

I N H A L T S V E R Z E I C H N I S

Eleni A v d o u l o u: Fragment eines Gelddarlehens aus der römischen Zeit (Taf. 1).....	1
Lincoln H. B l u m e l l — Kerry H u l l: A Greek Christian Epitaph of Egypt in the San Antonio Museum of Art (Taf. 2).....	7
Bianca B o r e l l i — W. Graham C l a y t o r: A Dossier of Seed Orders and Farmers' Oaths from Karanis (Taf. 3–6)	11
Nikolaos G o n i s: Four Documents Concerning Military Supplies (Taf. 7–8)	57
Giulio I o v i n e: Latin and Latin-Greek Papyri from Late Antique Egypt (<i>ChLA</i> XLIV 1262, 1285, 1286, <i>ChLA</i> XLIV 1304 <i>verso</i> , 1307, XLV 1336, 1350 <i>recto</i> ; <i>P.Vindob.</i> L 64) (Taf. 9–13).....	67
Giulio I o v i n e: Sette papiri militari latini dalla collezione di Vienna (<i>ChLA</i> XLIV 1297, 1299, 1302, 1308, 1309, XLV 1327, <i>P.Vindob.</i> L 169) (Taf. 14–17).....	87
Aikaterini K o r o l i: A Greek Late Antique Heracleopolite Land Register with Numbered Parcels and Payments (Taf. 18–19)	117
Egidia O c c h i p i n t i: A Note on the Quire of P.Bodmer 45–47 and 27 ..	125
Amphilochios P a p a t h o m a s — Marianna T h o m a: A Woman's Application for the Appointment of a Guardian (<i>tutor ad actum</i>) (Taf. 20)	133
Amphilochios P a p a t h o m a s — Marianna T h o m a: Erstedition eines christlich-literarischen Fragments aus der Sammlung der Öster- reichischen Nationalbibliothek (Taf. 21).....	143
Ioan P i s o: Eine merkwürdige Ritzinschrift von Copăceni bei Potaissa (Taf. 22–24).....	151
Ioan P i s o — Vlad-Andrei L ă z ă r e s c u — Sorin C o c i ș: Zur Geschichte des <i>numerus Maurorum Optatianensium</i> (Taf. 25–27).....	155
Davide R e d a e l l i: L'importanza dell'indicazione della centuria nelle iscrizioni dei soldati delle milizie urbane	165
Matthias S t e r n: The City Solution? Theodosiopolis and the System of Joint Administration in the Late Antique Fayyum	189
Federico U g o l i n i — Deborah C v i k e l: Inscriptions from the Timbers of the Late Antique Ma'agan Mikhael B Shipwreck (Taf. 28–31).....	215
Bemerkungen zu Papyri XXXVII (<Korr. Tyche> 1142–1151)	225
Adnotationes epigraphicae XV (<Adn. Tyche> 128)	249
Tafeln 1–31	

LINCOLN H. BLUMELL — KERRY HULL

A Greek Christian Epitaph of Egypt in the San Antonio Museum of Art*

Plate 2

The San Antonio Museum of Art (SAMA) has in its possession a small collection of Greek and Latin inscriptions that span the Hellenistic through the Byzantine period and come from diverse regions in the Mediterranean World.¹ One unpublished piece in the collection is a Christian grave stele from Egypt that was acquired by SAMA in 2000.² The limestone epitaph contains a one-line inscription carved along the rounded top edge of the stone for a woman named Rachel and is decorated with elaborate iconography. The central iconographic image is an eagle, wings outstretched and bearing a *bullā* on its chest, that is positioned between two pilasters supporting a plinth and tympanum.³ At each edge of the plinth is a cross pattée. The pilasters with palmette capitals are torsaded on the upper portion, trilobed with floral ornamentation in the center, and

* We would like to thank Jessica Powers, Interim Chief Curator at the San Antonio Museum of Art, for permission to publish this piece as well as for providing us with important information regarding its acquisition when we visited the Museum in 2023.

¹ These texts may be searched and viewed via the SAMA website: <https://www.samuseum.org> (last viewed on 08/04/2025). The various pieces in this collection were acquired at different times since the SAMA opened in 1981.

² This inscription was acquired through Sotheby's in New York; the acquisition record is dated 14 June 2000. It now bears the SAMA object number 2000.12.

³ For comparable round-topped stelae with a central eagle between pilasters see: Fig. 15 of J. van der Vliet, *Christian Epitaphs from Egypt and Nubia at the Museo Egizio, Turin: A Dossier*, *Rivista del Museo Egizio* 5 (2021), presumably from Esna (Latopolis); Stèle de Taïam in the Louvre (E 26832), dated to between A.D. 500–630, provenance unknown within Egypt: <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010048364> (last viewed on 08/04/2025); two grave stelae in the British Museum: EA 680 and EA 1850. EA 680 (=I.Chr. Egypt 521) comes from Armant (Hermonthis) and is dated A.D. VI/VII: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA680 (last viewed on 08/04/2025). EA 1850 comes from Esna (Latopolis) and is dated A.D. VII–VIII: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA1850 (last viewed on 08/04/2025).

decorated with dual rosettes at their base.⁴ Inside the tympanum is a pediment with symmetrically placed vine leaves on both upper sides and similar foliation within.⁵

The Greek inscription that surmounts the piece runs around the upper edge and measures just over 2 cm in height throughout.⁶ The text is upright, lacks adornment, and contains traces of red paint. At the very top of the stone the text breaks and is written on either side of a bifurcating element atop the pediment and is flanked at beginning and end by two crosses. The execution of the letters at times lacks precision, but this might be the result of the fact that the letters were cut in a narrow section that borders the outer edge of the gravestone and the interior iconography. While the orthography is a little shaky, as there is a case of metathesis/inversion and the interchange of a couple of letters (ο > ω and η > ε), the meaning of the text is not affected. The terse epitaph begins with the well-attested funerary acclamation formula εἰς θεὸς ὁ βοηθός (*vel sim.*) and is followed by the name of the deceased, a woman named Rachel.⁷

The origin of the inscription within Egypt is unknown, but given that it shares striking parallels — both textual and iconographic — with Christian funerary stelae from Armant (Hermonthis) and Esna (Latopolis), it seems likely that it originated in this region.⁸ The acclamation formula preserved in the epitaph followed by the name of the deceased, though attested in various regions of Egypt, seems to have been especially popular in Armant and Esna.⁹ Iconographically, the closest parallels to this

⁴ For other examples of round-topped funerary stelae with torsaded pilasters see Plate 97, nos. 621, 1326, 1327, and 1337 of H. R. Hall, *Coptic and Greek texts of the Christian period from Ostraka, Stelae, etc. in the British Museum*, London 1905.

⁵ For comparable foliate elements see Plate 94, no. 1255, and Plate 95, no. 1257 in Hall, *Coptic and Greek texts* (s. n. 4).

⁶ When we visited the museum, we were able to examine the piece up close; however, we were not permitted to remove it from the case in which it was on display. Therefore, we were unable to view the backside of the piece. The sides of the inscription are unworked and contain no iconography or text.

⁷ On the acclamation formula εἰς θεός, see most recently C. Gers-Uphaus, *Paganer Monotheismus anhand der Θεος Υμνοστος- und Εἰς Θεος-Inschriften*, JAC 60 (2017) 52–76. Gers-Uphaus notes that there are about 450 attestations of this formula with the majority coming from the regions of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt (p. 52). He also notes (p. 53) that the Egyptian evidence for this formula is almost exclusively confined to Christian epitaphs.

⁸ Armant and Esna were both situated on the west side of the Nile about 30 km from each other in Upper Egypt. For the Christian inscriptional remains of Armant and Esna, see most recently the useful discussion and analysis in B. Tudor, *Christian Funerary Stelae of the Byzantine and Arab periods from Egypt*, Marburg 2011, 372–373.

⁹ Tudor, *Christian Funerary Stelae* (s. n. 8) 165–166. Textually the present text is remarkably similar to six inscriptions that come from Armant: I.Chr. Egypt 519–523, 527; for the texts of these six inscriptions see n. 1 in *Notes* section below. For the use of εἰς θεός ὁ βοηθός (*vel sim.*) at Esna, see E. Peterson, *Eis theos: epigraphische, formgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*, Göttingen 1926, 70–73; for texts in the updated edition, see C. Marksches, *Heis theos: epigraphische, formgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur antiken „Ein-Gott“-Akklamation*, Würzburg 2012, 498–508.

inscription are also found in epitaphs from Armant and Esna.¹⁰ In terms of the date of the inscription, paleography offers little help given the small amount of inscribed text to work with combined with the fact that the text appears to have been executed by a seemingly unskilled inscriber. Gravestones that share similar iconography tend to be dated between the sixth and eighth centuries.¹¹ The use of the acclamation formula in Christian epitaphs from Egypt does not appear to predate the fifth century;¹² the formula does not seem to be used much later than the eighth century, although the Coptic equivalent (εἰς θεός or ΟΥΑ ΠΕ ΠΝΟΥΤΕ) is attested into the tenth century.¹³ Accordingly, a date falling somewhere in the sixth or seventh century seems likely for this inscription.

Armant or Esna

35 × 25 × 3 cm (H × W × D)

A.D. VI–VII

Plate 2

1 ⲛ εἰς θεὸς ὁ βοθεός. Ῥαχήλ. ⲛ

l. βοηθός.

Translation

One is God, the helper! Rachel.

Notes

1 The spelling βοθεός is without parallel; based on the formula either βοηθός (“the helper”) or βοηθῶν (“the one who helps”) was intended. In remarkably similar epitaphs from Armant both words are used:

I.Chr. Egypt 519 ⲛ εἰς θεὸς ὁ βο(η)θῶν. Θεωτόρα. ⲛ

I.Chr. Egypt 520 ⲛ εἰς θεὸς ὁ βοηθός. | Δαυεῖδ, Παχῶν θ', | τῆς ἰβ' ἰνδικ(τίωνος). ἀμήν.

I.Chr. Egypt 521 ⲛ εἰς θεὸς ὁ βοηθῶν. ἡ Ῥαχήλ. ⲛ

I.Chr. Egypt 522 εἰς θεὸς τὸ | βοεθ(ῶν).

¹⁰ See n. 3 above for iconographic parallels. Over a century ago G. Daressy, *Renseignements sur la provenance des stèles coptes du Musée du Caire*, ASAE 13 (1914) 270 made the observation that Christian funerary stelae from Armant that had iconography tended to depict a bird with outstretched wings on the bottom, foilage with a pediment above, a short inscription along the top edge of the gravestone and employed the Greek acclamation εἰς θεός ... In his brief discussion of the Christian funerary stelae from Esna on the same page he noted the same iconographic and textual features. The principal difference he noted between stelae from Armant and Esna was that the former were frequently inscribed on sandstone while the latter on limestone.

¹¹ See n. 3 above.

¹² Tudor, *Christian Funerary Stelae* (s. n. 8) 243–245, 327.

¹³ W. Brunsch, *Koptische Grabinschriften aus der Sammlung des Liebighauses in Frankfurt am Main*, in: S. Giversen et al. (eds.), *Coptology: Past, Present, and Future: Studies in Honour of Rodolphe Kasser* (OLA 61), Leuven 1994, nos. 9 and 10.

I.Chr. Egypt 523 † εἰς θεὸς ὁ βοθεῖ|ῶν. [[. . . .]].
 I.Chr. Egypt 527 εἰς θεὸς ὁ βοηθός|⟨ν⟩. Ῥεβεκα.

In 523 βοθεων is attested, in the notes G. Lefebvre corrected it to the participle βοηθῶν. While this does not solve the present question, it is a parallel case of -θε-metathesis/inversion; the η > ε interchange is common.¹⁴ While there are terminal interchanges of -ς and -ν,¹⁵ we are inclined to think that the inscriber correctly terminated the word; therefore, we prefer to restore the noun βοηθός instead of the participle βοηθῶν. The omega is not definitive for the restored reading as ο > ω interchanges are common.¹⁶

Ῥαχίλ. The rho is damaged at the top so that the loop is partially effaced; the only other option would be to read a τ, but the name Ταχηλ is unattested. The name Ῥαχίλ is the only option and is attested in two other Christian epitaphs from Armant: I.Chr. Egypt 521, which is remarkably similar to the present inscription, and I.Chr. Egypt 456.2–3. On the name Ῥαχίλ see TM Name 11853.

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¹⁴ F. T. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods*. Volume I, Phonology, Milan 1976, 242–244.

¹⁵ Gignac, *Grammar* (s. n. 14) 131–132.

¹⁶ Gignac, *Grammar* (s. n. 14) 277.



Greek Christian Epitaph

zu L. H. Blumell, K. Hull, S. 7