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DILETTA MINUTOLI

ANOTHER SO-CALLED 'BOUS' AMULET

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ANOTHER SO-CALLED 'BOUS' AMULET¹

A new so-called 'Bous' amulet has been fortuitously found among the ruins of the ancient city of Antinopolis². It was a chance discovery, not connected with the activity of the excavations carried out by the Papyrological Institute «G. Vitelli» from 1935/36 to the present, but well localized and also 'miraculous', considering the dimensions of the object (cm 1.6 × 0.6) and the 5 km² of ruins and rubble at the site.

This kind of amulet, made usually in wood or bone, has been extensively studied during the last ten years, thanks in part to the edition of new finds which fall into this category of objects. This latest amulet is a novelty: not for the material (again wood), nor for the 'Bous'-formula (pretty typical), but for its unusual shape, an octagonal prism. Four of the eight faces, associated with the longest edges, bear the inscriptions; alternating between these, the other four faces are narrower and uninscribed. The amulet was pierced through its middle longitudinally³ so that it could be worn; the piercing is a typical feature of amulets of the same typology (hole ø: cm 0.3).

The only one amulet comparable to ours in formula and shape is SEG XXXIV 1625 (= TM 105021)⁴, a wooden parallelepiped with a handle attached to the middle of one side. This parallel bears its words «on the four longitudinal sides», but with the letters written underneath each other (vertically) and not one after the other (horizontally), as in our case. This means that in SEG XXXIV 1625, when the amulet is suspended, the position of the letters is not correct, but turned 90° to the right; instead, when ours is suspended, the position of the letters is correct.

Typically these amulets are flat, with a hole (or holes) or a small handle on the upper part and writing on one or both of the faces⁵.

G. Nachtergaele (Un amulette cit., pp. 93–101) provided the initial list of these objects. He divided the so-called 'Bous' amulets into three groups based on their formulae. Our find belongs to his first group, which comprises amulets which present only a sort of 'declension' of the Greek name (pp. 97–98).

In most of these amulets – but not in ours – there is a cross, which led Nachtergaele (Un amulette cit., p. 97) to conclude, «Toutes sont probablement chrétiennes, quand bien même quelques-unes omettent la croix initiale».

For an explanation linking 'Bous' to the decan/decan god Bos, see W. Brashear, *Lese Früchte*, *ZPE* 50 (1983), pp. 97–107, in part. pp. 101–102 (accepted, in a first moment, by G. Nachtergaele, *Quelques étiquettes de momies et une amulette chrétienne d'Égypte*, in R. De Smet – H. Melaerts – C. Saerens, *Studia varia Bruxellensia ad orbem Graeco-Latinum pertinentia*, IV, *In honorem Aloysi Gerlo*, Leuven 1997, in part. p. 203). An explanation excluding a connection with the decan and instead proposing a link with "babbling charms" was made by C. Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets, Chiefly Graeco-Egyptian*, Ann Arbor 1950,

¹ I want to thank the Director of the Excavation in Antinopolis, R. Pintaudi, for allowing me to publish this find in the present journal. The amulet was recovered on 28th November 2016. My special thanks to Todd Hickey for reviewing my English.

² G. Menci (Un amuleto "Bous" da Antinoe, *ZPE* 159, 2007, pp. 249–252) published an amulet of the same typology (but with the usual wooden slab shape) that surely comes from Antinopolis and is at present exhibited in the Museum of the Papyrological Institute «G. Vitelli» in Florence. In view of the similarity of the hand-writing and the formula of the Florentine amulet to those of two specimens published by G. Nachtergaele, *Un amulette chrétienne du Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon*, *Ricerche di Egittologia e di Antichità Copte* 4 (2002), pp. 93–101 (one amulet is stored in Dijon [pp. 93–94], the other appears in a sale catalogue [see p. 97, no. 9]), G. Menci asserts that «la sicura provenienza antinoita di questo reperto non può non essere estesa agli altri due amuleti» (Menci, *Un amuleto cit.*, p. 250). Thus, of 14 known amulets, 4 could come from Antinopolis.

³ This way of suspension, so different from the holes or the handles, allows to wear the amulet, not only in a necklace, like a pendant, but also in a bracelet (or an anklet?). Moreover this form makes possible the union of more than one amulet of the same shape, even with different 'cases' of the βουζ-formula or other words.

⁴ The text was published by P. J. Sijpesteijn, *Another ΒΟΥΣ Amulet*, *ZPE* 55 (1984), p. 114, pl. II g–h.

⁵ For a link between the text and the kind of material used and the suspension system (hole or handle), see Menci, *Un amuleto cit.*, p. 251.



p. 68 (see also Nachtergaele, *Un amulette cit.*, p. 98). For a third suggestion, which connects the amulets with βύας or βουβών (from Latin *bubo*), ‘owl’, bird of the dark, see Menci, *Un amuleto cit.*, p. 252. In any case, it is clear that the purpose of this kind of object was to protect the wearer (τὸν φοροῦντα), as is usual in magical texts.

Th. J. Kraus has published the most recent list of the amulets (which numbered 12 in 2008)⁶. To this may be added the amulet published here and a wooden one in slab form published by A. Delattre and K. Worp, *Trois tablettes de bois du Musée de Leyde, CdÉ LXXXVII/174* (2012), pp. 361–382, in part. 2. La formule Βους, le Psaume 90 et des textes épistolaires, pp. 363–370, with *l’Annexe 2. Une nouvelle amulette Bous*, pp. 377–378.

⁶ Th. Kraus, Βους, Βαινχῶωχ und Septuaginta-Psalm 90? Überlegungen zu den sogenannten ‚Bous‘-Amuletten und dem beliebtesten Bibeltext für apotropäische Zwecke, *ZAC* 11 (2008), pp. 479–491. In addition to analyzing the ‘Bous’-formulae, Kraus classifies and divides amulets in groups, also in reason of the association between the ‘declension’ of βους respectively with the word βαινχῶωχ and with the first verse of Psalm 90. To the list given by Nachtergaele, Kraus adds the wooden amulet published by G. Menci, as well as a bone amulet from Italy (IG XIV 2414, 123) quoted by her (p. 251). Kraus also reconsiders the various attempts to explain the origin of word βους.

For dating purposes, the writing of our amulet is not useful, but in view of the find's archaeological context and Nachtergaeel's assertion that the amulets «forment un ensemble homogène approximativement datable des VI^e et VII^e siècles» (Un amulette cit., p. 97), we can suggest that it comes from the same period. The round shape of the letters (the lower part of β differs from the parallels, in which it is written with a perfectly horizontal stroke; note also the curves of ω, as well as υ, which looks like v in the parallels) leads me to exclude the VIII cen.

The following is a transcription of the four different forms of the word, in the order in which they appear from bottom to top (running clockwise).

βουϷ
 βουη
 βουου
 βουω

The 'cases', which appear to be a sort of 'declension' in which the sound becomes darker through the progression, are never identical in the different amulets. More typically the formula deploys forms with *alpha* (Βουα, Βουαι, ΒουαϷ and variants of the diphthong ου), but a formula closer to ours appears in the aforementioned SEG XXXIV 1625: βουϷ | Βουη | Βουω (ο Βουε) | Β(ο)η⁷.

For an attempt to explain the origin of the 'cases', see G. Menci, Un amuleto cit., p. 252.

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⁷ Menci (Un amuleto cit., p. 251, nt. 15) supposed that the handle between *beta* and *eta* could represent *omicron*.