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Semitic Loanwords and Transcriptions in the Greek Epigraphy of Judaea-Palestine

Michael Zellmann-Rohrer

Abstract

Semitic loanwords and transcriptions of longer phrases are considered in Greek inscriptions from Judaea-Palestine. Complementing recent studies in neighboring parts of the Near East, on Syria, Phoenicia, and Arabia, select examples illustrate how local languages, Hebrew and Aramaic, survived the rise of Greek to epigraphic dominance in a partially assimilated form in loanwords and transcriptions. These local languages owed a debt for this role, as did Greek, to the epigraphic habit—or varieties of epigraphic culture and mode—fostered in the region particularly under Rome and resulting in a proliferation of writing in daily life. As in neighboring areas, evidence for Judaea-Palestine clusters in the religious domain but is not limited to it. A marginal or liminal status assigned to Semitic loanwords and transcriptions in recent literature should be reexamined through considerations of distribution and context, in particular, orientation towards a real or imagined community as audience.

Across the ancient extent of their distribution, Greek inscriptions provide a well-established index of Hellenization. Persistence of a distinct local identity, alongside language, religion, and culture, can nevertheless be detected in the content of these inscriptions, in their modes of writing, and in the monuments that they accompanied. Judaea-Palestine, which is the focus of this chapter, offers especially complex illustrations of the interplay between Hellenization and local particularity and of its implications for political history. Local dynasties engaged with Greek language and culture but retained political independence from Hellenistic monarchies

and Rome until relatively late, an independence re-asserted in armed insurrections.¹ In a development inextricably linked with the overall expansion of inscription as practice under Rome, the well-known epigraphic habit—or as also more recently defined, epigraphic culture—,² Greek inscriptions came vastly to outnumber those in the local Semitic languages, but the latter remained current in everyday speech and for worship, especially in the case of Hebrew. Even if the local languages by and large failed to rise on the tide of the epigraphic habit, their persistence impressed itself upon Greek epigraphy, where the Semitic languages provided loanwords and appeared in their own right in bilinguals. So too within the resulting epigraphic landscape, a hallmark of the epigraphic habit, MacMullen’s “sense of audience” with respect to a community,³ shows through in the transference of social into graphic interaction in the case of graffiti that manifest in turn the hybridity of language and script considered here.

This chapter examines Greek inscriptions containing Semitic loanwords and transcriptions of longer syntactical units. The resulting small but significant group, which has yet to be systematically collected and studied, draws on a range of genres: epitaphs, commemorative mosaics, and graffiti. A companion study considers the evidence from Arabia,⁴ which began to be developed already in the conference version of this chapter. The neighboring regions of Syria and Phoenicia, from which the evidence for loanwords has been analyzed by J.-B. Yon, offer a comparable illustration of the connection between their use and the resistance of local

¹ For the revolts, see recently Geiger 2016, Mason 2016 and the essays collected in Schäfer 2003.

² See chapter 1 (Bodel) in this volume.

³ MacMullen 1982: 244-46; for further considerations on communal aspects, see chapter 18 (Meyer) in this volume.

⁴ Zellmann-Rohrer 2022.

customs, especially religious, to assimilation.⁵ Yon already pointed in passing to material from farther south, but its analysis remains to be systematically developed, work that is now assisted also by the recent progress of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae* (CIIP).⁶ For the purposes of this chapter, “loanword” is defined as the transcription of a word from one language into another with the preservation of sense in the new context. The scope of the discussion, following Yon’s example, is restricted to common nouns. Personal, divine, and geographic names, all of which offer abundant evidence for transcription from Semitic languages, are subject to distinct traditional processes best served by separate study.

The considerations developed here may also balance the conclusions of a recent examination of the transcription of Semitic languages into Greek, and vice versa, in the Graeco-Roman period. Starting from an admittedly selective gathering of instances—of which it is further said, “there is no need to discuss them all in detail here”—, J. Price and S. Naeh argue that language and script for Greek and the Semitic languages, as in general in antiquity, are essentially inseparable, and exceptions therefore signal marginality or liminality.⁷ Here a narrower body of epigraphic sources is at issue, but their detailed examination will reveal complexities of context that prove difficult to dismiss as marginal or liminal.

Loanwords

Funerary epigraphy offers the first example of relevant material. This domain is a point of intersection between the personal and the religious, the latter a rich vein of loanwords also in

⁵ Yon 2007.

⁶ For an overview of the project, see Eck 2013; for summaries of and corrigenda to the published volumes I-III, *SEG* LX 1720, LXI 1423, LXIV 1657; for volume IV, *BE* 2019, 493.

⁷ Price and Naeh 2009: 269-70.

the Syrian material collected by Yon. The Semitic languages in their native scripts, on their own or as bilinguals, are well enough represented in the epigraphy of death in this region—witness the abundance of Hebrew and Aramaic ossuary inscriptions—to set the conditions in which loanwords could be comprehended and, if not expected, at least not felt to be out of place. Loanwords are most common in Jewish texts as terms for kinship relations and professional or official titles,⁸ but they extend also to the more discursive portions of epitaphs that represent religious communication.

A funerary text of special note establishes verbal loans from a cultic corpus of the most venerable antiquity, the Jewish scriptures. This inscribed limestone ossuary was discovered in a burial cave on the outskirts of Second Temple-period Jerusalem (the French Hill). The first line is a dipinto in Hebrew, in charcoal or dark paint, now faded and nearly invisible; the lexicon, in this case the noun “wife” used in the identification of the deceased woman by her husband’s name, disambiguates between Hebrew and Aramaic, which the same script could also have served. The rest is a four-line, incised inscription in Greek. Archaeological context gives a date in the first century BCE or the first century CE.

1. Jerusalem. Ossuary of Marieamē, wife of Mathias

Rahmani 1994: 197 no. 559 = *CIIP* I.1 451, with Zellmann-Rohrer 2017: 131

(*BE* 2018, 479); Zellmann-Rohrer 2022: 23-25.

[INSERT FIGURES 1 and 2 HERE]

מרים אשת מתיא

⁸ For an example, see the commentary on the epithet *αζανα* (*hāzān*) in *CIIP* II 1490.

Μαριαμη Μαθιας

γυνή· ὕάν τις κινήσ'

αὐτά, πατάξει αὐτὸ

5 ουρουv

3. 1. ἔάν | 1. κινήση || 4. 1. πατάξει αὐτόv

(*Hebrew*) MRYM wife of MTY'

(*Greek*) Marieamē wife of Mathias. If anyone moves them (sc., her bones), may blindness strike him.

As expected and paralleled in ossuary epitaphs, the deceased is identified, here in both Hebrew and Greek. The Greek portion continues with a curse on anyone who disturbs the burial. There are once again parallels in the region, and elsewhere in the Greek world.⁹ More noteworthy is the appearance of a Hebrew loanword at the culmination of the curse, whose formulation amounts in turn to an allusion to Jewish scripture, the book of Deuteronomy. The loanword ουρουv, as the first editor recognized, transliterates what is conventionally vocalized *'iwwārôn* in the Masoretic text of Hebrew scripture, though the notation of vowels in particular depends on medieval manuscripts centuries later than this inscription. The orthography can reasonably be expected to reflect local, contemporary pronunciation, probably colored by Aramaic, in this instance: the reduction of the first two etymological vowels is paralleled by the vocalization of the Syriac Aramaic reflex of the same root

⁹ For the region, see the commentary in *CIIP* and more recently Käppel and Wozniok 2020; elsewhere, Strubbe 1997, Schürr 2010, and Bettarini 2013.

‘*wîrûṭâ*’,¹⁰ the Aramaic versions of the passage of Deuteronomy in question generally substitute nouns formed from a different root.¹¹

Following a recent proposal, the optative πατάξαι is to be read as the verbal form describing the progression of the blindness in the ossuary text. The conjunction of that specific verb with a reference to blindness gives the key to the identification of a scriptural allusion, namely the curse pronounced with divine authority in Deuteronomy 28.¹²

2. Deuteronomy 28:28

Masoretic text

yakkəkāh YHWH bə-šiggā ‘ōn u-bə-‘iwwārōn u-bə-timhōn lēbab

Greek version (LXX)

πατάξαι σε κύριος παραπληξία καὶ ἀορασία καὶ ἐκστάσει διανοίας

May the Lord strike you with madness and blindness and derangement

Jerusalem ossuary

πατάξαι αὐτὸ οὐρου

May blindness strike him

¹⁰ Sokoloff 2009: 1079b.

¹¹ That is, SMY: Targum Neofiti: smyywth; Targum Onqelos: smywt'; Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: smyt'.

¹² The first editor already referred to this verse but only among examples of the many occurrences of πατάσσω in the Septuagint.

This allusion offers strong evidence of a sophisticated contemporary understanding of scripture in its original language, circumscribed within an engagement with the Greek language, however orthographically infelicitous. At this point in Deuteronomy, after the Mosaic law has been summarized, the blessings promised to those who follow it are listed (28:1-13), paired with a still longer series of curses on those who do not (28:15-68). The curses include general detriment (“You will be cursed in your coming in and cursed in your going out,” 28:19) and more specific provisions against children, crops, and livestock (28:18) and reference to disease, blight, and drought (28:21-24) and to defeat and oppression by foreign enemies whose result is described in grim and graphic detail (28:49-57). In that context, a mundane curse against violators of an individual tomb is elevated to the universal plane of the divinely-issued commandments to be observed by the entire Jewish people. To that epitaph, in turn, the contractual implications outlined in Deuteronomy 28 in particular can also be expected to extend, that is, implicitly, the benefits for respecting the sanctity of the burial and, explicitly, the dire penalties for violation. An ancient reader familiar with Jewish scripture would not have failed to notice that the Deuteronomy curses make specific reference, shortly before the mention of blindness, to the denial of proper burial: “Your corpses will be food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth, and there will be no one to chase them off” (28:26).

The disposition of the first line of the ossuary inscription shows that a Hebrew-Aramaic script was available to write the word for “blindness” there too, but Greek transcription has been preferred. The reason may lie partly in graphic harmony, partly in the fuller account of the vowels available in the Greek alphabet as token of authoritative and efficacious speech. Christian scripture offers instructive parallels: the transcription of the Aramaic acclamation

Μαροναθα “our Lord has come” to seal Paul’s anathema of the unfaithful (1 Corinthians 16:22), the Aramaic Psalm-citation of Jesus during the crucifixion (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34), and his Aramaic commands Ταλιθα κουμ “Arise, girl” and Εφφαθα “Be opened,” credited with raising the dead and curing a deaf-mute, respectively (Mark 5:41, 7:34).¹³

After these considerations, the choice of the loanword ουρουv to denote blindness in the ossuary inscription, and to set off a scriptural allusion, would seem to complicate Price and Naeh’s thesis of marginality. These authors might have dismissed this instance as evidence on the grounds of brevity, that is, the loan or transliteration is only a single word.¹⁴ The practice of this particular inscriber or commissioner, however, fits poorly with any conscious expression of marginality or liminality. What is at issue, rather, is a commandment from the core beliefs of the deceased’s coreligionists, at the center, not the margins of Judaism. The text, and the practice and orientation of its inscription—the visual tactics employed to convey meaning in the “epigraphic mode” as proposed by Bodel¹⁵—are oriented towards, and hence assume, members of a community competent to decipher it. The stakes, after all, are high: nothing less than preserving bodily integrity and spiritual repose in the hereafter.

Transcriptions

Two cases of longer transcriptions show more sustained engagement with Semitic languages through the medium of Greek in the later Roman period. The first will demonstrate a

¹³ On Aramaic (or vernacular Hebrew) words and phrases in the New Testament, see in general Mussies 1984.

¹⁴ Programmatically excluded are “[s]ingle transcribed words and brief, highly formulaic phrases, loan-words, brief citations” as these “reveal neither knowledge of Hebrew, nor the ability to read or pronounce Hebrew ... nor any theory or practice of transliteration” (Price and Naeh 2009: 261).

¹⁵ Chapter 1 in this volume [especially pp. 16-17].

continued link with the religious domain and the monumental epigraphic genre, and the second, with a view to the focus of this volume on the epigraphic habit, an extension into the more interactive practices of graffiti. These cases are not the loanwords proper to the title of this chapter, but a contiguous form of borrowing involving longer syntactic stretches of one language represented in the script of another.

For the first, from the Byzantine synagogue of Scythopolis in northern Judaea, there is space only for a brief mention. Here, alongside two Greek inscriptions recording the names of mosaicists and the date of construction, comes a text in Samaritan letters, a writing system developed to record Samaritan Hebrew.

3. Scythopolis. Invocation of the Lord

Tzori 1967: 159 no. 4 = Ovadiah, *Pavements Israel* 30 with *SEG LXI* 1456 app.cr.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE]

qwryh

bwth

’pry

qhy ‘nn

Remarkably, the Samaritan characters prove to transcribe Greek, which can be reconstructed as a prayer, Κύριε βοήθει Εφραι και Αναν “Lord, help Ephrai(m) and Anan,” probably for the benefit of two donors to the construction. The mentality of these men surrounding the inscription lies beyond reconstruction, but it would be difficult to see in the act anything marginal or liminal as opposed to an earnest plea for divine help and proud insertion of personal names into a sacred space, combining a language of elite culture and political power

with a script of holy scripture. The apparent rarity of such expressions must once again be carefully distinguished from any—at least contemporary—signification of marginality or liminality.

The second case of this extended consideration involves graffiti from a cave in Nahal Dimona (Wadi Jaraba) in the Negev desert of modern Israel. Two graffiti and some drawings were found on one of its walls.

4. Nahal Dimona (Wadi Jaraba). Aramaic graffito in Greek script

Kirk 1938: 238-39 no. 3 with Price and Naeh 2009: 269

[INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE]

σιμαθα καιαμα λαμαν

δαελαα σαβη ου ιαεβ λακ

Nahal Dimona (Wadi Jaraba). Commemorative graffito and puzzle (?)

Kirk 1938: 237-38 no. 2 with Price and Naeh 2009: 269

[INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE]

μνησθῆ Ζοραιθα

κλτλχντπρθσ

αααααααααααα

The first text amounts to Aramaic in Greek letters (Graeco-Aramaic),¹⁶ which can be

¹⁶ An extensive new witness to Graeco-Aramaic—which also attests a place for it at the center, rather than the margins, of civic identity—is a program of dipinto-captions to wall-paintings decorating a Roman-period tomb at Capitolias (Bayt Rās), illustrating the foundation and building of the city: for preliminary reports, see Aliquot, Gatier, and Yon 2022 and Aliquot and Gatier in Haron et al. 2022: 806-10.

reconstructed and rendered *sîmâtâ qāyāmâ la-man da-’ellāhâ šābê hû yāheb lak* “As for the treasure that is stored up, to whomever God wishes, he gives it to you.” The suitability of caves for hiding treasure seems obvious enough to allow that the sentiment might have been meant literally, but metaphorical and moralizing senses will also have been available: for example, and without requiring that the present text be Christian, the gospel imagery of merit in the earthly life earning “treasure in heaven” in recompense, as in Matthew 6:20, the Syriac version of which uses *sîmtâ* for “treasure,” a reflex of the same *sîmâtâ* implied here.

Nearby on the same wall is a Greek graffito. Its first line is a common commemorative formula, the verb $\mu\eta\sigma\theta\eta$ followed by a personal name,¹⁷ here of a woman, Zoraitha. The second line gives twelve consonants, and the third gives the same number of vowels, repetitions of a single letter. As the first editor recognized, we probably have to do with a word-game, in which the alphas are to be inserted after each of the consonants in the line above, which would yield $\kappa(\alpha)\lambda(\alpha)\tau(\alpha)\lambda(\alpha)\chi(\alpha)\nu(\alpha)\tau(\alpha)\pi(\alpha)\rho(\alpha)\theta(\alpha)\lambda(\alpha)\sigma(\alpha)$, “good are the vegetables that grow by the seaside.” Whether the sentiment is authentic, of one nostalgic in the desert for the lush produce of less arid climes, or mere convention, can only be guessed.

Price and Naeh, the most recent commentators on these two texts, have seen in them the work of the same hand, and identified the Zoraitha mentioned in the second text as this writer, making of her a Christian nun and her handiwork a writing exercise, but this interpretation is problematic. Despite the small sample size, some distinctive features of the lettering of both texts, to judge from the drawing published by Kirk, above all divergent forms of alpha, make an identification of the same hand difficult. Zoraitha herself, though commemorated in the

¹⁷ See recently e.g. Yon 2016: 24-25.

second text, need not have been the author even there, let alone a nun or even Christian. The commemorative graffiti of the region offer examples in which remembrances of absent friends and family are left in permanent, written form by travelers: such was probably the case for at least some of the mix of male and female names recorded in the Sinai desert represented by *I. Wadi Haggag* 28, 57, 98, 104, 140, and 170. In any case, no diagnostic signs of creed are to be found in the text. As to the putative writing exercise, the quality of both hands suggests competent and practiced rather than learning writers, and there is nothing about the cave in the report of Kirk that would suggest the infrastructure of a school. It seems safer to regard both texts as sportive, recorded for pure pleasure and pastime.

That two writers chose to engage in this pastime in close proximity need not surprise. Beyond the general frame of the epigraphic habit as community-oriented mode of writing, the concept of graffiti in conversation with each other, as has been established at Pompeii in the work of R. Benefiel,¹⁸ is an appealing model. In genre, the consonantal skeleton in the Greek text, expanded with its proper vowels perhaps by yet a third hand, would have offered an analogous puzzle to deciphering the Graeco-Aramaic text. Sportive and in particular interactive graffiti closer to this region are on record in Graeco-Roman Egypt, where designs of gameboards have been set out, then modified and extended by later players, and from late ancient Nessana in the Negev, where a “word-square” challenges readers to complete a Christological acclamation by finding sensible paths through a field of initially senseless letters.¹⁹

An Early Witness?

¹⁸ Benefiel 2010.

¹⁹ Gameboards: De Voogt, Nilsson, and Ward 2020. Nessana: Kirk 1936: 284 (fig. 3), reprinted as *I. Nessana* 53.

None of the examples marshalled here so far securely predates the Roman period, which coincided with the expansion of the epigraphic habit in the region. A Hellenistic graffito from a cave near Marisa might contradict that picture, according to the interpretation of its first editors, repeated in the recent *CIIP* IV, but the alleged loanword is probably to be discarded in favor of a more homogenous Greek whole, on grounds that bear some elaboration here. Two graffiti must be considered: the one carrying the word in question, and another nearby, which has implications for the context of its inscription.

The first text is cut into the rock high on the northern wall of the cave. The first editors read Φιλίνου ναατομια, taking the second word as a transcription of Aramaic *naḥtômayyâ* “bakers” governed by the genitive of a personal name: “the bakers of Philinos.”²⁰ What these artisans would have been doing in the cave is unclear, as is their relation to Philinos as eponym. There are also phonological complications to the interpretation of the loanword, among them the transcription with -τ- in an apparently intervocalic position where the Aramaic would have had an aspirated consonant better rendered by -θ-; the putative Aramaic form does indeed have the unaspirated consonant, but only because it follows another consonant, whereas ναα- here would imply a disyllabic *naḥa-*. A motivation for the use of a transcription also seems lacking, absent the cultic, monumental, or sportive basis marking the rest of the evidence: why would a writer competent enough to decline the Greek name Φιλῖνος correctly in the genitive muddle the construction with Aramaic when a Greek term such as ἄρτοκόποι would have been available? As J. Aliquot has pointed out,²¹ the text, which he also re-dates by palaeography to the early Hellenistic period (4th/3rd century BCE)

²⁰ Erlich, Sagiv, and Gera 2016: 57-58 text A, repeated in *CIIP* IV 3498; see now *SEG* LXVI 2170.

²¹ *BE* 2016, 542.

in place of the 2nd/1st century, should be re-read Φιλίνου ἢ λατομῖα “the quarry of Philinos,” a designation better suited in turn to the rock-cut context.

The rejection of a loanword gains traction from the ostentatiously Hellenic character of the second text. Now on the western wall, but in all probability in the same hand and mentioning the same man, it shifts unambiguously from an artisanal to an obscene register. The text, whose readings are clear, is the following:²²

5. Graffito of Philinos

Φιλῖνος ὁ νέαξ

ἐνθάδε ἐπύγιζι-

ζεν Παπίαν τὸν

τοῦ Κρατέρου

5 πρόγονον

Here is where the young Philinos fucked Papias, the *progonos* of Krateros.

The imperfect tense of the verb πυγίζω used to denote the coupling of the two men lends an emphatic sense of repetition, or least extended duration, to the act. It is not necessary to take νέαξ, with the first editors, as a literal indication of a later generation in the same family, when the sense “youthful,” “impetuous” better complements the activity of the bearer of the

²² Erlich, Sagiv, and Gera 2016: 58-60 text B, repeated in *CIIP* IV 3499; see now *SEG* LXVI 2169.

epithet, especially as this rare word, with comic associations,²³ may also contrast with the ambiguous πρόγονος: the latter may mean “ancestor” (father or grandfather) as well as “step-son” as previously assumed. In this connection an otherwise unattested, obscene connotation for the etymologically penetrative act of λατομία “stone-splitting” might be considered; the cave does not otherwise bear obvious signs of literal, commercial quarrying, though the term could refer more generally to the stone-cutting by which the space itself was prepared.

Whether or not there is any connection to the alleged “Herm-reliefs” identified by the first editors in the same cave, the introduction of the Hellenic genre of erotic graffiti to the Near East marked by this text is clear. It is, in other words, the very opposite of the context in which a Semitic loanword would be expected: Philinos, and probably the Papias too whom he boasts of penetrating, hew to the Greek culture expected from their names, and participate more specifically in an epigraphic habit of expressing that culture interactively through erotic graffiti.

Conclusion

The Greek inscriptions of the southern part of the Near East, when considered in the cultural context of communal expression and comprehension in the framework of the epigraphic habit—with the refinements proposed in this volume—offer no less significant documentation for language contact than the northern parts where they have so far been better studied. The local languages, Hebrew and Aramaic, weathered the onslaught of Greek both in their original scripts and as they surfaced in a partially assimilated form in loanwords and transcriptions.

There the new application of Greek script may have promoted wider use and comprehension,

²³ So Pollux (*Onom.* 2.11: ὁ γὰρ νέαξ, εἰ καὶ τῶν εἰρημένων ἐστίν, ἀλλὰ κομικώτερον ἂν εἴη), but in later Greek it seems to have meant simply “new,” “young,” e.g. as applied to wine in *Gp.* 6.8.2, 7.24 tit.

and the diffusion of inscribing itself as a feature of everyday life, the epigraphic habit, was fostered particularly under Rome. Loanwords and transcriptions should be added to the evidence from bilinguals in the study of the coexistence and interaction of local languages with more recent arrivals, especially, but not limited to, the religious domain. The marginal or liminal status assigned to them in recent literature should be reconsidered through a more balanced assessment of their communicative potential in a communal context, and of the potential implications of context for the mentality of their ancient writers and readers.

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