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## An unpublished graffito from the Palmyrenian Agora

During the excavation campaign 2010, the Polish-Syrian archaeological mission concentrated mainly on the area in which the famous Tariff of Palmyra had been set up,<sup>1</sup> with particular focus on a section in the close vicinity of Wadi Suraisir, West of the Agora. The unpublished inscription which is the subject of this paper was found accidentally during the study of the constructions linking the Agora with the pavement in front of the Tariff socle. The graffito is written on a flagstone of the pavement which was laid between the two first columns of the peristyle located in the southern corner of the Agora's courtyard. It is still *in situ*.

The flagstone concerns a small *tabula ansata* (dimensions: 5 × 5,5 cm) which contains a short cursive inscription. The text is written in a slipshod manner, thus causing several difficulties as regards the reading. The letters are rather small, circa 2 cm in height, and look very similar to each other. The text is probably late, and from the character of the script, its date is not earlier than the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. The cursive script is of comparatively poor quality,<sup>2</sup> which seems to rule out that it is the work of a professional engraver. No precise date is given.

We propose the following reading:

1. DKRY
2. 'G'
3. BWRY?
4. BR ḤRY

*Translation:*

1. May be remembered
2. 'Aga
3. (son) of Borrai',
4. the freedman.

1. This part was already targetted by the Polish mission during its campaign under the direction of M. Gawlikowski in October 2010.
2. E.g. the table of Palmyrenian cursive in J. CANTINEAU, *Grammaire du palmyrénien épigraphique*, Le Caire, 1935, p. 34.

### COMMENTARY

**Line 1** – The letters in DKRY are reordered. The metathesis is confirmed for example by a text from north-western Palmyrene.<sup>3</sup> It is very likely that the word DKRY signifies DKYR, which in turn is very frequent in West Semitic epigraphy, in particular in the inscriptions from Nabatea, Palmyra and Hatra. Furthermore, this word, in this passive participle form, is often used for ex-votos, dedications and, especially, for commemorations. This formula usually indicates that a person mentioned in the text is commemorated in the inscription. There are several examples of this type of inscription also written pavement flagstones among the epigraphic evidence from the Hatrene. However, those are usually found in temples and small chapels.<sup>4</sup>

**Line 2** – The name of the commemorated person is 'Aga, which is a masculine personal name well attested in Palmyra. It is also known from the inscriptions from Hatra and from a bilingual Greek-Palmyrene text, where its transcription is Ogas (Ὀγας). Yet, there can be no certainty, as it could also be a derivative of another name, 'GYLW, Ogeilu, which is also very popular in Palmyra.<sup>5</sup>

**Line 3** – The reading of this line is problematic, and the suggestion we advance is only one among several possibilities. In line 3, we discern the name BWRY. It is true that the epigraphic evidence from Palmyra and its hinterlands does not confirm this name unequivocally.<sup>6</sup> Further, the name DRY is not attested

3. D. SCHLUMBERGER, *Palmyrène Nord-Ouest* (PNO), Paris, 1951, no. 77 = PAT 1745: DKRY/ 'BYN/ BR HRMY/ LṬB.

4. B. AGGOULA, *Inventaire des inscriptions hatréennes*, Paris, 1991, no. 59, p. 46.

5. J. K. Stark, *Personal Names in Palmyrene Inscriptions*, Oxford, 1971, p. 104.

6. One of the altars dedicated to the Blessed Name contains the name Borra: BWR'; M. GAWLIKOWSKI, Kh. As'ad, "Inscriptions de Palmyre nouvelles et revisitées", *Studia Palmyrenskie* X, 1997, p. 24, no. 2.



Figure 1 - The graffito from the Palmyrenian Agora (photo. K. Jakubiak).

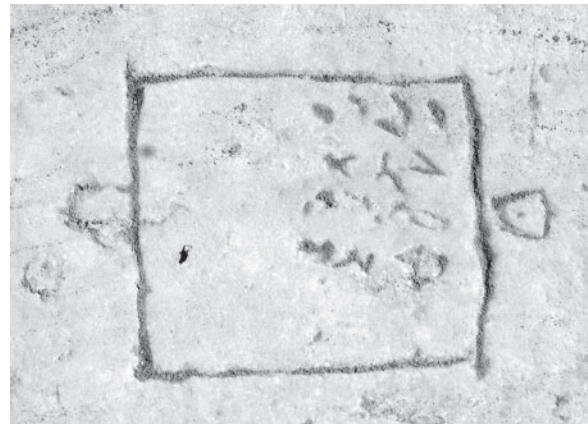


Figure 2 - Palmyra, the Agora, southern angle: localisation of the flagstone with the graffito (photo. K. Jakubiak).

in the inscriptions from Palmyra, yet some Hatrene inscriptions quote it,<sup>7</sup> and the tessera, where the similar name is partly damaged, also seems to support this reading.<sup>8</sup>

**Line 4** – The reading of the last line is rather straightforward. The father of the commemorated person was certainly a freedman. The status of the freedman is verified by many texts from Palmyra, such as, for example, in some dedications and ex-votos.<sup>9</sup>

Even though the graffito has a commemorative character, it goes beyond the cultic space. The context clearly reveals that it belongs to the administrative and the public domains, but not to the religious area. The inscription of graffiti in public spaces is well attested, such as, for instance, in Dura-Europos.<sup>10</sup> What is more, there is no indication for the reuse of such a flagstone for an inscription. Also, it seems very probable that the named 'Aga has engraved the text for himself.

If the possible parallels with Hatra are legitimate, we can assume that the author of this text, the son of a freedman, knew the Hatrene's customs or, perhaps, came from there. In fact, it is rather improbable that a Palmyrenian citizen engraved such inscription on the Agora's pavement, in a fashion that was not the local custom. Perhaps the Hatrene 'Aga came to the city in transit or for commerce or, indeed, for other unknown purposes. To conclude then, the evidence suggests that a foreign person, who visited this monumental public space, engraved this small text. Such practices also can, in fact, be observed among tourists and visitors to the historical places in more recent times.<sup>11</sup>

The inscription analysed in this paper is very brief and involves several problems of reading as well as interpretation. The difficulties arise from the negligent nature of the script. Although is very laconic in content, it can be confirmed that a certain freedman named 'Aga wanted to commemorate his visit in Palmyra, but the purpose of his visit remains unknown.

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7. For example the inscription H240 published by B. AGGOULA, *Inventaire* (supra, n. 4), p. 120.

8. H. INGOLDT, H. SEYRIG, J. STARCKY, *Recueil des tessères de Palmyre* (RTP), Paris, 1955, no. 485b.

9. E.g. CIS II 4000, CIS II 4013.

10. R. BERTOLINO, *Corpus des inscriptions sémitiques de Doura-Europos*, Naples, 2004. We mean the inscriptions from the Palmyra Gate.

11. For instance, the sculptures from the St Denis basilica contain graffiti dated to the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century, remains of visitors passing by.