



1988

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Recommended Citation

Keenan, J.G. (1988). A Christian letter from the Michigan collection. *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 75 (1988) 267–271.

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A CHRISTIAN LETTER FROM THE MICHIGAN COLLECTION

aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 75 (1988) 267–271

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A Christian Letter from the Michigan Collection

The papyrus edited below, P.Mich. inv. 3999, was purchased for the University of Michigan in 1925. It belongs to lot IV of the Nahman papyri, all of which come from Oxyrhynchus. The papyrus measures (roughly) 12 cm. (width) by 25 cm. (height). Margins are small at top (0.8 cm.) and (until line 19) at left (0.5 cm., discounting the vertical strip whose partial remains appear opposite lines 8-13). The prayer (lines 20-24) below the letter's body is indented at the left ca. 2.5 cm. inward from the mu of μηδένοϛ, the first word in line 19 (therefore ca. 3.0 cm. from the papyrus' left edge; cf. similarly *P.Ross.-Georg.* III 9.21-24). Righthand margin is virtually non-existent. At line ends (cf. 5, 7, 11, 12, 14) sigmas are sometimes finished off as filler strokes brought out to the very right edge of the papyrus. The bottom margin (there is seemingly no more writing after line 25 on the front) is also, where it can be measured, small, 0.3-0.5 cm. In antiquity, on completion of the front-side text, written along the papyrus' fibers, the papyrus was apparently folded inward, lengthwise in thirds, from right to left. One indication of this is that the righthand third is considerably narrower than the middle and lefthand thirds. The result was a long (25 cm.), narrow (4.4 cm.) strip. The strip was then turned over and sideways, and inscribed, again along the fibers, on the back of the lefthand third of the front-side text—another indication that the original folding went from right to left. The long, narrow strip was then itself folded in two, slightly off-center, resulting in a packet ca. 4.4 cm. x 13.7 cm. On the packet's inside was preserved (rather well) the text of P.Mich. inv. 3999. Ironically, yet quite naturally, it is along the creases that created the protective packet that the principal losses to the text have occurred. The two lines of writing on the outside of the packet are badly abraded. Though many details in these lines are clear, equally much is obscure. The sum has resisted satisfactory decipherment and connected sense has not been recovered. The lines appear not to be an address, but rather an addendum to the text of the front, possibly, but not assuredly, in a different hand.

In form, the text of the papyrus is a letter. As a letter, its subject matter is unique. The body of the letter borrows from the technical vocabulary of legal settlements (*compromissa*, διαλύσειϛ) and appears to summarize the results of an arbitration proceeding.¹ The object of the arbitration is the possession (ἔχειν, line 11, cf. ἔχει[v], line 8) of tombs (μνημεῖα), one large (μέγα), one small (μικρόν). The Michigan letter indicates (lines 9-10) that the large tomb at least, and perhaps the small one, too, could accommodate a number of corpses (κόματα) and could have its possessory rights divided into shares (line 13). Whether the tombs at issue were well-known landmarks whose spellings should be editorially capitalized in the Greek text (and, correspondingly, in the English translation) is uncertain. The labels

¹ See esp. *P.Lond.* III 992 (p. 253), reprinted as *M.Chr.* 365 = *Sel.Pap.* I 61 = *FIRA*, 2nd edn., III 182. See also *P.Monac.* 1 = *FIRA* III 184, *SB* III 7033, *M.Chr.* 98-99, *P.Oxy.* VI 903. In general: A.A. Schiller, "The Courts Are No More," *Studi in onore di Edoardo Volterra* I (Milan 1969, publ. 1971) 469-502. Cf. commentary notes below.

μέγα and μικρόν might just as easily have served as convenient shorthand labels by which the writer, Leontios, could identify tombs familiar to all parties concerned (including the letter's recipient), but elsewhere described in more complete detail, orally perhaps, or in a formally drafted *compromissum* which the Michigan letter apparently summarizes.

In any event, according to the Michigan letter, the parties to the arbitration had presented their argument (τῆς ὑποθέσεως αὐτῶν, line 7). The arbitrator rendered his decision (ῥοῖα, line 8); the parties were thereupon not only ready to comply (πιθόμεν[οι], line 17) with the decision: they straightway broke out into prayer for one another—a remarkably happy outcome which one should like to think was occasioned by the apparently Christian setting in which the decision was rendered and received. For the letter, especially in its address, its narrative denouement (remark esp. lines 17-18) and appended health prayer (20-24), is replete with Christian sentiment and phrasing. It is this, with other details, that gives a fourth-century *terminus post* and setting for the letter. The possibility that the arbitrator in this case was an ecclesiastical official—can Leontios have been a bishop?—bears mention even while resisting proof.² If this were so, the letter would then be placed in a framework of evidence, papyrological and legal, dating from the fourth to sixth centuries. As mentioned, some of its terms reflect the *termini technici* for formal legal *compromissa*. The finest surviving examples of these date to the sixth and seventh centuries, in Greek at first, but then running over into Coptic. This is one indicator (for another, see line 3 n.) that the Michigan letter belongs later, rather than earlier, in the fourth-to-sixth-century range.

The hand, however, which is apparently the same throughout, is very hard to place. I have not found decisive parallels in any of the standard picture books. This is clearly not a professional notarial cursive. It is a fairly thick, careful hand, not at all inelegant; it lacks the extreme floridness and rightward slant typical of some later Byzantine hands. Diaeresis is used four times (see app. crit.). Orthographical variations are usually (not invariably) simple itacisms (especially iota for epsilon-iota).³ An attempt at stylistic flair, the chiasmus beginning at line 8, results in an anacoluthon, with nominatives taking over for expected accusatives at the end of line 11. These nominatives may also, perhaps, be viewed as survivors from the nominatives of the arbitrator's original pronouncement: "Let NN have ..."

P.Mich.Inv.No.3999

12 cm. x 25 cm.

Sixth century?

1 τῷ εὐλόγο[υ]μένῳ καὶ ἀληθῶς ποθει-
νοτάτῳ υἱ[ῷ] Θεῶνι πολιτευομένῳ
πατρὶ πόλεως Λεόντιος ἐν Κ(υρί)ῳ χαίρειν.

² For episcopal jurisdiction in Egypt, about which there is little evidence, see H.I. Bell, *Byzantion* 1 (1924) 139-44, V. Dautzenberg, *Die Gesetze des Codex Theodosianus und des Codex Justinianus für Ägypten im Spiegel der Papyri* (Köln 1971) 32-37.

³ Between the lines appear occasionally strokes of ink which, although they are quite distinguishable, seem to be meaningless: e.g. line 5 αὐτουσ, 17 πιθόμεν[οι], 18 ταυτή.

- 4 καθὼς ἀπέτειλας Ἰωάννην καὶ Εὐδέ-
βιον καὶ Δίδυμον ἐπὶ τῷ αὐτοῦς
ἐπ' ἐμοῦ κριθῆναι, νῦν εὖ ἀκούσας
τῆς ὑποθέσεως αὐτῶν, οὕτως
- 8 οὖν ὥρισα ὥστε Δίδυμον ἔχει[ν]
ὅλον τὸ μέγα μνημίον παρ[ὰ]
τὰ σώματα αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸ μικρὸν
μνημίον ἔχειν αὐτὸ οἱ τρεῖς
- 12 Ἰωάννης καὶ Εὐδέβιος καὶ Δίδυμος
ἐκ τρίτ[ου] μ[έ]ρ[ου]ς τοῦ ἐνός.
καὶ Θεοῦ π[ρο]ενοήθησαν οἱ τρεῖς
Ἰωάνν[η]ς καὶ Εὐδέβιος καὶ Δίδυ-
16 μος (vac.) κ[αὶ ἀπ]ήλθαν ἀπ' ἐμοῦ
πειθόμενοι[οι] καὶ ἠύχοντο{ν} ἐπ' ἀ-
λήλων ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ ἡμέρ[ον,]
μηδένοσ αὐτῶν λυπουμένου.
- 20 ἡ Θεῖα πρόνοια διαφυ-
λάξει σε ἐπὶ μήκιτον
χρόνον ὑγιαίνοντα
καὶ εὐθυμοῦντα ἐν
24 τῷ φόβῳ τοῦ Θεοῦ.
[.] θ (vac.) τατα [.] .

2 ὑἱο pap. 3 Kō pap. 4 ἀπέτειλας Ἰωαννην pap. 9 and 11 μνημεῖον
11 αὐτό followed by blank space τρεῖς 12 Ἰωαννην pap. 14 ΘΥ pap. τρεῖς
15 Ἰωανν[η]ς pap. 17 πειθόμενοι? 17-18 ἀλλήλων

(Reverse side):

26 ἐντεῖλαι Θεοδώρω α του ρ [.] υτου μετρίου

27 ... το ἔργον αὐτοῦ ι ιον [.] ου ...

Commentary

1-2 ἀληθῶς ποθεινοτάτω: L. Dinneen, *Titles of Address of Christian Greek Epistolography to 527 A.D.* (diss. Catholic U., Washington, D.C., 1929), pp. 68-70 (esp. 69 at bottom), 106, 107, 109, M. Naldini, *Il Cristianesimo in Egitto. Lettere private nei papiri dei secoli II-IV* (Florence 1968), no. 89.1 and n.

2 υἱ[ὸ]: "As a title, υἱός is addressed to juniors in age, in ecclesiastical rank, or lay persons. The term is one of familiar address" (Dinneen, p. 75).

πολιτευομένων: The term means "of the curial class"; it is "particularly characteristic of the late fourth century ... though it certainly occurs later": *P. Oxy.* LI 3627.1 n., cf. H. Geremek, *Anagennesis* 1 (1981) 231-47.

3 πατρὶ πόλεως: The half dozen papyrus references to this title are late (sixth and seventh centuries). The view that this (honorific) title replaced the earlier (functional) title *curator civitatis* (Greek λογιστής) has been rejected by P.J. Sijpesteijn, *Tyche* 2 (1987) 171-74.

6 κριθῆναι: For the use of this patently "courtroom" term in arbitration proceedings, see Schiller (above, n. 1) 476 n. 36.

6-7 ἀκούσας τῆς ὑποθέσεως: cf. the above-the-line addition to *P. Lond.* V 1708.127: ἔγὼ ὁ ἀκουσῶ τῆς τῆδε τῆς ὑποθέσεως.

7 ὑποθέσεως: cf. *P. Lond.* V 1709.1 (Coptic), the Budge papyrus (Coptic), lines 284-85 (Schiller, *JARCE* 7 [1968] 79-118), H. Musurillo, *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*, p. 200.

8 οὖν: For the late position in this sentence, in particular after a preceding participle, cf. E. Mayser, *Grammatik der griechischen Papyri aus der Ptolemäerzeit* II 3 (Berlin 1934) 151.

ῥῥιχα : cf., e.g., *P. Lond.* III 992.14, 19, 20; V 1707.8; 1732.5; *P. Monac.* 1.22.

11: For the anacoluthon (nominatives where we expect accusatives) see introduction, p. 268.

13-14: The restoration and interpretation of these lines must be received with utmost caution. τοῦ ἐνός most likely belongs to ἐκ τρίτου μ[έ]ρ[ο]ς. In this case, τοῦ ἐνός could perhaps assume a meaning like "of the whole." But this yields a redundant phrase. Hence, we may rather translate: "of the one (of the two tombs), " i.e. of the smaller tomb. In this sense, the use of εἷς in phrases like ὁ εἷς αὐτῶν or even ὁ εἷς μὲν – ἄλλος (or ἕτερος) is comparable (E. Mayser, *Gramm.* I 2.71; II 1.57; 2.90; 3.129f.; Blass-Debrunner-Rehkopf, *Gr. d. nt. Griech.* [Göttingen¹⁵ 1979] § 247.3). An interpretation along such lines seems to be preferable to the assumption that the writer of this letter intended to say something like εἷς ἕκαστος ἐκ τρίτου μέρους (possibly by thinking of an incomplete *gen. abs.* construction: ἐκ τρίτου μέρους τοῦ ἐνός ἐκάστου ἔχοντος).

Assigning τοῦ ἐνός to the following sentence results in a jarring asyndeton and a peculiarly positioned καί. The scribe may have intended <καὶ> τοῦ ἐνός {καὶ} Θ(εο)ῦ π[ρονοή]θησαν or, e.g., τοῦ ἐνός καὶ <πρώτου> Θ(εο)ῦ π[ρονοή]θησαν. Cf. *Ascl.* 26 (*Corp. Herm.* II p. 330 Nock-Fest. *ex Lact., Div. Inst.* 7,18.3): τοῦ πρώτου καὶ ἐνός θεοῦ (ref. owed to L. Koenen). But correcting the scribe in any of these ways is a dangerous procedure.

17 πιθόμεν[οι]: cf. *P. Lond.* V 1707.8; *P. Lond.* III 992.14: πείθεσθαι τοῖς ὀριθησο-μένοις, cf. 11. 19, 20.

ἠύχοντο{ν}: For the added nu, see F. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods* I (Milan 1976) pp. 112-14, esp. 113 para. d.

17-18 ἀλλήλων: For the haplography of lambda, see Gignac I, p. 155.

20-24: Indented at the left ca. 2.5 cm. in from the mu of μηδένοσ (line 19). Likewise indented, and similar in substance and vocabulary, is the prayer appended, by a second, cruder hand, to the epistolary text of *P. Ross.-Georg.* III 9 (fourth century). For similarity of sentiments (though more often expressed toward the beginnings of letters), see Naldini, *Cristianesimo*, nos. 55.26-28 (at the letter's close), 56.3-5, 57.4-5, 65.6-7, 73.3-4, 78.4-5, 89.5-7 and n., 97.4-5,

with Naldini's introduction, pp. 12, 14-15. See also no. 36.35 and note, *P. Herm.Rees* 5.3-4. For similarity of sentiments and closing indentation, see *P. Bour.* 25.16-18 (= David and van Groningen, *Papyrological Primer*, 4th ed. [Leyden 1965], no. 83 = *Sel.Pap.* I 165) (fourth or fifth century, from Apamea in Syria). For indentations at letter closings, see further Naldini, *Cristianesimo*, nos. 13, 36, 40, 78, 83, 89, 92.

20-21 διαφυλάξει: It is simplest to take this as a volitive or imperatival future (cf. B.G. Mandilaras, *The Verb in the Greek Non-Literary Papyri* [Athens 1973], pp. 184-90), though the same prayer in *P. Ross.-Georg.* III 9 has the verb in line 23 in the optative (διαφυλάξιεν, read -ειεν) and a similar prayer in *P. Abinn.* 8 has the verb in line 29 in the subjunctive (διαφυλάξη). For the (original) optative giving way to the subjunctive in such prayers, cf. Mandilaras, *Verb*, p. 278, para. 633.

21 μήκιςτον: Apparently not a scribal slip for μέγιςτον.

Translation

(Lines 1-24): To the blessed and truly dearest son, Theon, *curialis*, city father, from Leontios, greetings in the Lord.

Inasmuch as you sent John and Eusebios and Didymos for decision in my presence, now, upon having given their argument a fair hearing, I have decided as follows: That Didymos have all the great tomb for his corpses, and, as for the small tomb, that the three, John and Eusebios and Didymos, have it, each a third share of the one tomb. And the three, John and Eusebios and Didymos, took thought of God and they left me compliantly and prayed for one another this very day, no one of them showing any signs of annoyance.

May the divine foresight protect you for a very long time, in health and good spirits, in the fear of God.