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Background

In 1983 the antiquities and rare book dealer H. P. Kraus of New York issued Catalogue 165, in which were included, among other items, two copper plaques inscribed with Greek alphabetic writing, listed as “The Fayum Tablets.” Their provenience and date were given simply as “Northern Egypt, eighth century B.C. or earlier.” The two plaques measure 215 by 135 millimeters (plaque 1) and 212 by 137 millimeters (plaque 2); both are approximately 1.3 millimeters thick. The catalog further describes the plaques as: “Inscribed on all four plate faces (written surface 190 x 100 mm.; one plate partially cleaned, both plates having been covered by a layered structure of patina; small holes punched in each corner). In a red morocco box.”

In 1988 these plaques were acquired by a Norwegian collector, Martin Schøyen, in whose collection they presently remain. The plaques in the Schøyen collection represent a subset of some larger set of such plaques. A third member is housed in the Martin-von-Wagner-Museum of the Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, acquired by the museum in the gift of Egyptian and Greek artifacts from the collection of Alexander Kiseleff in 1982. The existence of a fourth plaque has been reported, but its whereabouts undisclosed.

In 1986 Alfred Heubeck, distinguished German classicist and linguist, published an analysis of the plaque from the Würzburg museum. His analysis was based on a careful visual examination of the plaque. Heubeck’s observations were necessarily hampered, however, owing to the heavy patina that covers a large portion of the Würzburg plaque – identical to the thick patina that likewise obscures much of the surface of the two Schøyen plaques. Even so, Heubeck realized that the alphabet of the Würzburg plaque was unique among

Greek alphabets in that it terminates with the letter *tau*: in other words, the alphabet has no *upsilon*, it has none of the so-called “supplemental consonant symbols” – *phi*, *chi*, and *psi* – and no *omega*. The Würzburg alphabet is thus coterminous with the Phoenician consonantal script, the source of the Greek alphabet, which runs from *alep* (Greek *alpha*) to *taw* (Greek *tau*). Heubeck also drew attention to the shape of *alpha*, *lambda*, and *sigma*, which he viewed as being closer to later, rather than earlier, forms of these letters, and to *iota* and *nu*, as being “in allen griech. Alphabeten ohne exakte Parallele.” Heubeck proposed a date for the plaques of late ninth or early eighth century B.C.¹

In 1999 Martin Schøyen sent the two copper plaques in his collection to the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles for physical and chemical analysis in order to verify their authenticity. The plaques were there subjected to a battery of tests, including binocular microscopic analysis, metallography, X-ray fluorescence spectrometry, X-ray diffractometry, X-ray radiography, and environmental scanning electron microscopy. These tests were carried out under the direction of Dr. David Scott, then director of the Getty Conservation Laboratory.²

In 2001 I contacted Dr. Irma Wehgartner of the Martin-von-Wagner-Museum regarding the possibility of examining the plaque held in that museum’s collection. The museum generously loaned the plaque to the Getty for the same analytic treatments: the outcome of that examination was consistent with the analysis of the Schøyen plaques and revealed that the three plaques had been cut from a single piece of copper. A summary of the analyses of the three copper plaques appears in Chapter 3, authored by David A. Scott.

A discovery that came to light in the process of examining the plaques in the Getty laboratories was that, even though large portions of the plaque faces cannot be read, and other portions read only with difficulty, or uncertainty, being encrusted by this heavy patina, radiographic images of the plaques fully reveal the letters with which they are engraved. A single radiograph displays the abecedaria incised on each side of a plaque, front and back, one set superimposed upon the other.

Methodical and repeated examinations of the radiographs, and the plaque surfaces where possible, revealed that the numerous abecedaria on the three copper plaques preserve – in the case of most letters – not a single letter shape but a set of variant letter shapes: in some instances the variation is subtle but clearly observable, in other instances the variation is remarkably ostentatious. The extent and degree of variation in some cases had not escaped Heubeck’s attention. The treatment of the variant forms of the Greek letters of the copper

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plaques is the focus of the next chapter. The four sides of the two plaques in the collection of Martin Schøyen are identified as MS 1-1, MS 1-2, MS 2-1, and MS 2-2. The two sides of the plaque in the Würzburg museum are labeled W-1 and W-2. An X-ray image of each side of each of the three plaques is presented between Chapters 1 and 2.

The find place of the plaques cannot at present be identified with more precision than the Fayum, as specified in the Kraus catalog description cited earlier. That description was provided to Kraus by the individual responsible for introducing into the United States those two plaques that now reside in the collection of Martin Schøyen: that individual has been identified as the late Dr. Aziz Suryal Atiya, a native of Egypt and a distinguished scholar of Coptic and medieval studies, perhaps best known to broader audiences for his *Coptic Encyclopedia* (published posthumously),³ a work that has received new life in an expanded digital form from the Claremont Graduate University School of Religion.⁴ More will be said shortly on Atiya and his apparent role in bringing the plaques, ultimately, to scholarly attention.

However and whenever these copper (not bronze) documents came to rest in the Fayum, I think it unlikely that they were crafted in that place. As the reader will notice as she or he progresses through this work, there is a network of affiliations that appear to draw the plaques into the world of the Greeks of the eastern Mediterranean, especially East Ionic Greeks. Particularly seductive are associations with the island of Samos – a place with demonstrably strong ties to Egypt (as will be discussed in Chapter 6). The plaques were most likely crafted for some specific cult purpose. With the *performative alphabetic weaving* to which I argue these plaques do attest, one might compare, for example, the weaving of a peplos for Athena in the celebration of the Panathenaia, with its accompanying rhapsodic performance of Homeric epic.

No compelling reason presents itself for rejecting Heubeck's dating of the alphabet of the copper plaques, based on his examination of the Würzburg document. Recent finds require an earlier date for the origin of the Greek alphabet than that advocated by many classicists throughout much of the twentieth century, as do various considerations of the most likely scenario in which that script was devised:⁵ late ninth century BC is reasonable. And the analyses of the letters that is presented in Chapter 2 fully allows such a date for these materials, even if some of the letter shapes of the copper-plaque abecedaria are better known from later periods. One could imagine that the *alpha-through-tau* abecedaria that one finds engraved in these documents are typical of that date but that the plaques themselves are of somewhat later

production; in other words, the scribes who produced the plaques were recording an alphabet, in its variant avatars, of a more archaic type than one used in their own day – preserving a primitive Greek script that had been preserved and transmitted to them in some ritual context – perhaps on ritual implements that have not survived, executed on a perishable medium such as cloth or leather. If that should turn out to be the case, however, the crafting of the plaques must be sufficiently early that the notion of *alphabetic weaving* is still a productive one at the time of their engraving, unless, of course, this conceptualization of the production of the alphabet also itself became fossilized.

It was the University of Utah professor Aziz Atiya (1898–1988), Coptacist, Islamicist, and medieval historian, a major collector of Egyptian epigraphic materials, from whom H. P. Kraus acquired the two copper plaques that were advertised in Catalogue 165 (1983) according to Martin Schøyen, the Norwegian collector who in turn purchased the plaques from Kraus.⁶ Atiya was born in the village of El-Aysha, Egypt, located within the Nile Delta, later moved to Zagazig, and was eventually schooled in Cairo. He attended university in Liverpool (1927–1931), subsequently earned a doctorate from London (1933), and undertook postdoctoral work at the Universität Bonn, Germany, returning to Egypt in 1939, where he remained in academic employment until 1952 (1954?), departing the University of Alexandria under less than favorable circumstances, reportedly owing to his involvement with a Library of Congress expedition to the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai (1949–1950) in which he seems to have played a significant role not only as scholar but as political facilitator.⁷ Atiya had been a Fulbright Fellow in the United States during 1950–1951; after his departure from Egypt, he returned to the United States. There followed a series of visiting appointments at American universities: Michigan, Columbia, Union Seminary, Indiana, and Princeton (including a year as a fellow of the Institute for Advanced Study). In 1959 he joined the faculty at Utah.⁸

The Aziz S. Atiya Middle East Library at the University of Utah, a special collection within the university's J. Willard Marriott Library, houses the Atiya archives, to which I was given generous access during a visit to Salt Lake City in 2011. Among Atiya's personal letters preserved in the archive are numerous pieces of correspondence between Atiya and H. P. Kraus, dating from 1962 to 1980.⁹ References within the letters make it clear that the archive does not contain the full set of all such correspondence. The earliest archived correspondence between the Kraus firm and Atiya is a 1962

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letter from the firm that must have accompanied a copy of H. P. Kraus Catalogue 101, *Liberal Arts Periodicals Works and Reference Works Including Social and Political Science, Law, Business, Publications of Learned Societies, Government Publications*. The author of the letter draws attention to the “subject matter” of the cataloged items as being of the sort that Atiya had previously purchased for the University of Utah library and curiously refers to the period of those purchases as a time “when you [i.e., Atiya] were with the University of Utah,” as if he were no longer so. Atiya was affiliated with Utah from 1959 until the end of his career. The mischaracterization in this 1962 missive may reflect Atiya’s absence from the university in 1961–1962, and subsequently, on “buying trips”¹⁰ to Egypt to purchase volumes for the Middle East collection at Utah;¹¹ in any event, it betrays previous contact between Kraus and Atiya.

Much of the correspondence between the Kraus firm and Atiya has an air of familiarity to it: both a personal and professional relationship must have existed. In 1965 the Kraus Reprint Corporation published a revised edition of Atiya’s work *The Crusade in the Later Middle Ages* (first published in 1938 in London by Methuen). In 1967 Atiya contributed an article to a Festschrift for Kraus, *Homage to a Bookman*, edited by Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, whom Kraus called one of his “two chief assistants”:¹² Atiya’s contribution is an essay on the Codex Arabicus, “a unique tri-lingual quintuple palimpsest,” which he says he discovered on June 12, 1950, in the Sinai Monastery of St. Catherine.¹³ In correspondence dated December 8, 1978, Kraus writes in response to a letter from a “Mr. Olsen” that Atiya had forwarded to him. Evidently Olsen had something to sell, and Atiya was directing him to Kraus as a potential buyer: Kraus tells Atiya that he “is not collecting this kind of material.” Olsen is possibly to be identified with Fred Olsen (died 1986), an officer of Olin Mathieson Chemical Corporation and patron of the Fred and Florence Olsen Foundation of New Haven and Guilford, Connecticut, promoting Coptic and Andean art among other activities, with whom Atiya first corresponded while at the Institute for Advanced Study in 1959.¹⁴ The most recent of the archived letters of correspondence with the Kraus firm is dated to 1980 and concerns the republication of volumes on Eastern Christianity by the Kraus-Thomson Organization Ltd. (a publishing arm that Kraus initiated in 1967 together with the Canadian newspaper tycoon Roy H. Thomson [Lord Thomson of Fleet]);¹⁵ Atiya’s *A History of Eastern Christianity* was republished by Kraus-Thomson, carrying the publication date of 1980 (originally published by Methuen in 1968).

Atiya was a consummate collector. In an interview with Everett Cooley, responding to a question about his collecting activities, Atiya states: “I was collecting all my life.”¹⁶ The University of Utah Library boasts of holding the largest Arabic papyrus, paper, and parchment collection in North America, numbering more than seventeen hundred fragments (as of 2007): most of these were a gift of Atiya to the library in 1975.¹⁷ In the Cooley interview, Atiya describes a moment in which the continuation of the Utah Middle East Center appeared to be in jeopardy. In order to save the center, Atiya says, he decided to turn over to the university “an amount of manuscripts in my possession as well as a heap of Arabic papyri which looked like rubbish, because papyrus looks like rubbish,”¹⁸ thereby endowing in one motion a major international research collection. “These papyri,” says Atiya, “were my life, in a sense.” These papyri were collected “all over the world,” but in Egypt principally, and also in Beirut and London, he says. Atiya continues: “Everywhere where there was a scrap of Arabic papyrus I pocketed it because Arabic papyri, unlike the Greek and Coptic which were involved in Biblical material, were less in demand by collectors.”¹⁹ It is an interesting, and probably revealing, differential characterization, as we shall see.

In the same interview, Atiya describes his method of acquisition:

I can tell you one thing, that when I went to Egypt, collections were lying idle in vaults, which I invaded. When I came out I just spat mud. I swallowed so much dust, sitting dust that had accumulated for a hundred years on these books. I got all the treasures available in the market. It was after I made that invasion in Egypt with my connection with book sellers and so on that the other centers became aware and started looking for what I had left behind. This collection, really, getting it, was in a sense a romance that needs a special tape and we don't have time to do that sort of thing. Personally I had so many pleasant ventures in my collecting; for instance, I saw a heap in a corner which included something that I wanted very badly. So I would ask the sheikh, “How much do you want for that collection?” He said, “Nothing. It's rubbish. Take it.” I said, “No, I'll give you ten pounds for it, ten pounds.”²⁰

The only commodity explicitly mentioned is “books,” but one must suspect that among the “rubbish” were the precious papyri (“papyrus looks like rubbish”) and likely other “treasures.”

How was Atiya able to get these materials out of Egypt? A clue may perhaps be provided by comments that he offers in one of the Cooley interview sessions as he discusses the microfilms that were made during the Library

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of Congress Sinai expedition. After describing his supervisory role in the expedition, Atiya adds: “I was instrumental in helping to export the material untouched because of the sensitive microfilms. If the customs began to play around with this material, it would have been calamitous.” He goes on: “I had access to the minister of foreign affairs. Through him I was able to let the microfilm consignments leave the country untouched.”²¹

H. P. Kraus Catalogue 105, bearing the title *A Collection of Papyri: Egyptian, Greek, Coptic, Arabic, Showing the Development of Handwriting Mainly from the Second Century B.C. to the Eighth Century A.D.*, contains an introduction authored by Father Theodore C. Petersen, who had been until 1948 a professor of Coptic at the Catholic University of America. Kraus credits Petersen with “preparing the catalogue.”²² The entry for Father Petersen in Atiya’s *Coptic Encyclopedia* includes a reference to Petersen’s “Introduction” to Catalogue 105 and identifies the date of the catalog’s publication as 1964.²³ The catalog itself bears no publication date. In his autobiography, Kraus writes of it, “In 1961 I issued a catalogue of very fine classical papyri containing 140 items.” A publication date of 1961 is certainly mistaken: a single buyer acted quickly enough to procure the entire collection from Kraus, a purchase that was announced in the *New York Times* on July 1, 1964²⁴ (and compare the previously discussed Catalogue 101 that had appeared by 1962). In an article treating one of these papyri, Emmel draws attention to Kraus’s 1961 dating of the catalog, and he is likely correct when he suggests that Kraus had in mind the date of his acquisition of the items.²⁵

The buyer of the collection of Kraus Catalogue 105 was Edwin J. Beinecke, and the catalog’s contents were destined for the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale.²⁶ In his “Introduction” to the catalog, Father Petersen writes that the papyri “were until quite recently the private collection of a renowned scholar in the field of papyrology.” Somewhat similarly, Kraus in his autobiography, after describing his sale of a Book of the Dead papyrus to the Swiss collector Martin Bodmer circa 1961, then mentions: “Later I came into the possession of a large, valuable collection of Greek and Coptic papyri assembled by a well-known collector.”²⁷ This “renowned scholar” and “well-known collector” who sold the papyri to Kraus was Aziz Atiya, according to Martin Schøyen – Kraus purportedly having revealed Atiya’s identity to Schøyen when the Norwegian collector purchased from Kraus pieces that had been part of the assemblage out of which came the Beinecke papyri: for example, MS 244/01 (a Greek papyrus) and MS 245/07 (a Coptic liturgy on a limestone fragment); see also MS 247 (a Greek funerary inscription on

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linen that made its way from Kraus to Schøyen via the collection of Richard Linenthal). The timing of the appearance of the Beinecke papyri on the market undeniably, and neatly, correlates with Atiya's book-buying trips to Egypt in 1961 and 1962 (and subsequently) and with the correspondence between Atiya and Kraus, which was under way prior to the 1962 letter that resides in the Atiya Archive, and can be taken as highly supportive, if not confirmatory, evidence. It must have been on one such trip that Atiya stumbled across the copper plaques.

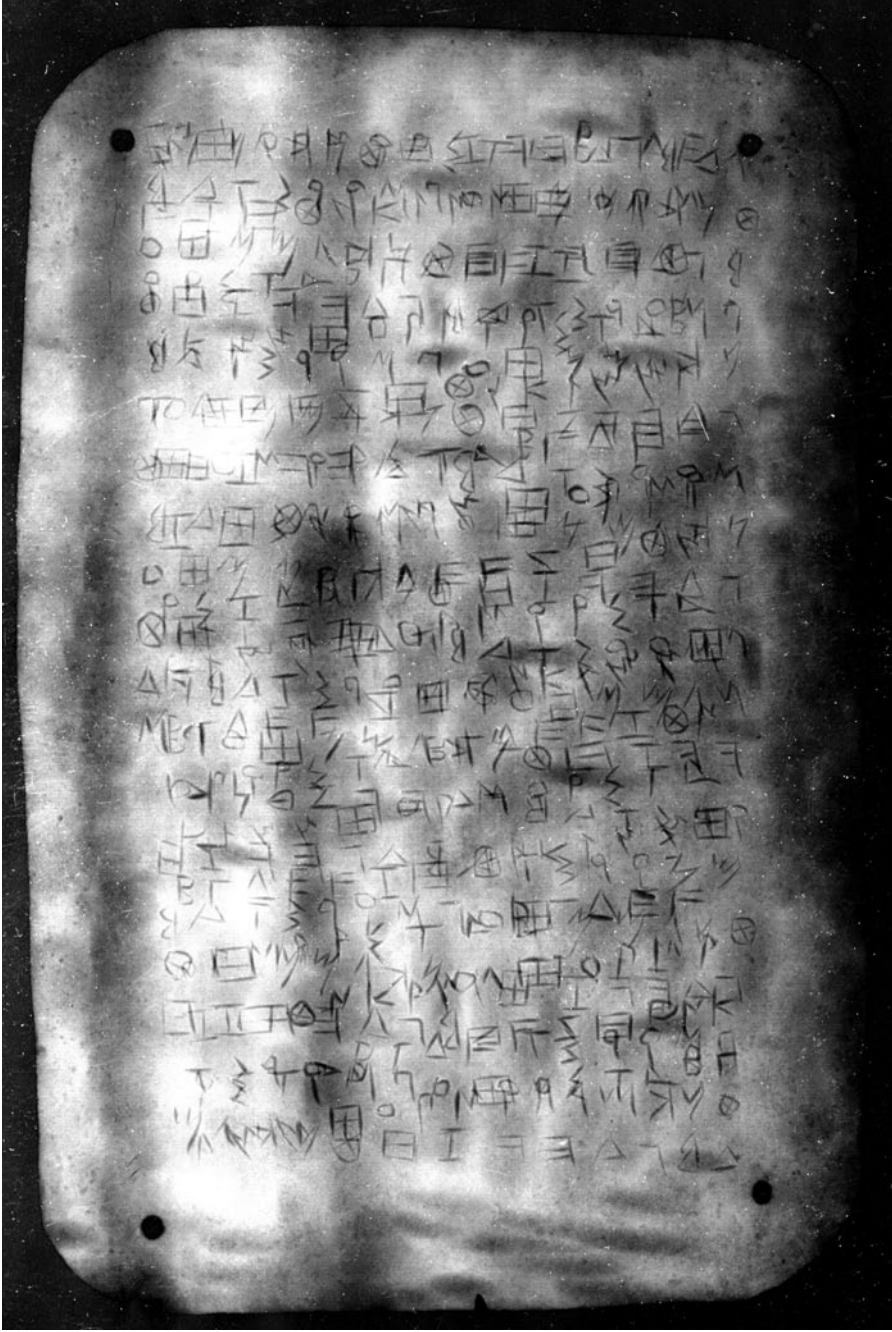
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w-1. X-radiograph of obverse face of Würzburg plaque. Courtesy of Professor David A. Scott.

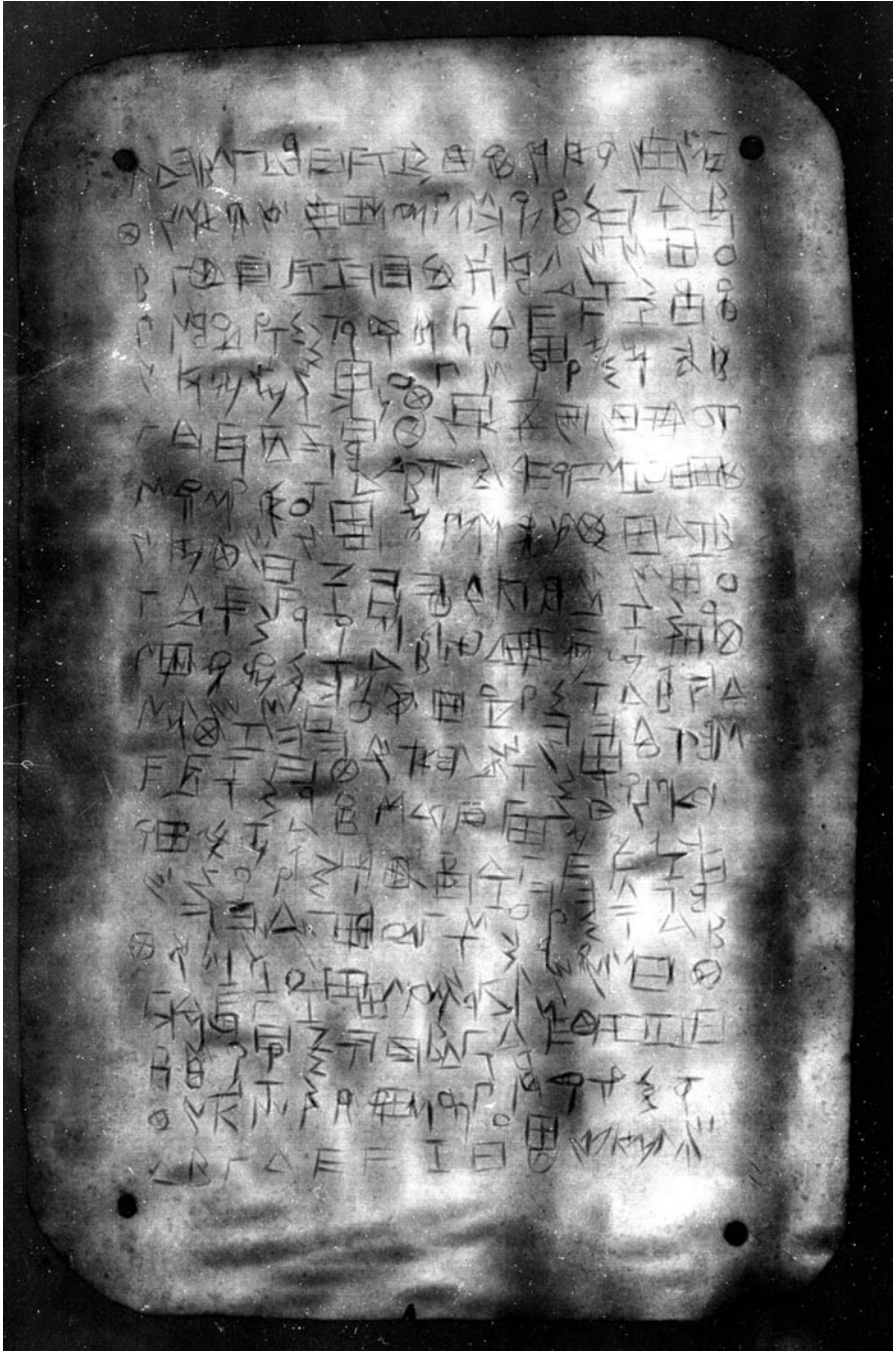
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w-2. X-radiograph of reverse face of Würzburg plaque. Courtesy of Professor David A. Scott.