

Allegorical Images in Greek Laudatory Inscriptions in Eretz-Israel

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RESUME

The present article follows after a number of Greek inscriptions of poetic character, in which there are allegorical images and expressions of praise to the mosaic art, the bath-house and its hot, warm and cold waters, and the church in the wider sense of the word, namely the Christianity.

These poetic inscriptions, found in Israel and Northern Sinai, were variously composed in the early Byzantine period by an Empress, a clergyman and an anonymous poet. Their language is the Classical Greek, which at that time was probably commanded by educated people and men of letters. This indicates the continuity of the Classical heritage during the early Byzantine period in the Land of Israel and the neighbouring countries.

The allegorical images in the inscriptions under discussion indicate on the one hand poetic-artistic tendencies with a Neoplatonic flavour, and on the other hand - elements of religious anti-pagan polemic.

In this article, I shall examine a number of Greek inscriptions, composed in poetic form, which make use of allegorical images. The inscriptions praise the art of mosaic, the bathhouse and its hot, warm and cold waters, and the church in the wider sense of the word, i.e. Christianity.

Discovered in Israel and Northern Sinai, the inscriptions date to the early Byzantine period (fourth to sixth centuries C.E.) and were variously composed by an empress, a churchman, and an anonymous poet. They are written in Classical Greek, which at that time was almost certainly the language used by scholars, rhetors, educated people and intellectuals,

indicating the continuing influence of the Classical heritage at this period of time, in both Eretz-Israel and the neighbouring countries.

I

Three inscriptions in a pure Classical Greek are incorporated into the polychrome mosaic floor found at Sheikh Zouède in Northern Sinai (now exhibited in the Ismailiya Museum, Egypt), dated to between the mid-fourth and mid-fifth centuries C.E. This mosaic floor together with other coloured mosaics paved several rooms of a large building, whose function is unknown (according to the excavator it was a fortress), but it seems to have been a villa. The inscriptions eulogize beauty, and in particular the beauty of the mosaic art.¹

Inscription no. 1 (Figs. 1-2):

Εἴ με φιλεῖς, ὄνθρωπε, χαίρων ἐπίβαινε μελάθρων.
 ψυχὴν τερπόμενος τεχνήμασιν οἷσιν ποθ' ἡμῖν.
 Πέπλον ἱμερόεντα Χαρίτων ἢ Κύπρις ὕφανεν
 λεπταλέη ψηφίδι, χάριν δὲ ἐνεθήκατο πολλήν.

If you love me, gentleman, enter gladly into this grand hall and then your soul will enjoy the works of art herein. Cypris wove this splendid peplos of the Charites by a mosaic of delicate cube stones, into which she has put much charm².

Inscription no. 2 (Fig. 3):

Δεῦρ' ἴδε τὰς χάριτας χαίρων, φίλε, ἅς τινὰς ἡμῖν
 τέχνη ταῖς ψήφοις ἔμβαλε, πηξαμένη τὸν φθόνον ἐκ
 μέσσου καὶ ὄμματα βασκανίης, τῆς ἰλαρῆς τέχνης
 πολλάκις εὐξάμενος.

Friend, observe here with pleasure the charming things which art has placed in the mosaic cubes, petrifying and repelling jealousy and the eyes of envy. You are one who is proud of the enjoyable art³.

¹ The mosaic pavement was discovered by J. Clédât (1915: 21-28) in 1913. See Ovadiah 1987: 51-53; Ovadiah, Gomez de Silva and Mucznik 1991: 181-191.

² Ovadiah 1987: 52-53; Ovadiah, Gomez de Silva and Mucznik 1991: 182-183.

³ Ovadiah 1987: 52; Ovadiah, Gomez de Silva and Mucznik 1991: 187.

Inscription no. 3 (Fig. 4):

ἴδι οἰς Νέστορα τὸν φιλόκαλον κτίστην.

*You could see Nestor the builder, lover of beauty*⁴.

The three inscriptions extol the beauty of art or of artistic creation in general—especially the beauty of the mosaic pavement. They invite those entering the gates of «this grand hall» (μέγαθρον) to enter in joy and to delight in the beauty of the creation before them. These messages, delivered as they are in such noble language and style, doubtlessly reflect the attitude of the owner of the premises to art, and in general to the Classical world and its heritage. The poetic inscriptions have Classical features, one of which is the metaphorical use of pagan images. The «beauty» and «charm» mentioned in them are of like nature, and concord with the concept of «the beauty» and apparently also «the intelligible» or «the intellectual beauty», as described in detail by Plotinus, the third-century C.E. Neoplatonist philosopher. This perhaps indicates that we should pay special heed to the Neoplatonic content or significance of the scenes depicted in the mosaic (Phaedra and Hippolytus, Dionysus' triumphal procession [*triumphus*], satyrs and maenads, Pan and the drunken Heracles)⁵ and in the Greek inscriptions incorporated in it. Hence, both the scenes on the mosaic and its inscriptions reflect the conceptual tendency of the anonymous owner of the edifice.

⁴ Ovadiah 1987: 51; Ovadiah, Gomez de Silva and Mucznik 1991: 187. The correction and completion [ἴδ] οἰς is according to Perdrizet's interpretation (Perdrizet 1922: 94), who argues that ναοῖς is an error of the mosaicist, probably an Egyptian. Perdrizet's completion would appear to be the more reasonable, as the word ἴδοις in the inscription directs the spectator's attention to the splendid work of the mosaic pavement made or ordered by «Nestor, the builder». The «lover of beauty» in the inscription indicates the aesthetic attitude of Nestor to the works of art and indirectly praises the beauty of the mosaic floor. It is still relevant to the visitor nowadays. It should also be noted that the mosaic belongs to a secular building, so the word ναοῖς (temples) is not appropriate. In addition, the two other inscriptions also praise the beauty of the work of art and the mosaics decorating «this grand hall».

⁵ Certain literary sources from the early Byzantine period describe mythological scenes that their authors put into writing after being visually impressed, e.g. Phaedra and Hippolytus, Appolo and Daphne, Theseus and the Minotaur, heroes and others of the Trojan War (such as Odysseus, Agamemnon, Menelaus and Priam). A literary source describing paintings of mythological subjects in the city of Gaza, subsequently lost, was written by the orator Procopius of Gaza – "Ἐκφρασις Εἰκόνοϋ; see Friedländer 1939. Two other poetic literary sources of the early Byzantine period, composed by John of Gaza and Paulus Silentarius, describe the Cosmic Tablet ("Ἐκφρασις τοῦ Κοσμικοῦ Πίνακος) and the Church of Hagia Sophia ("Ἐκφρασις τοῦ Ναοῦ τῆς Ἁγίας Σοφίας) and the Ambon ("Ἐκφρασις τοῦ Ἀμβωνοῦ) respectively; see Friedländer 1912.



Figure 1. Sheikh Zouède.



Figure 2. Sheikh Zouède.



Figure 3. Sheikh Zouède.



Figure 4. Sheikh Zouède.

Plotinus writes in his treatise «On Beauty» as follows:

«Beauty is mostly in sight, but it is to be found too in things we hear, in combination of words and also in music, and in all music [not only in songs]; for tunes and rhythms are certainly beautiful: and for those who are advancing upwards from sense-perception ways of life and actions and characters and intellectual activities are beautiful, and there is the beauty of virtue. If there is any beauty prior to this, this discussion will reveal it.

On this theory nothing single and simple but only a composite thing will have any beauty. It will be the whole which is beautiful, and the parts will not have the property of beauty by themselves, but will contribute to the beauty of the whole. But if the whole is beautiful the parts must be beautiful too; a beautiful whole can certainly not be composed of ugly parts; all the parts must have beauty.

You must become first all godlike and all beautiful if you intend to see God and beauty. First the soul will come in its ascent to intellect and there will know the Forms, all beautiful, and will affirm that this, the Ideas, are beauty; for all things are beautiful by this, by the products and essence of intellect. That which is beyond this we call the nature of the Good, which holds beauty as a screen before it. So in a loose and general way of speaking the Good is the primary beauty; but if one distinguishes the intelligibles [from the Good] one will say that the place of the Forms is the intelligible beauty, but the Good is That which is beyond, the spring and origin of beauty; or one will place the Good and the primal beauty on the same level: in any case, however, beauty is in the intelligible world»⁶.

To Plotinus' way of thinking, in order to win the way to true beauty, man must first develop «an inner sight». His «soul must be trained, first of all to look at beautiful ways of life: then at beautiful works, not those which the arts produce, but the works of men who have a name of good-

⁶ Plotinus, *Ennead* I. 6 (trans. A.H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library, I, London and Cambridge [Mass.] 1966: 232-235, 260-261).

ness: then look at the souls of the people who produce the beautiful works»⁷. In other words, only the soul that has in itself become beautiful has the capacity to perceive supreme beauty and good. According to Plotinus «the stone which has been brought to beauty of form by art will appear beautiful not because it is a stone – for then the other would be just as beautiful– but as a result of the form which art has put into it. So this beauty was in the art, and it was far better there; for the beauty in the art did not come into the stone, but that beauty stays in the art and another comes from it into the stone which is derived from it and less than it»⁸. The plaudits to the beauty of art, especially to the art of mosaic found in the Sheikh Zouède inscriptions, link this mosaic to Neoplatonic concepts and perceptions.

II

Another Greek inscription in a similar style, within a *tabula ansata*, has been found in an early Byzantine mosaic floor in a church at Apollonia (Fig. 5)⁹.

† ἀμβροσίης τελέθω καὶ [νέκταρος οἴκο]ς ἀρείων
καὶ με Μαρίνος ἔτευξε θεὸ[ν κλυτόμ]ητιν (ἅ)[ίρ]ων
[μυσ]τικὸν ἀχράαντον αἰεὶ νόον ἡνιοχεύων †.

*I am a church (i.e. Christianity) better than ambrosia and
nectar,
and Marinos erected me exalting God-extolled-for-His
wisdom and ever ruling his pure and mystic spirit.*

Despite the damage to the inscription, its dactylic-hexameter verse pattern can clearly be discerned, especially in the relatively undamaged third line:

⁷ Plotinus, *Ennead* I. 6 (trans. A.H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library, I, London and Cambridge [Mass.] 1966: 258-259).

⁸ Plotinus, *Ennead* V. 8 (trans. A.H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library, V, London and Cambridge [Mass.] 1984: 236-239).

⁹ Birnbaum and Ovadia 1990: 182-191.



Figure 5. Apollonia.

- V V	- V V	- -	- V V	- V V	-] -
- V V	- V V	- V V	- [VV]	- V [V	-] -
[-] V V		- V V	- V V	- V V	- -

This somewhat bombastic and florid poetic Christian inscription, rhetorically ornate in content, is nonetheless written with an outstanding mastery of Classical Greek. Its author was clearly a scholar steeped in the Classical heritage and the riches and nuances of the language. This intriguing poetic inscription, worded in a polished style, bears witness to the mixture of pagan and Christian notions current in the early Byzantine period. The writer of the verse (either the Marinos mentioned in the inscription, who cannot be positively identified, or some other contemporary poet) is a man well versed in Classical Greek literature. He makes use of poetic words, a few of which are specific to this literary genre, while most are commonly employed by the Church Fathers, either with their original connotation or with derived meanings. The study of Classical Greek literature and its dissemination in Palestine were widespread at this time, so that the writer of this poem is no exception¹⁰. Surprisingly, the poet uses this language to extol the Church, namely Christianity; but an even more amazing element is the Church's declaration that it surpasses ambrosia and nectar. In employing this metaphoric language, borrowed from the pagan lexicon, the writer may have been promoting the Church (i.e. Christianity) over paganism, which had begun to wane at around this time. Thus the inscription might well reflect an attempt at reli-

¹⁰ Friedländer 1939.



Figure 6. Hammat Gader.

gious propaganda, and mirror the Church's struggle against paganism, in which Emperors Theodosius I 'The Great' (379-395 C.E.) and Justinian I (527-565 C.E.)¹¹ took an active and decisive part.

III

In the Roman-Byzantine baths of Hammat Gader there have been found a number of Greek inscriptions. One consists of sixteen lines headed by the name and title of the Empress Eudocia (Εὐδοκίας Αὐγούστῃς) (Fig. 6)¹², the ex-wife of the Emperor Theodosius II (408-450), who lived in Jerusalem from 442-443 until her death there in 460. Eudocia was also known to have been a lyric and epic poetess, using the dactylic-hexameter verse pattern, and respected for her literary work, of which only a small part is preserved¹³. She was born Athenais, in Athens in 393, into a rich, pagan and aristocratic Athenian family. She was the daughter of the Athenian philosopher Leontius and her education was supervised by pagan learned men, based on a wide Classical background.

This laudatory inscription may have been meant to celebrate the completion of construction work of the baths or a section of the complex. The inscription, poetically phrased, is an encomium of the baths and the hot

¹¹ J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*, 67, Paris 1864: Sozomenos, *Hist. Ecc.* III 14; Collins-Clinton 1977: 3; Vasiliev 1932: 197-198; Jones 1964: 938ff.

¹² Green and Tsafir 1982: 77-91.

¹³ Cf. Ludwig (ed.) 1897: 24-114.

springs of Hammat Gader. For example, the source of the hot water is described as the «noble furnace» (κλίβαν' ἑδθλέ). In another reference, the furnace (*clibanus*) is likened to, or identified with, the ocean (ὠκεανὸν πυρόεντα νέον θέμις ἐδτι καλεῖσθαι) and is called Paeon, the physician of the gods, in recognition of its well-known healing power. In the words of the inscription, the furnace is the source of life and the possessor of famous therapeutic powers, providing bathers with sweet streams (γλυκερῶν δοτῆρα ῥεέθρων). It is the furnace that engenders, or fashions, the infinite flow of boiling, cold and tepid waters: ἐκ δέο τίκτεται οἶσμα τὸ μυρίον, ἄλλυδις ἄλλη, ὅππη μὲν Σεῖον, πῆ δ' αὖ κρυερὸν τε μέδον τε. The furnace (*clibanus*) pours its beauty into four rows of fountains or springs: τετράδας ἐς πίδυρας κρηνῶν προχέεις δέο κάλλος.

The «four tetrads» of springs mentioned in the inscription may refer to a series of fountains installed in the bath, perhaps in the four corners of one of its halls¹⁴. The praise of the baths emphasizes their therapeutic powers «For those in pain your mighty strength is ever constant. But (I will sing) of god, famous for wisdom... For the benefit of men and...» (ὠδεῖνουδι τεὸν μένος ὄβριμον ἦνε[κὲς αἰέν,] ἀλλὰ θεὸν κλυτόμητιν αἰῖδο [μαι] εἰς εὐεργεδεῖην μερόπων τε...) ¹⁵.

Beauty, too, is praised in this poetic inscription, possibly linking it to Neoplatonic concepts and trends as expressed by Plotinus in his above-mentioned treatise «On Beauty»¹⁶.

The Empress Eudocia's poetic inscription together with other poetically-styled lapidary inscriptions, in celebration of the construction from the period of the Emperor Anastasius (491-518)¹⁷, found at Hammat Gader, are all written in metrical verses, in an evidently Classical style. They bear witness to the high reputation of the Hammat Gader baths, their beauty, dimensions, and the therapeutic properties of their hot waters. Archaeological finds support this reputation with evidence of the great numbers of bathers who flocked to the site seeking cures and medical treatment. The baths would thus appear to have become the focus of interest of the rich and powerful, who, in an effort to perpetuate their names, commissioned various inscriptions in the magnificent structures of the bathhouse. These inscriptions indirectly indicate the cultural atmosphere which prevailed at Hammat Gader in Late Antiquity.

¹⁴ Green and Tsafirir 1982: 86.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 79-80 (lines 15-17).

¹⁶ See above, nn. 6-8.

¹⁷ Di Segni and Hirschfeld 1986: 251-268.

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The allegorical images deployed in the above-mentioned inscriptions indicate on the one hand poetic-artistic tendencies with a Neoplatonic flavour; and on the other hand elements of religious anti-pagan polemic. These inscriptions, composed by learned people profoundly educated in the Classical heritage, were written in the finest style and language of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E. The high-flown, 'purple prose' of the inscriptions, probably designed to parade the linguistic scholarship and sophistication of their authors, conveys much more than simply their authors' erudition. It bears witness to a yearning for that earlier era, perceived as one of exalted ideals and sublime creativity; an era that has indeed left its imprint on two thousand, five hundred years of Western Civilization, down to and including our own times. We may see in these inscriptions an attempt to return to the world of yesteryear; to revive what could no longer to be revived, in a nostalgic-and anachronistic-gesture by the intellectuals and scholars of the early Byzantine period.

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