



Festal Letters: Fragments of a Genre

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Festal Letters: Fragments of a Genre*

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Festal or Easter Letters are a literary genre unique to Egyptian Christianity. They were circulars sent by the bishop of Alexandria to the other bishoprics, churches and monasteries around Egypt, in order to announce the exact date of Easter for a particular year. They consisted of two parts: a lengthy catechetical one, which was in effect a homily since it was read aloud to the congregation; and the second, practical part, fixing the date of Easter for that year. These letters were usually issued around the day of Epiphany (although written much earlier) to offer sufficient time for Lent, fasting, and all Easter-related festivals. Their practical part, fixing the date of Easter, defines the genre. They also served a catechetical purpose, since they contained a discussion of current ecclesiastical affairs or problems of Christian life and exhortations to observe the fast, to almsgiving, reception of the sacraments, etc. It was an opportunity for the patriarch to present annually to his see important theological issues. They were a useful tool in the hands of their authors and played an influential role in ecclesiastical affairs. This paper addresses evidence and issues arising from papyrological findings of Easter letters in Greek, i.e. the ones circulated by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria.

Festal letters are obviously a sub-genre of epistolography, with all its particularities and a special focus on rhetoric. Only a few festal letters have attracted the attention of scholars, mainly from a theological and a historical point of view.¹ There is still no full study of the genre, despite some recent efforts to rectify this.² Being circulars, Easter letters were probably issued in multiple copies, translated into Coptic (if not in Latin too) and read aloud in churches and monasteries, a practice that could have contributed to their physical preservation.³ But as with most other epistles, a letter is only as important as its author (or its recipient for that matter) and, although we have substantial collections by a few prominent figures, most Easter letters are now lost.

These letters were much more than a formality. They were serving a catechetical purpose and they were a product of disputes: the date of Easter in the early Christian years was not a simple thing to calculate. It had been the subject of several controversies in the early Christian centuries. The issues involved varied from whether the Christian Pasch celebrated the Passion, Christ's Passover or the Resurrection, to the complexity of astronomical calculations at the time. There is very little evidence regarding the celebration of a major religious festival in the first centuries. The first testimony of an established celebratory practice for Easter is probably found in the Paschal Homily of Melito of Sardis. Although by no means an Easter letter it has been traditionally seen as an important text of such a major controversy. The Greek text has mainly come down to us on the fourth century P.Beatty VIII 12 and P.Bodmer XIII. Melito's Paschal Homily has also survived in Latin, Georgian and

* I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments and suggestions.

¹ The best-known festal letter is probably Letter 39 of Athanasius of Alexandria, which has not survived in Greek in full. It is known mainly because it contains a list of the canonical books of the Old and New Testament.

² The main studies are Camplani (2003) and overviews by Külzer (1998) and by Allen (2015).

³ See Allen (2015) 177.

Coptic translations. To support further the hypothesis of a well-established early tradition of celebrating Easter and in line with relevant doctrinal and practical concerns, comes a recent finding from the Oxyrhynchus collection.⁴ It is a fragment from a codex, preserving the beginning of Melito's homily, a part not fully attested by our witnesses so far.⁵ The new fragment is dated to the early third century, approximately 50 years after its original delivery (around 170 CE).

Melito supports the prevalent Quartodeciman tradition in Asia Minor that the Christian Easter should coincide with the Jewish Passover. The Church of Alexandria (as well as that of Rome) celebrated Easter the Sunday following that day. The controversy continued into the fourth century, when it was solved at the Council of Nicaea, by endorsing the calculation of the Easter date independently from the Jewish lunar calendar. Needless to say, this took some time to comply with in some areas.⁶

The Church of Alexandria, which was actively involved in the controversies, decided to settle the issue, at least as far as its see and its subordinate churches were concerned.⁷ This marked the beginning of the festal letters tradition, which also reflected the primacy of the Alexandrian bishop over the other bishops in Egypt. The actual beginning of this practice is not known. The earlier fragments of a festal letter come from the time of Dionysius, who served as Bishop of Alexandria from 248 to 265.⁸ References to this Alexandrian practice are not uncommon as early as the fourth century.⁹

The tradition continued for several centuries and Patriarchs annually issued festal letters. It has been suggested that the tradition of festal letters amongst Greek Orthodox Patriarchs dies out with the Arab conquest of Egypt and the Copts alone continue the tradition, but findings dating in the eighth century suggest that this was not the case.¹⁰

1. Festal letters surviving on papyrus

Papyrological evidence of this practice includes a relatively short list of fragments. In Greek, all in all seven fragments from such letters survive. Their bulk came down to us in collections and florilegia through medieval manuscripts. Respective evidence in Coptic is as scarce, with eleven fragments of Festal letters found in total on both ostraka and papyri. The ones on ostraka only contain the announcement of Easter date, evidently missing the catechetical part, with all relevant implications and questions arising regarding to their usage. Traces of the practice are found continuously for several centuries, despite the limited direct evidence on manuscripts. Apart from findings in papyri, collected parts in florilegia and incidental references in other literature, few substantial collections survived: all but three of Cyril's letters, several ones by Athanasius (mainly in Syriac and Coptic and very few in Greek and Armenian), as well as a translation of one of Theophilus' epistles and some fragments of

⁴ P.Oxy. inv. 16 2B.48/F(d).

⁵ A new finding restores the beginning of P.Bodmer XIII, which overlaps with the Oxyrhynchus papyrus. See Nongbri / Hall (2017).

⁶ A brief and useful account of the controversies can be found at Évieux (1991) 74-75.

⁷ The Council of Nicaea gave the responsibility of fixing the date to the church of Alexandria, which was recognised for its efficiency in astronomical calculations. See Évieux (1991) 80-88.

⁸ Évieux (1991) 94-106.

⁹ See for instance Euseb. Hist. Eccl. 7.20.1: "Ὁ γε μὴν Διονύσιος πρὸς ταῖς δηλωθείσαις ἐπιστολαῖς αὐτοῦ ἔτι καὶ τὰς φερομένας ἑορταστικὰς τὸ τηνικαῦτα συντάττει, πανηγυρικωτέρους ἐν αὐταῖς περὶ τῆς τοῦ πάσχα ἑορτῆς ἀνακινῶν λόγους.

¹⁰ Külzer (1998) 390; see also note 9 in La'Da / Papatthomas (2004) 10.

other letters of his.¹¹ The most complete collection is that of Cyril's twenty-nine festal letters, surviving complete for the years 413-442, compiled in a collection possibly by people in his circle shortly after his death.¹² This assumption is mainly based on known such practices regarding the writings of other Church Fathers. Other than that, there is no evidence about the date of such compilations, as the manuscript tradition of these particular letters bears no witnesses before the Middle Ages.

So far only two papyri have been found to contain Cyril's letters, both published in 2011. They are probably official circulars rather than fragments from books containing letter collections. The first one is a fifth century roll fragment preserving Cyril's ninth letter, namely PSI XVI 1576.¹³ It has been dated in 421, considered by the editors to be Cyril's actual Easter letter for the year, since the part announcing the date is missing from the papyrus. There are no substantial textual problems that would imply a use different than that of an Easter letter. Considering also its typical Festal letter format (a large format roll with equally large formal Alexandrian majuscule script), and palaeographical dating compatible with the fifth century, it is probably safe to conclude that PSI XVI 1576 was one of the letters distributed in 421 by the patriarchate (possibly sent to the diocese of Antinoe, where it was discovered in all probability) to announce that year's Easter date.¹⁴

2. The case of P.Oxy. LXXVI 5074

The other finding of this sort is a late sixth-early seventh century papyrus from the Oxyrhynchus collection, namely P.Oxy. LXXVI 5074 Cyril of Alexandria, Festal Letters 28, PG 77.944C-949A. Although this title describes all of the (readable) content of the fragment in question it does not necessarily reflect the content of the roll, from which P.Oxy. LXXVI 5074 comes. The surviving text contains parts of Cyril's twenty-eighth Easter letter and the biblical quotations included within it. This particular letter was issued in 440 and had we followed the method used to date the previous specimen, this should have been the date of the manuscript too. However, palaeography suggests it is improbable that the manuscript was produced during Cyril's lifetime. It was probably produced much later, in the sixth or seventh century.

Unlike PSI XVI 1576, there are some textual problems as well as palaeographical issues in P.Oxy. LXXVI 5074 distinguishing the latter from the typical Easter letter. P.Oxy. LXXVI 5074 is the only Easter letter in Greek found so far not written in the Alexandrian Majuscule script. Instead, it is written in a large formal sloping hand, dating in the late sixth or even in the seventh century containing a text known to have been composed a couple of centuries earlier. This is not an ad hoc composition, which we generally assume to have been common practice for Easter letters. No doubt, different levels of originality in composing the catechetical part is expected, but in P.Oxy. LXXVI 5074, the text preserved is exclusively taken from Cyril. There are also a few textual issues arising when compared to the medieval tradition, which by no means should be considered as an absolute authority.

Because the papyrus is of very large format, the sizeable fragment only contains a small portion of the text. This –together with a textual discrepancy– leaves space for speculation

¹¹ Cristea (2011).

¹² One of the reviewers brought to my attention the date of Cyril's first letter (413) and not 414 as several scholars cite. See Camplani (1999).

¹³ Bastianini / Cavallo (2011) 31-45.

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion on the use of roll for early Christian literary texts including festal letters, see Stroppa (2013).

regarding the roll's function. It's a roll containing the bottom of two consecutive columns with unknown number of lines missing from the top. Between the bottom line of written in a large formal sloping hand.

There is a textual discrepancy at the beginning of col. ii, the three first lines of which cannot be identified with certainty. The space available in the papyrus is not sufficient to accommodate the text found in the medieval tradition. 140 lines would have been required in the upper part of the second column in order to fit the text between PG 77.944.41 and PG 77.948.55 (the text transmitted in the medieval tradition). We do not know of a papyrus roll with more than 55 lines per column, and even if P.Oxy. LXXVI 5074 came from such a large roll, the fragment would still have been short by 100-120 lines. It is obvious that there was an omission – a rather sizeable one – when copying the text, either by accident or deliberately. It concerns the top of the fragment's second column, of which the transcription follows:¹⁵

col. ii

> . μ . [

παντ[οὔκοῦν καθά φησιν

(PG 77.948.55)

> ὁ θεσπ[έσιος Μελωδὸς ἀνδρίζεσθε καὶ κραται

> οὔσθω ἢ [κ]αρδία [ὑμῶν πάντες οἱ ἐλπίζοντες

5 > ἐπὶ κν' τίνα δὲ τ[ρόπον καὶ τοῦτο κατορθώσω

μεν διαδείξει λέγων ὁ χν' μαθητῆς διδὸ ἀναζω

> σάμενοι τὰς ὁσφύ[ας τῆς διανοίας ὑμῶν νή

> φοντες τελείως ἐλ[πίσατε ἐπὶ τὴν φερομέ

> νην ὑμῖν χ[άριν ἐν ἀπ]οκ[αλύψει τοῦ χου] ὡς τε

10 > κνα ὑπακοῆς [μ]ῆ συσχημ[ατιζόμενοι ταῖς

> πρότερον ἐν τῇ ἀγνοίᾳ ὑμῶν ἐπιθυμίαις

ἀλλὰ κατὰ τὸν καλέσαντα ὑμᾶς ἅγιον καὶ αὐτοῖ

Solving the issue of the missing text is further obstructed by the first two lines of the second column, which are largely illegible. The missing lines in col. ii possibly contain part or parts of text between 944.41 and 948.55, in which there are several instances matching the traces in col. ii ll. 1-2: 945.5, 945.2, 945.31, 945.48 and 945.49. None of the above contains a quotation to correspond with the possible dipole in the margin (marking as usual a quotation from the scriptures). The possibilities can be narrowed down by eliminating the cases where a clause would not have been completed shortly after παντ[in col. ii l. 2. Assuming that οὔκοῦν καθά φησιν, i.e. the beginning of the clause in col. ii l. 3, was copied intact in col. ii l. 2 and that no alteration took place to smoothen the transition, 20 letters are needed to complete col. ii l. 2. The only such instance is 945.4 and col. ii ll. 1-2 can be restored as:

πάλαι κεχρη

σμοφ[δημένα μετακεχώρηκεν εἰς ἀλήθειαν

πάντ[α γὰρ ἐν Χριστῷ καινά. οὔκοῦν καθά φησι

This solution has the obvious disadvantage that the meaning of the secondary clause: ἐπειδὴ παρώχηκεν ἢ τοῦ νόμου σκιά, καὶ τὰ τυπικῶς τοῖς πάλαι κεχρησμοφδημένα μετακεχώρηκεν εἰς ἀλήθειαν, πάντα γὰρ ἐν Χριστῷ καινά, is not completed by a main clause before the new portion of the text starts. This could have arisen from poor understanding of the text by the scribe or from revision by the person responsible for the short version. The printed text encloses πάντα γὰρ ἐν Χριστῷ καινά in brackets and then punctuates after καινά, perhaps following one or more of the medieval manuscripts. In terms of meaning, this would

¹⁵ As published in P.Oxy. LXXVI 5074.

represent a suitable breaking point, serving as a concluding sentence before introducing a new discussion on *τύπος*. In the medieval tradition, the text in col. ii l. 3 marks such a change of topic, following a discussion on gender. If this conjecture holds and the text runs uninterrupted from col. i l. 11 to col. ii l. 1, then there are 22 lines in-between, resulting in a column of 34 lines, and a roll 38-40 cm high and 3.2 cm in length, if containing a single homily.

Several theories could explain the short space available in the papyrus: perhaps the scribe is copying from a codex with a missing folio, since the amount of text missing roughly corresponds to that contained in a large folio or a small bifolio. The reverse could also be the case and the text attested in the medieval tradition may have been inserted at a later stage.

There are other possibilities raised by the hypothesis of a shortened version: perhaps there are several small portions of text missing rather than a single large chunk; or col. ii ll. 1-2 contain a paraphrase of (part of) the text, serving as a transitional phrase connecting the two excerpts and, therefore, not found in the medieval tradition.

Alternatively, col. ii ll. 1-2 could be transmitting a new reading, still assuming that a shorter version is transmitted. This would have made reconstructing col. ii ll. 1-2 impossible. If the omission is deliberate, then P.Oxy. LXXVI 5074 preserves either a shortened version of Cyril's Letter XXVIII, or excerpts from works by Cyril and perhaps by other prominent theologians.

We cannot exclude the possibility that the papyrus contains another text on Easter by Cyril or even another author and our fragment preserves two separate quotations from Cyril's letter twenty-eighth. No doubt, there was a practice of quoting earlier established authorities in Easter letters. One such example comes from P.Grenf. II 112, containing an Easter homily quoting Cyril's commentary on John (not one of Cyril's Easter letters). However the quotation in P.Oxy. LXXVI 5074 is a rather lengthy one compared to e.g. P.Köln Gr. V 215. Four out of the seven known papyri with Easter letters in Greek are by or contain quotations from Cyril. I am not aware of any example of an actual Easter letter quoting an Easter letter. Moreover, in P.Grenf. II 112, where Cyril's homily on John is quoted, the quotation is marked in the left margin with a dipole, acknowledging its different authorship. In P.Oxy. LXXVI 5074 the dipole only marks those lines of Cyril's letter, which contain an excerpt from the New Testament, thus implying that the rest of the text (the actual Cyril's letter) comes from the main author of the roll. It is rather odd that a compiler would have inserted an excerpt from another work (or even by another author) between two other lengthy excerpts sitting almost consecutively in the same work. Other possibilities include the missing text being the compiler's / composer's own contribution to Cyril's text, some kind of comment or other original text aiming to bridge the two passages.

3. Format, Function, and Provenance

The above hypotheses assume that the papyrus roll in question was intended as a book, since the text itself as well as the formality of the script exclude the possibility of a document or a scrap copy for private use. A roll of such format would have been a very expensive book to produce, with a very formal and exceptionally large script, indicating a luxurious copy probably to be read in public or for the private library of a wealthy individual. It could have even been a copy for the libraries of one of the bishops in Egypt, possibly that of

Oxyrhynchus.¹⁶ However, if our papyrus was intended as a book containing a collection of Easter letters or excerpts from Cyril's or other authors' writings, then its transmission on a roll is rather unusual. This statement needs little justification for a sixth-seventh century manuscript. It suffices to say that by the seventh century, from when our papyrus dates, there is not a single Christian book written on a roll. According to Aland and Rosenbaum (1995) from the 82 patristic papyri (of all periods), 62 were written on codices, and quite a few on sheets and *transversae chartae*.¹⁷ The only patristic texts that are certain to have been written on papyrus rolls in all centuries are paschal letters (six of them so far). All homilies copied after the fifth century are certain to be on codices and only one from the fourth-fifth century is possibly a roll. Even in the second and third century, the vast majority of homilies are copied on codices.

Thus, a fragment of an Easter letter on a roll more likely comes from an actual circular Easter letter than a literary collection of them. The papyrus contains the pastoral part of the Easter letter either circulated directly from the patriarchate in Alexandria to the bishop of Oxyrhynchus, or copied and forwarded by the bishop to the local churches.¹⁸ However, it has been suggested that copies for all the churches in Egypt were made in and sent off from Alexandria directly, but there is no evidence for this.¹⁹

The format of the roll further supports the theory that P.Oxy. LXXVI 5074 comes from an actual Easter letter, issued a few centuries after Cyril's lifetime, since it is improbable on palaeographical grounds to date the papyrus before the second half of the sixth century. The hand represents a much later version of the Formal Mixed Style. The contrast between the narrow and wide letters has considerably given in, compared to its earlier forms and there is no shading, a trend typical of the fourth century.

Apart from Easter letters, no other homily or other patristic text from the same period survives in such a large and majestic script (although there are some in formal hands, but still much smaller), usually reserved for very luxurious copies of the classics and the Bible.²⁰ This holds true both for the Alexandrian majuscule, the script of all surviving Greek Easter letters, and for the sloping pointed majuscule, the script of P.Oxy. LXXVI 5074.²¹

The type of the script further complicates the case. All the other Easter letters survive in fine Alexandrian majuscule hands, traditional for the patriarchate of Alexandria and appropriate for the occasion. There is not a single manuscript known to come from the patriarchate of Alexandria in a hand similar to the one of P.Oxy. LXXVI 5074, but then again there are only a handful of such manuscripts in total. If this is indeed a circular letter announcing Easter and not a book containing Cyril's Easter homilies, it is not possible to determine the provenance of the manuscript. The non-Alexandrian script is not necessarily evidence against Alexandrian provenance. Alexandrian majuscule has been stressed as a characteristic of Easter

¹⁶ I assume that the papyrus was found in Oxyrhynchus only because this is the recovery location for the majority of the papyri in the collection. The inventory number does not give clues for the whereabouts of the particular fragment at excavation and an investigation of the excavation notes by Grenfell and Hunt yielded no further information.

¹⁷ Aland / Rosenbaum (1995) CXVI. The only patristic papyrus on a roll that is not a festal letter is also a public epistle (KV89).

¹⁸ See for instance Camplani (2000) 11. On the audience that Cyril has in mind suggesting that the festal letters were read beyond larger cities and reached smaller churches with rural populations, see O'Keefe (2009) 7.

¹⁹ Évieux (1991) 108, where he quotes a letter by Synesius as the source for the distribution of the letter, but Synesius does not refer to the procedure of copying and distributing the letters.

²⁰ Several fragments of Christian writings in formal script have been recovered especially in Alexandrian majuscule, e.g. fragments of *Apophthegmata Patrum* are usually in Alexandrian majuscule, but normally of smaller size, see for instance P.Cair. SR 3726 and Bagnall / Gonis (2003).

²¹ Tchernetska (2009) 751.

letters from Alexandria, but this has been based only on the scarce evidence mentioned above.²² One of the main reasons why this particular script was named Alexandrian and it was considered to be the formal script of the patriarchate, was the fact that the Easter letters discovered, which are one of the very few documents known certainly to come from there, are all written in that script. Again, with only seven Easter letters written in Greek discovered so far, there is a scarcity of evidence pointing to that direction. Thus, if we use this script as an argument to assign our papyrus to Alexandria, we fall into the loop of a cyclical argument.

A large formal script is expected in a celebratory Letter from both the patriarch of Alexandria and the bishop of Oxyrhynchus. Thus, P.Oxy. LXXVI 5074 could be a copy of the Easter letter that a local bishop received from the patriarch in Alexandria in order to distribute it to the churches of his diocese, assuming it was each bishop's duty to inform the rest of the churches in his see about the date of Easter after receiving the letter from the patriarch, but we do not know how he was expected to do so. It makes sense, though, that a letter with a catechetical content which was obviously meant to be read out to the people, would have been read in many churches and not only to the bishop's congregation and it has been suggested that these letters were read out to audiences well beyond those of the metropolitan sees.²³ On the other hand, a single copy of the letter received from Alexandria could be read in turns by priests to their congregation, or by the bishop (or his delegate) to the different churches as he visited them. However, if the text was supposed to be read around the same time in all churches, more than one copy would have been needed. The mere number of letters needed in order to reach all the churches and monasteries in Egypt could explain the *transversae chartae* copies of the letters, such as P.Grenf. II 112. On the other hand, it is not improbable that it was read only in the largest and most significant churches of each diocese, especially in times of stress, such as immediately following the Arab conquest, in which case no copies of the letter would have been required (or very few of them).

4. The sender of the Letter

Festal letters are identified as such by their closing, announcing the date for Easter. It is, therefore, easy to date them fairly accurately (usually having two or three alternatives of exact year). This is not the case for P.Oxy. LXXVI 5074, for which dating has been decided purely on palaeographical grounds. Although not completely accurate, it is rather certain that Cyril, who died in 444, is not the sender of the letter. It is also the only Festal letter known so far that consists (perhaps in its entirety, since the portions of Cyril's text seem to be much more than a quotation) of excerpts from an older Festal letter to announce another year's Easter date.

We are dealing, therefore, with a patriarch who is recycling the pastoral part of old Easter letters –one or more per year, perhaps adjusting or enriching their content to match current circumstances– and replaces the part where the dates are announced. For practical purposes and having in mind that the dating in the late sixth-early seventh century opted for maximum inclusion, any year between 550 and 650 is a possibility and the corresponding patriarchs are candidates for its authorship. No Easter letter survives from most of this period's patriarchs (namely: Zoilus, Apollinarius, John IV, Eulogius, Theodore, John V, George, Cyrus and Peter) has an Easter letter by him surviving; in fact, there is nothing at all surviving by some of them.²⁴ Several important events fall within the period in question that could explain a lack

²² See for instance La'Da / Papatthomas (2004) 11.

²³ Allen (2015) 176-177.

²⁴ One of the reviewers brought to my attention a surviving Easter letter by Eulogius, see Camplani (2004). He also pointed out that P.Grenf. II 112 has been attributed to Peter by Camplani (1992).

of focus on this tradition and its sidetracking by more important concerns. Not least of these events was the Arab conquest of Egypt from 639 onwards, after which the tradition of Easter letters by the Greek patriarch weakens and only the Copts continue the practice.²⁵

One possible explanation is that our Easter letter falls within the two periods of the late sixth and early seventh century (579-581 and 619-621), where the throne of the patriarchate of Alexandria was vacant and part or parts from one or more older homilies were used to announce Easter for the year. Since there was no patriarch on the throne, the clergy serving in the patriarchate possibly did not feel entitled to undertake such a duty and decided to include passages from previous patriarchs. With all the trouble following the council of Chalcedon in 451 (to which the lack of substantial collections of letters from after the fifth century has been attributed), Cyril would have been a safe choice, an authority free of the blemish of heresy in such turbulent times.²⁶

5. Conclusion

Although purely on palaeographical and codicological grounds, it appears that P.Oxy. LXXVI 5074 is an Easter letter. Together with PSI XVI 1576 they are possibly the first instances of actual Easter letters in Greek, the full text of which is known to us. The catechetical part of the letter is taken from one (or perhaps more) of Cyril's letters. The patriarch circulating the epistle, in all probability, is not Cyril. It remains to explain why a patriarch (and who) circulated a festal letter without composing an original pastoral text and to be vigilant for other evidence pointing to that direction.

Letters –unlike most other genres that originally served another purpose and are customarily collected and published, like homilies or other speeches– come from a written prototype. Thus, festal letters offer a rare opportunity to study the actual original of a text that came down to us through the usual journey of multiple copies and complicated traditions of medieval manuscripts. Original festal letters, the equivalent of autographs, keep being discovered in papyrological collections. They can then offer us a glimpse into how far the medieval tradition has taken the original text. This is a rare privilege of this genre.

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²⁵ Külzer (2004) 10.

²⁶ Allen (2015) 188.

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