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ARKADIY AVDOKHIN

OFFERING WREATHS, HYBRIDIZING GENRES:
AN UNUSUAL THIRD-CENTURY MUMMY LABEL (P. ROSS. GEORG. 1, 14)

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AN UNUSUAL THIRD-CENTURY MUMMY LABEL (P. ROSS. GEORG. 1, 14)*

The mummy label (τάβλα) in Roman Egypt is typically an artifact of modest size (within the average range of 5 × 10 cm) with a brief text inscribed on it that includes the name, parentage of the deceased and, often but not always, her/his occupation, and age.¹ Written in Demotic, Greek, or combining both, the labels were affixed to mummies (often with cords inserted through pigtailed shapes in a resemblance of the *tabula ansata*) before entombment, sometimes substantially earlier, including during transportation along the Nile. As small objects that were part of the burial, the labels, inconspicuous for their small size and scribbled text, and interred (or otherwise enclosed within the burial space) alongside the mummy, would not be primarily designed for the eyes of a human beholder.

The object that I discuss below challenges these conventions on a number of counts. It is a wooden plaque of substantial size (23 × 7 cm) that, despite the self-description as a τάβλα in its Greek verse inscription in red ink, engages with the reader and urges her/him to perform a commemorative ritual of offering wreaths to the tomb. What I offer below is a brief discussion of the inscription followed by tentative suggestions as to the object's possible ritual function as an element of the burial that will hopefully encourage further interest and research.

Description, text, and dating

The inscribed object is exclusively known through the 1925 edition of Greek papyri by Georg Zereteli, who, alongside publishing his own papyrus collection, sought to include a wider range of papyri (in the broad sense of the word) into it; the artifact under study used to form part of a private collection of Professor M. I. Maximova and had been purchased in Cairo in 1909 by B. A. Turaev.² Unfortunately, the wooden tablet does not seem to have physically survived, nor did Zereteli provide its image in his edition. The attempts to locate the object, its fuller description, or image, in Maximova's archive (now at the Institute for the History of Material Culture, Russian Academy of Sciences, St Petersburg), have been fruitless and no further record seems to be available.³

Zereteli, based on the palaeography, assigned a third-century date to the wooden tablet.⁴ According to his description, the text was written in red ink, in a non-elegant hand that combines cursive and uncial letters. The tablet seems to have been made in imitation of a *tabula ansata*, complete with smaller exten-

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¹ The best general discussion is still Jan Quaegebeur, *Mummy Labels: An Orientation*, in *Textes grecs, démotiques et bilingues*, ed. by E. Boswinkel and P. W. Pestman (Leiden 1978), pp. 232–59 (with further bibliography). For a more recent selection of texts with a good introduction, see S. P. Vleeming, *Demotic and Greek-Demotic Mummy Labels and Other Short Texts Gathered from Many Publications* (Leuven 2011).

² *Papyri russischer und georgischer Sammlungen*, 5 vols., ed. by Georg Zereteli (Amsterdam 1966), vol. 1, no. 14, pp. 93–4 (with a brief commentary). This edition is a facsimile copy of the original Tiflis edition. Professor Maximova, an archaeologist and art historian, was Zereteli's colleague and close friend. Both of them, alongside B. A. Turaev and M. I. Rostovtzeff, would regularly purchase artifacts in Egypt's antiquity market for their respective private collections, some elements of which found their way into Zereteli's edition. For the formation of the collection, see the brief remarks in Elena Chepel, P. Tbilisi inv. 344v: Inventory from Memphite Land Register, *Tyche*, 33 (2018), 43–6 (especially 44–5).

³ I thank Elena Chepel for contacting the archive holders on my behalf.

⁴ Alongside the palaeographic description in the edition cited above, see a little more detailed exposition in Georg Zereteli, *Zwei Denkmäler der griechischen Schrift in Aegypten*, *հայերն ժյւնոյրդժժ* = *La Science en Géorgie*, 1 (1923), 75–9 (77–9).

natural order of season change and vegetational growth.³⁵ A rare, and incomplete, parallel in a Greek verse epitaph is found in Rome, although on a tombstone from someone hailing from Asia Minor – potentially an instance of dominance of Roman literary and commemoration culture over the Hellenic origin of the deceased.³⁶ Unsurprisingly maybe, asking for flowers to be cast at the tomb is usual in imperial epitaphs in Latin, which may reflect the Roman habit of *rosalia* (the practice of offering flowers, predominantly roses, in course of a regulated ritual, often performed by necropolis authorities) or connected rites and expectations.³⁷ While it may be tempting to suggest that what we see in the mummy inscription may be a reference to *rosalia*, we do not have good evidence for the rite in Roman Egypt, and the existing epigraphic references (in Greek) come from mainland Greece, Asia Minor and, occasionally, Rome. Most importantly, ῥοδισμός inscriptions tend to be explicit about the ritual enactments performed in a regulated, repetitive, usually calendric pattern, and often attest to institutional arrangements,³⁸ whereas the discussed inscription emphatically presents a private request from a casual reader-viewer, which tallies well with its reliance on the epigraphic conventions of addressing a passer-by.

How are we to imagine, therefore, the spatial and ritual context of the barely paralleled, privately reverential gesture asked for in the inscription under study? This literary conceit would have been ultimately premised on the dead body's spatial accessibility, possibly a deliberate ritual display. There has been an ongoing debate about potential forms of such display. In a departure from the once-widely held view of the popularity of keeping mummies in *atria* of Egyptian houses, recent studies have suggested a range of other options that could offer opportunities to visually present bodies of the dead for visitation and commemoration.³⁹ Chapels at νεκροπόλεις may have been the most natural venue in which encounter with the dead could be made possible and even welcome; the prolonged periods of time before burials that, as suggested by funerary art and *paraphernalia*, could have also involved conscious display.⁴⁰ While we are in the dark regarding the specifics of Anoubion's burial, his body was clearly displayed at some point of his *post mortem* existence, with a commemoration rite involving offering of wreaths.

The particularities of the inscribed *tabula ansata* as an element of the mortuary display remain equally obscure. The spectrum of public exposure patterns and their Romanized and Hellenic visuality in mortuary design in Roman Egypt was indeed large, encompassing such perceivably peculiar instances as, for example, a standing mummy coffin executed with a remarkable similarity to Greek statues in his posture and attire (British Museum EA 55022).⁴¹ To quote Christina Riggs's fortunate formulation, "The elaborately

³⁵ Bernand, *InscrMetr*, no. 87. The epitaph speaks of seasons giving their respective offerings, including winter with a wreath of narcissus (ναρκίσσω δὲ στέφει, l. 8), spring the primrose (ῥόδον ἐκ καλύκων, ἄνθος ἔρωτι φίλον). For discussion and bibliography, see now Marjorie Susan Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife in the Tombs of Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Cambridge 2015), pp. 91–5.

³⁶ IGUR III, 1288, ll. 10–12: ἀλλ' ἰκ[ετεύω], / πᾶς παράγων, στέψ[ον με] ῥόδοις (A. Wilhelm prints ἦ[δη με ... στέψ[ον τε], cf. SEG 30 1206); roses, not wreaths, however.

³⁷ Lattimore, *Themes*, pp. 135–8.

³⁸ Christina Kokkinia, Rosen für die Toten im Griechischen Raum und eine neue ῥοδισμός-Inschrift aus Bithynien, *Museum Helveticum*, 56.4 (1999), 204–21. Certain elements of mortuary designs in Roman Egypt, however, have been tentatively linked with *rosalia*, although the connection remains speculative, such as floral designs in tomb vaults (Alexandria) and walls (Tuna el-Gebel) – see, respectively, Marjorie S. Venit, The Tomb from Tigrane Pasha Street and the Iconography of Death in Roman Alexandria, *American Journal of Archaeology*, 101.4 (1997), 701–29, at 717–8; Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife*, p. 91.

³⁹ For the academic trajectory away from the ancient topos of keeping mummies in Egyptian houses, famously followed by Flinders Petrie and, more recently, Barbara Borg, The Dead as a Guest at Table? Continuity and Change in the Egyptian Cult of the Dead, in *Portraits and Masks: Burial Customs in Roman Egypt*, ed. Morris L. Bierbrier (London 1997), pp. 26–32, see Cornelia Römer, Das Werden zu Osiris im römischen Ägypten, *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, 2.2 (2012), 141–61.

⁴⁰ For necropolis chapels as possible places of display of mummies, see Dominic Montserrat, Death and Funerals in the Roman Fayum, in *Portraits and Masks*, pp. 33–44; for archaeological data on the display of mummies, often in specialized cases, see now Marie Vandenbeusch, Coffins as Statues? The Study of Cover British Museum EA 55022 from Roman Egypt, *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections*, 23 (2019), 127–53 (especially 145–6); see also the remarks of Christina Riggs, Tradition and Innovation in the Burial Practices of Roman Egypt, in *Tradition and Transformation: Egypt under Roman Rule*, ed. by Katja Lembke, Martina Minas-Nerpel and Stefan Pfeiffer (Leiden, Boston, MA 2010), pp. 343–56 (at 351–2).

⁴¹ Vandenbeusch, Coffins as Statues (with further examples and bibliography).

decorated monuments and mummies dating to the late Ptolemaic and Roman Periods testify to the suitability of the mortuary sphere as a forum for negotiating identities, which could be remarkably flexible.⁴² While highly unusual in introducing a full-fledged Greek epitaph onto a mummy label, the inscription falls into the broader category of *tabula ansata* mortuary epigraphy in Egypt that could make good use of visibility patterns typical of Roman and Hellenistic public epitaphs, as, for example, is the case with Ardemidora's brief yet lavishly executed gilt inscription set up prominently in a *tabula ansata* on an upright element of her elaborate coffin.⁴³ The stating of ritual suggestions (albeit shrouded in the traditional idiom of Hellenic verse epitaph) in our inscription presupposes regular visual exposure that, while finding itself at home in the culturally hybrid ritual environment of Roman Egypt, may not be easily reconciled with the conventionally acknowledged function of mummy inscriptions as, on the one hand, practical labels regulating shipping and burial procedures and, on the other, as mortuary tokens ensuring smooth translation to afterlife. The possible ritual implications of the inscribed *tabula ansata* merit further research; I will limit myself here to pointing out the technical possibility that its two pierced pigtales may have been used to fix it to a solid structure such as coffin, similarly to certain other mummy labels.⁴⁴

As an exceptional instance of funerary epigraphy in verse on mummy labels, the inscription is a remarkable object, and deserves significantly more attention than it has so far received. It can, potentially, throw new light on funerary and commemoration practices in imperial Egypt, and will hopefully be used in further research on them.

Arkadiy Avdokhin, HSE University, Institute for Oriental and Classical Studies, 21/4 Staraya Basmannaya street, Moscow, Russia, 105006
aavdohin@hse.ru

⁴² Christina Riggs, *The Beautiful Burial in Roman Egypt: Art, Identity, and Funerary Religion* (Oxford, New York 2006), p. 256.

⁴³ New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 11.155.5a, b, AD 90–100, inscription SB I 5993 = TM 40595; see Riggs, *Beautiful Burial*, pp. 112–13, figs. 48–9.

⁴⁴ E.g. the two unusually large and beautifully executed plaques from Brussels – see Quaegebeur, *Mummy Labels*, p. 236, who flags up the possibility of them having been fixed to a coffin.