#articleTitle

**An Inscription from the Reign of Probus in the Isis Temple at Berenike**

#author

Rodney Ast

#affiliation

Heidelberg University

#email

[ast@uni-heidelberg.de](mailto:ast@uni-heidelberg.de)

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| --- | --- |
| Find no. | BE-15/18/22 111.999.001 |
| Inventory no. | inv. 111016 |
| Dimensions: height | 72 cm |
| Dimensions: width | 83 cm |
| Dimensions: thickness | 9 cm |
| Material | anhydritic gypsum |
| Inventory Number | CBL 142.2 |
| Date | AD 276–281, November 17/18 |
| Inscription identified | 26.01.2022 |

#Introduction

The stele published here was first excavated, albeit partially, in 2015 in the forecourt of the Isis temple at the port of Berenike on Egypt’s Red Sea coast.[[1]](#footnote-1) It lay under a pile of large stones heaped near the northwest corner of the temple courtyard. The inscribed side was not exposed until January 2022 after a large roof block had been removed.

The stele, which measures 83 × 72 × 9 cm, is made from the anhydritic gypsum stone commonly used in Berenike for buildings, statues, inscriptions, etc.[[2]](#footnote-2) It originated on Ras Banas, the peninsula that stretches north and east of the port across from Foul Bay.[[3]](#footnote-3) Broken at the top and on the left side, the dedication comprises at least five lines. Clearly incised guidelines cut at intervals of about 3cm give it an unfinished appearance. While such guidelines are apparent in other inscriptions from the site,[[4]](#footnote-4) these are much more pronounced. The surface of the stone is now very damaged, and decipherment is seriously impeded by flaking, but it has been possible to read most of the extant text with the help of Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI), which was performed by Kamila Braulińska.[[5]](#footnote-5) A novelty of this edition is that it is accompanied by this imaging, which is presented in an RTI Web viewer.

The lettering of the inscription is largely bilinear with individual letters measuring 2.6–3.0 cm in height. Omicron poses an exception: In several places it is incised so small that it resembles an exaggerated medial dot (cf. the second omicron in Πρόβου in line 3 and that in κυρίου in line 4). Following Σεβαστοῦ at the end of the regnal formula in line 4 is a punctuation mark shaped like an angular bracket (>). A large ivy leaf (*hedera*) is visible after the month and day, Ἁθὺρ κα, in the last line. Whether another leaf was inscribed before the month name is difficult to say (see comm. ad loc.).

The physical format of the stele finds parallels in other third-century dedications from Berenike. The stones are in the shape of thin slabs, not the large dedication bases intended to support monumental statues that were typical of the first and early second centuries, although this type is also found albeit in smaller format.[[6]](#footnote-6) The slabs are too slender to have been self-standing. They must have leaned against a wall or other stable vertical surface. Other examples of this format are found in two Greek dedicatory stelai, one from the joint reign of Gallus and Volusianus (April 17, 253), 58 × 74 × 20 cm, and another from the reign of Septimius Severus (September 7, 210), 70 × 73 × 13 cm.[[7]](#footnote-7) The Brahmi Sanskrit-Greek stele from sixth year of Philip the Arab (September 9, 248), 55 × 83 × 17.5 cm, is also of the slab type.[[8]](#footnote-8) Like the inscription edited here, the Sanskrit stele features a large blank space at the bottom that might have served as a backdrop to a votive offering or have been decorated in paint or some other medium that has since faded from view.

The present inscription is a private dedication of an individual whose name is no longer preserved. All that remains of the part identifying this person are the letters -ων at the beginning of line 2. The dedicatee’s name is also no longer extant, but it was likely either Isis or Sarapis, the two most common recipients of dedications in the temple. The dedicant made the offering as an expression of piety (εὐσεβείας χάριν, ll. 2–3). The same reason is given for two other dedications from Berenike, one for Isis and one for Sarapis.[[9]](#footnote-9)

All that can clearly be associated with a date, besides the month and day, is the expression Πρόβου τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Σεβαστοῦ in line 3–4. This formulation is unprecedented in papyri and inscriptions and is not part of any standard regnal clause. The closest regnal formula found is the common ὁ κύριος ἡμῶν Πρόβος Σεβαστός.[[10]](#footnote-10) This raises the question whether the clause belongs syntactically to the main part of the dedication. To answer this is difficult, because there is a gap in front of Πρόβου that has resisted interpretation. In it, the upper and lower guidelines are very clear; each consists of doubled lines, as in a few other spots on the stone. But, besides that, there are only some faint vertical strokes and a single, short horizontal slash. If the clause referring to Probus were a regnal formula, one would expect the year to have been carved before it, but the strokes do not immediately suggest the symbol for year (ἔτους). If it is not the regnal formula, then there would be no necessity for a year here, and, in fact, the year seems to have been written at the beginning of line 5 (see comm. ad loc.). We might then consider two possibilities: either that there was an empty space or that a word such as ὑπέρ was carved. The vertical strokes and horizontal bar would be consistent with this word, which would fit this space. The only other inscription from Egypt dated in the reign of Probus has ὁ κύριος Πρόβος ([SEG 40](https://papyri.info/biblio/13310) 1565; Kharga Oasis).

Moreover, there is no trace of the symbol for ἔτους. The vertical lines referred to above could be from the letter M, perhaps an abbreviation for Μάρκου but the abbreviated form Αὐρ(ηλίου), which one would then expect, is in no way visible.

The precise year of the Berenike dedication is unclear; one expects to find it in front of the regnal formula in line 3, but there is little or no trace of it there (see comm. ad l. 3). It was possibly postponed until line 5, where there are remains of what might be part of the symbol for the word ἔτους and a number (see comm. ad l. 5).

The dedication is from a period of significant uncertainty in both Berenike and the wider Eastern Desert. Prior to excavations in the Isis temple, the third century was thought to be very poorly represented at the port, with only one inscription bearing a third-century date.[[11]](#footnote-11) Now, the third century is the second best-attested century in precisely dated documents from Berenike: In total, eight third-century dedications have been registered. Four of them are from the first decade (years 209 and 210) and one is from the year 215;[[12]](#footnote-12) the Sanskrit-Greek stele and dedication from the reign of Gallus and Volusianus mentioned above date to 248 and 253, respectively; the inscription published here is from the period 276–281. The very latest inscription from the temple dates to the Tetrarchy (305). This evidence naturally changes our perspective on the period, and there can be no doubt that the port was operating throughout the third century, even if intermittently and at a smaller scale than in the first and early second centuries.

The principal reason for believing that the third century was a stagnant time in Berenike has been the absence not only of dated texts, but also of coins and ceramics.[[13]](#footnote-13) As far as coins are concerned, what H. Cuvigny and K. Lach-Urgacz say about the *praesidia* of the Eastern Desert could equally apply to Berenike as well: “the absence of 3rd c. coins is easily explained by the fact that in this period almost only billon tetradrachms were minted, a denomination which people were careful not to lose, while the State relied on old bronze coins of previous reigns to serve in daily exchanges.”[[14]](#footnote-14) In the case of ceramics, very few third-century *loci* have been identified, but third century ostraca and dipinti have been documented among residual small finds. For example, in the area just outside the door leading from the Isis temple courtyard to the north, a costrel from the second half of the second or the third century was found alongside a third-century ostracon that seems to mention Palmyrene archers.[[15]](#footnote-15) Thus, given the irrefutable presence of third century material, it is tempting to suppose that either the third-century contexts (*loci*) simply await excavation still or they have not been properly identified in previous seasons, or both.[[16]](#footnote-16)

A significant body of third century material, including dated texts, has been documented also in the forts along the road that connected Berenike to the city of Coptos, which was the principal emporium in the Nile valley for goods passing through Berenike from the East on their way to Alexandria. This evidence includes ostraca found in the last occupation layers of the fort of Xeron Pelagos, which are dated to 264 and overlap with the latest ostraca from Didymoi. J.-P. Brun has concluded from this material that the forts were abandoned sometime around 270. In his view, this corresponded with the removal of the Palmyrene archers from the area following Zenobia’s capture of Egypt in 270.[[17]](#footnote-17) The Probus inscription and the dedication from the reign of the Tetrarchy prove that there was activity at Berenike during and after this time. This forces us to consider pushing the date of the abandonment of the forts somewhat later. The shipments arriving in Berenike were likely still being transported to Coptos so that there must have been at least some infrastructure to serve the caravans along the Coptos–Berenike road.[[18]](#footnote-18)

It is unclear who was residing in Berenike in the late third century. It was a politically tumultuous time in Upper Egypt, with Coptos being a flash point for hostilities. Probus (ca. 280), Galerius (293/94) and Diocletian (297/98) all took measures to deal with unrest fomented by rebels, especially by the semi-nomadic tribe of Blemmyes.[[19]](#footnote-19) Coptos’s status as a center of trade with the East was surely an important reason for imperial intervention, and this status depended too on smooth operations in Berenike. In fact, I would go so far as to assert that still in the late third century Berenike was directly affected by major events in Coptos. Unfortunately, the inscription edited here does not shed any direct light on the situation. One might assume from the use of the regnal formula for Probus that, at the time of its carving at least, imperial structures were still functioning at the port or that there was at least some degree of civic-mindedness.[[20]](#footnote-20) But even supposing a very different scenario, for example, that the Blemmyes had seized both Coptos and Berenike, we should not presume that they would have abandoned Roman imperial regnal formulas to date dedications.[[21]](#footnote-21) On the other hand, the inscription could postdate Probus’s intervention and thus reflect a situation in which the imperial administration had reasserted itself. A further possibility is that our sources have exaggerated the discord in Coptos,[[22]](#footnote-22) and trade channels had not been disrupted in any meaningful way. Without additional evidence, we cannot say who was organizing trade in Berenike in the time of Probus or how regional politics were affecting the port.

It should be noted that the abandonment of the Roman-built forts did not spell the end of Berenike or other settlements in the desert.[[23]](#footnote-23) Although there is very little written evidence from after the third century,[[24]](#footnote-24) ceramics and other finds from the mid-fourth through the fifth century have suggested a significant renewal in activity at the site.[[25]](#footnote-25) The Blemmyes seem to have played a large part in this, but what networks they used and how they organized trade is a subject that deserves further attention.

#text

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1. lost.?lin

1. [.?] .4 [.?]

2. [ca.3] .2ων̣ ἀνέθηκεν εὐσ̣[εβ]ε̣ία[ς]

3. [χ]ά̣ριν̣ ἐπ᾿ ἀγαθọῖ̣ς̣ [ca.4] Πρόβο̣[υ]

4. τ̣οῦ κ̣υρίου ἡμῶν Σεβαστοῦ > \*filler(extension)\*

5. [.?] .3 Ἁθὺρ κα  \*hedera\*

=>

#translation

“… set this up as an expression of piety for the benefits … of Probus our lord Augustus…Hathyr 21 (hedera).”

#commentary

2 On autopsy, the reading [ ca. 3 ]α̣ρ̣ων̣ seemed plausible, but not firm enough to warrant being printed in the text.

The letters EY are easily read. Upsilon is followed by a vertical stroke connected to a horizontal hasta on top that sticks out to the right; this could be the top of either Σ or Π. At the end of the line is Ι and part of Α. While εὐπλοίας could fit these traces, it would require much less space than is present on the stone. Moreover, part of Ε can probably discerned before Ι. Thus, the reading εὐσεβείας is to be preferred.

3 There is empty space large enough for a single character between [χ]ά̣ριν̣ and ἐπ᾿. While blank space may have marked a *vacat*, it is also possible that a punctation mark stood there.

It is unclear if anything was incised between ἀγαθοῖς and Πρόβου. The upper and lower guidelines are very clear; each consists of doubled lines, as in a few other spots on the stone. Otherwise, there are some faint vertical strokes and a single, short horizontal slash. One expects the year to have been carved before the regnal formula, but here it might have been inscribed at the beginning of line 5. Moreover, there is no trace of the symbol for ἔτους. The vertical lines referred to above could be from the letter M, perhaps an abbreviation for Μάρκου but the abbreviated form Αὐρ(ηλίου), which one would then expect, is in no way visible.

5 There are clear remnants of incisions before the month name. Since the regnal formula certainly ended in the previous line, the writing cannot belong to that. One possibility is that ἐπ᾿ ἀγαθῷ was carved at the beginning of the line, but there are two problems with that interpretation: 1) it does not account for the tips of two diagonal lines (//) visible just to the right of the large lacuna; 2) it is hard to fit ω between what *could*  be Θ and the round sign before alpha in Ἁθύρ. Another possibility is that the visible lines are from two slanting strokes that followed an L-shaped ἔτους symbol (L//) and a Δ (not a Θ). On this interpretation, the round sign before the alpha would then be part of another *hedera*. If this is correct, then the date of the inscription will have been 17 November 278.

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1. This article is part of a larger project to document inscriptions from the port of Berenike, most of which have been found in recent years in the central Isis temple. For information about the Isis Temple project, see \*\*\*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. When dimensions are given in this article, the measurements are always in the order of width × height × thickness. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. J.A. Harrell gives a detailed analysis of the local gypsum stone in [Sidebotham et al. 2021](https://papyri.info/biblio/95969): 21–22. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Of the published inscriptions that show guidelines I can point to a dedication commissioned by Epaphroditus, the freedman of the merchant Marcus Laelius Cosmus, under the emperor Claudius (51 CE) (Ast 2021: 150–151 with Fig. 6) as well as to the Ptolemaic inscription [I.Pan](https://papyri.info/biblio/8962) 70 from 133 BCE ([Ast 2020](https://papyri.info/biblio/95932)). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. RTI has been employed on a number of inscriptions in order to enhance legibility and visualization. Information about the technology is available on the website of [Cultural Heritage Imaging (CHI)](https://culturalheritageimaging.org/Technologies/RTI/) and in Earl et al. 2010. In addition to it, the project uses infrared photography for inked documents and photogrammetry for architectural and artistic elements. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Good examples of first- and early second-century large dedication bases from Berenike are in [Ast and Bagnall 2015](https://papyri.info/biblio/89162) and Ast 2021. A small format dedication base is seen in BE-15/18 111.040 (Inv. 111007) from AD 209, which measures 48 × 60 × 49 cm. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Both are still unpublished. The same general format is also observed in I.Portes 86 (August 13, 2019) from Coptos, although that stele is, overall, smaller in size, measuring 47 x 58 (the thickness is not recorded). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sidebotham et al. 2023: 20–21 with Pl. XXIII.2; full publication of the stele and other Indian artifacts from the port will appear in Sidebotham, Ast et al. (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Respectively, these are BE-15/18 111.040 (inv. 111007) and BE-22 150b.011.001 (inv. 150(b)001), both unpublished. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [Bureth 1964](https://papyri.info/biblio/6514): 124–125. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See [Sidebotham 2002](https://papyri.info/biblio/71692): 219–220, which is based on the evidence that was available at the time. The inscription in question, which is dated 215, was excavated in the so-called Palmyrene shrine; see A.M.F.W. Verhoogt in [Sidebotham and Wendrich 1998](https://papyri.info/biblio/15536): 193–196 (cf. [SEG 48](https://papyri.info/biblio/16616) 1977 and SB 28 16916). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cf. preceding note for the inscription from 215; the others are \*\*\*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See [Sidebotham 2011](https://papyri.info/biblio/79310): 63, where it is also noted that “nothing … would indicate the physical appearance of ships or harbor facilities or their location” between the late second and early fourth centuries. Sidebotham ([2011](https://papyri.info/biblio/79310): 63–64) acknowledges, however, that there was some evidence of activity in the late second and first part of the third centuries. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cuvigny and Lach-Urgacz 2020: 331. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See [O.Berenike 4.535](https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/pylon/article/view/89358/83988#ch_112) with references; the ostracon is [O.Berenike 4.534](https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/pylon/article/view/89358/83988#ch_107). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Nick Bartos and Roderick Geerts, personal comm. 28.02.2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. [Brun 2018](https://doi.org/10.4000/books.cdf.5239) §31; cf. Cuvigny 2022: 113–114. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Concern about the impact of conflicts on trade traffic in the desert is voiced also elsewhere; cf. Cobb 2023: 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Accounts in the *Historia Augusta* (Probus17.2–3 [ed. Hohl] = *FHN* 3.284) and Zosimus (1.71.1 = *FHN* 3.323) of Probus’s suppression of the Blemmyes, which led to the liberation of Coptos and Ptolemais, are well known. They differ with each other in detail and attempts have been made to reconcile them, but, overall, Zosimus is regarded as the more reliable source; see Kerler 1970: 253–254; so, too, Desanges 1978: 343–344 w. n. 227. For the revolts confronted by Galerius and Diocletian, see [Barnes 1976](https://papyri.info/biblio/51199): 180–182; [Thomas 1976](https://papyri.info/biblio/51720) (on the date of the revolt of L. Domitius Domitianus); [Bowman 1978](https://papyri.info/biblio/52377): 26–28; [Rathbone 2002](https://papyri.info/biblio/71386): 194. For extensive treatment of material evidence for the presence of Blemmyes in the Eastern Desert of Egypt in the third century, see the contributions by Cuvigny, Chaufray, Cooper and Gates-Foster in Cuvigny 2022; for discussion of papyrological evidence related to Blemmyes, see [Cuvigny 2021](https://papyri.info/biblio/95999): 415–437. [N. Pollard 2013](https://papyri.info/biblio/88598): 3–9, 33–35 looks at the security situation of the late third and fourth century, and imperial (mainly Diocletian’s) measures to strengthen it. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The latest references to the prefect of the desert are confined to the first quarter of the third century. At Berenike, the latest is sometime after the transfer of the *ala Herculiana* to Egypt in 183 ([SEG 48](https://papyri.info/biblio/16616) 1977). Outside Berenike, on the road leading to Coptos, the last securely dated reference to the office is in 219. See [Cuvigny 2021](https://papyri.info/biblio/95999): 104 and 109; [Cuvigny 2021](https://papyri.info/biblio/95999): 127–132. We cannot say if it persisted as late as the third quarter of the third century and existed at the time this dedication was made. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. We do know that a century and a half later the Blemmyes were using their own regnal system to date writings, which appears to have been ‘keyed’ to Diocletianic eras. This is evidenced by an inscription from Berenike dated to the 10th year of the Blemmye King Isemne; see [Ast and Rądkowska 2020](https://papyri.info/biblio/95924). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. [Rathbone 2002](https://papyri.info/biblio/71386): 195–196. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Biblio on so-called “enigmatic settlements”\*\*\*\* [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. [Ast and Rądkowska 2020](https://papyri.info/biblio/95924); Ast, Popławski and Rądkowska 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. “From the mid-fourth through the fifth centuries A.D., there was a renaissance,” [Sidebotham 2002](https://papyri.info/biblio/71692): 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)