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AGONISTIC TERMINOLOGY IN CHRISTIAN NUBIA^{*}

NUBIA, THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOUR OF EGYPT stretched along the Middle Nile Valley, was part of the Christian *oikoumene* between the sixth and the late fifteenth centuries.¹ Christianity was adopted in Nubia as a state religion thanks to the efforts of three evangelization missions, which took place in 542–545, 569–575, and 580–588. The missions were carried out with Egyptian means and forces, but underpinned by the partial consent of the imperial court in Constantinople.² With their newly acquired Christian faith, the Nubians took on the cultural baggage of Christianity, which included patterns of visual and literary culture. It is a well known fact that the Christian

^{*} I would like to thank Ewa Wipszycka and an anonymous reviewer for their remarks, which enriched the paper.

¹ For Nubians and Nubia with focus on its medieval history, see W. Y. ADAMS, *Nubia, Corridor to Africa*, Princeton – London 1977, *passim*, especially pp. 433–546; D. A. WELSBY, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia. Pagans, Christians and Muslims along the Middle Nile*, London 2002; R. WERNER, *Das Christentum in Nubien. Geschichte und Gestalt einer afrikanischen Kirche* [= *Studien zur Orientalischen Kirchengeschichte* 48], Münster 2013.

² For the Christianization of Nubia, see S. G. RICHTER, *Studien zur Christianisierung Nubiens* [= *Sprachen und Kulturen des christlichen Orients* 11], Wiesbaden 2002; J. H. F. DIJKSTRA, *Philae and the End of Ancient Egyptian Religion. A Regional Study of Religious Transformation (298–642 CE)* [= *Orientalia Lovaniensia analecta* 173], Leuven – Paris – Dudley MA 2008, pp. 271–304.

culture of late antiquity, i.e. at the time of the Christianization of Nubia, was firmly rooted in Greek and Roman pagan tradition with respect to both imagery and the means of expression. No wonder then that these pagan elements were also brought to Nubia and were discernible there long after its conversion to Christianity. A good illustration of this phenomenon is the use of Greek agonistic terminology in texts that were produced by Christian Nubians.

Agonistic terms can be found in the epitaphs of two bishops of Faras (Pachoras), one of the leading centres of Nubian Christian culture situated in Lower Nubia, in the area of the second Nile cataract. The epitaphs in question were found during excavations carried out in Faras by a Polish archaeological expedition in the 1960s. They occurred in their primary contexts, immured over the tombs of the hierarchs attached to the west wall of the cathedral. The older of these epitaphs, written in Greek, commemorated Ignatios, who died on 28 Tybi, year 518 of the Era of Diocletian (23 January AD 802), the younger, in Sahidic Coptic, was erected for Aaron, who passed away on 16 Khoiak, year 689 of the Era of Diocletian (12 December AD 972).

In lines 9–11, the epitaph of Ignatios summarises his life. The text reads as follows:

ζήσας ἀπὸ γεννήσεως αὐτοῦ ἕως
τελευτ(ῆς) ἔτη οἱ, ἐν μὲν τοῖς ἀγῶσιν τῆς μοναδικῆς βίου νε',
ἐν δὲ τῇ τάξει τῆς ἀρχιεροσύνης λς'.

Stefan Jakobielski, who was the first to study this inscription in his seminal monograph on the history of the bishopric of Pachoras, was puzzled by the expression ἐν τοῖς ἀγῶσιν τῆς μοναδικῆς βίου νε'. He chose to translate it as: 'in the assemblies of the monastic life 55 (years)', and commented: 'the word ἀγῶσιν in plural clearly attests that here more than one monastery is concerned'.³ Jakobielski must have based his translation on the entry ἀγών in Liddle–Scott–Jones' *Greek-English Dictionary*, where the meaning 'gathering, assembly' is given as the first one, without noticing that this meaning is

³ S. JAKOBIELSKI, *A History of the Bishopric of Pachoras on the Basis of Coptic Inscriptions* [= *Faras 3*], Warsaw 1972, p. 70, n. 28. The complete text of the Ignatios' epitaph was transcribed in the Coptic majuscules on pp. 203–205 of this book.

proper to early Greek epic poetry, especially Homer. Later, through the intermediary step ‘gathering at the contest’, the meaning ‘contest’, ‘game’, also ‘struggle’, ‘battle’, and ‘combat’ developed, and it is this meaning that undoubtedly occurs in the epitaph for Bishop Ignatios. It was chosen by Jadwiga Kubińska for her edition of this inscription,⁴ and by the present author in the ultimate publication of the text.⁵ Neither Kubińska nor I provided a commentary explaining the vocabulary, however. The complete sentence can be translated as follows:

*He lived from his birth until
his death 78 years, in the combats of the solitary life 55 years,
in the order of archpriesthood 36 years.*

It should be noted that in accordance with a practice widespread in Oriental Churches, Nubian bishops were recruited from among monks and retained their monastic status after the ordination.⁶ Ignatios became monk at the age of twenty-three; after 19 years as an ordinary monk he was ordained bishop and remained one for 36 years.

The epitaph of Aaron presents the deceased in the following words (ll. 7–8):

ΠΑΘΛΟΦΟΡΟΣ ΜΜΑΚΑΡΙΟΣ ΑΒΒΑ
ΔΑΡΩΝ ΠΕΠΙΣΚ(ΟΠΟΣ) ΜΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΙΣ ΠΑΧΩΡΑΣ
*The blessed prizewinner abba
Aaron, the bishop of the metropolis of Pachoras.*

Stefan Jakobielski remarked:⁷ ‘The term ἀθλοφόρος in relation to a bishop has never been encountered in similar documents. This might have been applied in connection with some unusual occurrence in Aaron’s life’. Jacques

⁴ J. KUBIŃSKA, *Inscriptions grecques chrétiennes* [= *Faras 4*], Warsaw 1974, pp. 26–32, no. 4.

⁵ A. ŁAJTAR in A. ŁAJTAR, A. TWARDECKI, *Catalogue des inscriptions grecques du Musée National de Varsovie* [= *Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplement 2*], Warsaw 2003, no. 106.

⁶ Cf. A. ŁAJTAR, ‘Nubian bishops: A study of a group of the Christian Nubian society’, forthcoming.

⁷ JAKOBIELSKI, *A History of the Bishopric of Pachoras* (cit. n. 3), p. 122, n. 93.

van der Vliet, the ultimate editor of the inscription has so commented:⁸ ‘Aaron is not merely styled as usual, μακάριος, but also ἀλοφορος, “prizewinner”. The latter is a distinct martyr’s epithet, common in all kinds of texts where martyrs are mentioned or commemorated. It is only sporadically attested in funerary epigraphy where it may have been applied somewhat more loosely, as an “agonistic” image, underlining the deceased’s exemplary spiritual zeal, but not necessarily implying real martyrdom”. This commentary is entirely correct, even if some details may be expanded upon.

The Graeco-Roman world, in which the Christian Church developed after leaving its Palestinian cradle, was dominated by the idea of competition. Greeks and Romans competed with each other on different fields. Cities competed for primacy within provinces of the Roman Empire; members of civic elites endeavoured to outdo one another in their pursuit of the embellishment of their cities with buildings and cultural events; poets, sculptors, and painters created their works by means of competition, and competition frequently accompanied the performance of poetic and musical works; orators drew on all their powers to outdo one another in delivering speeches on a given topic; and a series of Roman-date inscriptions from Ephesus even testify to doctors competing in diagnosing and surgery.⁹ Sport was the field of especially fervent competition, which occurred on two levels: the amateur and the professional. The former took place in the gymnasium on an everyday basis and involved all free boys and men, the latter – well-trained and highly specialised athletes, who met at games (ἀγῶνες) organised by cities or sanctuaries in regular intervals on fixed dates. *Agones*, whose number might have reached several hundred in Roman times,¹⁰ enjoyed enormous popularity comparable to

⁸ J. VAN DER VLIET, *Catalogue of the Coptic Inscriptions in the Sudan National Museum at Khartoum (I. Khartoum Copt.)* [= *Orientalia Lovaniensia analecta* 121], Leuven – Paris – Dudley MA 2003, p. 30, no. 3.

⁹ For full references and an interpretation of these inscriptions, see A. ZIMONYI, ‘The context of medical competitions in Ephesus’, *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 54 (2014), pp. 355–370.

¹⁰ The literature on Greek and Roman *agones* is immense. For an introduction, see S. G. MILLER, *Ancient Greek Athletics*, New Haven 2004; D. G. KYLE, ‘Greek athletic competitions: The ancient Olympics and more’, [in:] P. CHRISTENSEN, D. G. KYLE (eds.), *A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, Wiley Blackwell 2014, pp. 21–35.

only the big sporting events of the contemporary world. Under such circumstances, it can hardly surprise us that athletic and competitive imagery infiltrated other spheres of life, including, in the first instance, the language in both its spoken and literary form. Sport terms and metaphors were frequently applied by Saint Paul, the originator of the opening of the Christianity on the Graeco-Roman world.¹¹ The term ἀγών occurs six times in his corpus, assuming both literal and metaphorical meaning. The latter is well seen in such places as 1 Timothy 6:12, 2 Timothy 4:7–8, and Hebrews 12:1–2.¹² In them, Paul compares the life of a Christian to a running competition, in which the contestants are both the hostile external world and one's own weaknesses. The organiser of the competition (ἀγωνοθέτης) and its judge is Jesus, who will also distribute eternal life as the prize (ἄθλον) to the winners. The Pauline idea of life as a struggle was subsequently exploited in the works of Church Fathers. In the clearest form it is probably found in John Chrysostom's writ-

¹¹ Generally on this subject, see V. C. PFITZNER, *Paul and the Agon Motif: Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Letters*, Leiden 1967; H. M. GALE, *The Use of Analogy in the Letters of Paul*, Philadelphia 1964, p. 109; P. P. ESLER, 'Paul and the agon: Understanding a Pauline motif in its cultural and visual context', [in:] A. WEISSENRIEDER, F. WENDT, P. VON GEMÜNDEN (eds.), *Picturing the New Testament. Studies in Ancient Visual Images* [= *Novum Testamentum Supplements* 16], Tübingen 2005, pp. 356–384; R. GARRISON, 'Paul's use of athlete metaphor in 1 Corinthians 9', *Studies in Religion* 22 (1993), pp. 209–217.

¹² 1 Timothy 6:12: ἀγωνίζου τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα τῆς πίστεως, ἐπιλαβοῦ τῆς αἰωνίου ζωῆς, εἰς ἣν ἐκλήθης καὶ ὡμολόγησας τὴν καλὴν ὁμολογίαν ἐνώπιον πολλῶν μαρτύρων, 'Fight the good fight of faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses'; 2 Timothy 4:7–8: τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα ἠγωνίσamai, τὸν δρόμον τετέλεκα, τὴν πίστιν τετήρηκα, καὶ λοιπὸν ἀπόκειται ὁ τῆς δικαιοσύνης στέφανος, ὃν ἀποδώσει μοι Κύριος ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ὁ δίκαιος κριτής, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day'; Hebrews 12:1–2: τοιγαροῦν καὶ ἡμεῖς τοσοῦτον ἔχοντες περικείμενον ἡμῖν νέφος μαρτύρων, ὅγκον ἀποθέμενοι πάντα καὶ τὴν εὐπερίστατον ἁμαρτίαν, δι' ὑπομονῆς τρέχωμεν τὸν προκειμένον ἡμῖν ἀγῶνα, ἀφορῶντες εἰς τὸν τῆς πίστεως ἀρχηγὸν καὶ τελεωτὴν Ἰησοῦν, ὃς ἀντὶ τῆς προκειμένης αὐτῷ χαρᾶς ὑπέμεινεν σταυρὸν αἰσχύνης καταφρονήσας ἐν δεξιᾷ τε τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ θεοῦ κεκάθικεν, 'Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God'.

ings. In the third homily *On Lazarus* he presents the life of a Christian on this world as a *skamma*, a pit covered with sand used for combat sports,¹³ and in the first homily *On the Holy Pascha*, as a wrestling competition itself.¹⁴

Agonistic imagery acquired a special importance (and a special topicality) in the time of the persecutions, when numerous believers in Christ were forced to fight in arenas in defence of their belief. Those who suffered death in this way, and generally all martyrs, achieved the honourable title of the 'athletes of Christ'. Their death was interpreted as a victory in the contest against the oppressors, for which they received from the hand of Jesus Christ, a prize (ἄθλον, βραβεῖον) in the form of a palm or wreath, the same as the victors in athletic games. As such, they were called 'prizewinners' (ἀθλοφόροι). Such an interpretation of martyrs' deaths is common in their acts,¹⁵ and finds a visual expression in the later iconography of these saints.

¹³ Joannes Chrysostomus, *De Lazaro homilia 3*, PG XLVIII, col. 1000: καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς δὲ τοῖς μαθηταῖς ἔλεγεν· ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ θλίψιν ἔχετε· ἀλλὰ θαρσεῖτε, ἐγὼ νενίκηκα τὸν κόσμον. αὕτη, φησὶν, ἡ θλίψις ἅνεσιν ὑμῖν προξενεῖ· σκάμμα ἐστὶν ὁ παρὼν βίος· ἐν δὲ τῷ σκάμματι καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἀγῶσιν οὐκ ἂν δύναιτ' ἀπολαύειν ἀνέσεως ὁ στεφανοῦσθαι μέλλων. ὥστε εἴ τις βούλοιοτο στεφανωθῆναι, τὸν σκληρὸν καὶ ἐπίπονον αἰρείσθω βίον, ἵνα βραχὺν ἐνταῦθα πονήσας χρόνον, διηνεκοῦς ἀπολαύσῃ τιμῆς ἐκεῖ, 'Christ also said to his disciples "In this world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome world" (John 17:33) This very tribulation, it is said, procures for you rest. The present life is an arena, and he that is to be crowned can have no rest while in the arena, and engaged in context. Thus also, if one may be desirous to be crowned, he must adopt a hard and laborious mode of life, in order that having toiled here for a short period, he may hereafter enjoy perpetual repose'.

¹⁴ Joannes Chrysostomus, *In sanctum Pascha 1*, PG LII, col. 772: ἀγὼν γάρ ἐστι καὶ πάλῃ πᾶς ὁ παρὼν βίος, καὶ τοὺς ἐν τῷ σταδίῳ τούτῳ τῆς ἀρετῆς ἅπαξ εἰσελθόντας προσήκει πάντα ἐγκρατεῦσθαι. Πᾶς γὰρ ὁ ἀγωνιζόμενος πάντα ἐγκρατεύεται, 'The entire present life is a combat and wrestling, and those who once entered this stadium for the reason of excellence should exercise self-control in everything, because "every athlete exercises self-control in all things" (1 Corinthians 9:25)'.

¹⁵ Thus, for example, in the acts of Saint Perpetua, martyred together with Felicitas in Carthage AD 203, masterfully interpreted by L. ROBERT, 'Une vision de Perpétue martyre à Carthage en 203', *CRAI* 1982, pp. 228–276; reprinted in: L. ROBERT, *Opera Minora Selecta V*, Amsterdam 1989, pp. 791–839; see also J. BREMMER, 'Perpetua and her diary: authenticity, family and visions' [in:] W. AMELING (ed.), *Märtyrer und Märtyrerakte*, Stuttgart 2002, p. 118, with n. 186. The most comprehensive study of the Christianisation of the pagan Greek and Roman athletic (and military) terminology still remains A. VON HARNACK, *Militia Christi. Die christliche Religion und der Soldatenstand in der ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, Tübingen 1905. Of

In the period after the cessation of the persecutions, the ideology of life as a struggle was conveyed upon ascetics, who took on the mantle of the Church heroes from the martyrs. The arena of combat become now the deserts ringing the eastern Mediterranean, and later the monastic communities. Hermits in their hermitages and monks in monasteries were engaged in incessant combat (ἀγών) on the path to perfection. In the first line, it was an internal battle against the body and its weaknesses. At the same time, it was a violent confrontation with an external foe, a demon (of temptation, anger, pride, acedia, etc.), imagined as a fully embodied opponent, fought one on one, a true anachoretic ἀγών, such as that experienced many times by Saint Anthony (251–356), the father of the anachoretic movement, according to his *Life* written by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, around 360.¹⁶ The ultimate goal of these achievements is Heaven where the victors will be granted the beatific vision of God. Similarly as with sport competitions, this goal can be achieved only with much exercise and training, ἄσκησις, which is the original meaning of the word in Greek.

Agonistic imagery and terminology is to be found in both theoretical works on ascetism and monasticism, and the edifying literature, which portrayed the lives and deeds of individual members of the monastic movement. As far as theoretical writings are concerned, one has to mention first of all the teachings of Evagrius Ponticus (345–399), one of spiritual fathers of the Oriental monasticism. In the treaty *To Eulogius on the Confession of Thoughts and Counsel in Their Regard*, he presents a monk ‘like an athlete (...) engaged in the most demanding competitions’.¹⁷ He has to leave behind

the more recent studies, see, e.g. J. LEEMANS *et al.*, ‘Let Us Die that We May Live’: *Greek Homilies on Christian Martyrs from Asia Minor, Palestine, and Syria*, London 2003, p. 29; J. LEEMANS, ‘God and Christ as *agonothetae* in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa’, *Sacris Erudiri* 43 (2004), pp. 5–31; IDEM, ‘Style and meaning in Gregory of Nyssa’s panegyrics in martyrs’, *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 81/1 (2005), p. 117.

¹⁶ For monastic life as a combat, see in the first line D. BRAKKE, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity*, Cambridge, MA 2006; see also R. ALCIATI, ‘Ascetism between agon and agency’, [in:] D. ALBRECHT, K. WALDNER (eds.), *Zu Tisch bei den Heiligen. Askese, Nahrung und Individualisierung im spätantiken Mönchtum. Gedenkkolloquium für Prof. Dr. Veit Rosenberger (7. April. 1963 – 1. September 2016)* [= *Potsdamer altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge* 63], Stuttgart 2019, pp. 43–54.

¹⁷ Cf. R. E. SINKIEWICZ (translation, introduction, and commentary), *Evagrius of Pontus: The*

home, family and possessions in order to enter into a series of challenging contests. His voluntarily exile is a 'wrestling school of the desert',¹⁸ which requires from him an appropriate training that will prevent him from being dragged down. The image of a monk as an athlete surfaces prominently also in the writings of John Cassian (360–435), the continuator of Evagrius. In *Institutes* 5.16 he compared a monk to a participant of the Olympic Games, who, after having been freed from fleshly desires, is ready to fight in spiritual combat, constantly gazing up toward the heavenly Jerusalem where Jesus Christ prepared a prize for him.¹⁹ Jesus is also presented as the organiser of a combat contest (ἀγωνοθέτης) by Shenoute, the renowned abbot of the White Monastery near Panopolis in Upper Egypt.²⁰ In the seventh century, a Syriac writer Isaac of Nineveh (c.613 – c.700) repeatedly emphasised the idea of the struggle against the enemy (devil) in his ascetic teachings, and compared the human life to the stadium or arena, thus testifying to the survival of antique agonistic imagery long after the abolishment of antique games.²¹ Among the works of popular literature exploiting agonistic imagery, the *Apophthegmata Patrum* yield some interesting examples. Apophthegm 52 of the fifth chapter of the systematic collection recounts the story of two young brothers who were sent to a village for some reason.²²

Greek Ascetic Corpus [Oxford Early Christian Studies], Oxford 2003, pp. 29 (translation), and 236 (commentary). Generally for Evagrius' agonistic rhetoric, see B. STEFANIW, 'Evagrius and Authority', [in:] J. KALVESMAKI, R. D. YOUNG (eds.), *Evagrius and His Legacy*, South Bend 2016, pp. 96–127.

¹⁸ SINKIEWICZ, *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* (cit. n. 17), p. 30. See also M. TOBON, 'Evagrius as a writer: The example of Eulogios 2's discussion of *xeniteia*', [in:] S. KACZMAREK, H. PIETRAS, A. DZIADOWIEC (eds.), *Origeniana Decima. Origen as Writer. Papers of the 10th International Origen Congress, University School of Philosophy and Education "Ignatianum"*, Kraków, Poland, 31 August – 4 September 2009, Leuven 2011, pp. 765–768.

¹⁹ See, e.g., W. HARMLESS SJ, *Desert Christians. An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, Oxford 2004, p. 385.

²⁰ R.-G. COQUIN, 'La traité de Šenoute "Du salut de l'âme humaine"', *Journal of Coptic Studies* 3 (2001), pp. 36–37.

²¹ J. D'ALTON, 'St. Isaac and agôn: Isaac's development of the Greek notion of the Heroic struggle and his metaphors for the ascetic life', *Universitas: Monthly Review of Philosophy and Culture* 43/5 (2016), pp. 59–95.

²² J.-C. GUY SJ (ed.), *Les apophthegmes des pères. Collection systématique. Chapitres I–IX* [= *Sources chrétiennes* 387], Paris 1993, pp. 302 (Greek text), 303 (French translation).

The younger of them was tempted (obviously sexually) five times by the devil, but he managed to resist thanks to the power of prayer. When he, after returning to his cell, confessed to having committed fornication, his spiritual father comforted him saying that it is the contrary that is true because he had a vision of five crowns of victory reposing on the young brother's head. Apophthegm 542 of the alphabetical collection, devoted to an otherwise unknown Abba Mark the Egyptian, calls him 'the noble one and athlete of Christ' (γενναῖος καὶ ἀθλητὴς τοῦ Χριστοῦ) because of his prudence.²³ Finally, one can mention *Vita Hypatii* 24.78, which features a comparison of an ascetic with an athlete put into the mouth of the main character, the founder and the first abbot of the monastery of Rufinianae near Chalcedon.²⁴

One can suppose that monastic and/or ascetic literature was the means through which the image of the monastic life as combat (ἀγών), surfacing in the epitaph of Ignatios, was transmitted to Nubia. Even though none of the works mentioned in the previous paragraphs are attested in Nubia, the image in question was widespread enough to exempt one from the obligation to look for actual sources. Suffice it to remark that Nubian monasteries were in the possession of such literature, as is demonstrated by the finds made in Qasr el-Wizz, the main monastic establishment of the Faras agglomeration. The excavations carried out there by the American Research Center in Egypt in the 1960s brought to light, among other textual finds, fragments of a codex containing the *Sermo asceticus* of Stephen of Thebes along with another ascetic work impossible to identify, parchment fragments with a dialogue connected with the Shenutean milieu, and the lives of monastic saints (Hilaria, Apa Dios, Marina), all of them in Coptic.²⁵ Worthy of mention in this context are also the wall inscriptions in the so-called Anchorite Grotto near Faras, executed in 738 by a certain monk Theophilus, probably one of the inhabitants of the Qasr el-Wizz monastery.²⁶ Encircled by ornamental frames in order to imitate book

²³ PG LXV, col. 304, ll. 40–41.

²⁴ G. J. M. BARTELINK (ed.), *Callinicos. Vie d'Hypatios* [= *Sources chrétiennes* 177], Paris 1971.

²⁵ The texts remain unpublished. Their publication is being prepared by Alexandros Tsakos.

²⁶ F. LI. GRIFFITH, 'Oxford excavations in Nubia LII. The Anchorite's Grotto', *Liverpool Annals of Archaeology and Anthropology* 14 (1927), pp. 81–91.

pages, they contain, among others, several *Apophthegmata Patrum* in Coptic.²⁷ Ignatios, who had been monk for many years before his appointment as bishop of Faras, must have been well acquainted with this literature. Perhaps he himself perceived his monastic life as ‘combats’ (ἀγῶνες) and presented it as such in talks with his entourage, including also the future author of his epitaph, who subsequently inserted the incriminated term in the text of the inscription. Alternatively, the author of the epitaph could have been connected with the monastic milieu himself and could have known the literary marked terminology referring to the monastic life. One can also not exclude the possibility that this monastic terminology with literary overtones was known in wider circles of Church in Nubia, including the bishop’s clergy, and the author of the epitaph should be identified as a clergyman from the entourage of the Faras bishop. Whatever the truth, the occurrence in Ignatios’ epitaph of a literary term together with some textual peculiarities of the inscription and a very sophisticated script characterised by extensive use of ligatures²⁸ testify to a high intellectual level of the milieu which surrounded the bishop of Faras in the second half of the eighth and the beginning of the ninth century.

The presence of the epithet ἀλοφορος (ἀθλοφόρος) in Aaron’s epitaph is probably due to the same learned tendencies in the entourage of the bishop of Faras. ἀθλοφόρος was a distinct epithet of martyrs as observed by Jacques van der Vliet in the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper. The author of Aaron’s epitaph must have known it from literature dealing with martyrdom (acts, collections of wonders, homilies in honour of martyrs, etc.) and applied to the dead bishop probably because of the pious zeal the bishop had demonstrated during his lifetime. ἀθλοφόρος is found as an epithet for Severus, a bishop, probably of a local heretic community, in a late fourth-century funerary epigram from Laodicea Combusta in Lycaonia (modern Ladik),²⁹

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 83–84, nos. 4–8 (Abba Arsenios, Abba Makarios, Abba Antonios, Abba Amun [?], unidentified anchorite); 86–87, nos. 15–18 (unidentified anchorite, Abba Hapio [Sara-pion?], apothegm ascribed to Palladius, unidentified anchorite, unidentified anchorite); 87–88, nos. 19–23 (Abba Esaias, Abba Pachom, Abba Esaias, Abba Euagrios, Abba Esaias *exegetes*).

²⁸ For the textual and graphical peculiarities of this inscription, see the commentary in ŁAJTAR, TWARDCKI, *Catalogue des inscriptions grecques du Musée National de Varsovie* (cit. n. 5).

²⁹ MAMA I 171; R. MERKELBACH, J. STAUBER, *Steinepigramme aus dem griechischen Osten*, vol. 3: *Der ‘Ferne Osten’ und das Landesinnere bis zum Tauros*, Munich–Leipzig 2001, pp. 81–

where its use is explained by the literary language of the inscription. In the case of both Aaron's and Severus' epitaph, ἀθλοφόρος was probably a mere counterpart of ἀθλητής τοῦ Χριστοῦ, which, as we already know, was applied not only for martyrs but also other Christians, including monks, who distinguished themselves in their piety.³⁰

There is still one element in the epitaph of Ignatios that requires a commentary. The expression ἐν μὲν τοῖς ἀγῶσιν τῆς μοναδικῆς βίου is grammatically incorrect: the noun (βίου) does not agree with its attribute (τῆς μοναδικῆς) with respect to the grammatical gender. The author of the epitaph probably wanted to write τῆς μοναδικῆς πολιτείας, but substituted βίου for πολιτείας. The words βίος, 'mode of life', and πολιτεία, 'daily life (in a community)', occur near one another in the titles of ancient and medieval biographical works (βίος καὶ πολιτεία τοῦ δεῖνος), including saints' lives, a literary genre that enjoyed an immense popularity in Late Antiquity and Middle Ages. While substituting βίου for πολιτείας the author of the Ignatios' epitaph might have been influenced, exactly, by the hagiographic literature. It should be further observed that the adjective μοναδικός, 'solitary', 'monastic', has literary overtones too. It has not been attested in the Greek papyri from Egypt, and is found only once in inscriptions in addition to the Ignatios' epitaph, in the epitaph of Abba David, who died after 'exercising the solitary life' (τὸν μοναδικὸν ἀσκήσας βίον).³¹ Among numerous literary attestations of the adjective in question³² the one occurring in letter 375 of Theodor the Studite (759–826), the famous abbot of the Studios monastery in Constantinople, deserves special attention from our point of view.³³ After

82, no. 14/06/04. B. H. MCLEAN, *Greek and Latin Inscriptions in the Konya Archaeological Museum* [= *BIAA Monograph Series* 29], London 2002, no. 216.

³⁰ To the examples quoted above one can add Laucadius, the deceased superior of the monastic community at Sannabodae in Cappadocia, praised by Gregory of Nazianzus in his *Letter* 238; ed. P. GALLAY, *Saint Grégoire de Nazianze. Lettres*, vol. 1, Paris 1964.

³¹ *SB* I 5100. The epitaph comes from Abydos, its exact date is unknown, but surely not before the sixth century.

³² For a collection of references, see G. W. H. LAMPE, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford 1961, p. 876, s.v. 'μοναδικός' B.

³³ Ed. by G. FATOUROS, *Theodori Studitae Epistulae* [= *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae, Series Berolinensis* 31], Berlin 1992, vol. 2.

the introductory rhetorics, the letter addresses the recipient who were the Canonic women: ὑμεῖς δέ, μητέρες καὶ ἀδελφαὶ ἐν κυρίῳ, τὸν καλὸν ἀγῶνα τῆς μοναδικῆς πολιτείας ἀγωνιζόμεναι, χαίρετε, ‘greetings to you, mothers and sisters in Lord, who are fighting in the beautiful fight of the solitary life’. The expressions used by Theodore are surprisingly close to what we have in the Ignatios’ epitaph. It is impossible that the Ignatios’ epitaph was dependant on the Theodore’s letter,³⁴ rather, two of them hailed from the same tradition of perceiving the monastic life and writing about it.

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³⁴ *Ibidem*, vol. 1, p. 342, dates *Letter* 375 to 817–818, i.e. sixteen years after the death of Ignatios.

AGONISTIC TERMINOLOGY IN CHRISTIAN NUBIA

Abstract

Two epitaphs of bishops of Faras of the ninth/tenth century display agonistic terms used to describe the life and the person of the deceased. The author discusses the background of this linguistic phenomenon and argues that the agonistic terminology might have reached Christian Nubia through the late antique ascetic and monastic literature.

Keywords: Christian Nubia, Faras, Greek inscriptions, Coptic inscriptions, agonistic terminology, ascetic and monastic literature

TERMINOLOGIA AGONISTYCZNA W NUBII CHRZEŚCJAŃSKIEJ

Abstrakt

W dwóch epitafiach biskupów Faras z IX i X w. terminy agonistyczne są użyte do opisanego życia osoby zmarłej. Autor omawia tło tego zjawiska i dowodzi, że terminologia agonistyczna mogła dotrzeć do chrześcijańskiej Nubii przez literaturę ascetyczną i monastyczną późnego antyku.

Słowa kluczowe: chrześcijańska Nubia, Faras, inskrypcje greckie, inskrypcje koptyjskie, terminologia agonistyczna, literatura ascetyczna i monastyczna