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Sidetic graffiti in the Memnonium at Abydos

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Abstract: Two short graffiti from the Memnonium at Abydos, hitherto unidentified, are personal names written in the Sidetic script. They were probably left by mercenaries from Side, mostly likely in the 4th or 3rd century BC.

Keywords: Sidetic, Anatolian languages, Abydos, graffiti, Ptolemaic Egypt, Ptolemaic Pamphylia.

Provenance

The so-called Memnonium at Abydos in Egypt, constructed in the 13th century BC, has one of the richest assemblages of graffiti known from the Ancient World. They survive in multiple scripts: Egyptian (hieratic, Coptic), Greek, Aramaic, Phoenician, Syllabo-Cypriot, Carian and Latin. Most of these are visitors' graffiti, left by people who came to Abydos to pay homage to the gods, since the Memnonium was reinterpreted as a temple in the mid 1st millennium BC. Many of them are simple names, some record that the writer came or paid his respects to the gods. Apart from the Egyptian ones, some of which date from the early 1st millennium BC. Most of them date from the 6th century BC to the 4th century AD. Some editions of graffiti in individual languages were done in the 20th century, but in some cases (particularly the Syllabo-Cypriot and Carian ones) more work is a desideratum.

There are also a number of problematic graffiti which have so far defied interpretation. The subject of this article is two graffiti which were first recorded by Théodule Deveria in 1866. They are situated in the staircase in the SW part of the building, and in the corridor (the 'Corridor of the Bull') leading to it, on the

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N. wall in each case. They are both still clearly visible as of September 2024. It was initially believed that they might be Aramaic or another Semitic script.¹ However, Mark Lidzbarski in his definitive study of the Phoenician and Aramaic graffiti ruled that out, without offering alternative suggestions, and no progress has been made on them since then.²

Sidetic graffito #1

The first Sidetic graffito in question is written high up on the north wall of the staircase at the east end, just to the left of the internal gateway. The Sidetic graffito is about 6 inches across and 2 inches high. There is an apparently unrelated Aramaic graffito immediately above it (Figs. 1–3).³

It was first published by Deveria, with a drawing.⁴ Further drawings were published by Lidzbarski and Murray.⁵ While most thought it unreadable, Levy had arbitrarily tried to take it as part of the Aramaic inscription above.⁶

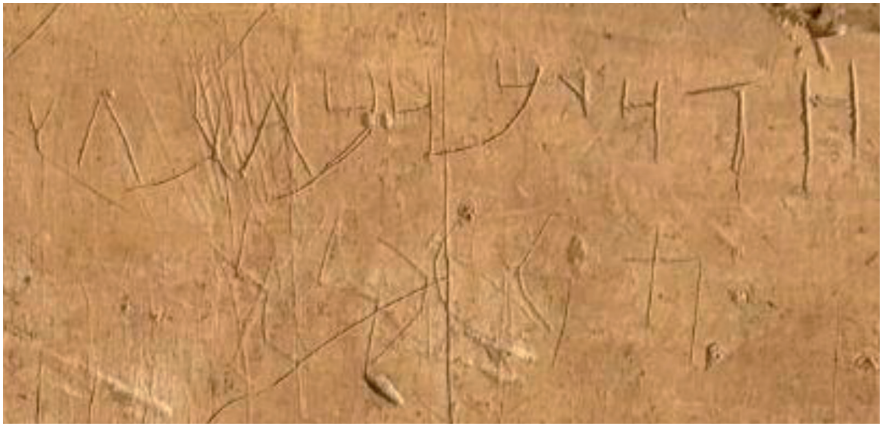


Fig. 1: Sidetic graffito below unrelated Aramaic. Photo Ian Rutherford

¹ Renan in CIS 2.1 (1889), p. 128: “omittendos esse putavimus, quamvis aramaicam quandam speciem praebeant”; CIS 1.1 (1881), p. 119: “vel aramaici vel alius sunt generis, forte safaitici”.

² His An, no. 40-1, p. X.

³ RÉS 1363 = Porten and Yardeni D 22.12; Porten and Yardeni translate “Hori son of Bagabaga”.

⁴ Deveria CIS 1.1, Taf. XVI. Lidzbarski (1915) called it Deveria 6, but Renan (1881) and (1889), Zotenberg (1868), and Levy (1870) called it Deveria 5.

⁵ Lidzbarski (1915) p. 108 Taf. IX,40; Murray (1904) Pl. XXIV,22.

⁶ Levy (1870) 18–19.



Fig. 2: Drawing after photograph, with incidental damage in gray

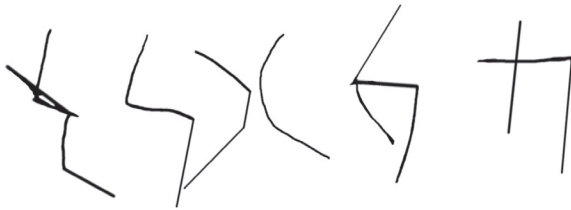


Fig. 3: Drawing as above, without incidental damage

w ⁽²⁾	a	y	o	p
N6 ⁷	N1	N7	N4	N8
←				

This graffiti is five characters long. Its identification as Sidetic is unquestionable. It provides a near-exact correspondence to the personal name *ṗoyaw* of the Sidetic name-list S9.⁸ By a strange coincidence, a poet from Side who left two

⁷ Numeration (but not transcription) of Sidetic characters following the sign-list of Nollé (2001) 629.

⁸ Cognate with Lyc. *Pajawa* (TL 40) and Pamphylian Πάϊων, Παιάφας (LGN V.B s. vv.); so Pérez Orozco (2003) 105. Cf. Houwink ten Cate (1961) 10 n. 1, with the suggestion that the Lycian name

Greek graffiti on the Memnon colossus in the late 1st century AD bore the name Paion, which is probably a Greek version of the same name.⁹

Like all Sidetic texts, this graffito should be read from right to left. While the initial letter (<p>) bears passing resemblance to an Aramaic *mem*, it is characteristically Sidetic. The identification of the script is assured by the presence of the rare <o>- and <y>-signs, forms absent from any Northwest Semitic script.¹⁰

The first four characters can be read without difficulty. As would be expected with roughly-cut graffiti, the letters are angular in form. Angular three-bar examples of N1 <a> are not rare, although the middle hasta is unusually long. N4 <o> is open below, which may be an accident in the carving; it otherwise resembles other forms of this letter seen elsewhere (see Table 2, below).

The final (leftmost) character poses the most difficulty. Given the similarities with the name *poyaw* as seen in S9, the expected value would be N6 <w>. The letter seen resembles N6 only if the upper-right hasta is discounted. Taking all strokes into account, this sign somewhat resembles the letter N22, albeit with an additional stroke below. N22 is a vocalic hapax in the inscription S9 for which no consensus value has been reached.¹¹ Given the formal differences between the sign shown here and N22 as in S9.6, a poorly-cut N6 should perhaps be preferred. This requires that we assume the upper-right hasta – which appears to be cut at the same depth as the other strokes of the graffito – is an accidental or later addition. The upper-left stroke, cut slightly deeper, may be corrective, after the careless lapicide realised their mistake. Such mistakes and subsequent corrections are not uncommon among casual visitors' graffiti at Abydos.

may be Sidetic in origin. Note, however, the objections regarding vocalic quality raised by Schürr (2016) 150.

⁹ Neumann (2007) 257 s. v.; id. (1967) 132. Bernard and Bernard (1960) no. 11-2, and Rosenmeyer (2018) 81, 123. Another visitor from Side who leaves graffiti is Athenaios son of Puthion (Baillet 1926: no. 1175 and 1962; Drexhage 1991: 83).

¹⁰ As regards correspondence with other Anatolian scripts: Sidetic <y> (N7) matches Lycian <θ> and Carian <z> in shape. Sidetic <o> (N4) bears only a passing resemblance to Carian <1-Ī> (#36 in the list of Masson 1976; cf. Adiego 2019). However, neither Lycian nor Carian have any known letters resembling Sidetic <p> (N8).

¹¹ Seen in the elusive string *tob-N22-remar*. N22 has been analysed as a graphic variant of N1 <a> by Zinko (2016: 368), or a mis-transcription of a more common vocalic letter by Pérez Orozco (2007) 128, although its identification as a distinct character is robustly defended by Simon (2021) 380. In recent decipherment systems: Pérez Orozco (2020) takes it as <a>; Zinko and Zinko (2020) similarly transcribe it <a₂> (after Zinko 2016: 368); Simon in *eDiAna* § 1640 transcribes it as <V>.

Sidetic graffito #2

The second graffito is inscribed on the north side of the corridor leading to the staircase under the bull. There is a Greek graffito immediately above it.¹² Sidetic #2 is large for a graffito, about 18 inches across with the letters up to 5 inches high.

Like the first graffito, it was first recorded by Deveria.¹³ Lidzbarski also published a drawing.¹⁴ Levy again thought it might be Aramaic.¹⁵



Fig. 4: Sidetic graffito below unrelated Greek. Photo Ian Rutherford



Fig. 5: Drawing after the above photo, with incidental damage in gray

¹² PL 350: Πρωτάρχου τὸ πρ[οσκύνημα]. There seems to be an additional vertical scratch before the τὸ.









¹³ Deveria CIS 1 Taf. XVI, no. 14.

¹⁴ Lidzbarski (1915) p. 108 Taf. IX,41.

¹⁵ Levy (1870) *loc. cit.* and 33. Levy thinks that the end of this graffito overlaps with the Aramaic one above the first, and also (33) that the first part (i.e. the Greek graffito) is Cypriot.



Fig. 6: Drawing, as Fig. 5, with most incidental damage omitted

							
u	e	b	y	t	y	i	p
N5	N2	N24	N7	N11	N7	N3	N8
←							

Like the first graffito, the lettering is angular but characteristically Sidetic. Reading is not inhibited by the large amount of damage both incidental and – in the case of the scratches on the third letter – intentional. The identification of <p>, <t>, <e>, and are essentially unproblematic.

The second character is likely a variant of N3 <i> rather than an exceptionally open N4 <o>. Its form here is unusual but not without parallel in the Sidetic corpus. While N3 may have a straight first (rightmost) hasta (as in S3, S8, and S9), this line is dramatically curved inwards (as here) in S1, S2, and S6, with an almost <o>-like claw-shape achieved in S4. The coin legends show a great amount of variability but typically have a curved first hasta and angular second, both of which incline inwards – like S1, S6, and (to a lesser extent) this graffito. Like the first stroke, the second (leftmost) hasta is rarely straight. It curves inwards, towards the first hasta, on most examples of Sidetic <i> (see Table 1). What is unexpected about this second hasta, in this graffito, is that it is unusually long, especially in relation to the first stroke. This arrangement however finds a parallel in S6 and perhaps S3, albeit to less pronounced degrees in both cases. The example of this letter as seen in Abydos simply exaggerates qualities known from the more carefully-cut inscriptions of Anatolia. This is not entirely unexpected for graffiti. On balance, this letter is very unlikely to be N4 <o>, as all known examples exaggerate ascenders and descenders of equal length and minimise a very tight bulb

(see Table 2), entirely unlike this lopsided and open character. N3 <i> is therefore the preferable interpretation.
















Table 1: Forms of N3 <i> in other Sidetic inscriptions ¹⁶				
				
S1	S2	S3	S4 (1.2 left, 1.3 right)	S6
				
S8 (1.1 left, 1.2 right)		S9	Coin legends	

Table 2: Forms of N4 <o> in other Sidetic inscriptions ¹⁷				
				
S1	S2	S3	S4 (1.2 left, 1.3 right)	S5
				
S7	S9 (From left to right: ll.2, 3, 5, 6)			

The additional stroke to the right of the first (rightmost) N7 <y> of Lidzbarski’s drawing, omitted in Deveria’s edition, is clearly present upon observation. It can however be safely ignored as incidental, immaterial to any reading. Neither Deveria nor Lidzbarski recorded the extended second stroke of the second (leftmost) N7 <y>. Because no alternative sensical reading presents itself, and the additional stroke occurs so far below the other lettering, this should also be disregarded and the identification of N7 <y> maintained.

¹⁶ Variants within an inscription given non-exhaustively. None present in S5 or S7. All after Nollé (2001).

¹⁷ As Table 1. None present in S6 or the coin legends.

The shape of the final *upsilon*, while unique in the Sidetic corpus, is not problematic as N5 <u>. It resembles V-shaped varieties (as seen on some Sidetic coinage) with either an overcut on the second stroke or a very short stem. The shorter right arm in Lidzbarski's drawing is a result of damage to the wall at that point, ignored in Deveria's copy.

Following recent scholarship, letter N24 is taken here as . ¹⁸ Its precise value is not certain; as N8 <p> may correspond to both β and π in Greek equivalences, N24 may instead represent a fricative (/v~β/) rather than a stop. ¹⁹

This paper has so far followed recent scholarship in assigning the transcription <y> to N7, assuming it to be the glide /j/. ²⁰ This graffito is alone in the Sidetic corpus in having <y> between two consonants. It otherwise occurs word-initially before a vowel (S3: *yewase*) or immediately follows a vowel (<i>, <o>, or <e>), i.e. behaving as a glide. It is nonetheless possible for a semivowel to serve as the syllable peak. In other Anatolian alphabets, this phenomenon is paralleled far more generally in Carian, wherein characters thought to have historically represented semivowels (<í/j>, <ú/w>, <ý>) were used almost interchangeably with their full vowel counterparts (<i>, <u>, <y>). ²¹ Sidetic's other glide, N6 <w>, may show a similar blurring of functional boundaries with N5 <u> on coin legends. ²²

Like the other short graffiti from Abydos, this is surely a single personal name. The initial element in *piy-* reflects the Anatolian verb stem 'give', cognate with Lyc. *pije-*, Hitt.-Luw. *pai-/piye-*. Contextually, *piyt* should not here be read as a 3sg. verbal form. In Sidetic it can be seen in the personal name *thanpiy-* (S1, S8, S9). ²³ A segmentation of *piy-tybeu* would provide a second element akin to Tβioc

18 First proposed by Meriggi (1978). Previously read as <k> by e.g. Ševoroškin (1975). See recent discussions: Rizza (2019) 545–46, Zinko and Zinko (2020) 422, 430. Pérez Orozco (2020) proposes a reevaluation of <ñ>, against which see Simon (2021) 383 with n. 43.

19 Rizza (2019) 546.

20 The values of N6 (now <w>) and N7 (now <y>) were reversed compared to previous readings (as in Ševoroškin 1975 or Nollé 2001). The change was proposed by Schürr (1997) 138; Pérez Orozco (2003). This identification is still not conclusive: cf. Rizza (2019) 541f.

21 Adiego (2007) 18–19, 234f.; (2020). This analysis of the Carian vocalic characters is not universally accepted, and the comparison with Sidetic <y> is flawed insofar as the Carian 'semivowels' rarely (if ever) function as glides. The reinterpretation of characters thought to historically represent semivowels as full vowels is so commonplace in Carian that their interpretation as semivowels has been disputed: cf. Melchert (2021). Nonetheless, our understanding of both Carian and (especially) Sidetic graphic notation is as yet so limited that tentative comparisons may provide productive avenues for analysis in future.

22 Ferrer Pérez (2020), albeit maintaining the phonetic distinction between <u> and <w>. The full reevaluation of N5 by Schürr (2016) provides no value for N6. The reinterpretation of N6 as <v> by Pérez Orozco (2020) is not fully justified; see Simon (2021) 379–80.

23 Zinko (2016) 369.

(LGPN V.B s. v.), Τῖβιος (LGPN V.C s. v.), Τῖβειος (LGPN V.B s. v.), and especially Τῖβας (LGPN V.C s. v.). A comparison of Τῖβιος and Τῖβιος shows that the short vowel could be reduced when not under stress.²⁴ This in turn might explain the use of <y> in this graffito, representing an unstressed high front vowel in contrast with the previous <iy>. Anatolian *Satznamen*, however, more often place the verbal element second, e.g. *θαν-pij-*.²⁵ Across the Anatolian languages, the only parallels for this reversed order are the theophoric Luwian names *Piyatarhui*, *Piyatarhunazi*, and *Piyatarhunda*.²⁶ A similar root may ultimately lie behind names seen in the Greek script in Imperial Anatolia, such as Πιατηραβις (well-attested at Termessos), which seem to be derived secondarily from the noun *πιατρα* ‘daughter-in-law, given daughter’.²⁷ The lack of an <r> in this graffito prevents identification with either this kinship term or the extensive family of names in -(δ)υβερις.²⁸

An alternative would be to interpret *piy-* not as the verbal element, but as the root of the substantivised noun *piyt* ‘gift’.²⁹ This would cohere with Melchert’s proposal that the above Luwian names reduced an initial haplology in **Piyata-tarhunza-*, etc.³⁰ See, similarly, compound names with the participial first element *Piyama-* ‘given’, such as the Arzawan rebel Piyamaradu.³¹ A segmentation *piyt-ybeu* can be read as a more typical verb-second *Satzname*.

Seeing in *-ybeu* a formulation in **-ube-* ‘offer, donate’ may be applicable,³² with the somewhat tautological sense of ‘given gift’. The <y> however makes this difficult. If it represents any full vowel, it would be a high front vowel like /i/, rather than the back vowel expected from Greek renditions in -οβας, -υβας, and -ουβας. Unexpected vowel quality in Sidetic personal names is not unusual, though. As such, interpretation of the latter part of this name must remain something of an open question.

24 One might tentatively compare the similar reduction of vowels according to stress observed, albeit in potentially different fashions, in Carian and Lydian. For Carian: cf. Adiego (2007) 241, (2020); Simon (2023). For Lydian: cf. West (1972); Eichner (1986), (1993); Gérard (2005) 52–55.

25 Melchert (2013) 44–45; Yakubovich (2013); Réveilhac (2024).

26 Laroche (1966) § 986–988.

27 Thonemann (2022) 127–128 with n. 68.

28 Common in Carian, Greco-Lycian, and beyond: Adiego (1993) 224–227.

29 Cognate with Lyc. *pijata-* ‘gift’, HLUw. *piyatta-* ‘gift’, Hitt. *pi(ye)tta-* ‘allotment’. See Hawkins (2000) 346–47; Neumann (2007) 272; Kloekhorst (2008) 677–78; Bauer – Sasseville *eDiAna* § 1699. Note also the Lydian denominative verb *pita-* ‘give as gift’ in LW 13.

30 Melchert (2013) 45–46.

31 Laroche (1966) § 980–983. Cf. Yakubovich (2013) 96–97, with bibliography.

32 Réveilhac (2024) 13–14.

The ending, *-eu*, can be compared to that of the PN *darkew* in S3, which can tentatively be compared to Greek PNs ending *-εὺς*.³³

In short, this second graffito should be read as a Sidetic PN *piytybeu*.

Historical context

It is perfectly plausible that people from Side in Pamphylia would have travelled to Abydos in the time that the Sidetic script was in use. Narrowing down the date range of these graffiti, though, is more difficult.

Alphabetic Greek graffiti from the Memnonium show Hellenistic-period visitors from Perge, Aspendos, and Pisidian Etenna.³⁴ Those visiting South Anatolians were likely mercenaries in the service of the Ptolemaic Empire. Ptolemy II and III governed Pamphylia, along with much of Pisidia, Cilicia, Lycia and Caria, in the third century.³⁵ Pamphylians who served abroad as mercenaries in this period almost exclusively did so in the Ptolemaic army.³⁶ The most famous was Andromachus of Aspendos, who drilled and commanded a phalanx at Raphia in 217.³⁷ Many Pamphylian mercenaries, settled as *klēroi*, made their homes in Egypt.³⁸ For example, one Andronikos of Perge was explicitly labelled *chiliarch* when settled in the Arsinoite nome.³⁹ This date range accords with the existing corpus of Sidetic inscriptions, thought to predominantly date to the third and second centuries.⁴⁰

An Achaemenid date cannot be ruled out, however. Cilician slaves with Luwic names in Egypt, including one Piyatarunazi, evidenced by the late fifth century Arshama dossier show similar linguistic contact directly consequent to

³³ Connected to *Δρακεύς by Pérez Orozco (2007) 129.

³⁴ PL 128 (Perge), PL 54 (Aspendos, fragmentary), PL 160 (Etenna; cf. Nollé 1992: 109 = 2.12).

³⁵ Bagnall (1976) 110–114. Ptolemy II acquired control of Pamphylia, with much of the rest of coastal Anatolia, in the late 280s: Meadows (2012). The earliest evidence is an honorific inscription for a Ptolemaic *strategos* or *oikonomos* in Termessos from 281/0 BC: Meadows and Thonemann (2013). The details of Ptolemy III's loss of Pamphylia to the Seleukids are unclear, cf. Grainger (2009) 109ff.

³⁶ Grainger (2009) 86, after Launey (1987) esp. 466f. On foreign recruitment in the Ptolemaic army, see Fischer-Bovet (2014) 166–195, with bibliography.

³⁷ Polybius 5.64–65, 83, 85. Andromachus was left as governor of Phoenicia and Coele Syria: Plb. 5.87.

³⁸ Cf. La'da (2002) 32–33, 227–228, 283.

³⁹ La'da (2002) E 1954.

⁴⁰ Cf. Nollé (2001) 630; Brixhe (2018). The civic coinage of Side bears Sidetic legends throughout the fourth century, but no stone inscriptions can be firmly dated as early.

the machinery of Persian government.⁴¹ Evidence for Luwic-speaking mercenaries is less forthcoming in the Achaemenid period though. The best candidate would be two Aramaic graffiti from the Memnonium at Abydos, both recording the presence of three people with Anatolian names: Trkmn, Trbmy and Ubrmos. The first is identified as a military commander (*rbh*) and a Pisidian.⁴² The use of Aramaic suggests an Achaemenid date. In the case of the Sidetic graffiti, their creation by mercenaries in the Achaemenid period is plausible. The apparently late development of Sidetic writing might incline us to rule out the fifth century, but the small size of the Sidetic corpus precludes any firm conclusions on this point.

These graffiti are of paramount importance for our understanding of the history of the Sidetic script and language. Almost all Sidetic inscriptions were confined to the city of Side itself. Regarding the lapidary inscriptions, the exceptions are the two stelae from Lyrbe, a small community c. 10 km northeast of Side.⁴³ While silver coinage with Sidetic legends struck by the civic mint may have circulated beyond the bounds of the city, these official productions do not speak to the popular usage of the script as the Abydan graffiti do.⁴⁴

Abbreviations

CIS: Renan, E. ed. (1881–) *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*. Paris.

eDiAna: *The Digital Philological-Etymological Dictionary of the Minor Anatolian Corpus Languages (eDiAna)*. Online access: <https://www.ediana.gwi.uni-muenchen.de/search.php>

LGPN: *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names. Vol. V.B, Coastal Asia Minor: Caria to Cilicia* (2013), Oxford. *Vol. V.C, Inland Asia Minor* (2018), Oxford.

RÉS: *Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique* (1900–), Paris.

TADAE: Porten, B. and Yardeni, A. (1986) *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt* (4 vols). Winona Lake, IN.

TL: Kalinka, E. (1901) *Tituli Asiae Minoris. Vol. I: Tituli Lyciae*. Vienna.

41 TADAE A6.7 (l. 4 names one *pytr'nz*, among others with Luwic names), A6.8, A6.9, and A6.15, all in Tuplin – Ma (2020). Cf. Vittmann (2020), esp. 275–76.

42 Porten and Yardeni D.22.25 and D.22.27 (Lidzbarski Aha-b= 34-5, RES 3.1367, 1372b; for the second see Grelot (1972) 82, no. 81), and for context Tuplin (2020) 306. On the Pisidian position in the Ptolemaic sphere – not entirely dissimilar from the Pamphylian – see Bagnall (1976); Kosmetatou (1997).

43 Zinko and Zinko (2020) S I.1.3 and S I.2.6. Cf. Zinko and Zinko (2016) 378–381.

44 The only possible comparandum is the 'para-Sidetic' scarab (Rizza 2005), an Egyptianising steatite artefact with no clear provenance which (if authentic) illustrates further 'private' or personal uses of the script.

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