A SEVENTH-CENTURY COPTIC LIMESTONE IN THE ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, OXFORD

(BODL. COPT. INSCR. 426)

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1. Introduction to the Limestone Manuscript and its Texts:

1.a. Previous research and discovery

This large Coptic limestone and some of its texts were briefly described in 1922 by W. E. Crum in a centenary volume honoring Jean-François Champollion.\footnote{W. E. Crum, “La Magie Copte. Nouveaux Textes” in Recueil D’Études Égyptologiques (Paris: Librarie Ancienne [H. & E. Champion], 1922) 537-544, the stone is only briefly discussed on p. 544 with no transcription or photo; Crum translates a few lines (B.10-15a) into French. His article is only briefly discussed by Kropp, who did not see the limestone (which would have been in the Bodleian at that time), but translates Crum’s French translation (of B.10-15a) into German, in A. M. Kropp, Ausgewählte koptische Zaubertexte, 3 vols. (Brussels: Foundation Égyptologique Reine Elisabeth, 1930-31) 3.210-11 (= §360). I am indebted to Dr. Helen Whitehouse of the Ashmolean Museum for allowing me access to the Ashmolean’s Bodleian collection in August 1993, for quality photographs and for her kind permission to publish the artifact; the stone, actually part of the Bodleian collection, has been stored in the Ashmolean Museum since 1939.} The texts and photos are published here for the first time in a volume honoring our late colleague and friend William M. Brashear.\footnote{The present writer was fortunate to work under William Brashear in the Papyrussammlung of the Ägyptisches Museum in Berlin for four long summers in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. The many months of discussion of problematic Greek and Coptic texts, and the endless hours we spent analyzing and conserving numerous damaged papyri, made clear to me that Bill’s reputation for scholarly excellence was combined with a generous willingness to share the vast treasures of the Berlin papyrus collection under his expert care.} Crum notes that the stone, written on both sides and in the Sahidic dialect, was acquired in Thebes by the noted epigrapher Norman de Garis Davies and deposited in the Bodleian Museum, Oxford.\footnote{Davies, a one time Congregational clergyman and a most promising dilettante Egyptologist under F. Ll. Griffith, quickly became a master epigrapher as his high quality work throughout Egypt demonstrates. His work in Thebes, El-Amarna, and Saqqara between 1898 and 1937 was done under the auspices of the Egypt Exploration Fund and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. However, the time and location of this find were not noted in the museum’s files which were made available for my study in August of 1993. On Norman de Garis Davies and his wife Nina Davies (an
1.b. Description of the manuscript

The limestone is unusually large (24.2 x 24.2 cm), and in the shape of an irregular hexagon of varying thickness (0.1-3.0 cm; see photos). The top edge (1.0-2.0 cm thick) is flat from tooling with traces of uncolored plaster or mortar indicating the stone had been previously used for some other purpose. The other edges are sharp, jagged and brittle, having suffered damage after inscribing, resulting in several lacunae.

Another unusual feature of the stone, crucial to an understanding of its function, is that it cannot stand upright by itself, as it is “top heavy” with a pointed and irregular bottom edge. The fact that the inscribed areas conform to the present shape of the stone indicates that the stone was essentially in its present shape when it was inscribed, despite some later minor damage. There is a small hole (ca. 3.5 mm diameter) which had been drilled through the stone near its bottom edge. The hole appears to have been drilled before the stone was inscribed, as the inscribed area on both sides is written around the hole, but one cannot be certain that the hole was or was not related to a previous function of the stone. Crum suggests that a cord was passed through the hole and the stone was “sans doute” suspended or mounted on a wall, or suspended from a piece of furniture. The basic problem with Crum’s suggestion is that the inscribed text would be “up-side down” on the suspended stone, and he offers no parallels for such stones suspended from walls or furniture,

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4 Crum gives the following dimensions: 24 x 26 cm. I cannot account for the differences in our measurements, except to say that my measurements in the summer of 1993 were made with these differences in mind. I find the greatest height to be 24.2 cm, and the greatest breadth to be (coincidentally) 24.2 cm. I suppose that Crum’s measurements were meant to be approximates, and this is further suggested by the cursory, though insightful nature of his discussion.

5 The greatest damage is to the right side of side A (= left side of side B), giving one the impression that the stone was dropped onto this edge after it was inscribed, causing the lacunae especially evident on side B. This raises at least the possibility of deliberate damage due to a context of persecution.

6 “En effet, un trou qui la transperce, du côté où son épaisseur est la moindre, a servi sans doute à la faire suspendre, au moyen d’une corde, soit à un mur, soit à quelque meuble; ce qui nous permet de reconnaitre le mode d’emploi de cette sorte de phylactères. Je ne me souviens pas d’avoir rencontré ailleurs un ostracon percé de cette façon,” Crum “La Magie Copte,” p. 544.