

Three Coptic Stelae

by

Claudius Labib

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Claudius Labib (1868-1918) was born in Meir, Middle Egypt, which is still a strongly Christian area. He studied Coptic in Cairo and went on to study Ancient Egyptian. He espoused the cause of reviving Coptic as a spoken language in the home, but his advocacy was not very successful.

In 1909 he published a short memoir of his visit to the monasteries of the Wadi Natrun. After a brief description of what he saw on his visit, he supplies the text and translations (Arabic and French) of three stelae.

The dating system used is A(nno) M(artyrorum), the accession year of Diocletian, which corresponds to 284 AD.

Text One

The first text was built into the wall of the monastery of John Kame. It is described as having been carved on white marble, 60 cm long, with 23 lines of text. From Labib's non-photographic reproduction it is possible to identify a slab of stone with rounded top and what look like 'architectural' features: the lunette rests on two columns, at the top of which is a rectangular area containing a creature that I cannot identify in the midst of plants, the whole intended perhaps as a stylized capital; the area below contains parallel diagonal stripes, perhaps intended as the decoration of a column; immediately below is a bulbous undecorated area, perhaps the stylobate, resting on a geometrical design intended perhaps as steps. These, however, are merely the causal remarks of someone with little knowledge of iconography. There is a text that runs around the outside the whole stele, to be read from bottom to top on the left, horizontally from left to right on the top and then top to bottom on the right:

ⲧⲈⲚⲓⲒⲐ ⲁⲣⲓⲡⲙⲉϥⲓ (left)

ⲙⲡⲈⲚⲘⲀⲔⲀⲢⲒⲐⲐⲐⲐⲐ ⲚⲒⲬⲧ ⲚⲧⲈⲡⲒⲐⲐⲐⲐⲐ ⲒⲎⲐⲐⲐⲐⲐⲐ ⲡⲒⲬⲐⲐⲐⲐⲐⲐ (top)

ⲧⲙⲧⲐⲚ ⲚⲧⲈⲢⲘⲀⲔⲀⲢⲒⲐⲐⲐⲐ ⲚⲢϥϫⲎ ⲁⲙⲎⲎ (right)

We pray, remember our blessed father that the Lord Jesus Christ may give rest to his blessed

soul. Amen

Note

In the third line there is gender agreement between 'blessed' and 'soul'. Coptic often ignores Greek gender, as for example in line 2 of the stele text.

ἦΕΝ ΠΡΑΝ ΝΤΤΡΙΑC
ΕΘΟΥΑΒ ΝΟΜΟΟΥCΙΟC ΠΙΩΤ
Ε ΝΕΜ ΠΩΗΡΙ ΝΕΜ ΠΙΠ̄Ν̄Ᾱ ΕΘΟΥΑΒ
ΑΦΩΠΙ ΝΧΙΠΙΧΙΝΟΥΩΤΕΝ ΕΒ
5 ΟΛ ΝΤΕ ΠΕΝΜΑΚΑΡΙΟC ΝΙΩΤ ΑΠΑ
ΩΑΝΝΗC ΚΑΜΕ CΟΥ Κ̄Δ̄ ΝΚΙΑΖΚ
ΝΤΙΑΧΠ ᾠ ΝΤΕ ΠΙΕΧΩΡΖ ΕΗΡΗΙ ἦΕΝ
CΟΥ Κ̄Ε̄ ΝΑΖΡΑΦ ΕΝ ΑΒΒΑ ΚΟCΜΑ ΠΙ
ΑΡΧΙΕΠΙCΚΟΠΟC Ν̄ΤΕ ΡΑΚΟΤ ΕΦΟΙ
10 ΝΖΙΓΟΥΜΕΝΟC ΝΧΕΠΕΝΙΩΤ ΝΑΠΑ ΑΒ
ΡΑΑΜ ΕΤΕΚΚΛΗCΙΑ ΜΠΕΝΙΩΤ ΕΘΟΥΑΒ
ΑΒΒΑ ΙΩΑΝΝΗC : ΜΕΝCΑ Ἰ ΕΝΑΒΟΤ
ΝΤΕ ΠΧΙΝΒΩΤΕΝ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΤΕΠΕΝΙΩ
Τ ΕΘΟΥΑΒ ΚΑΤΑΟΥΤΜΑΤ ΝΤΕΦΤ
15 ΑΦΕΜΤΟΝ ΜΜΩΦ ΝΧΕΠΑΙΩΤ ΠΑ
ΠΑ CΤΕΦΑΝΟΝ Ν̄CΟΥΘ̄ Μ̄ΠΙΑΒΟΤ :
ΑΘΩΡ : ΠΑΙ ΕΤΑΦΩΠΙ ΝΑΦ ΝΟΥ
ΩΗΡΙ Ν̄Π̄Ν̄ᾹΤΙΚΟΝ : ἦΕΝΤΑΙΡΟΜΠΙ ΝΟΥΩ
Τ ΑΥΕΜΤΟΝ ΜΜΩΥ ΕΠ̄Β̄ ἦΕΝΟΥΗΡΗΝΙ
20 Ν̄ΤΕΦΤ ΑΜΗΝ · ἦΕΝΤΜΑΖ Φ̄Ο̄Ε̄ ΝΡΟ
ΜΠΙ ΝΤΕΤΑΘΙCΙC Ν̄ΝΙΑΓΙΟC Μ̄ΜΑΡΤ
ΥΡΟC ΕΦΟΙ ΕΝΟΥΡΟ ΕΗΡΗΙ ΕΧΩΝ ΝΧΕΠΕΝ̄ΟC ἸΗ̄C̄
Π̄Χ̄C̄ ᾠΜΗΝ

In l. 12 the word ΜΕΝΕΝCΑ is to be read

In the name of the holy consubstantial Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the passing of our blessed father, Apa John Kame, happened on the 24th of Khoiak at the first hour of the night, on the 25th, in the presence of Abba Cosmas the archbishop of Rakoti, when our father Apa Abraam was hegoumenos of the

Church of our holy father Abba John. Ten months after the passing of our holy father, it was the will of God that Apa Stephanos should go to his rest on the 9th of Hathor, the one who had been a spiritual son for him. In this same year the two went to their rest in the peace of God. Amen. In year 575 of the struggle of the Holy Martyrs, Our Lord Jesus Christ being king over us.

Notes

According to the Julian calendar Hathor begins on October 8 and Khoiak on November 27. I take it that the 'first hour of the night' means 'midnight', the bridge from Khoiak 24 to 25. In standard Sahidic this is expressed by **ⲧⲠⲁⲱⲎ ⲛⲧⲉϥⲱⲛ**. It is customary to reckon the 24 hour period as starting at 6 am (the first hour) and so on. I am not familiar with any earlier reference to the , and I am not certain which would make midnight 'hour 18'. The writer seems to have no difficulty moving between 'Apa' and 'Abba'. 575 AM corresponds to 859 AD.

Text Two

This Sahidic text on white marble from the Church of John on the island of Roda south of Minya, almost opposite Antinoopolis, is built into an altar.

ⲠⲄⲒⲐⲐⲐ ⲧⲢⲢⲉ ⲉⲡⲣⲱⲙⲉ ⲉϥⲣ̅ⲗⲱϥ ⲛⲟⲉ ⲛⲟϥⲕⲁⲡⲛⲐⲐⲐⲐ ⲁϥⲱ ⲛⲣⲟⲟϥⲱ ⲧⲢⲣⲟϥ ⲛⲧⲉ
ⲠⲄⲒⲐⲐⲐ ⲉⲧⲐ ⲛⲟⲉ ⲛⲟϥⲗⲁⲒⲒⲉⲐⲉⲐ ⲉⲱⲁⲐⲣⲓⲕⲉ ⲛⲉⲗⲒⲃⲢⲏⲥ ⲧⲢⲣⲟϥ ⲛⲧⲧⲠⲛⲟϥⲧⲉ
ⲗ̅ⲛⲁⲧⲃⲓⲛⲣⲁⲧⲟϥ ⲛⲉ ⲁϥⲱ ⲗ̅ⲛⲗⲁⲡ ⲉⲙⲉ ⲛⲉⲧⲱⲟⲟⲡ ⲉⲡⲉϥⲉⲙⲧⲐ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ
ⲗ̅ⲙⲡⲧⲣⲉⲡⲉⲟϥⲟⲉⲓⲱ ⲟϥⲛ ⲱⲱⲡⲉ ⲉⲧⲣⲁⲕⲁⲐⲱⲙⲁ ⲉ̅ⲗⲣⲁⲓ ⲁⲥⲉⲓ ⲉ̅ⲗⲣⲁⲓ ⲉⲕⲱⲓ ⲉⲃⲓⲧϥ ⲗⲟⲧⲉ
ⲉⲁⲓⲕⲧⲟⲓ ⲉ̅ⲡⲕⲁⲗ ⲕⲁⲧⲁ ⲟⲉ ⲛ̅ⲛⲁⲓⲟⲧⲉ

ⲁⲣⲓⲡⲁⲙⲉⲉϥⲉ ⲟϥⲛ ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ⲧⲓⲧⲁⲗⲗⲓⲡⲟⲣⲟⲥ ⲡⲉϥⲣⲱⲛⲓⲁ ⲛⲧⲉⲡⲛⲟϥⲧⲉ ⲉⲣⲟϥⲛⲁ ⲛⲙⲙⲁⲓ
ⲛ̅ⲧⲁⲙ̅ⲧⲟⲛ ⲉⲙⲁⲓ . . . ⲕⲓⲗⲁⲗⲕ ⲕⲁ̅ ⲉⲧⲟϥ ⲗ̅ ⲁⲡⲟⲗⲓⲟ

There are two designs at the bottom right of the text:

one is a large **X** with a **K** to the left, **H** at the top and **CZZ** at the bottom;

the other is the Christogram **XP** with **λ** and **Ω** at the bottom.

The whole of life is like smoke and all the cares of this life are like a declining shadow. All the works of God are inscrutable and true judgements are those that are before Him. Since therefore the time has come for me to leave the body, the*

*shadow ** has descended upon me to take it, I having returned to the earth like my fathers.*

*Remember me Febronia that God may be merciful to me and I may rest in peace . . .
Khoiak 21 Year 7 of Diocletian.****

Notes

* This line is an allusion to Romans 11, 33

** The subject of the verb is a fem. pronoun and I take it to refer to the 'declining shadow'

*** The diagram to the left has numbers that may be intended to emend those in the text: Khoiak 28 and 267 AM (=551 AD). Year 7 would make the stele 291 AD, which is not likely.

Text Three

There is a photograph of this black granite stele, 55 x 40 cm. At the time of writing it was in the possession of M. Philippe of Cairo. It has 27 lines of Sahidic text. It is said to be from Akhmim, the city opposite the White Monastery of Shenoute. It is dated 502 AM (=786 AD). The photograph has not really helped me to read the text, so I have largely used Labib's text. Labib writes that, because of the linguistic errors or peculiarities, it is thought by some ('on prétend') to be a forgery, which Labib obviously and rightly dismisses. There are passages that I do not understand, but it reads as if the text has been written by a young person about a young person.

Ω ΧΕΟΥΑΩ ΜΝ
ΗΝΕΠΕ ΠΙΠΩΡΧ Ω ΒΙΝΒΩΚ
ΕΠΕΨΜΜΟ ΕΣΟΥΗΥ ΠΑΡΑ Ν̄СОП ТΗ
ΡΟΥ Ω ΒΙΝΠΑΕΑ ΕCNAΩΤ ΕΝΕΙ ΕΠΕΚΡΟ
5 ΘΑΛΛΑCCA ΟΥCΨC ΑΥΩ ΠΕCΖΟΕΙΜ Ο Ν̄ΑΓΡΙ
ΟC · ΟΥΚΥΙ ΔΕ ΠΑCΚΑΦΟC Ε̄ΤΕ Τ̄Μ̄Ν̄ΤΒ̄Ρ̄ΡΕΙΕ
Μ̄ΠΑCΩΜΑ Μ̄Ν̄ΤΑΜ̄Ν̄ΤΨΑΡΑΖΕ · ΕΨΧΕ ΟΥΝ ΠΡΟ
ΦΗΤΗC ΕCΦΟΥΑΑΒ ΕCCOΟΥΝ ΕCΖΑΙ Ν̄Ζ̄Ν̄ΤΟΕΙΤ ΜΑΡΕC
ᾹΖΕΡΑΤC Ν̄Μ̄ΜΑΙ Ζ̄Ν̄ΠΕΙΜΕΡΟC ΕΨΧΕ ΟΥΑ ΕC
10 CΟΟΥΝ Ν̄ΡΙΜΕ Μ̄Ν̄ΕΤΡΙΜΕ ΠΕΙΚΕΤ ΜΑΡΕCΩΠ ΕΡΟΝ ΕΨ
ΧΕ ΟΥΝ ΟΥΑ ΕCΑΙΘΑΝΕ ΕΨΩΠΤΕ Τ̄C̄ΑΠΕ Μ̄ΜΙΝ Μ̄ΜΟC ΜΑ
ΡΕΖΩΝ ΕΖΟΥΝ ΕΡΟΝ ΝΙΜ ΠΕΤΝΑΤΙ ΝΟΥΜΟΥ ΕΧ̄Ν̄ΤᾹΛ̄ΠΕ ΟΥ
ΜΟ ΟΥΠΗΓΙ Ν̄Ν̄ΡΜΕΙΗ · Ε̄Χ̄Ν̄ΝΑΒΑΛ · ΤΑΡΙΜΕ Ε̄Χ̄Ν̄ ΤΝΟΒ Ε̄Ν̄Μ̄
ΚΑΖ̄Ν̄ΖΗΤ ΕΤΑCΤΑΖΟΝ ΕΤΒΗΗΤ̄Κ̄ · Ω ΠΕΤΖΟΛΟ ΑΥΩ ΕΤΝΟ
15 Τ̄Μ̄ · Ζ̄Ν̄ΝΕCΨΑΕ · ΚΟCΜΑ ΠΩΖΥΓΟC · ΠΕΤΚΗ Ζ̄Ν̄ΠΕΙΤΑΦΟC

ἄνωφρον ἄγω ἑππερείου ἡμπεργενος · ἐτὸ ἄσοεῖτ
 ἡννετογόνῃ ἄγω ἑτροογτ νῶε ἡπογείοτε ἑφτερ
 πει ἡμπερῆι ἑγραψε · ἑχἡνερῑμοτ ἑνανογού
 ἡνογῳῑνε ἄφῆνιδιον τἄροῑ ἡτεντκολεγῑς ἑπνογ
 20 τε ἄφχωκ ἑβολ ἡτἡτἡτῳνεῡτηῑ ἑπνογτε ἄχἡ
 ἄἄἄ ἡψτορτῑ · ἄτερἡτῳαραῡ ἡωοβ ἡνογῳτἡμ
 ῳωνε ἄερογἑμπεχορτοῑ ἑψἄφῳοογε ντετερῑρη
 ρε ἑρῡω ἄφχω ἡογνοῑ νενἡκαῡἡῡἡτ ἡνερῑνηγ ἄ
 25 ον δε νἡ ἑτἡἄῡερατογ ἡνωῑ σοπῑτι ἡροῑ ἑπεερατῑ ἡπνογτε
 πἄῑ · ἡταῑἡτον δε ἡμοῑ ἡποογ ἡἡνο φἄἡῡτηρ ἑ ἑτογῑ
 ἄποδιοῑς φῑ

What is this separation ? Going into unimaginably distant exile ! The harsh voyage to come to the shore ! (5) The sea is wide and its waves fierce, but my skiff is small, that is, the youth of my body and my brief life. If there is a holy prophet who knows how to write lamentations, let him stand with me in this portion. If there is one who (10) knows how to weep with those weeping, let this one run to me. If there is one who perceives the defect of his own head, let him approach us. Who will pour water on my head, water a source of tears on my eyes that I may weep for the great sadness that has seized me for your sake, the one who is sweet (15) and pleasant in his words, Cosmas Pôhygos, ** who is lying in his grave, wise and of brilliant family, well known among those who are as prominent and established as their fathers, who was a joy in his household, which rejoiced over his good manners. Of a sudden he was taken by the order of God and completed his life through the mercy of God without (20) any distress. His brief life was spent*** without illness. He ate*** plant matter after the bad flower had withered. He has left his brothers in great pain and gone to God in the seal of Christianity. We are the ones who follow him, praying for him at the feet of Christ (25) God. He has gone to his rest on Hathor 9, year 502 AM.*

Notes

* I am by no means certain of how to understand this word

** Cosmas is not an uncommon name in Christian Egypt. Is 'Pôhygos' perhaps Arabic, the first part something like بهى 'splendid' ?

*** The verbs in these two sentences are not clear to me: 'was spent' and 'ate' are both guesses. One has the impression that the young man or boy had lived a healthy life before dying very suddenly of an unspecified illness.