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Unusual meanings of Greek words on the eastern periphery of the Byzantine world: παραθήκη, κατοίκησις, συνοδία*

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The author discusses the newly found Greek inscriptions from Lasicia, from the basilica on Machkhomeri Hill near Khobi dated to the 6th c. CE, with three Greek words and expressions having non-standard meanings. The only possible interpretation of the expression ἔχετε ἐν παραθήκῃ (sic) that comes to mind is “to have or keep as a pledge, to have or keep entrusted” i. e. the martyrs must keep the soul of the founder Gorgonios, which he entrusted to them as a pledge of his own salvation. The standard meanings of the term κατοίκησις as “settling” or “dwelling, abode” do not correspond to the context of the list of the benefactors either as an act or as a locus, as well as the early Byzantine meaning “government, administration”. It should mean here a burial, which could be understood as a new dwelling of the body or even a shrine for the relics (probably one of the Forty Martyrs), which appeared in Machkhomeri in connection with the rebuilding of the basilica and which was placed in the martyrion in the eastern end of the southern aisle. Finally, the term συνοδία by its origin meant a “companionship on a journey”, and later became a *terminus technicus* for caravan; new, Byzantine meanings of this word are “Christian fellowship company of the faithful, local congregation”, “gathering, assembly for worship”, “community of religious”. But here it is an “association of lay people around an institution or an influential person, probably functioning as a group of pilgrims”.

Keywords: Byzantine epigraphy, Lazica, lexicography, pilgrimage.

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For many peripheral regions of the Roman and Byzantine Ecumene, Greek was the only written language due to the absence of any script in the local languages. This was, among others, the case of Lazica (ancient Colchis), a kingdom that occupied the territory of modern Western Georgia. All local inscriptions created there before the 10th century are written in Greek. Until recently, only two epigraphic monuments of the Early Byzantine Lazica were known: a fragmentary inscription from the church in Vashnari and an invocative inscription of a certain Goulos on the altar screen from the basilica in Sepieti (Kauchtschischwili 2009, 121, 135).

However, recently, in 2018–2021, Georgian archaeologists excavated the ruins of a basilica on Machkhomeri Hill near Khobi and found eight fully or partially preserved Greek inscriptions (Chitaia, Papuashvili, Vinogradov 2020). They should be dated, judging by the paleography, either to the period of construction of the basilica in the first half or mid-6th c., or to the time of its reconstruction, probably into a domed church with a funerary chapel and a martyrium, in the middle or second half of the same century. These inscriptions are an exceptional source on the early history of Christianity in Lazica, but here we will deal only with the unattested meanings of the three Greek words that occur in them.

1. Παραθήκη

Invocative inscription no. 1 is at the same time a building inscription, mentioning a certain Gorgonios as the founder of the “martyrium”:

+ Κ(ύρι)ε, ἐλέησον
τὸν δοῦλόν σου
Γοργόνιν τὸν
οικοδομήσαν-
5 τα τὸ ἅγιον μα-
ρτύριον. Καὶ οἱ ἅγι-
οὶ μάρτυρες, βο-
ηθίτε αὐτόν.
[Κ]αὶ μετὰ τὸ ἀπ-
10 [ο]θανῖν αὐτὸν
ἔχετε ἐν παρα-
θέκῃ τὴν ψυ-
χὴν αὐτοῦ, οἱ ἅ-
γιοι μάρτυρες.
15 + Οἱ ἅγιοι μάρτ-
υρες, βοηθίτε τ-
ο γράψατι τοῦ-
το. +

“Lord, have mercy on Your servant Gorgonios, who built the holy martyrium. And you, holy martyrs, help him. And after he dies you, holy martyrs, have his soul entrusted. Holy martyrs, help the man who has written this.”

The rare name Gorgonios was borne by one of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, who were highly revered in the Byzantine East and to whom, obviously, Machkhomeri martyrium was dedicated. Among the standard appeals to help the builder and the carver, there is

an unusual invocation to the saints: “And after he dies you, holy martyrs, have his soul in παραθήκη (i. e., παραθήκη).” On the one hand, the word παραθήκη can mean a coffin (*Testamentum XII patriarcharum* 12, 12, 2), but the idea of storing a human soul (not a body!) in a coffin is very dubious. On the other hand, the standard meaning of παραθήκη as “pledge” (LSJ, s. v.) makes unclear what kind of pledge is it where the martyrs should have the soul of the deceased: the word παραθήκη, on the contrary, designated the soul itself as entrusted to man by God (Lampe 1961, 1016). Therefore, the only possible interpretation of the expression ἔχετε ἐν παραθήκῃ that comes to mind is “to have or keep as a pledge, to have or keep entrusted” i. e. the martyrs must keep the soul of Gorgonios, which he entrusted to them as a pledge of his own salvation.

2. Κατοίκησις

Fragmentary inscription no. 3, which probably dates to the period of basilica’s rebuilding and contains a list of its benefactors together with their companions, can be reconstructed in the following way:

- [παρὰ — — μετὰ τῆς συ]νοδία[ς καὶ παρὰ τῶν]
 [ἁγίων (?) τεσ]σεράκον[τα] μετὰ τῆς σ[υνοδίας]
 [καὶ παρὰ — — μετ]ὰ τῆς [σ]υνοδίας καὶ παρὰ [...]
 [- — — μετὰ τῆς σ]υνοδίας καὶ παρὰ τοῦ εὐσ[ε-]
 5 [β- — — μετὰ τῆς συνοδίας — —]ΡΟΥ
 [- — -]
 [- — -] κατοίκησιν
 [- — - το]ῦ Χριστοῦ εὐλο-
 [γ- — — οἱ ἔδει]ξαν (?) ἡμῖν τοὺς
 10 [ἁγίους e. g. — — — ἦ]δε (resp. ὧδε) κατοίκησις.

Of course, the poor preservation of the inscription does not allow us to restore the full text, but the double occurrence of the word κατοίκησις, unique for Christian epigraphy, at the end of the list of the benefactors, raises some questions. The standard meanings of this term as “settling” or “dwelling, abode” (LSJ, s. v.) do not correspond to the context either as an act or as a locus, as well as the early Byzantine meaning “government, administration” (cf. οἴκησις, διοίκησις) (Lampe 1961, 734). However, the mention of κατοίκησις in a short section of the text as both an object (acc.) and a subject (nom.) indicates most likely a real object. The best candidate for this seems to be a burial, which could be understood as a new dwelling of the body. However, it is unclear why such an unusual term should have been used for an ordinary grave, even of an important person. But this would be understandable if it was a shrine for the relics (probably one of the Forty Martyrs), which appeared in Machkhomeri in connection with the rebuilding of the basilica and which was placed in the martyrion in the eastern end of the southern aisle. One should recall at this point that the body of the saint was perceived in Christianity as a living and active subject. This hypothesis is confirmed also by the indication ἦδε (“this one”) or ὧδε (“here”) placed before κατοίκησις. Then it becomes clear the placing of this passage at the end of the benefactors’ list was not accidental, since the transfer of the relics could have been initiated by the persons mentioned above.

3. Συνοδία

The above-mentioned list of the benefactors from inscription no. 3 continues in inscription no. 5, which was executed by the same carver, although, judging by the characteristic letters, probably after a while, and which presents itself as a continuation of the previous list, because of the initial καί:

- +
Καὶ παρὰ τοῦ ἁγιοτά[τ]ου ἐπισκ[όπου Σ]ατάλων Ἀνυσίου
μετὰ τῆς συνοδίας κ[αὶ παρὰ ..]νήρου μετὰ
[τῆς συνοδι]ας καὶ [παρ]ὰ τοῦ α[.....]ουτου
[- — — μετὰ τῆς συ]νοδίας καὶ [παρὰ ...]
5 [μετὰ τῆς συνοδίας — — -].

All benefactors from these lists, both individuals (Bishop of Satala) and institutions (the church of St. Forty martyrs), are accompanied by a mention of a certain συνοδία. This term by its origin meant a “companionship on a journey”, and later became a *terminus technicus* for caravan (LSJ, s. v.). In Christian usage, the original meaning of the word was preserved, including epigraphic material (SEG 32, 1302); so, it would be possible to see here behind such a συνοδία a group of pilgrims who visited the relics of the martyrs. However, this supposition contradicts the mention of the synodia of the church of St. Forty martyrs itself.

Therefore, it is necessary to look in the direction of the new, Byzantine meanings of this word: “Christian fellowship company of the faithful, local congregation”, “gathering, assembly for worship”, “community of religious” (Lampe 1961, 1334), which are also attested in inscriptions (SEG 37, 1498). But in our case, such a συνοδία exists not only around the church, but around the bishop and other persons without ecclesiastic ranks, i. e. laypeople, hardly corresponding only to monks and even clerics. Συνοδία may not also mean a family or relatives (LSJ, s. v.), since they are called οἶκος in inscription no. 2 from Machkhomeri or πάντες οἱ διαφέροντες in the inscription from Sepieti, and since it is hardly imaginable for a church. However, one can find a parallel to such a συνοδία in two early Byzantine inscriptions from the village of Estyla near Seleucia Sidera in Pisidia, where a synodia, well organized (with two chiefs) and consisting of laymen, is mentioned around the local church of St. George (Rott 1908, 351, 354, Nr. 12, 18). Therefore, συνοδία in Machkhomeri inscriptions is also, most likely, some kind of association of lay people around a church, bishop or other influential persons: this does not exclude its actions as a group of pilgrims, which would explain the origin of such a term.

Thus, in the inscriptions from Machkhomeri in Lasica, there are non-standard meanings newly attested for the three Greek words and expressions: ἔχειν ἐν παραθήκη “to have, to keep as a pledge”, κατοίκησις “deposition of the relics”, συνοδία “association of lay people around an institution or an influential person, probably functioning as a group of pilgrims”. It is not clear whether they are a local transformation or were brought to Lazica from Asia Minor or Syria (e. g., by the carvers of inscriptions). However, the very fact of using non-standard meanings of words and expressions in Machkhomeri inscriptions, as well as unique epigraphic formulas, testifies to the significance of such “peripheral” monuments for the history of the Greek language.

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Необычные значения греческих слов на восточной периферии византийского мира: παραθήκη, κατοίκησις, συνοδία*

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В статье рассматриваются недавно найденные греческие надписи из Лазики, из базилики на холме Мачхомери близ Хоби. Надписи принадлежат двум первым этапам строительства храма, относящимся к VI в.: возведению трехнефной базилики на столпах и ее перестройке с выделением мавзолея и мартирия в восточных концах боковых нефов. В трех из этих надписей встречаются нестандартные значения трех греческих слов и выражений. Единственное возможное толкование встречающегося в строительной надписи выражения ἔχετε ἐν παραθήκῃ — «иметь, держать в залоге», т. е. мученики должны сохранить душу строителя храма Горгония, которую он вверил им как залог своего спасения. Стандартные значения термина κατοίκησις «поселение, жилище» не соответствуют контексту списка донаторов храма ни как действие, ни как локус, равно как и ранневизантийскому значению слова «управление, администрация». Здесь оно должно означать погребение, которое можно было бы понимать как новое жилище тела или даже раку для мощей (вероятно, одного из свв. Сорока мучеников), которая появилась в Мачхомери в связи с восстановлением базилики и была размещена в мартирии в восточной части южного нефа. Наконец, термин συνοδία по своему происхождению означал «группу спутников», а позже стал terminus technicus для обозначения каравана; новые, византийские значения этого слова — «сообщество верующих или клириков, богослужebное собрание». Но здесь это должно быть «объединение мирян вокруг институции или влиятельного лица, вероятно, функционировавшее также как группа паломников».

Ключевые слова: византийская эпиграфика, Лазика, лексикография, паломничество.

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