Epigraphic Habits and Writing Conventions in Late Antique Egypt*

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1. Introduction

In the 8th century there were no longer many Greeks in the glorious Antinoupolis, the "city of fine living" (*euktiton*) – in the verses of the notary and poet Dioscoros of Aphrodito, who borrowed an epithet from Homer[1] – and the seat of the *dux Thebaidos*. By then, the great public buildings of the previous centuries had been reduced to quarries from which building materials were extracted, to be re-used in other constructions, and the great martyrium of St. Colluthus, one of the most important centers of Christian life in the city, had already entered into an irreversible decline.[2] By this time, moreover, much of the Coptic community had moved further to the south, on a plain where another walled city, Ansina, had sprung up; and there life continued even after the arrival of Saladin, in the 12th century.[3]

Yet, in the great necropolis that was north of the wall erected by Diocletian, funerary Greek inscriptions were still written and displayed, continuing a centuries-old practice capable of transcending any human turnover of power. The most recently discovered one dates from a year between 744 and 753, when the Abbasids

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[1] P.Aphrod. Lit. IV 14, 34.

[2] See Grossmann 2014.

[3] The story of Ansina is still largely unknown, and its remains have not been yet properly explored, except for a recent survey by Alison Gascoigne, still unpublished (see Pintaudi 2017a, 524); the most relevant evidence known so far is collected in Grossmann 1969.

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were about to replace the Umayyads in Fustat (Fig. 98).[4] Unfortunately, as the entire upper half of the text is missing, much information is lost: we do not have any details about the identity of the deceased, not even his or her name. This individual's passing away was metaphorically indicated with the passive aorist ἐκοιμήθη, "(he/she) fell asleep", according to a typical formula that had been used in the city's inscriptions for at least three centuries;[5] after this, we find a prayer, employed as a sort of strengthening clause (ὁ Θ(εὸ)ς ἀνάπαυσον, "God, give him/her rest").[6] The juxtaposition of the two syntagms, which were not usually employed together in the standardized formulary of Antinoupolis funerary inscriptions, in itself reflects a greater attention to the role of the text, a need to provide a more articulate and complex message; all this would be clearer if we had the first lines of the text, where a reference to purification or atonement of sins (πτ̣αισμάτων) also occurs, in terms that are not paralleled by standard formulas.

The physical features of the inscription are as interesting as the text itself. Even at first glance, one gets the impression to face a sort of "epigraphic *pot-pourri*", where contrasting elements interact. The epitaph is inscribed on a well-cut slab of Proconnesian marble (probably re-used from a previous building), a material which had been employed only for a small number of funerary inscriptions in the previous centuries, because of its value. In accordance with the chosen material, the stonecutter strove to give the layout a "monumental" texture: the letters are geometrically arranged on the available space, avoiding any unevenness, even though the interlinear spaces are never the same; the main part of the text, with the invocation of God's *pietas* on the dead, is separated by the closing formula through a frame which develops from a Greek cross with ornate ends; finally, beneath it, in order to fill a large *agraphon*, another, more elaborate cross was added, with the motif of the so-called knot of Solomon, a Coptic version of a magic symbol attested in funerary inscriptions[7] as well as other types of texts, from *ostraka* to codices.[8] The script, however, makes a different impression, and deserves some further reflection. The text was engraved by a hand that does not seem too confident about working with a marble surface, in a far from accurate version of the upright ogival majuscule;[9] some of the letters

[4] I. inv. Ant. gr. 331. Full text in the Appendix, below; see also Del Corso 2019, 239-240.

[5] See Tudor 2011, 164-165 and 264-265; Del Corso 2019, 251-252.

[6] This is a typical prayer formula found in funerary inscriptions from Antinoupolis: see Tudor 2011, 258-259.

[7] See e.g. the funerary stele for the priest Severos, from the Kalabasha region, now in the Bankes collection. The text, assigned to the 7th-9th century, is published in van der Vliet and Worp 2015, 34-38 no. 3; see also Delattre *et al.* 2016, 388-389 no. 28 (with further comparisons).

[8] Horak 1995, esp. 45, with a list of relevant material.

[9] On the intrinsic limits of the comparisons between "book scripts" and scripts used for publicly displayed texts in Late Antiquity, see Orsini 2012, esp. 630-631 (with further bibliography).

are written in different forms (e.g. *alpha* sometimes consists of three strokes, in a wedge shape, sometimes of two, with the first and the second traits joined in the same curve); moreover, we find some abbreviations by suspension, which are typical of parchment and papyrus scripts.[10]

This juxtaposition of elements allows us to regard the Antinoupolis inscription not just as one of the many signs of the "collapse" of a previously widespread epigraphic culture – which in any case did occur, as is clear from the many orthographic mistakes and paleographic irregularities. Indeed, this epitaph can be regarded as the consequence of a process of ethnic and cultural resistance, to put it boldly, which found concrete expression at the level of writing practices, in an effort to keep the centuries-old tradition of the funerary epitaph alive. Such an attitude is all the more striking considering that, in the same period, epigraphic culture had undergone a radical evolution, which extended to the ways in which the dead were commemorated. In Constantinople, from the 7th century stone or marble epitaphs became the prerogative of a few elite families: the latest text that can be referred to a "middle-class" individual is the funerary inscription of a soldier from Heraclius' army, dated 710;[11] one century later, the anonymous author of the *Parastaseis syntomoi chronikai*, a sort of topographic guide to the New Rome, had some difficulties trying to read surviving inscriptions that had been quite legible for his predecessors, such as Socrates of Constantinople and Hesychius of Miletus.[12]

The "epigraphic resistance" of Antinoupolis is not an isolated case in Egypt. Further south up down the Nile, in Latopolis (Esna), a substantial production of marble and limestone funerary stelae is attested, which continues throughout the 7th century.[13] The latest explicitly dated Greek funerary inscription, discovered so far, come from this city: the epitaph for Pitronia, which was inscribed on a limestone slab on April 30th, 890.[14] This second text is as complex as the first. Against a multicultural background, made clear by the simultaneous reference to the Era of the Martyrs and the Hegira year, the usual formulaic patterns are combined with quotations from the Old and New Testament. In the last lines (ll. 12-13), the expression παράδεισος τῆς τρυφῆς – which would have suggested more mundane pleasures to a Greek citi-

[10] On the so-called "upright ogival majuscule" see Crisci 1985 and, more recently, Cavallo 2008, 111, and 2009, 132-133. Ogival scripts are quite common in "Byzantine" inscriptions: see Mango 1991, 242-245 and Orsini 2012, 630-631; on the palaeographic relationship between ink-written and "exposed" ogival scripts, with a focus on the early Byzantine period, see Orsini 2015.

[11] Mango 2015, 34. For the text of the inscription see Zuckerman 1998.

[12] Mango 1991, 240-241; but see Rhoby 2017, 269 (decline is not the same as disappearance).

[13] See below, 329.

[14] Egyptian Museum inv. 9243; Milne 1905, no. 75; *I.Chr. Egypte* 541; Sauneron and Coquin 1980, no. 29, with commentary. On the date range for Christian funerary inscriptions in Egypt, see also Tudor 2011, 137-142.

zen living a few centuries earlier – is a reference to the Paradise lost by Adam in *Gen.* 3.23; and a few words before, the wish to find rest ἐν κόλπῳ Ἀβραὰμ καὶ Ἰσαὰκ καὶ Ἰακώβ, "in the womb of Adam, and Isaac, and Jacob" is a clear echo of Luke 16:22 (the miracle of Lazarus). We do not have a photographic reproduction of the stele: it was carried to the storerooms of the Egyptian Museum at the end of the 19th century, after Albrecht snatched it from the hands of some *fellahin* who were going to turn it into lime;[15] since then, it has been impossible for scholars to inspect it. Nevertheless, the description and the *facsimile* drawn by Seymour de Ricci[16] point to a roughly engraved text, with small, uneven letters (6–11 mm in height), some squared, some more rounded, but all arranged on the writing space in a geometrical and orderly fashion, with the addition of crosses and filling elements in the *agraphon* at the end. As for the Antinoupolis epitaph, the layout is designed to enhance the visual impact of the script, which in any case no longer displays the degree of formal elaboration and geometrical accuracy characteristic of "exposed writings"[17] from the previous centuries.

If considered in terms of their materiality as written objects, the two inscriptions acquire an emblematic value that goes beyond the information we can infer from them, however important this may be. Behind the stonecutters' uncertain strokes, and their orthographic mistakes, we may see the endpoint of a process that, in certain respects, brings Egypt close to other regions of the *pars Orientis*,[18] while at the same time reflecting specificities that deserve to be examined.[19] However, in order to do so, it is necessary to examine – without any claim to exhaustiveness – some characteristic patterns in the production of Greek inscriptions in Egypt, as they emerge from the Severan reforms onwards, both in the public and in the private sphere, from the point of view of the relationship between text, script, and layout. In order to make their interweaving clearer, let us go back a few centuries, and shift our attention from funeral monuments to official celebrations.

2. Scripts and Layout in Public Inscriptions

Within a few decades, the Romans' arrival in Egypt sparked the development of new graphic conventions, in the frame of a general evolution of the epigraphic habits. For "exposed writings" of public interest, this entailed the diffusion of a model of

[15] Sauneron and Coquin 1980, 251.

[16] de Ricci 1902, 146.

[17] The expression "exposed writings" alludes to the Italian category of "scritture esposte", introduced by Armando Petrucci (see e.g. Petrucci 1985, esp. 88 for a short definition); for its application to Greek and especially Roman epigraphy see Susini 1989.

[18] See the theoretical framework sketched out by Tantillo 2017.

[19] The problems related to the specificity of Greek epigraphy in Egypt are brilliantly outlined in Bingen 1989 (later translated into English as Bingen 2007), mostly focusing on earlier periods, but with some suggestions which are valid also for Late Antiquity.

epigraphic communication largely based on the use of a "grammar of legibility" – to borrow an expression coined by Malcom Parkes for a completely different category of written items, and a different period.[20] This model was designed to emphasize specific parts of the text, without abandoning the canons of geometry and regularity typical of Ptolemaic public inscriptions, through the adoption of specific layout arrangements and signs.[21] To this general phenomenon another one was added: the increase in "civic" epigraphic production, as a consequence of the spread of "Greek" forms of civic life from the 2nd century, culminating in the general introduction of city councils under Septimius Severus.[22]

The need for self-representation felt by the new, strongly local bouleutic class, the multiplication of gloriously epichoric agons and ephebic games, besides the obvious wish of the new *poleis* to show their complete adhesion to Roman imperial ideology, encouraged the display of marble or stone inscriptions. These were all quite similar in terms of phraseology and layout – which were designed to serve the same communicative needs – but different in terms of their scripts and lettering: each city would appear to have adopted its own epigraphic style (an "official style", we might say), recognizable thanks to specific paleographic features, which sometimes are so characteristic as to become a sort of local tag.

Some examples may help to clarify this point. The fine ephebic list from Leontopolis, written in 220,[23] was accurately engraved using a peculiar script, a sort of Greek version of the so-called Latin rustic capital of Severan age (as it is clear, e.g., from the marked apices added to the letters in the first lines).[24] In the same period, the extant official dedications from Koptos – whose layout is structured so as to draw

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[20] Parkes 1992, 23.

[21] Del Corso 2017, 49-54. For a more detailed study of the palaeography and layout of Ptolemaic inscriptions see Crowther 2020.

[22] On such a crucial moment in the history of Roman Egypt, with its cultural implications, besides the seminal study by Bowman 1971 see esp. the further reflections by Bowman and Rathbone 1992 and Bowman 2008 (though limited to the case study of Oxyrhynchus); on the impact of the Severan reforms on the production of texts see, more recently, Graham Clayton 2018 (focused on the production of everyday documents).

[23] First published by Tod 1951, but assigned to Leontopolis by Jeanne and Louis Robert (*BE* 1952, 180 pp. 194-196) and *SEG* XL 1568.

[24] On epigraphic rustic capital in Latin inscriptions see J.M. Reynolds and J.B. Ward Perkins in *IRT*, p. 6, and Del Corso 2010a, 208-209; for a more general discussion of the characteristics of this script, taking account of both epigraphic and papyrological evidence, see Fioretti 2014. The Greek equivalent of the script is well attested in Egypt: see e.g. the dedication of a statue of a gymnasiarch in Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum, inv. M 59, published in *I.Alexandrie imp.* 31 (*I.Breccia* 148). The date of the latter, however, is problematic: Evaristo Breccia dated it to the 2nd-3rd c., without justifying this choice (*I.Breccia*, p. 87); François Kayser instead assigns the text to the 1st-2nd c., based on the use of a peculiar title: the addressee is called ἀρχιπρεσβευτής, "chief of the embassy" (sent to Rome), and Alexandrian embassies to the emperor are attested especially in the first two centuries of our era (*I.Alexandrie imp.*, p. 132). The palaeography, in any case, points to a later date, such as the one proposed by Breccia, and it is noteworthy that

the reader's eye to the most important names and information – were written in a lighter ogival script, less decorated and more widely spaced.[25] Indeed, it is in Antinoupolis that we may follow the phenomenon across a broader chronological span. Here the surviving public inscriptions – a small minority compared to the previous epigraphic glory – are engraved in two characteristic epigraphic styles: the first is essentially a "monumental" version of a script especially attested in Greek papyri, the rounded majuscule;[26] the other, even more interestingly, is characterized by strongly angular letters and is very close to a script, first described by Margherita Guarducci, typical of some Hadrianic inscriptions from Athens and other cities in mainland Greece.[27] This "angular majuscule" is used in many ephebic lists, and in dedications (such as the famous base for the philosopher Flavius Mecius Severus Dionysodoros, now in the British Museum).[28]

In the following centuries, especially from the Tetrarchic period onwards, we witness an abrupt turnaround. In public epigraphy there is no longer the need to arrange the information in a hierarchical order, so as to help the reader to understand the text following its segmentation; therefore, we find a gradual reduction in the use of signs and other graphic devices aimed at dividing the main parts of the text, which becomes a compact block again, where the letters are carved according to geometrical rules, not their meaning. As in other periods, the epigraphic space serves as a surface where the writing is envisaged first of all as a meaningful decoration.

Signs of such an evolution can be detected in epigraphs from different parts of Egypt. In Antinoupolis the base erected in 385-387 for Flavius Ulpius Erythrios, governor of the Thebaid (Fig. 100),[29] is inscribed with a tortuous metrical panegyric, whose layout makes it difficult even to just distinguish the hexameters from the pentameters, without a careful reading, as line-ends do not coincide with verse-ends. Indeed, the difference compared to the past is even clearer in places where texts from

Kayser himself assigns to the Severan age other inscriptions written in the same script, such as a dedication to Serapis (*I.Alexandrie imp.* 52) and a fragment mentioning the fleet in Alexandria (*I.Alexandrie imp.* 116).

[25] See e.g. the dedication in the Cairo Museum, inv. 9248, republished in *I.Portes du désert*, Koptos 86.

[26] On this script see in general Cavallo 2008, 95-98; some remarks on its epigraphic use in Del Corso 2010b, 14, and 2015, 5-7.

[27] Guarducci 1967, 378-379 (where it is called "a lettere angolari"); Del Corso 2019, 246 (evidence from Antinoupolis). Though considered by Guarducci typical of Athens, as remarked above, the script is well attested outside Attica: good parallels are offered by 2nd- and 3rd-century inscriptions from Thessaloniki and other centres in Macedonia (see e.g. the inscription in the Museum of Beroia, inv. Λ 234, dated June 229, published in *I.Beroia* 68, with a plate; incidentally, at l. 16, the enlarged and rounded *epsilon* in ἔτους, very different from the angular forms of the letter used in the previous lines, is clearly influenced by the cursive script in the papyrus draft used for the inscriptions, as well as the salutation formula at the very end, whose palaeographic appearance is completely different from previous lines).

[28] British Museum, inv. 1648; *I.Portes du désert*, Antinoupolis 14.

[29] Cairo Museum, JdÉ 29876 (= inv. 9290); *I.Portes du désert*, Antinoupolis 20 (*I.Egypte métriques* 123).

different periods are displayed together. In the sanctuary at Philae, where we have a stratification of inscriptions in different languages extending for almost a millennium, the epigram dedicated by Catilius to Augustus (Fig. 99),[30] on the southern pylon, stands out not only for its script – a remarkable epigraphic transposition of the papyrus script called "*epsilon-theta* style"[31] – but also for its layout, which was designed so well as to place the name of the dedicatee in a special position, close to that of the emperor himself. On the contrary, such devices are completely missing in later texts. The great dedicatory inscription to Diocletian and Costantius I on a base at the entrance of the sanctuary already shows all the characteristics of the new epigraphic language of power, designed to emphasize an abstract geometrical disposition of the letters and lacking any cues that might help the reader to understand the information provided.[32]

Later on, such a trend becomes more pronounced. In the long series of inscriptions that commemorate the restoration of sections of the *teichos* encircling the island, in the 5th century, all textual subdivisions disappear. Only extraordinary information is distinguished from the main text: for example, in the inscription that recalls the restoration sponsored by the abbot Daniel between 449 and 468, after the indication of the year of indiction we find the reference to one Satyros, who took care of the engraving of the text.[33] In some cases, the geometry of the forms seems designed to inspire a sort of reverential admiration. The inscription that commemorates the "recovery" and final Christianization of the temple, with its dedication to Saint Stephen, around 537 (Fig. 101),[34] was carefully carved using a monumental script based on the unimodular variant of the Alexandrian majuscule,[35] with a *stoichedon*-like disposition of the letters; only slight fluctuations in letter size prevent the full achievement of this effect, revealing the artificial nature of the operation. Other inscriptions, which recall the event on the perimeter walls of the cella, are set up in a similar way, though their script is less decorated and only generically rounded.[36]

Diacritical signs similar to those employed in books are not completely lacking. In the dedication to Theodorus, *dux* and *Augustalis* in Thebaid, dated to 577, diaereses are found on vowels at the beginning of words, while in the last line *dicola* too

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[30] *I.Philae* 142.

[31] Cavallo 2008, 78; Del Corso 2006-2008, 245-247; some epigraphic attestations of this script are discussed in Del Corso 2010b, 3-5.

[32] British Museum, Dept. no. 1359; *I.Philae* 185.

[33] *I.Philae* 194 (facsimile at pl. 103).

[34] *I.Philae* 202.

[35] On such a script, which is not so well attested in inscriptions, see Cavallo 2008, 101, and 2009, 129-131.

[36] See e.g. *I.Philae* 204 (pl. 51).

are employed to mark the final clause;[37] but these are tiny signs within dense and irregular lines, and can be seen only by a careful and proficient reader, who knows how to follow the order of the text. In other, rarer cases the signs used serve a merely decorative function and are quite unrelated to the contents of the inscription. In a later text engraved for the restoration of another section of the *teichos*, the stonecutter rather systematically employs a typically Latin sign, the *hedera* (according to the facsimile by Seymour de Ricci, which is nonetheless indicative of the general appearance of the epigraph).[38] Such *hederae*, though, are not intended as word dividers, as is usually the case in "Classical" epigraphy, but rather serve as elaborate abbreviation marks; thus, they represent more of an obstacle than an aid to the understanding of the text.

The loss of attention towards the legibility of inscriptions is clearly a general trend in the Greek East, at least from the age of Diocletian. Indeed, in Egypt the break with previous conventions seems even sharper, at least judging from the surviving evidence. In Ephesus, as in other nearby *poleis*, many public dedications, engraved in the 4th or 5th century, still retain the layout typical of previous centuries. To provide just one example, in the encomium carved on the statue base for Andreas, probably governor of Asia between the late 4th and the 5th century (Fig. 102), *tricola* are used to help even a casual bystander to grasp salient aspects of the composition, and to enjoy even the bold similarities between the addressee and figures such as Minos, Lycurgus, and Solon.[39]

In short, in Egypt we witness the polarization of a phenomenon affecting the whole East: the selection of the recipients of the epigraphic messages. The scripts and layout arrangements employed in the first centuries of the empire are the product of a codification process stemming from a double necessity: to corroborate the authority of written documents and, at the same time, to communicate the relevant information both to the minority of literates who could understand all the elements of a text, and to the much wider group of individuals who were only partially educated, and who needed some help to understand at least some crucial points (a date, or a name). In Late Antiquity the authorities no longer felt the need to make an effort to convey part of the content of texts on public display: indeed, inscriptions became less and less formulaic, and more rhetorically involuted, so much so that they could only be understood by a "specialized" audience; as far as all other people were concerned, the only important message to transmit was a self-celebratory show of power. Consensus-building processes did not involve the public display of texts, the making of writings to be "exposed" with a coherent layout.

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[37] *I.Philae* 216 (facsimile at pl. 106).

[38] *I.Philae* 225 (facsimile at pl. 104).

[39] *I.Ephesos* 1301.

From a paleographic point of view, the evolution just described goes hand in hand with (and is expressed by) the disappearance of the particularism of local epigraphic styles and, more generally, of any graphic model. Epigraphic scripts become structurally dishomogeneous: stonecutters often juxtapose letters with basic forms – sometimes square, sometimes ogival – with no particular aesthetic pretensions; but in other cases they create highly idiosyncratic writings, which may originate from a patchwork of letter-forms taken from contemporary ink-written scripts on papyrus or parchment.

3. Some Evolutions of Funerary Epigraphy

An evolution of the communicative function of written displays can be seen also in the private sphere, as it seems clear even through a superficial survey of the largest category of extant inscriptions, namely funerary epitaphs.

Written words, and sometimes even books, always played a significant role in the complex economy of Graeco-Egyptian funerary practices. Yet, it is only from the Imperial period onwards that we find a relevant number of stone or marble stelae with painted or carved epitaphs, which represents the "classic" way of commemorating the dead for the Greeks and Romans.[40] In the private dimension of such texts the typical particularism of public epigraphy can be perceived even earlier, and in radical ways. A few concrete examples, quite familiar to anyone interested in texts of this sort, will help provide a better understanding of the characteristics of this phenomenon.

On the Rosetta branch of the Nile, around 70 kilometers north-west of Cairo, there lay the town of Terenouthis (present-day el Tarrana). Its necropolis (kom Abu Bellou), though pillaged by *sebbakhin* for many decades, has yielded the largest number of funerary stelae in all of Lower Egypt: around 400 limestone stelae, almost all inscribed, and arranged according to such peculiar conventions that their provenance can be easily understood even when the excavation records are no longer available.[41] At the current state of our knowledge, their dates are elusive: we can only say that the necropolis was quite well frequented in the 4th century, as many coins found there can be assigned to the period between the reign of Claudius Gothicus and that of Constantine II, though some tombs must certainly date from the beginning of the Roman age.[42]

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[40] Firon 2020 (on the cultural relevance of epigraphic practices see esp. 145-156 and 205-216), with further bibliography.

[41] See the survey by Vitali 1984 (though the estimates concerning the number of surviving stelae, and the proportions between uninscribed and inscribed stelae, are no longer reliable, due to the publication of new findings); general reflections on the necropolis and the stelae, together with the editions of new texts and further bibliography, can be found in El-Nassery *et al.*1978, 231-235; Cribiore 1997; Bagnall *et al.* 2019-2020 (esp. 28-32).

[42] Vitali 1984, 256; Cribiore 1997, 6-8; King 2018, 110-112.

The most characteristic stelae from Terenouthis show an interaction between a text and a figurative scene: in the extant *corpus* (considering also the most recent discoveries), only around sixty items have images without any inscriptions, while sixteen provide only a text, without an image. The figurative reliefs are designed to express the mourning through fixed schemes, and without any physiognomic portrait of the deceased: thus, we may find female or male figures, standing with raised hands or recumbent on a triclinium, alone or with other companions, as in the micro-Asiatic *Totenmalreliefe*; small columns, arches, shelves with some objects, or a dog – a lonely personification of Anubis – may add some depth to the scene.[43]

In such cases, the text serves first of all to complement the representation. Therefore, it is arranged in the available space according to the figurative economy of the scene: words are added in the lower part, set within a specific space[44] or encircled by a frame;[45] in other cases the text is inscribed laterally, within a sort of "stele in the stele" displayed by the deceased in a "meta-epigraphic" gesture that might seem bitterly ironic to today's viewers.[46] In any case, the epitaph was always added by the stonecutter at a second stage, using a script that had been in use for centuries. When required to engrave a text that was not limited to only a name and a greeting, the stonecutter would be given a draft first, which sometimes he could even misinterpret. For example, in the stele of Zenarion, son of Zenon (Fig. 103),[47] we find an incomprehensible ΦΛΗΝΟΣ ΚΑΙΟΛΡΕΙΩ (l. 4) which can only be understood as μηνὸς Καισαρείῳ (a solecism for Καισαρείου), and such a confusion can only be explained by positing the misunderstanding of an antigraph written in a script too cursive for the stonecutter, who must have mistaken a sinuous M for the group ΦΛ, and then the group ΣΑ for ΟΛ.[48] A further hint in this direction is offered by an interesting paleographic feature: the use of letters in simplified, cursive forms together with their slow, "epigraphic" counterpart, as we see especially for *epsilon*[49] and *zeta*.[50] In some other cases, the need to "display" the text led to some drastic changes: in the recently published stele for Heliodora *mathematike*,[51] in order to list the pe-

[43] For the different iconographic schemes see Vitali 1984, 247-255; Thomas 2000, 8-9; King 2018, 107-108.

[44] Stele of Euangelos: El-Nassery *et al.* 1978, no. 31 (pl. LXXVI).

[45] Stele of Hierakammon and Nemesous: El-Nassery *et al.* 1978, no. 7 (pl. LXXI).

[46] Stele of Hermine: Wagner 1972, no. 6 (pl. XXXIV).

[47] Wagner 1972, no. 8.

[48] The orthographic mistakes of the stele are discussed in Wagner 1972, 149.

[49] This letter is mostly ogival in shape, with a dot instead of the middle stroke, as in other texts from this necropolis; but at the same time we also find a quicker, two-stroke version, with the middle stroke joined to the upper part (see e.g. l. 2, φιλάδ̲ελφος; l. 3, χρηστέ̲).

[50] Written in two strokes: l. 1, Ζ̲ήνωνος.

[51] The stele, now at the University of Missouri, has been published and extensively discussed in Bagnall *et al.* 2019-2020.

culiar titles of the deceased, the stonecutter had to gain more space by breaking the lower part of the frame and chiseling the surface below it.

All details aside, from such elements we may infer the existence of a preliminary *ordinatio*, as Jean Mallon called it,[52] aimed at arranging the text on the available surface not only with a decorative purpose, but also in order to emphasize some basic information, such as the name of the deceased and the date of her/his death. This can also clearly be perceived in the case of the few stelae from Terenouthis where the inscription is not accompanied by a figurative relief. For example, in keeping with his profession, one Erenios – ποιητής and ἐπειγραματογράφος (*sic*)[53] – asked to have only a written (albeit not metrical) epitaph: in order to lay out the words, the stonecutter clearly considered both the size of the stele and the meaning of the text, keeping the main blocks of information together on the same line.

Similar points could be made about other groups of stelae dated to the same period, but coming from other parts of Egypt, such as Abydos, where funerary inscriptions show an interaction between text and image similar to what we often find in Terenouthis epitaphs, but with a different lettering;[54] or Akoris, where usually short, highly formulaic texts have been engraved in plain lettering on undecorated limestone stelae.[55]

Besides the "standard" epigraphic production, many Egyptian sites have yielded texts where feelings of mourning are expressed in verse. In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the textual and stylistic characteristics of such metrical epitaphs: to appreciate their complexity and fascination, the works of Valentina Garulli[56] and Gianfranco Agosti[57] are now crucial references in relation not only to Egypt but to the Greek East as a whole.

Here I recall only a specific element: in such inscriptions the complexity of the text is always associated with a neat layout and the use of reader-oriented critical signs. Graphic devices such as the indentation of the pentameter, the division of *cola* across several lines, the use of plain or elaborated *diplai*, and of *paragraphoi*, *dicola* and other marks are often not just residual traces of a papyrus draft, or ways of imitating the columns of a bookroll, but attempts to create a "grammar of legibility" that might help the reader to understand the text while remaining within the epigraphic dimension. The epitaph of Heras from Memphis is one of the most striking examples of this atti-

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[52] Mallon 1952, 57–58; Susini 1997, 34–44.

[53] El-Nassery *et al.* 1978, no. 3.

[54] See e.g. the stele of Apollonios, son of Hermogenes, 2nd c., now at the Louvre, Dép. des Antiquitès égyptiennes, inv. C 131 = C 319; *I.Egypte Nubie Louvre* 91 (pl. 53, though erroneously labelled as 52).

[55] The most substantial group of funerary texts is published in *I.Akoris* 42–173 (with a general introduction at pp. XXIV–XXV).

[56] See e.g. Garulli 2014 and 2019.

[57] Among his many contributions on this topic, see Agosti 2015 and 2020.

tude towards the function of epigraphic texts.[58] The epigram consists of an imaginary dialogue between a passer-by and the small lion that was originally sculpted on the stele. Through their words, we are informed about the sad passing away of the young man, who was greatly appreciated both in his homeland and beyond it. To help readers to understand all the subtle nuances of the composition, the change of speaker is signaled by a *dicolon*, while the *stigme* helps to understand the syntax; the indentation of the pentameter and the *paragraphoi* at the end of each verse clarify the metric scheme; finally, the diaereses help solve the problems of word division. All this is counterbalanced by an attention towards the orderly and symmetric disposition of the writing lines, achieved through the addition of guiding lines traced before the engraving, as well as of dots, which showed the stonecutter the starting point of each verse.

From the 4th century onwards, such communicative strategies undergo a noticeable transformation. Even if local peculiarities can be still detected, especially in terms of the textual formulas employed, the extant evidence allows us to identify a general tendency: a disarticulation of the layout, functional to merely exhibit and emphasize the script as a sequence of traits and signs.[59] The necropolises of Antinoupolis, which have yielded hundreds of funerary inscriptions (still largely unpublished), may help us to understand this phenomenon.[60] Here, from the 5th to the 7th century, the most common type of inscribed stele was a rectangular or square limestone slab, used to cover or close the tomb.[61] The inscriptions on them show a marked degree of textual standardization (in most cases they are limited to the phrase "NN the blessed fell asleep", followed by the day of the month and the indiction), as well as many orthographic mistakes. At the same time, they present some common paleographic characteristics: the letters, large and square, are well cut, with marked and thick strokes; the letters are rubricated, and thus more evident to the eye; the writing surface is sometimes crossed by deep lines, aimed at aligning the words, but intended above all to serve as decoration; finally, to catch the attention of passers-by, the unwritten spaces are often painted in red or other bright colors, and crosses or other Christian symbols are drawn on them.[62]

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[58] Cairo Museum, inv. 11/11/(19)32, first published by Edgar 1927 (with a plate); cf. *I.Egypte métriques* 68; Garulli 2012, 149-150, and 2019, 112-114 (with a full discussion of the signs employed in the inscriptions).

[59] For a survey of Christian inscriptions from Egypt see Brown 1986 and, more recently, Tudor 2011.

[60] On the necropolises of Antinoupolis see the general surveys by Donadoni 1974, for the South Necropolis, and Manfredi 1998, Pintaudi 2008, and Minutoli 2018, for the North Necropolis and other areas excavated under the aegis of the Istituto Papirologico "G. Vitelli", University of Florence, as well as for a general presentation of the different activities of the Italian archaeological mission, now directed by F. Maltomini. For a list of the Christian funerary inscriptions published so far see Nachtergael and Pintaudi 2017, 677.

[61] Donadoni 1974, 144-149; Calament 2005, 270-279; Tudor 2011, 59-60.

[62] Del Corso 2019, 246-256.

In many inscriptions from the cemeteries of Latopolis (Esna)[63] or Panopolis (Akhmin)[64] it is not difficult to perceive the same attitude, despite the choice of different phrases, which are usually repeated with a few variations and many mistakes.

However, even in the last part of the Greek presence in Egypt, the tradition of expressing the mourning with complex textual forms, in verses or prose, was not abandoned. In Antinoupolis such epitaphs are mostly written on marble slabs, usually taken from buildings of the Imperial age, while in Latopolis limestone is more common. Regardless of the material employed, in both cities textual complexity is not associated with an effort to give a more monumental aspect to inscriptions: the scripts do not follow fixed models and often try to offer a poor imitation of contemporary "book" scripts, though the outcomes are inconsistent and far from uniform, if only because of the difficulties that stonecutters apparently had in producing letters of the same size; the lines are never really parallel, but rather arranged to fit the edges and shape of the stone, which on its turn was not properly prepared before being engraved; in general, there was not a preliminary planning of the layout. The inscription of Isaac from Antinoupolis (Fig. 104), full of references to Paul and Gregory of Nazianzus,[65] and the above-mentioned epitaph of Pitronia from Latopolis[66] are clear examples of such dichotomy between the aspiration to complexity of such texts and their poor appearance.

4. Conclusions

This survey, albeit general, points to a range of oppositions that encapsulates the complexity of the phenomenology of writing in Late Antiquity and of its social implications. The graphic features of the inscriptions discussed here cannot be simply connected to a drop in the number of literate individuals: indeed, one of the characteristics of the cities of the Thebaid and of the Delta is the spread of a refined written culture, as extant papyri (or at least some of them) clearly show; likewise, the presence of "epigraphic" scripts with "book" elements implies the persistence of some sort of familiarity with complex texts.

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[63] Some examples are offered by the stelae in Sauneron and Coquin 1980, nos. 9-11. For an overview of French archaeological work on this site see also Sauneron 1969; on late-antique funerary stelae from Latopolis see also Thomas 2000, 12-14, and Tudor 2011, 104-105.

[64] E.g. the epitaph for Kyros, now at Louvre, Dép. des Antiquitès égyptiennes, inv. E 8410; *I.Egypte Nubie Louvre* 108 (pl. 63). Other stelae from Akhmin are kept in the Graeco-Roman Museum at Alexandria, in the Coptic Museum at Cairo, and in other European collections, though no mention can be found of their discovery: see Tudor 2011, 87-89 for a survey (with bibliography).

[65] I. inv. Ant. gr. 75, published in Del Corso and Pintaudi 2014. The script of the epitaph shows some points in common with that used on the funerary marble stele of Leontios, at the Louvre (Réserve Napoléon, inv. MA 4758; *I.Egypte Nubie Louvre* 112). Because of this similarity, it is tempting to imagine that the latter, whose provenance is missing, comes from one of the Antinoupolis cemeteries, which were looted over the centuries; a further hint in this direction is the use of the formula ἐκοιμήθη ὁ μακαρίτης at the beginning (l. 1), which is typical of funerary inscriptions from the city (above, n. 5).

[66] Above, n. 14.

Therefore, the transformations that took place in funerary epigraphy are possibly the consequence of a deeper process. In epitaphs from the Imperial Age, the interaction between contents, layout, and sometimes image(s) was intended to express a range of messages: certainly, remembrance of the dead, but even more so adherence to a social model and the assertion of "identitarian" traits, which were more useful to the living than to the dead.[67] More complex texts, such as finely inscribed funerary epigrams, reflect a further aim: to affirm an individual's belonging to a more exclusive cultural elite, which shared the same framework of values. By contrast, during Late Antiquity new needs emerged. Funerary inscriptions were not primarily conceived as a means to keep the memory of the deceased alive, since the fixed formulas that were used ended up depersonalizing them. Indeed, in most cases the setting up of such inscriptions was intended as a purely symbolic, self-referential gesture, coherent with a process of transfiguration of written words that began in Late Antiquity and reached its completion in the Middle Ages: in short, letters and scripts came to be widely perceived as images with a symbolic value, and as such they were able to express a message beyond their literary meaning.

This "synthetic figural" approach[68] to the written text is clearly visible in many graphic manifestations, mostly designed to establish a contact with God, and to ask for his help and mercy: e.g., the graffiti and painted inscriptions (mostly prayer passages from the Scriptures) that cover the walls of monks' cells in Kellia, similar to a shield against the attacks of the Adversary,[69] or the invocations engraved by many pilgrims, together with their names, on the columns of the churches where they stood in prayer.[70] It is not surprising, then, to recognize similar intentions in funerary epigraphic practices as well.

In such a perspective, extant stelae can be seen to reflect a structural reversal of the connections between signifier and meaning, complementary to the reversal – already seen in the sphere of public epigraphy – in the graphic display of the relationship between power and individuals. In both cases, the relevance accorded to the figural component was the prelude to a redefinition of the role of written displays in the communicative system, and lastly of their decline, in the frame of a drastic

[67] Firon 2020, 166-222.

[68] The idea of a "synthetic-figural" (originally "sintetico-figurale") perception of writing was first introduced in palaeographical studies by Armando Petrucci, who used it to explain certain features of Christian book production in the West (Petrucci 1977, drawing upon Assunto 1967; see also Bartoli Langeli 1995, esp. 5-6). However, this concept was soon more generally applied to the study of late-antique and medieval writing culture; more specifically, for reflections on the "synthetic-figural" value of Greek written displays, from Late Antiquity to the Byzantine Middle Age, see Cavallo 1988; Cavallo 1994; Cavallo 2015, 98-100; Orsini 2012, 629-625; Orsini 2013, 38-40; Rhoby 2017.

[69] See esp. room 45 in the Kellia monastic complex: Kasser and Partyka 1999.

[70] This is the case with the graffiti on the columns of the so-called Church of Ionic Capitals in Antinoupolis: Pintaudi 2017b and Delattre 2017, 497-508.

change in lifestyles. If this is so, it is worth considering once more the late epitaphs from Antinoupolis and Latopolis that we mentioned at the beginning of our discussion. In such longer and more articulated texts, written at a time in which epigraphic practices had generally become very different, we find a desire of resistance, expressed on two different yet inextricably linked levels: religion, which was even more important to people whose rulers prayed a different God in a different language, and the defense of an even older heritage, the Hellenic one, which required that commemoration, and memory itself, were achieved through the employ of the right words, and as a consequence encouraged the search for proper, more sophisticated expressions. In this way, in its public and "exposed" dimension, the choice of writing in Greek centuries after the Arab conquest seems to acquire an even deeper value: from a mere identitarian assertion, it becomes a conscious political act.

Appendix: A New Greek Funerary Inscription from Antinoupolis

I. inv. Ant. gr. 331 (Northern Necropolis. Recovered on February 3rd, 2013); see Fig. 98.

Proconnesian marble stele, broken at the top and on the right side; 32.5 x 34 x 2 cm; letters: 2.5 cm; interlinear space: 1–1.5 cm. In the *agraphon* beneath the text two crosses: one on the left, with ornate ends, the other on the right, bigger than the previous one, in the shape of a Solomon's knot.

Date: 744–753 (cf. dating at l. 5)

– –
[– – – – – – –] καὶ ΕΠΙ[– – – – – – – – – – – – –]
[– – – – –].ΕΝΟΣ ΕΛΕΘΕΘΕΡ̣[– – – – – – – –]
[– – –] π̣τ̣αισμάτων (*vac.*) [– – – – – – – – – – –]
4 [ἐ]κ̣οιμοίθ(η) δὲ ἐν μηνὶ Παῦνι [– – – – – – – – –]
ἀπὸ Διοκλητιανοῦ · ϋξ[– – – – – – – – – – – – –]
† ὁ Θ(εὸ)ς ἀνάπαυσον αὐτ(---) μετὰ Τ[– – – – –]
†

4. ἐ]κ̣οιμοι$^{\theta}$: *l.* ἐκοιμήθ(η).
6. α$^{\text{ϋ}}$υ : *l.* αὐτ(όν) *vel* αὐτ(ήν).

2. [– – –].ΕΝΟC. Before the break, traces of a vertical stroke point to [– – –] μενος, possibly a participle (in this case, the stele would probably commemorate a deceased man).

ΕΛΕΘΕΘΕΡ̣[– – –]. The stonecutter possibly had a form of the verb ἐλευθερόω in mind, or of the noun ἐλευθερία. Neither term is attested in Christian inscriptions from Egypt (and they are quite rare in funerary epigraphy even outside Egypt), but both have a long-standing tradition in Christian literature.

3. πτ̣αισμάτων. The *tau* is almost certain (traces of both vertical and horizontal strokes can be seen), unlike *pi* (only part of the second horizontal stroke of the letter survives). The reading is quite certain; though not attested in other inscriptions from Antinoupolis or other Egyptian cities, it is found in funerary texts from other regions (see e.g. *I.Gerasa* 314, from Jarash, dated 533; Barth and Stauber 1993–1996, no. 663, from southern Troas, assigned to the 9–10th c.). As synonymous with ἁμάρτημα, the term is often used in Patristic literature (many references in Lampe 1961, *s.v.*). Moreover, it is sometimes found in association with ἐλευθερία / ἐλευθερόω: see e.g. [Chrys.] *annunt.*, *PG* LX, col. 758, ἐλευθερῶ σε τοῦ πταίσματος; Cyr. *dial. Trin.* 5.579a Durand, τὸ καὶ πταισμάτων ἐλευθεροῦν. If we consider ΕΛΕΘΕΘΕΡ̣[- - -] in l. 2 to be related to this semantic sphere, we should infer that the engraver here wished the deceased to be freed from his/her sins.

5. This is one of the few Christian dated funerary inscriptions, and the only one with a complete reference to the Era of the Martyrs, found in Antinoupolis so far, as these usually only have the year of indiction and the month (with or without the day): see Del Corso 2019, 252–253. Since the last number is missing, any year between 460 E.M. = 744 and 469 E.M. = 753 is possible.

6. The formula (with its variants) is typical of funerary inscriptions from Antinoupolis: see Tudor 2011, 258–259; Nachtergael and Pintaudi 2017, 694 (comm. on inscr. 13, ll. 5–6, especially on the use of nominative where a vocative would seem required). For ἀνάπαυσον with the acc. of the demonstrative pronoun see SB I 1561 (from Antinoupolis).

μετὰ Τ[- - -]. Perhaps μετὰ τ[ῶν δικαίων], never used in Antinoupolis, but see e.g. *CIG* 9278; *I.Smyrna* 561 (Smyrna, 541), ll. 3–4: ὁ θεὸς ἀναπαύσῃ | τὴν ψυχήν σου μετὰ τῶν δικαίων.

For other late-antique funerary inscriptions with the motif of Solomon's knot, see 318 above.

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