DE PH APUD CENCHREAS

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DURING the 1960s, when the University of Chicago and Indiana University were conducting excavations at Cenchreae, the eastern port of ancient Corinth, for the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, one of the major areas investigated was the southwest end of the harbor. The remains of an extensive array of buildings were located here, some of which were identified with a high degree of probability, if not absolute certainty, as belonging to the sanctuary of Isis mentioned at Pausanias 2. 2. 3, and used by Apuleius (*Met.* 10. 35–11. 24) as the setting for the conversion of Lucius.[1] It was eminently clear from the remains that these buildings had been taken over and used by the Christian community, and that they had been adapted and improved by successive remodelings for use as a church. Various archaeological indications established that the conversion had taken place some time after A.D. 375, but probably not much, if at all, later than the end of the fourth century.

One of the structures was a navelike hall or passage, or *dromos*, some 54 feet long, flanked by aisles or porticoes which were separated from the *dromos* by colonnades. The southwest colonnade had been thoroughly dismantled, but on the northeast there survive the stylobate and the bases of five columns—the entire original complement. During one of the later modifications of the structure, a wall or thick parapet of small stones and mortar was built up between the columns; by the time of excavation, the columns themselves and most of the parapet had disappeared, though the bases were still preserved *in situ*, to a considerable extent encased in the mortar. The evidence indicates that the original colonnade is to be dated to a period before or close to A.D. 375, before the building was converted to a church, and that the wall or parapet belongs to a later period, during the history of the church itself.

The bases are extremely plain and simple, each consisting of a square plinth surmounted by a shallow conical member above which rises a disc, presumably the start of the column itself. The workmanship is reasonably neat for the place and period, though certainly not finely finished.

Four of the plinths (the fifth is still enshrouded by the later masonry) have one vertical face inscribed with the letters *PH*, about 0.04 to 0.05 meters high. The carving is bold and simple, with chisel marks still obvious—by no means refined and finished. But the letters would certainly have been conspicuous on the bases before they were covered by the masonry of the later construction. The question is, then, What significance might they have had?

One must first decide whether the two letters *PH* are Latin or Greek. To be sure, it is unlikely that they would be Latin at Cenchreae in this period.

1. *Hesperia* 36 (1967): 138–58.

And in any case, a laborious search has failed to reveal any possible explanation for them as Latin characters.

Whether Latin or Greek, they might be simply masons' marks, intended to document a stonecutter's claim for payment, especially if he had made the bases in his workshop and delivered them finished to the site for installation. Indeed, given the tradition of construction in this region, this would be the most natural interpretation—except that the letters are displayed so prominently.

One proceeds, therefore, to ask whether they represent a Greek word. Among the ordinary parts of speech, there seems to be no word which normally begins with this spelling. It is conceivable that the two letters are a phonetic spelling (or misspelling) of some irregular or incorrect form of ῥέω ("flow") or *ἔρω ("speak"). But this would give no meaning that is apparent, and the hypothesis is far from persuasive.

Even among proper nouns there is no word normally spelled this way. There is a form Ῥῆ recorded as a rare, and unaccepted, variant of Ῥέα. Herodianus (Περὶ μον. λεξ., Book 1, s.v. Γῆ, Dindorf, p. 7, l. 5) notes that "Ῥέα is called Ῥῆ by the Syrian [Pherekydes]," but adds that the usage is not accepted by others. One might also think of Ῥῆ in Coptic as a common noun meaning "light" or as a proper noun denoting the sun (god) Re or Re-Osiris. Either of these interpretations would be intelligible in a sanctuary of Isis-Rhea, as one of Isis' "myriad names," or as a name of Re-Osiris her companion. But the Isiac environment would not significantly favor either one over the other, nor add substantial weight to either fragile hypothesis. Furthermore, one would have supposed that if the letters represented a sacred word or name formally inscribed in a conspicuous place, they would have been made more carefully.

Finally, then, one might understand the characters as representing a numeral, 108. The fact that they occur on several of the bases makes it unlikely that they are meant to give the number of some commodity, such as column bases, for example. But it does raise the possibility that the letters constitute a charm of some sort—a magic number, a cabalistic invocation. Here one is reminded of the astrological system represented by Firmicus Maternus (*Math.* 2. 4. 4–6), in which each sign of the zodiac is divided into three "dekans," making 36 in all, and to each of these are attributed three "numina," for a total of 108, which thus in their totality account for the totality of phenomena.[2] Again, whether by obscure and tenuous ramification or by pure coincidence, the number 108 is an "ultimate parameter" of Indian astronomy[3] (and also, according to Indian acquaintances, an emphatic number in certain Indian idioms, as if one were to call someone "108-times blessed," or to speak of "108 percent honesty"—or to say that to connect all this with the columns at Cenchreae is a problem of 108-fold difficulty!).

2. See also J. Lindsay, *Origins of Astrology* (New York, 1971), p. 160.

3. See E. Burgess, "Translation of the Surya-Siddhanta, A Text-book of Hindu Astronomy, with Notes and an Appendix," *JAOS* 6 (1860): 141–498, esp. 160–62. This paper was brought to my attention, with other observations, by James L. Fitzgerald, who was a graduate student at the University of Chicago.

The next possibility is that *PH*, if they stand for a number, might be taken as a date: the year 108 in some chronological system. The system in this case would have to be the Era of Diocletian, which began in A.D. 284, giving us the date A.D. 392 in our era. One objection to this hypothesis might be that dating by the Era of Diocletian is rare. But the system did have some currency, and is notably attested at Philae in Egypt.[4] Moreover, a remarkable coincidence which perhaps lends some support to the hypothesis is that the most significant effort of the early Christian emperors to eradicate the pagan cults is associated with a decree dated to 8 November A.D. 392; the decree ordained that places where pagan religion was celebrated were to be "annexed to our fisc."[5] In the light of these circumstances, it becomes attractive to suppose that the inscribed letters may record the conversion of the sanctuary of Isis to Christian use. It should be added that whether they embody a cabalistic number or a date, the relatively careless workmanship of the letters might be explained by supposing that, when they were inscribed, they were already meant to be covered by the masonry of the wall or parapet.

On the negative side, there appears to be no parallel case in which a building has been inscribed with a cabalistic number of this sort, or in which the date of construction or conversion has been marked in this way (though one wonders whether parallels might have gone unnoticed because they have been taken as unintelligible graffiti). In fact, there are even parallels which would militate against the numerical hypothesis. According to J. N. Travlos,[6] the letters ΖΩ are inscribed on column bases from the sanctuary of Asklepios on the south slope of the Acropolis in Athens, from the Library of Hadrian in Athens, from a Christian building near the Olympieion in Athens, and in the church of Agia Paraskevi in Saloniki. Travlos proposes no explanation, but for the purpose of this discussion it should be noted that the letters cannot easily represent any number that would be significant as a date (not to mention the unlikelihood that all four structures might have been built or remodeled in the same year), or significant in any other sense. They might conceivably be interpreted cabalistically, but how this would help to interpret the *PH* at Cenchreae one cannot now say.

For the moment, let this discussion be taken to have two immediate purposes: first, to inquire for information about similar graffiti which might bear on the problem, and, second, to convey 108 felicitations to RTB.

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4. E. Bernand, *Les inscriptions grecques et latines de Philae* (Paris, 1969), vol. 2, nos. 190, 193, and 196–99.

5. *Cod. Theod.* 16. 10. 12, from the translation by C. Pharr (Princeton, 1952).

6. "Hē Palaiochristianikē Basilikē tou Asklēpieiou tōn Athēnōn," *Archaiologikē Ephēmeris*, 1939–41 (1948), pp. 45–46, with n. 1 on p. 46.