

‘From Heaven Shone the Grace of the Martyrs.’ A Christian Hymn Reconsidered

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Abstract: New edition of a short Christian hymn preserved on papyrus.

Keywords: Christianity, hymn, papyrus, martyrs

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Patri Michael Dillmann OP maximas agens gratias

The papyrus P. 11842 (TM 64971) was acquired by the Berlin Papyrus collection through Friedrich Zucker in 1910.¹ The sheet is written on both sides and preserves three texts in total. The text on the verso was published as a ‘Weihnachtslied’ by Kurt Treu, ‘Neue Berliner liturgische Papyri’, *APF* 21 (1971) 57–81, at 66, no. 3.² The first editor noted that there are remains of seven lines on the left and four lines on the right of the hymn rotated 90° to the left as well as a receipt on the verso. The document on the other side, a Hermopolite receipt for annona militaris and canonica, was subsequently published by Günther Poethke in 2001 as BGU XVII 2709.

Poethke argued in the introductions to BGU XVII 2709 and also 2708 for a date around the mid-fifth century, which was suggested by terminological affinities with some more securely dateable parallels. However, Nikolaos

Preliminary note: I thank Marius Gerhardt, the curator of the Greek and Latin papyri of the Berlin collection, for providing me with digital images of P. 11842 and for his permission to reproduce them in this article. I am indebted to Céline Grassien and Ágnes Tóthné Mihálykó for their help with this text and guidance in the world of liturgical papyri. I have discussed this text on several occasions with colleagues who helped to clarify difficult points: I thank Charikleia Armoni, Nikolaos Gonis, and Michael Zellmann-Rohrer for their suggestions.

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¹ See <<https://berlpap.smb.museum/03361/>>.

² The hymn has recently been presented in a blog post by Ágnes T. Mihálykó, see <<https://papyrus-stories.com/2018/12/12/an-egyptian-christmas-carol/>>.

Gonis has recently revised the date of our receipt: the deduction of 3 carats per solidus, as in this document, does not occur before the very late fifth century, thus the third indiction mentioned in the text 'should be not earlier than 496/7.'³ This provides a *terminus post quem* for the hymn: depending on how quickly the receipt came to be discarded, it could have been written in the very last years of the fifth century or in the early years or decades of the sixth.

Based on a re-examination of digital images, the history of the papyrus can be reconstructed as follows. First, the receipt was written on the *recto transversa charta*.⁴ Then the sheet was rotated by 90° and the verso was used to write a text against the fibres which has not yet been edited or described. This is hardly surprising, since it is extremely difficult to read, because it was at least partially washed off (see below). The layout and the readable⁵ words suggest that it was some sort of account, but it is not entirely clear, even if likely, that the writing to the right of the hymn was the lower part of the text to the left, especially because we cannot be certain whether the blank space below the account to the left of the hymn is original or only a result of a thorough washing off. At a later stage, the middle part of the text(s) on the verso was washed off, as it is apparent from the different color and damaged surface of the sheet there. This space was used to write the hymn parallel to the fibres. The fact that the text was copied on a reused document and that there was no effort to completely erase the previous writing indicates that we are dealing with an informal copy meant for personal use. Since the tax receipt is issued to a deacon, whose name cannot be read, Ágnes T. Mihálykó proposed that he could have reused the document for the hymn.⁶ While this is certainly an attractive possibility, we cannot be sure, especially since the

³ See Nikolaos Gonis, 'Soldiers and Money in Early Sixth-Century Hermopolis', *ZPE* 209 (2019) 237–241, esp. 220/n. 22.

⁴ Another example for a similar receipt from around the same period written *transversa charta* is BGU XII 2171.

⁵ The text starts with a cross on the top (l. 1), as already noted by Treu, but does not have a heading. The list is organized according to numbers: We find σλθ, (l. 2), σμ (l. 4), σμϱ (l. 5), and σμβ (l. 6) at the start of lines. What these numbers could refer to is unclear to me: are they perhaps summaries of numbered columns of an account? Lines 2 and 6 may contain the symbol for ὑπέρ: γ. Line 4 may contain after the number σμ the name Ἰωάννου and line 7 may mention a Διόσκ(οπος) and perhaps the abbreviation κ(εράτια) as κ. The text to the right of the hymn is even more obscure: I have not been able to read any word.

⁶ Ágnes T. Mihálykó, *The Christian Liturgical Papyri. An Introduction* (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 114), Tübingen 2019, 250.

reading of the deacon's title in the tax receipt on the recto is not beyond doubt.⁷

Both the receipt and the account(s) are written in a regular and experienced, even if not calligraphic, handwriting typical of documentary texts of this period. The handwriting of the hymn also belongs to the same style, but, despite its similarity with what remains of the account, it cannot be said whether it was written by the same scribe. Such 'informal upright hands' were typical for liturgical texts in the 3rd and 4th century and are occasionally found in the 5th century as well.⁸ There are two tremata in the text (l. 4: ὕμνον; l. 5: ὑψιστοῖς) and ἀλληλούεια is centered at the bottom. The hymn displays several phonetic spellings; it is likely that the text was copied from memory or dictation, as Mihálykó suggested: 'perhaps someone took a note of a hymn he heard in church.'⁹ However, the choice to lay out the final acclamation on its own line could also point to an aide-de-mémoire for performance.

It follows from this observation that the current line-division need not be significant. If we take it seriously, we would end up with a rather irregular structure: the lines of the hymn would tend to be isosyllabic, apart from line four: 11, 12, 11, 9, 12 syllables/line. Each line would contain three or four accented syllables if we do not count the 'minor' words such as the article or καί. Thus we could establish the metrical structure 3, 4, 3, 3, 4. We may consider whether μᾶς for ἡμᾶς in line 2 is meant to be enclitic as in modern Greek (cf. 2n): In this case, we would have a more regular structure with the first four lines having three stressed syllables each and the final one four. This could have been intentional, since it is common for the last verse of a liturgical composition to contain an additional stressed syllable.¹⁰ A very similar metrical composition is attested by the Easter hymn P.Bodmer XII which can perhaps be attributed to Melito of Sardis: five lines with three stressed syllables each are followed by a final one with four.¹¹

However, a much smoother metrical composition can be established if we assume that the line division of the papyrus does not mirror the original one, as has been pointed out to me by Nikolaos Gonis. We could divide the hymn

⁷ BGU XVII 2709, 1–2: ὀν(όματος) γινος | διάκονος. For a new reading in line 2 of the receipt see my PN correction in the editorial history of the document in the DDbDP.

⁸ See Mihálykó, *The Christian Liturgical Papyri* (n. 6), 85.

⁹ See above n. 2.

¹⁰ See Ludwig Koenen, P.David 5, esp. p. 33.

¹¹ See the edition in Othmar Perler, *Ein Hymnus zur Ostervigil von Meliton?* (Papyrus Bodmer XII), Freiburg 1960.

into four lines each containing 14 syllables with four stresses, again not counting 'minor' words and the final hallelujah. The first three lines consist of two isosyllabic cola with two stressed syllables each:¹²

οὐρανόθεν ἔλαμψεν || τῶν μαρτύρων ἡ χάρις
καὶ ἐδίδαξαν ἡμᾶς || τὸν λόγον τῆς πίστεως
καὶ ἐκήρυξαν ἡμῖν || τὸν ὕμνον τῶν ἀγγέλων
δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις Θεῷ τῷ σωτήρι ἡμῶν

This would produce the following metrical scheme (∪ = unstressed syllable/minor word; — = stressed syllable):

∪ ∪ — ∪ — ∪ ∪ || ∪ ∪ — ∪ ∪ — ∪
∪ ∪ — ∪ ∪ ∪ — || ∪ — ∪ ∪ — ∪ ∪
∪ ∪ — ∪ ∪ ∪ — || ∪ — ∪ ∪ ∪ — ∪
— ∪ ∪ ∪ — ∪ ∪ — ∪ ∪ — ∪ ∪ —

The metrical structure of the first three lines is nearly identical, while that of the fourth is conditioned by a biblical quotation (see below). The first three lines all start with an anapaest, a meter characteristic of hymnical compositions of this date. Similar metrical structures are attested in the papyri,¹³ but also in other probably contemporary hymns.¹⁴ Overall, this second metrical interpretation is much more attractive than the first one and also produces a more sensible word division between the lines, cf. e.g. the syntactical parallelism of lines 2 and 3.

The composition was identified as a Christmas hymn by Treu, but this does not seem to hold in light of the new readings. The hymn begins with the grace of the martyrs which shone from heaven, and the martyrs themselves are presented in the next lines as teachers of the faith and of the angelic hymn (Lc 2,14) which is quoted in a slightly modified version at the end. Even if it may appear surprising that the names of the martyrs are not specified in the text, this is not without parallel: such 'generic' hymns could

¹² I have normalized the spelling of the papyrus for the following metrical description and assumed that μᾶς in l. 2 was intended as ἡμᾶς.

¹³ William Brashear, 'Ein byzantinischer christlicher Hymnus (P.RainerCent. 31, P.Louvre E 6581, P.Berol. 5478 und 21292)', *ZPE* 59 (1985) 91–106, esp. 105.

¹⁴ See no. I.3 in Paul Maas (ed.), *Frühbyzantinische Kirchenpoesie. Anonyme Hymnen des V–VI Jahrhunderts* (= Frühbyzantinische Kirchenpoesie I; Kleine Texte für Vorlesungen und Übungen 52/53), Bonn 1910. This hymn consists of alternating lines of 14 and 12 syllables. Several of the 14-syllable lines display a nearly identical metrical structure to our hymn.

be sung in honour of different saints on various occasions.¹⁵ However, the martyrs' role as teachers in this text may suggest their identification with St. Peter of Alexandria and St. Mark, see 2n. The phraseology of the text is common in hymns and hagiography: for parallels see the notes below. It is impossible to say whether what is preserved is only a short troparion or an excerpt of a longer composition, although its somewhat abrupt nature and awkward line of thought may slightly favour the later hypothesis. The hymn might have been an Egyptian composition, but an import from elsewhere is also possible.

P. 11842
Hermopolite (?)

30 × 7 cm

After 496/497

↓

- 1 οὐρανόθην ἔλαμψεν τῶν μαρτύρων
2 ἡ χάρις καὶ ἐδίδασκεν ἡμᾶς τὸν λόγον
3 τῆς πίστεως καὶ ἐκήρυξαν ἡμῖν
4 τὸν ὕμνον τῶν ἀγγέλων· δόξαν
5 ἐν ὑψίστοις Θεῷ τῷ σωτήρι ἡμῶν
6 ἄλληλούεια

lectiones discrepantes editionis principis

1 Φ]ος ἄνοθην ἐλάμψεν *ed.pr.* 2 η δε . . . α . . ἡμᾶς τὸν λόγον
ed.pr. 3 ἐκήρυξαν (*l. ἐκήρυξεν vel ἔκραζεν*) *ed.pr.*, 6 ἄλληλούια *ed.pr.*

apparatus papyrologicus

1 *l.* οὐρανόθεν 2 *l.* ἐδίδαξαν ἡμᾶς 3 *l.* ἐκήρυξαν 4 ὕμνον *pap.*, *l.* τῶν ἀγγέλων,
l. δόξα 5 ὑψιστοις *pap.*

Translation

‘From heaven shone the grace of the martyrs, and they taught us the word of the faith and heralded to us the hymn of the angels: Glory to God, our Saviour, in the highest! Hallelujah!’

¹⁵ See Ágnes T. Mihálykó, “‘Intercede for Our Souls, Holy Martyr’ – Saints in Late Antique Hymns on Papyri”, in: Arkadiy Avdokhin (Ed.), *Resonant Faith in Late Antiquity. Idiom, Music, and Devotion in Early Christian Hymns* (forthcoming). I thank the author for sharing with me her article before its publication,

Commentary

1–2 ἔλαμψεν τῶν μαρτύρων | ἡ χάρις. The interpretation of the whole hymn depends on the reading of the last word of the first line. *Prima facie*, ἀστέρων may be also an option, but this reading is difficult both in terms of paleography and content. If we read the first letter as an alpha, there remains a small appendix on its left lower part which can belong neither to the alpha nor to the preceding ny of τῶν. However, it can be identified as a my with a shape similar to, even if slightly tighter than, the one in ἔλαμψεν in the same line. Of the second letter, read here as alpha, only the left part is visible, and of the rho essentially only traces of the descender are preserved, which seems to have slightly slanted to the left, possibly similarly to the rho of οὐρανόθην at the beginning of the line. The tau is fairly well preserved: only the right part of its crossbar is missing. For the following ypsilon-rho cf. the same combination in ἐκύραξαν (l. 3) and also the ypsilon in ὑψίστοις (l. 5).

While there are references to the star guiding the magi in hymns (see Anna Di Bitonto Kasser, 'Due nuovi testi cristiani', *Aegyptus* 79 [1999], 93–106, esp. 98–99), the collocation χάρις ἀστέρων would be awkward and unparalleled as far as I know and searches in the TLG have shown. However, there are several parallels for the phrase ἔλαμψεν τῶν μαρτύρων | ἡ χάρις. The most pertinent one stems from the roughly contemporary, fifth-century life of St. Thecla by Basil of Seleucia, see Gilbert Dagron (éd.), *Vie et miracles de sainte Thècle* (Subsidia hagiographica 62), Bruxelles 1978, 1.12: κελεύει πυρὶ παραδοθῆναι τὴν Θεέκλαν, ἵν' ἅμα καὶ ἡ τοῦ Χριστοῦ διαδειχθῇ δύναμις καὶ ἡ τῆς μάρτυρος ἐκλάμψη χάρις. Similar phrases can also be found in other hymns, see Ada Debiasi Gonzato (Ed.), *Analecta hymnica graeca. Canones Octobris*, Rome 1979, day 5, canon 4, ode 1.22–23: ἔλαμψε τῇ χάριτι | ἡ ἀήττητος μάρτυς Χριστοῦ; day 17, canon 21, ode 6.6–8: ὡς προσταγμάτων Θεοῦ ὄντες φύλακες, | ἀήττητοι καὶ φωταυγεῖς | ἀπεφάνθητε χάριτι, μάρτυρες.

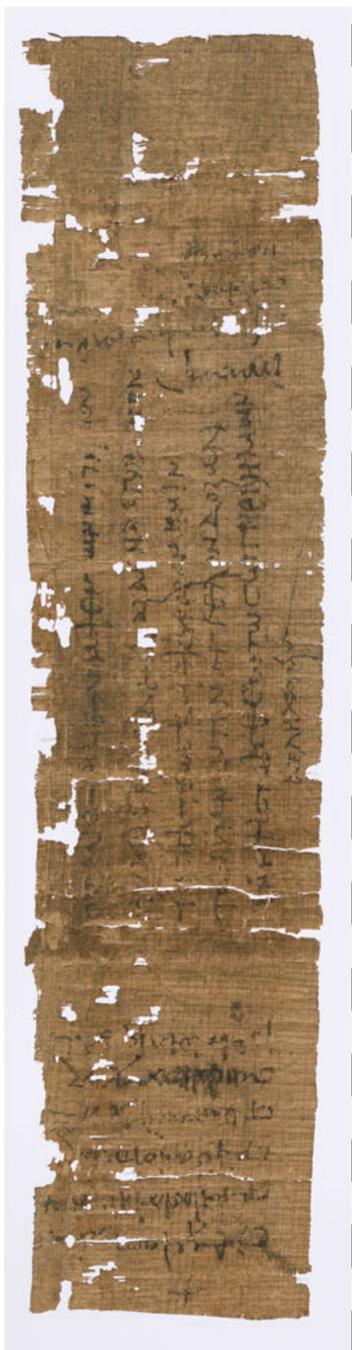
2 ἐδείδαξαν. The subject of ἐδείδαξαν (l. 2) and ἐκύραξαν (l. 3) can only be the martyrs. Alternatively we may consider whether ἐδείδαξαν is a misspelling for ἐδ(ε)ίδαξαν which could be still governed by ἡ χάρις, but this would essentially produce the same meaning. For martyrs as teachers cf. e.g. Ephraem Syrus, *De iudicio et compunctione* (Ed.: Konstantinos G. Phrantzoles, *Ὅσιον Ἐφραίμ τοῦ Σύρου ἔργα*. II, Thessalonike 1989, 386–402), p. 393: Πῦρ ἀθάνατόν ἐστιν ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ Θεοῦ· ὑποῦται ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς καὶ μισεῖ τὰ γῆινα. Καὶ διδάσκουσιν ἡμᾶς οἱ ἅγιοι Μάρτυρες οἱ γευσάμενοι αὐτῆς καὶ κορεσθέντες ἐξ αὐτῆς. As Ágnes T. Mihálykó points out to me, these verses may suggest that the unspecified martyrs of our text are St. Peter

of Alexandria and St. Mark, since teaching the faith is much more commonly associated with bishops than martyrs. In fact, the pairing of these martyr-saints occurs in several other papyri.¹⁶

μᾶς. *l.* ἡμᾶς. Alternatively one could read ἡ<μ>ᾶς, but the dropping of the eta is more likely than skipping a letter. It is questionable whether this form is already a sign of the development of the modern Greek enclitic μας, since there are only a few examples of the latter in the papyri: see Francis T. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods II. Morphology*, Milano 1981, 163.

4–5 δόξαν | ἐν ὑψίστοις Θεῷ τῷ σωτήρι ἡμῶν | ἀλληλούεια. The second part of the angelic hymn (Lc 2,14: καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς εἰρήνη ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίας) is replaced by τῷ σωτήρι ἡμῶν. The accusative δόξαν instead of δόξα as well as the conclusion of the doxology with hallelujah is attested in the papyri: for parallels see the introduction and the notes by Treu in the *ed.pr.*

¹⁶ This will be argued in more detail in Mihálykó, “Intercede for Our Souls, Holy Martyr” (n. 15).



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