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SOTERICUS' *HYMN TO ISIS*:
A NOTE ON WAGNER, *INSCR. GRAFF. DOUSH II* = SEG 38.1797*

A graffito painted in large red letters on one of the door jambs of the first pylon of the temple of Isis and Sarapis at Kysis-Dush in the Kharga Oasis contains the text of a short hexameter hymn to Isis.¹ It was first published by Guy Wagner in 1987 (pp. 50–51, plate xvii); the Egyptologist Peter Dils gave a slightly improved version of the text in his doctoral thesis (2000: A17). It must have been written sometime after 116 AD, when the pylon was built;² Wagner dated it to the 2nd century AD, though this can't be regarded as certain.³ I reproduce Dils' text here, with one change in line 6 (see below):

σώτειρα κρήμνοισ(ι) φερέσβιος [. . .] ΜΑ . Ο
 ὦ[. . .] ανοις πύλης ινε[. . .]λοις .[.]δ[.]υια
 τείχεα . . ΔΕΦΥΛ[.] . . . [.] ΩΝΗ .
 ΗΝ . Α . ΕC ἄλλοι[.] ΑΥ . ΙΙΙ . [
 5 ΠΥΣΑΙ α . προ . ς λύμην ἀλωήων Α[.] ΝΑΝΑΙΩ.
 Ἰσι θεά, πεδίοισιν[.] ΩΠΙΣΣΟΝ ΤΑΤΕ[.] .[.] . . .
 χειμάδες ΩΝΤ[.] . . . [.] ΝΙ Ω . β[ι]αρκέα καρπόν
 οἶνον σπειρος . Ο . καὶ ἀθέσφατα λήιμνους
 ὕδατα δῶ ὁ Νεῖλος [.] Ρ .[.] . . . Α ὑμέτ[ερων] λαόν

The text presents many difficulties, and would probably benefit from further analysis. We can at least make out that it focusses on Isis' role as patron of agriculture, which *prima facie* finds a good parallel in the earlier Isis-hymns by Isidorus from Narmouthis/Medinet Madi in the Fayum.⁴ One point where I offer an improvement to Wagner's text is at the start of line 6: Wagner (followed here by Dils) interpreted the first two words of line 6 (ΙΣΙ ΘΕΑ) as a dative Ἰσι θεᾶ, but a vocative surely suits the context of an Isiac hymn better,⁵ and in any case a dative Ἰσι here would not fit the metre, since the second iota ought to be long.⁶

A striking feature of the hymn is that the first letters of the lines spell out an acrostic, Σωτηρίχου. I take this to be the genitive form of the name of the poet, which we would not otherwise know. (Notice also how the name resonates with the epithet σώτειρα at the start of the poem, which is written in larger letters than the rest.) To the best of my knowledge this acrostic has never been pointed out before, which seems surprising; one reason that it has escaped scholars' attention may be that Wagner's edition of the text inexplicably has ὁ rather than ρ at the start of line 5; SEG 38.1797 followed, printing ο (likewise the PHI online repertory of inscriptions). But ρ is clearly visible on Wagner's photograph and indeed in his diplomatic transcription immediately below it. Dils' text corrects the error without commenting on it, but this does not seem to have been reported in SEG.⁷

* I'd like to thank a number of scholars with whom I discussed this text: Eleanor Dickey, Rachel Mairs, Anastasia Maravela, John D. Morgan, Ian Moyer, Hana Navratilova, Lucia Prauscello and Amy Smith.

¹ For the position, see Dils 2000 Tafel 97. This graffito is to be added to other examples of graffiti in red ink usefully collected by Marganne 2022: 702.

² SB 8438; Wagner 1987: 335, n.4.

³ Wagner 1987: 336; Dils 2000: 254 observes that this dating is "ohne Begründung".

⁴ On this, see Dils 2000: 202–3; also Wagner 1987: 336; and Kaper 2010: 162, who offers a very useful comparison between Isis' divine persona at Kysis and elsewhere in the Oases.

⁵ For Ἰσι as vocative, see Isidorus *Hymns* 1.2, 2.1, 3.2.

⁶ Notice also that the dative of Ἰσις was more commonly Ἰσιδι in this period.

⁷ The most recent discussion seems to be that of the late Raffaella Cribiore in her learned discussion of the literary culture of the Oasis (2019: 278–9); Cribiore knows Dils' edition, but doesn't comment on the acrostic.

Acrostics are of course a common device in Greek poetry starting from the Hellenistic period if not before, found in both literary and inscribed poems.⁸ In Greco-Roman Egypt there are many examples, continuing even into the Christian period.⁹ Most acrostics spell out the name of a person – a poet, a dedicator or in the case of epitaphs the person commemorated; the name can be in the nominative or in the genitive, the latter either with or implying a governing word with the meaning “poem”, “dedication”, or “tomb”.¹⁰ Acrostics naming the poet are numerous, from literary cases such as the Hellenistic poet Nicander to inscribed examples, such as Paccius Maximus from Kalabsha, or Katilios from Philae.¹¹

In the time of Diocletian there was a famous hexameter poet called Soterichus whose ethnicon “Oasites” may well indicate that he came from the Great Oasis, which included the Dakhla and Kharga.¹² Suda attributes to him an “Encomion of Diocletian”, which is most likely to have been delivered when Diocletian visited Egypt in 297/8 AD (Radicke 1999: 256). The question naturally arises of the relation between him and our poet. For the poets to be the same, the hymn would have to be much later than Wagner suggested, no earlier than about 270 AD. That’s not impossible: the Egyptian gods were probably still worshipped at Kysis right through to the end of the 3rd century AD¹³ and we also know that Greek poetry was still being taught to children as late as the 4th century AD in Amheida/Trimithis in the Dakhla Oasis.¹⁴ However, appealing as it might be to identify the two poets, it’s perhaps more likely that they’re distinct, since Soterichus is not a rare name in Roman Egypt (e.g. attested several times in the 4th–5th century ostraca from Kysis).¹⁵ One might add that the apparently crude literary quality of the hymn is not what might have been expected of a virtuoso performer.

⁸ See e.g. Courtney 1990: 6; Lutz 2010: 1–77 and 375–6; Garulli 2013; Mairs 2013; Mairs 2017. Wagner himself wrote about an acrostic from Kalabsha (1993), and also included the text of an unusual epitaph from Bagawat just north of Kysis where the first letters of seven stanzas make up an acrostic *Petechon* (1987: 66–7).

⁹ Schubert 2004; Mairs 2013; Mairs 2017. Guy Wagner himself was interested in acrostics, publishing a note on an acrostic from Kalabsha (1993), and also including in his *Oasis* book the text of an unusual Christian epitaph Bagawat just north of Kysis (from 4th century AD) where the first letters of seven stanzas spell out the name of the deceased *IIETEXΩN* (1987: 66–7 = SEG 38.1704).

¹⁰ Garulli 2013: 265 gives two examples in the genitive: an epitaph from Lycia, *SGO* 4.17/08/04 (her no.5) and the Moschion stele from Sakha/Xois in N. Egypt, Bernand 1969a: no. 118 (her no. 11; for the uniquely complex lay-out of this bilingual text see Mairs 2017); Mairs 2013 cites the example of IPhilae = Bernand 1969b: no 143: *KATIAIOY TOY KAI NIKANOPON*, a more complex type of acrostic, involving the first two letters of the lines; the second letter of each pair also appears at the end of the line.

¹¹ Nicander: *Ther.* 345–53; *Alex.* 266–74; Paccius Maximus: Bernand 1969a: no. 168–9; Katilios: see note 10. Another poem from the temple of Isis at Kysis seems to have an acrostic with the poet’s name: this is an epigram in elegiac metre inscribed on the East side of the entrance, commemorating the construction of the portico by Epus Olbios, son of Valerius (Dils 2000: A6; earlier versions in Wagner 1987: 48–50 and Bernand 1969a: no. 118); the first letters of the lines read *EYΠOΛI . O . EΠH*, which, as John Morgan and independently Anastasia Maravela suggested to me, could be restored as *Eὐπόλιδος ἔπη* (“the verses of Eupolis”), Eupolis perhaps being another local poet.

¹² See Derda and Janiszewski 2002: 51–2; Radicke 1999. The source is Suda s.v. (FHG1080T1); Stephanus of Byzantium (T2) gives his homeland as “Hyasis, a city of Libya, also known as Oasis”.

¹³ See Frankfurter 1998: 167; the νεκροτάφοι of Kysis were active in the 3rd century (see Dunand 1985); and if the “Dush Treasure”, a collection of sacred objects connected to the cult of Isis and Sarapis, was deliberately buried in the 4th or 5th century AD, that may imply that they were in continuous use up to then (Reddé 1992). Wagner (1987: 335–8) was also in favour of late activity, pointing to graffiti which could be early 3rd century AD (337), and local onomastics (338).

¹⁴ As we now know from the red dipinti of Greek poems discovered in a house in Amheida/Trimithis: see Cribiore, Davoli, and Ratzan 2008; Cribiore and Davoli 2013; also Cribiore 2019.

¹⁵ O.Douch 1.44; 3.249; 3.291 (Soterichus).

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