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# CHRISTIAN PRISONERS: FIFTH AND SIXTH CENTURY INSCRIPTIONS FROM CORINTH<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Among the inscriptions from Corinth (in publication), there are graffiti carved into the floor of a prison in Corinth. They shed interesting light on the hopes, beliefs and opinions of Christians from late antiquity. This study offers an overview of the insights to be gained from these graffiti. Now that *IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 Fasc. 3. Inscriptions Corinthi, regionis Corinthiae* is available, the evidence on Christian prisoners in the later Roman Empire will be easily accessible.<sup>2</sup> The texts consist of graffiti on limestone floor tiles. They were found at the back of the “Boudroumi” arches.<sup>3</sup> The vaults were shops north-west of the agora of ancient Corinth. Currently, these fragments of the limestone slabs that are still available are kept in the museum’s storerooms.

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- 1 The research for this paper was done within the research group B 5-3 of the Excellence Cluster 264 Topoi: The Formation and Transformation of Space and Knowledge in Ancient Civilizations ([www.topoi.org](http://www.topoi.org)). I thank Erikki Sironen and Klaus Hallof for making the material in *IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3* available to me in advance and Dr. Marina Veksina of the ICG Project for valuable comments. ICG refers to the database *Inscriptiones Christianae Graece* (<http://www.epigraph.topoi.org>) at the Institut für Christentum und Antike in Berlin, developed with the support of Topoi.
  - 2 Cf. *IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3* nos. 808 and 810, 812-814, 817-821, 662-663. This study addresses only full texts and larger fragments. For the photos, cf. the coming edition. The inscription on a limestone plate found in Paul’s Basilica (*IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3* no. 809) and the prayer of a presbyter on the lid of a fragmented marble bowl (no. 815) do not belong to the *carceraria*.
  - 3 In modern Greek, *μπουντρούμι* means “prison” or “dungeon”. The word is borrowed from Turkish and could derive from the Greek *ὑποδρόμιον*.

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The decision to focus on the prisoners was determined by the occasion,<sup>4</sup> although one has to expand on the term “Early Christianity” to some extent. It is notoriously difficult to date inscriptions, but, in these instances, there is material from the fifth or sixth centuries. By this time, the majority of the Corinthian population were Christianised. Nevertheless, I have found the following observations on graffiti that can be classified as Christian on the basis of crosses as well as specific Christian names and terminology. However, the focus on prisoners should not create the impression that the majority of Corinthian Christians were imprisoned.

The occupations of the Christians match those of Corinth in late antiquity.<sup>5</sup> Funerary monuments from Corinthia inform us about people who were craftsmen, for example, a tailor (IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1521), another one selling textiles (ICG no. 2610), a cobbler (2638), and somebody selling sandals (2613). There were shopkeepers (2616) selling vegetables (2655), a butcher (IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1468), a livestock fattener (ICG nos. 2633 and 2651), as well as sellers of goat’s meat (2647), pheasants (2653), and brine (2631 and 2642). Apart from those who were officials (*excubitor* 32, 2650), there is evidence of a barber (IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1279), a furrier/pelt monger (ICG no. 2564), a coachman (2621), a wagon owner (2573), a cattle ringer (IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1604), a veterinary surgeon (IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1340), a bathhouse keeper (ICG no. 2625), and a gravedigger (2647). A few instances mention the deceased’s function in the church. We learn about a presbyter (2667), a reader (2639), a choir member, and the “driver” of the bishop’s mule (IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1486).

The *carceraria* are graffiti, carved by hand into limestone slabs. The occupations of those who were imprisoned are rarely mentioned. We can only guess the reasons for their imprisonment. Sometimes they carved their names into the floor, sometimes also those whose accusation sent them to prison.

Formally, the texts are invocations, addressing the Lord. In general, God is invoked; he should listen. The drawing of an ear and the words ἔσκουε (= εἰσάκουε) illustrate this clearly: “God, listen! Lord, help your servant!”<sup>6</sup> The Latin cross introducing the inscription and the *nomina sacra* clearly mark the monument as Christian. Do “God” and “Lord” refer to the same person of the Trinity, or to the Father and to the Son? There are other instances where Κ(ύρι)ε is followed by ὁ Θε(εός). In this instance, the

4 Paper read at an international conference on “Perspectives on the socially disadvantaged in Early Christianity”, 23-24 October 2014, Faculty of Theology, University of the Free State, South Africa.

5 Cf., in general, Walbank (2010:257-323).

6 IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1271: + Θε(εός) ἔσκουε | *auris* | + Κ(ύρι)ε, βοήθι τοῦ δούλου σο. The reading ἔσκουε is problematic. Should one read ἐπ<ά>κουε or εἰσάκουε?

nominative is determined by the article, because it is used as a vocative.<sup>7</sup> In these cases, further qualifications of the addressed show that the focus is on God as creator<sup>8</sup> and judge.<sup>9</sup> This is also the case when only  $\delta \Theta(\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma)$  is used.<sup>10</sup> When  $\text{K}(\acute{\upsilon}\rho\iota)\epsilon$  stands alone, it probably refers to the first person of the Trinity.<sup>11</sup> In one instance, however, “Lord” indisputably refers to Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup> In either case, God or Jesus Christ is invoked as  $\text{K}(\acute{\upsilon}\rho\iota)\epsilon$ , ruler. This is important, because the prisoners were detained, awaiting trial or to enforce payment of debt. The decision on their future pending, they prayed that the Lord will come to their aid.

The content of the prayers can vary considerably. The three pieces of a white limestone plate preserve the prayer of two Christian brothers, Budios and John, bodyguards (*bucellarii*) of the prefect (of Illyrium). Marking the beginning and the end of the inscription with Latin crosses, they asked the Lord, God and pure justice, to release them from this place, the prison.<sup>13</sup> The prayer ends with a Biblical amen. The use of the verb  $\lambda\upsilon\tau\rho\acute{\omega}$  could signify that the supplicant was confined in order to enforce payment of debt. If no ransom is paid, he could be sold into slavery. But the verb could also, more generally, express the petition to be rescued.

Even when a petition to be rescued or ransomed is not expressed directly, it is included in the prayer for help, as in the case of Kosma, servant of the Lord, Jesus Christ:  $\text{K}(\acute{\upsilon}\rho\iota)\epsilon \text{ } \text{I}(\eta\sigma\omicron)\upsilon \text{ } \text{X}(\rho\iota\sigma\tau)\acute{\epsilon}$ , βοήθῃ τῷ δούλῳ σου | Κοσ[μ(ᾶ)] | + ἀμήν. +<sup>14</sup> The use of the verb  $\beta\omicron\gamma\eta\theta\acute{\epsilon}\omega$  reflects Biblical tradition. Introducing invocations with phrases adapted from the Psalms in the form of  $\theta\epsilon\acute{\epsilon}$ , κύριε or Χρίστε (or the nominative with article as vocative) and βοήθῃ, with a dative of the person calling for help,<sup>15</sup> is common in Christian funerary inscriptions from late antiquity.<sup>16</sup> The Biblical ἀμήν ending the

7 Cf. Blass & Debrunner (2001:§147).

8 Cf. IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1275.

9 Cf. IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1270.

10 Cf. IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1279.

11 Cf. IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 nos. 1269, 1273, 1276 and 1277.

12 Cf. IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1272.

13 IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1270: +  $\text{K}(\acute{\upsilon}\rho\iota)\epsilon \delta \Theta(\epsilon\delta)$  και δίκ[ι] χ[α]θαρά |  $\lambda\upsilon\tau\rho\acute{\iota}\sigma\epsilon$  τοῦ τόπου τούτου | τοὺς δὺω ἀδερφοὺς | Χ Φ Χ Βούδιον και Ἰωάν|νιν τοὺς βουκελλαρίους | οὗ τοῦ ἐπάρχου, ἀμήν.+

14 IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1272. Cf. the inscription of an unknown presbyter on a bowl found on the agora (IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3, no. 1267): +  $\text{K}(\acute{\upsilon}\rho\iota)\epsilon$ , βοήθ[η] τοῦ δούλου] σου Λ- - - - - πρεσβυτέρου · ἀμήν. +

15 Cf. Psalm<sup>LXX</sup> 53:6 (ἰδοὺ γὰρ ὁ θεός βοηθεῖ μοι); 69:6 (ὁ θεός, βοήθησόν μοι); 78:9 (βοήθησον ἡμῖν, ὁ θεός ὁ σωτὴρ ἡμῶν); 93:18 (κύριε, βοηθεῖ μοι); 108:26 (βοήθησόν μοι, κύριε ὁ θεός μου, σῶσόν με κατὰ τὸ ἔλεός σου); 118:86 (βοήθησόν μοι); 117 (βοήθησόν μοι, και σωθήσομαι).

16 Cf. Breytenbach (2012:383).

inscription is known from several other Christian monuments, in both Corinth and Attica.<sup>17</sup> It is appropriate as the end of a prayer.

Why would the supplicants be imprisoned? It is important to note that, in imperial times, prisoners were awaiting trial, not serving punishment. Creditors could confine their debtors in order to enforce payment. Corinth, a Roman colony since 44 BCE, was under the rule of Roman law. It is likely that the person invoking the Lord could have been an *addictus*, *debtor* in a process of legal action, who, after being convicted, had not paid the sum owed within 30 days and had consequently been brought before the magistrate by the creditor by means of *manus iniectio* and had been handed over by the magistrate by *addicere* to the creditor for enforcement of payment.<sup>18</sup>

If the debtor failed to pay or to give guarantees, the creditor could take the *addictus* home with him and hold him prisoner. In compliance with regulations, the creditor could, after sixty days, sell him as a slave or even kill him. The original location of *carceraria* supports the hypothesis that supplicants could be *addicti*. The “Boudroumi” arches were vaults among the shops north-west of the agora of ancient Corinth. It is likely that merchants kept the *addicti* in enclosed rooms adjacent to these vaults where they themselves had their shops.

The supplications expressed in the inscriptions confirm the hypothesis that the prisoners were awaiting trial. To ask for help is not the only perlocution engraved into the limestone plates. In several instances, the power of the Lord or of God or of Jesus Christ is invoked to punish those whom the supplicant holds accountable for their imprisonment.

An inscription, in which the initial cross Κ(ύρι)ε is followed by ὁ Θεός (as vocative), draws on the tradition of Genesis 1:4-5. The Lord, God, the Creator who separated (διαχωρίζω)<sup>19</sup> the darkness and raised the light throughout the world (οἰκουμένη), the Godbearer (θεοτόκος),<sup>20</sup> is asked to deliver (ἀποδίδωμι) Marinus, who placed them here,<sup>21</sup> and shall interrogate them and their Petronia<sup>22</sup>: + Κ(ύρι)ε ὁ Θεός ὦ τὸ σκότος διαχορίσας κέ | φῶς

17 Cf. ICG no. 2659. For Attica, cf. ICG nos. 1885, 1901, 1943, 2094 and 2150.

18 Cf. Paulus (2014).

19 Cf. Genesis<sup>LXX</sup> 1:4-5: καὶ εἶδεν ὁ θεὸς τὸ φῶς ὅτι καλόν. καὶ διεχώρισεν ὁ θεὸς ἀνὰ μέσον τοῦ φωτὸς καὶ ἀνὰ μέσον τοῦ σκότους. καὶ ἐκάλεσεν ὁ θεὸς τὸ φῶς ἡμέραν καὶ τὸ σκότος ἐκάλεσεν νύκτα. καὶ ἐγένετο ἑσπέρα καὶ ἐγένετο πρωὶ, ἡμέρα μία.

20 Cf. LSJ (1968:s.v.) “mother of God”.

21 Read βαλότος ἡμᾶς ὅδε as βαλόντος ἡμᾶς ὅδε. For βάλλω *cum acc.* in the sense of “to put, place”, cf. LSJ (1968:s.v. 6).

22 IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1275. The text is difficult. Read line 8: ὧδε καὶ ἐπίσω δὸς ἡμᾶς καὶ ἡμῖν.

ἀνατῆλας διὰ | τῆς ὑκουμένης, ἀπό||δος, θεοτόκε, ἀπό||δος Μαρίνου τοῦ | βαλότος ἱμᾶς  
| ὅδε κὲ πύσο τὸς | ἱμᾶς χ' ἱμᾶ||ς τὴν Πετρου|νίαν. +<sup>23</sup> The bottom left corner  
was already missing when the prayer was carved into the limestone,  
leaving space only for a final cross, and not for the usual final amen.  
In this instance, the Lord God as creator is invoked to deliver Marinus, whose  
accusation led to the imprisonment of the supplicant. It appears that the  
latter does not want to be interrogated by Marinus. Petronia's role is not  
clear.

We are tempted to ask if the attitude towards Marinus reflects the ethos  
of Christianity. However, love for the enemy is indeed absent from the next  
prayer. One of the two pieces of the limestone plate has survived, but  
crosses ending and closing the text and *nomina sacra* suffice to classify  
the monument as a Christian prayer. The God of justice who judges rightly  
is invoked to quickly flog the Greeks and to destroy the enemies of [--]  
yrus and Marinus, sons of John, the barber: + ὁ Θε(ε)δς τῆς δίκης τῆς δικα|ζούσης  
ὀρθῶς, φλα[γέλ]ωσον τάχος | τοὺς Ἑληνας Τ- -c.5- -ΡΟΥ ποτε κ(αι) ἀπώ|λεσον τοὺς  
ἐχθρ[οὺς - -c.6- -]υρου κ(αι) Μαρίνου || [τῶν] υἱ' ὧν Ἰ[ωάννου τοῦ κ]ουρέος +<sup>24</sup> Both  
supplicants have Latin names, but this does not suffice to detect reasons  
why they ask that the Greeks be flogged soon.

In despair, someone scribbled on another limestone slab: “Lord, make  
them to die a bad death.”<sup>25</sup> The last lines of a fragment left it to God (?)  
to “judge between me and my enemies”.<sup>26</sup> But this is the exception. The  
tendency is rather to pray that God punishes the opponent.

Another text ends by even negating the most basic Jewish-Christian  
supplication: “Lord, do *not* have mercy toward those who put us here.”<sup>27</sup> In  
fact, this is not part of a prayer, but the last two lines on a limestone slab.  
The text of the first line forms an acclamation: “May the good fortune of  
those who are plunged into”<sup>28</sup> this illegal place overcome.”<sup>29</sup> The case is  
still pending and the wish to win the case is expressed.<sup>30</sup> It is a place of  
injustice and the Lord should not pity the creditors.

23 Cf. Kraus (1895:92, 355).

24 IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1279.

25 IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1273: πῶσον Κ(ύρι)ε μὲρψ κακῶ ἀποθάνε τους.

26 IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1281: [νικᾷ ἢ] τύχη ΟἱΥ | 3 lines vacant | Δ[.].ΙΜ[.].]ΑΡΑ δικά|σον ἀνά  
μέσο(ν) | ἐμοῦ κὲ τῶν ἐκθρῶν | μοῦ.

27 IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1277: νικᾷ ἢ τύχη τῶν καταπ|ονουμένων ἐν τῷ | ἀνόμου τόπο τοῦ|το·Κ(ύρι)ε, μὴ  
ἐλείσεις τὸν | βαλότα ἡμᾶς ὅδε.

28 The verb is unclear. If the verb is καταποντόω, it means (as -ίζω) “to sink”, “plunge  
into”; cf. LSJ (1968:s.v.); Danker (2000:s.v.).

29 Cf. previous note for the text.

30 In a legal context, νικάω expresses the notion of winning a legal case. Cf. LSJ  
(1968:s.v. 5).

The two potential outcomes of the trial are also reflected in the two parts of an inscription written by two hands. In the first part, the wish is expressed that Georgius and Eumorphias should win the trial. After the cross, in a second hand, the supplicants air their anger against the accuser in prayer: “Lord destroy Leonianus through whom we came in here.”<sup>31</sup> Another fragmentary text shows the dual structure. The Holy --- is invoked, followed by the petition to save Andreas and Georgius from this place. Then follows “destroy ...”.<sup>32</sup>

Our penultimate example is particularly interesting, but difficult to interpret. Is it a Christian monument? In the first line, the *tau* could be in cruciform. The limestone slab was found with other Christian monuments. The inscribed text is an acclamation: νικᾷ ἡ τύχῃ τῶν καλῶν | κορασίον | τῶν φιλόνη|τον τοὺς | ἀγάμους.<sup>33</sup> “May the good fortune of the beautiful girls who loved the unmarried (men) prevail.” Were the girls imprisoned? If so: Why would the καλὰ κοράσια be imprisoned? Is this an example of Early Christianity curbing the infamous Corinthian prostitution? In that case, the last lines would make sense. The beautiful girls are not guilty of adultery; they loved the unmarried. What if the alleged cruciform *tau* is merely the result of damage to the limestone?

In our final example, only part of the text to the right of a drawing is legible. This fragment is indecipherable.<sup>34</sup> The rough drawing to the left of the fragment of text is an image of a young girl wearing a dress. It is not known why her image was found among the *carceraria*. Perhaps she was the beloved of one of the prisoners.

This short review of inscriptions from Corinth in the fifth and sixth centuries illustrates that Paul's advice that the Corinthians should not deliver each other towards the worldly judges, has by now become obsolete. Christianity was the determining religion in the dwindling empire. People were still causing the imprisonment of others. The prisoners seek help from God, whom they regard to be just. He is invoked to enable their release or to let those who accused them suffer, or both.

31 IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1276: I. νικᾷ ἡ τύχῃ Γεοργίου κ(αι) Εὐμο|ρφίας. + Λεόμυθος | II. Κ(ύρι)ε, ἀπόλεσον Λεωνιανό(ν), διὰ | τίνος ἐσήλθαμεν ὁδε. For ἐσήλθαμεν read εἰσήλθαμεν. The name Leomythus was added by the second hand.

32 IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1280: + ἄγιε -----| ζῶμεν-----| ἀπὸ τοῦ τόπ[ου τούτου] | Ἀνδρέαν, Γεώρ[γιον, --]--| + τρον, κ(αι) ἀπόλεσο[ν --] | -----.  
For the invocation with ἄγιε, cf. also no. 660.

33 IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1274.

34 IG IV<sup>2</sup> 3 no. 1286.

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