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ATHENAIS EUDOCIA — DIVINE OR CHRISTIAN WOMAN?¹

Scholars investigating the political and religious history of the Eastern part of the Roman Empire in the 5th century have devoted a considerable amount of attention to the Empress Athenais Aelia Eudocia, stressing the romanticized aspects of her marriage with the Emperor Theodosius II, her influence on his politics in the fields of religion and culture, or her role in the religious conflicts of the mid-5th century². On the other hand, her literary activity has not been appreciated very highly by the scholars, who charge it with being imitative³. For a more independent view of the matter, it is worth taking a closer look at the literary work of the first known poet-empress.

The subject of this article is the poem (*ekphrasis*) which was found in the ruins of the Roman baths at Hammat Gader. The town is situated 8 km east of the Sea of Galilee, near the Yarmouk River. The baths in question were located in the southern section of the town, between the Roman theatre and the riverbank. In Roman times,

¹ I would like to thank dr. A. Twardecki and dr. hab. T. Polański for their assistance and all the valuable advice I had received during my work on this article.

² The fundamental works on the Empress Athenais Eudocia: F. Gregorovius, *Athenais: Geschichte einer byzantinischen Kaiserin*, Leipzig 1882; Al. Cameron, *The Empress and the Poet: Paganism and Politics at the Court of Theodosius II*, YCS 27 (1981), pp. 217–289; K.G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses. Women and Imperial Domination in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley 1982, pp. 112–130, 175–228; R. Scharf, *Die Apfel Affäre oder gab es einen Kaiser Arcadius II?*, BZ 83 (1990), pp. 435–450; E. Sirkonen, *An Honorary Epigram for the Empress Eudokia in the Athenian Agora*, Hesperia 59 (1990), pp. 371–374; J. Burman, *The Athenian Empress Eudokia* [in:] *Post-Herulian Athens. Papers and Monographs of the Finnish Institute at Athens*, vol. 1, P. Castrén (ed.), Athens 1991, pp. 63–87.

³ The first publisher of her works was A. Ludwich, *Eudocia Augusta carminum reliquiae*, Königsberg 1893.

In recent years, several editions with critical commentary have been published: M.D. Usher, *Homeric Stichings: the Homeric Centos of the Empress Eudocia*, Roman and Littlefield 1998; M.D. Usher, *Homero-centones Eudociae Augustae*, Stuttgart, Leipzig 1999; *Centos Homérique*, SChrét 437, ed. A.L. Rey, Paris 1998; *Homero-centones*, CCSG 62, R. Schembra (ed.), Leuven 2007.

Hammat Gader was a well-developed municipality, with a theatre, a synagogue, a church, a number of inns, paved streets, as well as a quarter with houses of wealthy citizens. The development was undoubtedly due to a great number of visitors from all the regions of the Empire coming to take advantage of the healing effects of the baths water. The baths complex was erected in the mid-2nd century AD, during the reign of Antoninus Pius (138–161), as attested by some coins struck under his reign, which have been found at the site. The first reconstruction of the compound was carried out following the earthquake in 363, which the Christians ascribed to God's wrath after the Emperor Julian Apostate had permitted the Jews to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem. Major renovation works were subsequently performed in the mid-5th century to repair the damage caused by several earthquakes in the early years of the Emperor Marcian's reign. During Anastasius' reign (491–518), more works were carried out at the baths. The last works were done in 662. They would have the most significant impact on the appearance of the complex: fountain tops, statues, and mosaics were demolished in all of the halls, richly decorated lintels were demolished as well, whereas the overall area of the complex was reduced by filling in as many as four of the existing pools, leaving only the largest three ones. The baths continued to be in service in the Arab period and would be completely destroyed in consequence of the earthquake in 749. In the following years, the ruins became a shelter used by people and animals. It also served as a source of building material. The baths buildings occupied an area of 3,500 m² and the wall heights ranged from 8 to 18 m. Large windows provided ample lighting in the bathing rooms. The baths used water coming from six springs: one at a temperature of 52°C, four — 25 to 42°C, and one cold spring. The bath-house complex was fitted with an intricate system of channels, lead service pipes and drainpipes, as well as some special devices for mixing hot and cold water. The archaeologists found 7 pools, situated in 6 chambers of various shape and size. There is no extant written evidence that would be of assistance in attempting to recreate the appearance and decor of the particular halls. We can only rely on the findings of the archaeological research conducted there in the years 1979–1982 under the direction of Yizhrak Hirschfeld. However, the present ruined condition of the complex makes it impossible to recreate the exact appearance of the rooms, their decorations and usage⁴.

The empress Eudocia's inscription was engraved in a block of grey marble, 71 x 185 cm. The slab was found cracked and slightly damaged; the text was almost complete, with some missing parts of the work in the last three verses. The inscription slab was discovered in Room D (also called the Hall of Fountains). It was set in the pavement not far from the entrance, and, as the archaeologists believe, it had remained in the same location from the beginning. The contents of the inscription

⁴ Y. Hirschfeld, *The Roman Baths of Hammat Gader*, Jerusalem 1997; Y. Hirschfeld, E. Cohen, *The Reconstruction of the Roman Baths at Hammat Gader*, *Aram* 4 (1992), pp. 283–290; L. Di Segni, *Greek Inscriptions of the Bath House in Hammath Gader*, *Aram* 4 (1992), pp. 307–318; Y. Hirschfeld, G. Solar, *The Roman Thermae at Hammat Gader: Preliminary Report of Three Seasons of Excavations*, *IEJ* 31 (1981), pp. 197–219; *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, M. Avi-Yonah (ed.), vol. II, London 1990, cols. 496–473.

were published by Judith Green and Yoram Tsafrir⁵, who presented the Greek text along with an English translation and their own interpretation of the text.

In order to understand the analysis of the poem further on, let us take note of the fact that the Hall of Fountains was the largest chamber of this complex and one of the largest Roman rooms discovered in Palestine. It was 13.9 m wide and 29.7 m long, and the total length with the two wings was 53.3 m. There was a large pool with cool water in the middle (9 m x 24 m, 1.3 m deep; there were steps situated in the four corners of the pool). Along the two longer sides there were 32 fountains, which the archaeologists date back to the mid-5th century. The fountains varied in size, but each one was surmounted with a human or animal mask of marble, which served as water outlets. Along the two longer walls of the room there were five niches, the middle one was semicircular, while the other four were rectangular. The niches contained bathtubs also added in the mid-5th century. This hall had no less than ten entrances. Cold water in the pool indicates that the room was a *frigidarium*⁶.

Let us now have a look at the Greek:

1. Εὐδοκίας Αὐγούστης

Πολλὰ μὲν ἐν βιότῳ κ(αὶ) ἀπίρονα θαύματ' ὄπωπα,
τίς δέ κεν ἐξέρει, πόσα δὲ στόματ' ὦ κλίβαν' ἐσθλέ,
σὸν μένος, οὐτιδανὸς γεγαῶς βροτός; Ἄλλά σε μᾶλλον(v)

5. ὠκεανὸν πυρόεντα νέον θέμις ἐστὶ καθεῖσθαι.

Παιάνα καὶ γενέτην γλυκερῶν δοτήρα ῥεέθρων.
Ἐκ σέο τίκτεται οἶδμα τὸ μυρίον, ἄλλυδις ἄλλη,
ὄπη μὲν ζεῖον, πῆ δ' αὖ κρυερόν τε μέσον τε.
Τετράδας ἐς πίσυρας κρηνῶν προχέεις σέο κάλλος.

10. Ἰνδῆ· Ματρώνα τε· Ῥεπέντινος· Ἥλιας ἄγνός·

Ἄντωνίνος εὖς· Δροσερὰ Γαλατία· καὶ αὐτῆ
Ἰγεία· καὶ χλιαρὰ μεγάλα· χλιαρὰ δὲ τὰ μικρά·

⁵ *Greek Inscriptions from Hammat Gader: a Poem by the Empress Eudokia and Two Buildings Inscriptions*, I EJ 32 (1982), pp. 77–95. Apart from the poem inscription, the “Hall of Fountains” also contained four other, later, inscriptions. Three of them, found near the niches, mention Mucius Alexander of Caesarea, the governor of Palestina Secunda under Anastasius, as donator. As one of the inscriptions attests, he co-financed, with the Emperor’s assistance, the reconstruction of this chamber. The fourth one, dated 662, informs of the renovation of this part of the bath-house. The baths complex also contains over 70 Greek inscriptions, providing a substantial amount of excellent research material. The inscriptions make it clear that patients from various parts of the Empire, from Gaza, Tyre, Bostra, Perge in Pamphilia, as well as representatives of diverse social circles and professions, came to Hammat Gader. Of course, the most eminent visitor was the empress Aelia Eudocia, but the place was also frequented by representatives of aristocratic and official elites, high-ranking officers, and other officials, e.g., a certain *agens in rebus* from Gaza. One of the notable visitors in the mid-5th century was Flavius Zeno, an influential patrician and commander active in the later years of Theodosius II’s reign. The inscription which confirms his presence at the *thermae* was found inside Room C, on the floor. Besides, the inscriptions provide us with a list of representatives of various occupations who had visited Hammat Gader, mostly performers and artists: actresses, dancers, a juggler, or a sculptor. The presence of the former may be attributed to the theatre at Hammat Gader; on the inscriptions found at the bath-house, see Di Segni, *Greek Inscriptions...*, pp. 307–318.

⁶ Y. Hirschfeld, É. Cohen, *The Reconstruction of the Roman Baths...*, pp. 287–288.

Μαργαρίτης· κλίβανος μαλέος· Ἴνδῆ τε· καὶ ἄλλη
Ματρῶνα· βριαρὴ τε Μονάστρια· κ' ἢ Πατριάρχου.

15. Ὠδεῖν οὖσι τεδὸν μένος ὄβριμον ἠνεκ[ἔς ἀίν.]
ἀλλὰ θεὸν κλυτόμητιν ἀείσο[μαι- υ υ - -]
εἰς εὐεργεσίην μερόπων τε χρ[υ - υ υ -]

And this is my rendition of the poem:⁷

1. Eudocia's Augusta
In my life I have seen many extraordinary things,
But who, whose mouths, will express, O noble source,
Your might, such a man cannot be found. But rather
5. It is proper to call you a new fiery ocean,
Paeon and a giver of sweet water streams.
From you are born countless streams, flowing out in all directions.
One of them hot, one cold, the other tepid,
You pour forth what is of most beauty in you, four springs set
Into four tetrads.
10. Indian and Matrona, Repentinos, Elijah the Holy,
Antoninus the Good, dewy Galatea and
Hygeia herself, the large warm and the small warm,
The Pearl, the old source, Indian, and another
Matrona, the Mighty and Monastria, the spring of the Patriarch.
15. You always give your strength to the ailing.
I shall glorify God famous for His abilities
For this beneficence to mortals ... rendered?

It can be seen that the poem has its characteristic signature, the empress' name and her title Augusta. There are crosses engraved on either side. The presence of the crosses would not have been surprising at all, except for the fact that the Emperor Theodosius II had forbidden depicting the cross on any pavement plates or plaques (in 427)⁸. The inscription plate in question would have been thus in violation of this particular injunction. However, it does not appear likely that Eudocia had intended to violate the prohibition enacted by her husband. It is more probable that the inscription as well as the poem itself had been engraved already after the empress' departure⁹.

The second verse, i.e., the first verse of the poem proper, is an expression of rapture over the wonders of nature which, as we can imagine, will be surpassed by the impression left by the place to which the poem is dedicated. There can be no doubt that the empress is the lyrical subject of the poem and the work depicts Eudocia's impressions of her visit there. It is a typical lyrical figure of speech.

⁷ It is obvious that the poem consisted of these 16 verses, but since the first editors Green and Tsafirir begin the numbering with the author's name and title, I have decided to comply with it for the sake of clarity.

⁸ *Corpus iuris civilis*, II: *Codex Justinianus* I, VIII, 1.

⁹ J. Green, Y. Tsafirir, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

In the third verse, the poetess wants to arouse our curiosity, as we still do not know the object of such an intense rapture. At the very end of the verse, she invokes “noble Clibanus”.

At this particular point, my interpretation differs from that offered by Green and Tsafirir. These scholars construe the term to refer to a baking oven and thus, in the poem, to a section of the baths where the hot and cold water streams would be mixed, whereas the name itself had drawn on the shape reminiscent of a baking oven or a high temperature of the water¹⁰.

In my opinion, the word *klibanos* is used here in a metaphorical sense and refers to a source of water, perhaps the warmest one, where the water would reach a temperature of 52°C. Such an interpretation renders the following verses logical. It is hard to imagine that the empress would have referred to a device in the form of a baking oven as Paean (either a song of triumph or in reference to Apollo’s appellation Paean, i.e., a healer). On the contrary, the hot spring is this fiery ocean, Paean (as it is both powerful and therapeutic); it gives rise to all the lesser streams that are directed to the halls. This reasoning is confirmed by the archaeological findings, which indicate that the water from the hottest spring was channelled into the pools inside the baths. On the other hand, the cold water was directed from the source situated at the back of the baths into the Hall of Fountains as well as all the fountains in the other rooms by means of lead pipes. This is how the spring waters were mixed. We know that the water temperatures were different in each individual pool¹¹.

An interpretation problem arises in verse 9; according to Green and Tsafirir, “four springs set into four tetrads” refer to the sixteen fountains in Room D¹². However, as this particular room contained 32 fountains, the passage makes reference, in my opinion, to the four water intakes, with their outlets perhaps fitted with some decorative elements, providing the water into the bathing halls from one main source.

There are some more interpretation differences in the verses 10 to 14. Green and Tsafirir believe that the names mentioned in this passage refer to the individual rooms of the *thermae* and are derived from some characteristic features or objects, which reflects how Eudocia had remembered those rooms¹³.

I think that the names may refer to the sixteen outlets in each room and are connected with the four tetrads from the previous verse. The names may have been derived from the sculpted ornamentation of the water outlet or the name of the founder of one of the rooms where that water outlet had been situated.

It is noteworthy that India and Matrona are mentioned twice. Most probably, the names refer to the women of which two must have possessed some features characteristic of Indian women. The appearance of Antoninus the Good, as Antoninus Pius is referred to in the sources, is obvious, as the oldest part of the baths, i.e., the Hall

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 83–85; SEG 32, n. 1502.

¹¹ Y. Hirschfeld, G. Solar, *The Roman Thermae at Hammat Gader: Preliminary Report...*, pp. 197–205.

¹² J. Green, Y. Tsafirir, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 86–89.

of Fountains, had been erected during his reign. It is therefore natural that this water outlet was named after Antoninus. Green and Tsafirir admit that they have a problem with the identification of Repentinus; they suppose he was one of the donators and a statue or an inscription in his honour must have been placed in one of the rooms¹⁴. The name Repentinus is mentioned in the sources twice, in reference to father and son. The father, Sextus Cornelius Repentinus, was a quaestor and praetorian prefect under the emperors Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius; he came from Scillium near Carthage. In my opinion, there can be no coincidence here and Repentinus may have supervised the works ordered by the emperor. As a result, another water outlet was named after him.

“Elijah the Holy” is most likely a reference to the Old Testament prophet born at Tishbe in Gilead¹⁵. In the latter half of the 6th century, Antoninus of Placentia¹⁶ called Hammat Gader “the baths of Elijah”. He also noted that lepers took baths in one of the rooms. “Elijah the Holy”, mentioned in Eudocia’s poem, may have referred to the water outlet in this particular hall. We have the least difficulty with the mythological figures “dewy Galatea” and “Hygeia” — a nereid and the goddess of health, respectively — whose presence among the names mentioned in the poem is definitely justified.

The names that follow, i.e., the large warm, the small warm, and the old source, convince me even more that the empress could not have referred to any statues or mosaics, but to the aforementioned water outlets. The following two names, i.e. “the Pearl” and “the Mighty” (Green and Tsafirir render the latter name as “Briara”, as they consider it as a proper name¹⁷, even though it is not mentioned in any written source) were most probably derived from some characteristic features, which are no longer identifiable due to the devastation of the complex.

Finally, the poem mentions “Monastria” (“the Nun”) and “the Patriarch”. Green and Tsafirir associate these two names with the empress Eudocia, as they believe that she had participated in the restoration of one of the halls. The room would be named “the Nun”, most likely in recognition of the empress (already separated from her husband for many years). The two scholars link “the Patriarch” with Bishop Juvenal of Jerusalem, who had reportedly visited Hammat Gader along with the empress and founded one of the parts of the *thermae* (hence, this room would be named in his honour). This is the reason why, in their opinion, these halls of the bath-house, named “the Nun” and “the Patriarch”, were intended to be used by Christians only¹⁸. Another interpretation of the title Patriarch has been proposed by the Israeli scholar E. Habas¹⁹. He rejects the possibility that one of the parts of the *thermae* had been

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 87.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 88.

¹⁶ *Itinerarium* 10, ed. P. Geyer, Turnhout 1965.

¹⁷ J. Green, Y. Tsafirir, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 90. For an account of Juvenal’s activity and the empress Eudocia’s relations with the bishop, see E. Honigman, *Juvenal of Jerusalem*, DOP 5 (1950), pp. 209–279.

¹⁹ *A Poem by the Empress Eudokia: a Note on the Patriarch*, IEJ 46 (1996), pp. 108–119.

named in honour of a Christian clergyman and asserts that one of the halls at Hammat Gader was named after a Jewish religious leader of the mid-4th century.

I think that a different interpretation is possible. The sources make no mention of Eudocia's alleged vows of chastity (as suggested by Green and Tsafirir) or that she considered herself a nun because of the presence of many clergymen, in particular the monks of the Judean Desert associated with Euthymios, in her entourage. Undoubtedly, the authors were misled by the figures of Eudocia's three sisters-in-law, especially Pulcheria²⁰, who had indeed taken her vows of chastity. It is more likely that the passage makes reference to one of the Old Testament fathers and these names, as well as "the Nun", are derived from the history and tradition of this particular place.

The verses 15 to 17 are of a different, more religious, nature. The empress invokes God (although without any explicit reference by name) and it is very doubtful if she would have meant any of the pagan gods of medicine: Asklepios or Apollo. It is the Christian God who manifests His power and wisdom at this place of healing and recovery. This is exactly why the poem of Hammat Gader ought to be treated as a religious work, as attested not only by the crosses around the empress' name and title, most certainly engraved along with the poem itself, but also its final verses.

We have no indications or clues that would allow us to determine the date of the inscription. The author of the poem is the empress Aelia Eudocia, the consort of the Emperor Theodosius II, who reigned in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire in the years 408–450. She had stayed in the Holy Land twice: in 438 and in the years 442–460. The latter presence was much longer and thus more productive in terms of the empress' founding activity throughout Palestine²¹.

The scholars investigating the history of Hammat Gader find arguments in favour of both the former and the latter dates of the empress' presence in the Holy Land as regards the origin of the inscription. It results from the already noted identification of the Patriarch mentioned in verse 14 with a specific historical figure. Therefore, the scholars²² opting for 438 as the year of the inscription's origin believe that Eudocia had arrived at Hammat Gader together with Bishop Cyril of Alexandria, who subsequently consecrated the empress' foundation. The proponents of the later dating²³ hold that the Patriarch in question is Bishop Juvenal of Jerusalem and in view of the religious discord following his affirmation of the decrees of Chalcedon and the fact that the empress was an opponent of the bishop (the reconciliation took

²⁰ K.G. Holum, *op. cit.*, pp. 79–112.

²¹ H. Vincent, F.M. Abel, *Jérusalem. Recherches de topographie, d'archéologie et d'histoire*, vol. II, Paris 1926, pp. 747–752, 909–912; E. Clark, *Claims on the Bones of Saint Stephen: the Partisans of Melania and Eudokia*, *Church History* 51 (1982), pp. 141–156; E.D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire AD 312–460*, New York 1982, pp. 221–249; C. Horn, *Asceticism and Christological Controversy in Fifth-Century Palestine. The Career of Peter the Iberian*, New York 2006, pp. 73–76, 97–100, 115, 124–125, 139, 297, 316, 369, 373.

²² L. Meimaris, *Duo Epigrafes tes Augustes Eudokias (423–460) apo ten Emmatha ta Gadara kai apo ta Jerosolima*, *Theologia* 54 (1983), pp. 395.

²³ J. Green, Y. Tsafirir, *op. cit.*, p. 89; L. Di Segni, *Greek Inscriptions...*, p. 313.

place in 456), these scholars fix the time of Eudocia's visit and the making of the inscription to a period between the years 456 and 458 (the latter date is the year of Juvenal's death).

The earlier date, i.e. the year 438, cannot be ruled out. On her return trip to Constantinople, the empress had chosen to travel by land and she may have visited Hammat Gader. However, it is more likely that Eudocia had visited the *thermae* during her second sojourn in the Holy Land. She had stayed there for as many as 18 years and taken active part in the social and economic development of the region, notably through her numerous foundations and contributions. I do not agree with the determination of the dating as based on Juvenal and the narrowing of the arrival date to a period of two years only. It is true that the empress Eudocia had taken active part in the religious controversies following the Council of Chalcedon (451). Bishop Juvenal, who had subscribed the decrees of the Council, was not admitted back into Jerusalem upon his return from Chalcedon. The siege continued for several months. The empress and the clergy joined the opponents of Juvenal. After the misfortunes that had afflicted her family, she became reconciled with the followers of Chalcedon in 456.²⁴ In the sources composed past the year 456, there is no mention of any collaboration between the empress and Bishop Juvenal. She harboured a personal resentment towards Juvenal. It would not prevent her from coming to terms with the pro-Chalcedonian party, but she would not begin to co-operate with the Bishop himself.

As for the date of the inscriptions' origin, let us take note of one of the inscriptions discovered in the so-called Room C. It is dated back to the early 450s; it says that many men and children died at the baths as a result of the destruction caused by an earthquake, after which the baths would have to be rebuilt. On the basis of this information, L. Di Segni dates the empress Eudocia's sojourn at Hammat Gader to a period between *ca.* 455 and 460; it was then that the empress would have composed the poem, but we do not know if she had witnessed the placement of the inscription stone²⁵. Di Segni's dating is confirmed by John Malalas' account, according to which several earthquakes had occurred in that area in the early years of the Emperor Marcian's reign (450–457)²⁶. It is further corroborated by the results of the archaeological research: reconstruction works took place at the *thermae* in the mid-5th century. Among other things, Room D was restored, fountains were installed and bathtubs added inside the niches.

We have no direct evidence for the empress Aelia Eudocia's financial participation in the reconstruction of the baths at Hammat Gader. There exists, however, some indirect proof of her contribution: let us notice the fact that the inscription had been found in the Hall of Fountains, near the entrance to this room. It was the only roofless hall in the entire complex, thus ensuring proper visibility of the inscription slab situated at the floor level. Let us also note another clue: the *dativus*

²⁴ E. Honigman, *op. cit.*, pp. 247–259.

²⁵ L. Di Segni, *Greek Inscriptions...*, pp. 312–314.

²⁶ John Malalas, *Chronografia* 367, CFHB 35 (2000).

possessivus in the poem's heading ("Eudocia's Augusta") may have been intended to convey a double meaning. We have seen that the empress played with the poem's composition and language: sixteen verses, sixteen water outlets. Is it not possible then that the heading thus suggests it is not only the poem itself that belongs to the empress but also the hall had been renovated with a substantial contribution on her part? It is exactly the spot where the inscription had been installed that I think is the evidence that Eudocia had participated in the restoration of the baths, in particular of the Hall of Fountains.