

NEW GREEK INSCRIPTIONS FROM THE NEGEV

P. Figueras

The inscriptions presented and discussed in this article have all been discovered in the last decades in the south of Israel, mostly around Beersheva (see map in fig. 1). Details about the exact place and circumstances of their discovery are here given for each item as far as this is possible.¹ It goes without saying that the epigraphical and historical value of these inscriptions is very relative, but some of them include new names, dates and particular palaeographic features. In accord with their specific contents and variegated location, these inscriptions could be grouped under seven different headings, namely personal names on small objects (nos. 1-2), names and graffiti on parts of church buildings (nos. 3-7), devotional text on church floor (no. 8), memorial (nos. 9-11) and burial inscriptions (nos. 12-14). With one exception, all these inscriptions were recently found and are published here for the first time, no. 14 having been exhibited for years in the Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem.

Additional texts from the Byzantine period have been recently discovered in new excavations in Bersheva and other Negev sites, but only one has been published so far (Ustinova - Figueras 1996).

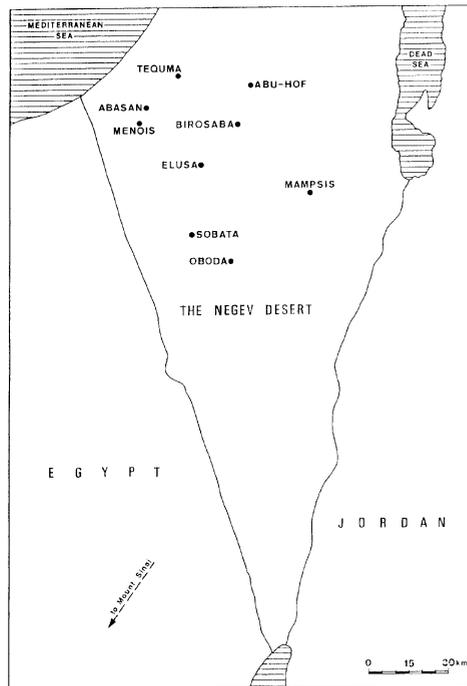
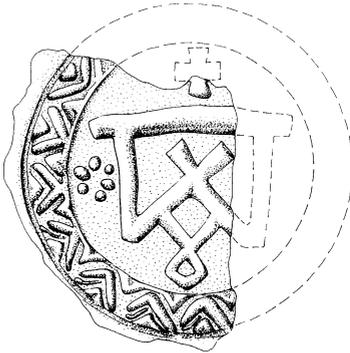


Fig. 1 Map of the Negev region.

1. My thanks are due to the officials of the Israel Antiquities Authority for allowing me to examine those inscriptions which are today preserved in the premises of the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem, and to publish all the materials here discussed. Drawings of inscriptions are acknowledged to H. Sokolovskaya and Y. Figueras, and Phot. 5 to the Israel Antiquities Authority. Photos 1-4 are by the author.

Inscription no. 1 (phot. 1)

Fragmentary plaster stamp ($6 \times 7 \times 1.5$ cm) from Elusa (Halutza, grid ref. 117.056). Dimensions of letters: initial Π 4×4 cm; group OY 0.18×0.11 cm. Depth of impression 2 to 3 mm.



$\Pi\text{A}\text{OY}$ (monogrammed) $\Pi\alpha(\acute{\upsilon}\lambda)\omicron\upsilon$

“Of Paul”

The inscription consists of a monogram stamped on a very hard plaster, in high relief, with traces of red paint roughly spread over it. The monogram is framed by an ornamental zigzag circle. Between the two, on the left side, there is a small flower motif that was probably repeated on the right side. On the top, between the Π and the missing part of the circle, a small part of another motif, probably a little cross, is still visible. The entire symmetric design can be easily reconstructed.

The monogram clearly includes the Greek letters Π , A and the group OY , as usual in the Byzantine period. The missing Λ has to be read into the A , and the Υ and OY are included in the little appendage to the A . There is no doubt that the intended word to be read here is the genitive form of the name $\Pi\alpha\acute{\upsilon}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$. It has to be noted that such name appears in many other inscriptions in Israel (Meimaris 1986: 284), but never, as far as I could verify, in monogrammed form.

The object here described was found by the present writer on the surface of an ancient debris pile among the ruins of Halutza, ancient Elusa, some 20 km south of Beersheva. The object is most probably a fragmentary jar-stopper, the reverse showing a round mark. A small number of such devices, in clay and plaster, were found in Elusa by the Colt expedition in the 1930's, and they have just most recently published (Kirk - Gignoux 1996: 185, nos. 282, 283). The material on which our monogram is impressed is much harder than simple plaster, obviously containing marble powder, which gives it the con-

sistency of concrete. The object is probably an import from abroad, the monogram representing the name of a wine producer or wine dealer.

Inscription no. 2

On a pottery seal (c. 10 cm diam.) from near Tequma (grid ref. 109.095). Height of letters 1 cm.

ΚΙΑΟΥΑΝΟΥ Σιλουανοῦ “*Of Silvanos*”

The stamp, probably to be used as a mark for bread (not necessarily liturgical bread despite the cross), was found in 1964 in a Byzantine site near Tequma,² an Israeli *moshav* situated some 30 km north of Beersheva. This is a round pottery stamp of light brown colour, with the inscription invertedly carved around a central circle that includes a symmetric simple cross. Another small cross appears immediately after the last Υ of the name. Between this cross and the initial letter C the surface appears slightly damaged, but it does not seem that any other sign had been carved on this spot.

The dating of the stamp varies between the 4th and the 7th centuries C.E., as nothing on the object can actually indicate a more precise date, and its archaeological context is unknown. Comparison with other breadstamps from the Byzantine period also found in Israel does not help either, because their style did not undergo any substantial changes during the Byzantine centuries.

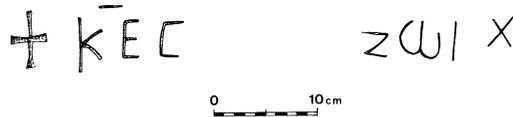
The name *Silvanos*, here in genitive case, probably indicating the name of the baker, is known from some other sources in Byzantine Palestine. Without claiming any particular relation with the one of our inscription, we may note that two of the sources mentioning that name are related to the region where this breadstamp was found. One is the fragmentary epitaph of a certain “Silvanos of Biro-saba” (Beersheva) (Alt 1921: 15, no. 11). The second is the *Plerophories* of the monophysite monk John of Beth Rufina, who tells us about a famous monk of that name who settled in the Gerar region (Nau 1911: 102.178). The same name occurs also in Nessana, pap. 79 (Kraemer 1958: 231).

2. This information was copied from the identifying note in the vitrine where the seal was exhibited for some 25 years in the Negev Museum in Beersheva. The seal has today been removed to the storage rooms of the Israel Antiquities Authority in Jerusalem.

We shall note that this name, originally Latin (*Silvanus*), has been transcribed in two different ways in Greek. While in our breadstamp and the above mentioned inscription the original letter V is transcribed by a Greek OY, on the mosaic floor of a church in Evron, in the north of Israel, it appears transcribed by a Greek B (Meimaris 1986: 169, no. 848).

Inscription no. 3

On a limestone column in Oboda (ʿAvdat, grid ref. 128.022). Height of letters 4 cm approx.



ΚΕC ΖΩΙ X Κ(ύρι)ε σ(ῶσον)... Ζωι... X
 “Oh Lord, save... Zoi...”

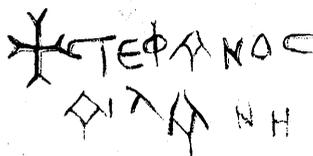
This incomplete inscription is carved on a ring of a column of the northern row in the north church of Oboda (ʿAvdat) but has never been reported, as far as I know. It might have been written by a visitor or pilgrim in Byzantine times.³ The column in question was obviously restored in its present location with elements found spread over the area during the excavation of the site. This means that the column ring with the inscription was originally somewhere else, possibly not even inside the church but in the atrium. This fact would explain the rough carving instead of a simple incision, which would be more logical for an invocation that looks rather personal.

The invocation has only some words, the first one abbreviated in the normal way, with a stroke on the first and last letters. Next is a rather square C, followed by the very effaced remains of an Ω for σῶσον, usual in other such invocations. The following letters of the inscription are illegible except for Ζωι, possibly for Ζωή(ν) or Ζωί(λον).

3. The presence in the Negev of the pilgrims making their journey to Sinai is attested by literary as well as epigraphical and archaeological sources (P. Figueras, “Pilgrims to Sinai in the Byzantine Negev”, in *Akten des XII. internationalen Kongresses für christliche Archäologie*, Bonn 22.-28. September 1991, Teil 2, Münster 1995, 756-762, Tafel 101).

Inscription no. 4

On a limestone building block from Sobata (Shivta, grid ref. 114.032). Height of letters 2 to 8 cm.



+ ΣΤΕΦΑΝΟΣ
ΑΙΛΑΝΗ

Στέφανος
Αϊλανή[της?]

“*Stephen of Aila*”

This is a two-line graffito incised with a pointed tool on the outer part of the limestone wall of the narthex of the south church of Sobata (Shivta), near the central entrance. Unfortunately, this wall has been recently vandalised and destroyed.

The two words forming the graffito are preceded by a double-horn cross. The dimensions of the letters are very irregular, the last A being, for instance, four times bigger than the two C's. We shall also note the triangular shape of the O in the first word and the long central pendant of the A's. Some of the lines of the letters could be easily confused with other strokes unintentionally made on the stone.

This graffito has never been reported and is not included in the collection of the Shivta inscriptions made by the Colt expedition in the 1930's, nor in the one more recently published by A. Negev.⁴ Like in the previous case, it must have been written by the hand of a visitor or pilgrim, obviously coming from the city of Aila, near the present-day 'Aqaba, on the Red Sea.⁵ The initial cross is a sign of the devotional character of the graffito. The name *Stefanos* is most common in the Negev inscriptions. With no intention to find any real relationship with the present graffito it is interesting to observe that “Stephen of Aila” is also the name of the architect engaged, in the 6th cen-

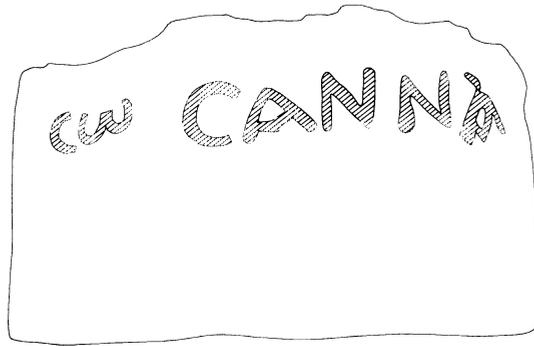
4. The Greek inscriptions from Shivta discovered by the American Colt Expedition in 1934 were collected by E. Kirk in an article that was never published but was kindly showed to me by Dr. Yulia Ustinova, History Dept., Ben Gurion University. The same and other inscriptions were later independently collected and published by Prof. A. Negev (1981: 47-67).

5. The Christian presence in this important harbour-city of the Roman and Byzantine period is documented since 325, when its bishop attended the Nicaean council, and up to the end of the Byzantine period. The epitaph of a certain Καίουμος Αιλησιος was found in Beersheva (Alt 1921: 18, no. 19; reprod. Figueras 1979: fig. 20; and id. 1985: 23, no. 15).

ture C.E., to build the beautiful church for the monks living at the foot of Mt. Sinai, today known as St. Catherine's.⁶

Inscription no. 5 (fig. 5)

On a limestone basin (40 cm diam.) from Mampsis (Kurnub, Mamshit, grid ref. 154-043). Height of letters 7 cm.



ϞϞCANNNA

Σωσάννα

“*Sosanna*”

The letters are written in red paint on the outer face of a roughly hollowed circular stone, freely preserved in the atrium of the west church of Mampsis. The object could have served as water basin for hand-washing. Today, the two first three letters of the name *Sosanna* have almost completely disappeared, but they were quite visible some years ago, when I first copied this inscription. The writing is very irregular.

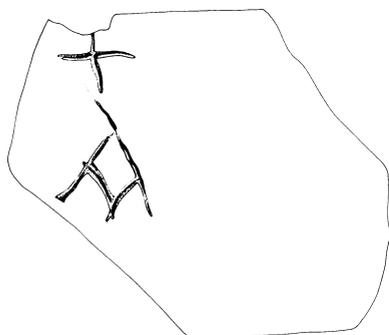
This inscription has never been reported, neither in the collection of the Negev inscriptions (Negev 1981) nor in the more recently published report on Mampsis (Negev 1988). The name *Sosanna*, here almost certainly that of the donor, is of Semitic origin (Hebr. *Shoshanna*). It was used by Jewish women (Daniel 13:2 and passim [LXX]) and adopted by Christians up to the present. In Byzantine epigraphy, it is known from at least three other Palestinian inscriptions, from Jerusalem (Meimaris 1986: 55, no. 328), from Birosaba

6. His name is still carved on one of the beams supporting the roof of the church (Tsafrir 1993: 330). The daughter of this man is possibly “Nonna, (daughter) of Stephanos of Aila”, whose tombstone was discovered in Bersheva (Alt 1921: 23, no. 36).

(Alt 1921: 23, no. 21),⁷ and from Elusa, the latter referring to a virgin (Alt 1921: 29, no. 64), and it appears also in Egypt (Preisigke 1967: no. 400).

Inscription no. 6

On a marble fragment (12.5 × 10.5 × 0.8 cm) found in Elusa (Halutza, grid ref. 117.076). Height of letter 4 cm.



ϩ

Α

The small fragment was occasionally found in 1994 on the surface of an ancient debris pile in the ruins of Elusa, some 200 m east of the Byzantine basilica. Deprived of any special archaeological interest, the fragment is published here for the first time. We know nothing of its original setting, but the rather unskilful carving and the thinness of the slab make of it a sporadic graffito more than an inscription. It was likely an indication for the right placing of the marble plaque in the interior of a religious public building. The graffito would not be visible, as both faces of this plaque are equally polished.

Inscription no. 7 (phot. 2)

On a marble capital from Menois (Horvat Ma'on, Kh. Ma'in, grid ref. 093.082). Height of letters 5 to 6 cm.

7. A reproduction of this inscription, today in the premises of the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem, can be seen in Figueras 1985: 27, no. 19. A certain "Monastery of Sosanna" existed somewhere in Palestine during the 6th century, where a well was constructed at the expenses of emperor Justinian, according to the records of Procopius of Caesarea (*Buildings*, Book V, IX, 17).

✠ΑΓΣΤΕΦ
 ΑΝΣΜΩΝ
 ΑΕΙΤΩΝ

✠ΑΓΣΤΕΦ
 ΑΝΣΜΩΝ
 ΑΕΙΤΩΝ

Ἁγ(ίου) Στεφ-
 άν(ου) Μων-
 αειτῶν

“Of St. Stephen of Menois”

This short inscription is carved in big characters on the upper, unpolished, face of a marble capital. This capital decorates today the garden in front of the dining-room of Kibbutz Nirim, 20 km south-west of Gaza and 10 km from the Mediterranean coast. The capital had been preserved in the house of a kibbutz member for thirty years. According to what is known, the man had rescued it from the ruins of an old Arab house in the premises of the kibbutz, near a small hill, known as Horvat Ma'on or Khirbet Ma'in.⁸ This is the site supposed to represent the ancient town of Menois, not far from the ruins of an ancient synagogue, including a well-known mosaic floor.⁹

The identification of Kh. Ma'in with ancient Menois had been proposed by Alt and accepted by Avi-Yonah (1977: 78), but no epigraphic or other clear evidence for it had been discovered so far. Now, with the present inscription, which is made public here for the first time, there is no doubt that the proposed identification was right.

The reading of the inscription offers no particular difficulties. The text starts with the cross, followed by only three words, the first two abbreviated in the usual form, namely with a *stigma*. These abbreviations substitute more probably a genitive form than a dative one, although my general interpretation of the inscription considers it a sort of address. Indeed, carved in such an odd place as the upper face of the capital, obviously destined to remain hidden from the moment of its placing in the church as an architectural element, this inscription plays the role of a practical mark for the identification of the

8. I acknowledge this information to my friend and ancient student Amir Gorzalzani, of the Israel Antiquities Authority, who was the first to discover and to report on this important find in January 1989.

9. Studied and published by M. Avi-Yona in S. Levy (and others), *Bulletin of the Louis M. Rabinovitz Fund for the Exploration of Ancient Synagogues*, III, Jerusalem 1960, 25-35.

church for which the capital had been sculptured. A dative form would seem to be more logical. But, if this was the case, the second *stigma* would only substitute one character, an Ω , which does not make much sense, though it is not the only case of such use.

The third word is the most interesting, as it represents the geographic indication about the location of St. Stephen's church. It must be admitted that the interpretation of the term ΜΩΝΑΕΙΤΩΝ , in genitive plural, as *Menois*, is not apparent at first sight. First of all, because that word is an ethnical denomination ("the people of Menois"), which was a usual way to refer to a town or city. Secondly, because the name of the town included in that ethnical denomination is different from all other forms of that name transmitted by the sources. In Latin, in the early 5th century C.E., the Theodosian *Code* VII, 4, 30, has "Moenoium Castrum." From the same period, also in Latin, the *Notitia Dignitatum* 73:22 reads "Equites promoti Illiriciani Menoidea" or "Menochia." In Greek, Eusebius' *Onomasticum* 130:7 has Μανῶν . The episcopal councils of Ephesus A.D. 449 and Chalcedon A.D. 451 read Μινωίδος , while the council of Constantinople A.D. 536 reads Μενοίδος , and the Jerusalem synod A.D. 536 Μονοίδος . Finally, the Madaba Map has the interesting note $\text{ΜΑΔΑΒΗΝΑ Η ΝΥΝ ΜΕΝΟΙC}$ (Avi-Yonah 1944: no. 114) for a locality situated south-east to *Sycomazon* and *Bethagidea*.

The name of the town as it appears in our inscription would logically be Μωναείc rather than Μενοίc , but this is not a serious difficulty for its identification. One must acknowledge that there is no way to know the real form of a name which was probably pronounced differently by different people, as occurs even today with a good number of geographic names.

From the written sources it becomes evident that Menois was not only a military camp, but also a civil settlement with a Christian population under the leadership of a bishop. Archaeology had added the interesting datum of the existence, in the town, of a Jewish quarter, with a sumptuous synagogue (above). Now, a sporadic discovery has provided an artifact, a Corinthian capital sculptured in white marble, bearing a Greek inscription with the name of one of the churches in the town of Menois, dedicated to St. Stephen. The geographic specification was necessary in a region where that saint was most popular, several churches being dedicated to this memory.¹⁰

10. The existence of churches dedicated to St. Stephen is attested to on inscriptions from Nessana (Meimaris 1986: 134, nos. 706-713), Be'er Shema' (Tsafirir 1996: 81*-82*) and Birasaba. A fragmentary inscription from the latter city mentions a topos of "Abraham and... the Protomartyr..." (Figuerras 1985: 13, no. 5; see photo in id. 1979: fig. 19). See also below, n. 13.

Our short inscription is also an epigraphical proof that marble architectural pieces were not sculptured *in situ* but were sent from abroad totally prepared for the construction of public buildings in Byzantine Palestine. This fact was already known from some written sources, particularly the biography of bishop Porphyry of Gaza by Mark the Deacon.¹¹ It becomes evident that that kind of sculpture was not made locally but somewhere else, probably abroad, in the region where the pieces were ordered. In our case, at least, the capital had certainly been sculptured in a workshop rather distant from the area of its final destination. It was in that workshop where the sculptors carved the name of the church to which it was sent.

Inscription no. 8 (phot. 3)

On the mosaic floor of a church, Abu-Ḥof (grid ref. 134.088). Height of letters 15 cm.

ΙΚΑΙΟϸΥΝ ΣΕΙϸΕΛΘΣ ΕΝΑΥΤ ΗΞΟΜΟΛΟΓΙϸΟΜΣ
ΥΛΙΚΕΟΙΕΙϸΕΛΕΥϸΟΝΤΣ ΕΝΑΥΤ Η

ΙΚΑΙΟϸΥΝΣΕΙϸΕΛΘΣΕΝΑΥΤΗΞΟΜΟΛΟΓΙϸΟΜ
ΥΛΙΚΕΟΙΕΙϸΕΛΕΥϸΟΝΤΣΕΝΑΥΤΗ

[Ανοιξατε μοι πύλην δ]ικαιοσύνης) εἰσελθὼν ἐν αὐτῇ ἔξομολογίσομαι(αι)
[τῷ Κ(υρίῳ). Αὐτὴ ἡ πύλη τοῦ Κ(υρίου)] υ δῖκεοι εἰσελεύσοντ(αι) ἐν αὐτῇ

*“Open me the gate of righteousness, entering it, I will confess
the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord, the righteous will enter it.”*

This fragmentary inscription is still in its original site, at the entrance of the upper church at Abu-Ḥof, in the premises of Kibbutz Lahav, as part of the mosaic covering its pavement. The ruins of that church were discovered and excavated in the 1970's by David Alon of kibbutz Mishmar Hanegv.¹² The

11. See English translation of this text in G.F. Hill (ed.), *The Life of Porphyrius Bishop of Gaza by Mark the Deacon*, Oxford 1913.

12. I take this opportunity to thank my friend David Alon for his readiness to put at my disposal the records of this dig and to allow me to publish these and other epigraphic materials discovered by him in the region.

inscription, like the entire mosaic floor, is today covered by a layer of earth and stones for protection. I copied and photographed it in 1978 (phot. 3).

This inscription runs in two lines at the entrance of the church, in its inner part, but it is set in the opposite direction to those entering the church. The Greek characters are carefully designed in lines formed by red tesserae upon white background. Unfortunately, the inscription is not complete on its left side, but we can restore the missing words. The text is basically the well-known quotation of Psalm 117:20 (LXX), the use of which was widely spread in the Byzantine world to decorate the entrance of churches, including those of the Negev.¹³ But our inscription adds also v. 19, with the change of the plural $\alpha\upsilon\tau\alpha\iota\varsigma$ into $\alpha\upsilon\tau\eta\eta$, which suggests the presence of $\pi\acute{\upsilon}\lambda\eta\nu$ in the missing part of line 1 instead of the original $\pi\acute{\upsilon}\lambda\alpha\varsigma$. One can also note that the last word of the same line does not make much sense without the continuation $\tau\hat{\omega}$ Κυρίῳ of the original, which has been restored at the beginning of line 2.

The iotacism of the writing is flagrant (I for H in the last word of line 1) and inconsistent ($\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\sigma\acute{\upsilon}\nu\eta\varsigma$ on line 1, $\delta\acute{\iota}\kappa\epsilon\omicron\iota$ on line 2). Judging by the form of the letters, which is very particular but similar to that of some dated inscriptions in other parts of the country,¹⁴ the inscription can soundly be attributed to the 6th century C.E. However, we shall have to wait for the results of the archaeological study of the whole site.

Inscription no. 9

On a limestone slab (50 × 30 cm approx.) from Northern Negev, exact place unknown. Height of letters 5 cm approx.

ϸΥΝΤΕ	Συντέ[λ(εια)]
ΥΠΕΡΤΗC	ὑπὲρ τῆς
ΑΝΟΙΚΟΔΟ	ἀνοικοδο[μ-]
ΗCΕΩCΤΗC	ἡσεως τῆς
ΕΚΚΛΗCΙΑ	ἐκκλησία[ς]

“Joint contribution to the renewal of the church”

13. One of these inscriptions was found in Beersheva in 1907, obviously coming from a church dedicated to St. Stephen (Alt 1921: 14, no. 9, reprod. Figueras 1985: 14, no. 6). A similar inscription is still *in situ* above the original gate of the Justinianean church on Mt. Sinai (Tsafirir 1993: 329).

14. One of the characteristics of the writing of Abu-Ḥof inscription is the decorative form of some letters, such as Υ, showing a horizontal stroke in their middle. A similar feature is found in other inscriptions of the Byzantine period, e.g. at St. Basil's church in Rihab, Transjordan (Piccirillo 1981: tav. 57, phot. 17), which is dated to the year 594 C.E. (*ibid.*, p. 70).

This inscription was carved on a yellowish limestone, typical of the Northern Negev region. The stone was accidentally found by a young Beduin, who subsequently sold it to an Israeli family. It was in their home in Omer, near Beersheva, that I could copy it some years ago, but it has since then been transferred somewhere else. I was not allowed to photograph it. The rectangular slab is broken along its right side, some 10 to 20 cm now missing. The cross under the text was apparently carved at an equal distance from both side edges, the text itself not allowing a longer completion than the one suggested here, which makes full sense.

The square form of the letters, particularly the C and the ω is rather typical of the Byzantine inscriptions from the Negev likely to be attribute to the 6th century C.E., but this is not an absolute dating criterion. Indeed, similar square letters are found in earlier periods.¹⁵ The same is true of the V-form of the Υ, which is also found on inscriptions dated A.D. 454/5 (Negev 1981: phot. 74 and fig. 17) and A.D. 613 (Figueras 1985: 35, no. 27).

Most interesting is the contents, which commemorates a “joint contribution” (συντέλεια), probably for the renewal of the pavement or a part of it. Unfortunately, the total lack of information about the archaeological context in the report on the discovery of this inscription minimizes its significance and historical value. One would like to know the circumstances that led to the “renewal” of that anonymous church, whether it had been an act of rutinary maintenance, an occasional embellishment, or rather a necessary restoration after collapse or destruction. We shall never know. But this inscription can always be taken as a reference point by archaeologists when facing the problem of dating the Negev churches, as these are just the remains of old buildings that underwent thorough changes and “renewals” in the course of two or three hundred years of active existence.¹⁶

15. Thus in the Dionysos mosaic from Sheikh Zuweid [in A. Ovadia - S. Mucznik and the late C. Gómez Silva, 1991, “A New Look at the Mosaic Floor from Sheikh Zuweid in the Ismailiya Museum”, *Qadmoniot* 24, 3-4 (95-96) 122-126, Hebrew]. In favor of the square letters having to be considered later, there are cases where both kinds of writings, round and square, are carved on the same stone in two inscriptions, the older being round, the more recent square (Figueras 1985: 25, no. 17).

16. Repairs of all kinds are typical in churches from the Byzantine period that were in use for several hundreds of years. Architectural elements are often found playing a role totally different from their first function. In Horvat Karkur Elit, some 7 km north of Beersheva, circular pieces of columns were used as substitutes for tomb slabs, fragments of stone chancel screens paved the enlarged floor or the sanctuary, and the old cruciform baptistry was covered and cancelled, substituted by a small stone basin. See my short report: “L’Église byzantine de Karkur dans le Négev”, in *Acts of the XIII International Congress of Christian Archaeology (Split-Poreč Sept.-Oct. 1994)*, Split (forthcoming).

Inscription no. 10

On a mosaic floor at Abasan el Kabir (grid ref. 087-082). Height of letters 15 cm approx.



ΘΕΟΔΩΡΟΥ ΚΕΝΤΟΥΤ
ΛΟΠΙΣΕΝ ΜΗΝΙΑΙΣ Ι

[... τοῦ ἁγίου?] Θεοδώρου καὶ ἐν τοῦτ[ω ...]
[... κα]λλόπισεν μ(ηνὸς) Δαισ(ίου) ἰν[δικτιῶνος ...]

“... of (saint?) Theodore, and in this ...
... embellished on the month of Daisios, indiction ...”

This inscription is probably still *in situ* on a mosaic floor covered by some 10 cm of earth and stones, in the main street of the Arab village Abasan el-Kabir, between the towns of Deir el-Balah and Khan Yunes, 20 km south-west of Gaza and 10 km from the Mediterranean coast. Its discovery was reported to me by David Gateno of Beersheva some 10 years ago.¹⁷ Unfortunately, only a fragment of it was uncovered and photographed, so that the present text hardly hints at the occasion on which the mosaic was set. The inscription is followed by a continuous leaf-pattern of mostly green colour of two or three different varieties. Green colour on floor mosaic is rather unusual, as it is not easily found in natural stone, and green tesserae used at times on pavements are of glass or *smalto*, which does not last long under treading.¹⁸

The letters of the inscription are nicely worked out, and one will note the normal abbreviations of group ΟΥ and the word μηνὶ or μηνὸς in a simple Μ, as in most inscriptions from the region in the Byzantine period. It is risky, however, to give this inscription a date on the paleographic criterion alone.

17. I take this opportunity to express him my gratitude for reporting on this discovery, allowing its publication and putting at my disposal his photographic material.

18. Another mosaic in the same neighbourhood, the well-known fragments from Kissufim [R. Cohen, “A Byzantine Church and Its Mosaic Floors at Kissufim”, in *Tsafir* 1993a: 277-282], includes a few dozens of green tesserae, today visibly damaged in comparison with the stone tesserae in other colors.

The main clue for the general interpretation of the fragmentary inscription is undoubtedly the first word, [κα]λλόπισεν (for καλλώπισεν), i.e. “(they) embellished”, which hints at a restoration, maybe a dedication, of a public building, probably a church. The name *Theodore* is very common in the south along the Byzantine centuries, and it is found on a number of inscriptions in the Negev, not only referring to dignitaries and church officials but also to the saint of the same name. Its appearance here is ambiguous. The word here restored as τοῦτω could also be completed in other dative forms, feminine and plural (-τῆ, -τοῖς or -ταῖς). In the Gaza calendar, which was the one used in that area, the month of Daisios begun on the 26th of May.

The discovery of a mosaic floor in Abasan el-Kabir is not surprising. As early in 1920 mosaic pavements were reported in that area by the British authorities.¹⁹ But we are not certain that we are dealing here with the same discovery. We do not know much either about the identification of Abasan el-Kabir, an Arab village settled only in the 1920's, and built in large part with ancient stones found on the spot. Fr. Abel suggested that it could be the ancient town of Menois (Abel 1940: 27, n. 1) but this opinion must now be totally excluded, after the discovery of the inscription reported above, no. 7.

Inscription no. 11

On a slab (stone, dimensions and height of letters unknown) from Birosaba (Beersheva, grid ref. 139.072).

ΑΝΝΟΥ	... Ἰω]άννου ο[...
ΟΚΑΙΤΟΠ	...] ὁ καὶ το(π)[ος (?) ...
ΠΟΥΔΗΚΠΡ	... σ]πουδῆ κ(αὶ) πρ[ονοία (?) ...
ΤΗΡΙΑΚΤΩ	ὑπὲρ σω]τηρίας τῶ[ν ...
ΜΗΓΟΡΠΙΑΙΟΥΙΝΔΣΕΤΟΥΣ	ἐν] μῆ(νὶ) Γορπιαίου ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος) ς' (?) ἔτους [...

“... of John ... being also the (memorial) place of ... by care and diligence of ... for the salvation of ... in the month of Gorpaios, 6th indiction, year ...”

19. See the anonymous article: “Antiquities on the Desert Between Egypt and Palestine”, in *Geograph. Journal* (London) 55 (1920) 465-467.

This inscription was probably found in the Neve Noy quarter of present Beersheva, south of the large *wadi* of the same name, near the ancient sites of Bir Safadi and Abu Matar. A copy of the text was made available to me on occasion of the exhibition of Byzantine inscriptions in 1985 (above, Introd.), and I publish it here for the first time. Its present whereabouts are unknown, and there is no way of verifying my copy or any other details. Due to its poor state of preservation, we cannot be sure of what kind of inscription it was, but it has a dedicatory character.

The name restored on line 1, *Ioannes*, is only probable. It appears on a number of inscriptions in the Negev during the Byzantine period (Alt 1921, passim; Negev 1981: nos. 17, 44d, 47, 51, 52, 57, 62, 66, 75; Kirk - Gignoux 1996: 176, no. 19). In our case, we cannot be sure if it refers to a person or rather to St. John. If this was the case, it would be the first reference to this saint in the region. If my reading of the word τόπος at the end of the second line is right, it could be a confirmation of that reference. As stated above (no. 10), in Beersheva epigraphy that word was used meaning a place dedicated to the memory of saints.

We cannot be sure about the date either, because there is no reference to the era, and we know that three eras, if not four, were used simultaneously in Birosaba, namely those of Eleutheropolis, Gaza and Elusa or Arabian (Figueras 1980: 154-155; id. 1985: 36-37, nos. 28-29). The use of the Greek or Macedonian names of the months, as in our case, was usual in Birosaba, though the Latin and Semitic names have also been found.²⁰ But the correspondence of their days with those of the Roman calendar system was different according to the era being used. The 1st of the Greek month Gorpaios corresponds to the 29 of August of the Roman calendar in the Gaza era. But in the Arabian era, which was also used in Birosaba, it corresponds to the 24th of August (Samuel 1972: 177). The indiction year recorded in the inscription cannot be but the 6th, reading as figure and not only as abbreviating sign the *stigma* immediately following INΔ, which otherwise would not be specified. The following word, ἔτους, refers, as usual, to the era year.

Inscription no. 12

Material, provenance, and height of letters unknown.

20. See references in the study of another inscription recently found in Beersheva, using the Semitic month *Soubat* (Ustinova - Figueras 1996).

ΛΣΟΜΑ	Ἐτε]λ(εύτεσεν) ό μα[κάριος]
ΩΣΔΑΚ	[...]ως δ(ι)άκ(ονος)
ΟΝΑΧΩΣ	[καὶ μο]ναχός
ΙΠΑΝΕ	[ἐν μην]ι Πανέ[μου
ΠΡΟΤΗΕΤΟ	[ἡμέρα] πρώτη του
ΥΣΥΞΕ	[ἔτο]υς υξε'
ΝΔΓ	[ἰ]νδ(ικτιῶνος) γ'

“Blessed..., deacon and monk, passed away in the first day of the month of Panemos, year 465, 3rd indiction”

The text of this burial inscription was shown to me on occasion of the exhibition of Byzantine inscriptions in Beersheva in 1985 (Figueras 1985). Unfortunately, its provenance and all other details were not revealed. Its interpretation offers no particular difficulties, and I publish it here for the first time from the copy I was allowed to transcribe.

This is a typical epitaph using customary formulae, and this enables us to fill such gaps as the verbal form *ἔτελεύτεσεν* on line 1. Unfortunately, it is not so easy to restore the name of the deceased at the beginning of line 2, a name with the ending *-ως* possibly for *-ος*. This cannot be the end of the adjective *μακάριος*, restored on line 1 after the first syllable *μα-*, likely abbreviated in *μακς* (Avi-Yonah 1940: 83), which would leave no place for the name of the deceased. *δακ* certainly stands here for *διάκονος*, although the normal abbreviated form includes and *ι* after *δ* (Avi-Yonah 1940: 59).

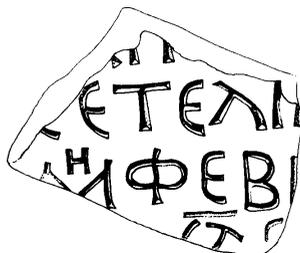
The Greek characters are of the square type, especially visible in the endings *-ως* (for *-ος*). The term *μοναχός* is important from the historical point of view, as it represents new evidence for the presence of monks and monasteries in the Byzantine Negev.²¹

Neither the era nor the calendar here used were indicated, but they only could be the Arabian ones. Thus the 1st of month Panemos corresponds to the 25th of June, and the year 465 corresponds here to 570 C.E. The 3rd indiction, indeed, fell on 569/70 C.E.

21. Literary, epigraphical and archaeological evidence for this presence has been collected in my recent study: Figueras 1995.

Inscription no. 13 (phot. 4)

On a fragmentary marble slab (30 × 20 cm approx.). Provenance unknown. Height of letters 3.5 cm approx.



ΕΤΕΛΙ
 ΗΦΕΒ
 ΥΛΕ

... ο]ς ἐτελι[ῶθη (?)
 ...] μ(ηνὶ) Φεβρ(ουαρίου) ...
 ...] υλε' ...

“(Here rests ...) who passed away (on ...) of the month of February ... of the year 435”

This fragment of inscription was brought to the Negev Museum in Beersheva in 1985 on occasion of the exhibition of Byzantine inscriptions (Figueras 1985), but was not exhibited. Now it is kept in the storerooms of the Israel Antiquities Authority in the Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem.

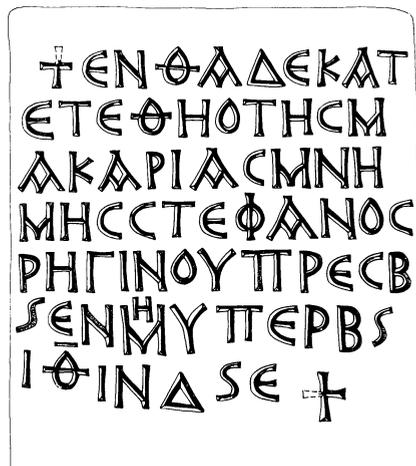
As can be seen in the photo (phot. 4), the writing is of the round style, a feature indicating, in the Negev inscriptions, a greater care than that of the square characters. The term for “month” is abbreviated in the usual manner. On line 4, a horizontal stroke upon the three letters indicates their use as numbers.

The poor state of preservation of the fragment, in which personal names and adjectives are totally missing, makes the interpretation uncertain. We interpret it as a burial inscription, but it could also be a dedicatory one, for both are allowed by the verb ἐτελι[ῶθη], which is used to mean either “passed away” or “was completed”. The remains of line 1 could include something like ΕΠΙ, which would favor the dedication, but they could also be fragments of any other letters. It can soundly be argued that a dedication would have left traces of a much longer text, including titles and grandiloquent formulas. A strong argument in favor of a burial text is here the fragment of *sigma* preceding the verb ἐτελιῶθη, most likely being the second letter of the relative pronoun ὅς. This is not normally preceding ἐτελιῶθη in the dedication inscriptions. Therefore, this fragment seems to represent the central part of a simple epitaph which contained only essential data.

The Latin name of the month is not a surprise. Although much less used than the Macedonian or Greco-Arabian, the Roman months, including February, appear on a number of inscriptions (Meimaris 1992: 416-419). The year number is here indicated by the letters ΥΛΕ, capped by a short stroke, meaning 435. If the reference is to the Arabian era, which is likely, the date corresponds to February 541 C.E.

Inscription no. 14 (phot. 5)

On a marble slab (51 × 39.5) from Birosaba (Beersheva, grid ref. 130.072). Height of letters 5 cm.



+ΕΝΘΑΔΕΚΑ
ΕΤΕΘΗΟΤΗCΜ
ΑΚΑΡΙΑCΜΝΗ
ΜΗCCTΕΦΑΝΟC
ΡΗΓΙΝΟΥ ΠΡΕCΒ
CΕΝΜΥ ΠΕΡΒC
ΙΘΙΝΔCΕ+

Ἐνθάδε κατ-
ετέθη ὁ τῆς μ-
ακαρίας μνή-
μης Στέφανος
Ρεγίνου πρεσβ(ύτερος)
ἐν μ(ηνί) Ὑπ(ε)ρβ(ερεταίου)
ιθ' ἰνδ(ικτιῶνος) ε'

“Here was buried Stephen, of blessed memory, son of Reginos, the priest, on the 19th of the month Hyperberetaios, the 5th indiction”

This nice epitaph, carved on a marble slab, is very similar in its writing to the previous one, but has a different formula. Probably discovered in the

first years of the present century among the ruins of ancient Beersheva, it was sold in 1940 by the Rivlin Bros., Hebron, to the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem, where it is permanently exhibited (registr. S. 972), but was never published.

The characters are of the round type, and abbreviations are usual. The name of the deceased, a priest, is *Stefanos*, and that of his father *Reginos*, a Latin name seldom found in Palestinian epigraphy (Avi-Yonah 1934: 50, no. 336). In a recently published inscription from Elusa, a man of the same name appears as father of Zenobia, who died on the 31st of May 564 C.E. (Kirk - Gignoux 1996: 176, no. 22). There might be a relation between this Reginos and the one of Biro-saba, but we cannot check if there is a likely correspondence of dates, as the era year is not indicated in our inscription. Only the similarity of the latter's writing with that of other Beersheva inscriptions from the 6th century, makes acceptable the assumption, like in the previous inscription, that it belongs to that period. 19th of Hyperberetaios corresponds to 16th of October in the Gaza era, but to 6th of October in the Arabian one (Samuel 1972: 177), which is the most probable here. The formula τῆς μακαρίας μνήμης, "of blessed memory", is also found in other inscriptions from the region, and it is assumed that it was reserved to persons of a certain rank, civil or ecclesiastical, as in our case.

Relevant data contributed by the new inscriptions

1. Personal names	ἐκκλησία (no. 9)
Θεοδώρος (no.10)	μοναχός (no. 12)
Ἰωάννης (no. 11)	
Πάυλος (no. 1)	4. Religious terms and formulae
Ρεγίνος (no. 14)	ἅγιος (no. 7)
Σιλουάνας (no. 2)	Κύριε σῶσον (no. 3)
Σωσάννα (no. 5)	μακάριος (no. 12)
Στέφανος (nos. 4, 14)	μακαρίας μνήμης (no. 14)
Zωι (no. 3)	ὑπὲρ σωτηρίας (no. 11)
2. Saints	5. Biblical quotation
Στέφανος (no. 7)	Psalm 117:19-20 (LXX) (no. 8)
3. Ecclesiastical terms	6. Chronology
διάκονος (no. 12)	Δαισίου ζ' (?) ἰνδικτιῶνος... (no. 10)

Γορπιαίου ἰνδικτιῶνος ς' (?) ἔτους... (no. 11)	Ἵπερβερεταίου ἰθ' ἰνδικτιῶνος ε' (no. 14)
Πανέμου (ἡμέρα) πρώτη του ἔτους υξε' ἰνδικτιῶνος γ' (no. 12)	8. Ethnical and geographical Αἰλανή(της ?) (Aila) (no. 4)
Φεβρουαρίου... υλε' (-θ' ?) (no. 13)	Μωναιετῶν (Menois) (no. 7)

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