

MARY MAGDALENE IS NOW MISSING:

A CORRECTED READING OF RAHMANI OSSUARY 701

By Stephen J. Pfann, Ph.D.

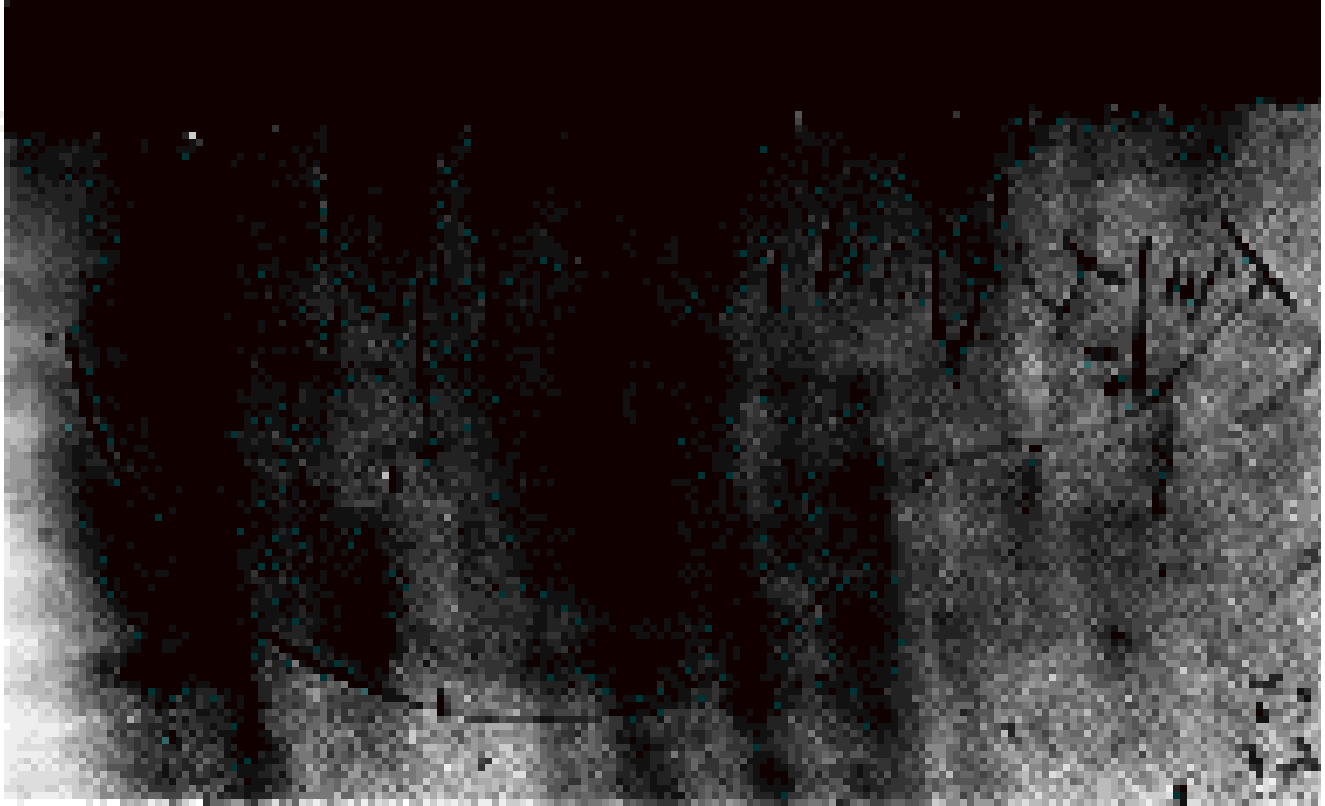
SUMMARY POINTS OF DISCUSSION:

- *The original transcription of the inscription was incorrect.*
- *The inscription does not read “Mariamene the Master” nor does the name Mariamene or Mariamne appear on the ossuary at all.*
- *The inscription reflects the writing of two distinct scribes who wrote in different forms of the Greek script.*
- *The correct reading of the inscription is “Mariame and Mara,” based on parallels from contemporary inscriptions and documents.*
- *The ossuary thus contained the bones of at least two different women, interred at two separate times, one named Mariame and the other Mara.*
- *No support exists for ascribing the ossuary to Mary Magdalene.*

Rahmani Ossuary 701



“MARIAMENOU MARA”; Rahmani 701.



The name "Mariamene" is of central importance to the story line of the documentary *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* and its companion book. Since "Mariamene" is unique (and likewise, "Mariamne," is rare) among the ossuaries, this name is also highly significant when creating statistics and probabilities concerning the uniqueness of the Talpiot cave and its inscribed ossuaries.

According to Prof. François Bovon of Harvard University Mary Magdalene's name in the apocryphal Acts of Philip was "Mariamne." Based upon apocryphal stories which speak of a close relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus, and which give a high prominence to her in the early church, the storywriters have surmised that Jesus and Mary were married and even produced a family. (Of these three assumptions—(1) that the name of Mary Magdalene was not Maria or Mariam, as recorded in the Gospels, but rather Mariamne; (2) that the Mariamne of the Acts of Philip is to be identified with Mary Magdalene, though the Acts of Philip never says so explicitly, and (3) that Jesus was married and fathered a child—none is supported by any of the earliest records dealing with these individuals, namely the canonical Gospels and Josephus).

The original publication of the ossuaries by archaeologists L.Y. Rahmani and A. Kloner interpreted this inscription as reading MARIAMENOU-MARA: "of Mariamene (a.k.a.) Mara." However, recent publications of Greek papyrus manuscripts among the Dead Sea Scrolls have provided evidence to clarify the reading of the ossuary. The following evidence challenges the existence of the name "Mariamene/Mariamne" in this tomb at all.

The first name and the first scribe:



The first name on the ossuary was written in the contemporary Greek documentary style of the first century. Four letters of the first name are clear and erect: M, A, R, I. The next three letters are written a bit more clumsily but are certainly recognizable, and in the same style: A, M, E. So far, the word as it stands forms 'MARIAME,' which is the normal Greek form of the Hebrew name "Mariam." ("Mariame" appears seven times in the Rahmani Ossuary Catalogue.)

Of particular note, are the "M" *mu*, the "A" *alpha* and the "P" *rho* of the inscription. The lines on both parts of the inscription were inscribed, not deeply, with a dull pointed metal object. This instrument was most likely a metal stylus which was commonly used for taking notes on portable wax tablets and which makes similar marks.

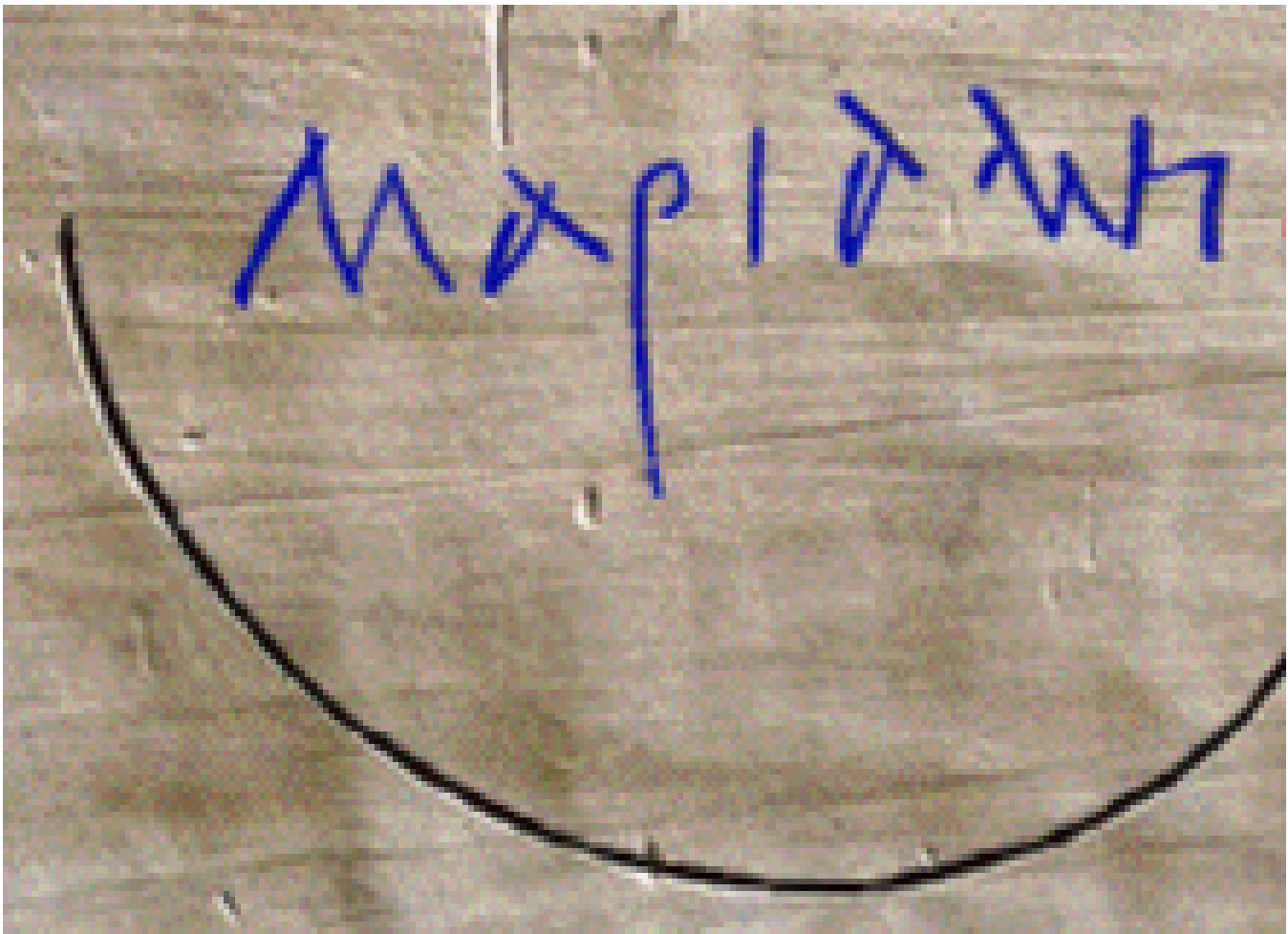
The "M" is formed by a number of separate but intersecting strokes. The separate strokes are indicated by the nonalignment, scissor-like appearance of the ends the various of the strokes where they intersect.

The "A" is formed by two strokes instead of three, comprising a right-tilted "V" followed by a left-tilted diagonal line. This reflects a semi-cursive tendency in this letter that appears in non-literary documents as well on ostraca and *tituli picti* in the first century CE at Masada and elsewhere. (*Tituli picti* are inscriptions on wine jars.)

The "P" (= R) is inscribed with two strokes. The vertical stroke descends well below the baseline. This feature is common among the ossuaries and is also typical of non-literary documents of the period as well as on the ostraca and *tituli picti* of Masada.

This name is followed by a gap that is sufficiently wide to signify a space between distinct words.

After this series of letters, the irregularities begin. Rahmani suggested that the next letter was an "N." However, it can only be read so if it is taken to be retrograde (i.e., written backwards.) The suggestion that it should be read as a retrograde "N" raises the question of whether it is truly an "N" at all. Among all of the ossuaries inscribed in Greek listed in Rahmani's Catalogue and the numerous ossuaries from Dominus Flevit (on the west slope of the Mt. of Olives), there are no other cases in which it has been suggested that an "N" has been written in this way. Furthermore, the following two letters do not resemble the combination "OU," as proposed in Rahmani's original publication.

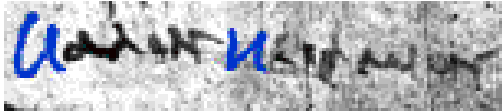


As we shall see, this is not because the scribe suddenly introduced anomalous letterforms, nor even changed his handwriting style in mid-sentence. Rather, it is because a second scribe had subsequently added the last two words of the inscription in a different handwriting style. Upon closer examination, it appears that the three letters Rahmani read as "NOU" are almost certainly to be translated by the common word "KAI" *and*, written in the Greek cursive form of the word.

Cursive tendencies and the second scribe:

Cursive tendencies among the various scribal hands led to varying degrees of cursive letter forms. These cursive forms often appeared in official documents which normally would be written in the formal Greek documentary script. These forms may be termed as cursive or semi-cursive depending upon the extent to which these tendencies were exhibited. The most common cursive tendency was to execute individual letterforms without lifting the tip of the pen from the writing surface. Another tendency was to connect consecutive letters without lifting the pen to form ligatures. This tendency is known as "connected writing" when the interconnection of letters is more prevalent. The overall appearance of cursive writing is that there is a graceful sequence of looping strokes as can be seen in KAI MARA. This stands in contrast to the triangular, squared and rather jagged succession strokes of the more formal script used by the first scribe while inscribing MARIAME.

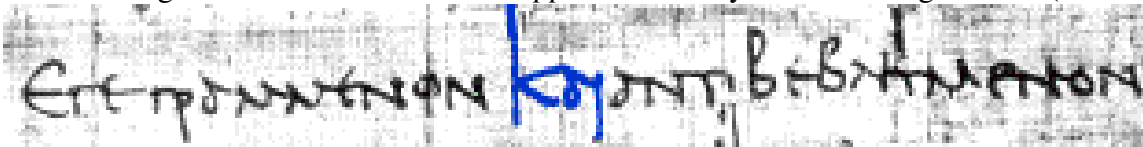
As usual for both the semi-cursive and cursive "K," its left vertical stroke ascends above the rest of the letter (cf. 5/6Hev 12 and 5/6Hev16 below). A *kappa* that is written with only two separate strokes rather than three might be termed "semi-cursive" (as in the case of 5/6Hev12 below). The *kappa* on this ossuary exhibits the full cursive form of this letter, which requires that the letter's three strokes be executed without lifting the tip of the pen (cf. Masada *tituli picti* 858 and 5/6Hev16 below).



"KALON KERAMION" Masada *tp* 858

This is also true concerning the cursive form of the remaining letters A and I which, as in this case, were commonly written together as a ligature, i.e., without lifting the tip of the pen (cf. both 5/6Hev12 and 5/6Hev16 below). At times the entire word is written without lifting the pen as is clearest in XHever/Seiyal 63 and 69 and 5/6Hev16. (The cursive form of the "A" appears also in the second name "MARA").

Document exhibiting KAI with a semi-cursive *kappa* followed by the cursive ligature AI (5/6 Hev12):



Another document parroting the same text containing KAI but with cursive *kappa*, ligature AI and *connected writing* (5/6Hev16):



Following normal scribal practice of the period, the scribe engraved the words of his inscription in *scripta continua*: with no space between the words, writing KAIMARA. He, or someone else, subsequently provided a stroke, a word divider, to separate the KAI from the name, apparently to distinguish the two words, resulting in KAI'MARA.

He also continued in the cursive style with respect to the word MARA.

The *mu* "M" of the second name Mara, is written in one continuous looping gesture. The first leg of the letter is initiated below the base line upon which the body of each letter sits, with the center of the letter sitting higher and formed like the letter "U", and the right leg curving toward the next letter. This is typical of Greek cursive and miniscule forms of the letter (e.g., see Masada *tp*858 and both 5/6Hev12 and 5/6Hev16 above). This stands in contrast to the practice illustrated in the first name of this

inscription, where the entire letter "M" remains above the base line and the middle forms a pronounced "V").

The *alpha* "A," in both cases, appears to have been written with one continuous looping stroke. The first form exhibits a counterclockwise rotation with its final stroke finishing high near the letter's ceiling line. This is common among medial forms of the letter (i.e., a letter appearing before another letter in the same word) where the letter ends in a place near to where the initial stroke of next letter *rho* will begin (not dissimilar to the formation of the *alpha* of the ligature "AI" in the previous word KAI). The second example is a typical final form of the *alpha* (being the last letter of a word or line) where the final diagonal stroke of the enlarged letter descends and ends, almost emphatically, at its baseline.

The letter *rho* "R" (resembles a "P" but is pronounced like "R") is drawn with two strokes as is generally the case in most contemporary, locally inscribed papyrus documents, with the crescent shaped head written first, followed by the down stroke which descends well below the baseline.

In the photographs there appears to be a small line surviving between the last two letters of MARA. Upon close examination, it is clearly a small natural pit that must have preceded the inscription. This is similar to natural pitting found in various places elsewhere on the ossuary.

Yet another Mary and Martha?

This revised reading of the inscription based on contemporary inscriptions and documents would leave the words MARIAME KAI MARA "Mariam and Mara." Mara, as noted by Tal Ilan among other scholars, was a common shortened form of the Aramaic name "Martha."

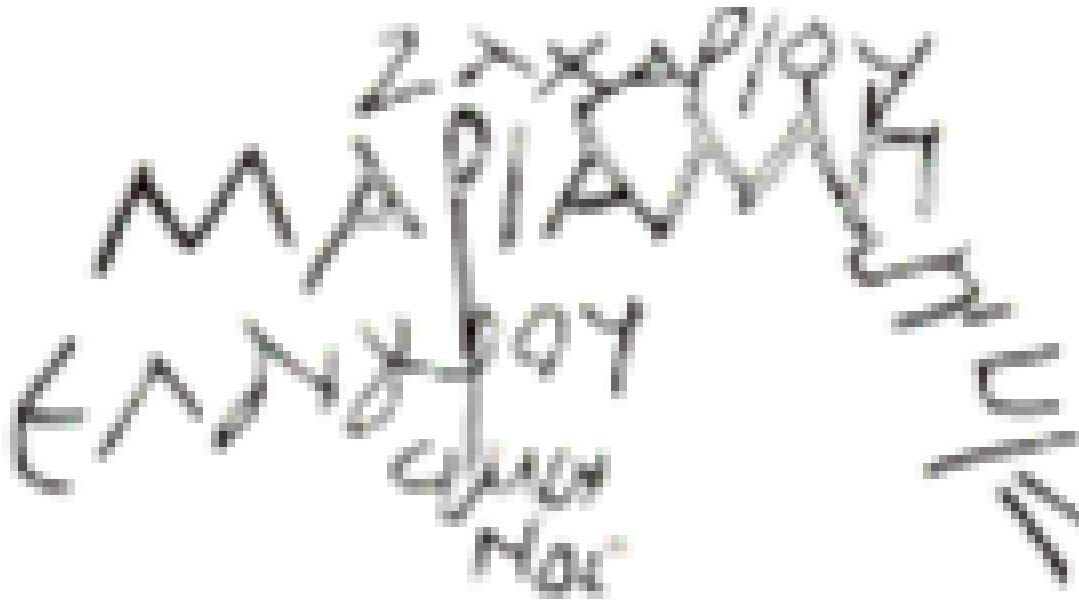
Due to the fact that (1) an ossuary would often contain more than one individual's bones and (2) these two names are among the most common personal names of the first century, the combination of these two names together on an ossuary is not unique.

In fact an ossuary was discovered at Dominus Flevit on the west slope of the Mt. of Olives that has the Hebrew equivalent of the two names as a pair written three times on the same ossuary (however, with the order reversed: "Martha and Maria"; Dominus Flevit, ossuary 7):



Multiple burial and DNA

The fact that two individuals were named on the side of an ossuary does not limit the remains inside to be of those two individuals. There may have been others inside whose names were not inscribed. To give us an idea as to how many individuals might have been inside a single ossuary, there was one ossuary, also from the Dominus Flevit tomb complex (Dominus Flevit, Ossuary 37), which bears the names of five individuals, indicating that the ossuary contained at least five distinct burials. The named individuals buried in the ossuary were Zacharias, Mariame, El'azar, Simon, and Sheniit(?). The variety of scripts and character of the cuts indicate that the inscriptions were written by different individuals with distinct instruments. There may be the skeletal and DNA remains of at least five individuals in this box (not accounting for others who went unnamed).



CONCLUSION

The so-called "Mariamene" ossuary contained the names and remains of two distinct individuals. The first name on the ossuary, "MARIAME." was written in the common Greek documentary script of the period on the occasion of the interment of the bones of this woman. The second and third words "KAI MARA" were added sometime later by a second scribe, when the bones of the second woman Mara were added to the ossuary. This scribe's handwriting includes numerous cursive elements not exhibited by the first scribe who wrote "Mariame." In view of the above, there is no longer any reason to be tempted to link this ossuary (nor the ambiguous traces of DNA inside) to Mary Magdalene or any other person in Biblical, non-Biblical or church tradition.

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