Sayce’s Axumite Inscription from Meroe — Again

T. HÄGG


It would be easy just to say that almost all that is new in Bersina's contribution is either manifestly wrong or unconvincing, and refer the serious student to the publications just mentioned; anyone with more than a superficial knowledge of Greek will be able to see for himself. But it may be of some service, to non-philologists at least, to demonstrate in some detail the shortcomings of Bersina's attempt; it would indeed be unwise for anyone to base any further historical conclusions on her translation and comments.

**Line 2.** It is not true that "the name of God Ares can neither be read in the inscription nor grammatically reconstructed" (Bersina p. 2). The four last letters of Ares in the genitive case, [A]PEΩΣ, are perfectly readable, whereas only a faint trace of the A (bottom right part) is discernible in the photographs (in addition to that of Altheim & Stiehl, I have had access to another good photograph as well). The use of the gen. is also unproblematical: it depends on a lost υλός, "son of" (for parallels, see Altheim & Stiehl); and the most likely reconstruction of the first two lines remains: 

"[I, N.N. (Ezana?), King] of Axum and Himyar [...1...] son of the invincible god] Ares
Bersina's proposal \( \delta \varepsilon \omega \varepsilon \zeta \), with the alleged meaning "I attack", is impossible Greek: \( \delta \varepsilon \omega \) means "flow", "stream", "run" (of water etc.), and the metaphorical personal use which Bersina apparently has in mind would perhaps have been acceptable in an Aeschylean choral ode, but definitely not in Ezana & Co.: "I stream against my enemies...."

Nor is the form \( \varepsilon \zeta \) for \( \varepsilon \zeta \) "to" to be expected here. Anyway the extra space between \( \omega \) and \( \zeta \) is hardly big enough to house an \( \varepsilon \); it was no doubt left blank by the stone-cutter because of some irregularity in the stone's surface. The \([\alpha \pi \alpha] \varepsilon \) with which Bersina lets her reconstructed line begin has no basis in the stone, so far as photographs can tell (pace Bersina p. 4: "three parallel straight lines are clearly visible"), and anyway could not be translated "immediately" (the word means "once").

In short, the mention of Ares (Mahrem) as the king's "father" still belongs to the (few) reasonably certain facts about this inscription, and the following (reconstructed) absolute genitive construction, \( \delta \nu \delta \omega \nu \delta \sigma \delta \nu \tau \left[ \omega \nu \right] ... \kappa \alpha \tau \alpha \kappa \alpha \alpha \rho \rho \nu \ldots \), far from "violating grammar norms and logical agreement between words" (Bersina p. 3), is excellent Greek and exactly paralleled in the Ezana inscriptions from Axum (e.g., Bernand 1982, lines 4-6: ... \( \nu \lambda \omega \zeta \theta \varepsilon \theta \left[ \delta \right] \o \nu \delta \kappa \iota \kappa \tau \nu "\) Ares\( \omega \zeta , \) \( \delta \tau \alpha \kappa \tau \kappa \delta \right[ \tau \delta \nu \left[ \alpha \zeta \right] \o \kappa \alpha \alpha \rho \nu\) to\( \delta \left[ \epsilon \nu \rho \nu \right] \delta \nu \delta \zeta \nu \tau \delta \zeta \left[ \tau \delta \varepsilon \right] \zeta \lambda \alpha \zeta \mu \zeta \varepsilon \nu \) etc.) - that is of course why that suggestion was put forward, and merits attention.

Line 3. \( \pi \alpha \pi \alpha \left[ \omega \right] \left[ \varphi \right] \) "having disobeyed" (Bersina: "did not submit") is unlikely, since the grammatical form shows that it refers to the subject of the clause, i.e., the king himself. I have suggested the alternative reading \( \pi \alpha \pi \alpha \left[ \mu \right] \left[ \varphi \right] \) "having conveyed" or "transported" (see Hågg 1984), which goes well with the following \( \delta \pi \o \tau \left[ \chi \right] \) "from the" + a lost noun (or name) in fem.sing. I fail to see the foundation for Bersina's translation "contrary".
Line 4. Bersina may well be right in suggesting that there has been a λ before the notoriously difficult ειαίος (she is certainly right in rejecting Altheim & Stiehl's suggestion); but her proposed restoration (be it [βασι]λείοι (sic) οίς, as in her text, or [(αλβασι)]λείαι οίς, as in her commentary, p. 4) is ungrammatical and her translation ("[King]doms to them") impossible. If οίς is to be read, it is not a personal but a relative pronoun ("to whom"), referring to an antecedent in the masc. or neutr. pl. (while βασιλείαι "kingdoms" is fem.). τάς ὁ[πογεγραμμένας πόλεις], if that bold suggestion by Altheim & Stiehl should be accepted, means "the under-mentioned cities", not "afore-".

Line 5. "The said ones" is Bersina's translation of κλειθέν (for κληθέν), but this participle is in the sing., and it means "called", "named"; Altheim & Stiehl provide parallels. "Heading for" should be "having arrived at".

Line 6. γεννάται, if that should be read (the alternative is γεννάω, "(women) of noble birth"), means "is produced" (passive), or possibly "produces" (middle voice), but hardly "originating from" (followed by an accusative).

Line 10. Bersina's ἔπηλθεν (3rd pers.sing.) is a misprint, taken over from Altheim & Stiehl (1961; but cf. 1962), for ἔπηλθον (1st pers.sing.); the verb probably means "I attacked" rather than "came".

Line 11. Bersina reads, with Altheim & Stiehl (1962), [ταύ]ς ὄμαις οἶκῳ[αίς] and interprets ὄμαиς as = ὄμαις (cf. Altheim & Stiehl 1961) = ὄμετραις, "to your (plur.) homes", adding (p. 6) that this is the only Axumite inscription "containing a direct address", namely, to the defeated people on whose territory the inscribed victory monument was placed. The supposition of a stone-cutter's error, O for Y, though perhaps not a very likely one, might have been admissible if it had produced an acceptable Greek
word; but ὑμός for ὑμέτερος is an old dialect form totally out of place in the present context. J. Bingen (in SEG) suggests another word division: ἵσῳ σοι καὶ [---] to you (sing.)"; but this is hardly satisfactory either (who is this "you" in the sing.?).

Most of Bersina's more specific conclusions about the inscription are based on her attempted new readings, restorations, and interpretations; and with them they fall.

**Bibliography** (in addition to that given in Bersina 1984):


