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The Vienna stela for the head of the confectioners guild Heracleides: suggesting a new solution for the end of the text

Votive Stela for Heracleides with Greek inscription.
Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Ägyptisch-Orientalische Sammlung, inv. no. 205.
Limestone, 55 cm high, 33 cm wide.
Date: year 32 of Augustus, February 19, 3 A.D. (according to text).
Provenance: Fayyûm (according to text).
Acquisition: 1854, present of the Austrian consul Christian von Huber.

The stela, which is decorated in Egyptian style, is of the usual rectangular form with a rounded top. Its decoration is crowned by the winged solar disc. The wings, that follow the round of the top, enclose an ‘ankh sign, flanked by two crocodiles. Under these emblematic depictions there is a register with pictorial contexts. The lower part of the stela is covered by eleven lines of Greek text.

The pictorial register shows on the left side two Egyptian deities, both facing to the right: in front (i.e., on the right side of the left half), a male deity with the head of a crocodile, behind him a female deity with a solar disc and cow horns on her head. As is very frequent in the Graeco-Roman period, the figures are accompanied by empty text columns. As the text clearly indicates that the stela was erected in Herakleopolis, the crocodile god can be identified as Sobek (Souchos), lord of that city. His female companion may be Hathor (who usually accompanies him in Upper Egyptian temple reliefs) (Lexikon der Ägyptologie V, 1010), but equally well Isis (op. cit. V, 1013).

The counterpart of the two gods, on the right side of the register, are three persons facing the left side, i.e. the deities. The first is a man, the second a woman. The third person (male) is smaller, which would point to a child, but his smaller proportions are probably due to the high and elaborate hemhemet crown he is wearing. The latter marks him as a deity, in particular a young god. Most probably we have to do with Harsomtous (Horus-Sematawi). Having the role of a son, he is found among the venerators of the divine couple, Soukhos and Hathor (or Isis).

Although the text is not perfectly preserved (the surface is rather worn), it is sufficiently legible to be fully understood, except for the last words of the main text: these will be the topic of the following discussion. The language is not standard: note especially the wrong case endings which are found several times.

1 ΥΠΕΡ ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΟΡΟΣ ΚΑΙΣΑΡΟΣ
   Υπέρ Αὐτοκράτορος Καίσαρος,
Under the Imperator Caesar,

2 ΘΕΟΝ ΥΙΟΥ ΔΙ ΕΛΕΥΘΕΡΙΟΝ ΣΕΒΑΣΤ
   θεοῦ υἱοῦ Διοὶς Ἐλευθέριοι, Σεβαστ-
son of the God, Zeus Eleutheros, Augustus,

3 ΟΝ ΠΟΠΛΙΟΥ ΟΚΤΑΟΥΙΟΥ ΟΝΤΟΣ ΕΠΙ Τ
   Ποπλίου Ὀκταούιου ὁντὸς ἐπὶ τ-
Publius Octavius being (praefectus) over
The problem lies in line 9. IKONAN is obviously parallel to στήλην, hence accusative: εἰκόνα, “a picture,” or sim. IKONAN ΩΡΗΝ was traditionally emended to (ε)ἰκόνα(ν) λιθίνην, i.e. “a stone picture,” viz. a statue, or a relief, made of stone; see Bernard Recueil des inscriptions grecques du Fayoum III 147-149 (no.212). This was first suggested by G. Lumbroso, and it was accepted by IGR and Preisigke Sammelbuch I 984, and eventually by Bernard op. cit.:

«Il est manifeste que le lapicide ignorait le grec, étant donné la forme dont il écris (λιθίνην), reconnu par G. Lumbroso. L’adjectif précise qu’il ne s’agit pas d’un portrait paint (γραπτή) … On songerait volontiers, avec Wilcken, à une statue, mais le personnage n’est-il pas représenté en bas-relief avec sa femme et un enfant ?» (p. 149: no. 212).

1 In the presentation in the conference, an account was given of some etymological implications of the word πλάκω ("flat) cake", which is the basis for πλακουντόπωλος. It reached the early Romans via Lower Italy, whereby its masculine accusative was reinterpreted as the feminine nominative *placunta, later placenta. Romanian preserved for its placinta the original meaning of “cake” (whereas the other Romance languages use different words). On Hungarian hearths, this Romanian “cake” or “pie” became a very flat pancake or crêpe, and the word had to assimilate to Fenno-Ugric syllable structure and clear vowels, thus becoming palacsinta.

This new Hungarian dish soon conquered the kitchens and restaurants of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and neighbouring areas. It was in Vienna that the word was distorted to Palschinken (dissimilation of t to k); for the further dispersion cf. palačinka (Slovak, Serbo-Croatian, Slovenian), palačínke (Czech), palacinka (Polish); and of the cucina Triestina they say, “strudel di mele o ricotta [i.e., Apfel und Topfenstrudel; H.S.] e “palacinke” (crespelle dolci ripiene di confettura o noci) non mancano quasi mai in un menù” (Guida alla città di Trieste in the internet).

E. Breccia (vd. Bernard op. cit. 147) had proposed a less drastic emendation in reading ἐορτήν “a celebration”, which has, however, the disadvantage of posing syntactic problems: “(erected ...) a stela, and a ‘picture,’ (in ??/for ?) a celebration” ?

At last, the late Piet Sijpesteijn made a suggestion that implies just a trifling emendation, but also makes good sense (and follows correct grammar): after explaining the text form ἐλικόναῖ(ν) (..., hat der ... Steinmetz keinen so schlimmen Fehler gemacht ... bei ikóναν ist ihm ein itazistischer Fehler unterlaufen und er hat ein abundierendes Ny ... hinzugefügt”) he suggested that ὄρην is the scultor’s mistake for ὄρθην, and this seems more plausible than the earlier proposals. The mistake then lies in engraving one wrong sign only, which moreover looks rather similar to the correct one. The meaning “a true picture” is not less satisfactory than the assumed “a stone picture”.

Nevertheless, the difficulties have not yet come to an end with this achievement. We still have διὰ βίου in the end. We will agree to E. Bernard op. cit. 149 who says,

«La dernière expression fait difficulté. En raison de sa place [scil. after στῆλην καί ἐλικόνα ὀρθήν], il n’est pas possible de comprendre qu’Héracléidès était président «à vie» de l’association, comme le suggère M. San Nicolo ... »,

He justly adds,

« ... La date qui figure à la ligne précédente indique, par ailleurs, l’année durant laquelle le personnage a été en fonction. Il faut en conclure que cette dernière précision concerne le temps durant lequel l’inscription que porte la stèle sera offerte aux regards afin d’honorer les mérites du chef de l’association. »

Here now comes a tiny suggestion of my own: as διὰ βίου follows immediately on ἐλικόνα ὀρθήν, it probably contains a qualification, not of any foregoing phrase, but rather of the latter. What kind of qualification can “life” be for the correctness of a picture ? One cannot help but think of the picture’s truth to life, its portrait quality. What would be expected, though, for “true to life” is not what is written here, but rather ὀρθὸς κατὰ βίον. But then – nobody is perfect ... This would not be the only flaw of the inscription. Hence I suggest to understand the end of the inscription’s main text as,

... ΚΑΙ ΙΚΟΝΑΝ ΟΡΗΝ ΔΙΑ ΒΙ(10)ΟΥ
... καί ἐλικόνα ὀρθήν διὰ βίου
“... and a portrait true (to) life” (for κατὰ βίου.)

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