

# A Coptic Letter from Ihnasya el Madinah, Cairo Museum TR 1245, with References to Coptic Medicine\*

رسالة بالقبطية من إهناسيا المدينة، متحف القاهرة TR 1245، مع إشارات للطب القبطي

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## ملخص

يتناول البحث دراسة لبردية؛ وهي عبارة عن خطاب من شخص يدعى 'شنودة'، وهو راهب في أحد الأديرة القريبة من الفيوم - وذلك اعتماداً على لهجة الخطاب التي تنتمي بشكل نموذجي للهِجَة الفيومية-، موجهاً خطابه إلى شخص يدعى 'أثناسيوس'؛ الذي ربما كان قائداً لفرقة في الجيش.

وعلى ما يبدو، كان هذا الخطاب كان ردّاً على خطاب آخر أرسل إلى شنوده من أثناسيوس يسأل فيه عن علاج مرض أصيبت به عيناه. لذلك يقترح الباحثان أن شنوده أرسل هذا الخطاب إلى أثناسيوس ويذكر فيه أن علاج هذا المرض هو استخدام مادة التوتيا. وهذا العلاج مازال مستخدماً حتى الآن عند بعض الطبقات الشعبية في مصر. هذه البردية مكونة من سبعة أسطر على وجه البردي وسطر واحد على ظهر البردية وهو عبارة عن العنوان.

والبردية محفوظة الآن في المتحف المصري بالقاهرة تحت رقم TR 1245، وتؤرخ غالباً في نهاية القرن السابع وبداية القرن الثامن الميلادي. وقد اكتشفت هذه البردية في منطقة إهناسيا المدينة بمحافظة بني سويف، ولا نعرف بالضبط الظروف المحيطة بهذا الاكتشاف.

وتندرج هذه البردية تحت مجموعة البرديات القبطية الطبيعية حيث إنها تشير إلى نوع من الدواء يمكن استخدامه لعلاج العين.

ونستخلص منها أن مرسل هذه البردية راهب وعلى ما يبدو أن الكنائس والأديرة في الفترة القبطية لم تكن مجرد أماكن للعبادة والصلاة لكنها كانت مراكز طبية كما كان الحال في معابد مصر القديمة.

**Papyrus Cairo** (Ihnasya el Madinah).

**Special Register Number** (TR): 1245.<sup>1</sup>

**Provenance:** Ihnasya el Madinah, Beni Suef District.

**Date:** 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century CE

**Size:** Length 22 cm, width 16 cm (CG 30705).

**Hand:** Generally related to Stegemann, Taf 9, 11.<sup>2</sup>

**Palaeography:** Papyrus is written in large clear handwriting with the aid of a thin pen. The writing does not have any ligatures. Certain clauses are

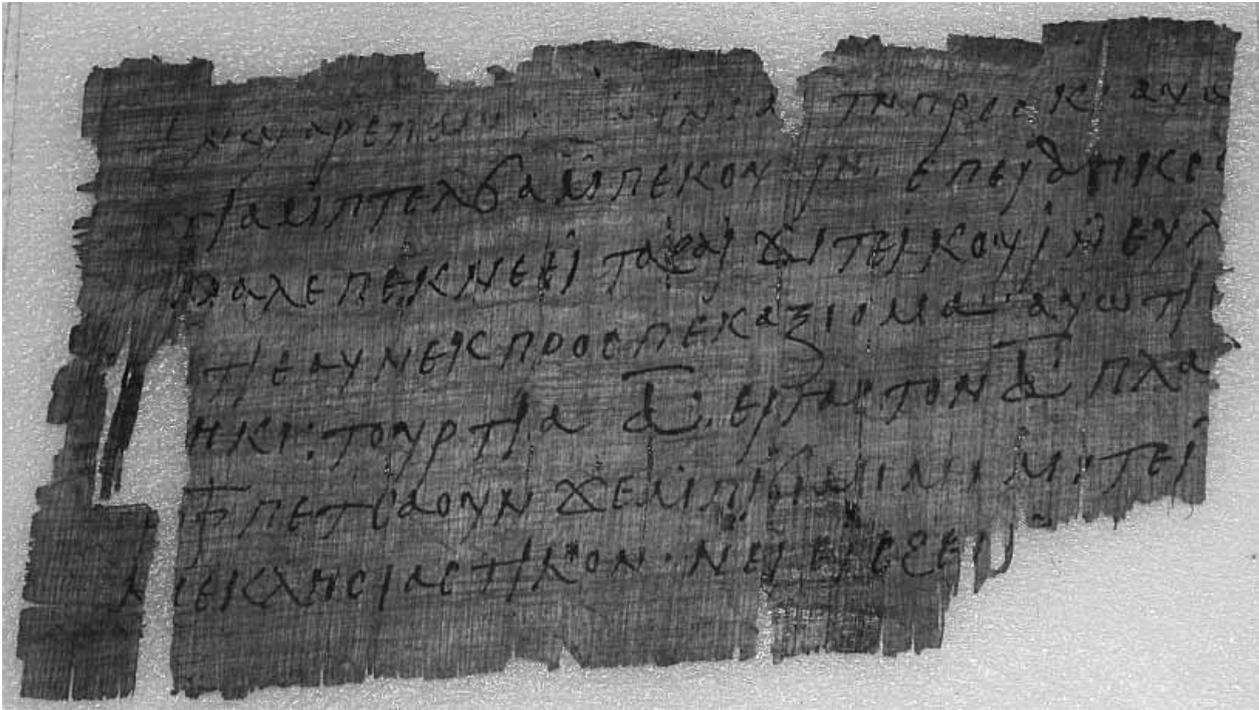
punctuated with a point above the line.

**Dialect:** Standard Fayoumic.

**Content or Subject:** Personal letter with medical terms.

**Preservation:** The left hand side of the first seven lines of this text is preserved in a good condition with only a small lacuna at the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> lines.

**Names mentioned:** Athanasius and Shenote.



Papyrus TR 1245, Recto.

**The Text:**

**Recto:**

- 1- 7 n̄arep(n) mn nxwy nim tn prosk, auw
- 2- g/ a mptelqa mpekou ain, epeidh ksa [oun
- 3- male pekneei tazai j i tei kou i neu [ogia
- 4- ti eau nek prospeka3ioma auw ti [
- 5- X]hki: tourtia Aergaston (eigaston?) A pIA[
- 6- v] 7 petsaoun j e Mpi qimi vmi/ mitei[
- 7- n eklasiastikon. nei ei s5e(i) [M mau

5- toutia

7- ekklasiastikon

**Translation:**

**Recto:**

- 1- First of all things we make obeisance and [
- 2- ...the healing of your light, since you know [

- 3- May your charity reach me and accept this small bless[ing]
- 4- I give glory to you according to your rank and I [
- 5- Poor: Cottage smoke one, erjaqto v one, [
- 6- That is god who knows that I did not find celery [
- 7- Ecclesiastic (Churchly?) those I write them [

**Verso:**

...nacioc pe tratilatiis? ̄enoute p t/ ey

Athanasius the Commander + Shenote the least.<sup>3</sup>

**Comments:**

This letter is written in text-book standard Fayoumic by a monk or monastic person called Shenote to someone called Athanasius the commander qtratulatus.

It is easy to notice that this is a medical papyrus as it contains certain expressions and terms used in these kinds of papyri.



This letter seems to be in reply to another letter of inquiry regarding a medical condition. It appears that the person called Athanasius who was a military commander, had some problem in his eye (wood or blood in eyes).<sup>4</sup> So he sent a letter to this monastic person called Shenote to ask him about the medicine. Shenote then responded with this letter including a prescription for his illness.

In Coptic times, monasteries and churches were used as medical centers. For example, many medical papyri were found surrounding the monastery of *Apa Jeremiah* in Saqqara. The temples of the Pharaonic period were centers of knowledge and learning. The priests of these temples were also known as healers. Certain sects of priests were particularly famous for this such as the priests of the goddess Sekhmet. This also continued in Roman Egypt and during the Islamic period as some mosques were known as medical centers. Many large present day mosques around Egypt also have medical centers attached who treat people with very reasonable prices and in some cases entirely for free.

Although very little information can be gathered from this fragmentary letter, it is still important because it offers some medical terms such as ‘**toutia**’. This is the first time that term appears in Coptic documentary texts. The term ‘**ergaston**’ is also not a commonly used term. It sounds like a Greek word but could not be located in dictionaries or other books. The word *ergaston* was almost certainly used as a remedy for eye illnesses, particularly blood in the eyes. Perhaps we may find a translation for this word in other texts.<sup>5</sup>

The word ‘**qtratulatus**’ had two different meanings in the late Roman empire.

First, it designated an army general. It is derived from the feminine term *στρατηλάτισσα*. It was also used in literary compositions during the Byzantine empire between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE as the military title of *Magister militum* during the Byzantine empire. It was also equivalent to the term *tribunus (civitatis)*. It is sometimes used in connection with relatively low offices of notary. From the 6<sup>th</sup> century,

it does not necessarily denote a general in the active service but is mostly used as an honorary title.<sup>6</sup> It is like using the term pasha for police officers and others nowadays in Egypt after it was abolished as a title, or using the word prince in the past to denote fine manners or grace. Second, it was a modest title. It often appears on seals of the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century. The title 'stratelates' is sometimes mentioned as an isolated dignitary.<sup>7</sup>

In Byzantine times and especially in literary texts, **qtratulatus** translates as a military commander. At the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries it is probably more appropriate to translate it as an officer 'honorary title'. However, in this letter, it is more likely a real commander since the tone indicates respect and awe such as line 4: 'I give glory to you according to your rank'.

Dialect of the letter: The dialect of this letter is standard Fayoumic.<sup>8</sup> The papyrus was found in Ihnasya el Madinah, Beni Suef District but was probably written in Fayoum. In any case, there is a possibility that the Fayoumic dialect was used in the whole area surrounding Fayoum and not just Fayoum itself. It is difficult in some cases to define the exact borders of a particular dialect.<sup>9</sup>

#### Commentary:

- 1- 7: An apostrophe-shaped mark barely appears at the top of the vertical stroke.
- 2- The first line is hardly visible because some papyrus fibres got out, but it is still readable. It begins with one of the most elaborate openings in Coptic letters.<sup>10</sup>
- 3- **prosk** is an abbreviated form of **proskunei**. There are many forms and abbreviations for this word.<sup>11</sup>
- 4- This is a well-known expression and is usually used when somebody is ill (**mptelqy Mpekoy Ain, mptelka Mpekou ain?**), specially with eye illnesses. Ophthalmology

was an important branch in ancient Egyptian medicine due to diseases caused by dust, heat, flies and intense light among other things. We know of at least five ophthalmologists from ancient Egypt. They were under the protection of the god Thoth who cured the eye of Horus after it was cut into 64 pieces. Amon was also believed to be an oculist who opens the eyes.<sup>12</sup> We have around 108 prescriptions to treat the eyes in medical papyri. Many of them state eye problems are said to be caused by having a demon in the eye which is a rather supernatural explanation.<sup>13</sup>

- 5- (**pet?**) **ksaoun** is reconstructed (meaning the word is not complete but can be completed based on the context).
- 6- The jussive **male, mare, mar\***,<sup>14</sup> expresses a command directed to one or more first or third person entities (jussive command).<sup>15</sup>
- 7- **Neul ogia** is reconstructed.
- 8- This line describes the medicine to be taken by Athanasius. **tougia** should be **coucia** or **coucie** توتيا توتيا. Cottage smoke is used in Coptic prescriptions for healing the eyes, or as a medicine against eye illnesses and other illnesses.<sup>16</sup>
- 9- The word **ergaston** could not be found.
- 10- This is a well known expression (**Mpiqimi**), when somebody cannot do something.
- 11- With **mi** and **mit** the scribe probably made a mistake and added **mi** to the word **mit**. This mistake might have happened because of the end of **mpiqimi** is **mi**, and the beginning of **mi** and **mit** as well. **mit** which is probably celery, was used in ancient times to treat a variety of diseases. It is a remedy to stop blood in the eyes, like frankincense, celery is placed on both eyes.<sup>17</sup>

12- The address describes the recipient, Athanasius, as a commander or an officer.

13- Athanasius was a very common proper name in Middle Egyptian.<sup>18</sup>

### Verso:

7 stands for ornamental purposes in the middle space where the tape crossed.

### Notes

\* This research paper was presented in the Ninth International Congress of Coptology held in Cairo from 14-16 September, 2008.

- 1 This papyrus does not have a CG or TR number because it was stored with many other Greek pieces from one box in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The box is from Ihnasya el Madinah and is in section 6 of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, Curator Mr. Sayyid Hassan.
- 2 V. Stegemann, *Koptische Paläographie*, 25 Tafeln, Band I, *Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Altertums und des Mittelalters* (Heidelberg: Selbstverlag von F. Bilabel, 1936).
- 3 This kind of expression is common in letters, like the humble servant.
- 4 In ancient Egyptian medicine, diagnosis and name of disease was merely a statement of symptoms.
- 5 For more details concerning medicine and medical terms, see: Marie Hélène Marganne, *La Chirurgie dans l'Égypte gréco-romaine: Inventaire analytique des papyrus Grécs de Médecine* (Genève, 1981). Also: Marie-Hélène Marganne, *La chirurgie dans l'Égypte gréco-romaine d'après les papyrus littéraires grecs. Studies in Ancient Medicine* 17 (Leiden, 1998).
- 6 Palme, Bernhard, *Griechische Texte XVII, Dokumente zu Verwaltung und Militär aus dem Spätantiken Ägypten, Corpus Papyrorum Raineri*, Band XXIV, *Textband* (Wien, 2002), 178 n. 2.  
 'Zu στρατηλάτης als Ehrentitel s. Jones, *Later Roman Empire* II 535; ferner Gascou, *Grands domaines* 65, Am. 362 und A. Kazhdan, *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* III (1965) s.v. Stratelates. Daß der Terminus schon im 6 Jh. Nicht nur einen General im aktiven Dienst, sondern als blosser Ehrentitel auch den Rang einer Person (und nicht ihre Funktion) bezeichnete konnte, geht zweifelsfrei aus der feminine Form στρατηλάτισσα (CPR) X 127 [Ars., 584] hervor'. Daneben kann στρατηλάτης allerdings auch in byzan-

tinischer Zeit (Besonders in den literarischen Quellen) noch militärische Kommandanten bezeichnet und zwar also Äquivalent für magister militum: J. Durliat, *Magister militum- στρατηλάτης dans l'empire byzantine* (VIe-VIIe siècles), *BZ* 72 (1979) 306-320; oder für dux: M. Gelzer, *Altes und Neues aus der byzantinisch-ägyptischen Verwaltungsmisere*, *APF* 5 (1913) 356; auch *BZ* 22 (1913), als Äquivalent für tribunus (civitatibus): Maspero, *Organisation militaire* 83 f. und 89.

- 7 A.P. Kazhdan, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* III, (New York, 1991), 1965. In the Late Roman Empire, 'Stratelates' has two different meanings which are general or 'Magister militum', or a modest title equated to that of the **apo aparchon** in Justinian I's novel 90. It often appears on seals in the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> CE. It continued into the 11<sup>th</sup> century and meant commander in chief.
- 8 Fayoumic dialect is characterized by the exchange of the 'r' sound to an 'l' sound. Most Fayoumic documents fall between the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In writings from the previous century, they sometimes referred to it as the 'Bashmuric' dialect. This is a misnomer as the latter is the dialect of people who live in the northern Delta near Mansoura. In Arabic: E.M. Ishaq, *Coptic Literature: Coptic Dialects and their Literary Effects* (Cairo, 1998), 21, 24.
- 9 For medical information check: A. Biedenkopf-Ziehner, *Untersuchungen zum Koptischen Briefformular unter Berücksichtigung ägyptischer und griechischer Parallelen. Koptische Studien*, Band I (Würzburg, 1983), 94 ff. προσκυει.
- 10 For more details about **toutia**, see: G.E. Baithar, *Zusammenstellung über die Kräfte der Bekannten infachen Heil- und Nahrungsmittel von Abu Mohammed Abdallah Ben Ahmed aus Malaga, bekannt unter dem Namen Ebn Baithar. Aus dem arabischen überetzt von Joseph v. Sonthheimer*. Erster Band (Stuttgart, 1840); W.C. Till, *Die Arzneikunde der Kopten* (Berlin, 1951), 67, no. 64; Hüttenrauch, J.R. Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1992).
- 11 H. Förster, *Wörterbuch der griechischen Wörter in den koptischen dokumentarischen Texten*; Herausgegeben von Hans Förster. *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur*, Band 148 (Berlin, 2002), 690 ff. προσκεινε, προσκεινει, προσκηνη, προσκηναί, προσκηνε, προσκηνησ, προσκινε, προσκινει, προσκινουσ, προσκινσ, προσκινσν.
- 12 H. Kamal, *Dictionary of Pharaonic Medicine* (Cairo, 1967), 159.
- 13 Some of the eye spells are: nos. 9, 23, 34, 36 from the London papyrus, 356, 360, 385 from Ebers, os-

- لبللى عزام، التعاويز، 1062 (8) no. Deir el Medina tracon  
 السحرية ضد الأمراض في عصر الدولة الحديثة: دراسة حضارية،  
 (رسالة دكتوراة، كلية الآداب، جامعة حلوان، 2001)، 127-120
- 14 B. Layton, *A Coptic Grammar with Chrestomathy and Glossary: Sahidic Dialect, Porta Linguarum Orientalium N.S* (2002) §340.
- 15 Layton, *A Coptic Grammar, Porta Linguarum Orientalium* 20 (2004), §340, 268.
- 16 W.C. Till, *Die Arzneykunde der Kopten*, 67, no. 64, Hüttenrauch.
- 17 L. Manniche, *An Ancient Egyptian Herbal* (London, 1989), p. 76-77. Ancient Egyptian  *mAtt*, Arabic كرفس karafs. Dioscorides gave the Egyptian name as *mith* (III.75). According to Hassan Kamal, *Dictionary of Pharaonic Medicine*, 92, celery or 'mater' could mean either celery or parsley. There were different kinds of celery such as *Apium graveolens* (pharmaceutical *Herba Apii graveolentis*, *Fructus Apii graveolentis*), *Apium dulce* Mill (celery of the Delta), and *Apium petroselinum* (desert celery). In his translation of Ebers, Dawson rendered it as mandragora. In papyrus Ebers Pres 352, it is used externally as an application over the eye to expel blood from the eyes-probably a sub-conjunctival haemorrhage, Ebbell's translation of Ebers, 70; B. Ebbell, *The Papyrus Ebers: The greatest Egyptian medical document* (Copenhagen, 1937). It appears in Crum as parsley or celery in both Sahidic and Bohairic. W.E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford, 1962), 188.
- 18 B.A. Pearson and J.E. Goehring (eds.), *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity. Studies in Antiquity and Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1986). Perhaps Ch. Kannengiesser, S.J., 'Athanasius of Alexandria vs. Arius: The Alexandrian Crisis', 204-215; A. Schiller, 'A Checklist of Coptic Documents and Letters', *BASP* 13, no. 1 (1976), 99-123. See: pap. V 9492.