

Sayce's Axumite Inscription from Meroe — Again

T. HÄGG

In *MNL* 23 (1984) 1-9 S. Ya. Bersina presents a new reconstruction and translation of the well-known Axumite inscription from Meroe first published by A.H. Sayce in 1909. She bases her observations on the text and photograph published by F. Altheim and R. Stiehl in 1961 (revised version in 1962) but is obviously unaware of the improved text printed in *SEG* 24 (1969: No. 1246) as well as the minor modifications to the text which I presented at the Meroitic conference in Berlin in 1980, for which she might have consulted *Bull.Ép.* (1981: No. 662; now also in Hägg 1984). It would be easy just to say that almost all that is new in Bersina's contribution is either manifestly wrong or unconvincing, and refer the serious student to the publications just mentioned; anyone with more than a superficial knowledge of Greek will be able to see for himself. But it may be of some service, to non-philologists at least, to demonstrate in some detail the shortcomings of Bersina's attempt; it would indeed be unwise for anyone to base any further historical conclusions on her translation and comments.

Line 2. It is not true that "the name of God Ares can neither be read in the inscription nor grammatically reconstructed" (Bersina p. 2). The four last letters of Ares in the genitive case, [A]PEΩΣ, are perfectly readable, whereas only a faint trace of the A (bottom right part) is discernible in the photographs (in addition to that of Altheim & Stiehl, I have had access to another good photograph as well). The use of the gen. is also unproblematical: it depends on a lost υἱός, "son of" (for parallels, see Altheim & Stiehl); and the most likely reconstruction of the first two lines remains: "[I, N.N. (Ezana?), King] of Axum and Himyar [...] son of the invincible god] Ares

(=Mahrem)". Bersina's proposal ῥέω ἐς, with the alleged meaning "I attack", is impossible Greek: ῥέω means "flow", "stream", "run" (of water etc.), and the metaphorical personal use which Bersina apparently has in mind would perhaps have been acceptable in an Aeschylean choral ode, but definitely not in Ezana & Co.: "I stream against my enemies...".

Nor is the form ἐς for εἰς "to" to be expected here. Anyway the extra space between ω and ς is hardly big enough to house an ε; it was no doubt left blank by the stone-cutter because of some irregularity in the stone's surface. The [ἀπα]ξ with which Bersina lets her reconstructed line begin has no basis in the stone, so far as photographs can tell (*pace* Bersina p. 4: "three parallel straight lines are clearly visible"), and anyway could not be translated "immediately" (the word means "once").

In short, the mention of Ares (Mahrem) as the king's "father" still belongs to the (few) reasonably certain facts about this inscription, and the following (reconstructed) absolute genitive construction, ἀντιδικησάντ[ων ...]... κατὰ καιρὸν ..., far from "violating grammar norms and logical agreement between words" (Bersina p. 3), is excellent Greek and exactly paralleled in the Ezana inscriptions from Axum (e.g., Bernard 1982, lines 4-6: ... υἱὸς θεοῦ ἀνικῆτου Ἄρεως, ἀτακτησάντων κατὰ καιρὸν τοῦ ἔθνους τῶν Βουγαειτῶν ἀπεστίλαμεν etc.) - that is of course why that suggestion was put forward, and merits attention.

Line 3. παρακο[ύ]σας "having disobeyed" (Bersina: "did not submit") is unlikely, since the grammatical form shows that it refers to the subject of the clause, i.e., the king himself. I have suggested the alternative reading παρακο[μί]σας, "having conveyed" or "transported" (see Hägg 1984), which goes well with the following ἀπὸ τῆς "from the" + a lost noun (or name) in fem.sing. I fail to see the foundation for Bersina's translation "contrary".

Line 4. Bersina may well be right in suggesting that there has been a λ before the notoriously difficult ειαιοις (she is certainly right in rejecting Altheim & Stiehl's suggestion); but her proposed restoration (be it [βασι]λείοι (*sic*) οἷς, as in her text, or [(αἰ)βασι]λεῖαι οἷς, as in her commentary, p. 4) is ungrammatical and her translation ("[King]doms to them") impossible. If οἷς is to be read, it is not a personal but a relative pronoun ("to whom"), referring to an antecedent in the masc. or neutr. pl. (while βασιλεῖαι "kingdoms" is fem.). τὰς ὑ[πογεγραμμένας πόλεις], if that bold suggestion by Altheim & Stiehl should be accepted, means "the *under-*mentioned cities", not "afore-".

Line 5. "The said ones" is Bersina's translation of κλειθέν (for κληθέν), but this participle is in the *sing.*, and it means "called", "named"; Altheim & Stiehl provide parallels. "Heading for" should be "having arrived at".

Line 6. γεννᾶται, if that should be read (the alternative is γενναῖαι, "(women) of noble birth"), means "is produced" (passive), or possibly "produces" (middle voice), but hardly "originating *from*" (followed by an accusative).

Line 10. Bersina's ἐπῆλθεν (3rd pers.sing.) is a misprint, taken over from Altheim & Stiehl (1961; but cf. 1962), for ἐπῆλθον (1st pers.sing.); the verb probably means "I attacked" rather than "came".

Line 11. Bersina reads, with Altheim & Stiehl (1962), [ταῖς] ὀμαῖς οἰκί[αις] and interprets ὀμαῖς as = ὀμαῖς (cf. Altheim & Stiehl 1961) = ὀμετέραις, "to your (plur.) homes", adding (p. 6) that this is the only Axumite inscription "containing a direct address", namely, to the defeated people on whose territory the inscribed victory monument was placed. The supposition of a stone-cutter's error, O for Y, though perhaps not a very likely one, might have been admissible if it had produced an acceptable Greek

word; but ὑμός for ὑμέτερος is an old dialect form totally out of place in the present context. J. Bingen (in *SEG*) suggests another word division:]σομαί σοι κί[, "I shall [---] to you (sing.)"; but this is hardly satisfactory either (who is this "you" in the sing.?).

Most of Bersina's more specific conclusions about the inscription are based on her attempted new readings, restorations, and interpretations; and with them they fall.

Bibliography (in addition to that given in Bersina 1984):

- Bernand, E., 1982 "Nouvelles versions de la campagne du roi Ezana contre les Bedja". - *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 45 (1982) 105-114.
- Bersina, S.Ya., 1984 "An Inscription of a King of Axumites and Himyarites from Meroe". - *MNL* 23 (1984) 1-9.
- Bull. Ép.* 1981 J. & L. Robert, "Bulletin Épigraphique". - *Revue des Études Grecques* 94 (1981) 362-485.
- Hägg, T., 1984 "A New Axumite Inscription in Greek from Meroe". - *Meroitistische Forschungen 1980, Meroitica* 7 (1984) 436-441.
- SEG* 24, 1969 *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, Vol. 24, Leiden 1969.