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A NEW PHOTOGRAPH AND RECONSIDERED READING OF THE LOST INSCRIPTION
FROM KHIRBET EL-KHALIDI (IGLSYR XXI 4, 137)

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Photo negatives of a former Dutch student of the *École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem* have recently been found and developed.¹ Some of these pictures were taken in October 1953. Leo Boer, then a 26-year-old student at the *École*, joined an *École*-organized journey through Transjordan and, on Monday, 26 October, the group of students and their lecturers travelled to the city of Aqaba to visit the site of Tell el-Kheleifeh, purported to be the Biblical Ezion-Geber. The tell was unfortunately located in a no-man's land and the responsible British officer refused the group permission to visit the site, arguing it was too dangerous due to military tensions in the area. Unable to tour the tell as planned, the lecturers challenged their students to translate a Greek inscription on a stone block which, as Boer mentions in his account, had been found by British soldiers only two days prior. The students failed in this task, insisting the letters were too faded to be legible. Before leaving the area, Boer photographed the block (Figure 1).

As it turns out, the *École* students were not the first to study this inscription.² Nelson Glueck had encountered the block on his journey through the Aqaba area in late 1936. Based on his account, it seems that this reused building block was found within the ruins of the larger of the two structures at Khirbet el-Khâldeh (Khirbet el-Khalidi)³, both of the structures having served as fortresses and caravanserais. Glueck interpreted the block to have originally been a tombstone⁴ and dated the inscription — working in conjunction with J. H. Iliffe — to sometime in the sixth to seventh centuries CE. A photograph of the block (Figure 2), along with Iliffe's reading of the inscription, was published in the third volume of *Explorations in Eastern Palestine*.⁵ Unfortunately, due to the poor quality of the picture, it has been difficult to verify or amend Iliffe's reading of the text, which is not without uncertainty: the last editor, Maurice Sartre, arrived at a slightly different reading than the editio princeps, just working from the photograph Glueck supplied. At some point after 1953, the block dropped out of the artifactual record and has since been lost, meaning that all subsequent scholars depended on Glueck's photograph.

Given the history of the piece, the revelation of a new photograph of the inscription is quite fascinating, and is now been published here. Although the quality of this picture itself might be better than that of Glueck's original photograph, it is obvious that the inscription had been weathered much more extensively in the seventeen years which elapsed between Glueck's initial documentation and the later, fortuitous photograph taken by Boer in 1953.

¹ Bart Wagemakers, *A Forgotten Diary and Photograph Collection as Valuable Records for the Historical and Archaeological Study of Israel and Transjordan*, *Strata* 29 (2011), 121–139; Leo Boer studied for the priesthood at the Pontificia Università Gregoriana (Pontifical Gregorian University) in Rome from 1947 till 1951. After his study he was affiliated for four years with the Pontificium Institutum Biblicum (Pontifical Biblical Institute) — also in Rome — as a doctoral candidate. In this period he had the opportunity to stay at the *École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem* for one year (1953–1954). In 1955 he was appointed as a professor of the Holy Scripture at the seminary in Valkenburg, the Netherlands. In 1968 he requested for dispensation of the priestly obligations, which was granted to him later that year; for a photo of Leo Boer, entering Cave 4 A at Qumran, see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/palestineexplorationfund/5904070227/in/photostream/>.

² The authors are grateful to Dr. K. Kritikakou-Nikolaropoulou of the Institute for Greek and Roman Antiquity in Athens for pointing them to the existing publications of this inscription.

³ The location where Glueck found the block is approximately forty kilometres north-east of the military base at which Boer and the *École* students studied it (for a map, see: N. Glueck, *Explorations in Eastern Palestine, III*. The Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research, Vol. 18/19 (1937–1939), Map 1c. Number 13 is Khirbet el-Khâldeh; number 2 is Aqaba). It is unclear as to how the stone was relocated in the period between 1936 and 1953; a reasonable assumption would be that British soldiers found the block at Khirbet el-Khâldeh during patrols prior to Boer's visit and brought it back to their base at nearby Aqaba.

⁴ But see below.

⁵ Glueck (n. 3), 18.

We can see that the block is – against Glueck’s early interpretation – not a really typical example of a tombstone.⁶ It has a raised boss in the centre, which would be an atypical masonry style for the region during the sixth to seventh centuries CE. The boss might be a later alteration meant to produce a rough *tabula ansata* for the inscription. In addition, it is unclear if the cross is cut into a previously existing inscription, or if the Greek letters are laid out around a previously carved cross.⁷ But the stone is clearly re-used, therefore its form and lay-out do not necessarily preclude its being a tombstone. The Alpha and the Omega, so often found below a cross’s arms, may even belong to the first use of the stone.

After some efforts by J. H. Oliver and A. Alt,⁸ Sartre, IGLS XXI 4, 137 read the following letters in the first three lines, i.e. above the bars of the cross:

ΚΕΟΘΕΣΩ ΑΥΥΟΩΝ
ΕΥΣΣ..ΙΡΗ ΜΑΚΑ
ΡΙΣΤΩ

From this, Sartre printed the following text: κ(ύρι)ε ό θε(ός) σω(σον) Δύβρων. | Εὐσ[τάθι] ἰρή[νι καὶ] μακαρι[ζ]έτω. | ΑΩ. “Seigneur Dieu, sauve (?) Dybron. Il est bien établi dans la paix et qu’il soit bienheureux. ΑΩ.”

This is, as Sartre well knows, bristling with difficulties (most of which cannot be resolved by our photo – even though it seems to show that the readings and interpretations of Oliver and Alt cannot stand⁹). To state only the obvious: the first line is read continuously, but in l. 2 and 3 the right and the left part of the inscription are treated separately. Line 2 seems to begin with ΔΥΣ, and we believe that there is an abbreviation mark after the last alpha. It surely looks as if there had been letters in l. 3 on the left side – but the supplement ἰρή[νι καὶ] is certainly too short. We are left with the hitherto unknown name Δυβρων (which should perhaps be left without an accent, even though its ending looks Greek); Feissel’s suggestion apud IGLS (Αυορων, derived from the toponym Αουρα) seems impossible, but we can now see – with Sartre – that the Beta of the name is not certain (but Δυορων is not much better than Δυβρων). μακαρι[ζ]έτω is certainly a possibility, but requires a change; μακαριστω[ς] ... is another possibility, that might accord with a funerary inscription.

All of this does not amount to a new text, even though it seems that the left and the right column should be read apart. Perhaps somebody else has more success with this text.

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⁶ The authors would like to thank Dr. Robert Schick of the American Center of Oriental Research in Amman for pointing out these features in personal communication.

⁷ One example of a cross being added to a Greek inscription from the Roman period on a re-used building block comes from the Petra Church (J. Vionen and Z. Fiema, Greek and Latin Inscriptions, in Z. Fiema, C. Kanellopoulos, T. Waliszewski and R. Schick (eds.), *The Petra Church* (Amman, 2001), 343). Alt, by the way, suggested a metal cross which has disappeared since antiquity. But such a cross would make dowel-holes necessary.

⁸ J. H. Oliver, A Christian epitaph from Eastern Palestine, *AJA* 45 (1941), 542–543; A. Alt, Eine Inschrift aus dem Limeskastell *chirbet el-chalde*, *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 70 (1954), 85–87.

⁹ Oliver: Κ(ύρι)ε ἐλεήσο(ν) Δύβρων; Alt: Κ(ύρι)ε ό θε(ός) τῶ[v] δυνάμεων.



Figure 1



Figure 2

(Courtesy of the Archives of the American Schools of Oriental Research)