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Eusebios' aedicula tombstone from Hippos

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ABSTRACT

During excavations of Tal Fortress, on the fringes of Hippos' Southern Necropolis, a tombstone was found in secondary use. This Roman-period funerary stela depicts the bust of the deceased Eusebios engraved in an aedicula, with the name and short formula inscribed on the aedicula's side. This tombstone is the first inscribed funerary portraiture to be unearthed in Hippos of the Decapolis, and the first to be published. It may have been produced by a local yet unidentified workshop.

KEYWORDS

Hippos; Decapolis; aedicula; Roman; tombstone; epigraphy; necropolis; funerary culture

The Southern Necropolis and Tal Fortress

Three necropoleis were identified in the vicinity of Hippos, a Graeco-Roman city located 2 km east of the Sea of Galilee (Eisenberg 2017, 17–19; Zingboym 2018).¹ The Saddle Necropolis and the Eastern Necropolis were smaller and are less known. The Southern Necropolis, also known as the 'Hill of the Caves', was the largest, and it has been extensively surveyed (Figure 1). The hill is located to the south of Sussita Mountain, separated from it by the Sussita Stream (Zingboym 2018, 27–33). Dozens of burial caves are cut into the northern slopes of the sandy and chalky hill; 59 of them have been marked during the surveys but many more are no longer visible due to collapse of the fragile rock and sand. On the southern fringes of the Southern Necropolis, ca 150 m south of the hill's peak, a fortlet was identified, known as 'Tal Fortress' (Figure 1; Israeli coordinates: 26237/74200; Eisenberg et al. 2014, 96–97). The fortlet was constructed in the Roman period (ca second century CE), and later incorporated into a farm in the Byzantine period. One of the Late-Byzantine-period walls reused a Roman-period tombstone (Figure 2).²

The tombstone

The tombstone is carved in a monolithic piece of the local basalt.³ Its general 'Omega' shape includes an arched aedicula (without columns) with the deceased's bust portrayed frontally in the center, and two wings, the one on the right incorporating a short inscription in Greek (Figure 3). The tombstone is almost fully preserved, but there is slight chipping on the left side, an edge missing on the right side, and scarring all over. Its maximum dimensions are as follows: 73 cm long, 33 cm wide, and 60 cm high. The stela is roughly dressed and not fully symmetrical. The right wing that carries the inscription is wider than



Figure 1. Orthophotograph of Sussita Mountain and its vicinity. The three necropoleis are marked in color, and Tal Fortress is indicated (Ofek Aerial Photography, Feb. 2012).

the left wing. The bust is depicted in a rather high relief in the middle of the aedicula (ca 3 cm in depth). The head of the deceased is rounded, his ears protruding. He has a short helmet-coiffure hair style, the forehead and eyebrows are very high and emphasized, the eyelids are schematic and prolonged with an attempt to draw the eyelashes. The pupils are not drilled or engraved.⁴ The nose is wedge-shaped, depicted in a very low relief and perhaps damaged. The mouth is depicted as a curved asymmetric line. The neck is



Figure 2. Tal Fortress, the tombstone in secondary use in a Late Byzantine wall (photo. M. Eisenberg).



Figure 3. The aedicula tombstone (photo. M. Eisenberg).

slim, ending in short rounded shoulders. Approximately half of the upper torso is pictured. The torso is a rounded rectangle, without any hands visible. A tunic covers the torso, illustrated with four wavy folds. The lower part of the tombstone is flat, to allow the installation of the free-standing stone next to a grave or in a niche above it, as customary in the Decapolis (Lichtenberger and Raja 2019, 144). The sculpturing is stylized with a rather low ability of craftsmanship. The inscription demonstrates similar low ability in dressing and designing of the hard basalt.

The stela was clearly taken away from the nearby necropolis to be incorporated in a wall. It was used here as an ordinary rectangular ashlar in the second surviving course of a rather poorly built wall, with the sculpture facing up and fully covered by the upper wall courses (Figure 2). Apparently, the Late Byzantine builders had little fear of disturbing the long-time dead.

The tombstone in context

Funerary portraiture in basalt is known from Syria (including the Hauran) and the Decapolis (for the regional distribution map of portraits style, see Skupinska-Løvset 1999, 263, Map 1). Most of the published examples are at least slightly more elaborated and better executed than the Hippos aedicula (Skupinska-Løvset 1983, 1999, 231–40; Sartre-Fauriat 2001, 241–91 Vol. I; Weber 2002, 2006, 2015, 571, 582–83; Blömer and Raja 2019). Face features similar to the head from the Hippos tombstone characterize the basalt ‘Head of Man’ that probably originates from the Hauran (Wenning 2001, 322–23). Wenning dates it to the late first century BCE–early first century CE. The short (curly?) coiffure, forehead and nose are similar. A relief of a soldier dated to the first half of the second century CE from Batanaea is considerably better executed, but it also bears close stylistic similarity of features (Weber 2006, 50: 37, Plate 28). A similarly stylized work in limestone of a square bust and forehead is found in the ‘Anthropoid Bust’ from Tell el-Ḥammam (near Nysa-Scythopolis). This sculpture is probably unfinished, and it was dated to the early Severan period (Skupinska-Løvset 1996, 37, 2). Some of the

basalt busts from Nysa-Scythopolis necropolis bear similar features to the Hippos tombstone, yet none is sculptured with an aedicula or shares most of the stylistic elements (Skupinska-Løvset 1983). Bust no. 37 shows some similarities in the coiffure, forehead and bust design (Skupinska-Løvset 1983, Plate XVI), as well as bust no. 137, which is dated to the fourth century CE based mainly on the helmet-coiffure style but could also be Trajanic-Hadrianic in date (Skupinska-Løvset 1983, 219, Plate LXXV).

Apparently, the funerary portraiture production in Nysa-Scythopolis, Hippos' south-west neighbor within the Decapolis, started around the times of Trajan, and stopped in the early fourth century (Skupinska-Løvset 1983, 353–54, 359). This local chronological frame does not necessarily apply fully to the small sister-city of Hippos or to other Decapolis cities where funerary stelae were discovered (mainly Gadara and Abila). The Hippos tombstone seemingly fits better with the stylistic parameters of the eastern Decapolis cities, above all Gadara, which was Hippos' large south-eastern neighbor (for an updated study of the funerary portraiture in the Decapolis, see Lichtenberger and Raja 2019). Weber's in-depth discussion of Gadara's funerary sculptures recalls busts with similar stylistic features, although not executed within an aedicula (Weber 2002, mainly Plates 64, A and 74, B). They also lack the helmet-coiffure hair style. Interestingly, aedicula-shaped tombstones are quite rare in the funerary repertoire of the region. Skupinska-Løvset (1999, 174, Pl. 25a, 175–85) describes a few of these, although none is like the simple arched aedicula from Hippos. Two additional examples of funerary busts within aedicula from the Decapolis were published recently. The tombstones found in Al-Qunayyah (south-east of Gerasa) and Ḥayyan al-Mushrif (east of Gerasa) were probably products of local workshops and are dated to the second half of the second century CE (Gharib, Aliquot, and Weber-Karyotakis 2017, 225–29). It is impossible to date the Hippos tombstone solely based on style parameters, since these do not fully follow the known parallels.

The inscription

Three lines of text are recognizable on the wider right wing of the tombstone (Figures 3 and 4).⁵ The left wing carries no traces of letters. The height of the letters engraved unorderly varies between 3.0 and 4.5 cm; sigma 3.0 cm; epsilon 4.0 cm; beta 4.5 cm.

Θάρ-

σι, ^v Εὐ-

σέβι[ε]

'Have courage, Eusebi(o)s!'

Syllable division is regular.

Θάρ|σι; read Θάρ|σ(ε)ι: This formula, whose iotacistic spelling is not uncommon, is extremely widespread in Syrian-Palestinian epitaphs. Gregg and Urman provide 13 instances from Fiq alone, located in the territory of Hippos (Gregg and Urman 1996, Nos 26–38), all of which are in the form θάρσει + name + age (resp. official rank in no. 30 and 34). The present inscription does not seem to indicate the age, usually formulated: ET(ΩN) number.

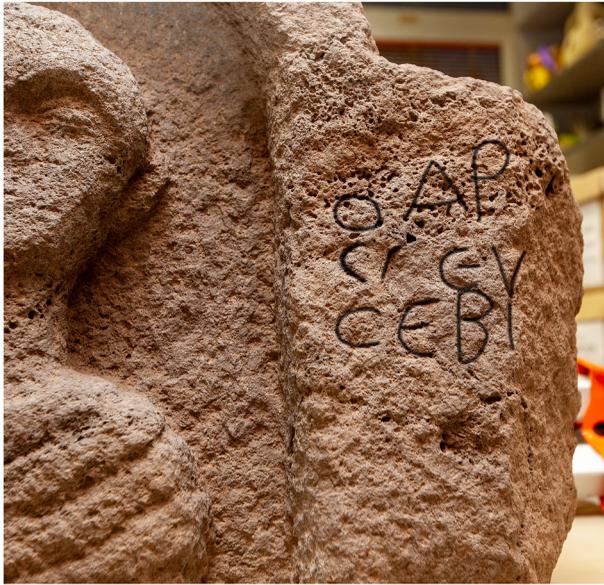


Figure 4. The inscription with proposed reconstruction of the letters (photo. M. Eisenberg).

Εὐ|σέβι[ε]: The name of the deceased addressed in vocative was Εὐσέβι(ο)ς.⁶ The addition of an epsilon originally placed at the lost end of line, and thus the edition Εὐσέβι[ε], would correspond to classical morphology, but is not necessarily required; in postclassical times personal names ending in -ιος are regularly shortened to -ις (Gignac 1981, 25–28; for Iudaea/Palestina see CIIP IV 2 Index, 1531 s.v. Εὐσέβι(ο)ς), so the form Εὐσέβι could be accepted as vocative, either according to the words of -ις, or to a loss or fusion of epsilon in the second declination form Εὐσέβι(ε). The personal name Εὐσέβιος, meaning ‘the pious’, seems to be the masculine transformation of the female proper name Εὐσέβεια or Εὐσεβία, derived from the noun εὐσέβεια (‘piety’). Nevertheless, the male variant is more frequently found. The name appears in the early Imperial period in pagan contexts, but later it is used mainly in Christian areas. We need only remember the Christian scholar Eusebios, who became bishop of Caesarea Maritima about 315 CE. Without any symbols present on Eusebios’ tombstone, it is not possible to tell if he was pagan or Christian. For a close parallel to the inscription from Hippos, see a basalt stela from et-Turra, west of Adraha in northern Jordan, where, in similar spelling, the formula and the name are additionally completed by the age of the deceased; SEG 61 no. 1478, Θάρσι, Εὐσέβι, ἐτῶν [...].

Discussion

The aedicula tombstone displays the first known and published portraiture from a Hippos necropoleis. It is clearly a simple local provincial work. It can be assigned to local ‘domestic art’, which eludes general typologies (Skupinska-Løvset 1983, 296–98). Most of the published funerary portraiture does not have a solid base for dating, i.e. stratigraphic context of excavations or datable inscriptions, hence the chronology is based mainly on regional

and stylistic parameters. For the ‘domestic art’ this chronological range is often too wide, as in the case of the Hippos aedicula tombstone. Based on style and epigraphy, we may only offer a wide dating frame for the tombstone – from the early second to the early fourth century CE. The sculpting style and the aedicula shape do not fully comply with products of workshops known from Hippos’ Decapolis sister-cities – Gadara or Nysa-Scythopolis. Consequently, the tombstone indicates an operation of a local workshop at Hippos. We propose to view Eusebios’ aedicula tombstone from Hippos as a representation of the local/regional style made in a local workshop. Recently, surveys at the three Hippos’ necropoleis were initiated and two mausolea are excavated in the Saddle Necropolis.⁷ Analysis of additional local funerary sculptures, at least two of which are currently known, will allow a better understanding of features particular to this local workshop.

Notes

1. For a general discussion of the Hippos necropoleis see Zingboym 2018. Zingboym’s research includes information on previous surveys. For the latest overview following 20 years of research at the site, and further references, see Eisenberg 2017, 2019.
2. The excavations were carried out by the Hippos Excavations Project on behalf of the Zinman Institute of Archaeology, University of Haifa, Israel, directed by M. Eisenberg. Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) excavation license: G-16/2012; Israel Nature and Parks Authority (NPA) excavation permit: 2793/12; Tal Fortress lies within the Susita Nature Reserve.
3. The stela is currently on display at the Hecht Museum, University of Haifa, as part of the exhibition *Before the Earth Shook—The Ancient City of Hippos–Sussita Emerges*, opened in December 2017. Its excavation basket no. is A10800, and its IAA registration no. is 2017–1974.
4. The representation of irises and pupils appeared during the early Hadrianic period and became very fashionable from the end of Hadrian’s reign (Claridge 2015, 109; Fejfer 2009, 158, 278); however, it is doubtful if it should be considered a strict chronological parameter with domestic art, such as the tombstone from Hippos. No remains of paint were noticed on the eyes or other parts of the sculpture. For the problem of comparison between the local workshops and the Roman funerary portraiture, see Skupinska-Løvset 1999, 262.
5. The text is hard to read due to the uneven nature of basalt, its erosion, and the crude way of engraving. Various photography techniques, including photogrammetry, allowed partial reading and documentation. Squeezes, one of which is stored at the University of Cologne, helped the reading further.
6. Adam Łajtar suggested that the name could be Eusebios based on photographs in 2017 (Eisenberg 2017, 18).
7. The Lion’s Mausoleum has been fully excavated and a second mausoleum, known as the Flowers Mausoleum or Mausoleum B, is in the process of excavation. Both mausolea are of the Roman period.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Gregor Staab (PhD, 2001, University of Jena) is an epigraphist, a lecturer and researcher at the Institute of Classical Studies at the University of Cologne (Germany). He is responsible for the coin collection of the department and member of the editorial board of the 'Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik'. Besides the edition of new inscriptions, his main research interest is currently focused on the interrelation between literature and epigraphy, especially the interpretation of verse inscriptions in the light of their socio-cultural background.

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