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St. John the Forerunner in Amisus: A note on a Christian epitaph

Abstract: In the present paper I discuss the possible metric character and literary inspirations of an epitaph from the territory of Amisus. The inscription deserves attention as it is often cited as a model Greek inscription attesting to a burial *ad sanctos*. However, its possible metric nature has never been expressly stated and there is no detailed commentary associated with it so far. In my opinion, the inscription consists of a clumsy hexameter verse followed by a prosaic section inspired by a passage from the Epistle to the Hebrews (Hbr 9,12). The initial hexameter is especially interesting because of the usage of the dactyl, σοί, μάκαρ, which is first attested in Oppian's *Cynegetica*, then in the *Greek Anthology* and in works of several early Christian writers.

Keywords: Amisus; Christian epitaph; St. John the Forerunner; μάκαρ; religious poetry.

In the first decade of the 20th c. Henri Grégoire¹ published a Christian epitaph from the territory of Amisus (modern Samsun) in Helenopontus, which is now in the Musée du Cinquantenaire (Brussels). The monument has attracted considerable attention from scholars² primarily because of the elaborate allusions to a burial *ad sanctos*. The text says that the deceased, a certain Eugraphios, was buried close to or even inside a sanctuary of St. John the Forerunner,³ to whom he had committed his soul:

- † σοί, μάκαρ Πρόδρομε,
 2 ἀνέθησεν ἑαυτὸν
 Εὐγράφιος ἀποφυγὴν πάν-
 4 των ὀδυνηρῶν τὸν πρὸς <σ>ἐ
 τάφον εὐράμενος. TETAI

5. TETAI Guarducci, Cumont: perhaps this dubious sequence of letters should be understood as the second half of the last word in l. 4 τὸν προσ/τεταγ\(\mu\acute{\epsilon}\(vov\) (suggested by Denis Feissel in a letter dated 17.09.2016); the whole phrase would read: ἀποφυγὴν πάντων ὀδυνηρῶν τὸν προσ/τεταγ\(\mu\acute{\epsilon}\(vov\) τάφον εὐράμενος, τετάρ(τω) or τετάρ(τη) Delehay, τε ταί[ε] κ.τ.λ. (?) Cumont who supposed that the text continued on another plaque.

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¹ Grégoire 1909, 4–5, 145; *Studia Pontica* III 1, no. 13.

² Guarducci 1978, 407; BE (1965), 2 (only mentioned); Robert 1959, 23 n. 3 (only mentioned); Halkin 1953, 95 (a brief summary); Jalabert – Mouterde, col. 655; Schultze 1922, p. 163; Cumont 1913, 165–166 (no. 140); Delehay 1911, 335 (a brief summary).

³ Grégoire 1909, 5–6 reports that the sanctuary was located in the so called *Monastiri* – a rock-cut ancient tomb transformed into a Christian place of cult. A survey of the site revealed several pagan burials and subsequent Christian ones. Grégoire adds that a local folk legend associated this place with the cult of St. John the Forerunner.

† *To Thee, O the blessed Forerunner, Eugraphios devoted himself. He found the grave near Thee (?), the refuge from all pains.*⁴ (- -)

In the present paper I would like to emphasize another aspect of the text – its possible poetical character. Despite the fame gained by the monument, no one has ever addressed this possibility. The commentary, included in the *editio princeps* does not refer to this option, other scholars discussing the object have never suggested it either.⁵ The inscription was not reprinted either by Reinhold Merkelbach and Josef Stauber in the relevant section devoted to metric inscriptions from Amisus in the second volume of *Steinepigramme aus dem griechischen Osten*⁶ or by Werner Peek in *Griechische Versinschriften*. Nonetheless, in my opinion, the possible metric character of the inscription is worthy of investigation. The monument seems at least to be an example of a poetic attempt, perhaps unsuccessful.

The most intriguing element of the inscription is its beginning, i.e. the word μάκαρ employed to address the saint. In inscriptions saints normally are simply called ἅγιοι,⁷ while the adjective μάκαρ (or more often μακάριος) was reserved for the common deceased.⁸

Among Anatolian inscriptions there is, however, a single parallel text in which a saint was addressed by the word μάκαρ. It is an inscription from Ephesus that consists of a single hexameter verse which is recorded in the *Greek Anthology*.⁹ It is presumed to have accompanied a picture of St. John the Apostle. The inscription deals with the dedication of war spoils to the saint by the emperor Justinian. The verse reads: σοί, μάκαρ, ἔκ σεο δῶκα τάπερ πόρες ἄμυν ἄρηι (*To Thee, O blessed one, from Thee, I give the spoils Thou gavest me in war* – transl. W. R. Paton). The similarity of these texts is striking: both begin in the same way, with an expression σοί, μάκαρ, in both the phrase addresses a saint, and in both the name of the saint is John (though the identities of these Johns differ).

Unfortunately, the phrase σοί, μάκαρ is lacking in the dossier of other Christian inscriptions from Anatolia,¹⁰ but the literary sources provide an interesting background for a more complex interpretation. The

⁴ The author of the inscription calls the tomb located in the vicinity of the sanctuary, ἀποφυγή πάντων ὀδυνηρῶν. Grégoire 1909, 5 claims that this expression means that Eugraphios sought protection from damnation after his death (“une garantie contre les souffrances de l’autre monde”). In my opinion, it is more likely that the phrase refers to the material world as a place of suffering, that the deceased had escaped, which is also consistent with the phrasing of Roman epitaphs.

⁵ Louis Robert cites the inscription in his review of the first volume of Peek’s GV in *Gnomon* (Robert 1959, 23 n. 3). However, he points to the inscription only as an example of an epitaph attesting to a burial close to a sanctuary of St. John the Forerunner, saying no word about its possible metric character.

⁶ SGO, vol. 2, 347–352. The chapter includes seven metric inscriptions numbered 11/02/01–06 and 11/02/99.

⁷ See Meimaris 1986, 15–18.

⁸ Anne Sartre-Furiat, while discussing some newer epigraphic evidence for the cult of saints in Arabia, stresses that this epithet was not used to address saints. She also remarks that every common deceased could be called μάκαρ or μακάριος. In her opinion these terms should be translated *beatus* and mean that the deceased has entered the Kingdom of God (Sartre-Fauriat 2000, 297–298). Even the form μάκαρ alone can point to the metric character of a text. Sartre-Fauriat points out that although the deceased could be called μάκαρ or μακάριος interchangeably, the usage of the first word is restricted to metric epitaphs (Sartre-Fauriat 2000, 297–298), see: IGLS XVI/1, 344 (Suweida): ὕπνος ἔχει σε, μάκαρ, πολήρατε, διὲ Σαβίνε κ.τ.λ. (*Thou hast fallen asleep, O the blessed one, the much-loved, excellent Sabinos*); IGLS XVI/2, no. 893 (Bousan): χαίρε, μάκαρ Βαναθε, σὺν ἱεροῖς τέκνοις κ.τ.λ. (*Hail, O blessed Vanathos with Thy esteemed children*).

⁹ Anth. Gr. I, no. 95 = I. von Ephesos, no. 1354/4.

¹⁰ It is debatable whether or not a dedicatory inscription for Theos Hypsistos found in Termessus in Pisidia (TAM III 1, no. 33) was erected by a Christian. Its last preserved line reads: ἔτευξα σοί, μάκαρ, εὐξάμενος (*I had it built for you as a vow, O the blessed one*). However, the phrase does occur in two Christian building inscriptions from Corfu, the first is dated to 363: IG IX 1, no. 721: (...) σοί, μά<κα>ρ ὑψιμέδον, τόνδ’ ἱερὸν ἔκτισα νηὸν... (*To thee, O the blessed one ruler on high, I had this sanctuary constructed*); IG IX 1, no. 1032: σοί, μά<κα>ρ ὑψιμέδον. They are both verse inscriptions.

phrase σοί, μάκαρ is a perfect dactyl, which has a good poetic tradition. It was used by both pagan and Christian authors. An examination of the works of Christian poets, especially those who came from Anatolia and reflect the intellectual background common for the author of our inscription, shows that Gregory of Nazianzus uses similar expressions several times in his *Carmina de se ipso* in the middle of the 4th c. In two cases¹¹ the form is exactly the same as the phrase from Amisus. The first example comes from *Carmen* II.1.1, v. 110 (PG 37, col. 978): σοί, μάκαρ, ἡδὲ νόμοισι τεοῖς κεχαρισμένα ῥέζειν, (*To Thee, O blessed one, and according to Thy laws one should perform the blessed rites*). The second is from *Carmen* II.1.30, v. 19: (PG 37, col. 1291): καὶ σοί, μάκαρ, πλείστη χάρις / καλῆς ἀτιμίας (*And to Thee, O blessed one, is due the whole grace of beauty dishonour*).

Gregory is the closest Christian literary parallel to the studied text but another Anatolian Christian poet, Methodius, bishop of Olympus in Lycia, who lived a generation earlier than Gregory (Methodius died in 311), also utilised the discussed phrase in his works. The passage in question comes from the *Logos* XI of his *Symposium, or on Virginity* and reads: ἔκραζέ σοι, μάκαρ (*He cried out to Thee, O Blessed One* – transl. H. Musurillo). This time the expression σοί, μάκαρ is, however, used in the last line of one of 24 stanzas, which are not written in hexameter but in iambs.¹² Therefore, links to the poem from Amisus are less probable.

Investigation of the pagan evidence is equally interesting. The earliest attested occurrence of the phrase σοί, μάκαρ is in the first line of the first book of *Cynegetica* written by an early 3rd c. author, Oppian of Apamea. He addresses the emperor Caracalla in the following manner: σοί, μάκαρ, αἰδέω, γαίης ἐρικυδέος ἔρεισμα (*To Thee, blessed one, I sing: Thou glorious bulwark of the earth* – transl. A. W. Mair). A phrase used at the very beginning of a large work and in a verse patterned after the first verse of the *Iliad* could be much more easily memorised than if it occurred somewhere inside the text. Thus, even if Oppian was not the actual inventor of this dactyl, his work certainly contributed to its dissemination.

Another poem from *The Greek Anthology* (VI 167) is also important to the discussion of the pagan evidence. The work was written by Agathias in the middle of the 6th c., its content is purely pagan. The first two lines read: σοί, μάκαρ αἰγίκναμε, παράκτιον ἐς περιωπὴν / τὸν τράγον, ὃ δισσᾶς ἀγέτα θηροσύνας (*Thine, [O blessed] goat-legged god, for Thy watch-tower by the sea, is the goat, Thou who presidest over both kinds of sport* – transl. W. R. Paton, lightly modified). The whole epigram is written in elegiac couplets. The phrase σοί, μάκαρ occurs in the first verse and therefore, belongs to the hexameter.

The same dactyl also leads a pagan dedicatory inscription commemorating the offering of an altar to Apollon.¹³ It was found in Yarziköy in Bithynia. Only its first half is metric:

σοί, μάκαρ | Ἀπολλων, | Κορνηλιανὸς | θέτο βωμὸν /
ὕπερ ἑαυτοῦ | καὶ τῆς γυνεκός μου | Αὐρ(ηλίας) Ἀπολαύστης | καὶ τῶν ἐμῶν | πάντων.

To Thee, o blessed Apollon, Kornelios set up this altar.
A vow for myself, for my wife Aurelia Apolauste and all members of my household.

¹¹ The number of modified, but similar expressions, is much greater. For example, in *Carmen* 46 Gregory uses a slightly different construction (*Carmen* II.1.46, v. 49; PG 37, col. 1381): σεῖο, μάκαρ, τάδε δῶρα, βροτῶν φάος (*Thy gifts, O the blessed one, are the light of mortals*). Its wording parallels that of the previously quoted epigram from the *Greek Anthology*: σοί, μάκαρ, ἔκ σεο δῶρα τάπερ πόρες ἄμυν ἄρηι.

¹² The poem is an abecedarian hymn sung by St. Thecla. The actual metrical pattern remains disputable. Musurillo supposed that Methodius composed music for this hymn, which could, at least partially, explain the lack of metrical uniformity, see: Musurillo 1958, pp. 236–237.

¹³ TAM IV 1, no. 47.

In summary, the poetic character of the introductory invocation σοί, μάκαρ is obvious. It seems that it evolved from a greeting addressing a pagan emperor, to an expression suitable to address Christ and his saints.

The above evidence proves that there is at least one strong indication of poetic inspiration in the discussed inscription from Amisus. Now, we can examine other aspects of the inscription. Immediately after the phrase σοί, μάκαρ follows the *epiclesis* Πρόδρομος in the vocative. The usage of this by-name is unusual.¹⁴ In other inscriptions from Asia Minor (invocations and boundary stones) John the Baptist is, normally, called *Ioannes* or *Baptistes*.¹⁵ It may be that the word Πρόδρομος was chosen because it also is a dactyl. Nevertheless, its position in the text is inconvenient. The two consonants at the beginning of the word (πρ) cause the undesirable lengthening of the final α in μάκαρ.

Recognition of the metre in subsequent sections is even more difficult. Though the phrase ἀνέθησεν ἑαυτόν¹⁶ can be read as the conclusion of a hexameter verse, it does not fit the preceding words and together they do not form a correct verse. An attempt to elide the ε in the phrase Πρόδρομε, ἀνέθησεν does not help either.

In spite of these problems, the beginning of the inscription from Amisus still seems to be at least an attempt to create a hexameter verse of very poor quality. It may have been written by someone¹⁷ who, inspired by poetic phrases learned at school or read from Christian religious poetry, was unable to join them correctly. The author simply put together a couple of dactyls and hoped it would work. A large empty space at the end of l. 2 which separates the first two lines from the rest of the text is yet another indication that the first two lines are meant to be a hexameter verse. It appears that the author deliberately sets the whole phrase, σοί, μάκαρ Πρόδρομε, ἀνέθησεν ἑαυτόν, apart from the rest of the

¹⁴ See: Meimaris 1986, 100–102. St. John used to be called with two by-names: the Baptist (Βαπτιστής) and the Forerunner (Πρόδρομος – this word itself has a good classical tradition, being attested, for example, in Hdt IV 121; IX 14). Although these by-names could be used interchangeably or could occur together in other kinds of sources, St. John is never called the Forerunner in any other Anatolian inscription (see n. 16 below).

¹⁵ 1) Naxos, Kiourtzian 2000, no. 42 (only *Ioannes*), 2) Sardis, Greenewalt 1998, 486: βοείθε τὸς ξένους ἅγιε Ἰωάννη Βα(πτιστᾶ), 3) Beşagil (Cana), MAMA XI, no. 357: + ὅροι τοῦ | ἁγίου καὶ | ἐνδόξου | Ἰωά[ν]ο[υ] τ[οῦ] | Βαπ[τιστοῦ], 4) Tchandir Yaila (to the east of Cana), Calder 1912, 264: [+] δύναμις θε(εο)ῦ καὶ χὶρ | βασιλέως | ὅροι τοῦ ἁγ[ίου] Ἰωάννου | τοῦ Βαπτισ[τοῦ], ἀμὴν, 5) Dereköy (area of Comana Pontica), Le Guen-Pollet 1989, 523–525, ll. 1–4: ὅροι ἀσυλίας τοῦ | εὐαγοῦς μοναστηρίου | τοῦ ἁγίου Ἰωάννου | τοῦ Βαπτιστοῦ, 6) İftyan (area of Tyana), I. Tyana, no. 105, l. 5: ἐγγύθι Βαπτιστοῖο.

¹⁶ Interestingly, ἀνέθησεν is not a correct form of the verb ἀνατίθημι. It is also a *hapax legomenon*. Perhaps the form is based on the aorist form ἀνέθεσαν (3rd person plural). Brixhe 1984 does not mention the form ἀνέθησεν but on pp. 85–87 he discusses the process of “regularisation” of verbs ending with -μι. Conjugation of these verbs was simplified, which led to the creation of similar forms in modern Greek as, for example, θέτω instead of τίθημι or δίδω instead of δίδωμι. 3rd person singular aorist forms of such verbs are: ἔθεσε, ἔδωσε, which is very close to our ἀνέθησε(ν).

¹⁷ We know nothing about the deceased, but Eugraphios (and Eugraphia) is a rather rare name characteristic of late antique Lycaonia, Pamphilia, and Caria. It occurs only 11 times in the PHI Database and 3 times in the Trismegistos Database; twice in PCBE 3 (one person from Lycaonia and one from Pisidia); twice in PLRE (a man and a woman), and twice in LGPN (our Eugraphios is recorded in vol. VA; in vol. II there is a person who bears this name who comes from Athens). One can notice that people from literate families were more likely to give this name to their children. For example, the name was borne by a *didascalus* from Posala in Lycaonia (MAMA VIII, no. 210), a presbyter of the *Apotactites* from the area of Laodicea Combusta in Pisidia (MAMA I, no. 173), and a priest of “the immortal God” from the area of Gdanmaua in Lycaonia (MAMA XI, no. 211 = SGO, no. 14/02/13; this inscription is written in hexameter verse). The editors of MAMA XI comment: “The names Eulalios and Eugraphios seem to be exclusively Christian,” but there are two pagan dedications to Imhotep, called Asclepius, and to Amenhotep made by a certain Eugraphios, found in Egypt in Deir El-Bahari, see: Bataille 1951, nos. 86 and 120 = Łajtar 2006, nos. 129 and 197 (Bataille considers the form Eugraphios as a genitive of the name Eugraphis but Łajtar opts for the nominative case).

text, which is written in prose. The habit of composing inscriptions of mixed poetic and prosaic phrases is not uncommon in late antique Asia Minor. For example, an inscription from Ancyra commemorating the embellishment of a *martyrion* (probably of St. Theodotus)¹⁸ consists of a single hexameter verse and the name of the founder in prose. The epitaph of a Novatianist martyr,¹⁹ found in Bash Hüyük in the area of Laodicea Combusta, begins with a prosaic introduction followed by several verses, which could have been drawn from a Novatianist hymn. Although not Christian, the previously mentioned dedicatory inscription to Apollon from Yarziköy in Bitynia, is, likewise, an example of a mixture of poetry and prose.

The presumably prosaic second part of the epitaph from Amisus does not lack interesting literary connotations either. In my opinion, it was based on a reshaped quotation from the Epistle to the Hebrews. Indeed the similarities between the texts are striking:

Epitaph: ἀποφυγὴν πάντων ὀδυνηρῶν (...) εὐράμενος
he found (...) the refuge from all pains

Hbr 9,12: αἰωνίαν λύτρωσιν εὐράμενος
he found eternal redemption

Both passages deal with acquiring the salvation and both include a very rare participle εὐράμενος²⁰ placed in the same position – at the end of the sentence. Moreover, in the Epistle the cited phrase is pre-preceded by the expression εἰσῆλθεν ἐφάπαξ εἰς τὰ ἅγια (*he entered the holy place once for all*) and in the epitaph there is a corresponding content in the presumed hexameter verse: σοὶ, μάκαρ Πρόδρομε, ἀνέθησεν ἑαυτὸν. In other words the author of the letter says that Christ entered the holy place and he opened the way of salvation for his followers and likewise the deceased from Amisus says in the text of the epitaph that he entered the sacred space next to the saint's grave and found there the relief of all pains. The passages concern so similar issues and the structure of both sentences is so similar that one can hardly negate the influence of also the Biblical passage on the author of the epitaph.

Abbreviated Literature²¹

Bataille 1951	A. Bataille (ed.), Les inscriptions grecques du temple de Hatshepsout à Deir El-Bahari, Cairo 1951.
Boudreaux 1908	P. Boudreaux (ed.), Ὀπτιανοῦ Κυνηγετικά, Paris 1908.
Brixhe 1984	C. Brixhe, Essai sur le Grec Anatolien au début de notre ère, Nancy 1984.
Calder 1912	W.M. Calder, Julia-Ipsus and Augustopolis, JRS 2, 1912, 237–266.
Cumont 1913	F. Cumont, Musées royaux du Cinquantenaire. Catalogue des sculptures et inscriptions antiques, Brussels 1913.
Delehay 1911	H. Delehay, Bulletin des publications hagiographiques, Analecta Bollandiana 30, 1911, 321–392.
Greenewalt 1998	C.H. Greenewalt – M.L. Rautman, The Sardis campaigns of 1994 and 1995, AJA 102, 1998, 469–505.
Grégoire 1909	H. Grégoire, Rapport sur un voyage d'exploration dans le Pont et en

¹⁸ SGO, no. 15/02/10 = RECAM II, no. 211.

¹⁹ SGO, no 14/06/05.

²⁰ This form occurs only once in the New Testament, precisely in the cited passage from the Epistle to the Hebrews. Interestingly, the participle εὐράμενος rhymes with the name Εὐγράφιος. Perhaps this is not a mere coincidence, but a deliberate poetic construction called *parallelismus membrorum*. It was pretty popular in Jewish and then, later, in Christian poetry. In Anatolia it is probably used in the epitaph of *prophetissa* Nanas that was found in the area of Cotyaeum (SGO, no. 16/41/15). Relevant passages read: εὐχῆς καὶ λιτανίης (...) ὕμνοις καὶ κολακίης (...) εὐχομένη πανήμερον | παννύχιον θεοῦ φόβον κ.τ.λ. See Poirier 2004.

²¹ Standard editions of literary sources and epigraphic corpora are omitted.

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Özet

Amisos'ta Müjdecî Aziz Yuhanna. Bir Hıristiyan Mezar Yazıtı Üzerine Not

Bu makalede, Amisos teritoryumundan bir mezar yazıtının olası metrik karakteri ve edebi ilhamları tartışılmaktadır. *Ad sanctos* bir gömüyü gösteren örnek bir Yunanca yazıt olarak sıkça atıfta bulunulmasından dolayı yazıt ilgiyi hak etmektedir. Buna rağmen, yazıtın metrik yapısı bugüne kadar açık bir şekilde hiçbir yerde belirtilmemiş ve onunla ilişkili olarak detaylı bir yorum yapılmamıştır. Yazarın düşüncesine göre, yazıt bozuk bir heksameton vezin ve İbranilere Mektup'taki (Hbr 9,12) bir pasajdan esinlenmiş tekdüze bir bölümden oluşmaktadır. Birinci heksameton, ilk olarak Oppian'ın *Cynegetica*'sında, daha sonra ise Yunan Antolojisi'nde ve çeşitli erken dönem Hıristiyan yazarlarının eserlerinde belirlenen σοί, μάκαρ daktil kullanımı dolayısıyla özellikle ilginçtir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Amisos; Hıristiyan Mezar Yazıtı; Müjdecî Aziz Yuhanna; μάκαρ; Dini Şiir.