

Sayce's Axumite Inscription from Meroe: Observations on a New Edition

S.M. BURSTEIN

Among the most tantalizing of the few textual sources bearing on the history of Meroe is a fragmentary triumphal inscription that was set up at Meroe by an unnamed Axumite king. The inscription was first published in an inadequate and inaccurate edition by A. H. Sayce in 1909¹ and republished with a greatly improved text by F. Altheim and M. Stiehl in 1961² and again by Jean Bingen in the annual review of Greek epigraphy, *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, as SEG 24 (1969) 1246.

On the basis of Jean Bingen's text I proposed in 1980³ a new interpretation of this important text and the relations between Axum and Meroe implied by it. That interpretation had three aspects. First, the inscription commemorated an expedition to Meroe and its environs conducted by a pagan Axumite king. Second, the "king" referred to in line 7 of the inscription was most probably a king of Meroe. Third, and most important, the inscription provided evidence that at least one of the last Meroitic kings was a vassal of Axum during a period of Axumite sovereignty over Meroe that lasted for an unknown period of time prior to the devastating raid by the forces of Ezana that is documented in both Ge'ez and Greek inscriptions from Axum.

Dr. S. Ya. Bersina challenged this reconstruction in a new edition of the inscription that was published in *Meroitic Newsletter* 23⁴ and summarized in SEG 34 (1984) 1641. In her article Dr. Bersina argued that there had been only one Axumite raid in Meroitic territory, that of Ezana, and that SEG 24 (1969) 1246 was a fragment of a throne set up by Ezana as a victory monument for that raid. This interpretation and its corollary, the invalidity of my proposed identification of the king mentioned in line 7 with

a king of Meroe rested on the following four considerations: first, that there is no similar reference to a Meroitic king in other Axumite inscriptions; second, that the so-called Sembrouthes inscription (*SEG* 24 [1969] 1247) invalidates the premise on which I made that identification, namely, that royal Axumite inscriptions in Greek were normally autobiographical in form; third, that *SEG* 24 (1969) 1246 should be associated with Ezana's campaign since that is the only attested Axumite incursion into the upper Nile valley; and, fourth, that the text of the inscription as published in *SEG* 24 (1969) 1246 is unsound, and, therefore, all interpretations based on that text are invalid.

Dr. Bersina's thesis would mark a major clarification of our understanding of the history of the last phases of the Meroitic state, if it were correct. In actuality, however, her arguments are irremediably flawed both methodologically and factually. Factually, her claim that Ezana's raid was the only Axumite incursion into Meroitic territory rested solely on the silence of the previously known sources concerning earlier Axumite raids and has now been disproved by the publication of a second Axumite inscription from Meroe by Professor T. Hägg in *Meroitica* 7 (= *SEG* 34 [1984] 1642),⁵ which provides clear evidence of military activity near Meroe by a pagan Axumite king prior to Ezana's raid. More important, however, are the methodological deficiencies of her edition.

Reconstruction of fragmentary inscriptions, such as *SEG* 24 (1969) 1246, in which not one sentence or clause is preserved complete requires extreme care. Proposed restorations must be compatible with the known stylistic characteristics of other inscriptions of the same type, and they must not require the assumption of unusual or unattested grammatical

forms or meanings. Dr. Bersina's new edition of *SEG* 24 (1969) 1246 fails both tests.

The formal characteristics of Axumite Greek inscriptions are well known. These inscriptions normally take the form of autobiographical statements with first person aorist verbs predominating in the narrative portion of the text. That this is also true of *SEG* 24 (1969) 1246 is clear from the nominative singular aorist participles and first person singular verbs in lines 3, 4, 5, 10, and 11 in the remains of the narrative section of the text. Dr. Bersina's citation of the Sembrouthes inscription (*SEG* 24 [1969] 1247), in proposing a restoration at variance with these well attested formal characteristics of Axumite Greek inscriptions ignores the atypical character of that inscription in which the "narrative" of the king's deeds consists of two words, **ἔλθων καθείδρυσε**, "having come, he made a dedication (lines 5-6)", sandwiched between the royal titulary and the date formula. Even more serious than the deviations from the attested formal characteristics of Axumite Greek inscriptions required by Dr. Bersina's new text of *SEG* 24 (1969) 1246, however, are the grammatical errors and lexical anomalies that are found in almost every line of her text.⁶ These flaws are particularly serious in her restoration of the critical second line of the inscription.

Mine and all previous interpretations of *SEG* 24 (1969) 1246 depend on the reading of the name of the war god Ares, [**Ἄρεως**] at the beginning of that line. Although Dr. Bersina claims that earlier restorations of this line violate both Greek grammar and sense, the reality is exactly the reverse, since not only are those restorations compatible with the visible traces on the stone, but they are paralleled almost word for word in an inscription describing Ezana's relations with the Beja⁷ and supported by the similar

reference to Ares in the new Axumite inscription from Meroe recently published by Professor Hägg. Her restoration of this same line, however, ἄπαξ ῥεω [ἐ]ς ἀντιδικήσαντι[ός] με ("immediately attack those who rival[ed me") , poses almost insuperable difficulties. The problems are threefold. First, no traces of the letter " ξ " which the author prints at the beginning of the line are, in fact, visible on the photograph of the inscription that accompanies Dr. Bersina's article.⁸ Second, her restoration of the word ἄπαξ with the meaning "immediately" is extremely dubious since that meaning is unattested either in extant Classical or Patristic Greek literature (cf. LSJ⁹ s.v. ἄπαξ ; Lampe¹⁰ s.v. ἄπαξ). Third, and finally, her reading of the second word in the line as the verb ῥεω with the meaning "attack" is similarly unsatisfactory both because that meaning is also unattested in extant Greek literature (LSJ s.v. ῥέω ; Lampe s.v. ῥέω) and because the tense of the verb in the proposed reading is present¹¹ instead of aorist as is the case with regard to the other verbal forms in lines one to ten of *SEG* 24 (1969) 1246. Clearly, any restoration that requires the assumption of three anomalies, two lexical and one stylistic, in two words is unacceptable.

The factual and methodological deficiencies of Dr. Bersina's new edition of *SEG* 24 (1969) 1246 are clear. Unless new evidence is discovered, interpretations of the historical significance of this important inscription must be based on the text as printed in *SEG* 24 (1969) 1246 with its implied ascription of the monument to which it originally belonged to the aftermath of an incursion into Meroitic territory by a pagan Axumite king prior to that described in Ezana's Ge'ez inscription. Whether that king was Ezana prior to his conversion to Christianity or one of his predecessors,

unfortunately, cannot be determined on the basis of the evidence now available.

California State University, Los Angeles

¹A. H. Sayce, "A Greek Inscription of a King (?) of Axum found at Meroe," *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology*, 31 (1909) 53-65.

²F. Altheim and R. Stiehl, "Die Datierung des Königs Ezana von Aksum," *Klio*, 39 (1961) 234-248.

³Stanley M. Burstein, "The Axumite Inscription from Meroe and Late Meroitic Chronology," *Meroitica*, 7 (1984) 220-221; and more fully in "Axum and the Fall of Meroe," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, 18 (1981) 47-50.

⁴S. Ya. Bersina, "An Inscription of a King of Axumites and Himyarites from Meroe," *Meroitic Newsletter*, 23 (June, 1984) 1-7.

⁵Tomas Hägg, "A New Axumite Inscription from Meroe," *Meroitica*, 7 (1984) 436-439.

⁶A particularly serious example is the author's translation of the nominative singular aorist active participle παρακούσας as " (sc. those who) did not submit", apparently misconstruing it as accusative plural.

⁷*Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae*, edited W. Dittenberger (Leipzig, 1903) 200, line 6.

⁸Bersina, Pl. 1.

⁹H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. edition by H. S. Jones and R. McKenzie (Oxford, 1968).

¹⁰G. W. H. Lampe, *Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford, 1969).

¹¹The suggested parallel of *SEG* 26 (1979) 1813, lines 10-22 is imperfect since the present tense occurs only in Ezana's profession of his Christian faith while all the verbs in the narrative of his campaign against the Noba (lines 22-32) are first person aorist forms as is the case in the narrative portions of all other Axumite royal inscriptions in Greek.