

SCRIPTA CLASSICA ISRAELICA

YEARBOOK OF THE ISRAEL SOCIETY
FOR THE PROMOTION OF CLASSICAL STUDIES

VOLUME XLIII

2024

ISSN 0334-4509 (PRINT)

2731-2933 (ONLINE)

The appearance of this volume has been made possible by the support of

Bar-Ilan University
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
The Open University
Tel Aviv University
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PUBLISHED BY
THE ISRAEL SOCIETY FOR THE PROMOTION OF CLASSICAL STUDIES
<http://www.israel-classics.org>

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Price \$50

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Camera-ready copy produced by the editorial staff of *Scripta Classica Israelica*
Printed in Israel by Magnes Press, Jerusalem

SCRIPTA CLASSICA ISRAELICA

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OMONYA on Late Antique Wedding Objects

Dimitrios Papanikolaou

Abstract: The paper is concerned with a group of published late antique wedding objects bearing the Greek inscription OMONYA. The paper argues that the curious unorthographical spelling is nothing more than a specimen of the postclassical (Hellenistic and Roman-era) vernacular spelling of the oi diphthong as an υ, which ceased to exist only during the eleventh to twelfth centuries. The analysis presents the rings as valuable testimonies to this pronunciation since the rings belong to the quite late period (sixth to early eighth century AD) when the papyrological evidence on it becomes scarce.

Keywords: late antiquity, hypsilon, oi diphthong, Greek phonetics, postclassical era.

The subject of the present paper is several published golden wedding objects (a belt and a ring) of unknown provenance, deposited at the Dumbarton Oaks Centre of Byzantine Studies,¹ and of a ring deposited at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.² These objects bear the same misspelling, a minority among late antique wedding objects which are normally inscribed impeccably as OMONOIA.³ The wedding objects contain a miniature depiction of a newly-wed couple (on the left and right-hand side of the object) bearing white tunics; at the centre, Jesus Christ is depicted. The objects have been usually dated between the sixth and the eighth centuries AD on artistic grounds—and rightly so: it is a huge question whether such a depiction of Christ would be possible after AD 730, when the Iconoclastic controversy was raging in the Eastern Roman empire. The spelling of the OMONYA objects does not change the dating of the rings. Since this spelling was current for almost thirteen centuries (see discussion later on), it cannot provide us with a *terminus post quem* or *ante quem* to date the rings. Therefore, a consideration based on the history of art (the fact that the year AD 730 was the date of the first Iconoclastic laws of Leo III, which forbade images of Christ) could provide us with the convenient and safe *terminus ante quem* for the objects and their iconography.⁴ Leaving this issue aside, the present study will focus on the curious spelling (OMONYA) of these objects.

It should be noted that the seemingly unorthographical OMONYA inscription of the Virginia and Dumbarton Oaks objects is written in phonetic script, which reflects the actual pronunciation of the diphthong oi as υ [ü] during Hellenistic and Roman times and

¹ Dumbarton Oaks Collection, acc.no. 37.33 and 47.15 respectively= Ross (1965), vol.2, pp. 37–39, 58–60).

² Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (Richmond), acc.no. 66. 37.7 = Gonosova and Kondoleon (1994), 48.

³ See discussion of all these pieces (but without analysis of the OMONYA spelling) in Walker (2001), 61–63 with nn. 15–17 and fig. 4.3–4.4; p. 66 with n. 54.

⁴ On the date of the first Iconoclastic decrees (AD 730), see Ostrogorsky (1963), 136 n.1. The OMONYA wedding objects are all dated before the Iconoclastic period: see Walker (2001), 61–63 with fig. 4.3–4.4; 72–73, nn. 15–17, and esp. pp. 61–62.

late antiquity and up to the tenth and eleventh centuries AD.⁵ It must also be noted here that a high (and ever-increasing) number of Greek papyri from the Ptolemaic period down to late antiquity, as well as inscriptions from that very same era, contain the misspelling of the diphthong *oi* as *υ*.⁶ The misspelling has to be attributed to the (then prevalent) pronunciation of the classical Greek diphthong *oi* as *υ*, which means that the diphthong pronounced [oi] during the classical period was now pronounced as [ü], a pronunciation represented by the *ypsilon* *υ* (n. 5). This pronunciation seems to have existed already during the Hellenistic period; it ceased to exist after the period to which the wedding objects are dated, namely during the tenth and eleventh centuries AD.⁷

In any case, the phonetic inscription OMONYA would be impossible to exist from the eleventh and twelfth centuries onwards, when the pronunciation of both the *oi* and the *υ* in the Greek-speaking world starts to coincide with the pronunciation of *ι*, being now both pronounced as an [i]. This is the standard pronunciation of both phonemes that persists to this day in the modern form of the language (this is, in fact, the last big evolution in Greek pronunciation, which remains henceforth almost the same: see n. 7).

Therefore, the objects under discussion have to be added to the various other pieces of evidence (inscriptions, papyri, ostraca) that testify to the postclassical (Hellenistic, Roman-era, protobyzantine) pronunciation of the classical Greek diphthong *oi* as *υ* [ü], which constituted the transitory stage towards the present pronunciation of both phonemes

⁵ On this postclassical pronunciation (incorrect according to the classical ancient Greek rules of spelling), see Schwyzer (1953), 194–96, 232–33; Kapsomenos (1953), 255–56; Blass and Debrunner (1961), 13; Debrunner and Scherer (1969), 97–99, 101; Mayser and Schmoll (1970), 87 (with older bibliography), 89–90; Gignac (1976), 197–99, 330 last remark, 331 first table; Allen (1987), 81; Petrounias (2007), 603, 605 Tables IV–V; Horrocks (2010), 162–63, 167–68, 173 (27)b. This development (class. [oi] > hell. [ü]) is most probably attested for the Boeotian dialect already at the mid-fourth century BC, whereas Boeotian shows also an early change of [oi] onto [oe], with the first intermediate change being the elimination of the pronunciation [i] inside the diphthong *oi*: see the observations of Schwyzer (1953), 194; Allen (1987), 67; 81. See the evidence of the Hellenistic pronunciation change [oi] > [ü] in the Hellenistic and Roman-era Greek papyri and inscriptions in the next note.

⁶ On papyrological evidence, see Mayser and Schmoll (1970), 89–90 (mainly concerned with Hellenistic papyri); Gignac (1976), 197–99 (Roman-era papyri, first to sixth century AD). Unfortunately, papyri may reflect only Egyptian usage, and therefore the epigraphical evidence is crucial for establishing this spelling in other regions of the Greek-speaking world. On the epigraphical evidence in Asia Minor and Athens (suggesting that the pronunciation appears in inscriptions during Roman imperial times, i.e. the second century AD), see Schweizer (1898), 80; Meisterhans and Schwyzer (1900), 58–59; Schwyzer (1953), 195, 233; Debrunner and Scherer (1969), 99; Allen (1987), 81 with n. 51, focusing his attention on the testimony of the famous inscription at the library of Pantainos in Athens (*SEG* 21, no. 500, late first to early second century AD), with *ἀνογήσεται* instead of *ἀνογιήσεται*.

⁷ On the chronological end of this pronunciation, see Schwyzer (1953), 195–96 (proposed date of change: eighth to tenth century AD); 233 (chronological map of changes in pronunciation); Debrunner and Scherer (1969), 99 ('erst um 1000 durchgesetzt'); Allen (1987), 69; Horrocks (2010), 169 (date of change: ninth to tenth century). See also the evidence provided by a satirical poem of Michael the Grammarian (eleventh century AD), who talks about the pronunciation of phoneme *υ* as [i] in rural areas, but not in Constantinople: see discussion in Lauritzen (2009) with invaluable further bibliography.

in modern Greek as [i]. In fact, the present wedding objects (with their inscription depicting the real phonetic / popular pronunciation of that period) are a valuable testimony to postclassical Greek phonetics since they probably belong to the quite late period (late sixth to early eighth century AD) when the papyrological evidence on this pronunciation becomes increasingly rarefied (n. 6), giving its place to the evidence provided by inscriptions, lexica, and literary texts.⁸ For that reason, we have to be grateful for those OMONYA inscriptions: they give us further evidence for the later (early medieval) phase of the pronunciation of *oi* as [ü], a few centuries before its gradual extinction in the face of further evolutions in Greek phonetics.

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⁸ The pronunciation seems to have well outlived the Iconoclastic period. See epigraphic evidence in Beševliev (1963), nr. 2, line 21: λπᾶ instead of λουπᾶ (it is the notorious protobulgarian / Greco-Mongolian inscription of Hambarli / Malamirovo, where the Bulgarian *khan* Krum boasts in almost vernacular Greek about his victory over Roman emperor Nicephorus I in AD 811. The orthography of the stone is almost phonetic). See also the testimony of the *Suda*, an encyclopedia of the tenth century AD, where entries beginning with *oi-* are catalogued after *τ-* entries and just before *-ὶ* entries and not as sub-entries of *ο-* (a major concession to the real phonetic value of *oi*, then being tantamount to *v*): see Adler (1935), 614–30. On the transition of *v* [ü] towards an *ι* [i] pronunciation in the eleventh century, see evidence in Lauritzen (2009), 161–68, and esp. 161–64.

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