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Bilingualism as Protection and Resistance on an Egyptian Jewish Proseuche

Background: There are several Greek/Latin bilingual documents from late Ptolemaic and early Roman period Egypt, but only one that pertains directly to the Jewish community -- a decree granting asylum, or *asylia* (royal protection from harm) to a Jewish temple. The interplay of languages in this decree is indicative of the shifting tides of imperial control upon a minority community, and suggests the emblematic function of language as a means of protection from the intended audience - Romans - as Egypt passed from Greek to Roman rule.

The edict, *Corpus of Ptolemaic Inscriptions* (CPI) *125* (fig. 1), is a reinstatement of a decree of benefaction by Ptolemy VIII Euergetes (170-131 BCE). Owing to the 19th-century European traffic of artifacts through and out of Egypt, the stone's place of origin is unclear, as is its date of production and which rulers it concerns. This paper uses the patterns of bilingualism on the stele to reconstruct its historical context. The use of Latin suggests Roman military presence in the area and this would indicate that the stele was erected on a synagogue during the reign of Cleopatra VII (51-30 BCE) and her son by Julius Caesar, Caesarion (44-30 BCE). But The fact that this inscription gives primacy to Greek suggests through language that the Ptolemaic rulers continued to assert their authority in regions far from the metropole, even at a time of encroaching Roman military presence. At the same time, since Greek was the principal language of administration and much of the population of Egypt spoke Greek by this point due to centuries of Ptolemaic rule, it would not have been necessary to include Egyptian or Hebrew (Bingen 1982).

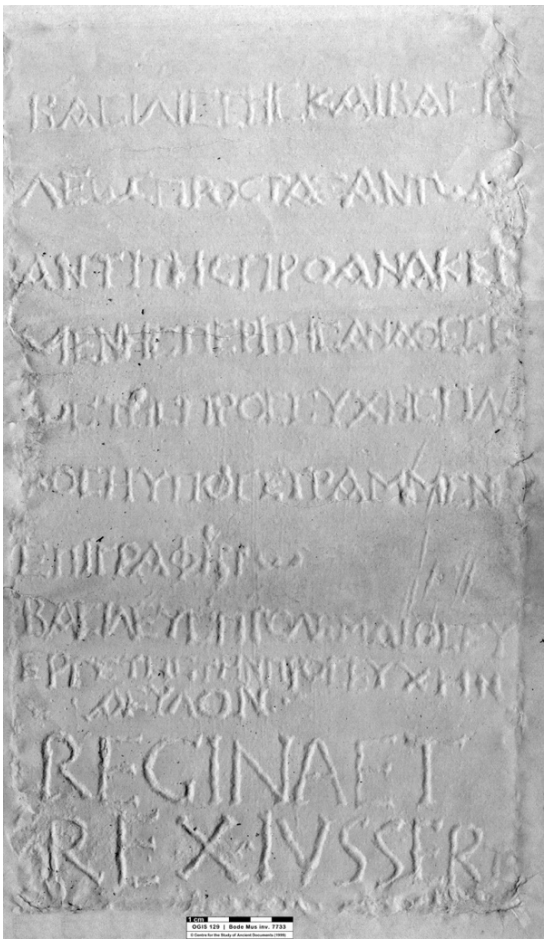
Research Questions: What does bilingualism represent in the context of imperial fragility? How does a minority community use code-switching, relying on the language of one imperial power to protect it against another? What was the linguistic landscape of Jewish communities in late Ptolemaic Egypt?

Analysis: I consider several sociolinguistic variables of the inscription. I chiefly investigate the significance of code-switching from Greek to Latin within the utterance/inscription, and compare it with slightly later bilingual and trilingual inscriptions with Greek and Latin from early Roman Egypt, contrasting ordering, quantity, and font-sizing of languages to see how the use of linguistic and epigraphic variables in an inscription reveals its political climate. I argue that the edict served as a warning, conveying to the Roman military in large letters in their own language that the temple was granted protection by the Ptolemies, not to be meddled with by the military occupiers of the region.

I also look at the lexis, and the presence of formulaic language. Certain lexical items (e.g. *proseuche* for a synagogue) and the presence of formulaic language but an absence of religious language, are both frequently found in monolingual *asylia* decrees. Epigraphical variables (style, font size, and alignment of the text), strongly suggest the intended audience of the inscription. Although we are far from knowing the full story of this royal edict on a lost temple, it suggests an important story of cultural exchange, linguistic influence, and the power that a language can wield. Its bilingualism represents a transitional period in Egypt between imperial powers. The bilingualism of the inscription is indicative of Greek and Roman presence in the region, but at the same time – subtly by means of the choice and order of languages, the relations between language and text, and the size of the carved letters – it may show the resistance of local communities to the incoming imperial force, and the determination of Cleopatra to demonstrate her far-reaching power in Egypt.

Annex:

Fig. 1: CPI 125, Royal Edict about a Synagogue:



Βασιλίσσης καὶ βασι-
λέως προσταξάντων
ἀντὶ τῆς προσανακει-
μένης περὶ τῆς ἀναθέσε-
ως τῆς προσ[ε]υχῆς πλα-
κὸς ἡ ὑπογεγραμμένη
ἐπιγραφήτω.
Βασιλεύς Πτολεμαῖος Εὐ-
εργέτης τὴν προσευχὴν
ἄσυλον.
Regina et
rex iusser(un)t

Translation:
"The queen and king command, in the place of the plaque of the consecration of this *proseuche* (place of prayer) written (before), let this consecration be inscribed. King Ptolemy Euergetes (gave) this *proseuche* asylum. (In Latin): The queen and king command it."

References: Adams, J. N., 2003. *Bilingualism and the Latin language*. Bingen 1982, "L'Asylie pour une Synagogue." Bowman, et al., ed., 2021. *Corpus of Ptolemaic Inscriptions*. Rigsby, 2003. "A Jewish Asylum in Greco-Roman Egypt." Horbury & Noy, 1992. *Jewish inscriptions of Graeco-Roman Egypt.*