the meaning of “getting old” in this context? Actually there is no clear evidence from Coptic texts that can inform us about this issue. However from the ancient Egyptian sources we know that, although the ideal age was 110 years, the average age of the Egyptian was between 50 and 60 years.13 It could have been the same in Late Antique Egypt. Therefore, hypothetical old age could be around 40 years. Also unclear is the age for marriage. There is no direct evidence for average marrying ages in Coptic literary or documentary sources. In Late Roman Egypt it is generally assumed that women were around late teens, while men were in their early twenties.14
like other Late Antique societies, the Coptic society had some experience of extramarital affairs, especially extramarital sex (adultery, lesbian, homosexual, rape, and prostitution activities), even among monks, shepherd and nuns. On the one hand, literary sources provide some instances of extramarital sex in order to oblige the Christian population to avoid these forbidden relations and to exhort women and men to chastity and faithfulness to their partners. Sometimes the local ecclesiastical authority even wrote to parents, disapproving the private asylum of their daughter running away from her husband and asking them to send her back to him and to fulfil her matrimonial duties.

On the other hand, documentary evidence of the practice of extramarital sex in late Antique Egypt is rare. I am aware of the following examples: biblical story of a woman taken in adultery; abduction and sexual violence against a woman by a shepherd; and a letter describing how a man found his wife in the courtyard with another man (her lover). We can also figure out this practice from the threat of Apa Abraham to excommunicate any man or woman who divorce for any reason other than adultery; a possible evidence of a prostitute woman from Thebes; a story inserted in a will concerning the son of the testator, who married against the wish of his father and then got fights and disturbances in his married life because the virginity of his wife had not been intact.

As a consequence, women saw possibilities of their marriage ruined or they had to run away from their own towns/villages; sometimes illegitimate children are mentioned. From the Greek evidence text, killing the adulterer could also be an option.

“..."The one who hates every good thing" dissuaded the parents from accomplishing their vow of donating their child to the monastery (انياخت پتامحوی نيم نوكس ینییشت یرنیکتوو ییاضوی یین ینیرپهت). The devil is also mentioned in the deeds of divorce as the one who “separated”.

Both features are actually connected with the “southern dialects” and we must recognize here an attestation of the active infinitive with an object introduced by ε, a rare combination in non-literary Sahidic.
1. 17. ολοκλήρωσις is more precise than ἐνάντια ή μεταβλητά, to be used in the text. It is an interesting word to be found here, because it is generally used in the legal documents, especially the wills,28 where the testator wants to emphasize that his reasoning ability is sound. This tightens the links of this text with a legal context (see the general discussion below).

1. 17-18. ΠΤΟΟΥ ΕΤΟΥΑΛ ΝΝΑΠΑ ΣΑΜΟΥΗΛ: the monastery of the holy Apa Samuel is known nowadays as “Deir El-Gizāz”, about 12 km to the south-west of Qûs (Kôs).29 Among the non-literary sources, it is only attested in one Coptic30 and one Greek text as the monastery of Apa Samuel of Phel.31 This ostraca is thus the third attestation. It sounds consistent with the living place of Strategios’s family (Pshanhôr) that he chose to enter this monastery.

General Discussion

This text is neither a letter nor a legal document since it contains no epistolary formula, no name of contracting people, no date and no witnesses. It is a story narrated by the first person. To this respect it shows similarities with the stories contained in the donations of children to the Monastery of St. Phoibammon in Thebes.32 Thus O.NMEC 117 might have been written as a draft of the story of Strategios, namely what happened in the past and what he intended to do in the future. Perhaps this story was meant to be inserted in a more official document written on papyrus and addressed to the clergy of the Monastery of Apa Samuel, either a request to enter the monastery (which would be nowadays a “motivation letter”), or possibly a self-donation. Once the document was ready, the draft was no more useful or no more valid,33 which could explain why all its lines are crossed and why it has been reused (see verso).

However this interpretation raises another question, what did this man want? To donate himself to the monastery as a servant or simply to retire there? Since our document does not...
give any indication of serving intention, one may suggest that the man simply wanted to retire and stay in the monastery without any kind of commitment, as a place to spend the rest of his life in repentance. The stories of miracles in the Coptic literature often provide similar events: after having done serious sins against a saint or a holy place and having been severely punished, the man or woman decided to enter the place as a servant or to donate his/her properties to it.\textsuperscript{34} Whether Strategios was intending to become a monk, as George and Claudius in the \textit{Panegyric} of St. Claude\textsuperscript{35} or/and to donate his possessions to the monastery is impossible to say at this point.

