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THE INTRIGUING MESSAGES OF A MUSLIM SLAVE'S TOMBSTONE

Jelle Bruning (Leiden University)

Jelle Bruning taps a new source for the history of slavery among early Muslim communities and shows what funerary epigraphy can tell us about how ninth-century Muslims dealt with their deceased slaves.

> This is the grave of Bashir, the boy of Muhammad ibn Umayya ibn Maymun ibn Yahya ibn Muslim ibn al-Ashajj al-Zuhri, may God's mercy and forgiveness be upon him and may He be pleased with him. He died on Monday two nights remaining of Muharram of the year two hundred and forty-seven [= April 14, 861 CE].

These few words capture the little that is known about an enslaved man named Bashir who lived in Aswan in the ninth century CE. The text comes from the man's tombstone, a rectangular and undecorated slab of grey sandstone today kept in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo. It is an outstanding piece of funerary epigraphy. Even though it is one of the thousands of early Islamic tombstones that have been preserved and shares many features with other tombstones (such as the near lack of biographical details about the deceased and unremarkable prayers), it provides an unparalleled window onto how Muslims in the first centuries of Islam commemorated deceased slaves.

Bashir was one of the many slaves who lived among ninth-century Muslim communities. The flourishing economy in the Realm of Islam generated an enormous demand for slaves, who were mostly assigned domestic tasks but were also set to work as entertainers, artisans, couriers, soldiers, and sex slaves. In addition to those who were born into slavery, professional slave traders brought huge numbers of enslaved Europeans, Africans, and Central Asians to the main markets within the Muslim polity. A ninth-century European pilgrim noted in his travelogue that he saw in the harbour of Taranto, southern Italy, six ships bound for North Africa and Egypt "having on board nine thousand captives of the Christians of Beneventum" – no doubt an exaggeration, but nonetheless indicative of the size of the ninth-century slave trade.

What makes Bashir's tombstone so interesting is that it conveys seemingly contradictory messages. To begin with, it is noteworthy that the tombstone is utterly silent about the deceased's origins. Whereas the text highlights the illustrious pedigree of his owner, going back not less than five generations, there is no room for Bashir's patronymic. The tombstone only mentions his legal status and calls him a "boy". By using this word, the text heeds an allegedly Prophetic prohibition against using cruelly accurate terms for the legal status of enslaved people, such as "slave" (*'abd*) or "owned person" (*mamluk*). The absence of Bashir's patronymic signifies that his belonging to the Abbasids' tribal society solely rested on the fact that another member of that society exerted rights of ownership over him. Legally, slaves were

deracinated persons whose origins (or offspring, for that matter) were unimportant. Origins only mattered at slave markets, where regional and social backgrounds influenced a human's price. In other words, the tombstone highlights Bashir's social dependency.
That said, the very fact that a tombstone marked Bashir's grave is not a trivial fact. Apparently, someone found it important that the location of his grave was known and that the site became one of commemoration and prayer. Whereas ninth-century (and later) Muslim scholars frequently criticised the building of funerary monuments upon or around graves, including those that carried text, the unknown person or persons who paid for Bashir's tombstone saw no fault in funerary epigraphy. The tombstone does not reveal the identity of the commissioner(s) but it does tell us that he (they) cared for Bashir's wellbeing after death. The funerary inscription ends with a telling prayer:

> O God! Have mercy upon him through Your mercy and accept him through Your kindness.

Like the prayers in the passage that identifies Bashir, this prayer was believed to realise through a visitor's actions alone. Some contemporary tombstones explicitly encouraged visitors to read such funerary texts aloud. Quite common was the implicit request "May God have mercy upon those who asked for mercy upon the owner of the grave!" Medieval Muslims commonly believed that the deceased needed the help of the living to withstand the so-called Chastisement of the Grave and to enter Paradise. In other words, Bashir's tombstone did much more than just mark the grave of a slave. It also created religiously meaningful space and facilitated local commemoration of a slave's death.

Bashir's tombstone, then, conveys two messages. It explicitly identifies the deceased as a slave, a subaltern, and sets his low slave status off against the elite background of his owner. Intriguingly, the tombstone also testifies to Bashir's humanity and to an emotional bond between him and others, i.e. that he was more than just someone's chattel. Medieval Islam encouraged the fair treatment of slaves and acknowledged their religious identity. Of course, Muslim slaves, like their free co-religionists, deserved a proper Muslim burial. Islamic jurists of the time prescribed that a slave owner provide the shroud and pay for the grave of his slave. After all, slaves did not leave behind an estate that could cover these costs. A tombstone, however, was a voluntary expense not required by Islamic law. The existence of Bashir's tombstone shows that people were willing to make these extra costs for his welfare after death.

Thus read, the text gives a valuable glimpse into how some ninth-century Muslims dealt with the death of their slaves. Yes, *some* ninth-century Muslims—few other early Islamic tombstones for slaves are known to exist. Most slaves must have been buried in anonymous graves without any text that invited passers-by to commemorate the deceased.

For an in-depth study of the Abbasid slave trade, see Jelle Bruning's Slave Trade Dynamics in Abbasid Egypt: The Papyrological Evidence, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 63 (2020): 682-742. Jelle Bruning currently studies the representation of slaves in Arabic funerary epigraphy.