

## 12. A nun's letter

Frederic Krueger (Berlin)

[P.Heid. Inv. Kopt. 51](#)  
4<sup>th</sup> century (?)

15,3 x 9,7 cm

Ashmunein  
plate XVI

This papyrus leaf contains the letter of a nun to the unnamed superior of a monastery, “my beloved father”  $\pi\alpha\mu\epsilon\rho\iota\tau\ \bar{\nu}\epsilon\iota\omega\tau$ , as lines 1/2 are certainly to be reconstructed and as repeated in line 1 of the verso, after which the self-identification of the sender as “his daughter”  $\tau\epsilon\varphi\text{-}\omega\upsilon\epsilon\rho\epsilon$  reveals that we are dealing with a nun's letter. The sole subject matter of the letter, reflecting the sender's emotional distress and sense of urgency, is the nun's inquiry after the health of another nun, her “sister” ( $\tau\alpha\text{-}$  or perhaps  $\tau\epsilon\kappa\omega\omega\kappa\epsilon$ , lines 2/3). The nun in question is apparently very sick or injured and is being taken care of at the superior's place (another monastery with which the nunnery is affiliated). The name of the sick nun is likewise not given, unless the word “sister” in line 3 is an apposition to the name which is then lost in the lacuna at the end of line 2. After the introductory greeting, the nun states the reason for her writing, namely that she heard about the “great sickness/injury” ( $\sigma\upsilon\gamma\nu\omicron\varsigma\ \bar{\nu}\omega\omega\kappa\epsilon$ , line 3) that had befallen her. The summary of her state or need of information in the first few lines is a bit sketchy because the last fourth of lines 1–5 is missing. She writes that she “had been suspecting for many days” (presumably, that something was wrong with her fellow nun? Did she not return from the other monastery in time?) but that she “could not find anybody to learn the ... (of) the matter” (presumably: about the sickness). “It is only today that I learned (about it) and I was deeply saddened ( $\lambda\iota\theta\lambda\iota\beta\epsilon$ )”. Thus line 6 concludes the introduction of the subject matter and the summary of the events leading up to the necessity of writing this letter.

The nun now implores her superior to send news of the sick nun's health ( $\pi\epsilon\sigma\omega\chi\alpha\iota$ , line 7) to her. She then asks whether she had recovered from illness and inquires after the “medicine for the wound that is upon her” ( $\pi\sigma\omega\omega\ \epsilon\tau\epsilon\pi\lambda\eta\kappa\eta\ \epsilon\tau\epsilon\zeta\iota\omega\varsigma$ ). She then repeats her wish that he send news of her health to her and stresses that she has been extremely worried. In the case that she recovers, she asks her superior to “raise her up and bring her, that she may receive the blessing of her sisters and that we may give her the blessing of the Virgin”.  $\bar{\mu}\tau\omicron\kappa$  (which basically means “to rest”) in line 8 most likely means “to recover” – the frequent euphemistic use of this verb with the meaning “to die” usually occurs with a reflexive pronoun that is absent here, in our case we would then expect  $\lambda\sigma\bar{\mu}\tau\omicron\kappa\ \bar{\nu}\mu\omicron\varsigma$ . “To receive blessing” ( $\chi\iota\ \sigma\mu\omicron\gamma$ ) can have the special meaning “to salute” (usually someone superior, which, granted, is not the case here). The scenario described here is then not one that the sender dreads but rather the one she hopes for: For the addressee to raise the nun from her bed in the infirmary and to escort her back to the nunnery where she will be happily reunited with her fellow nuns who have been so worried about her – she can then salute them (“take her sisters' blessing”) and they (“we”) can give the blessing of the Virgin to her – presumably a reference to the Virgin Mary. I believe this interpretation (i.e., that the nun's recovery rather than her death is expected) is further supported by the specific inquiry after the medicine that is applied to the nun's wound – a rather odd request, assuming the writer of the letter expects her to have died. She then closes with the addition that she also greets a certain “Tarsis, her

mother” (in the monastic context most likely meaning a female superior – perhaps of the sender’s and sick nun’s nunnery?) and gives the usual farewell: “Be safe in the Lord.” On the verso are written the addressee (interrupted by the *locus sigilli*) and the sender.

The colour of the papyrus is a light brown. The leaf is almost complete and preserves the entire text from beginning to end with the exception of a small piece of the top left corner and a bigger piece of the top right corner, both rectangular, being broken off and therefore producing lacunae in the beginning of lines 1 and 2 and the end (approx. the last fourth) of lines 1–5 respectively. The main text runs across the fibres and is written in a majuscule that is rather careful but at the same time not very skillful – the fact that the letters are strictly upright and exhibit no ligatures point to a low control of the script. S. Clackson has tentatively suggested that it may date to the 7th century or possibly even earlier<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, I would argue for a rather early date, possibly as early as the 4th century or at any rate not much younger, considering the strong palaeographical similarity of this strictly bilinear and almost ligature-free majuscule to many of the hands found in P.Kell. V. Certain linguistic features point to northern Upper Egypt, most likely Ashmunein, as the provenance of the letter, cf. most notably the discussion of lines 4, 6, 7, 8, and 1 of the Verso.

Recto ↑

[Ϸ]ἄθην μὲν ν̄ρωβ νιμ· †πρὸςκ[γνε μ̄παμε] [p̄]τ̄ ν̄είωτ̄ ἐπίτη αἰσώτμ̄ ̄.χ[ε ±7]  
 σ̄ωνε ω̄π̄ ο̄γνος̄ ν̄ω̄ωνε αἰ̄ [±7 ε]  
 π̄ίτη αἰ̄εσθ̄ανε εἰς̄ ϷϷ ε̄ροογ̄ ̄ε [±8]  
 5 ἀλλὰ μ̄πῑσ̄ν̄ Ϸ̄ωμε̄ ετ<ρ>ἄεἰμε̄ ἐπ[ca. 5–6]  
 φ{Ϸ}ωβ̄ ποογ̄ εματε̄ πε̄ ν̄ταεἰμε̄ αἰ̄θλιβ[ε]  
 τ̄ονογ̄ β̄ωεἰθ̄ῑ ο̄γν̄ τ̄νο[ο]γ̄ πεσογ̄χαἰ̄ ναἰ̄  
 ̄ε̄ ᾱσ̄η̄τον̄ ᾱγ̄ω̄ ν̄τ̄αμοἰ̄ π̄σ̄ω̄ω̄ ε̄τεπλη̄  
 κ̄η̄ ε̄τ̄ζῖω̄ς̄ μον̄ π̄ῑεἰ̄ μ̄π̄ρω̄σκ̄ ο̄γν̄ ε̄τ̄η̄  
 10 οογ̄ πεσογ̄χαἰ̄ ναἰ̄ ̄ε̄ ν̄εἰ̄σω̄ εἰ̄ω̄θη̄τ̄ ε̄βολ̄  
 ᾱγ̄ω̄ ε̄σ̄ω̄αν̄η̄τον̄ τ̄αλος̄ ν̄γ̄ν̄τ̄ς̄ ν̄ε̄σ̄χῑ̄ πε̄  
 σ̄μογ̄ ν̄νε̄σ̄σ̄νη̄γ̄ ᾱγ̄ω̄ τ̄εν̄τῖ̄ πε̄σ̄μογ̄ ν̄  
 τ̄παρ̄θεν̄ος̄ ε̄ρος̄ ᾱγ̄ω̄ τῖ̄ω̄ινε̄ ε̄τ̄ᾶρ̄σῑς̄ τε̄ς̄  
 μᾱᾱγ̄ ογ̄χαἰ̄ Ϸ̄μ̄ π̄χ̄οεἰ̄ς̄

1. μέν, προσκυνέω 2. ἐπειδὴ 3/4. ἐπειδὴ 4. αἰσθάνομαι, ε̄ροογ̄: *l.* ν̄ροογ̄ 5. ἀλλά, ε̄ταεἰμε̄: *l.* ε̄τραεἰμε̄ 6. φρωβ: *l.* φωβ, εματε: *l.* μ̄ματε, θλίβω 7. βωηθέω, οὖν, τ̄νο[ο]γ̄: *l.* τ̄ν̄νοογ̄ 8/9. ε̄τεπληκ̄η̄: *l.* ν̄τ̄πληκ̄η̄, πληγῆ 9. ζῖω̄ς̄: *l.* ζῖω̄ς̄, μον̄: *l.* μ̄μον, π̄ῑεἰ̄: *l.* μ̄π̄ῑεἰ̄, οὖν 9/10. τ̄νοογ̄: *l.* τ̄ν̄νοογ̄ 11. ν̄ε̄σ̄χῑ̄: *l.* ν̄ε̄σ̄χῑ̄ ο̄γ̄ ν̄ε̄σ̄χῑ̄ 13. παρθένος

Verso →

τᾱᾱς̄ ἐπαμερῖ̄[τ] *loc. sig.* ν̄είωτ̄ ζιτῆ̄ τ̄ε̄γ̄  
 ω̄ε̄ε̄ρε̄

1. ἐπαμερῖ̄[τ]: *l.* μ̄παμερῖ̄τ

1 See online catalogue, P.Heid. Inv. Kopt. 51.

## Recto

(1) First of all I reverently greet (my be(2)loved) father. Regarding: I have heard that (...) (3) sister has contracted a severe illness/injury. For I have (...) F(4)or I have been suspecting for many days that (...), (5) but I could not find anybody to learn the (...) (6) (of) the matter. It is only today that I learned. I was deeply saddened. (7) Help now, send (news of) her health to me (8) whether she has recovered and explain to me the medicine for the wou(9)nd that is upon her, for I could not come. Do not delay now to se(10)nd (news of) her health to me, for I have continued to worry. (11) And if she recovers, raise her up and bring her (back) that she may receive her (12) blessing of her sisters and that we may give the blessing of (13) the Virgin to her. And I greet Tarsis, her (14) mother. Be safe in the Lord!

## Verso

(1) Give it to my beloved father, from his (2) daughter.

**1** There appears to be no cross at the beginning. The lacuna at the end of the line allows for approx. 8 letters, therefore  $\pi\rho\sigma\kappa\upsilon\eta\epsilon$  is most likely the rendering of the verb that is to be reconstructed. The remaining space (up until line 2 picks up again after the lacunae) most certainly contains  $\bar{\eta}\pi\alpha\mu\epsilon\rho\bar{\iota}$ , the only question being where the line is broken.

**2** Assuming a correct separation of syllables, line 2 should begin  $\pi\bar{\iota}\tau$ . The missing part at the end of the line may conceal the name of the sick nun after whom the sender is inquiring. Greek  $\delta$  is rendered as  $\tau$  in  $\epsilon\pi\tau\eta$ , again in lines 3/4.

**4**  $\alpha\iota\sigma\theta\acute{\alpha}\nu\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$  means “to perceive, realize”, in this case perhaps with the nuance “to suspect”? The meaning would then be that the sender has “had a hunch” for a while that something was wrong with the other nun until word of her sickness reached her.  $\epsilon\zeta\omicron\omicron\gamma = \bar{\eta}\zeta\omicron\omicron\gamma$ ; the substitution of  $\bar{\eta}$  by  $\epsilon$  is a striking if not entirely consistent feature of this text and points to Ashmunein, as this feature is particularly prominent there, while it is very uncommon at Thebes<sup>2</sup>. Other instances are found in lines 6, 8 and 1 of the Verso.

**5**  $\epsilon\tau\langle\rho\rangle\acute{\alpha}\epsilon\bar{\iota}\mu\epsilon$ : The omission of Rho in the Inflected Infinitive is a feature that appears in documentary texts all the way from the Fayyum to southern Upper Egypt. A large part of the attestations stems from Kahle’s area C (Oxyrhynchos to Bawit) and includes examples from collection (B) of the Rylands papyri<sup>3</sup>, called the “Ashmunain Collection” because Crum believes the Hermopolite region to be the provenance of the vast majority of them<sup>4</sup>.

**6** Dittography:  $\zeta\omicron\upsilon\beta$  is spelled out including the Hori, even though it is already present in the preceding Phi ( $\pi+\varrho$ ).  $\epsilon\mu\alpha\tau\epsilon$  for  $\mu\mu\alpha\tau\epsilon$ , cf. lines 4, 8, and 1 of the Verso.

**7**  $\tau\eta\sigma\bar{o}\gamma$  “to send” is spelled with only one  $\eta$ , a common deviation from standard Sahidic that is once more typical of documentary texts from northern Upper Egypt, including Ashmunein, while being uncommon at Thebes<sup>5</sup>.

2 P.Bal. I, p. 113ff.

3 Ibid., 169f.

4 P.Ryl.Copt., p. viif.

5 P.Bal. I, p. 111f.

8 There is a supralinear dot above the final vowel in  $\alpha\gamma\acute{\omega}$ . None of the other instances of the word bear this feature.  $\pi\acute{\sigma}\omega\omega$  literally means “the pouring, melting, mixing”, but since it is “the pouring of the wound”, I believe it must here carry the medical meaning “flüssiges Heilmittel”<sup>6</sup> that is thusfar only attested for the reduplicated  $\sigma\omega\sigma(\epsilon)\omega$ , namely  $\omega\gamma\sigma\omega\sigma\epsilon\omega$   $\epsilon\pi\beta\alpha\lambda$ , an “instillation pour l’œil” that is mentioned in a medical papyrus from the 9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>7</sup>. We cannot be sure, however, that our  $\sigma\omega\omega$  necessarily refers to medicine for the eye as well, as the  $\pi\lambda\eta|κ\eta$ , i.e.  $\pi\lambda\eta\eta\eta$ , that is merely said to be “upon her” is a very general term for “wound”<sup>8</sup> and injuries or illnesses of the eye were certainly not the only maladies that required the application – the “pouring” – of liquid medicine. For  $\epsilon\tau\epsilon\pi\lambda\eta|κ\eta$  instead of  $\bar{\eta}\tau\epsilon\pi\lambda\eta|κ\eta$  cf. lines 4, 6, and 1 of the Verso.

9 Other deviations from standardised Sahidic are  $\xi\acute{\omega}\omega\sigma$  for  $\xi\acute{\omega}\omega\sigma\sigma$ <sup>9</sup> and  $\mu\omega\eta$  instead of  $\bar{\mu}\omega\eta$ <sup>10</sup>, the latter again being very uncommon for Thebes. The first person singular negative First Perfect, which has its standard Sahidic form in line 5, appears here without the initial  $\mu\upsilon$ . This phenomenon is well attested from the Fayyum to northern Upper Egypt, while it is, again, rare at Thebes<sup>11</sup>. As for  $\tau\eta|oo\sigma$ , cf. line 7.

10 I believe  $\omega\theta\eta\tau$   $\epsilon\beta\omega\lambda$  ( $\omega\tau$ -  $\xi\eta\tau$   $\epsilon\beta\omega\lambda$ ) must be a thusfar unattested idiomatic expression: “to cut the heart out”, which, judging from the context, should mean something like “to be very worried/aggrieved”.

11 The Conjunctive third person singular feminine is spelled  $\bar{\eta}\epsilon\sigma\chi\bar{\iota}$  instead of standard Sahidic  $\bar{\eta}\sigma\chi\bar{\iota}$  or  $\bar{\eta}\sigma\chi\bar{\iota}$ .

13 The first person singular First Present is here spelled  $\tau\bar{\iota}$ , just like the homomorphous verb “to give” in the preceding line, while it has its usual form  $\tau$  in line 1. The final Ypsilon in  $\tau\epsilon\sigma\mu\alpha\alpha\gamma$  bears the same strange supralinear dot as  $\alpha\gamma\acute{\omega}$  in line 8. The name  $\tau\alpha\rho\sigma\bar{\iota}\epsilon$  is thusfar unknown from the Coptic documentary evidence, but perhaps we may compare the similar  $\tau\alpha\rho\sigma\acute{\epsilon}$  in P.Lond V 1735, 20 from the 6th c.

#### Verso

1  $\epsilon\pi\alpha\mu\epsilon\rho\bar{\iota}[\tau]$ : Again,  $\bar{\eta}/\bar{\mu}$  is replaced by  $\epsilon$ , see lines 4, 6, and 8 of the Recto.

6 Walter Till, *Die Arzneikunde der Kopten*. Berlin 1951, 10.

7 Émile Chassinat, *Un papyrus médical copte*. Cairo 1921, 189.

8 Walter Till, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

9 P.Bal. I, p. p. 91.

10 *Ibid.*, 100f.

11 *Ibid.*, 159.

