

# Flood of the Nile: New Remarks on P.Michael. 4

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## Abstract

P.Michael. 4 (MP<sup>3</sup> 2271; TM 63404) is a literary description of the inundation of the Nile and its geological consequences in the Canopus area. The aim of this paper is to present some new observations on the most problematic parts of the text delving into predominantly lexicographical peculiarities.

## Keywords

Flood of the Nile, Lexicographical notes, Plutarch

Labelled as «Flood of the Nile», the enigmatic P.Michael. 4, is today considered an ancient Greek novel fragment not without uncertainty. Despite its long publishing history,<sup>1</sup> several problems remain unsolved and there is still no general agreement as to its genre. In this paper I shall discuss some of the most problematic parts of the text from a primarily lexicographical perspective.

It seems crucial<sup>2</sup> to mention that this papyrus, although recently belonged to the Schøyen collection under the number 2931,<sup>3</sup> today is in Grasse under the possession of David Nathan-Maister, who acquired it at the Bloomsbury Auctions (2018) in London on the 10<sup>th</sup> July 2018. I would like to thank David Nathan-Maister for giving me his permission to examine the papyrus<sup>4</sup>.

The text survives in two columns on the front written along the fibres, preserved on two of the larger pieces of the papyrus scroll that perfectly match (Fr. 1). Three smaller pieces (Fr. 2, 3, 4)

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<sup>1</sup> The text has been edited by Drescher (1949, 17-20), Crawford (1955, 10-13), Merkelbach (1958, 112-114), Bernard (1970, 225-228), West (1973, 75-77), Santoni (1991, 101-120), Stramaglia (1993, 7-15), López Martínez (1998, 238-249), and Stephens / Winkler (1995, 451-460).

<sup>2</sup> Clackson, cataloguing the Coptic manuscripts of the British Library and the Cambridge University Library, in her report (1994, 223-226) of the Michaelides manuscripts in these institutions had noticed a general lack of information of the whereabouts of the manuscripts of this collection.

<sup>3</sup> See [<https://www.schoyencollection.com/palaeography-collection-introduction/greek-book-scripts/greek-uncial/ms-2931>].

<sup>4</sup> Images of the papyrus can be found at [<https://auctions.dreweatts.com/auction-024/itemDetails/716/252836>] or [<https://www.schoyencollection.com/palaeography-collection-introduction/greek-book-scripts/greek-uncial/ms-2931>].

contain some letters, but their poor condition does not permit to relate them to the larger pieces.<sup>5</sup> The back is blank. Fr. 1 preserves thirty-five almost entirely preserved lines written in col. I and the fragmentary beginnings of twenty-two lines in col. II.<sup>6</sup>

The handwriting is a round capital of a professional book-hand, yet giving the impression of informality. The closest paleographical parallel seems MP<sup>3</sup> 1414.1 (P.Laur. IV 134 + P.Oxy. III 454 + PSI II 119)<sup>7</sup>, which contains Plato, *Gorgias* 471 d 4-472 b 8, 507 b 8-508 d 6, 522 b 5-526 a 6, assigned to the later 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. A.D. The hand is remarkably similar, bilinearity is emphasized by round blobs on feet of verticals, while only the diamond shaped φ and ψ protrude below and above the lines. The same δ can be seen with extended base line, ε with a high cross bar its top often connecting to the end of the cross bar, and a deep μ. Also exceptionally resembling is the visual layout of the column, which gives an impression of being compressed horizontally and thus elongated vertically, with additional line fillers<sup>8</sup> to create a flush-right orientation.<sup>9</sup>

The fragment is a geographical description of the inundation of the Nile, delving into its geological and hydrological consequences and their measurement, particularly in the Canopic area of the Nile Delta. The composition and the style of the text go beyond a simple account of this geographical event by using highly metaphorical language, unusual syntax, and exceptional words. Whenever there is an opportunity, the author transcends the concrete to metaphorically describe the geological changes that the Nile caused in the Canopus area in Egypt. The river not simply «drives a great amount of crop» to the Earth, but it «escorts abundant Demeter in procession» (ll. 7-8 Δήμητρα πομπεύει πολλ[ή]ν), it not «surrounded» Canopus, but it «embraced» it (ll. 17-18 ἡσπάσατο), and descending towards an accumulation of mud it has not solely «united it», but it «wove together with it» (ll. 19-20 συνύφηεν). Special attention has been given to select the aesthetically most attractive and the functionally most accurate vocabulary, even if it involved using surprisingly rare words.

P.Michael. 4

11 x 25 cm

Late second century

<sup>5</sup> Some editors (Santoni 1991; Stramaglia 1993; Stephens / Winkler 1995) provide a different number of fragments, as they have unified Fr. 1 and 2, which we do not follow here, as explained in detail below.

<sup>6</sup> The second column has been transcribed by Drescher (1949), Crawford (1955), Merkelbach (1958), Santoni (1991), Stramaglia (1993) and López Martínez (1998).

<sup>7</sup> For the images, see P.Laur. IV Pl. 99 (or [<http://www.psi-online.it/documents/plaur;4;134>]); Turner-Parsons (1987, no. 62); PSI II Pl. 2 (or [<http://www.psi-online.it/documents/psi;2;119>]). See also Crisci in Cavallo et al. (1998, 107-108), Pl. 22.

<sup>8</sup> The line fillers are horizontal traces in PSI II 119, while in P.Michael. 4 these have the form of a *diple*. For other signs of P.Michael. 4, see McNamee 1992, Pl. 3. Raised dots occur in the original papyrus after λεγόμενον (Fr. 1, col. I, l. 15) and ἡσπάσατο (Fr. 1, col. I, l. 18), which we do not reproduce in the transcript.

<sup>9</sup> Another reminiscent handwriting of P.Michael. 4 can be found in P.Oxy. XXXIV 2689 attributed to Plutarch's *Quaestiones Graecae*, assigned to the 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. A.D. Nevertheless, this papyrus reveals slightly more serifs than in the case of our papyrus and does not have the compressed effect I mentioned in the case of the Plato manuscript.

Fr. 1, col. I

ζώδιον νη[...]βιοτευον ἔ-  
 βδομον Αἴγ[υπτί]οις ἱεροῖς  
 γρ[ά]μμασιν, ὃ κατὰ ψῆφον >  
 ἀναπεσσευόμενον ἐπιχω-  
 5 ρίαν τεσσαρεσκαίδεκα δύ-  
 νатаι πῆχ' εἰ[ς]· ὃ γ[ὰρ] ποταμὸς  
 αἰρόμενος οἰκουμέ[νη] Δή-  
 μητρα πομπεύει πολλ[ῆ]ν  
 ἐπιλιμνάζων [τ]ῷ Κανώβ[ω].  
 10 καὶ ἀναχεόμενος πολ-  
 λὰ πεδία συνωμβρεῖτο πῆ-  
 δαξι καὶ πολ[υ]λοῖς ἔλεσιν, ἔ- >  
 κόλλα, τὸν τε Κάνωβ[ο]ν ὄν-  
 τα νησ[ε]ῖδα καὶ αὐ[τ]ὸν Θῶνιν  
 15 λεγόμενον τριάκοντά τε >  
 σταδίους περιγραφόμενον,  
 Αἴγυπτίους ἐδάφεσιν ἡσπά-  
 σατο καὶ κατὰ πρόχῳσιν >  
 μελαίνης {ε}ἰλύος συνύφη- >  
 20 νεν· νῦν δ' ἐστὶν ἀκρωτή- >  
 ριον ἀμφοτερίζον Ποσει- >  
 δῶνι καὶ Νείλω· δοκεῖ δέ μοι  
 περὶ τὸν τόπον ἀνθρώπει- >  
 ος π[ρῶ]τον ἀνατεῖλα[ι] τροφή·  
 25 π[ολλο]ῖς γὰρ ἱκμαζομένη  
 ὄχετ[οῖ]ς ἡ γῆ καὶ τὸ κ[αῦμα  
 ἐντρ[έ]φει ρίζας ἀπαλά[ς] ...  
 κ[α]ὶ γλυκὺν ἀνιείσας χ[υμὸν  
 ὄθ[ε]ν καὶ βουνόμ[ο]ν  
 30 φος ἀφ' ὧν γάλα δαψ[...]  
 .....]οιτη[.]εαν[.  
 .....]υπο[.]βοταν[.  
 .....]η ταύτας ἔλε[.  
 .....]νει συνοικο[.  
 35 .....]ευσατο καὶ κρατη[.

« ... the sign, living  
 ... the seventh in Egyptian  
 hieroglyphs, which, according to  
 the local method of calculation,  
 (is) leveled up to fourteen cubits.  
 For the river, rising, escorts  
 abundant Demeter in procession  
 to the inhabited land  
 inundating Canopus.  
 And, overflowing, it used to deluge  
 many plains with fountains and  
 join these with many marshes;  
 and Canopus, which was an island,  
 also called Thonis, and of a  
 circumference of thirty stades,  
 (the river) united it with  
 the Egyptian soil in an embrace  
 and, descending towards a piling up  
 of black mud, wove together with it.  
 Now it is a promontory,  
 which borders Poseidon on the one side  
 and Nile on the other. It seems to me that  
 around this area human  
 nourishment grew for the first time.  
 The earth, in fact, bathed by  
 numerous streams, and the heat  
 nourish tender roots  
 and producing sweet juice  
 whence even grazed by cattle  
 ... from whose milk ... »

26 ὄχετ[οῖ]ς Stramaglia : [...]ε[.] Drescher : ..επ[.]c Crawford, Merkelbach, Bernand, Santoni, López Martínez : .[.]ε[.]  
 .[.]ε[.] Stephens / Winkler | 26 κ[οῖλον] Stramaglia : κ[.] Drescher, Merkelbach, Bernand : κ[.] Crawford : κ[αῦμα] Santoni,

Stephens / Winkler, López Martínez | 30 δαψ[ιλές] Drescher, Bernand : δαψιλ[ές] Crawford : δαψιλ[ές] Santoni, López Martínez, Stephens / Winkler : δαψιλές Merkelbach, Stramaglia | 31 εαν[ Drescher : ἔάν [ Crawford : ἔαν [ Santoni, López Martínez : ἔαν δὲ κα[ Merkelbach, Stramaglia, Stephens / Winkler | 32 βοταν[ Drescher, López Martínez : βοτάν[ης Crawford : βοτανάρσ[ιος] Merkelbach, Santoni in comment. : βοτανάρσ[εως]? Stramaglia : βοταν... Stephens / Winkler | 33 ελε[ Drescher : ελε[ Crawford, López Martínez : ελε.φο[ Merkelbach, Santoni in comment., Stramaglia, Stephens / Winkler

## Fr. 1, col. II

	· · ·	
	δ[	Fr. 2
5	[	· · ·
	[	]σει[
	[	]κα[
	.[	]ρ[
	ξατο[	]φο[
10	ρασθυ[	· · ·
	τασδ[	
	αποπι[	Fr. 3
	του κα[	· · ·
	ατε γαρ [	]θα[
15	γατερ[	]τι[
	ενθα[	]·ρο[
	γ[	· · ·
	[	
	. [	Fr. 4
20	ηφα[	· · ·
	λε.[	]μ[
	νω[	]σει[
	· · ·	· · ·

The most intricate part of the text, the very beginning (ll. 1-6), presents a major obstacle for its correct understanding: the compound verb ἀναπεσσεύομαι, a hapax in Greek, which appears as a participle ἀναπεσσευόμενον (l. 4) coinciding with the neuter ζώδιον (l. 1). Scholars explained this verb through its possible connection with πεσσός, following the meaning provided by the LSJ A I 1 «oval-shaped stone for playing draughts». This semantic connection made the first editors think of a possible board-game involved in the context (see for instance Crawford 1955,

10-12,<sup>10</sup> Merkelbach 1956, 113,<sup>11</sup> and Santoni 1991, 106-107,<sup>12</sup> interpreting ζῳδιον as an animal figure (see Crawford 1955, 12 and Santoni 1991, 104), failing to find a general harmony with the overall content of the text.

It was West 1993, 75-77 who has made significant clarifications to these first lines by explaining that ζῳδιον (l. 1) must be understood as a hieroglyphic sign serving in a nilometer to indicate the height of the Nile alerting of an approaching flood, while no board-game was necessary to be presupposed in the text. West 1993, 76 simply translated ἀναπεσσεύομαι as «calculate», «reckon up», understanding πεσσός as a synonym of ψῆφος «calculation». The same translations can be found later in Stramaglia 1993, 9,<sup>13</sup> Stephens / Winkler 1995, 455 and López Martínez 1998, 242, as well as the DGE ἀναπεσσεύομαι s.v.

However, with regard to the testimonies of πεσσός in documentary papyri, included in Preisigke's *Wörterbuch* (cf. s.v.) and thoroughly studied by Husson in his lexicon related to the house in ancient Greece (1983, 226-230), the meaning of πεσσός is «staircase». As such, the Greeks from Egypt specifically distinguished between what we call «ladder» (κλίμαξ) and «staircase» (πεσσός), which not only in other parts of Greece but also in some modern languages are designated with the same word.<sup>14</sup> In the papyri from the 1<sup>st</sup> cent. A.D. onwards, πεσσός entirely replaces κλίμαξ for referring to the staircase of a house.<sup>15</sup> Despite that, the LSJ does not mention the meaning «staircase» s.v. πεσσός, but only s.v. κλίμαξ A I 2.

Furthermore, it seems relevant that staircases, along with columns and wells, were one of the most common ways of constructing a nilometer. According to Bonneau 1976, 1-11, these staircases were built with a covering structure made of large stones in form of a covered corridor running from any part of a temple and descending in a straight line or in different angles down to the river bed, in such way that the access to the Nile seemed an actual doorway. Given the context of a nilometer and the flood of the Nile, I find more convincing this semantic relation with πεσσός rather than those suggested previously. In consequence, πεσσός meaning «stair», «staircase», or even «step», «stair-step», «level», could lead to a translation of the participle ἀναπεσσευόμενον as «risen up to», thus «the sign [...] according to the local method of calculation, (is) risen up to fourteen cubits<sup>16</sup>».

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<sup>10</sup> Crawford believed that πήγεις (l. 6) was a figure used in a game, understanding the participle ἀναπεσσευόμενον as «moved in a game of pessos» and the phrase κατὰ ψῆφον meaning «according to the throw».

<sup>11</sup> Merkelbach following the same interpretation, translates the participle in a figurative way: «beim Würfeln».

<sup>12</sup> Santoni states «il verbo dovrebbe significare, conservando il riferimento alle pedine da gioco», translating «mosso, spinto in alto, come una pedina».

<sup>13</sup> However, Stramaglia 1993, 11 favours Santoni's semantical connection.

<sup>14</sup> See for instance Spanish «escalera» or Russian лестница.

<sup>15</sup> This is also confirmed by searches of the DDbDP, HGV and TM.

<sup>16</sup> Fourteen cubits were one of the most commonly marked heights on nilometers, since it generally marked a more or less adequate flood (see Bonneau 1971, 51-53). However, depending on the different areas of Egypt a Nile of fourteen cubits would mean too low, producing famine, such as Elephantine (see Bonneau 1971, Pl. 4), while near to the Mediterranean,

The interpretation becomes problematic again in l. 25, where the participle ἰκμαζομένη has been understood in very much divergent ways. The LSJ provides three possible meanings for this extremely rare verb<sup>17</sup>: (I) = ἰκμαίνω «moisten», (II) «filter through», «ooze», (III) «evaporate moisture», «dry up».

In the context of the papyrus it has been interpreted by Crawford 1955, 13 and Stephens / Winkler 1993, 457, 460<sup>18</sup> as «dried out», which scarcely results in an understandable context: ἰκμαζομένη ... ἡ γῆ καὶ τὸ κ[αῦμα] ἐντρ[έ]φει ῥίζας ἀπαλάς «for the land being dried out ... and the [heat] nourishes many tender shoots».<sup>19</sup>

I incline towards Stramaglia's interpretation 1993, 7-15, who reads ἰκμαζομένη ὄχετ[οί]ς ἡ γῆ καὶ τὸ κ[οῖλον] ἐντρ[έ]φει ῥίζας ἀπαλάς «la terra (è) bagnata infatti da numerosi canali, ed il (suo) [incavo] alimenta radici tenere». This not only yields a better understanding of the context, I find it barely conceivable how dryness can serve as nourishment for plants, but also the papyrus reads quite clearly the letters, which have been dotted by Stramaglia in ὄχετ[οί]ς. This adds another argument in favour of understanding the verb ἰκμάζω here as «moisten».

Additionally, I would raise objections to whether in Greek ἰκμάζω had the proposed meaning «dry up» by LSJ III, which, although could express its consequence, is not necessarily equivalent to «evaporate moisture». The sense «dry up» would be solely based on two testimonies. On the one hand, in Plutarch's *Principle of the cold* (954 E 10), the codices<sup>20</sup> which contain this word have been emended to ἐξικμάζω «dissectate» by Turnebus.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Hesychius glosses the verb with two different meanings depending on the voice. The inferred meaning would only occur in the active; note that even this appears (ed. Latte 1966, s.v.) with the sign of a *crux*: †ἰκμάζειν· κατασκελετεύειν (LSJ «reduce to a skeleton»).

As mentioned above (see n. 18), ἰκμάζω is among the most unusual words of this papyrus with only fifteen instances in Greek. I must emphasize the infrequency of this word, due to the fact that

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which is the area affected according to the text of this papyrus, fourteen cubits or even lower would suppose an excessive inundation (see Bonneau's chapter «valeur des hauteurs repérées aux nilomètres» 1991, 48-59).

<sup>17</sup> Only fifteen instances appear in TLG's full corpus, out of which only three are middle-passive, while DDbDP and Packhum show no testimonies of the word.

<sup>18</sup> Although the text has been later edited by López-Martínez 1998, the translation does not follow the aforementioned editors' suggestions.

<sup>19</sup> Stephens / Winkler's translation (1995, 457).

<sup>20</sup> ἰκμασθ. J α ἰκμαθ. O.

<sup>21</sup> See the edition of Hubert / Pohlenz (1955). This emendation seems unnecessary, as in the passive (ἰκμασθέντος) the verb could be understood as «evaporated»: ἀήρ μὲν γὰρ ἐξ ἑαυτοῦ πολλάκις φλόγας ἀναδίδωσι καὶ ζεῖ καὶ διαστράπτει πυρούμενος· τῷ δ' ὑγρῷ τροφῇ χρῆται τὸ θερμόν· οὐ γὰρ τὸ στερεὸν ἀλλὰ τὸ νοτερόν τοῦ ξύλου καυστόν ἐστιν· ἐξικμασθέντος δὲ τούτου, τὸ στερεὸν καὶ ξηρὸν ἀπολείπεται τέφρα γινόμενον. (Ed. Hubert / Pohlenz 1955) «But the air many times darts forth flame from itself; and being once set on fire, it grows fluid and flashes out in lightning. Heat also feeds upon moisture; for it is not the solid part of the wood, but the moist and oily part, that is combustible; which being consumed, the solid and dry is left behind in the ashes». (Tr. Goodwin 1874).

there are also two other words which stand out because of their rareness and coincide in that they have been employed by Plutarch.

The verb ἐπιλιμνάζω, «inundate», «overflow», which appears as a participle ἐπιλιμνάζων (l. 9), only shows ten very late entries in the TLG, not registered by DDbDP or Packhum. The earliest testimony is from Plutarch (*Caes.* 25): πεδία χειμάρροις ἐπιλελιμνασμένα. Later examples are from Christian writers, such as Eusebius (*Eus.*, *DE* 4. 5. 7, *E. Th.* 2. 17. 6, *LC* 12. 4) or Eustathius Antiochenus (*Eust. Ant.*, *Hex.* M18. 780), while the remaining four are from the 8<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> cent. A.D.

The compound συνομβρέω, «deluge with rain», occurs only in this papyrus (συνωμβρέτω l. 11) and in a fragment by Plutarch (*Plut.*, *Fr.* 157. 120), but nowhere else. Note that the verb in Plutarch appears as a form of συνομβρίζω and in a very similar context: ῥεῦμα ἦλθε πολλὸ καὶ συνώμβρισε καὶ κατέκλυσε τὰ πάντα.

The closing lines of the text, as expected, are almost incomprehensible. Specifically, in l. 32 editors proposed the reconstruction of a *hapax legomenon*: either βοτανάρσ[ιος] (Merkelbach 1958, 113 and Santoni 1991, 103 n. 9, 117 n. 86) or the gen. βοτανάρσ[εως] of a noun \*βοτάναρσις (Stramaglia 1993, 15; Stephens / Winkler 1995, 464). According to Stramaglia (l. c.) \*βοτάναρσις could be a variant of βοτανήρσις, «harvest of plants», which occurs in PMG IV, 287.

Nevertheless, I prefer to simply read βοταν[, following the papyrus, which, most probably, could be reconstructed as βοτάν[η / βοτάν[ης. This seems more accurate, because, in order to have the text that the later editors printed out (Santoni 1991; Stramaglia 1993; Stephens / Winkler 1995, l. c.), we would need to assume that Fr. 2 fits exactly at the end of ll. 30-33 of Fr. 1, col. I, which is questionable for ll. 31-33, and can be excluded for l. 30 because the papyrus, reads the sequence *cei* and is incompatible with *λec*, which would be necessary to read *δαψιλές* without having to restore it in square brackets in l. 30. I would also regard the text of the following three lines questionable as printed out in the aforementioned latest editions, since in l. 31 *κα* has not been completed as a word, in l. 32 βοτανάρσ[εως] which would be a genitive of \*βοτάναρσις, as previously noted, is unattested, and in l. 33 *φο* again has not been completed to suggest any word.

To conclude, where paleography is concerned, I think that the professional quality of the handwriting and layout is beyond doubt and can be paralleled with manuscripts attributed to other extant authors. Recent editors (Stramaglia 1993; Stephens / Winkler 1995; López Martínez 1998)<sup>22</sup> tend to consider this text a novel fragment, suggested so by West 1973, 75, on the basis of the style

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<sup>22</sup> Santoni 1991, 118-120 is the only one who suggested the possibility of interpreting it as a paraphrase or commentary of a textual poem, an Egyptian mythological tale perhaps by Chaeremon of Alexandria (1<sup>st</sup> cent. A.D.). Previous editors (Drescher 1949, 17; Crawford 1955, 10; Bernard 1970, 225) considered it a historical or geographical text, while Merkelbach 1958 proposed as a possible author Hecataeus of Abdera.

and the subject-matter, which are both very much comparable to Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*, more concretely to passages 2. 28, a description of the Nile, 9. 22, which mentions a well that served for measuring this river, 9. 9, which emphasizes the main origins of life to be the heat in combination with humidity (for these parallels, see López Martínez 1998, 246-249). At the same time, these authors are far from being entirely convinced of this ascription: West 1973, 75 admits that other alternatives could be equally possible, Stramaglia 1993 prints out a question mark at the title «Frammento di romanzo(?)», while the compilation of Greek novel fragments by Stephens / Winkler 1995, 451-460 include it among the «ambiguous fragments» and by López Martínez 1998, 238-249 it appears labelled as «incertum».

In this paper, without excluding the possibility of regarding the text as a novel fragment, I shall like to emphasize the revealing presence of three words, almost unknown in Greek, which coincide to have been used by Plutarch, who is contemporaneous with this papyrus. Although the similarities could be merely coincidental, they could also be explained if this were actually a text of Plutarch – one of the non-surviving parts of the *Greek Questions*, for example – or if the text were one that Plutarch was particularly familiar with, or a common source on Egypt.

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