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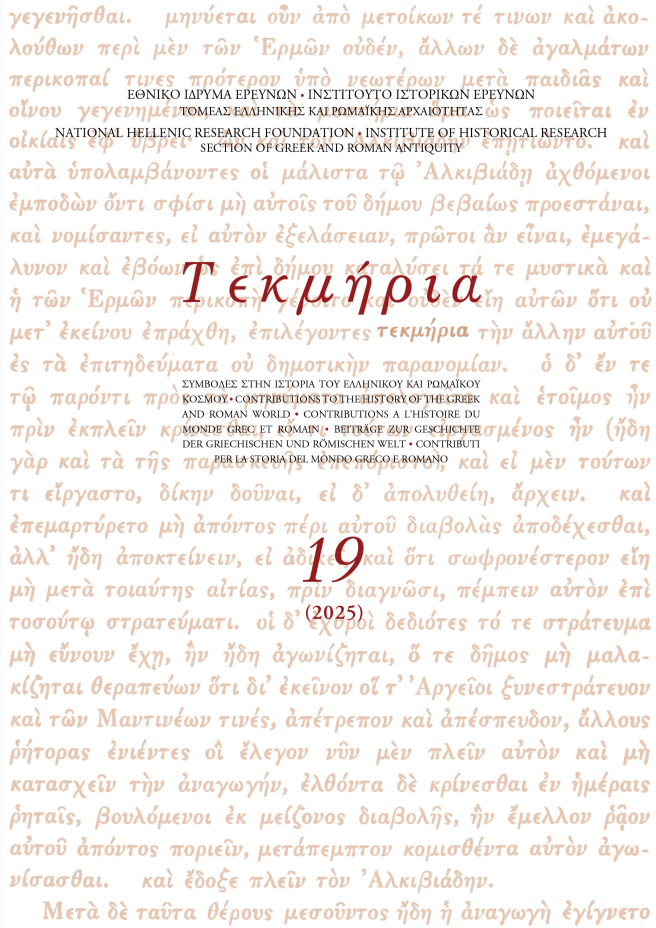

The Earliest χρηστιανοί of Messene and Their Third- and Fourth-century Funerary Monuments

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NIKOS TSIVIKIS

The Earliest χρηστιανοί of Messene and Their Third- and Fourth-century Funerary Monuments

Introduction

In 2020, during restoration work on the eastern wing of the Hellenistic gymnasium at Messene, heavy machinery was employed to relocate numerous large ashlar blocks for storage.[1] These blocks originated primarily from structures adjacent to the gymnasium, including a little-known Roman funerary monument (subsequently designated Monument M) situated just outside the city's south walls. It was in this process, after a large block from Monument M was positioned near the gymnasium's rear wall, that the inscription was identified. When the sun rose, striking the block's front surface with favorable side lighting, a worn, short inscription naming a Christian by the name Διομήδης became visible. Petros Themelis, the director of excavations, observed and recorded the inscription upon its initial discovery and subsequently brought it to the attention of the rest of us.[2] This paper discusses this significant epigraphic finding, setting it against its archaeological context, and addressing its contribution to the historical understanding of Late Roman and Early Christian Messene.

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1. This study is dedicated to the memory of the late Petros Themelis, whose diligent eye first spotted the Diomedes inscription and whose support for the archaeology of Late Antique and Byzantine Messene was unwavering. I extend my sincere thanks to Dr. Voula Bardani for her preliminary epigraphic notes and to Prof. Georgios Deligiannakis for our discussions on Late Antique society. I am particularly grateful to Prof. Nigel Kennell for reading an early draft and offering remarks that were crucial for the development of my arguments, and to Dr. Yannis Nakas for his expertise with the site plans, older and new. Finally, I thank the anonymous reviewers and editors for their suggestions. I retain full responsibility for any errors or shortcomings.

2. The block was excavated in 2003 and was catalogued then with Messene inv. no. 13139 by Petros Themelis and Voula Bardani. Since then, it was never included in the annual excavation reports of Messene by Petros Themelis at the *Praktika* of the Athens Archaeological Society (*PAAH*). In September 2020 during excavation at the Christian Basilica of the Asklepieion led by the author and Georgios Deligiannakis, Petros Themelis drew our attention to this understudied and unpublished inscription.

The funerary monument

The original provenance of the block as documented by detailed excavation records, is the Lekkas plot. This area lies south of the Messene stadium-gymnasium complex, which forms the southernmost extent of the excavated city center. The stadium-gymnasium complex reached the southern circuit of the city's fortifications, with sections of the wall and towers defining its perimeter (**fig. 1**). The Lekkas plot is thus situated immediately *extra muros*, beyond this southern fortification line.

This extra-mural area was used extensively as a Hellenistic and Roman cemetery, which has been only circumstantially explored so far. Access to this area from the city was provided by the main southern gates in the fortifications.[3] In the late first or early second century CE, at the south end of the stadium and along the fortification line, an imposing Heroon / Mausoleum was erected for an extremely important individual of Roman Messene, identified with a member of the Saithidas family.[4] The mausoleum was built in the form of a small Greek temple with a four-column façade to its north and looking towards the stadium. It stood on a monumental podium created of interchanging limestone and poros stone layers that was constructed by replacing a pre-existing fortification tower at the same spot. During this substantial modification of the city walls, it is likely that new access points to the southern cemeteries were created on the side of the mausoleum, but this remains a hypothesis as research on the fortification line at this area is difficult.

In 2003, during restoration work conducted south of the stadium and gymnasium complex, another funerary monument was discovered approximately 50 m southeast of the Saithidas mausoleum (**fig. 2**).[5] Subsequent limited excavation exposed significant portions of the new structure, involving the removal of fallen debris and the clearance of surrounding vegetation (**fig. 3**). The monument was provisionally designated Funerary Monument M, and it still awaits a full and detailed publication of its archaeology and architecture. Among the collapsed architectural elements recovered from this monument was the block bearing the Diomedes inscription; no indication was recorded as to what part of the monument the block belonged to. It was subsequently transferred inside the designated

3. Themelis 2005, 61-65; Müth 2019, 288-289.

4. Themelis 2003b, 48-51 and 2020, 212-230. On the Saithidas family, see Themelis 2016, 548-550. For a recent re-assessment of the existing information on the 1st-cent. CE Roman modification of the gymnasium of Messene, see Kennel 2021, 507-509.

5. Themelis 2003a, 44.

archaeological site for safekeeping and further study. At the time of my research, the inscribed block featuring the Diomedes text resided in secondary deposition, placed provisionally against the restored eastern back wall of the gymnasium's east stoa (**fig. 5**).[6]

The freestanding funerary monument M rested on an orthogonal limestone plinth (dimensions approximately 7 X 4 m) with a foundation of smaller ashlar stones, utilizing both limestone and poros (**figs. 3-4**). Its superstructure combined ashlar masonry of well-cut local limestone with elements constructed in brickwork and rich mortar. The monument consisted of two distinct spaces. The eastern two-thirds of the monument appear to have formed a well-constructed limestone podium with carefully joined slabs forming its floor. At the east end, the limestone slabs displayed a carved molding; the corner stones had a rectilinear shape turning westward, while the central slabs protruded approximately 0.20 m (**fig. 6**). A substantial stone threshold lay along the east-west axis, providing access between the monument's two chambers. A centrally located, regular, square depression is visible in the paved floor area, strongly suggesting a funerary chamber or large cist grave lying underneath, which awaits further excavation. Two shallow-fluted column drums found in association with the paved floor perhaps indicate a columnar arrangement.

The western part constituted a smaller orthogonal space lacking floor slabs. This room was defined by four massive brick and mortar piers at the corners, of which the northern ones are better preserved (**fig. 3**). These piers likely supported brick arches or even a more complex vaulted superstructure. On the north and south side walls and between the piers two orthogonal niches were formed, probably for the placement of tombs or even sarcophagi.

On the exterior of the monument and along its north side, at least one additional burial slot was constructed with characteristic Roman brick masonry. Within the western room, a still-unexcavated cist grave is visible on the ground level, likely a later insertion, as indicated by the irregular cover stones.

The monument's precise form remains uncertain, requiring detailed architectural study of the remains. The combination of ashlar limestone with brickwork, along with architectural elements like columns, closely resembles Roman double-chamber funerary monuments excavated at Messene outside the Arcadian Gate on the city's west side. In these we can see the limestone façade, occasionally with columnar arrangement that leads to a brick built funerary chamber or the

6. Themelis 2003a, 35-44.

orthogonal niches for the placement of sarcophagi.[7] One more Roman funerary monument with a typical square arrangement of brick-built sarcophagi along the interior of the side walls has been uncovered *intra muros*, immediately north of the gymnasium's propylon on the main street leading to the great complex.[8]

In fact, some of the well-dressed limestone elements incorporated in the plinth of the funerary monument M, were probably recycled in Roman times from some earlier Hellenistic monument (**fig. 6**). The presence of later walls and additional burials suggests prolonged use and reuse of the monument, that was expanded and modified.

The construction of the funerary monument in the Lekkas plot is datable to the first or the second century CE, as evidenced by its building techniques and *comparanda* from Messene and beyond. Typologically, it resembles the well-known funerary monuments near the Arcadian Gate of Messene and aligns with the tradition of later funerary structures associated with the stadium-gymnasium complex.[9] Beyond Messene, it finds parallels in the rich production of Roman Imperial period funerary monuments across the Peloponnese from Patras to Sparta.[10] Its erection may plausibly be linked to a renewed interest in large-scale funerary architecture, possibly stimulated by the prominent Saithidas mausoleum, the Roman-era restoration of the stadium-gymnasium complex, and the general redevelopment of this sector of Messene.[11] The monument likely remained functional until the latter half of the fourth century CE, specifically the period ca. 360s - 370s. This timeframe coincides with intense seismic activity that impacted much of Late Roman Messene and its monuments, leading to subsequent decades of reduced activity or abandonment in affected areas.[12] Correspondingly, the organized *extra muros* cemeteries of Messene appear to cease functioning in their established manner from the fifth century CE onward, by which time the city's principal cemeteries, now exclusively Christian, are attested in *intra muros* locations.[13]

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7. Themelis 1996, 140-144 and 2010, 81-89; on Late Roman and Early Byzantine pottery from these funerary monuments, see Yangaki 2014, 769-776.

8. Themelis 1999, 100.

9. Themelis 1996, 140-144 and 2010, 81-89.

10. Vitti 2016, 143-168 and 300-307; Doulfis 2020, 126-141; Tsouli 2020, 142-161.

11. Themelis 2002a, 53-55.

12. On Messene and the 365 CE earthquake, see Themelis 2002b, 40, and a more recent assessment in Themelis 2016, 552-556; Tsivikis 2020, 39; 2021; 2022, 178; 2025.

13. On the Christian cemeteries of Messene, see Tsivikis 2012, 62-64.

The Diomedes inscription

As already discussed after clearing the debris a single large building block from funerary monument M was found to be inscribed.[14] The stone measures 1.28 X 0.66 X 0.21 m and its dimensions are typical of medium sized building blocks created for special uses at Messene (**fig. 5**). On the viewer's left edge of the long side of the block a short inscription in three lines has been cut (**figs. 7-8**). The three lines of text almost fill the entire height of the left side of the block; they are finely aligned to their left while at their right they break making irregular indents. The size of the letters varies between 0.03 and 0.035 m. The writing exhibits care and ample spacing between the letters.

The inscription (Messene inv. no. 13139) reads:

Δ I O M H
Δ H C
X P H C T I A N O C

Διομή|δης | χρηστιανός

Diomedes Christian

The inscription exhibits characteristics typical of Late Roman formal epigraphy. The letter forms present a balanced mix of features, maintaining the rectilinear qualities of the *H*, *I*, *X*, and *P* alongside the distinctively curved *M* and lunate Σ. The overall quality is noteworthy, with the letters ranging from 0.03 to 0.035 m in size and carved with care and ample spacing. Diagnostic forms include the *A* and Δ, which display a marked leftward extension at the apex of their right-descending strokes, and subtle serifs discernible at the terminals of several letters. The letterforms suggest a general Late Roman date, but difficult to date later than the fifth century.

The inscription's striking arrangement aligns with the left edge of the elongated stone block, extending across three lines. This alignment likely reflects the stone's position flanking the side of an entrance (or a corner) of the original funerary monument, such that the inscription would be read by one entering the tomb.[15] To achieve this alignment, the carver divided the name Διομήδης across

14. The inscription was indexed by Voula Bardani with Messene inv. no. 13139 and was first discussed in brief in Deligiannakis 2023, 89.

15. We could consider also the possibility of painted inscriptions, that are no more visible, occupying the right side of the block. I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this suggestion.

two lines, placing the first three syllables on one line and the fourth on the subse-quent line: Διομή|δης. This division is atypical, as sufficient space existed on the block's surface to inscribe the name continuously. The rationale for this arrange-ment remains uncertain. It is possible that visibility to the remainder of the stone was restricted by a neighboring structure or obstacle, or that the left side of the block held some specific significance that dictated this alignment.

The text appears to be fully preserved, and its reading presents no significant challenges. The inscription is a typical funerary text of an extremely simple form with only two words in nominative, a personal name and an adjective functioning as a noun. It refers to a male individual, Διομήδης, identified by the substantive χρηστιανός (*chrestianos*) as a true Christian in faith.

Διομήδης, an ancient and exceedingly common Greek name with mythological roots, remained in use in Late Roman and Early Byzantine Christian contexts.[16] In the fourth century, its popularity was further enhanced by the canonization of Saint Diomedes, a martyr of Tarsus (*BHG* 548).[17] In the extensive epigraphic corpus of Messene, as well as wider Roman Messenia, the name Diomedes is unattested prior to this inscription and we need to travel further to Arcadia to encounter it, at least in Roman times.[18]

The formula of the Diomedes inscription is notably distinct from the majority of published Late Roman funerary texts from Messene.[19] The lack of a *nomen* points also to a period of simplification distanced from the times of the *Constitutio Antoniana*, where the use of the Greek name plus the new, powerful Christian identifier was deemed sufficient, overriding the need for the now common or unnecessary Roman *nomen* (probably late third to early fourth century).

16. Quite common in central Asia Minor, Lykaonia and Phrygia with 26 epigraphical occurrences according to *ICG*; in an interesting epitaph from Perinthos in Thrace a presbyter Tryphon, is mentioned as also having a second name of Diomedes, maybe a pre-baptismal one; cf. Sayar 1998, no. 235; *SEG* 48, 954.

17. The name is fully Christianized by the martyrdom of Saint Diomedes (*BHG* 548) a physician from Tarsus; cf. Latyšev 1914, 125-132.

18. The name does not appear in any of the inscriptions of Messene, based on published and unpublished records (I would like to thank Dr. Voula Bardani for providing the relevant information), and no Diomedes can be found in published onomastics of the region; cf. Rizakis, Zoumbaki, Lepenioti 2004. A Diomedes mentioned in a 2nd-cent. CE ephebe catalogue from Tegea in Arcadia (*LGPN* IIIA, 5490; *IG* V 2, 55) and another in a funereary inscription in Megalopolis (*LGPN* IIIA, 6553; *IG* V 2, 484) might be the closest geographical occurrences.

19. Bardani 2002, 82-98.

The formula of the Διομήδης inscription is notably distinct from the majority of published Late Roman funerary texts from Messene. Its unusual brevity, employing only two words in the nominative case –a personal name and a single substantive identifier– represents a rare and archaic mode of expressing the deceased's Christian identity. This simplicity, combined with the letterforms, suggests a pre-Constantinian date, most likely in the third century CE.[20] This observation aligns with research into early Christian epigraphy by scholars like Charles Pietri, who demonstrated that the earliest, isolated use of *christianus* (χριστιανὸς / χρηστιανός) on epitaphs often served as a simple declaration of belonging or distinction, rather than a developed *éloge* or funerary formula.[21] For the early Church, especially in provincial settings, this explicit, often solitary use of the nomen Christianum was a means of separating the faithful from non-Christians (Jews and Pagans) in shared or ambiguous burial spaces, a practice attested in third-century Phrygia and Rome. This immediate and concise assertion of religious status echoes examples such as the (probable) Christian funerary inscription of the presbyter Apollonios from Thessaloniki (*ICG* 3131), dated to the third, or possibly second, century CE.[22]

Locally, within Messene, the brevity and conciseness of the Diomedes inscription echoes, albeit the difference in use, the extremely simple donor inscriptions (*ICG* 3482 and 3486) from the early Christian assembly hall in a *domus* near the theater, which similarly provide only the donors' names and their adjectival titles along the active verb of donation.[23] Probably also in the Diomedes inscription we should understand an omitted verb and some localization, like Διομήδης χρηστιανὸς ἐνθάδε κεῖται / κοιμᾶται or Διομήδης χρηστιανὸς τόδε κτίζει / ποιεῖ.[24]

20. The use of nominative is a strong indication for pre-4th-cent. dating, like in the case of Apollonios in Thessaloniki; Ogereau 2022, 179 n. 8.

21. Pietri has established an exhaustive relevant chronology, placing the simpler uses of the χριστιανὸς identification in the epigraphy of the 3rd cent.: Pietri 1997, 1601-1602.

22. Although it is not completely clear if Apollonios was indeed Christian; Ogereau 2024, 166-168.

23. These similarities, coupled with the marked divergence of the Diomedes inscription's formulaic expression from other known Messenian epitaphs, suggest it probably predates them belonging to an earlier tradition; for 5th and 6th cent. examples, v.: Bardani 2002, 82-98.

24. Nominative with the verb κοιμᾶται is used in at least two more Christian epitaphs of Messene (*ICG* 3481 and 3545).

The inscription in its context

The inscribed block from the Lekkas plot funerary monument, bearing the name Diomedes and mentioning his Christian identity, must be understood within Messenian burial practice context. The inscribed stone recalls known Hellenistic and Roman inscriptions on other Messenian funerary monuments, such as those erected west of the gymnasium.[25] There prominent families of the city used for generations large family monuments, with new burials being often marked by an addition of a new inscription on the outer surface. The best documented of such funerary monument, the well-known K3 monument, has epitaphs cut on it from three distinct moments in time the earliest being of the third century BCE and the latest reaching the late first century CE.[26] This practice occurred over a long period, often spanning centuries, from the late Hellenistic to Roman Imperial eras. These observations are crucial, providing evidence for the practice of inscribing names on the walls near the entrance to funerary chambers, and demonstrating the long use of these monuments and the persistence of the epigraphic habit of adding inscriptions as new occupants were interred.

Situated within the local tradition of enduring family funerary monuments, the structure associated with Diomedes (presumably one of its last occupants) offers insight into evolving identities. Constructed during the Roman period, it was situated in an area extending both within and, primarily, outside the city walls (*intra muros* and *extra muros*), a zone characterized by numerous elite burials dating from the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The addition of the imposing Saithidas family mausoleum at the stadium's southern end in the late first century CE further attests to the ongoing development of this necropolis. It is probable that the monument housing the Diomedes inscription was also originally erected during this timeframe (late first or early second century CE), incorporating reused Hellenistic architectural elements alongside newly adopted Roman construction techniques, such as brick arches and vaults. Centuries later, likely in the third or fourth century CE, Diomedes, probably a member of the owning family, was interred there according to continuous Messenian practice. The crucial distinction lies in his inscription: emphasis was placed, perhaps uniquely for the first time, on his identity as χρηστιανός, rather than solely on kinship ties. This suggests not a Christian takeover of the space,[27] but a deliberate act by an elite

25. Kennel 2021, 517-530.

26. Themelis 2018, 188-203; Kennel 2021, 517-518.

27. The reuse of pre-existing funerary monuments in the Roman Peloponnese was not uncommon, including the reuse of older chamber tombs and other built monuments by

individual continuing family burial traditions while foregrounding Christianity as a significant component –complementary perhaps– to his established Roman and Messenian affiliations.

Considering and constructing Christian identity

Concerning the χρηστιανός substantive and the potentially early date of the Messene Diomedes inscription, it is pertinent to consider its broader implications beyond its evident function as a Christian identifier. The term χρηστιανός derives from the personal name Χρηστός / *Chrestus*, combined with the Latin suffix *-ianus* or its Hellenized form -ιανός.[28] Thus, the Greek word χρηστιανός is a direct transliteration of the Latin cognomen *Crestianus / Chrestianus*, literally denoting belonging to, or a special relationship with, individuals bearing the Latin name *Crestus / Chrestus* or the Greek name Χρηστός.[29] Some scholars suggest that, as early as the first century CE, during the reign of Emperor Nero, the word primarily identified followers of Jesus Christ.[30] By the third century, its appearance in inscriptions almost exclusively signifies an individual belonging to, or identifying with, the Christian faith, and (likely) a member of the Christian church. The Messene inscription being indeed of an early date, possibly as early as the third century, it clearly identifies an individual adhering to the Christian faith.

A second crucial point is the peculiar orthography of χρηστιανός in this brief inscription. Although commenting on spelling variations in epigraphy is generally challenging, particularly in simple funerary texts such as the Messenian example, the spelling of critical identifiers like the word χρηστιανός or various *nomina sacra* is rarely devoid of significance. As is widely accepted and Sylvain Destephen recently commented once again on early Christian epigraphical trends in Asia Minor, "the isolated use of the term 'Christian', deprived of any characteristic

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Christians: Rife 2024, 794-797. A good example is offered by the North Corinth cemetery where the Hellenistic and Roman graves were reused extensively in the 4th and 5th cent., probably by Christians: Slane 2017, 7. Occasionally, this reuse reveals intentional efforts by Christian communities to appropriate specific sites, potentially ascribing new meaning to these associations: Rife 2012, 133.

28. The history and debate about the formation of the word χριστιανός / χρηστιανός is explored in detail with most previous bibliography in Dickey 2023, 647-649. The creation of names with the use of the suffix -ιανός, although of Latin derivation, has also been regarded as a separate evolution in late Greek language in the East not representing a Roman custom: Corsten 2010, 456-463.

29. Shandruk 2010, 206-207; Cook 2020, 252-257.

30. Cook 2020, 237-264.

epithet, seems to indicate a pre-Constantinian date, especially when it adopts an archaic spelling (χρειστιανός or χρηστιανός instead of χριστιανός), *a fortiori* in an early paleographic or iconographic context".[31]

This early dating aligns with the consensus among researchers regarding similar inscriptions featuring the isolated use of *Christian* and employing the peculiar spelling with the χρη- or χρει-. The richest such epigraphic tradition can be traced to Phrygia in Asia Minor, an area where a particularly early Christian community was formed and expressed itself in original ways, before the proliferation of Roman state Christianity of the later fourth century.[32]

This pattern is also evident concerning the usage of χρηστιανός / χριστιανός on the Greek peninsula, a region where archaeological and epigraphic evidence for pre-Constantinian and Constantinian Christianity is comparatively less abundant than in other Roman provinces, such as Asia Minor, mostly Phrygia, or Italy, especially Sicily.[33] The known examples employing this designation originate from Thessaloniki and date to the earlier period of its Christian community, which traces its origins to the Apostolic Age. Consequently, the early appearance of the term in two funerary inscriptions from Thessaloniki (*ICG* 3659 and 3141) is consistent with this historical context. The epitaph of Eutychios (*ICG* 3141) is particularly noteworthy due to the repetition and variable orthography of the Christian identifier on the stone: Εὐτυχίου διδασκάλου χρηστιανοῦ χρηστειανοῦ νεωφοτείστου. This duplication, coupled with the alternate spellings (χρηστιανοῦ / χρηστειανοῦ), has generated various scholarly interpretations.[34] It likely indicates

31. Destephen 2010, 176.

32. An indexing of the *ICG* data base offers the following geographical pattern of occurrences of the term χρηστιανός (mostly) or alternatively χρειστιανός (much less): Lycaonia = 1, Lydia = 2, Pisidia = 1, Phrygia = 33, Macedonia / Thessaloniki = 2, Messene = 1, Thrace = 2. All of them being used in funerary contexts, and the vast majority dated in the 3rd or 4th cent., with scholars like Stephen Mitchell more inclined to attribute the Phrygian specimens to the earlier, 3rd-cent. dating; Mitchell 2020, 286-290 and 2023, 203; the Phrygian "Christians for Christians" epigraphic phenomenon is further elaborated by Gibson 1978. These types of Phrygian epitaphs have been occasionally attributed to the Montanist heresy, particularly active in the region during the 3rd and 4th cent. (Tabbernee 1997, 181-213 and 251-280), a view that has been thoroughly disputed in recent scholarship (Pietri 1997, 1583-1584; Mitchell 2020, 283). But similar observations can be made about the earliest Christians' expression of identity in other regions of the Empire, albeit the smaller number of these communities; for Sicily, cf. Felle 2005, 245-250.

33. Pietri 1997, 1587-1589.

34. Early publication of the text: Tsigaridas, Loverdou-Tsigarida 1979, 41-42 no. 8; it has been interpreted as a possible case of dittography: Feissel 1983, 119-121 no. 123; to explain

that the distinct spellings might have conveyed different meanings recognizable to the contemporary audience. Thus, Eutychios may have been simultaneously perceived as a teacher of the Christian faith (perhaps primarily instructing from Christian texts) and a newly baptized Christian.[35] The exceedingly rare use of χρηστιανός, or even χριστιανός, to identify Jesus Christ's followers in Greece has been previously noted.[36] This scarcity may be attributed to local traditions and unique characteristics of the first Greek Christian communities, or even to a rather late (post-mid fourth century) substantial growth of these communities at a period when the term is not quite so commonly used. Indeed, the chronological context of these Greek communities, or at least their epitaphs, warrants consideration, as they are generally somewhat later than, for example, the communities of Phrygia, where the adjective χρηστιανός is prevalent in the third and fourth centuries.[37]

Moving away from epigraphy and accessing early papyri documents from Egypt recent research has systematically demonstrated that the spelling of ι or η can be much more than merely a random phonetic error and be interpreted as a widespread and early variant. According to Walter Shandruk, who studied the phenomenon, this can be seen predominantly in the consistent use of ι for the appellation of Jesus as Χριστός and on the other hand the consistent use of η for the word χρηστιανός in the relative papyrological material.[38] The two variants can be expressing respectively an internal (in-group) and an external (out-group) language of and about the nascent Christian communities.[39] The communities themselves were using the appellation Χριστός to refer to the historical person of Jesus Christ following the rules of the common, at the time, Greek language; thus, they resolved to an ι orthography. While the name for the members of the Christian community was a Roman bureaucratic invention in order to categorize this new group and as such it was based on the Latin understanding of the conventional

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the double mention Velenis had proposed that a special relationship might be found in the name of the deceased Thessalonicean Εὐτύχιος with the Monophysite leader Εὐτυχής, a hypothesis that the author admits is tentative and difficult to support: Velenis 1998, 397-398; while recently it has been interpreted as possibly identifying "both a Christian teacher and a Christian neophyte": Ogereau 2024, 172 n. 36.

35. Ogereau 2024, 172 n. 36.

36. A related discussion on material from Athens and Attica in Breytenbach, Tzavella 2022, 22.

37. Mitchell 2023, 190.

38. Shandruk 2010, 205-219; I would like to thank Dr. Nigel Kennel for bringing this study to my attention.

39. On in-group language in Christian epigraphy, see Felle 2020, 131-148.

name *Crestus / Chrestus* constructing thus the word *c(h)restiani*, and from that in Greek the χρηστιανός orthography.[40] The papyrological material clearly exhibits the prevalence of the χρηστιανός spelling in documents mostly up to the fourth century and thus bolstering the use of this specific spelling as supporting evidence for dating also the Diomedes inscription to the third or early fourth century CE.

Ancient Messene yielded one additional inscription employing the early η spelling of the adjective χρηστιανός. This now-lost epitaph (*ICG* 3432), documented by Bees and Oikonomakes in the late nineteenth century, was observed built close to the lintel of the church of Hagios Ioannis, southeast of the current archaeological site of Messene, near the modern village of Simiza / Arsinoe. This area corresponds largely to the same south cemetery, where also the funerary monument M at the Lekkas plot was standing, albeit at quite a distance. It refers to a young male, Glykas, who died at the age of seventeen. He is described as "a Christian, who was loving to his father, loving to his siblings, loving to his friends".[41] The Glykas inscription utilizes a common formula in Late Roman and Early Christian funerary inscriptions of Messene, employing a series of adjectives (φιλοπάτωρ, φιλομήτωρ, φιλάδελφος etc.) to emphasize the deceased's loving relationships with family, friends, and the wider community[42] –a formula not widely used by other contemporary early Christian communities.[43] This expression of familial love

40. An intermediate position has been suggested by Townsend 2008, 214-217, where it is accepted that a Latin term *chrestiani* was created by the authorities, but largely reflecting the feeling of belonging to Jesus Christ that Pauline Christians had developed; whatever its origin, it seems clear that by the late 2nd and early 3rd cent. the identifier χριστιανός / *chrestianus* had been fully adopted by the Christian community: Lieu 2004, 250-259. This distinction was known by Christian apologetists of the 3rd and 4th cent., like Tertullian and Lactantius who commented on the spellings and miss-spellings of the name Christian: Shandruk 2010, 206-207.

41. Χαίροις Θ(εο)ῦ δοῦλε Γλυκᾶ, | χρηστιανέ, φιλοπάτορ, | φιλάδελφε, φιλόφιλε, | ζήσας ἔτη |ιζ΄ according to Bardani 2002, 88 no. 8; originally seen by Oikonomakis 1879, 37 no. 51, and Bees 1901, 388 no. X, with drawing.

42. These formulaic repetitive expressions (φιλοπάτωρ, φιλομήτωρ, φιλάδελφος, etc.) can be found in four different funerary texts from Messene (*ICG* 3431; 3432; 3434; 3545) and would need a more detailed study. I would like to thank Prof. Angelos Chaniotis for first drawing my interest to this peculiar aspect of the Messenian Christian funerary inscriptions.

43. However, this should not be interpreted as a feature unique to early Christian Messene. Among the limited number of comparable inscriptions known from outside Messene

sometimes evolved into a purely Christian form, as seen in another Messenian epitaph, this time for Helen (*ICG* 3545), which includes the adjective φιλόπιστος ("loving of the faithful").[44] The epitaph of Glykas (*ICG* 3432) having unfortunately been lost, cannot be studied in regard to its letterforms and materiality. Indeed, it uses the same designation χρηστιανός like the Diomedes inscription, adopting the same orthography. Still it likely represents a later phase in the same tradition, this time post-Constantinian but not very distant and is assignable to the later fourth or even perhaps the very early fifth CE.[45] This period saw Messenian Christian epitaphs increasingly elaborate on themes of love for fellow humans and community members, possibly influenced by the concept of φιλανθρωπία (*philanthropia*).[46]

Conclusions

I argue that the use of the adjective χρηστιανός, in its "external" form, should indeed be considered an indicator of an early date within the relative chronology of Early Byzantine Messene's Christian epitaphs. With the community's evolution and the increasing visibility or legitimization of Messenian Christians during the later fourth century inside a thoroughly Christian Empire, the chosen identifiers in these texts appear to shift towards more standardized forms. Shandruk's distinction between "in-group" (Χριστός) and "out-group" (Χρηστιανός) terminology offers a lens through which to view the Messene inscription. Its use could

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is an epitaph found in the Christian basilica at Lavreotic Olympus (*ICG* 2113; *IG* II/III^2 13527), which utilizes the same epigraphic model.

44. Πάσης ἀρετῆς καὶ σοφίης | συνόμαιμος Ἐλένη | ἐνθάδε κοιμᾶται | φιλοπάτωρ καὶ φιλομήτωρ, | φιλάδελφος, φιλόπιστος, | πασιφίλιτος χαίροις | ζήσασα λυκόπαντας | ἔτη ΕΚ: Themelis 2003, 42-43; the epitaph of Helen was found near the Arcadian gate on the west side of the city; note in the epitaph of Helen the rarely attested use of the adjective συνόμαιμος (of the same blood) maybe here in the meaning of belonging to the same brethren (of the Christians) like in the famous Aberkios of Hierapolis inscription from Rome (*ICG* 1597); see the detailed commentary on συνόμαιμος in Baslez 2020, 158-159; we find the same expression of φιλόπιστος with a Christian meaning in a 3rd- or 4th-cent. epitaph (*ICG* 2396) from Phrygia: Mitchell 1982, 219-220 no. 271.

45. From the same area of the village of Arsinoe / Simiza originates another early Christian funerary inscription (*ICG* 3434) dedicated to a 17-year-old girl named Theodoule, with the same *love of all* formula, though without the χρηστιανή identifier; Bardani 2002, 88 no. 7.

46. On *philanthropia* as an early Christian value of extending and practicing love towards the other human beings (and not as charity) see, indicatively, Malherbe 1969, 1-5, and, covering the older bibliography, Caner 2018, 229.

reflect the term's external origins or a period before orthography standardized within the growing Christian community, thus the Diomedes text represents an older, perhaps less formulaic, tradition compared to later Messenian epitaphs; one that is used by the Christians themselves but also expresses the views of the outsiders, the Roman society, about their faith in the third or early fourth century. After all it is only through the eyes of their wider community that the Christians of the time can identify themselves.[47]

Based on this understanding, Diomedes, designated χρηστιανός, can be situated within the known prosopography of Messene's pre-Constantinian Christian community. He represents the third identified member, following the previously attested lector Paramonos and bishop Theodoulos, known from mosaics in the Christian assembly hall.[48] Unlike these clerical figures, Diomedes was apparently a layperson, thereby offering valuable insight into the social composition of this early community. His social standing is suggested by his bearing a prominent mythological name without apparent censure and his interment within a substantial funerary monument, likely accessible through affiliation with the elite Roman Messenian family who owned it.[49] Diomedes can plausibly be placed within the same social milieu as Paramonos, also datable to the third century CE. This situates both individuals among a stratum of affluent Messenians who potentially held urban property and utilized privileged burial spaces within traditional cemetery locations, at the same time exhibiting their newly acquired Christian identity.[50]

Diomedes inscription seems to be a deliberate public statement of faith within the elite Messenian context to distinguish and set apart from other religious groups and identities.[51] While studying central Anatolia Mitchell has argued that

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47. For other Christian communities, like the Christians of Phrygia it has been supported that in "all these cases the word χρηστιανός (and the variant spellings) not only referred to the religion of the occupants of the tomb, but also evoked the wider community, the Christian brotherhood to which they belonged" (Mitchell 2023, 190).

48. Tsivikis 2022, 179-185.

49. Also, many of the explicitly pre-Constantinian Christian epitaphs from central Asia Minor seem to concern local elites adopting Christianity and choosing to display this identity publicly on traditional funerary monuments, Mitchell 2020, 296-297.

50. Some more general remarks on the early Christian community of Messene can be found in Themelis 2002, 20-58; Deligiannakis 2023, 86-92; Tsivikis 2017, 267-287; 2021; 2022, 175-197; 2025.

51. The choice to include in epigraphy this specific, simple, and explicit identifier of χριστιανὸς in the 3rd cent. has been elsewhere connected with the clear intention of differentiation and religious distinction: Pietri 1997, 1583-1602.

this very act of "coming out" epigraphically was a defining feature of Christianity's emergence.[52] This connects to the broader scholarly discussion on the growing importance of explicitly defining religious identity in late antiquity as the *par excellence* characteristic of the new monotheistic religion.[53] Thus, Diomedes' simple declaration wasn't just a label but participated in a fundamental development within early Christianity –the public assertion of the *nomen Christianum*.

Lastly, the extreme scarcity of comparable examples from Greece carrying the substantive χρηστιανός with the η orthography –only four in the entire Greek peninsula among a great number of known funerary inscriptions from Early Christian cemeteries– is significant and should be noted; two such examples are known from Thessaloniki and two more now from Messene. This limited number suggests that we can see two distinct expressions of third- and early fourth-century Christian communities: one reflecting the prominent position of the Thessalonian community, and the other the more provincial character of the Messenian Christian community in the southwestern Peloponnese, though both finding similar ways of expressing emerging Christianity.

By prominently declaring his religious faith on his tomb as his defining identity, Diomedes, a Christian from late third-century Messene, situated himself within a nascent tradition of Christian self-representation. This practice mirrored that of contemporary martyrs, whose stories were likely known to him, such as Carpus of Pergamum (second century). In the third-century Greek recension text of the martyrium of the second-century martyr we read that when interrogated about his name, Carpus responded: "My first and most distinctive name is that of Christian".[54]

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52. Mitchell 2020, 281; the "coming out" as a Christian notion for Messenian Diomedes has been raised also by Deligiannakis 2023, 89.

53. North 2010, 34-52.

54. Τὸ πρῶτον καὶ ἐξαίρετον ὄνομα Χριστιανός: as edited and translated in Musurillo 1972, 22-23; commented along other analogous examples by Lieu 2016, 223-227. Christian identity is the main aspect exhibited in the martyrium of Attalus of Pergamum, one of the Lyon martyrs, that was being paraded in the amphitheater with a sign around his neck saying: οὗτος ἐστὶν Ἄτταλος ὁ Χριστιανός (Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* V.1.44, commented also by Mitchell 2023, 9-10).

Summary

This article presents and analyzes a newly studied inscription from ancient Messene, found on an architectural block originating from a Roman funerary monument (Monument M) located *extra muros* near the stadium-gymnasium complex. The brief text, reading Διομή|δης | χρηστιανός, identifies a previously unknown early Christian resident of the city. Analysis of the inscription's paleography, simple nominative formula, and archaeological context suggests a date in the late third or early fourth century CE. Particular attention is paid to the orthography χρηστιανός, employing *eta* instead of *iota*. This spelling, rare in Greece but paralleled in early inscriptions from Phrygia, Thessaloniki, and documented in papyri, is interpreted as an indicator of an early, pre-standardized phase of Christian epigraphic practice, possibly reflecting the term's external Roman administrative origins before its full assimilation by the community. The inscription is contextualized within Messenian funerary traditions, arguing that Diomedes, likely an elite layman, was interred in a pre-existing family monument (originally created probably in the first or second century CE), demonstrating continuity in burial customs alongside a novel public assertion of Christian identity. This act is framed as a conscious instance of self-representation, reflecting the nascent tradition of foregrounding Christian faith as a primary identifier, akin to declarations found in martyr accounts. Diomedes constitutes the third known member of Messene's pre-Constantinian Christian community, alongside the lector Paramonos and bishop Theodoulos, offering valuable insight into the social composition and self-perception of Christianity in the city before the mid-fourth century. This finding significantly enhances our understanding of the chronology and character of early Christianity in the Peloponnese.

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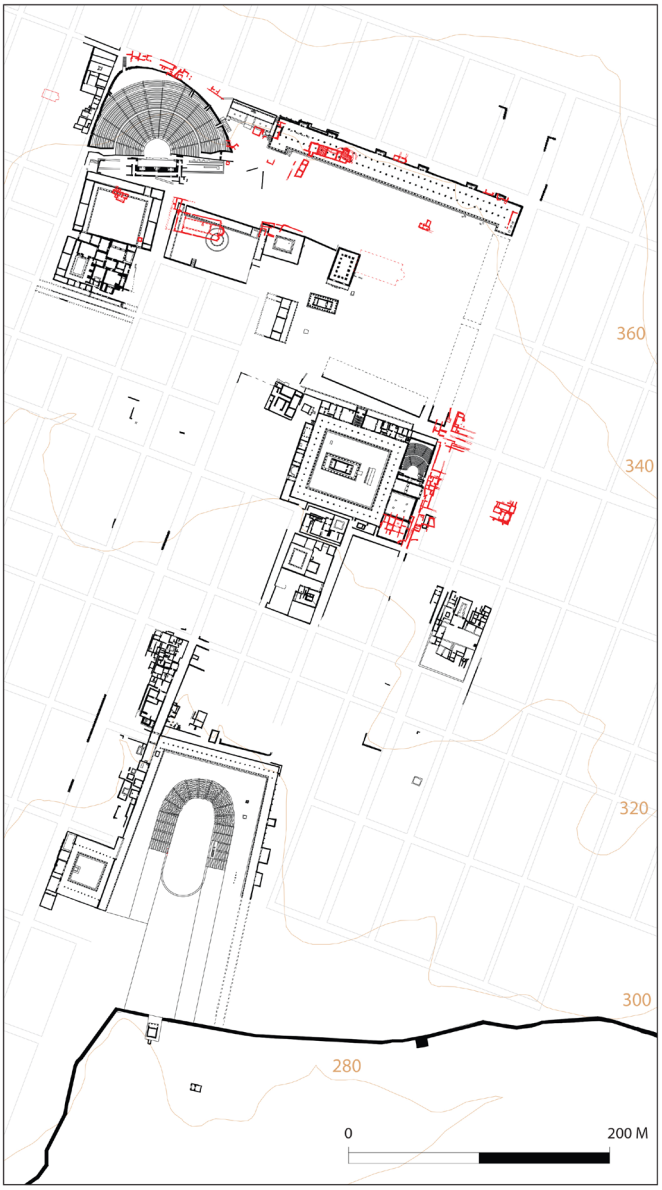

Fig. 1. General plan of the excavated city center of ancient Messene, in black the Hellenistic and Roman phases and in red the Byzantine and Medieval phases (courtesy Society for Messenian Archaeological Studies (SMAS)).

Fig. 2. The Stadium of Messene and the Funerary Monument M in the lower right corner, aerial view from S during 2015 season (photo by Kostas Xenikakis; courtesy SMAS).

Fig. 3. Funerary Monument M, aerial view from SW during 2013 season (photo by Kostas Xenikakis; courtesy SMAS).

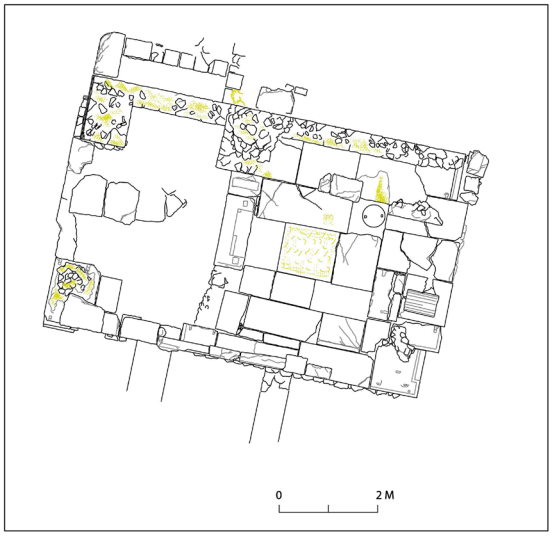

Fig. 4. Funerary Monument M, ground plan (courtesy SMAS).

Fig. 5. Block with Diomedes inscription at the Gymnasion of Messene (photo by the author; courtesy SMAS).

Fig. 6. Funerary Monument M, view from SW (photo by the author, courtesy SMAS).

Fig. 7. Diomedes inscription, black and white (photo by Petros Themelis, courtesy SMAS).

Fig. 8. Diomedes inscription, at the time of its discovery (photo by Petros Themelis, courtesy SMAS)