

JERZY DANIELEWICZ

Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu
ORCID: 0000-0002-6775-3563
danielew@amu.edu.pl

IS THERE AN ACROSTIC IN BALBILLA, EPIGR. 31 BERNAND?*

ABSTRACT. Danielewicz Jerzy, *Is There an Acrostic in Balbilla, Epigr. 31 Bernand?* (Czy w epigramie 31 (Bernand) Balbilli zawarty jest akrostych?)

The acrostic ερη ὦ Καε in one of Balbilla's epigrams (no. 31 Bernand), postulated by Marialuigia Di Marzio in 2019, can be supported only in part; there are serious arguments against it.

Keywords: Balbilla; acrostic; Memnon inscriptions; Hadrian

In 2019, Marialuigia Di Marzio published an article¹ suggesting a previously unnoticed acrostic in one of the epigrams by Julia Balbilla inscribed on the left leg of one of two colossal statues, originally carved in 1400 BCE to honour Amenhotep III, who at the end of the 1st century BCE was re-identified as Memnon, the son of the goddess Eos, the mythical king of Ethiopia killed at Troy by Achilles, but later bestowed with posthumous immortality by Zeus.² The statue was severely damaged in the first century CE and since then its stone base, probably expanding under the heat of the rising sun, began to make a mysterious sound at dawn, which was interpreted as Memnon's complaint to his mother. Hearing this sound was considered a sign of divine favour. During the first two centuries CE, crowds of pilgrims flocked to Thebes to witness the phenomenon (after two centuries, the statue grew silent again, probably due to efforts to repair the damage); many tourists / pilgrims commemorated their presence with inscriptions in Latin or Greek on the colossus. Hadrian and his consort Vibia

* The article refers to the interest in epigrams by women of the dedicatee of this volume, Prof. Elżbieta Wesołowska, author of the book *Dzielo lekką stworzone dłonią. Wybór epigramów z „Antologii Palatyńskiej”* [A work of light hand: A selection of epigrams from the “Palatine Anthology”].

¹ Di Marzio 2019: 105–130.

² On the Memnon/Amenhotep statue and the circumstances of Emperor Hadrian's visit to Thebes, I draw in particular from Amalia Margherita Cirio (Cirio 2011) and the publications of Patricia A. Rosenmeyer: Rosenmeyer 2018; Rosenmeyer 2008; Rosenmeyer 2019.

Sabina visited the statue in November 130, and Balbilla accompanied them on that tour, both as a lady-in-waiting of Sabina and as a poetess to celebrate the emperor's encounter with the Memnon statue.

The standard edition of Memnon's inscriptions (107 in total) was prepared by the brothers André and Étienne Bernard.³ The Balbilla epigram we are dealing with here is numbered 31 therein and reads as follows:

- 1 Ἐκλυον ἀυδήσαντος ἔγω ἔπι λίθω Βάλβιλλα|
 φώνα(ς) τᾶς θείας Μέμνονος ἢ Φαμένωθ.|
 Ἥλθον ὕμοι δ' ἐράται βασιλῆιδι τυῖδε Σαβίννα,|
 4 ὥρας δὲ πρώτας ἄλιος ἦχε δρόμος.|
 Κοιράνω<ι> Ἀδριάνω πέμπτῳ δεκότη δ' ἐνιαύτῳ,
 (φῶτ)α δ' ἔχεσκε(ν) Ἄθυρ εἴκοσι | καὶ πέσυρα.
 Εἰκόστῳ πέμπτῳ | δ' ἄματι μῆνος Ἄθυρ.

I, Balbilla, heard, from the speaking stone,
 the divine voice of Memnon or Phamenoth.
 I came here with our lovely queen Sabina,
 when the sun held its course during the final hour,
 in the fifteenth year of the emperor Hadrians's rule,
 Hathyr was on its twenty-fourth day.
 On the twenty-fifth day of the month of Hathyr.
 (trans. Patricia A. Rosenmeyer)⁴

Marialuigia Di Marzio rectifies verse 6 of this epigram, taking into account previous proposals by scholars dealing with it. The version she finds correct reads:

- Ἐκλυον ἀυδήσαντος ἔγω ἔπι λίθω Βάλβιλλα|
 φώνα(ς) τᾶς θείας Μέμνονος ἢ Φαμένωθ.|
 Ἥλθον ὕμοι δ' ἐράται βασιλῆιδι τυῖδε Σαβίννα,|
 ὥρας δὲ πρώτας ἄλιος ἦχε δρόμος.|
 Κοιράνω<ι> Ἀδριάνω πέμπτῳ δεκότη δ' ἐνιαύτῳ, 5
 <ἄμ>α<τ'> ἔχεσκε δ' Ἄθυρ εἴκοσι | καὶ πέσυρα.
 εἰκόστῳ πέμπτῳ | δ' ἄματι μῆνος Ἄθυρ.

A significant change from the Bernard brothers' edition is that the beginning of the verse in question (6) is read as <ἄμ>α<τ'> ἔχεσκε δ'⁵ instead of (φῶτ)α δ' ἔχεσκε(ν)⁶. Let me emphasise right away that I consider this a legitimate correction.⁷ Once this conjecture is adopted, the initial letters of the verses form the sequence ΕΦΗΩΚΑΕ, which Di Marzio resolves as ΕΦΗ Ω ΚΑΕ(ΣΑΡ). Her

³ Bernard 1960.

⁴ Rosenmeyer 2018: 221.

⁵ Following Edmonds and Peek.

⁶ Proposed by D'Orville and Jacobs.

⁷ For a detailed and convincing explanation of the origin of the engraver's error, see Di Marzio 2019: 115.

interpretation of it is noteworthy:⁸ “The poetess in the last epigram [= 31 Bernard], the one that is only apparently the most straightforward and administrative, plays with the reader and sends them a message, which is an exceptional example of syncretism in several respects. The statue of Phamenoth / Memnon spoke and, while speaking Greek (ὦ Καε), used the Latin form pronounced with the hard guttural (K), Cae(sar), instead of the normal Greek form Καῖ(σαρ), perhaps in homage to Hadrian’s Latinity. The encomiastic intention is thus not only in the invocation with the appellation typical of Roman emperors, but also in the Latin incipit of the honorary title. The Greek-Egyptian statue seems to bow to the Emperor of Rome and does so in his own language”.⁹

Di Marzio is right in stating the linguistic uniqueness of the vocative KAE. It is not found in either Greek or Latin inscriptions. In the former, there appear the abbreviations K, KAIΣ¹⁰ (and additionally on the coin inscriptions KAI)¹¹, in the latter CAES, CAE, C.¹² An argument for the intentional inclusion of the abbreviation of Καῖσαρ in the initial letters of verses 5–7 could be that KAE would match Κοιράνω<I> at the beginning of verse 5, forming together with it a kind of ‘homonymous gamma (or rectangular) acrostic’ to comprise two common imperial titles:

K O I P A N Ω < I >
A
E

The point of overlap between the two words discussed here, allowing only one character (and thus forcing a compromise), is the ‘corner’ letter to represent the ‘k’ sound, written K in one language and C in the other, which would to some extent justify the unusual spelling of the Latin CAE as KAE. The bilingual nature of such an acrostic would not be surprising, as a parallel case can be

⁸Di Marzio 2019: 116 (transl. J.D.).

⁹The view expressed synthetically in Di Marzio 2020: 68 n. 2: “Un messaggio breve, ma carico di sottintesi, nel quale il Colosso greco-egizio parla in greco, ma usa la forma latina Cae(sar) piuttosto che quella greca Καῖσαρ, in un probabile omaggio alla latinità di Adriano”. Di Marzio (2019: 117) enhances her observations with sociolinguistic aspects that take into account the perspective of the average reader: “[u]na mistione di elementi capace dunque di intercettare l’attenzione di qualsiasi viaggiatore ammirasse il colosso, quello greco ma anche quelli egizi o romani con una più o meno limitata alfabetizzazione greca”. On the possible function of acrostic in alien geographical and chronological contexts, see Garulli 2013: 274: “In particular, the provenance of the acrostic poems examined from areas where Greek was not the only (or first) language might also suggest that the acrostics could have functioned as a socially-oriented abstract of the whole inscribed text, especially for readers who were not native or good speakers of the Greek language”.

¹⁰McLean 2002: 53.

¹¹Hartmann, MacDonald 1969: 31.

¹²<https://www.forumancientcoins.com/dougsmith/abb.html> (Abbreviations on Roman Imperial Coins).

found in lines 27–30 of the inscription from the Mandulis temple at Kalabsha (*IMEG* 168 = 8 Garulli), where the Greek-Latin ‘gamma acrostic’ Ῥωμαίων / Ῥωμάνως is hidden:¹³

ΡΩΜΑΙΩΝ
ΜΑΝ
ΩΣ

The author of this inscription, transliterating into Greek characters the Latin plural accusative *Romanos*, even took pains to mark the length of the ‘o’ in his writing, clearly demonstrating that he consciously introduced two languages into the acrostic.

The presence of the acrostic in Balbilla’s poem also seems to be evidenced by its length: it spans the entire inscription (from the first to the last verse). Furthermore, it contains more than one word, more specifically a phrase with a verb, cf. verses 1–22 of the aforementioned Kalabsha inscription, where, in addition to the author’s name and status, the verb ἔγραψα (18–22) is inserted. Incidentally, in Balbilla the acrostichic *verbum dicendi* (ἔφη) has its counterparts in the concurrent verses: ἀυδήσαντος (1), φώνα(ς) (2).¹⁴

At this point, however, I would like to signal my doubts. Di Marzio understands the final words of the acrostic ΕΦΗ Ω ΚΑΕ(ΣΑΡ) as an invocation preceded by a *verbum dicendi*¹⁵ (Diceva: ‘O Cesare’)¹⁶ addressed to Hadrian by the colossus.¹⁷ Although the acrostic is by its nature paratextual, it refers only to the work in which it is anchored, and the communication layout encoded in epigram 31 does not include the emperor. The idea of referring in a preceding epigram (here 28) to an acrostic found in one of the subsequent pieces (here 31) within the same ‘chain’ of epigrams, as developed by Di Marzio,¹⁸ although ingenious, is unlikely. Uttering a sound by Memnon is a theme running through all four epigrams of Balbilla, who in *Epigr.* 31.1–2 finally makes herself the recipient of his voice (Ἐκλυον ἀυδήσαντος ἔγω ’πυ λίθω Βάλβιλλα / φώνα(ς) τᾶς θείας Μέμνονος ἦ Φαμένωθ). The comment contained in the acrostic, if any, would naturally refer to her. Theoretically, Balbilla could thus inform the emperor that she too had been honoured by the colossus with a sound made in her presence.¹⁹ Finally, it should be noted that the sound was inarticulate, so that

¹³The acrostic discovered by me, see Danielewicz 2013: 326–330.

¹⁴This does not mean, however, that the acrostic is in any way hinted at, since there is no explicit exhortation in the text of the epigram to catch the ‘vertical’ message of the text by verbs referring to a heuristic and cognitive activity, to use Valentina Garulli’s apt phrase (Garulli 2013: 268).

¹⁵Di Marzio 2019: 116.

¹⁶Di Marzio 2020: 68.

¹⁷Di Marzio 2019: 122.

¹⁸Di Marzio 2019: 124–125.

¹⁹But ἔφη hardly conveys the meaning of “he spoke [to me]”; the natural translation is “he said” (with the following quote).

the invocation “O Caesar!” simply could not come ‘out of the lips’ of Memnon. In *Epigr.* 28.4 Memnon greeted Hadrian “as he was able” (χαίρην εἶπέ (φ)οι ὡς δύνατον), and immediately afterwards in this poem his voice is compared to the sound of beaten bronze (v. 7–8 ὡς χάλκοιο τύπεντ[ο]ς ἦ Μέμνων πάλιν αὔδαν / ὀξύτονον).²⁰ As regards apostrophes, the true ones are directed by visitors to the statue, which thus, as it were, is revived and personified.²¹

The plausibility of the presence of the acrostic is also sought by Di Marzio against the background of certain ‘eccentric’ features of *Epigr.* 31, such as, *inter alia*, the lack of correct hexameter-pentameter alternation, with an isolated pentameter (v. 7) closing a series of full couplets (vv. 1–6).²² The scholar allows for the possibility that the piece was deliberately extended by one verse, since seven verses are needed to accommodate the invocation in the acrostic. The double dating in the final two pentameters²³ would then have been subordinated to this very purpose. In my view, this is an assumption made under a preconceived thesis. The second date bears all the hallmarks of an addition and has no parallel in the other Memnon inscriptions. The epigram proper was probably only six verses long.

There is, however, an even more serious reason to doubt the intentional stretching of the acrostic. As is well known, an acrostic, in order to be perceived by observers, must be visually distinguished by the positioning of its constituent letters at the beginning of successive verses. *Epigr.* 31 by Balbilla, as inscribed on the colossus, does not fulfil this condition, since from the second letter of the last word of the fifth verse onwards its graphic layout is broken up into segments that do not coincide with hexameter and pentameter (see above the text quoted according to the Bernand brothers’ edition, in which the vertical dashes indicate the boundaries of the individual lines). As a result, the beginnings of the inscription lines are arranged as follows:²⁴

E
Φ
H
Ω
K
N
K
Δ

²⁰For a detailed analysis of terms describing Memnon’s voice (across the entire body of Memnon inscriptions), see Moreno 2015; cf. also Cirio 2011: 41–42.

²¹Rosenmeyer 2018: 80–88.

²²Di Marzio 2019: 122 and 124–125.

²³Very controversial in terms of its relationship to documented events, cf. Rosenmeyer 2018: 148–154, Di Marzio 2020.

²⁴In this sequence, only EΦH makes any sense, but such a short, three-letter word may be the work of chance.

This means that the postulated acrostic is partially hidden from the observer's view. If Balbilla had indeed intended to introduce an acrostic, she would have had the lines carved "normally", that is, in whole verses, even at the expense of reducing the size of the letters (the distinguishing feature of this particular inscription is the enlargement of the letters in comparison to neighbouring inscriptions).

In the situation outlined above, Di Marzio's proposal, though generally interesting and intriguing, must ultimately be considered unproven.²⁵

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Editions and commentaries

- Bernard 1960: A. Bernard, É. Bernard. *Les inscriptions grecques et latines du Colosse de Memnon*. 1960. Paris.
 Cirio 2011: A. M. Cirio. *Gli epigrammi di Giulia Balbilla*. 1960. Lecce.

Studies

- Danielewicz 2013: Danielewicz, J. 2013. "An Unnoticed Second Acrostic in the Kalabsha Inscription of Paccius Maximus (IMEG 168)." In *The Muse at Play: Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry*. Ed. by J. Kwapisz, D. Petrain, M. Szymański, 326–330. Berlin-Boston: Walter de Gruyter.
- Di Marzio 2019: Di Marzio, M. 2019. "L'Epigramma 31 Bernard di Giulia Balbilla e l'acrostico con la voce di Phamenoth/Memnone". *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica*, n.s. 123/3: 105–130.
- Di Marzio 2020: Di Marzio, M. 2020. "Le 'immagini orarie' negli Epigrammi 28–31 Bernard di Giulia Balbilla: ipotesi per una nuova interpretazione." *Rivista di cultura classica e medioevale* 72/1: 51–69.
- Garulli 2013: Garulli, V. 2013. "Greek Acrostic Verse Inscriptions." In *The Muse at Play: Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry*. Ed. by J. Kwapisz, D. Petrain, M. Szymański, 246–278. Berlin-Boston: Walter de Gruyter.
- Hartmann, MacDonald 1969: Hartmann, J.E., MacDonald, G. 1969. *Greek Numismatic Epigraphy*. Chicago.
- McLean 2002: McLean, B.H. 2002. *An Introduction to Greek Epigraphy of the Hellenistic and Roman Periods from Alexander the Great down to the Reign of Constantine (323 B.C. – A.D. 337)*. University of Michigan Press.
- Moreno 2015: Moreno, J.G. 2015. "La voz del coloso de Memnón: estudio lingüístico de los términos que la describen." *Ianua Classicorum. Temas y formas del Mundo Clásico* 1, 2015: 513–522.
- Rosenmeyer 2008: Rosenmeyer, P.A. 2008. "Greek Verse Inscriptions in Roman Egypt: Julia Balbilla's Sapphic Voice." *Classical Antiquity* 27/2, 2008: 334–58.
- Rosenmeyer 2018: Rosenmeyer, P.A. 2018. *The Language of Ruins. Greek and Latin Inscriptions on the Memnon Colossus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

²⁵This publication is the result of research work carried out within the project "Late Greek Poetry: A Selection (Edition, Translation, Commentary)" financed from the state budget under the programme implemented by the Minister of Education and Science (Poland) called the National Programme for the Development of the Humanities (no. 0082/NPRH9/H22/88/2021).

Rosenmeyer 2019: Rosenmeyer, P.A. 2019. “Encrypted Inscriptions”. In *From Document to History: Epigraphic Insights into the Greco-Roman World*. Ed. by C. F. Noreña, N. Papazarkadas, 373–392. Leiden–Boston: Brill.

Online sources

<https://www.forumancientcoins.com/dougsmith/abb.html> (Abbreviations on Roman Imperial Coins)

IS THERE AN ACROSTIC IN BALBILLA, EPIGR. 31 BERNAND?

S u m m a r y

The article presents a critical discussion of the interpretation of one of Balbilla’s epigrams carved on the foot of Memnon’s colossus at Egyptian Thebes (Bernand no. 31) proposed by Marialuigia Di Marzio in her article published in QUCC 2019. According to this interpretation, it contained the acrostic ΕΦΗΩΚΑΕ, which Di Marzio resolves as ΕΦΗ Ω ΚΑΕ(ΣΑΡ), suggesting a direct apostrophe to the emperor Hadrian on the part of the statue. However, there are compelling reasons to reject this intriguing proposal.