άφθονοι οἶκοι: keeping the evil eye at bay

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

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Several late antique letters refer to ἀφθονοι οἶκοι 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 ἀφθονόν σου οἶκον
SB XXII 15482.21ff. (5th c.) ἀσπάζω πάντας τοὺς ἐν τῷ ἀφθόνῳ | σου οἶκῳ ἀπὸ μικροῦ ἐως μεγάλου
P.IFAO II 27.1f. (5th/6th c.) πο]λλὰ προσκυνό καὶ προφθέγγομαι τ[ | τῷ ἀφ]θόνῳ αὐτῆς οίκῳ1 κατ’ ὄνομα
BGU III 874.8–10 (6th c.) πολλὰ δὲ προσαγορεῖω τὴν κυρίαν τὴν ύμων μητέραν | καὶ ... τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς καὶ πάντας τοὺς ἐν τῷ | ἀφθόνῳ<ω>2 ὑμῶν οἶκῳ
P.Cair.Masp. II 67205.10ff. (c.566–73) ὑπερευχόμενος τῆς δ[ιαμονῆς ύμων καὶ σωτηρίας] | [τὸν εὐκλεεστάτον τέκνον καὶ παντὸς τοῦ ἀφθόνον]υ ύμῶν] οἶκου
P.Flor. III 303.8ff. (6th c.) πολλὰ πολλὰ πολλὰ προσαγορεῖο τὴν σήν | ἀρετὴν καὶ πάντας τοὺς ἐνοικοῦντας ἐν τῷ ἀφθόνῳ σου οἶκῳ, ἀπὸ μικροῦ | ἐως μεγάλου, τὸ κατ’ ὄνομα
P.Oxy. I 155.5f. (6th c.) καὶ πολλοίς | χρόνοις καὶ καλοῖς τῇ ύμων μεγαλοπρόειον μετά τοῦ ἀφθόνου ύμων οίκου
PSI XIII 1345.13f. (6th/7th c.) ὑπερευχομένου ὑπὲρ τῆς εὐζωικῆς καὶ [τῆς] | συστάσεως τοῦ εὐλογημένου ἔκατ’ ἀφθόνου’ ύμων οίκου
P.Bawit Clackson 82.3 (7th c.) καὶ ἀφθόνου ύμων οίκου3

1 Comparison with BGU III 874.10 and P.Flor. III 303.9 suggests reading [- - - καὶ πάντας τοὺς ἐν τῷ ἀφθόνῳ αὐτῆς οίκῳ 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 . . . οὐ ύμῶν οίκου; 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. ἀφθόνος: ‘unenvied bountiful B II.2 984.27 ... II.1 not grudged, 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 οἶκον, also attested in epigraphic and literary texts, though it probably conveys the sense of plentiness as well.5

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

SB VI 9549.15f. (4th c.) τοῦ οἴκου τοῦ | ἀβασκάντου
P.Abinn. 30.23f. (mid 4th c.) ἀσπάζομαι τὸν ἀβάσκαντόν σοι οἶκον καὶ τὰ ἀβάσκαντά σου παϊδία
P.Abinn. 35.28f. (mid 4th c.) ἀσπάζομαι σαί ἁμα μετὰ τῶν παϊδίων σου | τοῦ ἀβασκάντου σου οἴκου
P.Abinn. 37.3f. (mid 4th c.) προηγομένως εὐχομέ σαι τὸν | ἀβάσκαντον οἴκου (I. οἴκον)

As we see, the apotropaic ἀβάσκαντος, ‘whom the evil eye may not touch’,9 is used more or less in the same manner as ἀφθόνος. The acclamation SEG XXVIII 1404b, from Palaestina, illustrates their semantic affinity: Κύριε βοήθηθι ἀφθόνα 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 Vif 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, ὃ θεός, πόρρω διόκοι τὸν φθόνον. Cf. also the adverb ἀφθόνος 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. Gasco, ‘Nouveautés documentaires et littéraires sur Clyisma’, 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 Gasco, 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).
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 ἅβασκο[αν]τά [σο]ι παιδία, μεθ’ ὁν ἐφρομένην σε ĕν χυ[ρίῳ] [θ]έοι εὐχήμοια is correctly read, and provided that the formula ἔν κυρίῳ θεῷ 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 ἅβασκαντος wish is found in P. Mich. 519, which is presumably Christian to judge from the letters χυγ at the top.’

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 ĕν χυ[ρίῳ] | [θ]έοι is an impossible reading, though I have not been able to find a convincing alternative.

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 ἅβασκαντος-expressions. 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. ἅφθονος would carry the same semantic weight but no obvious ‘pagan’ connotations; it would be an ideologically correct apotropaic term to use for a household. But it could also be a mere matter of taste, which sees words displaced by others over the course of time.

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10 The starting point of this note is P.Ryl. IV 604 introd.: ‘a Christian should not employ the ἅβασκαντος 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 ἔν κυρίῳ θεῷ] 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.


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 ἅφθονος (PSI XIII 1345.14, quoted above); see e.g. P.Col. XI 301.9f. (4th c.) πάντας τοῦ εὐλογη[μένου ὑμῶν] | ὁ[ίκου μικροῦ καὶ μεγάλο]υς (for discussion, see CPR XXV 35.11–12 n.).