

Notes on Two Inscribed Gems and an Affectionate Address

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THE PUBLICATION of a gem in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale dell'Umbria provides the occasion for a brief note on the Greek text inscribed thereon,¹ and another on a comparable formulation on a second gem.

I. A fine color photograph of the Umbrian gem, an onyx cameo, accompanied the first edition, and the readings are not in doubt. The editor dated the gem to the third century A.D. For convenience I reprint the text here, with one change in articulation that will be justified below:

μά σε καρτέρι· οὐδὶς ἰ σε μιμήσεται. ❶

1–2 l. καρτέρι : Καρτέρι' ed. pr. 2 l. οὐδείς 3–4 l. μιμήσεται 4 ❷
om. ed. pr.

(I swear) by you (yourself), persevere: no one will match you.

The editor had translated, “O Kartèrios, nessuno sarà mai in grado di imitarti (*scil.* di rappresentare la tua bellezza per mezzo dell'arte).” The rarity both of the name Καρτέριος (cf. *LGPNI*, Va, and Vb s.v., for only three occurrences) and of the observance of elision in inscribed gems argues against that articulation, and the particular verb resulting from the new articulation fits well the likely context of a parting gift between lovers (see below).

The original rendering should also be modified to account

¹ P. Vitellozzi, *Gemme e cammei della collezione Guardabassi nel Museo Archeologico Nazionale dell'Umbria a Perugia* (Perugia 2010) 449, no. 557. The cameo was previously in the collection of the antiquarian Mariano Guardabassi (1823–1880) and is now kept under the inventory number 1761.

for the opening *μά*, whose force, as will be discussed in due course, is stronger than the simple interjection “O” (i.e. Greek *ὦ*), implying an oath sworn upon the object (*σε*).² More idiomatically the whole could be translated “On your life, persevere, no one will match you.” In the absence of any concrete reference to artistic representation, and in the specific context of an inscription on a luxury gift, *μιμῆσθαι* more likely expresses the sentiment that no one will match the recipient in the affections of the giver, even though the two may be physically parted. The latter circumstance is suggested particularly by the imperative *καρτέρει*, read in conjunction with the similarly structured formula in text II below, which unambiguously anticipates a long absence.³

II. A useful comparandum for both the oath phrasing *μά σε* and the sentiment behind *καρτέρει* can be found in an inscription on another gem which can now be re-classified as a similar expression of enduring affection. The object is an oval amethyst said to come from Constantinople and dated by its editor to the fifth to seventh centuries A.D.⁴ Here the giver identifies himself as Nektaris (Nektarios)⁵ and pledges his unceasing devotion. The text, with some slight modifications of previous editions, runs:

obverse οὐδέποτε ἐπιλήσομαι | κ(αὶ) ἂν Ὀδυσσεὺς γέινωμαι·
 reverse μά σε, | ἐξουθέλνι· ὁ δούλός | σου ἐγὼ | Νεκτάρης.
 obverse 2–3 ἐπιλήσομαι *SEG* : ΕΠΙΛΗCOMΑΡ ed. pr. 4 κ(αὶ) gem
 (abbr. *κ*) : κ' *SEG*

² On *μά* see R. Kühner and B. Gerth, *Ausführliche Grammatik der griechischen Sprache* II.2 (Hannover 1904) 148, §505.3.

³ For inscriptions on gems likely presented as gifts more generally see G. Bevilacqua, “Osservazioni su alcune formule affettuose e galanti di età imperiale,” *MiscGrRom* 16 (1991) 225–237; cf. *SEG* XLI 1867.

⁴ Munich, Staatliche Münzsammlung, acc. 1992/146, majuscule transcription by M. Restle in R. Baumstark (ed.), *Rom und Byzanz. Schatzkammerstücke aus bayerischen Sammlungen* (Munich 1998) 119, no. 22; an articulated text is presented in *SEG* LVII 612.

⁵ For the syncopated form see *LGP/Va* 329 s.v.

reverse 2–3 ΕΞΟΥΘΕΝΙΟΔΟΥΛΟΣ gem, l. ἐξουθένει· ὁ δοῦλος :
ἐξουθεν(έ)ω ὁ δοῦλος *SEG*

I will never forget, even if I end up as Odysseus. (*reverse*) (I swear) by you (yourself), think nothing of (it). I, Nektaris, am your slave.

The editor had translated, “Niemals werde ich vergessen, selbst wenn ich zum Odysseus würde. Fürwahr, ich will Dich verachten, ich, dein Sklave Nektaris,” explaining the inscription as “Der elegische Text eines Liebenden, Nektaris (Nektarios), an seine grausame oder ihn nicht mehr erhörende Geliebte.” Reprinted in *SEG*, the text is interpreted along similar lines as an “[e]xpression of unrequited love,” with comments on the inconcinnity of Odysseus in that context. However Odysseus could be better reconciled if taken as a figure for just what he turns out to be, the beloved who does indeed return after a long separation: the sense here is thus that the giver, Nektaris, will never forget his beloved, even if the two are parted for as long as the separation of Odysseus and Penelope. The object of the exhortation ἐξουθένει⁶ on the reverse is the possibility raised on the obverse, that Nektaris would forget his beloved, which is to be dismissed as baseless. The sentiment is followed and reinforced by a strong assertion of devotion, that the speaker is the beloved’s slave (δοῦλος). There are in fact no grounds for supposing that Nektaris’ love is unrequited, or that his beloved has rejected or treated him cruelly.

The editor’s “fürwahr” gets closer to the force of μά σε, but the phrase is worth further comment. The particle μά, with or without a verb of swearing, in prose generally introduces oaths in the name of divinities, who can also themselves be addressed through the collocation μά σε with their name in the vocative.⁷

⁶ For the sense of the verb here see Lampe, *Lexikon* 501a s.v. For the construction with an impersonal object cf. in particular LXX Sap 3:11 and Ecclus 19:1, and Theoph. Simoc. 8.7.8.

⁷ E.g. *Anth.Gr.* (ed. Beckby) 12.25.3 (Statilius Flaccus), οὐ μά σε Φοῖβε; 12.119.1 (Meleager), ναὶ μά σε Βάκχε; 12.130.5 (adesp.), ναὶ μά σε δαῖμον (probably Ἔρωσ, cf. line 4); 12.173.3 (Philomedes), οὐ μά σε Κύπρι;

As such, at an earlier period the expression might have suggested some semi-divine or beatified status for the beloveds addressed in these texts.⁸ Oaths sworn by the divine fortune or destiny (τύχη) attending a person of high rank are also attested in a period contemporary with the gems.⁹

Alternately, however, in a somewhat attenuated form, and probably under the influence of poetic diction, the locution μὰ σε seems to have become specially appropriate in affectionate addresses to cherished relations. An epitaph from Roman Saqqara perhaps bridges the two concepts: it is a representation in elegiac couplets of a dialogue between a passer-by (ὄδοιπóρε, 1) and a stone lion adorning the tomb, which speaks with the voice of the δαίμων of the man buried there (δαίμονος αὐδῆι | ἀνδρὸς ὑποχθονίου, 3–4); after hearing of the great virtue and untimely death of the deceased, the passer-by exclaims, “I weep, *daimōn*, (I swear) by you (yourself), after hearing what this animal said” (δακρύω μὰ σε, δαίμον, ἐπεὶ κλύον ὅσσ’ ἀγορεύει | θῆρ ὄδε, 13–14).¹⁰ In Nonnus *Dion.* 24.201–212, the locution appears in an oath in a more intimate connection: an Indian woman lamenting her dead husband addresses him and swears never to drink the water of the

12.194.5 (Strato), ναὶ μὰ σε γὰρ Κρονίδη. A humorous variant is provided in the *Vita Aesopi* G §15 (ed. Perry), where Aesop is addressed by a slave-dealer with μὰ τὴν σκοτίαν σου as a counterpoint to Aesop’s own oath μὰ τὴν Ἴσιν.

⁸ Cf. the acclamation orchestrated by the Αὐγούστειοι for Nero described in Cass. Dio 61.20.5, ὁ καλὸς Καῖσαρ, ὁ Ἀπόλλων, ὁ Αὐγουστος, εἰς ὡς Πύθιος. μὰ σε Καῖσαρ, οὐδεὶς σε νικᾷ.

⁹ I thank Kent Rigsby for pointing out this parallel. Such oaths can in fact be construed with μὰ, e.g. in an assertion to a Roman emperor beginning κύριέ μου Καῖσαρ, μὰ τὴν σὴν τύχην (*Acta Alexandrinorum*, ed. Musurillo 9 r, col. vi.8–9); compare also νῆ τὴν σὴν τύχην, Σεβαστέ, in Macrobius 2.4.31. More generally the practice of swearing by the emperor’s τύχη is frequent in oaths in documentary papyri from Roman Egypt (examples in LSJ s.v. τύχη IV).

¹⁰ Bernand, *Inscr.métriques* 68 (C. C. Edgar, “A Greek Epitaph from Saqqarah,” *ASAE* 27 (1927) 31–32; *SEG* VIII 530; *SB* IV 7423).

Hydaspes again, “by you and your burden that I bear here in my womb, by you and the passionate love that time knows no way to wither” (οὐ μὰ σε καὶ σέο φόρτον ὄν ἔνδοθι γαστρὸς ἀείρω, | οὐ μὰ σε καὶ τὸν ἔρωτα τὸν οὐ χρόνος οἶδε μαραίνειν). In the closest parallels to these gems, in two epigrams in the *Greek Anthology*, the phrasing develops such that it can be used simply to address a living person, but one with whom the speaker is on particularly intimate terms, namely a lover, while very likely maintaining connotations from the earlier usage in conjunction with various levels of divinities.¹¹

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¹¹ *Anth.Gr.* 5.238.1 (Macedonius), οὐ μὰ σε κόρη; similarly 5.254.4 (Paul the Silentiary), ναὶ μὰ σε, to a woman addressed as ἀργέτι κόρη (1) and φίλη (5).