

ἄφθονοὶ οἴκοι: keeping the evil eye at bay

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Abstract: Examination of the use of the adjective ἄφθονος and its synonym ἀβάσκαντος with reference to households.

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Several late antique letters refer to ἄφθονοὶ οἴκοι in the context of salutations and good wishes; the relative evidence may be presented as follows:

P.Flor. III 348.2 (4th c.) καὶ τὸν ἄφθονόν σου οἶκον

SB XXII 15482.21ff. (5th c.) ἀσιπάζω πάντα τοὺς ἐν τῷ ἀφθόνῳ | σου οἴκῳ ἀπὸ μικροῦ ἕως μεγάλου

P.IFAO II 27.1f. (5th/6th c.) πολλαὶ προσκυνῶ καὶ προφθέγγομαι τ[| τῷ ἀφ]θόνῳ αὐτῆς οἴκῳ¹ κατ' ὄνομα

BGU III 874.8–10 (6th c.) πολλὰ δὲ προσαγορεύω τὴν κυρίαν τὴν ὑμῶν μητέραν | καὶ ... τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς καὶ πάντα τοὺς ἐν τῷ | ἀφθόν<φ>² ἡμῶν οἴκῳ

P.Cair.Masp. II 67205.10f. (c.566–73) ὑπερευχόμενος τῆς δ[ιαμον]ῆς ὑμῶν καὶ σωτηρ[ίας] | [τῶν εὐκλεεστάτων τέκνων καὶ παντὸς τοῦ ἀφ]θόνου[υ ὑμῶν] οἴκου

P.Flor. III 303.8ff. (6th c.) πολλὰ πολλὰ πολλὰ προσαγορεύω τὴν σὴν | ἀρετὴν καὶ πάντα τοὺς ἐνοικοῦντας ἐν τῷ ἀφθόνῳ σου οἴκῳ, ἀπὸ μικροῦ | ἕως μεγάλου, τὸ κατ' ὄνομα

P.Oxy. I 155.5f. (6th c.) καὶ πολλοῖς | χρόνοις καὶ καλοῖς τὴν ὑμῶν μεγαλοπρ[έπειαν] μετὰ τοῦ ἀφθόνου ὑμῶν οἴκου

PSI XIII 1345.13f. (6th/7th c.) ὑπερευχομένοις ὑπὲρ τῆς εὐζωΐας καὶ [τῆς] | συστάσεως τοῦ εὐλογημένου `καὶ ἀφθόνου' ὑμῶν οἴκου

P.Bawit Clackson 82.3 (7th c.) καὶ ἀφθόνου ὑμῶν οἴκου³

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¹ Comparison with BGU III 874.10 and P.Flor. III 303.9 suggests reading [- - καὶ πάντα τοὺς ἐν τῷ ἀφ]θόνῳ αὐτῆς οἴκῳ κτλ.

² See BL XIII 27. The dating to the sixth century is mine, based on an image.

³ Ed. pr. read], . ω καὶ ἀφ . . . ου ὑμῶν οἴκου; see pl. XXXV.

When the word first occurred in a papyrus, it was rendered as ‘generous’ (P.Oxy. I 155). Preisigke, *WB* 246, translates the expression as ‘deine gastfreundliche Behausung’.⁴ This is not the only meaning of the word; see LSJ s.v. ἄφθονος: ‘unenvied bountiful B II.2 984.27 ... II.1 not grudging, plentiful Eup. 307 πόλιν ἀφθονεστάτην χρήμασι ; II.2 unenvied, provoking no envy A. Ag. 471 ὄλβος’. This must be the primary sense of the word when used of οἶκοι, also attested in epigraphic and literary texts, though it probably conveys the sense of plenty as well.⁵

To return to the papyri, the following passages provide further context for the practice:

P.Mert. I 24.22f. (3rd c.⁶) [ἐρρωσθα]ί σε δὲ εὐχομαι σὺν ὄλω | [τῷ ἀβ]ασκάντω σου οἴκῳ
SB VI 9549.15f. (4th c.⁷) τοῦ οἴκου τοῦ | ἀβασκάντου

P.Abinn. 30.23f. (mid 4th c.) ἀσπάζομαι τὸν ἀβάσκαν|τόν σοι οἶκον καὶ τὰ ἀβάσκαντά σου
παιδία

P.Abinn. 35.28f. (mid 4th c.) ἀσπάζομαί σοι ἅμα μετὰ τῶν παιδίων σου | τοῦ ἀβασκάντου
σου οἴκου

P.Abinn. 37.3f. (mid 4th c.) προηγουμένως εὐχομέ σοι τὸν | ἀβάσκατον υκον (I. οἶκον)

P.Mich. VIII 519.3–7 (4th c.⁸) πρὸ μὲν πάντων πολλά σοι προσ|γορεύω. ... καὶ [τ]οῦ
ἀβ[άσκ]αντάν σου οἴκου κατὰ ὄν[ο]μα

As we see, the apotropaic ἀβάσκαντος, ‘whom the evil eye may not touch’,⁹ is used more or less in the same manner as ἄφθονος. The acclamation SEG XXVIII 1404b, from Palaestina, illustrates their semantic affinity: Κύριε βοήθηθι ἄφθονα καὶ ἀβάσκαντα τῷ οἴκῳ σου.

⁴ A. Zehetmair, *De appellationibus honorificis in papyris graecis obviis* (1912) 55, notes that the adjective is used for houses ‘nobilium virorum’ (only BGU III 874 and P.Oxy. I 155 were known at that time). There is no way of knowing whether all the families defined as such were of some standing.

⁵ See J.-L. Fournet, *Hellénisme dans l’Égypte du VI^e siècle* (1999) ii 484, on Diosc. IV 4.31. Fournet further draws my attention to IGLSyr IV 1599.1, a Cristian invocation for the protection of a house: ἡ Τριάς, ὁ θεός, πόρρω διώκοι τὸν φθόνον. Cf. also the adverb ἀφθόνως in P.Ryl. II 77.36 (192) and SB XXVI 16533.8 (6th c.).

⁶ Originally assigned to the second/third century, its date has recently been placed in the second half of the third century; see J. Gascou, ‘Nouveautés documentaires et littéraires sur Clysma’, in J.-P. Brun et al. (edd.), *Le désert oriental d’Égypte durant la période gréco-romaine : bilans archéologiques* (2018) n. 20, at <<https://books.openedition.org/cdf/5183>>.

⁷ The date is after Gascou, cit. § 5; the editor had placed the text in the third century.

⁸ A date in the fifth century has also been considered (BL X 125) but cannot be proven (the original appears to be lost, and there is no photograph).

⁹ The translation of this expression is after H.C. Youtie, ‘Critical Trifles VIII’, *ZPE* 36 (1979) 75f. = *Scriptiunculae Posteriores* ii 567f.; see further D. Bonneau, ‘L’apotropaïque « abaskantos » en Égypte’, *RHR* 199 (1982) 23–36.

The chronological distribution of the examples is instructive. It is worth quoting an extract from the section on ‘Evidence for Christianity in the [Abinnaeus] Archive’, in the introduction of P.Abinn. (p. 32):

‘It has been thought that Christians avoided this adjective, which implied beliefs that they condemned. It appears in letters of a period prior to the spread of Christianity (...) if in P. Oxy. 2276. 28 the phrase ἀσπάζομαι κατ’ ὄνομα τὰ ἀβάσκ[αν]τὰ [σο]υ παιδία, μεθ’ ὧν ἐρρωμένην σε <ἐ>ν κυ[ρί]ῳ | [θ]εῶ εὐχομαι is correctly read, and provided that the formula ἐν κυρίῳ θεῶ certainly denotes a Christian writer, it would be proved that a reference to the evil eye was not impossible from a Christian pen. Moreover, the ἀβάσκαντος wish is found in P. Mich. 519, which is presumably Christian to judge from the letters χμγ at the top.’¹⁰

P.Oxy. XX 2276 (= M. Naldini, *Il Cristianesimo in Egitto* no. 18) offers no evidence that a reference to the evil eye could have come from ‘a Christian pen’: examination of the original shows that in lines 29–30 <ἐ>ν κυ[ρί]ῳ | [θ]εῶ is an impossible reading, though I have not been able to find a convincing alternative.¹¹ Nonetheless, texts such as PSI VIII 972 = SB X 10841 or P.Mich. VIII 519 (= Naldini nos. 64 and 67) show that also Christians could use ἀβάσκαντος-expressions.¹² The acclamation cited above is also Christian. Nonetheless, the use of the word declines after the third century and disappears from the papyri after the fourth.¹³ ἄφθονος would carry the same semantic weight but no obvious ‘pagan’ connotations; it would be an ideologically correct apotropaic term to use for a household.¹⁴ But it could also be a mere matter of taste, which sees words displaced by others over the course of time.

¹⁰ The starting point of this note is P.Ryl. IV 604 introd.: ‘a Christian should not employ the ἀβάσκαντος wish’.

¹¹ The letter was assigned to the ‘late third to fourth century’: according to the editor (introd.), ‘the handwriting might well belong to the fourth century, but in view of the very small sum of money involved in the case a date in the late third century is more appropriate’, while ‘this sign of Christianity [= the expression ἐν κυρίῳ θεῶ] suggests that the letter is to be dated not before the end of the third century A.D.’ (29–30 n.). But I cannot see how the hand can be later than the third century.

¹² See G. R. Horsley, *New Docs 1976* 70; G. Tibiletti, *Le lettere private nei papiri greci del III e IV secolo d.C.* (1979) 45f. Note that PSI VII 825 (= Naldini no. 44), need not be Christian; see Horsley, *ibid.*, and cf. E. Wipszycka, ‘Remarques sur les lettres privées chrétiennes des II^e-IV^e siècles (à propos d’un livre de M. Naldini)’, *JJP* 18 (1974) 221.

¹³ It would appear that late instances occur in PSI III 210, assigned to the fourth/fifth century, and SB XVIII 13112, placed in the fifth/sixth. But images of these two papyri suggest that they are written in fourth-century hands, the first earlier, the second later.

¹⁴ We find εὐλογημένος in a few cases, once even juxtaposed with ἄφθομος (PSI XIII 1345.14, quoted above); see e.g. P.Col. XI 301.9f. (4th c.) πάντας τοῦ εὐλογη[μένου] ὀϊκου μικροῦς καὶ μεγάλους (for discussion, see CPR XXV 35.11–12 n.).