

## A BOWL WITH A COPTIC TEXT

MATHIJS SMITH

The subject of this article, a bowl inscribed with a Coptic text, comes from the collection of a private owner.<sup>1</sup> Before long, it will be donated to the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden. The bowl came into the owner's possession in the sixties, when he bought it from the antiquities dealer Sayed Molattam in Luxor.

It is a bowl of reddish brown pottery with a diameter of 16.8 cm. The bowl is probably an example of Gempeler's pottery type 231a.<sup>2</sup> A triangular part of the bowl has broken off. At its broadest point the gap measures 10.1 cm. A crack runs from the narrowest part of the gap to the opposite side of the bowl till approximately 3.4 cm from the edge. The inside of the bowl is not inscribed, while the outside bears eight lines of text, arranged in two groups of four lines. The text is generally well preserved apart from the faded lines along the rim of the bowl and the loss of some words in the lines that have broken off (ll. 1-2). A vertical division line precedes the first group, which is the beginning of the text, while a horizontal division line runs under l. 6, subdividing the second group in two sections. This division line bends down at the right end and continues below l.4.

The scribe has a big, open spaced handwriting. The letter spacing is fairly regular and although the size of the letters does fluctuate, the variation is not excessive. The writing bears more similarity to writing in 'the rapid hand' or even 'the teacher's hand' than to the hand of a beginning student.<sup>3</sup> The text is written in Sahidic Coptic. No interpunction is used, but the superlinear stroke appears twice. Most iotas are crowned with tremas. The letters are not consistent in size.

Theban region

sixth/seventh century CE

1 ἀΡΙ ΟΥΝΑ Μ-Ν Τ/ΕΚΖΙΚΩΝ Ω [ - - - ]  
ΑΙΡ ΝΟΒΕ ΚΩ ΝΑΙ <Ε>ΒΟΛ (traces)  
†ΜΕΤΑΝΩΙΑ  
†ΟΥΩΨΤ ΝΑΚ

5 ΒΟΙΘΙ <Ε>ΡΟΝ  
ΣΩΤΜ ΕΡΟΝ  
ΤΩΒΕ ΧΕ ΠΙ Μ̄  
ΕΧΝ Ν . ΟΜ

1 the trema on the iota in ΑΙΡ is in fact a curved stripel εἰκὼν ll 1.3 μετάνοια | only the right dot of the trema on the iota in ΜΕΤΑΝΩΙΑ is preserved ll 5 βοηθέω ll 7 the tremas on the iota in ΠΙ Μ̄ are in fact short stripes ll

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the owner for giving me permission to publish the bowl as well as Renate Dekker (Leiden University) and Prof. dr. Jacques van der Vliet (Leiden University/ Radboud University, Nijmegen) for their help.

<sup>2</sup> R.D. Gempeler, *Elephantine X. Die Keramik römischer bis früh-arabischer Zeit* (Archäologische Veröffentlichungen 43; Mainz am Rhein, 1992), 74 and Abb. 19.7-13.

<sup>3</sup> See R. Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (*American Studies in Papyrology* 36; Atlanta, 1996), 106-112. For a comparison, see the handwriting of the 'Long passage 315' on pp. 250-251, pls XL and XLI.

- |   |  |   |                                    |
|---|--|---|------------------------------------|
| 1 | Have mercy on your image , ο [ - - - ] | 5 | Help us!                           |
| 2 | I have sinned, forgive me ...!         | 6 | Listen to us!                      |
| 3 | I have remorse.                        | 7 | Repay because the satisfaction and |
| 4 | I worship you.                         | 8 | over the ....                      |

### Language

In l. 1 a correction was made: a τ was added above the line between the η and the ε. The text displays a few remarkable features, such as the omission of the ε in ll. 2 and 5, and unusual spellings for Greek loanwords. The Greek noun *μετανωια* in l. 3 is used as a verb instead of being introduced by the Coptic verb ρ-,<sup>4</sup> and is written with an ω instead of an ο. The form *βοι̅θι* in l. 5 is not recorded in Förster's *Wörterbuch*,<sup>5</sup> but the variation between η and ī occasionally appears in Coptic documents from Middle Egypt<sup>6</sup> and is extremely frequent in the Greek papyri.<sup>7</sup> The most puzzling problem of the text is the interpretation of ll. 7-8.

### Commentary

The text seems to be a prayer expressing repentance and reverence. It might have been written with the intention of keeping (pieces of) a religious text in mind. Monks kept these pieces of text with them because 'the mere sight of [religious texts] renders [one] less inclined to sin, and incites [one] to believe more firmly in righteousness'.<sup>8</sup>

Ll. 1-6 consist of prayer formulae starting with an invocation to God, as is suggested by the word *ζικων* ('image'), which recalls 'the image of God' in Genesis 1:26: 'Καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεός Ποιήσωμεν ἄνθρωπον κατ' εἰκόνα ἡμετέραν καὶ καθ' ὁμοίωσιν';<sup>9</sup> 'And God said, Let us make man according to our *image*, and likeness'.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, I would consider the invocation as the beginning of the text and expect a reference to God in l. 1, such as 'πνουγτε' or 'πχοεις'.

Ll.1-4 are written in the first person singular, while ll. 5-8 use the first person plural. Ll. 5 and 6 are supplications marked by imperatives, as are ll. 1 and 2. The transition from first person singular to first person plural could indicate that we are dealing with a writing exercise or multiple passages of different texts. To my knowledge, however, the text does not parallel

<sup>4</sup> For more examples of the noun *μετανωια* used as a verb in Sahidic documentary texts, see W.E. Crum, *Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London, 1905), nos 544, 545, 574 (verso) and 489 (recto).

<sup>5</sup> H. Förster, *Wörterbuch der griechischen Wörter in den koptischen dokumentarischen Texten* (Berlin/ New York, 2002), 138. The most common Coptic spelling is *βοει̅θι*, according to Förster, and H.E. Winlock and W.E. Crum, *The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes*, vol. 1 (New York, 1926), 268.

<sup>6</sup> P.E. Kahle, *Bala'izah. Coptic texts from Deir el-Bala'izah in Upper Egypt*, vol. I. (London, 1954), 75, no. 35.

<sup>7</sup> F.T. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods Volume I* (Milan, 1976), 235-237.

<sup>8</sup> *AP/G Epiphanius* 8, translation in L.I. Larsen, 'Re-drawing the Interpretive Map: Monastic Education as Civic Formation in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*', *Coptica* 12 (2013), 10.

<sup>9</sup> A. Rahlfs, *Septuagint* (Stuttgart, 1935).

<sup>10</sup> L.C.L. Brenton, *The Septuagint version of the Old Testament according to the Vatican text: translated into English with the principal various readings of the Alexandrine copy and a table of comparative chronology*, vol. 1 (London, 1844).

any known writing exercise.<sup>11</sup> If the writer was little familiar with writing in Coptic, the errors would not be that remarkable. In view of the contents, it is more logical to see the text as a prayer with the extra function of keeping a certain mind-set by reading it and perhaps as an exercise in humility.

ll. 7-8 offer no coherent text and seem to be unconnected with the remainder of the text apart from the hand-writing. I would like to read  $\tau\omega\beta\zeta \epsilon\chi\epsilon\mathfrak{n}$ , ‘Pray for ...’, instead of  $\tau\omega\beta\epsilon \chi\epsilon$ , but this reading would not only imply the omission of a  $\zeta$ , but also the full writing of  $\epsilon\chi\mathfrak{n}$ , in order to account for the extra  $\epsilon$ . if one would accept such a reading we might perhaps read  $\pi\sigma\iota\mu\bar{\mathfrak{n}}$  as a proper name (Simon).<sup>12</sup> This would however entail two diverse writings of  $\epsilon\chi\mathfrak{n}$ . The division line under l. 6 either sets ll. 7-8 apart from the rest of the text or indicates the coherence of ll.1-4 and 5-6.

### *Provenance*

The provenance of the text is unknown. The only lead is the sale of the bowl in Luxor, on account of which the owner suspects that the bowl originates from the Theban region. With regard to the text, I propose Western Thebes as its likely place of origin, because multiple inscribed bowls are known to have come from that area.<sup>13</sup>

Since the bowl represents a fairly common type of pottery,<sup>14</sup> it cannot be established where it was produced without a chemical analysis.

### *Dating*

If the text inscribed on the bowl is from the Theban region, it can be generally dated between the sixth and the eighth centuries CE because most Theban documents in Coptic appear to date from that period. A comparison of the typology might help narrowing down this dating. The form of the bowl looks like type 231a as described by Gempeler, which is a fairly common type of bowl, the global dating of which is the sixth-seventh centuries CE.<sup>15</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The bowl presented in this article is inscribed with a prayer that was possibly used for memorization. The provenance of this bowl remains rather speculative. Since it was purchased in Luxor, a Theban provenance for the text would seem logical. The place of production of the bowl itself cannot be established without a chemical analysis. The bowl is tentatively dated to the sixth or seventh century CE primarily on a typological basis.

Leiden, May 2015.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. in M.R.M. Hasitzka and H. Harrauer, *Neue Texte und Dokumentation zum Koptisch-Unterricht* (Wien, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> E.g. J.C. Darnell, *Theban Desert Road Survey II: The Rock Shrine of Pahu, Gebel Akhenaton, and other Rock Inscriptions from the Western Hinterland of Qamūla* (Yale Egyptological Publications, 1; New Haven, 2013), 112.

<sup>13</sup> E.g. *O.Frangé* 196 and 220 in: A. Boud'hors and C. Heurtel, *Les ostraca coptes de la TT 29: Autour de moine Frangé*, vol. 1: *Textes* (Études d'archéologie thébaine 3; Bruxelles, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Gempeler, *Elephantine X*, 74.

<sup>15</sup> Gempeler, *Elephantine X*, 74, Abb. 19.7-8.

*Literature*

- Boud'hors, A., and C. Heurtel, *Les ostraca coptes de la TT 29: Autour de moine Frangé*, vol. 1: *Textes* (*Études d'archéologie thébaine* 3; Bruxelles, 2010).
- Brenton, L.C.L., *The Septuagint version of the Old Testament according to the Vatican text: translated into English with the principal various readings of the Alexandrine copy and a table of comparative chronology*, vol. 1 (London, 1844).
- Cribiore, R., *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (*American Studies in Papyrology* 36; Atlanta, 1996).
- Crum, W.E., *Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London, 1905).
- Darnell, J.C., *Theban Desert Road Survey II: The Rock Shrine of Pahu, Gebel Akhenaton, and other Rock Inscriptions from the Western Hinterland of Qamûla* (Yale Egyptological Publications, 1; New Haven, 2013).
- Förster, H., *Wörterbuch der griechischen Wörter in den koptischen dokumentarischen Texten*, (Berlin/ New York, 2002).
- Gempeler, R.D., *Elephantine X. Die Keramik römischer bis früh-arabischer Zeit* (Archäologische Veröffentlichungen 43; Mainz am Rhein, 1992).
- Gignac, F.T., *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods Volume I* (Milan, 1976), 235-237.
- Hasitzka, M.R.M., and H. Harrauer, *Neue Texte und Dokumentation zum Koptisch-Unterricht* (Wien, 1990).
- Kahle, P.E., *Bala'izah. Coptic texts from Deir el-Bala'izah in Upper Egypt*, vol. I. (London, 1954).
- Larsen, L.I., 'Re-drawing the Interpretive Map: Monastic Education as Civic Formation in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*', *Coptica* 12 (2013), 1-34.
- Rahlfs, A., *Septuagint* (Stuttgart, 1935).
- Winlock, H.E., and W.E. Crum, *The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes*, vol. 1 (New York, 1926).



Fig. 1. Outside of the bowl (photo by M. Smith)

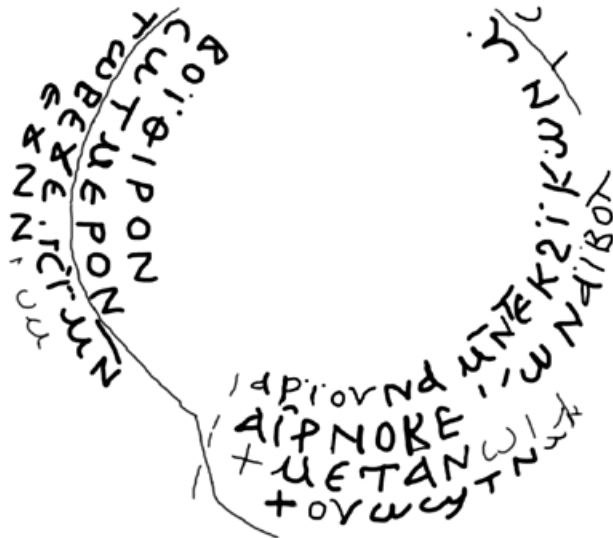


Fig. 2. Linedrawing by M. Smith

