

AN OBSCURE INSCRIPTION ON A GOLD TABLET

At a meeting of the Instituto di Correspondenza Archeologica held in 1852, a Jesuit archaeologist, R. P. Gianpietro Secchi, gave a brief account of an inscription which had recently come to light.¹ It was engraved on a thin plate of gold, and the circumstances of its discovery were strange indeed. The excavator, Gaetano Canestrelli, found it in the mouth of a skull—noteworthy, according to the report, for its perfect set of strong teeth—which was enclosed in a terracotta urn unearthed at the Vigna Codini, near the tomb of the Scipios; the neighboring ground had already yielded a number of leaden curse-tablets. The present location of the gold plate is unknown, at least to me; the scholars who have discussed it since Secchi seem to have done so without re-examining the object.

Secchi's reading of the inscription is as follows:

ΑΙΩΝΕΠΤΕΤΑ ΚΥΠΙΕ ΣΑΡΑΤΤΙ ΔΟΣ ΝΕΙΚΗΝ ΚΑΤΑ ΠΑΙΝ ΥΠΟΠΕΤΡΑΝ

Nothing is said about the arrangement of the words on the plate.² To judge by its obviously small size and by some similar objects, such as the silver petalon published by D. M. Robinson,³ the forty-seven letters may well have been divided into several lines. Adequate information about the form of the letters is also lacking. With the C-shaped sigma used in Secchi's text, amulets usually show the forms € and ω; when the form £ is used, we find E and w.

Secchi's interpretation is rather bewildered. He read *αιων ερπετα* as one word, rendering it *aevigradus*, but did not elucidate the meaning of that word, which is not elsewhere attested, and would probably be viewed with suspicion by Latinists. He took *παιν* to be the accusative of *παῖς*, although that poetical form of *παῖς* is not likely to have been used by the writer of a short charm in prose. As to *δος νίκηην, κτλ.*, some youthful memory of girls and grottoes (*grato, Pyrrha, sub antro!*) seems to have stolen into the mind of the scholar, only to be banished by the frown of a clerical conscience. Of these words he says:

“This invocation (i. e. of Sarapis) is followed by a prayer most unworthy of

¹ *Bull. dell' Inst.*, 1852, pp. 151-2. At later dates the inscription was briefly discussed by the following scholars, whose remarks will be hereafter cited by the name of the author without other reference: Panofka, *Arch. Anzeiger* (issued with *Arch. Zeitung*), 1854, p. 441; Froehner, “Sur une amulette basilidienne,” Caen, 1867, p. 9 (reprinted, with renumbered pages, from *Bull. de la soc. des antiquaires de Normandie*, VII, pp. 217 ff.); Drexler, *Woch. für klass. Philol.*, III, 1886, p. 1432; Wünsch, *Sethianische Verfluchungstafeln*, 1898, p. 101.

² Panofka and Wünsch speak of the text as in two lines, which seems to be merely an inference from the circumstance that Secchi discussed the invocation and the prayer separately.

³ In *Classical and Mediaeval Studies in Honor of E. K. Rand*, pp. 245 ff. and pl. I.

a decent man, yet very frequent in the immense moral disorder of pagan idolatry. The worshipper asks for victory over the natural virtue of an innocent girl."

What would Father Secchi have thought of the extremely plain-spoken love-charms in P. Oslo I? However, the innocent girl of his interpretation is a mere figment, as we shall see. Yet it is not very strange that he succeeded no better in interpreting the inscription, considering how little was known in his time of ancient magic, the lower manifestations of popular religion, and the language used by the simpler people.

Other scholars have done little more to explain this brief text. Panofka held that the prayer merely commended a girl who had died at an early age to the protection of Sarapis, the god of the lower world—a view which ignores the natural meaning of both *νίκην* and *κατά*. Froehner, who treats the inscription in a note on his publication of another amulet, would read *ὑπόπειραν* and regard *πάν* (erroneously written *παν*) as a grammatical irregularity for *πάσαν*—a point to which we shall return later. He would then translate, "grant victory over every temptation." Such a petition on a pagan amulet is probably unexampled; and if we could assume Christian influence in the language of a prayer to Sarapis, we should expect a form of *πειρασμός*. *ὑπόπειρα*, by the way, does not seem to be found elsewhere, although *ὑποπειράω*, "attempt to seduce," occurs in Alciphron and Aelian.

W. Drexler, who examined the inscriptions on a great number of amulets, rejected Secchi's explanation of our text without adding anything of his own, and Lafaye cites it without comment in his *Les divinités d' Alexandrie*.⁴ As far as I know, the inscription was last discussed by Wünsch, who was chiefly interested in the invocation of Sarapis.⁵ He rejected Secchi's explanation of the prayer as impossible, but confesses that the sense is not clear; "but in any event it is certain that the words are addressed to Sarapis as lord of the lower world, and that he is called *αἰὼν ἐρπέτα*."

If anything is to be made of this little inscription, it is well to begin with a general observation that I have found to be true after examining many magical amulets. Apart from brief acclamations like *εἰς θεός*, *εἰς Ζεὺς Σάραπισ*, *νικῆ ἢ Ἱσις*, few of them express any religious feeling, and still fewer convey a moral idea, such as the wish to overcome temptation. Most of these objects were made for a practical purpose—to gain favor for the wearer in his dealings with his superiors, to win the love of some particular person, to insure protection against disease and various dangers. This plate can perhaps be best explained as an amulet against a danger well known to most Mediterranean peoples, and especially in Egypt, the home of the

⁴ Page 323, no. 205.

⁵ The inscription is mentioned briefly by Cumont, *Textes et Monuments*, I, p. 76, note 6; *C. R. Acad. Inscr.*, 1928, p. 278, note 4; by Reitzenstein, *Gött. Nachrichten*, 1904, p. 319, note 5; and by Weinreich, *Arch. f. Religionswiss.*, XIX, 1916-19, p. 189, note 3.

Sarapis-cult—namely, the sting of scorpions and, it may be, the bite of poisonous snakes. Let us examine the prayer itself, passing over the invocation for the moment.

First of all, it seems certain that ΠΑΙΝ is simply an error for ΠΑΝ; the maker carelessly scratched a superfluous hasta. On this point Froehner was undoubtedly right. Next, I would read ὑπὸ πέτραν. Then, if one makes allowance for several laxities of language, such as are familiar to papyrologists and other students of late popular Greek, the prayer may be rendered, “Grant victory over everything under a rock.” The last words seem very vague and may have been chosen to avoid mentioning something hated and feared. They take on a more definite meaning when we confront them with a proverbial expression occurring in several forms, all of which refer to the danger from scorpions lurking under stones.

Soph. Fr. 37 (Pearson): ἐν παντὶ γάρ τοι σκορπίος φρουρεῖ λίθῳ.

Praxilla Fr. 4 (Bergk): ὑπὸ παντὶ λίθῳ σκορπίον, ᾧ ταίρε, φυλάσσεο.⁶

See also the skolion (20, Diehl, *Anth. Lyr.*, II, p. 187) cited by Athenaeus (695 D); Aristophanes, *Thesm.*, 528, with ῥήτωρ for σκορπίος, παρὰ προσδοκίαν; and other passages gathered by Pearson and Diehl in their notes on the fragments cited.

There are difficulties that meet the eye at once, particularly in the circumstance that all the proverbial passages use the word λίθος. Yet the words for stone and rock were not always carefully discriminated, especially in later Greek, just as in American and Australian English “rock” is often used by careless speakers for a stone of moderate or even small size. Πέτρος is to some extent synonymous with λίθος, though less common in Attic prose, and πέτρα seems occasionally to have been used carelessly for πέτρος, as in Xenophon, *Anab.*, 4, 2, 20 (ἐκυλίνδουν πέτρας, cf. ἐπεκυλίνδουν πέτρους, *Hell.*, 3, 5, 20), where, it is true, the best authority, the first hand of manuscript C, has πέτρους. Galen, who touches upon the matter in beginning his chapters on medicinal minerals, ridicules the distinction between πέτρα and πέτρος as a mere pedantry; and in Modern Greek, πέτρα is the ordinary word for a stone—“pelt with stones” is παίρνω με ταῖς πέτραις.⁷ Our inscription cannot be accurately dated without inspecting the original tablet, yet it is probably not earlier than Galen’s time, and may be later, like many of the lead tablets found near by. We can scarcely doubt that to the writer ὑπὸ πέτραν was equivalent to ὑπὸ λίθῳ or ὑπὸ πέτρῳ. Hence there is little need for another argument, namely, that scorpions and some snakes like the cool shadow of cliffs and massive rocks as well as the shelter of smaller stones—a fact which travellers and archaeologists have sometimes learned to their cost among the tombs and temples of Egypt.

⁶ Diehl apparently doubts the authorship of Praxilla and does not list the verse among her fragments.

⁷ I owe this observation to H. C. Youtie, who has also contributed some of the references in note 9. The passage in Galen is *Simpl. medicam.*, Vol. XII, 194 (Kühn).

The construction of *ὑπό* with the accusative to express position under anything, with no motion implied, is apparently more common in later Greek than that with the dative, and needs no defense.⁸ But in post-classical as well as in classical times *κατά* is normally used with the genitive, not the accusative, to mean “against,” “over,” in connection with a hostile act or attitude. Consequently, if there is any merit in the interpretation suggested above, we are obliged to adopt one of two explanations.

1) The engraver may have expressed himself vaguely rather than precisely, saying “Give me victory in relation to everything under a rock,” instead of “over everything,” etc.

2) We may have here an instance of an irregular extended use of the (properly) neuter accusative *πάν*.

There is evidence from inscriptions, papyri, and ecclesiastical texts showing that *πάν* was sometimes put in place of the masculine accusative *πάντα*.⁹ Whether it encroached still further upon the other forms of the adjective is uncertain. Froehner thought that *πάν* stood for *πάσαν* in our text, and also in his own amulet, where we find the words [*ὀρκίζω*] . . . *πάν πτωματισμὸν καὶ πάν ὑδροφόβαν*.¹⁰ The first *πάν* certainly takes the place of *πάντα*, but, contrary to Froehner’s opinion, the second does also, for *ὑδροφόβαν* is not an error for the feminine *ὑδροφοβίαν*, but the accusative of a masculine *ὑδροφόβας*, which Plutarch and some medical writers use as an equivalent of *ὑδροφοβία*.¹¹ Furthermore *πάσαν* occurs twice in Froehner’s amulet just after the words I have cited. Thus there is still no evidence for *πάν* = *πάσαν*, and I have not found *πάν* elsewhere used for *παντός*. But since in our text *πάν* is not accompanied by a noun, which might have obliged the writer to follow the grammatical norm, I incline to think that he here allowed himself this otherwise unparalleled license.

Of the request it only remains to say that while *δὸς νίκην* may seem a weighty expression to use in a prayer for immunity from the attacks of scorpions or reptiles, it is (like *δὸς χάριν*) so widely and loosely used in amulets that it scarcely calls for comment.

We turn now to the invocation, and particularly to the words *αἰὼν ἐρπέτα*.¹² In

⁸ Compare Liddell-Scott-Jones *ὑπό* B 1 with *ὑπό* C 2.

⁹ Maysen, *Gram. d. Griech. Pap.*, I², part 2, p. 32, lines 39-46; Helbing, *Gram. d. Sept.*, p. 51; Reinhold, *De graec. Patrum*, p. 52; somewhat analogous later developments cited by Psaltes, *Gram. d. byz. Chronikon*, p. 160, notes 1 and 2. The word *πᾶς* had evidently taken one step towards becoming an indeclinable; that the tendency went no further is due, apparently, to the fact that almost all forms of the word were disused in Modern Greek, being replaced by *ὅλος* and *κάθε*.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.* (see note 1), p. 7, lines 6-7 of the inscription.

¹¹ To the references in Liddell-Scott-Jones, add *Musée Belge*, XVIII, 1914, pp. 70-73; there Delatte gives a full description of a jasper amulet in Athens which bears the inscription *φύγε δαίμων ὑδροφόβα ἀπὸ τοῦ φοροῦντος τοῦτο τὸ φυλακτήριον*.

¹² Because of its verbal origin I give *ἐρπέτης* paroxytone accent (Kühner-Blass, I, p. 391), though it does not conform strictly to the rule.

discussing a text of such slight importance as this can claim, it would be inappropriate to enter upon so complicated a subject as the development of *αἰών* from the simple meaning of *life, time*, into a philosophical concept and into a name for a divine entity. Nock's treatment of the matter in his "A Vision of Mandulis Aion" not only serves as a valuable introduction to the topic, but also carries it as far as many inquirers will need to go.¹³ It is clear that the idea of eternity carried by this word from Plato on caused Aion to become a kind of hypostasis in relation to more than one deity. Thus Agathodaimon is Aion in magical texts,¹⁴ the sun is invoked as Agathodaimon,¹⁵ and the connection between Aion and the sun is fairly well made out.¹⁶ Apart from this gold plate, evidence for a connection between Aion and Sarapis is scanty; but ΑΙΩΝ, evidently for ΑΙΩΝ, appears in the field of an amethyst intaglio in the British Museum (No. 56427), where the design is a bearded head of Sarapis, adorned with six rays and wearing the modius, on top of a jar. Through the right handle of the jar a stalk of grain is thrust, through the left a kerykeion with snakes and wings.

A better example has been brought to my attention by A. D. Nock, who has generously allowed me the use of a piece of evidence in his possession. This is a photograph of an inscription which at least up to 1937 was in the collection of the late Carl Schmidt, who in that year presented the photograph to Mr. Nock. In doing so, he laid no restriction upon its use, and I therefore present the text here.¹⁷ It is noteworthy for the syncretism which brings together Zeus, Helios, Sarapis, and Aion.

Διὶ Ἡλίῳ μέγαλω
 Καράπιδι Αἰῶνι
 Μοροτταῖς καὶ Ἑρων εὐχῆ.

¹³ *Harvard Theological Review*, XXVII, pp. 53-104, especially pp. 78-99. My indebtedness to this work will be patent to any reader, and I also owe to Mr. Nock some important references and comments used in these notes. Among the many works dealing with Aion, the following may be mentioned: C. Lackeit, *Aion* (part 1: continuation has not appeared), Königsberg diss., 1916; *idem*, "Aion" in Pauly-Wissowa, *R.E.*, Suppl. III, 64; Weinreich, *Arch. f. Religionswiss.*, XIX, 1916-19, pp. 174-190; Zepf, *ibid.*, XXV, pp. 225-244; Cumont, *C. R. Acad. Inscr.*, 1928, pp. 274-282.

¹⁴ *Pap. Gr. Mag.*, IV, 3168 ff.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, IV, 1597 and 1607.

¹⁶ Nock, *loc. cit.*, p. 84, with lines 18-19 of the Mandulis inscription (p. 63); Cumont, *Textes et Monuments*, I, p. 80, and note 3.

¹⁷ Measurements of the stone are not available; it presents a trapezoidal face, the sides sloping slightly outward to the base. The letters of the second line are broadened, those of the third narrowed, to fit the space. An abrasion or weathering of the stone at the right side reached as far as the final iota of line 2, but even allowing for this, there can hardly have been a nu after *ευχη* in line 3. The lettering seems to be of the fourth century after Christ, possibly of the early fifth.

The provenance of the stone is unknown, but it may well have come from Egypt, where Schmidt acquired many antiquities. This is made slightly more probable by the occurrence of the name Heron, which is common in Egypt. Further, the strange name *Μοροτταῖς* may be made (with an Egyptian confusion of λ and ρ) on the stem of *Μολοττός*, which occurs in Egypt as a personal name, though in the form *Μολοσσός*. Still another indication of Egyptian origin may be found in the similarity of this dedication to two others listed by Seymour de Ricci, *Archiv für Papyrusforschung*, II, 446 (no. 72), 450 (no. 87). Both are addressed to Διὶ Ἡλίῳ Μέγαλῳ Καράπιδι ἐν Κανὼβῳ.

In a curious passage of the Alexander romance of Pseudo-Callisthenes¹⁸ the phrase Αἰὼν Πλουτώμιος (where Αἰὼν is a probable if not a certain restoration) seems to designate Sarapis, whose resemblance to Hades is well known, and who is often represented with Cerberus at his feet. That Sarapis is actually meant is made certain, in my judgment, by the fact that Aion Plutonium is spoken of as the patron god of Alexandria, by the mention of a very sacred xoanon of Sarapis, and by the incident of the eagle,¹⁹ a common attribute of Sarapis, especially on coins and late gems.²⁰

In ἐρπέτα Wunsch rightly recognized the vocative of ἐρπέτης, a form parallel to ἐρπετόν and ἐρπηστής, but not recorded elsewhere. It reminds us that a serpent with his tail in his mouth was a symbol of Aion,²¹ and occurs on hundreds of magical amulets, where, to be sure, its meaning was often scarcely present in the mind of the maker. If our gold leaf is an amulet against creeping things, the word ἐρπέτα is appropriate for a practical reason; the serpent god controls his creatures. The word is evidently more closely pertinent to Aion than to Sarapis; but it is to be remembered that a serpent with the head of Sarapis is known as an Alexandrian coin-type (Sarapis-Agathodaimon)²² and there is other evidence for the serpent as an attribute of this divinity.

Finally, it may seem strange that an amulet against scorpions or snakes should be put into the mouth of a corpse. But any amulet valued in life might be buried with the dead,²³ and the mouth, even in life, often served as a purse²⁴—as it does now, all too often, among lowly folk in many places. Besides, snakes were imagined as adding to the terrors of Hades from the time of Aristophanes²⁵ to the Apocalypse of Peter,²⁶ and may well have been among the “properties” of the Orphic Hell.

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¹⁸ 1, 30, 6; 1, 33, 2.¹⁹ 1, 33, 4-5.

²⁰ Sarapis as Pluto would be the husband of Kore; and since Sarapis is called Aion, it is surprising that Aion appears as the child of Kore in the strange Alexandrian ceremony described by Epiphanius (*Panarion*, 51, 22; Nock, *loc. cit.*, pp. 90 f.). But we have no right to assume a connection between the cult mentioned by Epiphanius and the story told by Pseudo-Callisthenes. They may represent different mythological tendencies. However, there would be nothing strange in an idea that Aion generated Aion. The legend αἰὼν accompanies the self-renewing phoenix (Numidian crane with radiate nimbus) on coins of Antoninus Pius (*B. M. Cat., Alexandria*, no. 1004, pl. XXVI; Vogt, *Die Alexandr. Münzen*, part 2, 68).

²¹ Cumont, *Textes et Monuments*, I, p. 80; *Festschrift für O. Benndorff*, pp. 292 f.²² *B. M. Cat., Alexandria*, no. 745, pl. XIV; Vogt, *op. cit.*, part 2, 55 (and other examples from Hadrian through the reign of Commodus).²³ Cf. Siebourg on the gold amulet found at Gellep in the Rhineland, *Bonner Jahrb.*, CII, pp. 123 ff., esp. 127, 152.²⁴ Cf. Aristophanes, *Wasps*, 791, and the custom of placing an obol in the mouth of the dead; the significance of this “fare for Charon” is treated in Rohde, *Psyche*⁴, I, p. 306, note 3; Wilamowitz, *Glaube der Hellenen*, I, p. 311; D. M. Robinson, *Excavations at Olynthus*, XI, pp. 202-206.²⁵ Aristophanes, *Frogs*, 143; cf. 278.²⁶ *Apoc. Petri*, 10 (25).