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Adam Łajtar

### A TOMBSTONE FOR THE SOLDIER ARES (EGYPT, LATE ANTONINE PERIOD)\*

AN INTERESTING TOMBSTONE OF EGYPTIAN ORIGIN with a relief scene and a Greek inscription commemorating a veteran Ares is kept in the British Museum under the inv. no. GRA 1973.4-22.1 (Sc. 2271). The stone was many times reproduced and studied from the stylistic and iconographic point of view.<sup>1</sup> Strangely enough, its inscription, interesting as it is, was never published. The aim of this paper is to cover this gap.

The exact finding spot of the stone is unknown. It has been suggested that it originates from Alexandria. It got to the British Museum at the end of 18th century from a private collection.

The object has the form of round-topped stela 59.9 cm high and 39.3 cm wide. It is made of gray marble of microasiatic origin. A large recessed field

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<sup>1</sup> A. H. SMITH, *A Catalogue of Sculpture. British Museum*, vol. 3, London 1904, p. 287, no. 2271, fig. 39. B. F. COOK, *British Museum Yearbook* 2 (1977), p. 69, no. 5, fig. 54. M. P. SPEIDEL, *Roman Army Studies* II [= *Mavors Roman Army Researches* VIII], Stuttgart 1992, p. 134 with photo on p. 133. K. PARLASCA [in:] *Roma e l'Egitto nell'antichità classica. Atti del I Congresso Internazionale Italo-Egiziano, Cairo, 6-9 Febbraio 1989*, Roma 1992, p. 268, fig. 4. IDEM, [in:] *Angebliche Mumienporträts und ägyptische Grabkunst aus römischer Zeit. Eine Ausstellung der Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, 30. Januar bis 11. April 1999*, p. 254-255, no. 159.

with a relief scene takes almost the whole surface of the stone. The scene shows two men standing near each other. On the right hand side one can see an old bearded man clad in tunic and toga, the free end of which he holds with his left hand. He lays his right hand on the group of weapons comprising shield, helmet and sword, which stand on the ground in a pyramid-like form along his right leg. This is the veteran Ares (cf. the inscription), shown already as a civilian, offering his weapons to the god Ares. On the left-hand side a younger man in military uniform spreads incense with his right hand on a horned altar with burning fire. With his left hand he holds an object consisting of two oblong parallel elements. The identity of this man is uncertain. It has been suggested that he was a brother of the veteran Ares. In my opinion, it is more reasonable to see in him the commander of the military unit which Ares belonged to as a soldier. The object held by him might have been a military diploma that he presents to Ares. If so, Ares was soldier of an auxiliary unit. The heads of the two men show portrait traits and their hairstyle reminds the mode of the Antonine period. The inscription with round epigraphic majuscules, carefully and nicely cut, stands beneath the relief scene. It runs as follows:

πανσάμενος στρατιᾶς Ἄρης Ἄρηϊ παρέδωκεν ὄπλα  
καὶ στρατίαν· καταλίψας ταῦτα εἰς ἕτερον κόσμον ἄκοσμον  
ἀπελήλυθε ὅπου οὐδέν ὑπάρχει εἰ μὴ μόνον σκοτίη· (ἔτους) κθ.

1. *areï* stone || 2. *στρατείαν* (?) *καταλείψας* || 3. *ὑπάρχει*

After retiring from the army Ares offered his weapons and military discipline (?) to (the god) Ares. After leaving this (world) he went to another world that is no world, where there is nothing else except darkness. The 29th year.

The inscription has a clear literary overtone both in the composition and in the vocabulary. It begins with a hexameter (*πανσάμενος στρατιᾶς Ἄρης Ἄρηϊ παρέδωκεν*), but then only elements of meter are discernible not forming complete verses. Note the poetic form *σκοτίη* in line 3. The aim of the author was possibly to compose a metric epitaph, but he was unable to put the information at his disposal and his ideas into metrically correct verses.



A tombstone for the soldier Ares  
© The British Museum

The main body of the text consists of two sentences, each of them referring to an event in the life of a man with the name Ares: 1) the offering of his weapons to the god Ares on the occasion of his retiring from the Roman army, and 2) his death. The first event is also illustrated in the relief scene. Thus, the inscription and the figural representation are closely connected with each other testifying to the integrity of the piece. It is not a standard work of a mason's workshop supplemented accordingly with an inscription as it often was the case with grave reliefs in classical Antiquity, but was produced at once as a whole to a well considered order, the author of which could have been the veteran Ares himself while he was still living.

That retirement from the army was chosen as a theme for figural representation on a grave stele and for mention in the accompanying inscription is understandable in case of a man like our Ares. While retiring he missed the whole domain of the god Ares that he loved (cf. commentary to line 2), but he became a Roman citizen (cf. the military diploma held by the man on the left hand-side), a fact that influenced the remainder of his life as a civilian.

1. *Ἄρης* is a name particularly suitable for a soldier. In view of that, one may suppose that it was not the name given him at birth, but a "Berufsname" that he took himself at a moment of his life, e.g. when he was reported for duty in the army. However, this supposition must not necessarily be true for *Ἄρης* is a common name in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt (several dozens of attestations in Preisigke, *Namenbuch* and Foraboschi, *Onomasticon*).

The inscription testifies to the fact that soldiers of the Roman Army possessed private weapons which they could dispose of according to their own wishes e.g. by dedicating them to the gods; cf. Speidel, *loc. cit.* (cit. n. 1). In addition to the present stele he mentions a bronze plaque from Sint Huibrechts Hern in Belgium proclaiming a centurion's dedication of his shield and lance to the goddess Vhansa. The custom of offering weapons as *vota* to Ares was widespread in Greek world. The souvenirs of such offerings are preserved in two epideictic epigrams of the Hellenistic period composed by the masters of the genre: Leonidas of Tarent (*Anth. Pal.* IX 322) and Antipater of Sidon (*Anth. Pal.* IX 323).

2. It is not quite clear how the word *στρατιαν* should be understood here. It may be accusative of both *στρατιά*: "armyband, company" and, through iotacism, of *στρατεία*: either "expedition, campaign" or "military discipline, military appointment". In my opinion the sense "military discipline" is the most appropriate of these possibilities in our text. The veteran Ares offered to the god Ares physically what was particularly dear to him but was not useful for his further life, namely his weapons, and,

symbolically what he missed very much, namely the well-organised military life with its discipline.

καταλ(ε)ΐψιας: For sigmatic aorists of thematic verbs, see B. G. Mandilaras, *The Verb in the Greek Non-Literary Papyri*, Athens 1973, pp. 142-145, § 306; F. Th. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods*, II. *Morphology*, Milano 1981, pp. 290-296, especially p. 291-292.

For κόσμον ἄκοσμον in the meaning "a world that is no world", see *Anth. Pal.* VII 561, 6-7: εἰ δὲ νέος τέλνηκεν, ὑπέρτερα νήματα Μοίρης μέμφο βουλομένης κόσμον ἄκοσμον ἔχει. The expression κόσμον ἄκοσμον occurs also in *Anth. Pal.* IX 323, 4 (the text mentioned above), however it has the meaning "an inappropriate ornament" there.

3. Taking into account the archaeological criteria (the hairstyle characteristic of the Antonine period) the 29th year is probably that of Kommodus, i.e. 29 August 188 – 28 August 189.

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