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RIÉ 277: An Inscription of the Time of Ptolemy II?

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The inscription known as RIÉ 277 has survived only in manuscript form: its text is preserved in the *Topographia Christiana* of Cosmas Indicopleustes together with RIÉ 276, an inscription of Ptolemy III Euergetes.¹ In this note, based on some preliminary encoding work in XML carried out in Beta maṣāḥəft,² I will propose that the text is actually a Ptolemaic one, but from a time before RIÉ 276.³

Fauvelle-Aymar wrote the most recent critique on interpretations of the inscription,⁴ underlining doubts about the identity of the unknown first person speaker as an Aksumite king, as well as the place thought to be the centre of the description. However, the hypothesis put forward by Fauvelle-Aymar of an otherwise unknown Trogodytic kingdom is not entirely convincing.⁵ In the same way, the involvement of the Romans, a hypothesis for which there is no convincing documentation, is a doubtful option.⁶ In fact, it is only the existence of a fleet of the king (στράτευμα

¹ See ‘Monumentum Adulitanum’, *E Ae*, III (2007), 1010a–1012b (G. Fiaccadori) where all the necessary preliminary information on this document, which will not be reproduced here, can be found. On Cosmas Indicopleustes, see ‘Cosmas Indicopleustes’, *E Ae*, I (2003), 806a–807a (A. Sima)

² See Liuzzo 2018 in Beta maṣāḥəft: Manuscripts of Ethiopia and Eritrea (Schriftkultur des christlichen Äthiopiens und Eritreas: eine multimediale Forschungsumgebung), <https://betamasaheft.eu/>. The text in the Beta maṣāḥəft’s record is that of RIÉ 277 (Bernand et al. 1991, 379–380) which is based on Wolska-Conus 1968. A description of the encoding of the alternative identifications of the toponyms in this text is given in Liuzzo 2019, 121–138.

³ Elements in favour of the Hellenistic attribution are also reviewed by Fauvelle-Aymar 2009, 144. Marrassini also underlines the importance of the geographical and political closeness of the Aksumite kingdom with Ptolemaic Egypt (Marrassini 2014, 195–196).

⁴ Fauvelle-Aymar 2009.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁶ In my opinion, the argument made by Speidel 2016 assumes that the dating of this text can safely be accepted as the third century CE, and that, given the probable presence of Rome, it was impossible for any other power to exist.

ναυτικὸν) which leads to the hypothesis of the Roman intervention, already put forward by Dillmann.⁷

Always assuming that the copy made by Cosmas is faithful,⁸ we know that settlements and towns were founded on the coast of the Red Sea during the third and second centuries BCE by the Ptolemies and it would be very surprising if the Ptolemaic pharaoh did not have a fleet and an army.⁹

Furthermore, the existence of the road ‘ἀπὸ τῶν τῆς ἐμῆς βασιλείας τόπων μέχρι Αἰγύπτου’ (‘from the lands of my kingdom to Egypt’)¹⁰ is not impossible if the king had acquired (or wanted to claim) these new settlements for himself—despite the comment by Salt that it is a ‘remarkable expression, which could never have been used by an Egyptian monarch’.¹¹ On the contrary, it would match the Ptolemaic plans in the area of the Red Sea, for canals, roads, and new cities. If Salt is right in separating the two texts (Cosmas also reports them separately), it may be that RIÉ 277 is actually Ptolemaic like RIÉ 276 even if it is not its continuation.

A possible parallel in a Ptolemaic inscription can be found in the Pithom stele from Heroonpolis,¹² which offers more than a hint in the direction of the text of RIÉ 277, together with the Decree of Canopus already compared by Bernand with RIÉ 276.¹³ In the text of the Pithom stele we find, for example, a comparison of the deeds of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, who is the subject of the inscription, to those of previous kings, where it says, ‘Never was done such a thing from the time of the fathers unto this day’.¹⁴ This is similar to what we find in RIÉ 277: ‘Πάντα δὲ ταῦτα τὰ ἔθνη πρῶτος καὶ

⁷ As reported in Bernand 2000, 32–45.

⁸ This copy may well not be faithful, given the fact that there are so few parallels of the formulae found in the texts available in the extant epigraphical material recorded in digital archives like The Packard Humanities Searchable Greek Inscriptions project, <https://epigraphy.packhum.org/>. Nothing guarantees that the text was so legible that Cosmas could read every word.

⁹ Burstein 1989, 6–8.

¹⁰ See Fiaccadori 2004, 115–116 who argues against the improbable hypothesis of a military expedition against Egypt.

¹¹ Salt in Viscount Valentia 1809, 198.

¹² Dated 264 BCE, http://www.attalus.org/docs/other/inscr_16.html. This stele was found in 1883 by Neville and recounts the deeds of Ptolemy II in twenty-six lines of hieroglyphics. It is catalogued in the *Catalogue général des antiquités égyptiennes du Musée du Caire* (CGC) as 22183 (Ahmed Bey Kamal 1905, 171–177 and Ahmed Bey Kamal 1904, pl. LVII). Not having knowledge of hieroglyphics, I base my comparison on the English translation.

¹³ Bernand 2000, 31.

¹⁴ See § 12 in the available translation: http://www.attalus.org/docs/other/inscr_16.html.

μόνος βασιλέων τῶν πρὸ ἐμοῦ ὑπέταξα’ (‘I was the first of all the kings who came before me to subdue all these people’).¹⁵ In the stele we also find a place named ‘Ro-zau’, which resonates at least with the Ῥωσῶ of the inscription. Unsurprisingly, the same hieroglyphic stele also has very strong parallels with RIÉ 276 where it mentions the fact that the gods were brought back to Egypt; it also mentions the canals.

We also know, from a passage in Strabo’s *Geography*,¹⁶ that inscriptions were made when more or less permanent settlements were established on the African coast of the Red Sea. In fact, if we take into consideration the inscription probably left at the straits between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean by Sesostris,¹⁷ such inscriptions were made much earlier. Bevan made this association and, in the Introduction to the collection of inscriptions from Ethiopia, Anfray admitted the Ptolemaic foundation of Adulis before Bernard stated the same idea in his commentary.¹⁸

The clearest indication that the king—the subject of the text in RIÉ 277—is an Aksumite king seems to be the object on which the inscription was set, that is, a throne, an object well-known from Aksumite excavations, especially since the Deutsche Aksum-Expedition, and whose importance was perhaps less known at the time of Salt’s voyage.

Another observation, which, I believe, can be drawn from the groupings of places named in the text of RIÉ 277 suggested by researchers in the past,¹⁹ is that there is not only one centre of geographical representation in the text of the inscription, but at least two: the first is the point of departure of the expeditions of war, rightly placed on the coast, at Adulis; the second is the one referred to in the final paragraph of the inscription’s text, where the territory of the king is described as τὰ ὁμοροῦντα τῇ ἐμῇ γῆ ἀπὸ μὲν

¹⁵ Bernard et. al. 1991, 379, lines 32–33 (in this edition the lines do not correspond to the lines on the stone which were not recorded by Cosmas); translation my own.

¹⁶ Cf. Strabo 16.4.15: ‘εἰσὶ καὶ στῆλαι καὶ βωμοὶ Πυθολάου καὶ Λίχα καὶ Πυθαγγέλου καὶ Λέοντος καὶ Χαριμόρτου κατὰ τὴν γνώριμον παραλίαν τὴν ἀπὸ Δειρῆς μέχρι Νότουκέρως, τὸ δὲ διάστημα οὐ γνώριμον’ (‘Along the coast there are both pillars and altars of Pytholous, Lichas, Pythangelus, Leon, and Charimortus, that is, along the known coast from Deire as far as Notuceras; but the distance is not determined’; translation from Perseus, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0099.tlg001.perseus-eng2:16.4.15>, accessed on 23 May 2019).

¹⁷ See Pliny 6.34.4, Strabo 16.4.4, and perhaps also Diod. 3.42.4.

¹⁸ See Bevan 1914, 175–176 and Bernard et al. 1991, 22.

¹⁹ There is a table with a summary of these groupings and identifications at the following link: <https://pietroliuazzo.github.io/DHEth/rie277table.html>. The table is a separate visualization of the text encoded in Liuzzo 2018.

ἀνατολῆς μέχρι τῆς λιβανωτοφόρου, ἀπὸ δὲ δύσεως μέχρι τῶν τῆς Αἰθιοπίας καὶ Σάσου τόπων’ (‘the lands at the boundaries of my land facing the rising of the sun until the incense-bearers, towards the setting of the sun up to the places of Aithiopia and Sasou’).²⁰ Λιβανωτοφόρου refers to a very specific place, which is not in doubt, and is the place where incense is produced in the southern Arabian Peninsula. The lands of the king at whose boundaries these countries lay could well be Egypt or the Ptolemaic Egyptian empire of the time of Ptolemy II Philadelphus.

Let me revise these points in favour of assigning this text to the time of Ptolemy II, by reconsidering the observations made by Salt. Salt’s original arguments have been the subject of several discussions over the years, but it is worth going through them again. The following are listed in support of the argument that the texts of RIÉ 276 and 277 should be treated as separate texts:²¹

- 1) The twenty-seventh year of the reign declared at the end of RIÉ 277 (ἔτει τῆς ἐμῆς βασιλείας κ(εἰκοστῶ) ζ(εβδόμῳ));
- 2) The fact the text is written in different persons, the first person in RIÉ 277 and the third in RIÉ 276;
- 3) The different styles in which the inscriptions are written;
- 4) The fact that no other Ptolemaic document speaks of these conquests;
- 5) The similarities to other Aksumite inscriptions in Greek;
- 6) Forms like ‘εὐχαριστίαν’, ‘ὑπέταξα’, ‘ἐπολέμησα’, and ‘ἔθνη’;
- 7) The ‘transliterated’ names;
- 8) The dedication to Ares;
- 9) The fact that no mention of Aksum is made;
- 10) The placement of the inscription in Adulis and not in Egypt or anywhere else.

Leaving aside the *ex silentio* arguments 4 and 9, the first point is highly relevant. Ptolemy III Euergetes, object of RIÉ 276, cannot be the subject of RIÉ 277 because he did not reign twenty-seven years. Points 2, 3, and 4 are decisive by themselves and perhaps it would have been enough to say that the two inscriptions are on separate objects to support the distinction of the two texts. Apparently Salt did not know of the scholia about Γάζη in manuscript Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 9.28 of the *Topographia Christiana*, which says, Γάζην λέγει τοῦς Ἀξωμίτας· ἄχρι γὰρ

²⁰ Bernard et al. 1991, 379, lines 35–36; translation my own.

²¹ The following list comes from the earlier 1809 volume (Viscount Valentia 1809), not from the 1814 more famous *A Voyage to Abyssinia* (Salt 1814). See Salt in Viscount Valentia 1809, 193–201.

καὶ τοῦ νῦν Ἀγάζη αὐτοῦς ὀνομάζουσι’ (‘He says that Gazēn means the Axōmites, and to this day they call them Agazē’),²² nor did he know the meaning of **ⲁⲓⲛⲓ**. (*agāzi* = Ἀγάζη) contained therein which invalidate point 9 because, if that is true, Aksum indeed is mentioned.²³ The dedication to Ares (point 8) is not without a parallel, especially in inscriptions by the Ptolemaic generals who were put in charge of hunting of elephants (‘ἐπὶ τὴν θήραν τῶν ἐλεφάντων’).²⁴

The obstacle to an early dating of RIÉ 277 seems to be precisely the identification of the unknown king mentioned in the text as an Aksumite king.²⁵ However, if we accept that this is not actually a given, then this *terminus ante quem non* is no longer a constraint; and, finally, we should consider the possibility that inscription RIÉ 277 predates RIÉ 276.

In the context of the great explorations to the south under Ptolemy II Philadelphus,²⁶ subject also of the Pithom stele, and the most active in this regard,²⁷ we know from our sources that more or less permanent settlements were founded and that, even in the short-term ones, inscriptions were set up by the generals in charge.²⁸ Eventually, as the hunting and exploration proceeded further south, only the most relevant and important of the centres remained and were developed, and this might well have been the case of Adulis, as we have seen.²⁹

We also know from Diodorus that Ptolemy II’s *strategoï* wrote official records which were deposited in Alexandria and were consulted by scholars in the library;³⁰ furthermore, we know that explorations to the south were

²² See Pankhurst in Huntingford 1989, 43–44.

²³ Marrassini 2014, 24–26.

²⁴ Prosopographia Ptolemaica II, no. 4419–28. See for example <https://epigraphy.packhum.org/text/219402>. A more complete account can be found in Casson 1993, 249–252.

²⁵ Marrassini 2014, 35.

²⁶ These expeditions preferred the sea to the route along the Nile because of the difficult relationships with the Meroitic kingdoms (Desanges 1978, 254–255) and the complexity of travelling with elephants.

²⁷ Burstein 2000.

²⁸ The hypothesis of a Ptolemaic foundation of Adulis does not imply its identification with Berenike Pancrysos, criticized by Desanges 1978, 277–278. See Fiaccadori 2004, 108 about the Ptolemaic settlement in Adulis and the purpose of the expedition of Ptolemy II Philadelphus.

²⁹ Casson 1993, 255.

³⁰ Discussing the relationships between Agatharchides of Knidus (see FGrHist 86 in Burstein 2016), Diodorus Siculus, and the *hypomnemata* of the Ptolemaic court,

inevitably connected with the *topos* of the sources of the Nile.³¹ These accounts include descriptions of marvels very similar to the observations made in RIÉ 277 about frost and snow on the mountains: ‘δυσβάτοις καὶ χιονώδεσι ὄρεσιν οἰκοῦντας, ἐν οἷς διὰ παντὸς νιφετοὶ καὶ κρῦη καὶ χιόνες βαθεῖαι, ὡς μέχρι γονάτων καταδύειν τὸν ἄνδρα’ (‘impassable and stormy mountains, in which it snows and rains so much, that men sink to their knees’).³² If these are not scholia which entered the text by the simple omission of a marker in the process of copying the manuscript of the *Topographia Christiana*,³³ they would perfectly fit one such account of the Ptolemaic explorations in the south, and would give the precise evidence needed to support one of the most famous theories on the sources of the Nile and the causes of the inundations of Egypt (the one attributed to Anaxagoras),³⁴ which, until that point in time, were wrapped in mystery, but certainly known to any educated Greek. We know a considerable number of these *strategoí* and explorers by name and some of them, like Timosthenes and Pythagoras, wrote literary works about the Red Sea area, not just reports.³⁵

The ‘road to Egypt’ in the context of founding settlements and setting up infrastructure for the supply of elephants along the African coast of the Red Sea is not surprising, as we also know of the road to El-Kanais and of that between Koptos and Berenike (Strabo 16.4.5) which were associated with these efforts.³⁶

Furthermore, in the context of the Ptolemaic expeditions, the question of the existence of the fleet is no longer problematic, since we know that Ptolemy II also went in that direction, making an expedition from north to south,³⁷ as in the text of our inscription. Thus, in this hypothesis, Ptolemy II can then be a possible subject of this inscription, because of the length of

Peremans provides a discussion of all explorers who might have left such documents (Peremans 1967). See also Burstein 1989, 30–32.

³¹ On the interests of Ptolemy II, see Burstein 1989, 4.

³² Bernand et al. 1991, 379, lines 7–9, destined in the specific case of Sāmen to become so important as to receive the attention of an entire article, namely Simoons 1960.

³³ One of the manuscripts of this text, Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat.gr.699, is easily accessible at https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.699, accessed on 23 May 2019. Scholia are introduced by the word ΠΑΡΑΓΡΑΦΗ and end with a cross, both of which could have been omitted easily.

³⁴ See Hdt. 2.22 and Diod. 1.38.4.

³⁵ For Timosthenes (FGrHist 2051) see Meyer 2013; for Pythagoras (FGrHist 2214) see Mann 2011.

³⁶ See also Burstein 1996; Burstein 2000; Burstein 2002; and Casson 1993.

³⁷ Diod. 3.43.5 and Strabo 16.4.18.

his reign (thirty-nine years) and because of the fact that we know he conducted an expedition to the south in person.³⁸ We know also that there was never direct control on some areas, as it is confirmed in the inscription, which does not affirm direct administrative control on all the subdued people and instead mentions that a payment of tributes was required.

The relation between this inscription and the throne on which it was set up remains to be clarified, because, of itself, it is not enough to justify the association of the text with an Aksumite king. However, given the fact that the Greek and non-Greek inscriptions in the RIÉ corpus clearly have distinctive features,³⁹ then, if this inscription is as early as I am proposing, the possibility of a Ptolemaic influence in the early Aksumite kingdom seems plausible.

Let me summarize. Perhaps Cosmas was correct in thinking that this was also a Ptolemaic inscription, and certainly we cannot blame him, when, even in extant documents, it is sometimes difficult for us to identify the king or pharaoh in question. Researchers have successfully identified the point of departure of the missions described in the text of RIÉ 277 as Adulis. Furthermore, we know that this type of document has similarities with the Pithom stele from Heroonpolis. Later, in the same port, Ptolemy III also had a basalt stele set up, perhaps to mark a further development of what was to be the longest-lived of the ports on the African coast—assuming Cosmas was indeed there in the sixth century CE.⁴⁰

We cannot say with absolute certainty who the unknown king was, until further evidence arises, and thus also using this text as a document for any historical reconstruction is a slippery matter.

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³⁸ Diod. 1.37–38, especially Diod. 1.37.5. The expedition is dated by the reference in Theocritus's *Idylls* 17.86.

³⁹ Marrassini 2014, 76. See Liuzzo 2019, 47–75 for a quantitative analysis.

⁴⁰ At some point in time, this port may also have been subject to the strongest influence of the Meroitic kingdoms, and, perhaps, the Zoskales named in the *Periplus* was one of these kings, as was Ergamenes (of whom the same description is given). In this case, the city would have become part of the Aksumite kingdom only later, but as a city in its own right. RIÉ 286 and 286 A, found at Meroe, show that there were also one or more victorious expeditions of the Aksumite kings in this direction.

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Summary

The article suggests that the inscription known as RIÉ 277 might be a Hellenistic inscription of the period of Ptolemy II Philadelphus. This interpretation is based on a revision of the main hypotheses concerning the geographical centre suggested by the text.