The Greek Ossuary Inscription in Talpiyot Tomb B – (hopefully) the Final Solution

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In my most recent attempt to interpret this inscription (posted on Mark Goodacre's NT Blog) I argued that the first nine letters of the inscription should be read as Δυ(ᵒ)σταιου (where ᵒ is the inscriber's correction of υ) and understood as the genitive case of the name Δοσταιος, indicating that the ossuary contains this man's bones. I shall not repeat here my detailed explanation of the name Δοσταιος, a version of Δοσίθεος. I remain convinced of this part of my interpretation of the inscription.

It leaves the five letters

ΨΩ
ΑΓΒ

I argued that these letters must also compose a name or names. There is indeed a rare Egyptian name that appears in a Greek version as Ψω. I therefore wondered whether there might be a compound name that could be represented in Greek as ΨΩΑΓΒ. If not, I proposed that we read two names Ψω and Αγβ. The second would be the Hebrew name Hagab, as I had argued previously. Although Ψω is a rare name, rare names – and even otherwise completely unattested names – do appear on ossuaries. Many Jews in the Egyptian diaspora bore Egyptian names and Jews from Egypt, as from all parts of the diaspora, returned to live and die in Jerusalem.

Further enquiry has not produced a plausible Egyptian name that could account for all five letters. I was never very happy with reading the two names Ψω and Αγβ. This would mean the whole inscription would comprise three names, which I do not think could plausibly be attributed to one man. Of course, many ossuaries contain more than one person's bones and some have two or even three names on them indicating this. But in this case the inscription was clearly inscribed as a whole, and so we should need to suppose that three persons' bones were interred at the same time. Of course, this is possible, but not something that would happen often. Moreover, it has often been pointed out to me that ΑΓΒ lacks the second vowel it should have if it represents the Hebrew name Hagab (which appears in the New Testament as Hagabos). It certainly could be that this is because the inscriber was squeezing the name into the remaining space on the ossuary and simply did not have room to spell it out properly. More anomalous things than that occur on ossuaries! Moreover, all attempts to interpret the inscription have trouble with these letters. There simply is no Greek word or Hellenized name of any derivation that ends ΑΓΒ. (I know that James Charlesworth still defends the reading ΑΠΟ, which was his reading when he first saw the inscription. But the last letter is very clearly a Β. What I read as a Γ could perhaps be a Π, but ΑΠΒ has no advantage over ΑΓΒ when it comes to finding a Greek word to fit!)

That the last five letters compose the two names Ψω and Αγβ is quite possible. But I now see that there is a better solution. I was being guided by the fact that

most ossuary inscriptions consist entirely of names, and so I missed the clue to the possibility that we might here have an example of something else that very occasionally appears on ossuaries: letters of the Greek alphabet used as atropaic magic (i.e. to protect the bones from disturbance). The clue lies in the fact that ΨΩ are the last two letters of the Greek alphabet, while ΑΓΒ are the first three, though in the wrong order.

We do not entirely understand the use of alphabetic formulae as atropaic magic, but there is no doubt that the Greek alphabet was used in this way in Jewish tombs, just as it was widely used with atropaic force in pagan contexts.[1] A considerable number of abecedaria – in which either the whole Greek or Hebrew alphabet is written or the first few letters of it are written in alphabetical order – have been found in Jewish tombs.[2] One Jerusalem ossuary has the first seven letters of the Hebrew alphabet inscribed on it (CIIP 289). But there are also examples of less straightforward uses of the Greek alphabet (CIIP 84, 112, 113, 284, 386). CIIP 84 probably gives the name Shalom in code (see the commentary in CIIP), though the purpose of this is unclear (the name is also written plainly in Hebrew). But CIIP 112 and 113 (= CJO 319 and 322) are the ones that can be usefully compared with our inscription. They are the subject of an illuminating article by Alice J. Bij de Vaate.[3]

Ossuary inscription CIIP 113 consists of four Greek letters placed roughly thus

ΧΨ
ΑΒ

CIIP 112 similarly has just four Greek letters, though aligned thus: ΙΦΚΧ

Bij de Vaate points out that in CIIP 113 ΧΨ are consecutive letters of the Greek alphabet, as are ΑΒ. In the second case, ΙΚ are consecutive letters of the Greek

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[1] The fullest argument for this Jewish practice, in the context of the evidence from non-Jewish sources, is Alice J. Bij de Vaate, 'Alphabet-Inscriptions from Jewish Graves,' in *Studies in Early Jewish Epigraphy,* ed. Jan Willem van Henten and Pieter Willem van der Horst (AGAJU 21; Leiden: Brill, 1994) 148-161. Some examples of abecedaria have been thought to be writing exercises of children or scribes, but it is generally agreed that this is an implausible explanation of those found in funerary contexts, and Bij de Vaate plausibly argues that at least some of the examples (on ostraca from Herodium and Murabaʿat, for example) that have been taken to be writing exercises may well also be examples of magical use of the alphabet.

[2] In addition to Bij de Vaate, 'Alphabet-Inscriptions,' see Rachel Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs, Practices and Rites in the Second Temple Period* (JSJSup 94; Leiden: Brill, 2005) 506-511; L. Y. Rahmani, *Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collection of the State of Israel* (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority/Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994) 18; Moshe Schwabe and Baruch Lifschitz, *Beth She'arim,* vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Masada Press, 1974) 46.

[3] Alice J. Bij de Vaate, 'Note on L. Y. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries,* Nos 319 and 322,' *ZPE* 113 (1996) 187-190.

alphabet, as are ΦΧ. This suggests a connexion with 'atbash' codes and similar codes which enable the substitution of each letter of the alphabet by another. (I do not need to repeat the details.)

This can be illustrated in the second case by writing the Greek alphabet in two parallel sequences of twelve letters:

ΑΒΓΔΕΖΗΘ**ΙΚ**ΛΜ
ΝΞΟΠΡΣΤΥ**ΦΧ**ΨΩ

This is what one would have to write out in order encode words by substituting the letters in one line for those in the other. The letters in the ossuary inscription are in corresponding lines and so must have been taken from such a code. If one knows about such codes, then the selected letters are sufficient to serve as a reference to the whole code.

To explain the first example (CIIP 112) Bij de Vaate appeals to codes that work by dividing the alphabet into sequences of seven, thus:

ΑΒ ΓΔΕΖΗ
ΘΙΚΛΜΝΞ
ΟΠΡΣΤΥΦ
ΧΨΩ

For the sake of comparison with our inscription, note that the letters in the CIIP 112 inscription are the first two of the alphabet (AB) and the last two bar one (ΧΨ). What the inscription does, therefore, is to indicate a code in which precisely this correlation happens.

In order to explain our inscription (Talpiyot tomb B) we should note that codes could also work by reversing the order of the alphabet (and apparently it was a normal school exercise to learn the alphabet in the reverse order as well as in the ordinary order). This means that we could represent the five letters in this inscription thus:

Ν ΞΟΠΡΣΤΥΦΧ**ΨΩ**
ΜΛΚΙ ΘΗΖΕΔ **ΓΒ Α**

The spacing doesn't come out well here, but the point is that, with the alphabet arranged in this way, the letters **ΨΩ** appear above **ΓΒ**, just as they do in the inscription. Note the similarity with CIIP 112. In that case the last two letters of the alphabet bar one (Ω) correspond to the first two letters of the alphabet. In our inscription the last two letters of the alphabet correspond to the first two letters bar one (A). The difference is that the in our inscription the second line is written backwards, while the omitted ultimate letter (A) is in this case actually included in the inscription, in the only place it could be if it were not to spoil the correspondence between **ΨΩ** and **ΓΒ.** It is not quite clear what the code would do with the A, but I suspect it would correspond to the N, which would also otherwise be left without a corresponding letter. In that case, the letters in the

inscription provide a reference to an easily usable code, just as those in CIIP 113 and (with a little more expertise in codes required) CIIP 112.

I submit that our inscription is plausibly doing much the same kind of thing as CIIP 112 and 113. Moreover, it provides an explanation for the otherwise very strange combination of letters ΓΒ at the very end of the inscription.

Writing the commentary on CIIP 112 as a CIIP editor, Jonathan Price accepts Bij de Vaate's account but adds: 'But the encoded meaning remains obscure.' Actually what we seem to have in these three cases is not encoded words (as in CIIP 84), but bits of the code itself. The phenomenon of consecutive letters of the alphabet occurs when the alphabet is written out as a code, not when the code is used to encode words. What we have in each case therefore is a reference to a particular way of arranging the alphabet for use as a code. The small selection of letters stand for the whole alphabet arranged in that way, just as, presumably, in those inscriptions in which we find the first seven or nine letters of the alphabet in the usual order those letters stand for the whole alphabet. The selection of letters at or near the beginning of the alphabet, as in CIIP 112 and in our inscription, could well be judged especially appropriate for this purpose.

Why should this be done? I suppose that since the alphabet itself was thought to have apotropaic power,[4] then the same or better effect might be achieved by using the alphabet in a special form, known from its formulation for coding purposes.

[4] For some attempts to explain this, though only in a very general way, see Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs*, 510-11; Schwabe and Lifschitz, *Beth She'arim,* vol. 2, 46 ('The letters of the alphabet were regarded as symbols of the world and the stars [στοιχεῖα]').