

14. Letter from Zacchaeus' Son to Philippos

Antonia St Demiana (Sydney)

[P.Heid. Inv. G. 141 verso](#)
7th–8th century

30,5 x 7,0 cm

provenance unknown
plate XVIII

This Coptic administrative letter is written on the verso of a Greek documentary text containing a list of names pertaining to the expenditure of an estate. It was published by Bilabel as P.Bad. IV 97 in 1924. The date given for the Greek text is the Arab period, but on palaeographical grounds, one might consider narrowing it down to the 7th century. This would mean that the Coptic verso is to be dated to around, or slightly after, this time.

The papyrus appears to have been cut arbitrarily with a sharp instrument for the purpose of reusing it. Apart from a few lacunae, the text of the Coptic letter is complete. It is written along the fibres in standard Sahidic.

At the beginning of the letter, the script resembles a book hand of the sixth to eighth centuries, which soon becomes more cursive as the text progresses. A standard system of supralineation is used, and both, single-letter and connective supralineation are employed. Diaeresis is used over iota in lines 1, 2, 4, and 6.

Two instances of punctuation consisting of a colon (:) may be noted: one marking the end of a sentence in l. 4; the other designating the end of the letter before the final salutation in l. 6.

The provenance of both recto and verso is unknown and cannot be identified from any features in the text. No toponyms or dates are included, and no certain attestations of the very same son of *ζαχαριος*, the sender of this letter, or of its addressee *φιλιππος* could be found in other documents.

The purpose of this letter was twofold: 1) to confirm the release / return of a certain woman and, 2) to order the transportation of particular goods by camels, this time loading them in both directions which, as stated in the letter, had not previously been the case.

The woman mentioned might have been a female worker or employee. Another possible explanation may be inferred from a number of Greek administrative letters from the seventh and eighth centuries ordering the release of wives, which had been held in custody.¹ P.Oxy. XVI 1835 and P.Horak 66 are two such examples. P.Oxy. XVI 1835 is from the late fifth or early sixth century: “As we urged your lordship not to release the wives of the village headmen until we wrote to your magnificence, we urge our master to release the wife of Menas the headman, the wife of Dionysius the comogrammateus, the wife of Enoch the headman, the wife of Pkoliios the chief (?) guard of the fields, the wife of Phoebammon the comarch, the wife of Pamouthius the other comarch, and the wife of Enoch the comarch, making seven women in all. We urge our master that these be released, and we will bring the said persons to you, whenever ordered to prison...”.

1 Thanks is due to Lajos Berkes for pointing out these Greek texts to me.

P.Horak 66 is a list which begins with a series of six women, all from the same site in the Arsinoite it seems, and all imprisoned for the same reason: they serve as hostages for their husbands. The editors of P.Horak 66 state that the women were imprisoned as a warranty (hostage, pledge, guarantee, or condition) for something that their husbands were required to do, or had not yet done; for example, the payment of taxes, personal loans, etc. There is a narrow possibility that the circumstances of the woman in the text here were similar.

If so, then the demand to send the twelve date trees or loads of dates and their leaves immediately following the announcement of the woman's release might be considered the condition agreed upon for doing so. However, a certain Anthenase is mentioned in line three to have brought the money – a statement, which seems more likely to precondition the sending of goods.

On the other hand, Anthenase's action might introduce a new business transaction. He might not have brought the money for the dates, but taking it, he leaves stones in exchange. These stones have now become so numerous at the site of the sender that he was unable to send them. He, therefore, proposes to send them via a transport animal, which he expects to come down to him, bringing the dates from Philippos. Instead of sending the camels back empty, as is usually the case, he seems to intend to load them with stones.

→ + πωε ν̄ζαχαῖος πετςζαῖ ν̄φιλιππος χε <ε>πιδη ακπαρακαλει μ̄-
μοῖ δ̄ικα τςζιμε νακ εβολ τ̄ενογ τ̄ν̄νοογ τ̄ν̄ντςνοογςε ν̄-
βεενε εζητ̄ αγω νεγπακ̄ μ̄μον <α>ανθεναςε q̄ι νογq̄ ακκα
νωνε νεγαωε μ̄πενχοογςε ογ̄ν̄ μαρεογναρβ̄ εῖ επκαρ: αγω
5 ωαρ̄εν̄σ̄αμογ̄λ̄ βοκ εβολ εγωογ̄ειτ̄ ωαγεῖ ερης̄ ν̄ςεστρεφε
μ̄μογ: ογ̄ζαῖ ζ̄μ̄ π̄χοεις +

1 ἐπειδή, παρακαλέω 4 οὖν 5 στρέφω

Translation

It is the son of Zacchaeus who writes to Philippos. Since you have asked me, I have released the woman for you. Now, send the twelve date measures (?) north and their leaves (?). Verily, Anthenase has brought (the) money. He left the stones. They were becoming many, so we have not sent them. May a transport animal come down. The camels usually go off empty. They always come south and just turn around. Be well in the Lord!

2 If we consider that δ̄ικα τςζιμε νακ εβολ is a reference to a female worker or employee, it may also be translated as, “I have forgiven the woman for your sake” or, “I have let the woman go for your sake”.

2–3 The word following the number τ̄ν̄ντςνοογςε “twelve” ought to be feminine. The reading however is slightly obscured. The information in the catalogue of the Papyrus collection at Heidelberg² mentions βοcνε, suggesting a type or breed of camel, a word

hitherto seemingly still unattested. Reading βε̄νε̄ instead and assuming a form either of the female swallow βη̄νε̄ (nn. m./f., Crum, dict. 40a.), of βη̄νε̄ “a part of a cart” (nn. f., Crum, dict. 40a.), or, perhaps more likely, of βη̄νε̄ the date tree (nn. f., Crum, dict. 40a.), might prove more rewarding. It might even be worth considering, whether the word βη̄σε̄, a bucket used for holding dates (nn. f., Crum, dict. 44b), and the word for dates βη̄νε̄ have been fused here.

πακ̄ is most likely to be understood as a form of ποκ̄ (thin sheet, nn m., Crum, dict. 261a), which might be a fleece or a piece of fine linen. With respect to reading “twelve date trees” or “twelve buckets of dates” one might consider that not only the fruit is to be sent, but the thin leaves of the date trees as well.

3 With respect to the perfect tense used at the end of the line, most likely read <α>ἀνε̄νασε̄ γινο̄υγ̄ “Anthenase has brought gold” (i.e. the money).

4 After the word νε̄νε̄ there seems to be a trace of ink visible before the next epsilon. It might be worth considering to read η̄ε̄γᾱσε̄, assuming ᾱσε̄ to be a form of the verb ᾱσᾱι “become many” (Crum, dict. 22b). Alternatively, one might consider ᾱσε̄ to be a form of either of the nouns ᾱσᾱι or ᾱση̄ “multitude” (nn. m./f., Crum, dict. 22b) and take η̄ε̄γ- to be the possessive plural article, “their multitudes”, which would provide the preceding object not yet been sent, i.e. “He left the stones. Their multitudes though, we have not send them.”

Fragment of ancient Greek papyrus with handwritten text in black ink. The text is arranged in several lines, though some characters are obscured by damage or fading. The script appears to be a cursive form of ancient Greek.

Nr. 14 Verso

Fragment of ancient Greek papyrus with handwritten text in black ink. The text is arranged in several lines, though some characters are obscured by damage or fading. The script appears to be a cursive form of ancient Greek.

Nr. 15 Recto

Fragment of ancient Greek papyrus with handwritten text in black ink. The text is arranged in several lines, though some characters are obscured by damage or fading. The script appears to be a cursive form of ancient Greek.

Nr. 15 Verso