A New Christian Text From Liverpool’s World Museum

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*Abstract* — Edition of an eighth-century papyrus fragment transmitting a Christian *adespoton*. The text mentions ‘the Father’, ‘God’, and the name of a certain Severus. The fragment appears to be written *transversa charta*. It is tentatively argued that the text is either a hymn or the copy of a Festal Letter.

*Keywords*: Severus, Christian, *adespoton*, Hymn, Festal Letter

Liverpool, World Museum inv. 56.21.433 H x W 14 x 4 cm Unknown provenance, VIII AD

A narrow strip of papyrus (not a codex leaf), glued on a piece of card, written in a fine pointed sloping majuscule datable to the eighth century (Fig. 1).[[1]](#footnote-2) Among dated examples of the sloping majuscule *PSI Com.* XI 2 (AD 743-767) and *P.Lond.Copt.* 1.513 (AD 793-817) provide the best parallels. Notable features are η with high middle bar and the contrast between narrow round letters and the long uprights of τ, ρ, and ψ reaching into the large interlinear space.[[2]](#footnote-3) The writing on the *recto* runs across the fibers, which suggests a text written *transversa charta*, that is, extended vertically, with sheets glued along the horizontal *kolleseis* and one long column of writing running down the roll. We can assume that the *verso*, which is entirely glued onto the card, was blank. There are signs of folding on the *recto*, at progressively larger intervals: two folds on the lower margin, about one fold per line in ll. 7-10, and one fold every two lines in the upper half. The lower margin of ca. 2 cm indicates either that the fragment belonged to the bottom of a *rotulus* (a single sheet cut in whatever size was necessary to receive the text)[[3]](#footnote-4) or, less likely, that the text was followed by another text after a break of two or more lines.

Due to the highly fragmentary character of the text (no more than 8 letters per line survive) and its anonymous status, the column width cannot be ascertained or inferred from the content. The text is an *adespoton*. It contains two abbreviations, one with the *nomen sacrum* Θ(εό)ϲ in l. 5 and one of an uncertain nature in l. 10 (on which see the commentary).[[4]](#footnote-5) It mentions ‘the Father’ (ll. 3, 10), ‘God’ (l. 5), and a certain Severus (l. 2), likely Severus of Antioch, who lived between AD 465 and 538.[[5]](#footnote-6) Severus was a proponent of miaphysitism, a Christological doctrine that conceived the nature of Jesus as one, that is, divine and human at the same time, or rather two natures united through the Incarnation into a single nature. This interpretation of the nature of Christ clashed with the views of the Chalcedonian Christian orthodoxy enforced by the Emperor Justin I (AD 518-527). After they were banned by Justinian, Severus’ writings were translated from Greek to Coptic and Syriac.[[6]](#footnote-7) His ideas were popular in Egypt, the seat of many miaphysite churches. *P.Lond.Lit.* 237 preserves a hymn in his honour which is also dated to the eighth century and written in a similar hand across the fibres.[[7]](#footnote-8) His name is also mentioned in a seventh century liturgical diptych from Egypt, *SB* 20.14591.[[8]](#footnote-9)

In the new Liverpool fragment, ll. 4 and following contain a (‘mixed’?) conditional sentence, with an imperfect in the *apodosis* (l. 6, ε]ἱπόμην?). The verb of the *protasis* (l. 4, ὃν εἰ ψ[) is lost, but the subject appears to be God (l. 5, ὁ Θ(εό)ϲ), with a masculine noun on the receiving end of the (missing) verb. The first person in ]ιπoμην in l. 6 (possibly also] ̣ακημεν in l. 9,) suggests that the text could be a Festal letter, sent by the bishop of Alexandria to the other bishoprics, churches and monasteries around Egypt to announce the date of Easter in a given year. The use of large capital letters to begin a sentence (see l. 2 ον) is also present in two other papyri transmitting Festal Letters, namely *PSI* 16.1576 (AD 421) and *P.Berol.* 10677 (AD 713 or 719). Α Festal letter could have contained theological or ecclesiological considerations (and could have cited Severus of Antioch).[[9]](#footnote-10) However, Festal Letters are not normally copied on *rotuli* and are usually written in a style closer to the Alexandrian majuscule.[[10]](#footnote-11) One may then posit that the Liverpool fragment is the *copy* of an original Festal Letter, purposely written in a different style and format to mark its distance from the Alexandrian chancery, transcribed for purposes of duplication and conservation, or to be used in the catechesis: cf. *P.Oxy.* 76.5074 (middle of fifth/early sixth c.).[[11]](#footnote-12)

But large initials are also found in hymns, which continued to be written in Greek until the tenth century. For eighth century exemplars, written in a hand similar to that of the Liverpool fragment, see *P.Berol.* 13220 (Hymn to Mary, visitation), ll. 8 and 29, and *P.Heid.* 4.292 (Hymn to Christ), ll. 4, 6, 8, 10.[[12]](#footnote-13) The former is also written *transversa charta* and contains abbreviated *nomina sacra.* In addition, in the Liverpool fragment the scribe appears to indicate, albeit inconsistently, word break through small blank spaces (ll. 2, 3, 5). This can also be seen in late hymns, such as *P.Berol.* 11633 (late eighth/ninth c.), the above-mentioned *P.Berol.* 13220 (eighth c.), and *P.Mich.* 19.799 (seventh c.). Such texts tend to display an irregular orthography. Hymns would not typically contain first person singular verbs, but in l. 6 a mispelling for πο<ι>μήν ‘shepherd’ cannot be excluded.

The provenance of the fragment is unknown. The papyrus was part of Norwich Castle Museum’s foreign archaeology and ethnology collections, and was sold to Liverpool in 1956. It was originally donated to the Museum by the sister of Flaxman Spurrell (1842-1915); Spurrell had acquired material from a range of sites excavated by his friend William Flinders Petrie.[[13]](#footnote-14) Spurrell’s collection of Egyptian antiquities initially went to Norwich Castle Museum in two accessions, before the World Museum purchased about 5000 objects from the Norwich collections in 1956. [[14]](#footnote-15) Among these were also two as yet unpublished fragments, namely a Ptolemaic document (inv. no. 56.21.431+56.21.432) and a Demotic text (56.21.434). The contents of Spurrell’s collection come mainly from fieldwork carried out by Petrie between 1886, the year in which Petrie resigned from the Egypt Exploration Fund, and 1894, when he founded the Egyptian Research Account. In 1889, Spurrell assisted Petrie with unpacking and arranging the contents of 101 cases coming from the Fayum excavations[[15]](#footnote-16), but the artefacts do not necessarily come from there.[[16]](#footnote-17)

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]τουπανα̣[

] *vac.* Ϲ̣ε̣υηρο ̣[

] ̣ πατερα̣[

] *vac.* ὃν εἰ ψ[

5 ]τοϲ ὁ Θ(εὸ)ϲ ο[

]ιπoμην ̣[

]ειϲ παϲαν ̣[

]ωποιηϲε[

] ̣ακημεν[

10 ]πατεραχρ[

“… (of?) Severus … father … whom if … God … all … made ? … father …”

1 Either ] τοῦ πανα̣[γίου πνεύματοϲ or πανϲ̣[έπτου.

2 A dot a top level after ο would seem to suggest Ϲ̣ε̣υήρου̣.

3 ]ι̣ or ν̣, then πατέρα̣ or πάτερ α̣-.

4-6 These three lines may be filled in as follows: ὃν εἰ ψ[υχώσας ἔφυϲεν αὐ]τὸϲ ὁ Θ(εό)ϲ, ο[ὐκ ἂν ε]ἱπόμην ‘even if God himself had created him (Christ), I would still not follow [these precepts, or adhere to this view]’. For the turn of phrase, see Clem.Al. *Paed.* 3.3.20.1 ὃν (Christ) εἰ ἐνοικοῦντα ᾔδειμεν, οὐκ οἶδ’ ὅπωϲ ἂν αὐτὸν λωβᾶϲθαι τετολμήκειμεν ‘whom, if we had known as dwelling in us, I do not know how we could have dared to dishonour’. Assuming a scribal error, l. 4 could be supplied as ὁ ν{ε}ίψ[αϲ, of Jesus washing the apostles’ feet at the Last Supper, followed in l. 5 by εὐλογη]τὸϲ ὁ Θ(εὸ)ϲ ὁ [ (or ὅ[ϲ), a phrase very frequent in the Septuagint, and in Christian hymns and liturgical prayers.

6 Before π, an upright curling slightly to the right at its upper extremity: ε]ἱπόμην or ἐλ(ε)]ιπόμην are preferrable to ἐ]ϲπόμην, although ι consistently curls to the left, cf. 4 ει, 7 ειϲ, 8 ποιηϲε. A compound form of λείπω in a similar context is found in Ath. *exp.Ps.* 72 ὅμωϲ οὐκ ἀπελιπόμην ϲοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ, οὐδὲ ἐξέπιπτον τῆς ἐκ τῆϲ χάριτοϲ ‘nevertheless I was not abandoned by you, God, and I did not fall out of your grace’ (cf. 7 χ̣[άριν?). With ε]ἱπόμην the sentence would acquire the sense of ‘follow someone’s ideas οr precepts’, cf. e.g. Clem.Al. *Strom.* 5.5.31.2 μὴ δεῖν ταῖϲ τῶν πολλῶν ἕπεϲθαι γνώμαιϲ; Iren. *haer.* 4.37.4 τὸ εὐαγγέλιον εἰ μὴ βούλοιτό τιϲ ἕπεϲθαι.

̣[: a dot at top level and the lower part of an oblique ascending to the right: probably χ. I would suggest either χ̣̣[άριν (cf. 2 Cor 9:8 and 13.13, 1 Pet 5.10) or χ̣̣[ρείαν, with ειϲ either as the end of a 2nd person verb, ‘you (God) will [meet, etc.] all of our needs’ or εἰϲ as a proposition, ‘[will work] towards [meeting, etc.] all of our needs’, cf. Phil 4.19.

8 ἐζ]ωποίηϲε? In the *Gospel of John*, ζωιοποιέω is used of Christ resurrecting the dead: 5.21 ὥϲπερ γὰρ ὁ πατὴρ ἐγείρει τοὺϲ νεκροὺϲ καὶ ζωιοποιεῖ, οὕτωϲ καὶ ὁ υἱὸϲ οὓϲ θέλει ζωιοποιεῖ, which is commented on as an aspect of the Son’s divinity in later Christological discussions. Severus uses ζωοποιόϲ to describe the union between Word and flesh in his ‘Orders to the *cubicularius* Eupraxius’ reported in *cat. Jo*, p. 255.17-20. However, Severus’ name in the papyrus precedes the blank space in l. 4, so the content of ll. 4ff. may not have anything to do with him.The verb could also be applied to the life-giving force of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 πανα̣[γίου πνεύματοϲ?), as in John 6.63 τὸ πνεῦμα ἐϲτιν τὸ ζωιοποιοῦν, ἡ ϲὰρξ οὐκ ὠφελεῖ οὐδέν· τὰ ῥήματα ἃ ἐγὼ λελάληκα ὑμῖν πνεῦμά ἐϲτιν καὶ ζωή ἐϲτιν. The form ζωποιέω (for ζωιοποιέω) is attested in *P.Jena* inv. 18 r°+ 21 r°(third/fourth century, Iren. *haer.*); cf. ζωποιόν on an ostracon transmitting the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed from the Council of Chalcedon in the Israel Museum (inv. 69.74.312, sixth/seventh century). However, other articulations are possible: ]ω (-ωι?) ποιήϲε[-, ]ω ποιῆι (ποίηι) ϲε[, …

9 ἐπ]λ̣άκημεν is precluded by the position of the spot of ink at top level after the break: either ] κ̣ακὴ μέν or ἐ]τ̣άκημεν. If the latter, the sense may be that God sent his Son to redeem men from sin: ‘we were consumed’ by it, cf. Job42.6 διὸ ἐφαύλιϲα ἐμαυτὸν καὶ ἐτάκην. We should not rule out an orthographical mistake for ἀ]ν̣ακειμεν[-.

10 αχρ[: if this is an abbreviation, it is not a standard one. χ is placed in the interlinear space between α and ρ. ἀρχ(άγγελοϲ) is abbreviated in this way in an inscription from a house in Emirli, Phrygia (*MAMA* I 434, p. 230). In papyri, the word is usually abbreviated as ἀρχ() (see e.g. *P.Rain.Cent.* 145.3, sixth/seventh century), with χ always following, not preceding ρ. ἀρχιεπίϲκοποϲ is abbreviated as ἀρχ(ι)επιϲκ(οπ) in *Stud.Pal.* 8.1255.1 (sixth century). πατέρ’ ἀρχ[ιεπίϲκοπον may have referred to one of the archbishops of Alexandria (e.g. Athanasius, who is called ‘father’ in Alexander II’s Festal Letter, or possibly Benjamin I in *P.Köln* 2.215 iii 2) or the theological authority of Severus archbishop of Antioch himself. If instead χ remedies an omission, then we may have πάτερ followed by e.g. a form of ἄχραντοϲ ‘undefiled’ or ἄχρι.

[insert fig. 1 here]

Caption: courtesy of National Museums Liverpool (World Museum)

1. I wish to thank N. Gonis, M. Stroppa, the two anonymous referees, and the editorial board of *BASP* for their valuable comments on an earlier version of this article. On the sloping majuscule, see P. Orsini, *Studies on Greek and Coptic Majuscule Scripts and Books* (Berlin 2019) 133-164. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. See Á.T. Mihálykó, *The Christian Liturgical Papyri: An Introduction* (Tübingen 2019) Figs. 21 and 24, and no. 155 and 191 in the appendix. In dating the fragment to eighth century, I follow one of the referees’ palaeographical analysis, which shows that a certain mannerism in the letter form, especially μ, ν, τ, and υ, is conducive to a relatively late date, possibly the second half or the end of the century. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. M. Stroppa, “L’uso di rotoli per testi cristiani di carattere letterario,” *APF* 59 (2013) 348-349, and “Testi cristiani scritti *transversa charta* nei PSI: alcuni esempi,” *Comunicazioni dell’Istituto Papirologico G. Vitelli* 9 (2011) 61-72. To the lists in Stroppa we can now add *P.Bastianini* 4 (sixth century; *Apophthegmata Patrum*), an isolated sheet of papyrus written *transversa charta* or an opistograph *rotulus*, and A. Camplani, “A Pastoral Epistle of the Seventh Century Concerning the Eucharist (Pap. Berlin P. 11346),” in V.M. Lepper (ed.), *Forschung in der Papyrussammlung. Eine Festgabe für das Neue Museum* (Berlin 2012) 377-386, with corrections in Á.T. Mihálykó, “The Thrice-Blessed Pesynthios of Koptos and the Presanctified Holies: Some Notes on a Coptic Pastoral Letter (P.Berol. 11346),” *Adamantius* 24 (2018) 143-149. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. For abbreviations in Christian papyri, see Mihálykó (n. 2) 180-182. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. On Severus, see J. D’Alton, Y. Youssef (eds.), *Severus of Antioch: His Life and Times* (Leiden 2016). For profiles of other eminent Severi in Late Antiquity (of Malaga, of Minorca, al-Muqaffa, Sebokht, the Tetrarch), see O. Nicholson (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity* (Oxford 2018) 1367-1368. The Severus mentioned in *PSI Com.* XI 2, a list of intercessions for clergy also written *transversa charta*, is not, as initially thought, Severus of Antioch, but the bishop of Antinoopolis, in office in or after AD 751: M. Stroppa, “Patriarch and Bishops in Greek Papyri with Prayers,” in T.M. Muhammad, C. Römer (eds.), *Thought, Culture, and Historiography in Christian Egypt, 284-641 AD* (Cambridge 2020) 168-171. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Y. Moss, “Saving Severus: How Severus of Antioch’s Writings Survived in Greek,” *GRBS* 56 (2016) 786, 808. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. For this date see Mihálykó (n. 2) 338, no. 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. See H. Brakmann, “Severos unter den Alexandrinern: zum liturgischen Diptychon in Boston,” *JbAC* 26 (1983) 54-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. On the content of Festal Letters, see A. Camplani, *Atanasio di Alessandria. Lettere festali. Anonimo. Indice delle Lettere festali* (Milan 2003) 25-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Exceptions in A. Camplani, “Coptic Fragments from a Festal Letter of the Late Sixth Century (John Rylands Library, Coptic Suppl. n. 47-48): Damian or Eulogius?”, in M. Immerzeel, J. van der Vliet (eds.), *Coptic Studies on the Threshold of a New Millennium* (Leiden 2004) 318-319. See also M. Stroppa, “Lettere festali su papiro,” *Comunicazioni dell’Istituto Papirologico G. Vitelli* 14, forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. I owe this point to M. Stroppa. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. See Mihálykó (n. 2) 325, no. 155 and 334, no. 191, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. F. Kalloniatis, *The Egyptian Collection at Norwich Castle Museum. Catalogue and Essays* (Oxford 2019) 11-12: “Flaxman Spurrell, who made the single, largest, donation to the museum, gave it in two separate ‘instalments’: part of it came during his lifetime in 1904, while the remainder came via his sister as a bequest in 1919 (four years after Spurrell’s death).” On Spurrell see W.M.F. Petrie, “Flaxman Spurrell,” *Ancient Egypt* 2 (1915) 93-94; B. Scott, A. Shaw, “The Quiet Man of Kent: the Contribution of F.C.J. Spurrell to the Early Years of Palaeolithic Archaeology,” in R.T. Hosfield, F.F. Wenban-Smith, M.I. Pope (eds.), *Great Prehistorians: 150 Years of Palaeolithic Research, 1859–2009* (London 2009), 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Presented by him in 1904 (inv. 54.04) and, four years after his death, as a bequest in 1919 (inv. 58.19): see A. Cooke, “Flaxman Spurrell’s Experimenting with Painting Materials,” in C. Graves-Brown (ed.), *Egyptology in the Present: Experiential and Experimental Methods in Archaeology* (Swansea 2015), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. W.M.F. Petrie, *Seventy Years in Archaeology* (New York 1932) 114-115. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. “I would hazard a guess at the Faiyum region but there is no record in the files to back this up. The Petrie Museum have similar cards (UC14877) for flint tools from Hierakonpolis pasted on with glue that Petrie sent to Spurrell to process.” (A. Cooke, *per litteras*) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)