

A Cry for Help

A New Letter from the Yale Collection*

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Abstract

The new text is a private letter, in which the writer sends a cry for help describing himself as naked. I discuss the distinctive uses of γυμνός and show how this word changes from its literal sense into a more abstract meaning.¹

Keywords

Γυμνός, improper appearance, insolvent, fleece, mutual favor

P. CtYBR 581

7.8 x 8.8 cm

2nd century A.D.

Provenance unknown

The papyrus contains 7 nearly complete lines; both right and left margins are preserved; three vertical folds are visible. The text runs along the fibers. The verso is blank.

The handwriting is similar e.g. to that of SB 6, 9337 (Bakchias, A.D. 171) Image in [<http://papyri.info/ddbdp/p.bacch;;3/images>]; SB 5, 8749 (Bakchias A.D. 123). Image in [<http://papyri.info/ddbdp/p.lund;3;9/images>].

The text lacks both its opening and closing formulas. In what is left, the sender gives added importance to his request by using overstatement and describing himself as naked. He asks the addressee to send him two fleeces and continues by reminding the addressee of the previous favors he has shown to him; in return, he urges him now to do his part. Both the sender and the addressee are unknown, but from the context they are both males, the sender using the masculine form expressing himself in ll. 5-6, while using the same masculine form for the addressee in ll. 2-3.

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¹ I would like to thank H. J. Brendan for his kind permission, in 2013, to publish this text; I would also like to thank P. Heilporn for his valuable notes during the congress; C. Römer for her insights and thorough comments on this article; W. Clarysse for his valuable notes and J. Baboukis for her kind English revision. I sincerely appreciate all the valuable comments and suggestions of the anonymous peer reviewers.

Letters have been the object of many studies; see more recently Grob and Kaplony (eds.), 2008; and earlier: Exler 1976, who presents various types of opening and closing formulas; White 1982, Choat and Nobbs, 2001-2005; and John 2008.

Recto

1 εξε.[+ 4].ανεφραμων
 οῦν ποιησάμενος ἀνα-
 βαίνων πείρασαι τοὺς
 δύο β πρόκους μοι ἐνέγκαι
5 διὰ τὸ γυμνὸν με εἶναι.
 οἶδας δὲ με μὴ ἀμελοῦντα
 ἐν τοῖς κατὰ σέ, καὶ σὺ οὖν

Apparatus

2. 1. ποιησάμενος

Translation

« ... as [...]amon ordered (?), therefore, coming up try to bring for me the 2 fleeces because I am naked. You know I don't neglect your affairs, and therefore you [...]».

Commentary

1 There are ca. 3 letters at the beginning of the line, of which the first letter looks like an *epsilon*. The remaining traces are more dubious; it may be read εξε.[and can perhaps be restored as ἐκέλε[ευσε, cf. e.g. O.Krok. I 64, 5 (A.D. 109?); P.Oxy. 82, 5321, 37, (2nd cent. A.D.).

After the lacuna, there is an inkblot above the fourth letter as if something has been corrected or the pen has been refilled and left a drop. The reading appears to be .ανεφραμων; this is perhaps a personal name lacking the first letter, it can be read as Πανεφρέμμης; cf. TM ID 4833. There is a small horizontal stroke after the *rho* probably as he started writing *gamma* and then he tried to correct it by making the tail of *rho* longer. In this case, it forms an *hapax*, giving Πανεφράμων as a new composite name, that consists of the masculine article pa- combined with nfr («good- beautiful») then the God

name Ammon; so it may mean «the good one of Ammon»; for the meaning of *nfr-* cf. Selden, 2013, 67. This suggestion has no supportive parallel so, another suggestion may be more acceptable, reading as *Τανεφράμων*; the horizontal part of *τ* is broken into two pieces as Ptolemaic and early Roman *tau* can be noticed. The possibility to have a name like *Τανεφράμων* could be mentioned, derived from the feminine name *Τανεφρέμις*, which frequently appears in the 2nd century A.D.

2 οὖν ποησάμενος: the reading here seems to be for the first sight οὖν. The particle οὖν would usually come in the second position of the sentence. At that time, one would expect οὖν being proceeded by a word belonging to the participle, like *καλῶς*, but that is certainly not writing here. Another suggestion is that the reading of οὖν ποησάμενος is not correct, and we might rather read *συνποησάμενος*. This suggestion may offer a good solution to this strange structure; at the same time, it is compatible with the context to mean «... assisting (whomever), as Panephramon had ordered, coming up try to bring ...».

The spelling confusion of the interchange of *ο* for *οι* is attested in the Greek documentary papyri, cf. Gignac 1976, 199.

The verb *ποιέω* is often used in the request formula in third-century papyrus texts in phrases like *καλῶς ἂν ποιήσῃς / καλῶς ἂν οὖν ποιήσῃς* + conditional participle, cf. Dickey 2016, 245.

3 πείρασαι: the use of the imperative aorist expresses the necessity to carry out an urgent order without delay; cf. Mandilaras 1973, § 700; e.g. P.Oxy. XLII 3057, 20 (1st - 2nd cent. A.D.).

4 δύο β πόκουσ: the β is connected to the *pi* of πόκουσ with a small diagonal stroke. The *pi* of πόκουσ looks like a *tau* that was corrected to *pi*. The meaning of πόκουσ corresponds to the context of the present letter more than τόκουσ.

Another correction has been suggested: that the scribe first wrote a *kappa*, then realized his mistake and corrected it to a *pi*. The vertical stroke of the *kappa* and the left line of the *pi* make a shape that is very similar to a *beta*.

One of the flock's importance is the production of fleece supplying wool for weavers throughout Egypt, cf. Wallace 1938, 79. There is no restriction of weaving and spinning woollen clothes at home in the Graeco-Roman Egypt, cf. Pomeroy 1984, 84.

Here πόκουσ comes with the definite article which may refer to either these fleeces are known to both speaking parties or at least there is a previous mention to these fleeces earlier. Sending or receiving fleeces is a subject of some other private letters, cf. P.Merton III 112, 6 (2nd cent. A.D.) where the sender confirms on the brother not neglect to send him quickly woolen fleeces. A pregnant woman sends a letter to her mother asking for some necessities and four fleeces of fine wool *καλὰ πόκουσ*, cf. SB V 7572, 7 (Philadelphia, 2nd cent. A.D.). Another letter in P.Oxy. VII 1062, 3-4 (2nd cent. A.D.) indicates the fleece's quality with a mention to the summer as the best season for fine

fleeces περὶ τῶν πόκων σου ἐπαγγελ[ο]μένου καλὰ ἀγοράσαι προσθέντος ὅτι τὰ θέρειά ἐστιν τὰ κρείσσονα.

The word γυμνός means «naked» in its basic sense, either full or partial nudity. Its meaning may extend to an overstatement in describing the needy case of someone. W. Clarysse has discussed the idea of the exaggeration in his article 2017, 63-86, where he tries to determine both the real meanings of the words and the emotions they express, and how the tone and style can be altered by superlatives and other intensifiers, repetition, and irony to express emotion. On a similar approach, here the uses of γυμνός vary relying on the context. Γυμνός is sometimes used to introduce a request for money: cf. P.Mich. 1, 90 (Arsinoite, 275 B.C.); P.Brem 63, 30 (Hermopolis Magna, A.D. 116). In other texts, γυμνός is used in a request to purchase new clothes for someone: cf. P.Wisc. II 73, 20 (Oxy., A.D. 122-123). Γυμνός is sometimes used to denote improper appearance, cf. BGU III 846, 5-10 (Arsinoite, 2nd A.D.); this letter is known as the prodigal son's letter γιγνώσκειν σε θέλω, ὅτι οὐχ [ἦλπ]ίζον, ὅτι ἀναβαίνω εἰς τὴν μητρόπολιν, χάριν τούτου οὐδ' ἐγὼ εἰσῆ<λ>θα εἰς τὴν πόλιν. [.].οπ[.]μην δὲ ἐλθεῖν εἰς Καρανίδα ὅτι σαπρῶς περιπατῶ. Ἐγραψά σοι, ὅτι γυμνός εἶμι, «I would have you know that I didn't expect that you were going up to the metropolis, for that reason I didn't come to the city myself. I was ashamed to come to Karanis because I am going about in rags. I write to you that I am naked ...». And he gave a hint about his debts, cf. ll. 15-16 οὐκ οἶδες, ὅτι θέλω πηρὸς γενέσθαι παραγενέσθαι ἢ γνῶναι ὅπως τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ, [ἔ]τ[ι] [ὄ]τ[ι] ὀφείλω ὄβολον, «Do you not know that I would rather be maimed (disabled) than feel that I still owe a man an obol».

Even though the writer is talking here about his improper appearance, the real meaning seems to be that he has no money at present and beseeching his mother to help him. The son would rather remain in his misery, rather become a cripple than return home and be still one single obol in debt. The mother will understand the hint and try to help him.

On The other hand, γυμνός is used in petitions to describe the circumstances where the complainer is attempting to prove that physical violence, as well as the removal of clothes, were part of the attack: cf. P.Lond. V 1830 (IV A.D.); P.Enteux 79, 7 (Krokodilopolis, 218 B.C.).

Γυμνός may also mean the depriving of the help: cf. P.Oxy. XII 1408, 24-26 (A.D. 210-14): ἀλλὰ] γυμνοὺς τῶν περικειμένων αὐτοῖς ὄντας ταχέως τ[ιμω-][ρησόμεθα ..., «But we will quickly punish them if they are deprived of those shelter them (who assist them)».

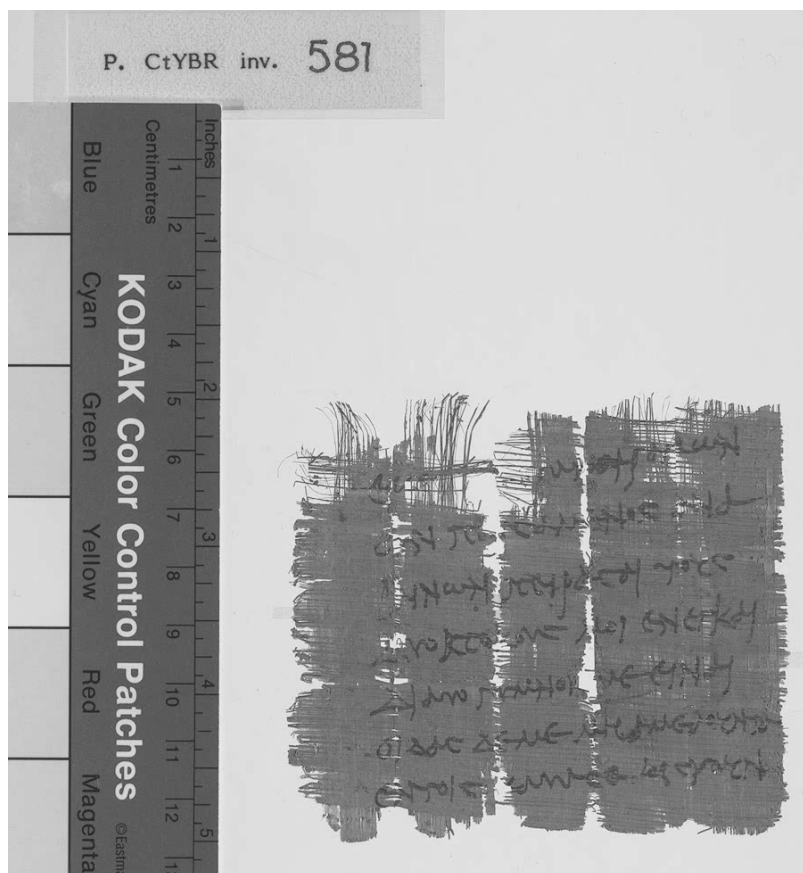
From these examples, one can conclude that the usage of the word γυμνός depends on the context. In the present text, γυμνός gives the sense of urgent need, whether for a material of making clothes or, in a general meaning, a call for help. Since we don't know the profession either of the sender or the addressee of the letter, we cannot decide.

6 οἶδας δὲ calls special attention to the phrase that follows. It is frequently used as an introduction to a plea for mutual favor or an instance of reciprocation. It is commonly found in private letters, e.g.

P.Col. 10, 279 (Alex. A.D. 240-260) 3-4; P.Iand. VI 94, 32-33 (unknown, A.D. 175- 225), P.Oxy. XXXIV 2727, 9-10 (A.D. 200-399).

Με μὴ ἀμελοῦντα: the verb ἀμελέω and its forms are frequently repeated in the private Greek letters to emphasize doing something or to call attention to the necessity of doing something: cf. White 1972, 160, and P.Bon. 44, 6 (?; 2nd cent. A.D.). The most common form is the addressee form, μὴ ἀμελήσης. Here, however, it is the opposite: the sender confirms that he did not neglect the situation, preceded by a strong phrase, οἶδας δὲ.

7 καὶ σὺ οὖν often denotes a mutual favor or instance of reciprocation. It is commonly found in private letters: cf. Salem 2014, 169-172. It can be restored as [μὴ ἀμελήσης].



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