

The Gold Foundation Deposit Plaque of Ptolemy IV from the Temple of Aphrodite Ourania at Koussai

The Corpus of Ptolemaic Inscriptions project (CPI) aims to provide a full corpus of up-to-date editions of the Greek and bilingual inscriptions on stone and, in some cases, metal from Ptolemaic Egypt (323-30 BCE), altogether consisting of some 620 items.¹ In the course of reviewing and updating the material, the CPI team² was fortunate enough to rediscover a series of poorly documented epigraphic monuments, previously recorded as being of ‘unknown current location’. Such is the case of this gold foundation deposit plaque, once part of a group of five inscribed plaques, deriving from the temple of Aphrodite in Koussai (Hermopolite Nome, Middle Egypt). This plaque is the only gold item of the group and is presented for the first time with a photo in this paper.³

An epigraphical report of 1931 by Evaristo Breccia, Director of the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria, has been the only source of information for the existence of this plaque.⁴ Breccia transcribed the text without providing an image. He simply mentioned that the plaque had been observed in the antiquities market of Alexandria and Cairo on offer at a very high price and that a faience plaque from the same group had been acquired by a French antiquities merchant. The rest of the plaques in this group seem to have followed a similar path and were acquired by private individuals soon afterwards. One of them ended up in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and another in the British Museum.⁵ The gold plaque, however, remained a family heirloom in a private collection, located in Athens.

Description of the plaque

Material: gold.⁶ State: complete on all sides. Dimensions: W. 10,2. H. 5,3 cm. Date: reign of Ptolemy IV Philopator (221-204 BC). The text is arranged in five lines. Letters are punched in cursive form, as with the rest of the painted plaques, with lunar

¹ The project is based at the Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents (CSAD), University of Oxford, and is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of England and Wales, and the John Fell Fund of the University of Oxford.

² The other members of the team are Alan Bowman, Simon Hornblower, Charles Crowther, Rachel Mairs.

³ For the group of plaques, assigned to the temple of Aphrodite Ourania at Koussai, see Fraser, P. M., ‘A temple of Hathor at Koussai’, *JEA* 42 (1956), 97-98; Id., ‘Graeco-Roman Egypt: Greek Inscriptions’, *JEA* 48 (1962), 144 (11); *CPI* 324.

⁴ Breccia, E. *BSAA* 26 (1931) 276, no. 1 (*SB* 5 7782; *SEG* 8 360. TM 6061). For the site of Koussai, *Dict. géogr.* 511; *P-M*, IV, 258.

⁵ For the plaque of the Metropolitan Museum (48.45), made of opaque glass: Hayes W. C. ‘A Foundation Plaque of Ptolemy V’, *JEA* 37 (1948) 114-115 (*SB* 8 10017; *SEG* 16 860; TM 109059). For the plaque of the British Museum (EA 65844), also made of opaque glass: Shore, P., ‘Miscellaneous Objects from the Nash Collection’, *The British Museum Quarterly* 24 (London, 1961) 35-6 (Cooney, J. D., *Catalogue of Egyptian Antiquities in the British Museum, Glass vol. 4*, (London 1976) no. 1839; TM 113171). Both plaques are bilingual, inscribed with both Greek and hieroglyphic text, one on each side. Their Greek text is identical to that of the gold plaque. Their hieroglyphic text reads (in the translation by R. Mairs in *CPI* 324): *The King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Ptolemy, living forever, beloved of Isis, son of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Ptolemy and the mistress of the two lands Berenike, the benevolent gods, to Hathor who is in heaven.*

⁶ It is one of the seven gold Ptolemaic plaques found so far. Five plaques have been discovered in Alexandria and a sixth one, more recently in 2003 in Kanopos (see notes 8 and 9).

sigma (c), small omega (ω), round epsilon, alpha with an acute angle, rho and phi with prolonged vertical lines.⁷ The text reads:

4 Βασιλεὺς Πτολεμαῖος
βασιλέως Πτολεμαίου
καὶ βασιλίσσης Βερενίκης
θεῶν Εὐεργετῶν
Ἀφροδίτηι Οὐρανίαι

Translation: King Ptolemy, son of King Ptolemy and Queen Berenike, Gods Euergetai, to Aphrodite Ourania

Ptolemy IV appears as the son of his royal deified parents, without his wife, Arsinoe III, and also without his cultic title Philopator. This is the most common formula for the specific category of epigraphic monuments, in which – unlike other categories of Ptolemaic royal dedications – kings or queens appear in the role of the sole founder identified by their royal ancestry, and not that of their own divine capacities.⁸

Aphrodite appears in Koussai with the epithet Ourania ('heavenly') as the *intepretatio Graeca* of Hathor 'who is in heaven'.⁹ Indeed, the Aphrodite-Hathor association was widespread all over the Egyptian *chora*. As regards the Corpus of Ptolemaic Inscriptions, we find a comparable example in the temple of Hathor on

⁷ The cursive lettering recalls that of the papyri of the period. See for example, from the Zenon papyri, the letter from Aristaeus to Zenon: *P.Cair.Zen.* 1 59059. Image available online in the Photographic Archive of Papyri in the Cairo Museum of the Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents, Faculty of Classics, University of Oxford: <http://ipap.csad.ox.ac.uk/PCZ-colour/72dpi/P.Cair.Zen.I.59059r.jpg>

⁸ See the bilingual foundation plaques of the Great Sarapeion, founded by Ptolemy III (Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum P.8357-8366, P.9431-9440, P.10049-10052), Rowe, A. *Discovery of the Famous Temple and Enclosure of Serapis at Alexandria* (Cairo 1946) 5-10 (*SB* 6 9299; *I. Alex. Ptol.* 13; *CPI* 12; *TM* 6209): Βασιλεὺς Πτολεμαῖος Πτολεμαίου καὶ Ἀρσινόης, θεῶν Ἀδελφῶν, Σαράπει τὸν ναὸν καὶ τὸ τέμενος; of the shrine of Harpokrates, adjacent to the Great Sarapeion, founded by Ptolemy IV (Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum P.10026-46, P.10048), Rowe, *ibid.*, 54-59 (*SB* 6 9300; *I. Alex. Ptol.* 21, *CPI* 18; *TM* 6210): Βασιλεὺς Πτολεμαῖος βασιλέως, Πτολεμαίου, καὶ βασιλίσσης Βερενίκης, θεῶν Εὐεργετῶν Ἄρποχράτει, κατὰ πρόσταγμα Σαράπειδος καὶ Ἴσιδος; of another temple of Sarapis and Isis in Alexandria (Private collection), Fraser, P. M. 'Inscriptions from Ptolemaic Egypt', *Berytus* 13 (1959-1960) 135-136, no. 4; (*SEG* 20 496; *SB* 8 9809; *I. Alex. Ptol.* 17, *CPI* 16; *TM* 5973): Βασιλεὺς Πτ[ολεμαῖος], Πτολεμαίου κ[αὶ Βερενίκης], θεῶν εὐεργε[τῶν] Ἴσιδι θεᾶι μεγίστηι ἀ[ντί πολλῶν], εὐεργεσιῶν εἰς [ἐαυτόν]; of a Komasterion in Kanopos, dedicated to Herakles, by Ptolemy III, Kayser, F, *BE* 120-2 (2007) 760 no. 544 (*SEG* 56 1986, *CPI* 99): Βασιλεὺς Πτολεμαῖος Πτολεμαίου καὶ Ἀρσινόης θεῶν ἀδελφῶν, τὸ [κω]μαστήριον, Ἡρακλεῖ, ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ καὶ βασιλίσσης Βερενίκης τῆς ἀδελφῆς αὐτοῦ καὶ γυναικὸς καὶ τῶν τέκνων. Also see the foundation plaques of the Boubasteion of Alexandria, dedicated by Berenike II (SCA storeys Alexandria), Abd el-Maksoud, M., Abd el-Fattah, A., Seif el-Din, M. 'Foundation Deposit Plaques from the Boubasteion', *BSAA* 49 (2015) 125-144 (*CPI* 13): Βασίλισσα Βερενίκη ὑπὲρ βασιλέως Πτολεμαίου τοῦ αὐτῆς ἀδελφοῦ καὶ ἀνδρὸς καὶ τῶν τούτων τέκνων τὸν ναὸν καὶ τὸ τέμενος καὶ τὸν βωμὸν Βουβάστει; and a fragmentary dedication, probably related to a foundation in the Great Sarapeion enclosure (Alexandria Graeco-Roman Museum 32), *I. Musée d'Alexandrie* 13 (*SB* 1 307; *I. Alex. Ptol.* 16; *CPI* 14; *TM* 6479): [βασιλίσ]σα Βερενίκη [...] [ὑπερ βασι]λέως [...] [Πτολεμαίου τοῦ] αὐτῆς [ἀδελφοῦ καὶ ἀν]δρὸς.

⁹ See above note 4 for the translation of the hieroglyphic text on the plaques of the Metropolitan Museum and British Museum. The association of Aphrodite Ourania with Hathor is also mentioned by Aelian (*Nat. Anim.* x, 27), see the discussion by Fraser (1956, 98).

Philae Island, where the lintel of the entrance gate to the inner hall bears a royal Greek dedication from Ptolemy VIII, addressed to Aphrodite.¹⁰

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Abbreviations

BE: *Bulletin épigraphique*, annually in *Revue des Études Grecques*

BSAA: *Bulletin de la Société Royale Archéologique d'Alexandrie*

Brugsch, H., K. *Dictionnaire géographique de l'ancienne Egypte* (Leipzig, 1877–81)

I. Alex. Ptol.: Bernand, E. *Inscriptions grecques d'Alexandrie ptolémaïque* (Cairo, 2001)

I. Musée d'Alexandrie: Breccia, E. *Iscrizioni greche e latine. Service des Antiquites de l'Egypte. Catalogue general des antiquites égyptiennes du Musée d'Alexandrie* (Cairo, 1911)

JEA: *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*

P-M: Porter, B., and Moss, R. L. B., *The Topographical Bibliography of ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs, and Paintings, IV. Lower and Middle Egypt* (1934, Oxford)

SB: *Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Agypten*.

SEG: *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*.

TM: Trismegistos online Database: <http://www.trismegistos.org> (last date visited, February 2018)

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Gold foundation plaque. Front side. Temple of Ahrodite Ourania, Koussai. Athens, Private collection.
2. Gold foundation plaque. Back side. Temple of Ahrodite Ourania, Koussai. Athens, Private collection.
3. Opaque glass foundation plaque. Greek text side. New York, The Metropolitan Museum 48.45. Public Domain (www.metmuseum.org/art/collection)
4. Opaque glass foundation plaque. Egyptian text side. New York, The Metropolitan Museum 48.45. Public Domain (www.metmuseum.org/art/collection)

¹⁰ See the dedication of Ptolemy VIII on the entrance gate (Temple of Hathor, Philae Island, in situ), SB 5 8882 (*I. Philae* 1 17; *CPI* 435; TM 6402) Βασιλεὺς Πτολεμαῖος καὶ βασίλισσα Κλεοπάτρα ἡ ἀδελφὴ καὶ βασίλισσα Κλεοπάτρα ἡ γυνὴ, θεοὶ Εὐεργέται, Ἀφροδίτη.

5. Opaque glass foundation plaque. Greek text side. London, the British Museum EA 65844. Fraser Archive, Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents, Oxford.

6. Glass foundation plaque. Egyptian text side. London, the British Museum EA 65844. Fraser Archive, Centre for the Study of Ancient Documents, Oxford.