

SOME ALEXANDRIAN FORGERIES¹

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CONSIDERABLE excitement has been caused in the Egyptian, and particularly the Alexandrian, press since the spring of 1960 by the claims of a Greek inhabitant of Alexandria, one Stelios Komoutsos, a waiter at the Union Bar, a restaurant the name of which will evoke happy memories for many. Mr. Komoutsos claimed—and indeed still claims (Dec. 1961)—to know the site of the tomb of Alexander the Great, basing his claim on ancient documents which, he asserts, contain drawings and descriptions of the position of the tomb.² On the basis of

¹ For opportunities to work in the Musée Gréco-romain I am once more deeply grateful to the Director, Dr. H. Riad, and his staff. I am also indebted to Mr. Lucas Benachi, both for introducing me to Mr. Komoutsos, and for the photographs on Pl. XLIIb and XLIV; and to Monsieur Max Debbane for the photographs on plates XLIIIb and XLV (provided by the Musée Gréco-romain).

² Reports of, and correspondence arising from *L'affaire Komoutsos* also appeared in *The Times* of 4, 11, 16, 22, and 27 April 1960. The 'Fourth Leader' of 6 April erroneously refers to Mr. Komoutsos as 'Komtasso'. Monsieur Debbane, to whose profound knowledge of modern Alexandria I am constantly indebted, points out to me that Mr. Komoutsos had a precursor in a certain M. Joannides who claimed to have discovered the tomb of Alexander in 1893. An account of his 'discoveries' appeared in the then bilingual *Egyptian Gazette* (20 June 1893), which through the kindness of Monsieur Debbane I am able to reproduce here:

'Mr. Joannides, who, in the course of digging for stone for building purposes at Chatby, discovered some remains of antiquity that have given rise to much comment, has come to an arrangement with the Director General of the Antiquities Department and is now in search of an expert to value the objects already found.

'Mr. Joannides asserts that he has discovered the tombs of Alexander the Great and Cleopatra. The former is at a depth of 16 metres from the surface and the latter is at a depth of 12 metres. He says the doors of the tombs are of bronze on which there are inscriptions in Greek and that the name of the occupant of the tomb is sculptured over the doorway. The bronze is eaten through in parts and with the aid of magnesium light, Mr. Joannides says that he was able to distinguish marble sarcophagi that had feet like lions' feet. He also says that he saw something like parchments or skins in these vaults. This is only part of what Mr. Joannides asserts to be in the vaults in question for it appears he found much jewellery and some beautiful Greek vases.

'This differs very much from the statements of the Conservator of the Alexandria Museum but we feel it our duty to our readers to place before them the statement of the original discoverer of these antiquities. In due time we shall

these claims Mr. Komoutsos persuaded the archaeological authorities to allow him to excavate near the Saad Zaghoul monument in the spring of 1960 and 1961—an operation which yielded two small pieces of marble but nothing else ancient. Mr. Komoutsos has never been particularly anxious to submit his documentary evidence to inspection, and I was therefore extremely gratified when he produced it for me, over a tea-table in the *pâtisserie* 'Athenaion', one day towards the end of June 1961.

I was unfortunately only able to give the book which he placed in my hands a very brief inspection, and what I have to say is based solely on that inspection. However, I made a memorandum immediately afterwards of what I had noticed in the book, and in any case as will be evident, no mistake was possible. The book, which constituted the documentary evidence, was roughly octavo in size, bound in old, dark leather, and consisted of possibly a hundred rather crisp, friable, parchment-coloured sheets of a material which I could not identify—certainly not papyrus, nor parchment of a normal sort. The edges of the sheets were discoloured and heightened the impression provided by the crisp condition of the pages, that at some time the volume had been in close contact with heat, perhaps in an oven. There was no evidence visible to me in my brief inspection that any of the pages were palimpsests. I would in general be very unwilling to speculate either as to the material of which the sheets were made, or their age, or the process to which they had been subjected, presumably to give them an air of antiquity.

Fortunately no such ambiguity surrounds the contents themselves. To my astonished—almost incredulous—eyes there were presented page after page of crude and erroneous copies, largely in black ink, of two Greek inscriptions familiar to me from the walls of the Musée Gréco-romain, Salle 6. In addition to these 'copies' there were childish drawn façades of Greek temples and tombs with meaningless inscriptions on the architraves evidently meant to refer to Alexander and the Ptolemies, but the artist's Greek had failed him, and from time to time the Greek lettering was diversified by the insertion of Coptic letters. Among a few other odd objects which I recall were similarly executed sphinxes (guarding, I suspect, the entrance to the tomb) and a church or two. I found it difficult to tell Mr. Komoutsos, who followed my perusal anxiously, what I thought of this gallimaufry, for he was, I am fairly certain, innocent of all intent know the real truth of the affair.' (The French version of this article has been republished by M. Debbane in *La Réforme* of Alexandria, of 2 October 1961.)

to deceive. Pointing to (I think) the words βασιλεῖ Πτολεμαίωι on the page before him he said to me 'There! Is that not a hymn to Alexander?', and I had not the heart to tell him the truth. It is almost incredible that any person should be the victim of such delusions when the evidence to refute them lies before his eyes written in his own language, but such are the facts. Psychologists may be able to explain them. Meanwhile Mr. Komoutsos continues to prosecute his inquiries with unabated zeal.*

The two inscriptions which, sometimes completely, sometimes in fragmentary form, were reproduced in the pages of Mr. Komoutsos's book, were, I have said, familiar to me from the originals in the museum. But that is not all. In the late summer of 1960 Mr. Lucas Benachi sent me a photograph of an inscription which he had seen in the shop of Mr. Tewfik Saad, one of Alexandria's best-known dealers. This I immediately recognized as a modern copy of an inscription in the museum. It is, in fact, the inscription which figures most prominently in Mr. Komoutsos's book. The history of both these must now be considered.

1. The inscription copied most frequently in the book, and of which there is also a surviving forged copy (now safely in the office of the Director of the Museum), is Musée gr.-rom., Inv. no. 19534. It was published by Breccia, *Rapport sur la marche du Musée, 1912* (1913), p. 38, no. 89 (with facsimile) (whence *Sammelbuch*, 5863). It is a limestone block¹ bearing a dedication of approximately the middle of the third century B.C., to Sarapis, Dionysos, Isis, Aphrodite, and the 'Theoi Soteres and Polyphoroi', by an Alexandrian Nikagoras, the son of Aristonikos. The forgery (see Pl. XLII, *a-b*, where the genuine (*a*) and the false (*b*) inscriptions are reproduced side by side) is carved on a thin, slatey type of stone,² and the inscription bears no resemblance in

* See addendum, p. 250.

¹ Measurements: height 0.23; width 0.33; thickness 0.065 m. Text:

Σαράπιδι Διονύσωι
Ἴσιδι Ἀφροδίτῃ, θεοῖς
σωτήρησι καὶ πολυφόροις,
Νικαγόρας Ἀριστονίκου
Ἀλεξανδρεὺς.

² Measurements: height 0.425; width 0.445; thickness 0.015 m. Text:

Σαράπιδι Διον-
ύσωι Ἴσιδι Ἀφρο-
δίτῃ θεοῖς σωτ-
ήρησι καὶ πολυφόρ-
οις, Νικαγόρας Ἀρ-
ιστονίκου Ἀλε-
ξανδρεὺς.

appearance to the original: it is disposed over a different number of lines (seven instead of five); the letter-forms are often wrongly made (notice particularly the curious omicrons, and the phi in line 4); there are some actual errors in the formation of letters (И for N , O for \Theta in line 3); and in general the writing is wholly unnatural and obviously modern. The modern version is not strictly speaking a forgery, in that it can never have been hoped to pass it off as the original, and indeed there would be no point in so doing.¹ The artist presumably wished to sell his copy as *an* original to someone not familiar with *the* original. I say 'presumably', because the intentions of forgers of objects with such little commercial value as Greek inscriptions are not easily divined.

2. The second piece which I recognized in one or two crude and incomplete reproductions in the book is Musée gr.-rom., Inv. no. 19398. Like the first, it was published by Breccia, *Rapport 1912*, p. 36, no. 88 (whence *Sammelbuch*, 5862). It is a marble block,² and bears a dedication by the Jews of Xenephyris of the pylon of their synagogue on behalf of Ptolemy Euergetes II and his two wives (143-116 B.C.): see Pl. XLIIIa.

The origin of this group of forgeries, the book and the inscriptions, can, I believe, be determined. Not only were the stones acquired by the museum in the same year, 1912: they were both bought at the same place, Abu el Matamir, a small village on the western edge of the Delta, though they were originally found at sites a few kilometres from there and from each other.³

The fact that the carver inscribed the upsilon on line 2 and not line 1, where, if the surface had been undamaged, there would have been abundant room, shows that the stone was already broken at the top right-hand corner at the time.

¹ Contrast the curious forgery of a well-known inscription from Aspendos in Antalya Museum, published by G. E. Bean, *Türk Bell.* xxii, 1958, p. 58, no. 63, which was apparently intended to provide a wholly legible version of the somewhat illegible original stone. The latter, which was in the museum before the First World War, has disappeared; its substitute was acquired from the Italian consulate.

² Measurements: height 0.20; width 0.25; thickness 0.055 m. Text:

Ἰπὲρ βασιλέως Πτολεμαίου
καὶ βασιλίσσης Κλεοπάτρας τῆς
ἀδελφῆς καὶ βασιλίσσης Κλε-
οπάτρας τῆς γυναικὸς οἱ ἀπὸ
Ζενεφύρεος Ἰουδαῖοι τὸν
πυλῶνα τῆς προσευχῆς,
προστάντων Θεοδώρου
καὶ Ἀχιλλῖωνος.

³ No. 1 was found at Kom Abou Afrita, a few kilometres east of Abu el

It seems clear that the possibility of (for example) a resident or residents in Alexandria entering the museum and there copying two inscriptions, neither of which was from Alexandria itself, and both of which came from the same village, when they are, in addition, almost, if not quite, the only two stones in the whole Salle from there, is exceedingly small. It is therefore natural to suppose, indeed I would say that it is certain, that the original copies of these inscriptions were made in Abu el Matamir in, or shortly before, 1912. Probably the dealer from whom Breccia acquired the stones (it is improbable that anybody else in Abu el Matamir would have the skill or opportunity to do it) carved the one forgery and made hand-copies of both stones, while waiting to sell them. Subsequently the book was built up on these foundations, and given an imaginary connexion with Alexander and Alexandria, but it would need another and a closer scrutiny of the book to determine what other elements contributed to its creation.

Against this reconstruction two objections may be raised. First, the length of time between the alleged execution and the date of public appearance may be urged. Forgeries do not improve with keeping, and forgers usually seek quick returns. Where were the forgeries in the intervening fifty years? Secondly, Mr. Komoutsos himself stated that the 'documents' that is, the book, had been in the family for many years.¹ As to the second point, I must confess quite simply that I suspect that Mr. Komoutsos (whose good faith I accept) has been misled by somebody, and if so it is useless to speculate further as to the culprit. In reply to the first question I would ask another: is it not very striking that the stone appeared on the market and Mr. Komoutsos's claims appeared in the press at approximately the same time? Is not the most likely explanation that both the stone and the written copies of the inscriptions were in the same hands for many years, in the course of which, no doubt, the book-copies were merged with other, more fanciful material, to form the present compilation briefly described above? This is, of course, conjectural, and in Matamir and west of Kom el Akhdar (itself approximately 10 kilometres east of Abu el Matamir), where no. 2 was found. This region was of considerable importance in Ptolemaic times when it was close to the southern shore of Lake Mareotis, whence a canal led to Naucratis and the Nile: cf. *Berytus*, xiii, 1960, p. 146.

¹ Mr. Komoutsos was quite firm about this when I saw him, but provided no details. Cf. *The Times*, 4 April 1960: '. . . documents in his family's possession for generations indicate that the square [i.e. Place Saad Zaghloul, in front of the Cecil Hotel] is the site of the lost tomb.'

any case the development of the 'Alexander-Book' (if I may so call it) from the hand-copies of the inscriptions to the finished article is a story which we cannot unravel; but the main conclusion, that both the book-copies and the stone copy date from 1912 and that they come from the same source, seems to me hard to gainsay. These forgeries, book and stone alike, belong to the lowest possible level and, one would have thought, would not deceive a Greek schoolboy. The next item is aristocratic by comparison.

II

A vase of the Hadra type in a show-case in the Musée gr.-rom., Salle 18a, Inv. no. 23864, of very indifferent shape and decoration, bears the following unpublished and highly unsuitable inscription: Λθ· Αντινόωι | ἐπιφανεῖ | Φειδοσανυς | ἐπιστράτηγος Θηβαίδος (Pl. XLIIIb, XLV). The vase was purchased for the museum in 1934. The inscription is a copy of a familiar piece from Antinoopolis, the large base of Aswan granite in the museum garden (south-eastern sector), bearing on one face (that now visible) the dedication Αντινόωι | ἐπιφανεῖ | Φεῖδος Ἀκύλας | ἐπιστράτηγος Θηβαίδος (Pl. XLIV).¹ The version on the vase, the lettering of which is large, round, fluent and only slightly suspicious, is certainly forged, if for no other reason than because Hadra vases were invariably funerary and not dedicatory, and are Ptolemaic and not Imperial. Nevertheless, it is interesting in several ways. First, the writing is good, and even if it is an attempt to copy the lettering of the inscription, the whole style suggests that it is the work of someone familiar with Greek book-hands of the Roman period.² Secondly, the copy is not perfect: it contains an addition and two errors. The addition consists of a date which is not in the original inscription Λθ, i.e. 'year 9', which, if it were Hadrian's regnal year, as it would need to be if it were genuine, would be A.D. 124/5. This is, of course, an invention, and an im-

¹ Inv. no. 21783. Both inscriptions on the stone are published (*post alios*) by Milne, *Cairo Cat. Greek Inscr.*, p. 16, no. 9274 (for details about earlier publications, and unpublished *fiches* see de Ricci, *Archiv*, ii, p. 452, no. 95). (a) the dedication to Antinous, is republished as *OGIS*, 700 (SB, 8907), (b) the dedication of A.D. 383-92 to Valentinian, Theodosius, Arcadius, and Flavius Honorius, by Fl. Eutolmius Tatianus, as *OGIS*, 723 (Dessau, ILS 8809).

² The hand resembles quite closely Roberts, *Greek Literary Hands*, pl. 12b of the first half of the second century A.D. So does that of the stone inscription, but I think it unlikely that the vase inscription is a direct copy of the original,

possible date: Antinoopolis was not founded until the death of Antinous in 130,¹ which was Hadrian's fourteenth year, and correspondingly Fidus Aquila, the epistrategos, is known to have been in Egypt in 134.² The false date then attests the learned inventiveness of the author, but nothing more. Why did he think of it? This is probably a fruitless question, but one may at least legitimately wonder if he had not seen one of the genuine Ptolemaic Hadra vases, on which the year is painted, including three, now in New York, with the identical year-date Λθ;³ if the latter, he may have regarded the symbols as a regular feature of Hadra-vase inscriptions. If he did, then I have given him too much credit for learning. The mistakes are more curious. (i) On the inscription AKYΛAC at the end of the third line is very clear, but on the vase these letters are rendered as ANYC. (ii) The omega of Ἀντινόωι is rendered as an omicron (or a very imperfect omega) although the letter is very clear on the stone. How are we to explain the fact that the author had apparently sufficient knowledge and skill to fabricate a date of the right type (though, admittedly, impossible in itself), and yet could not read a clear text? The most likely explanation is that the forger had only second-hand knowledge of the original and that the errors were present in the copy he used. Whatever the explanation—once again, little is to be gained by speculation—the errors at all events suggest that the forger, though familiar with Greek documents, was not a scholar; otherwise he would not have committed the errors, or would have corrected them, if he had found them in his copy. But he is in any case in a very different category from the crude practitioner(s) of the first item, and may be classed as a skilled forger.

The date of the forgery cannot be determined. The stone was first recorded at Antinoopolis in 1865,⁴ and by 1883 it was in the

both because of the errors (see below), and because a direct copier would probably have reproduced the shrunken epsilon of l. 2. And if it is not a direct copy then the lettering of the vase cannot be regarded as based accurately on that of the inscription.

¹ See Weber, *Untersuchungen z. Gesch. des Kaisers Hadrianus* (1907), pp. 248 ff.; Kühn, *Antinoopolis*, pp. 4 ff.

² For Iulius Fidus Aquila see particularly Wilhelm, *Mélanges Maspero*, ii (1937), p. 278; cf. A. and E. Bernand, *Inscriptions gr. et lat. du Colosse de Memnon* (Inst. franç. d'arch. orient., bibl. d'ét. 31, 1960), pp. 117-18; cf. below, p. 250, n. 2.

³ The three vases are nos. 24-26 in Braunert's list, *JDAI*, 65/6, 1950/1, pp. 236-7.

⁴ See Deville, *Archives de Missions scient.* 2ème sér. ii, 1865, p. 485.

Bulac Museum.¹ It remained in the Cairo museum, at Gizeh and Cairo itself, until 1925, when it was transferred to Alexandria.² Nothing is known of the history of the vase before it was bought in 1934,³ and it is possible that the inscription was copied in Cairo, long before the stone reached Alexandria. The inscribed Hadra Vases became known in bulk early in the 1880's and passed through many hands before reaching the museums of Cairo, Alexandria, and New York (to name the chief collections only),⁴ and during these early years there were ample opportunities for our artist, who may have been inspired by the sight of some of the inscribed vases, to improve his own vase, which, if genuine in itself, is a very poor specimen of its class.

¹ See Maspero, *Catal. du Musée du Boulaq*, p. 382, no. 5565.

² Inv. Mus. gr.-rom. ('Cheikh Abadeh'). Both Wilhelm (loc. cit.) and the brothers Bernand (cf. *JEA*, xlvii, 1961, p. 140, no. (4)) state that the stone is in Cairo, and I am not aware that its removal to Alexandria has ever been recorded in print hitherto.

³ Ditto ('Achat Herse'). I am grateful to Dr. Riad for permission to examine the inventory.

⁴ For a detailed account of the activity in the discovery and dispersal of Hadra Vases see B. Brown, *Ptolemaic Paintings*, pp. 4 ff.

ADDENDUM

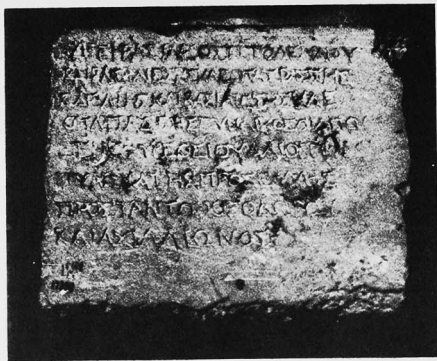
Since this article went to press Mr. Komoutsos has granted an interview to a representative of the Cairo weekly journal, *Images*, and the issue of 20 January 1962 contains (p. 17) an excellent photograph of one sheet of his documents, which, by courtesy of the editor of *Images*, I am able to reproduce here (Pl. XLVI). The sheet (which appears to me to have been detached from the book) illustrates very well the features described by me, and need not be analysed in detail. The inscription discussed above as no. 1 (p. 245 f.) is readily distinguishable in the top right-hand corner: in this particular version of it the name and most of the patronymic of the dedicant are omitted. To the left of this is a sort of taenia bearing the name Ἀλέξανδρος, below which is an attempt at a funerary inscription. I may leave the reader to elucidate the remainder himself.



a. Dedication by Nikagoras, the son of Aristonikos, of Alexandria (iii. B.C.)



b. Modern version of above



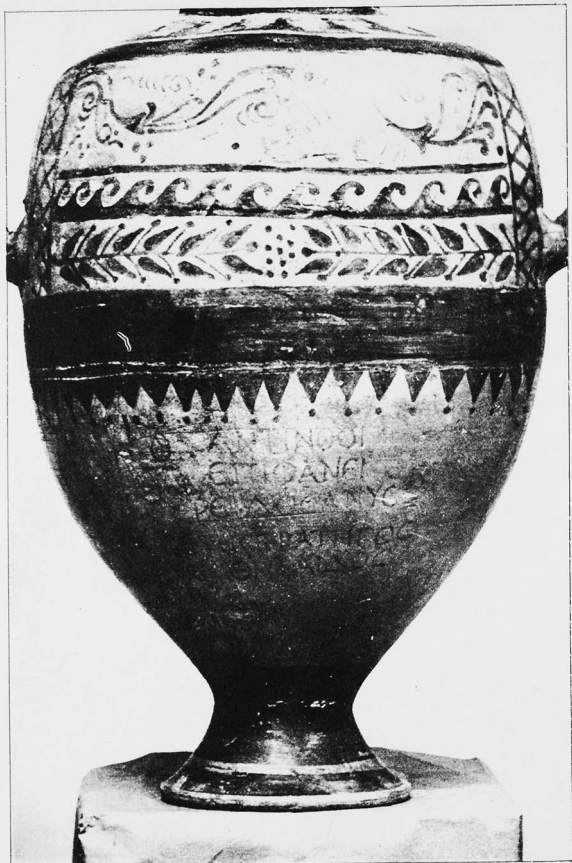
a. Dedication of pylon of synagogue by Jews of Xenephyris (143-116 B.C.)



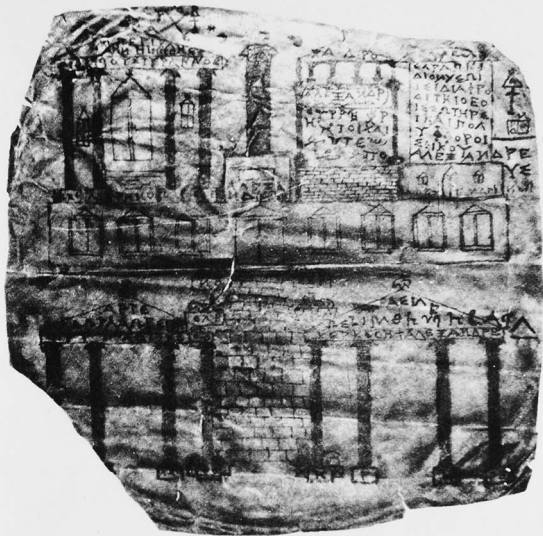
b. Hadra vase with modern painted inscription: complete vase



Original of inscription on Hadra vase



Hadra vase: detail showing inscription



Page from the 'Alexander-book' in the possession of S. Komoutsos
 [By courtesy of Images, Dar Al Hilal, Cairo]