

ΠΑΝΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΙΟ ΚΡΗΤΗΣ

ΑΡΙΑΔΗ

ΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΟΝΙΚΗ ΕΠΕΤΗΡΙΔΑ
ΤΗΣ ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΙΚΗΣ ΣΧΟΛΗΣ

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ΕΝΔΕΚΑΤΟΣ

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Learning the Letters of the Alphabet in Byzantine Egypt (*Papyrus Universitatis Cretensis* inv. 5)*

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Papyrus Universitatis Cretensis inv. 5 is a light brown piece of papyrus of poor quality, well preserved at all sides, although some vertical fibers are somewhat frayed at its top right-hand edge. There are four vertical foldings at the points (a), (b), (c), (d), shown at the photo (pl. 1). The dimensions are 17.5 in width by 7.3 cm in height. Its exact provenance in Egypt is unknown.

There is a *kollesis* (sheet-join) of c. 2.3 cm in breadth, which presents a peculiarity and allows for the possibility that we are dealing with a case of *protokollon* or *eschatokollion* (first or last protecting sheet, respectively) of a papyrus roll¹: Two pieces of papyri of the same quality (from the same papyrus roll?), which measure 4.4 × 7.3 cm and 15.5 × 7.3 cm, were pasted together, so that their fibers run in contrary directions. The writing surfaces are indicated conventionally as Side A (the small piece is the left-hand part and has vertical fibers pasted on top of horizontal ones) and Side B (the small piece is the right-hand part and has horizontal fibers).

Side A is a palimpsest, a previous text having been washed out. Traces of letters are visible of this text, which was written in at least three lines running on both pieces (and of course over the *kollesis*), the same way up. This is an indication that this side was the outside of the roll (Turner 1978, 23, fig. 3). On the same side there is a drawing in the upper right corner of the scrap. This drawing could be compared with some similar designs drawn sometimes in connection with the addresses in the last folding of the exterior surface of private documents dated from the Roman and Byzantine periods².

* The papyrus was acquired by the Workshop of Papyrology and Epigraphy, University of Crete, in 1998.

1. For the terms see Turner 1978, 22-5. In such cases it is difficult to recognize sides using the terms 'Recto' and 'Verso', 'Front' and 'Back' or the symbols of the arrows (*P.Oxy.* XLII, xv).

2. See *P.Oxy.* XLVIII 3396, note to line 32. One could think of a labyrinth-like design, even though there are many differentiations from its typical form (more than one exits etc., as stated in Kern 1982, 14). There are no similar drawings in Horak 1992.

The bottom edge of Side A is regularly cut off and suggests that it was the bottom of a roll, contrary to the top edge, which seems to have been torn (and not cut) from a larger piece. Taken all these features in conjunction, the present scrap seems to have been the lowermost left part of a larger piece of papyrus. Since the washed out text is difficult to resume, we cannot establish its content and, consequently, cannot draw a certain inference about the way the main text and, presumably, the address were written on it. Below the drawing just a few letters could be read with difficulty as]δϑεια αυ[(therefore possibly Αλεξαν]δϑεια?).

Then, both sides of the papyrus were used for school exercises. The papyri were the most frequently used material for such purposes (50% compared to other materials, e.g. ostraca, tablets or parchments) and especially papyri of poorer quality (Cribiore 1996, 58), as here. However, the practice of washing out a previous text was relatively uncommon (Cribiore 1996, 59; 2001, 148) and this papyrus seems to be the latest preserved example of such case. Moreover, the use of both sides of a scrap of papyrus for school exercises is very rare, about 5% (Cribiore 1996, 60-2, 73, Table 1).

The carbon ink on both sides is abraded at some points but the reading is certain. A thick pen was used. The text in Side A contains two lines with the letters of the Greek alphabet followed by the six letters of the Coptic alphabet, ω ϣ ϑ ς Ϟ †, an easy type of exercise with many parallel examples (Cribiore 1996, nos 71, 72, 75):

ΑΒΓΔΕΖΗΘΙΚΑΜΝΞΟΠΡΤ [drawing]

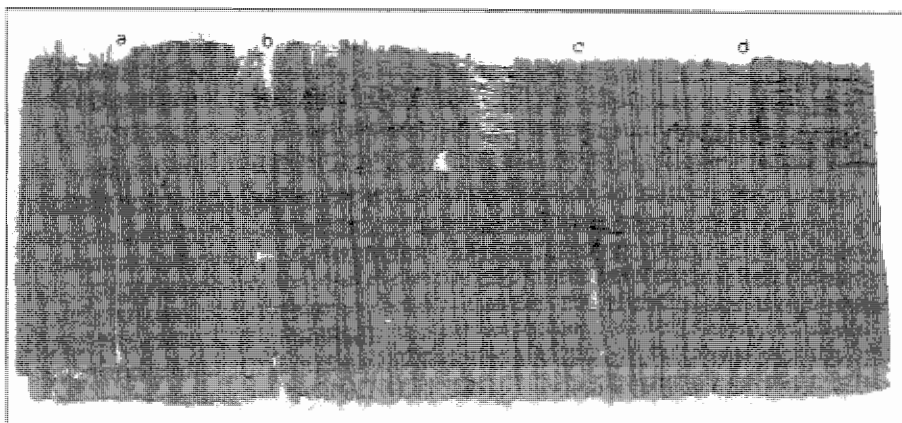
Υ
ΦΧΨΩω ϣ ϑ ς Ϟ † [traces of washed out letters]

[traces of washed out letters]
[traces of washed out letters]

At the top there is a margin of 0.1 – 1.3 cm and at the bottom 3.3 – 3.7 cm, because both the size of the letters varies and the alignment descends as the text runs towards the end of the lines³. The letter Y in the beginning of the second line was written below and close to A of the first line (interlinear space 0.3 mm), but the following letters Φ etc. are written further below keeping an interlinear space of 0.8 mm. The descending alignment could be explained as an attempt of the scribe to avoid the drawing at the end of the first line, which, as said above, seems to pre-exist the school exercise⁴, otherwise, the scribe should have written Y (at least, or a few more letters) after T in the first line. The writing begins at the very left top of papyrus and leaves a large unwritten area at the bottom, which suggests an inexperienced pupil who could not estimate the exact space their exercise would take (Cribiore 1996, 60). The letter C is corrected on top of

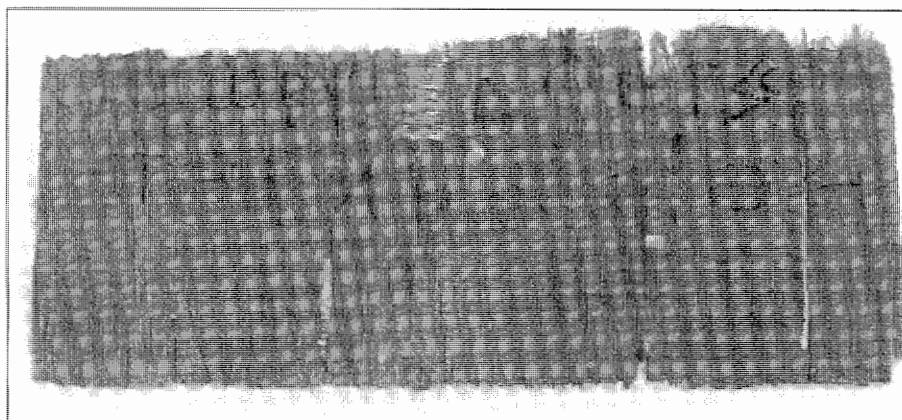
3. For the uniformity of writing see Cribiore 1996, 103.

4. There are some examples of drawings written together with alphabets in Cribiore 1996, 80-1.



Pl. 1. *Papyrus Universitatis Cretensis* inv. 5, Side A.

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Pl. 2. *Papyrus Universitatis Cretensis* inv. 5, Side B.

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another letter, probably *P*, and, if it is that, obviously an error of dittography.

Side B was used for two other types of school exercises. The letters of the Greek alphabet (the six Coptic letters are not involved in such examples) had to be paired in the following model, the first with the last, the second with the last but one, and so on, an exercise which seemed to be much more difficult than the first one of side A (Criore 1996, 38-9 and parallel examples in nos 44, 79, 83)⁵. Therefore, the pupil after the Coptic cross, which is used in such exercises (Criore 1996, nos 65, 72) wrote correctly

5. For the practice of pairing the letters and leaving the Coptic letter idle see Criore 1999, 284-5.

the first four pairs, $A\Omega$, $B\Psi$, ΓX , $\Delta\Phi$, but he paired mistakenly ET and ZP instead of EY , ZT , HC and ΘP . However, these mistakes were corrected by inserting the missing letter Y in the interlinear space below and between E and T , and the letter C huddled up between Z and P . The rest of the letters are written in the second line in reversed order, i.e. from Π to H , which is another (and easier) type of exercise with a few parallel examples (Criore 1996, nos 43, 45, 64, 79, 83). However, it is noticeable that even though the order is right, two letters, Ξ and N , are written in a mirror-shape form, which finds a parallel in Z of the previous line⁶. Based on details given in Criore (1996, 73, Table 2), the present scrap of papyrus preserves the only exercise on alphabets written on both sides. The text in Side B runs as follows:

†ΑΩΒΨΓΧΔΦΕΤΖϸΡ

ΠΟΞΝΜΑΚΙ^ΥΘΗ

Pairing the letters or writing them in reversed order were two of the most difficult exercises, whose purpose was to enable pupils both to learn the alphabetic sequence and begin recognizing the letters by their appearance. At the very beginning before memorization, they should certainly need a pattern or a teacher's model to copy (Criore 1996, 142). In the present situation it seems that the pupil wrote the exercise in Side B having as a pattern the one in Side A, where the letters were written in the regular sequence. However, because of the position of the letter Y , almost apart from the following letters in the second line, and the omission of the letter C and the dittography of the letter P there, the pupil probably used as pattern the following letters:

ΑΒΓΔΕΖΗΘΙΚΛΜΝΞΟΠ{Ρ}ΡΤ | ΦΧΨΩ.

Pairing this sequence is the result of the first line on Side B. Furthermore, a realistic inference to be drawn is that at the end of the exercise it was the pupil himself or the teacher who corrected it by inserting the two missing letters on Side B and writing the correct C on top of the second mistaken P on Side A⁷. It is also not certain whether it is the same pupil who wrote both sides since there are letters with different shapes on the two sides, e.g. A , E , Λ . The pupil writing on Side B seems to go through his exercise by turning the papyrus and taking a look (quickly or not) at Side A, either because he was ordered to act in this certain way by his teacher or he was trying to cheat⁸.

Finally, following Criore's (1996, 112, 131) typology, the handwriting's features reveal a stage between an "alphabetic" and an "evolving" one. It presents (apart from

6. For N written in the same way see Criore 1996, no 39.

7. For the methods of corrections see Criore 1996, 95-6.

8. For a parallel example see Criore 1996, 39.

the uniformity of writing, as described above) letters written in a relatively low speed, formed upright, large, in two or three movements, almost within a square (average size in Side A: 0.5 cm; in Side B: 1 cm) and aiming at their perfection. The letters meet at angles where necessary and do not cross each other.

The school exercises, especially the student's hands, are difficult to date, due to their idiosyncratic characteristics and the lack of persistence (Cribiore 1996, 117). However, a framework for dating is the existence of the Coptic alphabet, which points to the later Byzantine period, VI-VII centuries A.D.⁹ Some letter forms resemble those of *P.Lond.* 483 (= Seider 1967, no 56, lines 92-94; no 63, lines 99-101) dated in A.D. 616. Also, the noticeable broad Θ , the vertical middle stroke of Φ and Ψ , which protrude both below and above, the two somewhat curved bows of *B* are characteristic of the (Biblical or Coptic) uncial of the same period, used for literary hands, a pattern easily imagined for a pupil¹⁰.

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9. For examples of co-existence of Greek and Coptic letters in school exercises see Cribiore 1996, nos 91, 92, 94, 95, 96, 97. However, it is difficult to say whether this exercise was part of the Greek or Coptic education; see Gribiore 1999, 285.

10. According to Cribiore's (1996) model the papyrus should be catalogued as:

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Papyrus Universitatis Cretensis inv. 5

Photo: Plates 1-2

Date: VI-VII A.D.

Provenance: Unknown

Material: Papyrus scrap of poor quality, 17.5 × 7.3 cm

Content: Side 1: Greek Alphabet in two lines followed by the six Coptic letters. A drawing at the end of the first line.

Side 2: (line 1) an attempt to pair the first and last six letters of the Greek alphabet, preceded by a cross and (line 2) the rest of the letters in reverse order. Some corrections (by another hand?).

Hand: or hands, "Alphabetic", Letters of various size, by pupils who know their basic forms.

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Μαθαίνοντας τα γράμματα της αλφαβήτα
στη Βυζαντινή Αίγυπτο
(*Papyrus Universitatis Cretensis* inv. 5)

ΝΙΚΟΣ ΛΙΤΙΝΑΣ

Ο πάπυρος του Πανεπιστημίου Κρήτης με αριθμό ευρετηρίου 5 (*Papyrus Universitatis Cretensis* inv. 5) προέρχεται από την Αίγυπτο, αλλά δεν αναφέρεται ο ακριβής τόπος εύρεσης. Χρονολογείται στην ύστερη Βυζαντινή περίοδο (6ος – 7ος αι. μ.Χ.). Αποκόπηκε από έναν παλαιότερα χρησιμοποιημένο πάπυρο και είναι παλίμψηστος στη μία του πλευρά. Στην πλευρά Α διασώζει την άσκηση ενός μαθητή κατά την οποία έπρεπε να γράψει τα 24 γράμματα του ελληνικού και τα 6 γράμματα του κοπτικού αλφαβήτου με τη συνήθη ακολουθία τους. Στην πλευρά Β ένας άλλος (ή ο ίδιος) μαθητής δοκιμάστηκε σε έναν άλλο τύπο άσκησης, στο σχηματισμό ζευγών των πρώτων και τελευταίων γραμμάτων, ακολουθώντας μία συγκεκριμένη σειρά, το πρώτο με το τελευταίο, το δεύτερο με το προτελευταίο κτλ. Η άσκηση αυτή τελείωσε μετά το έκτο ζεύγος, έχοντας προβεί σε ορισμένα λάθη (στο πέμπτο και έκτο ζεύγος, *ET* και *ZP* αντί του σωστού *EY*, *ZI*, *HC* και *ΘP*), που δικαιολογούνται μόνο αν υποθέσουμε ότι κοιτούσε (κρυφά, προσπαθώντας να ξεγελάσει το δάσκαλό του ή φανερά, με προτροπή του δασκάλου του) την πλευρά Α, όπου είχε κάποια άλλα λάθη. Στη συνέχεια έγραψε έναν τρίτο τύπο άσκησης: συγκεκριμένα του ζητήθηκε να γράψει με αντίστροφη ακολουθία τα υπόλοιπα γράμματα του ελληνικού αλφαβήτου που δεν είχαν ζευγαρωθεί στην προηγούμενη άσκηση, δηλ. από το Π μέχρι το Η. Ο πάπυρος αυτός είναι ο μόνος έως σήμερα που διασώζει και τους τρεις διαφορετικούς τύπους ασκήσεων αλφαβήτου και ο μόνος που χρησιμοποιείται και στις δύο πλευρές του για το σκοπό αυτό.