Kontonaitor: a ghost word

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Abstract
The Greek word "kontonaitor", wrongly read in a Greek papyrus, is a ghost word.

Reference
Κωντοναίτωρ: a Ghost Word

In 1890, A.-H. Sayce published two papyri dated respectively A.D. 512 and 513, which were entrusted to him by Flinders Petrie. The second document, a contract of sale of a monastery, was signed, among others, by Φλ(άονιος) Τιμόθεως νιός (I. νιός) Ἀβρααμίου βουλ[ευ]τής κωντοναίτωρ τῆς Ἀρεσοπετῶν πόλεως (SB I 5175, 21).

In the editio princeps, Sayce did not accentuate the word κωντοναίτωρ, otherwise unknown, and put a question mark after it, not really knowing how it should be understood. He wrote (p. 143, n. 3): "J'ai traduit, suivant une ingénieuse suggestion de M. Dareste, κωντοναίτωρ comme le latin centonarius". A centonarius is a fireman who uses blankets (centones) to put out a fire.

The word κωντοναίτωρ was then incorporated into F. Preisigke's Wörterbuch III (Abschn. 8), without any interpretation. The original of the papyrus disappeared for some time, before being rediscovered by E. G. Turner a little before 1952, at University College, London. Turner took the opportunity to revise Sayce's readings, and confirmed κωντοναίτωρ, although he did not offer an interpretation of the word.

This was done by S. Daris, who proposed a bad spelling of κωντοναίτωρ = Lat. con- tionator. The word contionator does not occur in any other papyrus found in Egypt, neither under its Latin form nor transcribed into the Greek alphabet.

The Thesaurus Linguae Latinae quotes GRAM. suppl. 242,5: "contio dicitur congregatio. inde conionator dicit qui ad conionem i.e. ad congregationem sermonem facit, sicut Salomon ecclesiastes Graece, Latine conionator". The Thesaurus also says: "apud christianos, idem quod ἐκκλησιαστής, praedicator". If one follows Daris' interpretation, one would have to consider the existence of an official function in Arsinoe, held by a conionator, "he who addresses the assembly".

Examination of the original during a class given by Prof. H. Maechler in London has convinced me that the reading κωντοναίτωρ is wrong, and that one should read instead κωντούκτωρ, a Greek transliteration of the Latin conductor. The first omega is hardly surprising: Flavius Timotheos, the signatory, apparently does not distinguish omicron from omega (see e.g. νιός = νιός, same line 21). Instead of the first tau, one would expect a delta, but the phenomenon needs not surprise us. In P. Panop. Beatty 1, 60 (and 63 ?), one finds κωντούκτωρς =

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1 REG 3 (1890) 131-144 = SB I 5174-5175.
2 See JEA 38 (1952) 132-133.
3 Il lessico latino nel greco d'Egitto, Barcelona 1971.
4 Vol. IV, col. 734 (A. Gudeman, 1907).
κονδούκτορις. The letter that gave most trouble to previous scholars is the second kappa, although very similar to the one in δικέων (= δικαίων), l. 18-19, written by the same hand.

So much for the ghost word κοντοναίτωρ, and welcome to a new attestation of a conductor. The word means "contractor", and, in Roman Egypt, applies to the contractor for the cursus uelox (ὀξύς δρόμος in Greek), the postal service. From P.Oxy. VI 900, 6-7 (= W. Chr. 437), we learn that the office was a liturgy and lasted for one year: ὑποβληθέντος ἔτη εἰς κονδούκτορίαν τοῦ ὀξέος (l. - ἐκς) δρόμου τοῦ εὐτυχῶς εἰσίν τοῖς ἔτοις. The conductor was in charge of the conductorium, which dealt with a whole metropolis, as is the case in SB I 5175, 21, and also in P.Oxy. XVII 2115, 1-4: Φλάουσοις Ἐτημ[ή]ιοι λογιστὴς Ὀξυρυγήτου λογισμόρ μον κον- δούκτορίον τῆς αὐτῆς πόλεως χαίρειν.

It seems likely that he could have worked for a service at a higher level in the administration: in P.Mich. XI 624,24, we find a conductor apparently connected with a praesidial officium.

The conductor was apparently subordinated to a λογιστής. Contractors for the κονδούκτορία belonged to the bouleutic class. Of course, the conductor did not actually deliver the mail himself: he was given help for that purpose. Postal delivery must have been fairly frequent, as one can see from P.Cornell 52, 9-12: επάνδοναν σῶν ἔχων πολλὰς ἐρμομένοις εἰς τὴν Τακόνα ἢ τοῦ κονδούκτορίου ἢ τῆς κόμης ἀντιγράψατο μοι περὶ πάντας.

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6 It is worth noticing that Sayce's reading, δικεων, is also wrong, and has never been corrected since.
7 See SB I 5175,21 and P.Oxy. VI 900,4.
8 See P.Oxy. VI 900 and P.Panop. Beatty 1, 60-61.