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THE FUNCTION OF THE PARAGRAPHUS IN GREEK LITERARY PROSE
TEXTS

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The Function of the Paragraphus in Greek Literary Prose Texts

The *paragraphus*—by which I intend a horizontal stroke written below the line at the left margin—will be a familiar sign to those who work with Greek papyri. In dramatic texts, whether tragedy, comedy, or Platonic dialogue, the paragraphus is regularly used to mark a change of speaker. In lyric it most often separates a metrical group, as the divisions within a triad. In hexameter, it is sometimes found as a divider between sections of the text. In documents, it is likewise employed, though rarely, to separate sections or the members of a list, but fairly regularly a paragraphus will divide the main text from the *subscriptio*.¹

The frequent use of the paragraphus in non-dramatic literary prose is, if perhaps related, rather different. In those texts the paragraphus serves simply to note the end of a sentence. The ancient scribe (or corrector) was, generally speaking, accustomed to mark the end of each sentence with a space or dash or dot within the column of text, but he would also add a stroke at the left margin. This use of the paragraphus in book rolls of Greek literary prose is well recognized by papyrologists, yet few seem to have paused to ask why it is there. In a number of texts, it is true, the paragraphus serves to distinguish (by its presence) punctuation which marks a full stop and (by its absence) punctuation which marks a lesser pause.² But there remain many texts where only the full stops are marked, and yet punctuation and paragraphus both occur.³ In these cases, the paragraphus is, strictly speaking, redundant.

Now the knee-jerk response may be that the redundant use of the paragraphus is no more than fossilized usage derived from its more sensible employment in those texts where it serves to distinguish full from lesser stops. This may be so, but what evidence we have does not

¹ See E.G. Turner, rev. P.J. Parsons, *Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World* (London² 1987) 8,12. The use of the *παράγραφος*, named *παράγραφη* by our oldest writers, goes back at least to the classical period. We find references to its use as a section marker in Isocrates (*Antidosis* 59), Hyperides (*adv. Demosth.*, *apud* Harpocration, p. 235 Dindorf [=fr. c 1]), and Aristotle (*Rhet.* 3.8 Kassel, 1409^a20). It is possible that Aristotle intends the paragraphus as a sign to mark sentence end. There is some disagreement about the details of the use in early dramatic papyri which are no relevance to the present note. They will be briefly discussed by S. Bonnycastle[†] and L. Koenen in a forthcoming article on Euripides' *Kresphontes* (tentatively n. 26, cf. 24)

² I cull from my notes the following Oxyrhynchus examples, all dating between the late first and the third century: *P. Oxy.* 226, 231, 703, 844, 1019+2948, 1092, 1619, 2096+3374, 2097, 2404, 3327, 3447. For (rare) earlier examples, see below n. 4 (3). But it is often difficult to determine who has added the punctuation: *P. Oxy.* 3664 is a good example where a second pen has added high and low dots to signal lesser pauses after the original hand had marked sentence end with paragraphus accompanied by a dot. (I have examined all the Oxyrhynchus papyri cited here and in the next note.)

³ Some examples from Oxyrhynchus are as follows (in all of these the intended system seems clear enough, despite occasional omissions or inconsistencies): *P. Oxy.* 16+696, 19, 1376, 2100, 3376, 3451; also *P. Oxy.* 18 and 232, but in those cases a second hand may well have added the paragraphi; and see above n. 2 for *P. Oxy.* 3664. The practice appears to have been common in the earlier period: see below n. 4 (1), (2).

support it. Extant papyri lead rather to the conclusion that the redundant use of the paragraphus came first, and that the use of the paragraphus to distinguish full from lesser stops was a later, secondary development.⁴

Another, perhaps more plausible hypothesis is that the paragraphus was introduced to distinguish the punctuating space when it occurs at line end. A space within the column is usually obvious enough, but at line end the irregularity of the right edge of the column makes it unclear whether punctuation is intended; hence the additional mark may have been felt necessary. But we must then surmise that from this one problem the paragraphus came to reside not only beside all spaces, but also beside all dashes (a punctuation by our evidence as antique as the space) and beside all dots (an apparently later habit of punctuation); and that this became routine for literary texts but did not, generally speaking, affect the writing of even very formally written documents. The explanation is possible, but there seems a great deal of baggage to follow upon the awkwardness of a punctuation space at line end. Is there perhaps a more convincing reason why the ancients so commonly marked a full stop by a horizontal stroke in the left margin?

In a recent attempt to vivify for undergraduates what it was like for the ancients to read, I put together a lecture in a form designed to imitate an ancient book roll. Many details were of course inaccurate: I found myself unable to go without word division, for instance. But the lecture was written out on a roll, with columns, intercolumns, and margins of typical size. I also went so far as to mark each sentence with a paragraphus at the left margin. As I practiced and later delivered the lecture, it became clear to me how very useful the paragraphus is when you are reading aloud. Prose columns in ancient book rolls are generally very narrow, with the result that a typical column contains only a few sentences, hence only a few paragraphi. As you look up at your audience, or pause in the reading of the lecture to add some parenthetical remark or entertain a comment, you need only recall, "second paragraphus down." Returning to your text, the paragraphus immediately reorients you to the start of the next sentence.

⁴ A rapid review of Ptolemaic papyri published in Pack² turns up the following distribution (all observations rely on the edition, verified and supplemented by the plate wherever possible; I have not been able to inspect most of these papyri).

(1) A paragraphus accompanied by a blank space in the text serves to mark a period (sometimes also colon), with lesser pauses apparently unmarked: *P. Hibeh* I 16 (early iii B.C.); II 182 (early iii B.C.); II 183 (middle iii B.C.); *Musée du Louvre* inv. 7733 (Pack² 2579, iii-ii B.C.); inv. 9331 (Pack² 1235, ii B.C.); *P. Oxy.* 1377 (i B.C.); the dots noted by the editor at lines 4 and 8 appear to me stray ink from the extensive bleeding in this area); *P. Oxy.* 2399 (i B.C.); *P. Par.* 2 (ii B.C.); *P. Petrie* I 25 (iii B.C.); *P. Ryl.* I 21 (early i B.C.) III. 491 (ii B.C.). Apparent but more doubtful examples include *P. Freib.* 3 (ii-i B.C.); *P. Hibeh* I 26 (early iii B.C.; the paragraphi may well mark sections); *P. Ryl.* I 18 (ii B.C.); I 20 (i B.C.; a paragraphus at line 40, not noted by the editor, appears to be visible in the plate).

(2) A paragraphus accompanied by a dash in the text serves to mark a period, with lesser pauses apparently unmarked: *P. Hibeh* I 15 (middle iii B.C.); II 184 (early iii B.C.).

(3) A paragraphus accompanied by a space or dash in the text serves to mark a period, with lesser pauses marked by space alone: *P. Hamb.* II 128 (late iii B.C.); *P. Lit. Lond.* 134 (ii B.C.) *P. Petrie* I 10 (iii B.C.); *P. Würzb.* in U. Wilcken, *Hermes* 41 (1906) 103-141, 42 (1907) 510-512 (Pack² 1484, ii B.C.).

Doctrine today holds that the ancients usually read their literary texts aloud,⁵ but many seem to envision a reader quietly muttering to himself. This is not necessarily the case, indeed not what the evidence teaches us. The *locus classicus* in Augustine's surprise at Ambrose's silent reading:

sed cum legebat, oculi ducebantur per paginas et cor intellectum rimabatur, vox autem et lingua quiescebant. saepe cum adessemus — non enim vetabatur quisquam ingredi aut ei venientem nuntiari mos erat — sic eum legentem vidimus tacite et aliter numquam sedentesque in diuturno silentio — quis enim tam intento esse oneri auderet? — discedebamus et coniectabamus eum parvo ipso tempore, quod reparandae menti suae nanciscebatur, feriatum ab strepitu causarum alienarum nolle in aliud avocari et cavere fortasse, ne auditore suspenso et intento, si qua obscurius posuisset ille quem legeret, etiam exponere esset necesse aut de aliquibus difficilioribus dissertare quaestionibus atque huic operi temporibus inpensis minus quam vellet voluminum evolveret, quamquam et causa servandae vocis, quae illi facillime obtundebatur, poterat esse iustior tacite legendi. (*Confessions* 6.3)

From Augustine's remarks we get a vivid sense that ancient reading of literary texts was very different from reading today. Not only is Augustine surprised at the silence, but he anticipates that in the usual course of reading, there would be frequent interruptions and discussion from people sitting in the room. In such a situation, the reader might well appreciate some lectional aid to assist him in returning to his place in the text.

The remains of the Greek grammarians contain no discussion of the use of the paragraphus in prose texts. But the remains are more forthcoming on the use of punctuation dots, and for our purpose the remarks of Dionysius Thrax are particularly interesting. Dionysius distinguishes three dots: *στιγμή τελεία*, *στιγμή μέση*, *ὑποστιγμή*. The *στιγμή τελεία*, he tells us, is used where the thought is complete, the *ὑποστιγμή* where the thought is incomplete. So far his analysis is as we might expect. But the function he ascribes to the *στιγμή μέση* may surprise us. That, he says, marks a spot where it is necessary to take a breath. Moreover, he goes on to ask what distinguishes the *στιγμή* (presumably meaning the *στιγμή τελεία*) from the *ὑποστιγμή*. The answer is time: the length of pause is greater for the former than for the latter. The passage is notoriously difficult to relate to actual practice in the papyri.

⁵ The standard references are Josef Balogh, "Voces Paginarum: Beiträge zur Geschichte des lauten Lesens und Schreibens," *Philologus* 82 (1927) 84-109 and 202-240; G.L. Hendrickson, "Ancient Reading," *CJ* 25 (1929) 182-96. Bernard M.W. Knox, "Silent Reading in Antiquity," *GRBS* 9 (1968) 421-435 accepts that reading aloud was general even while presenting strong evidence for some silent reading. The story of Acontius and Cydippa gives an illustrative example of how usual reading aloud was, inasmuch as the story depends on the assumption that Cydippa understands the text only as she sounds out the words. (Callimachus, *Aitia* fr. 67 Pf. with Dig. Knox at 430-31 objects that this story is improperly used as evidence for reading aloud, since the maid seems to be introduced in order to motivate Cydippa's reading. To this L. Koenen suggests *per litteras*: "Knox's treatment ignores that, in reading the few words written on the apple to her maid, Kydippe was unable to perceive the threat until she arrived at the last critical word. She did not perceive the meaning of the brief sentence until she read it aloud. The maid was needed not because her presence would cause Kydippe to read aloud, but because Kydippe, being the kind of young lady such as she is depicted, would hardly have picked up the apple, which by tradition presented an erotic message with or without writing.")

But one point is clear: Dionysius in the second century B.C. is thinking of punctuation dots not just as grammatical dividers but as practical aids to reading aloud.⁶

My suggestion, then, is that the paragraphus in Greek prose texts was added primarily to assist with reading aloud — the typical way in which these literary texts would have been used. The hypothesis gains force from the following considerations. As already mentioned, we can thereby understand why the paragraphus is redundantly added to texts where the full stop is already clearly signaled by internal punctuation. But also the particular form and placement of the paragraphus makes sense, since a horizontal stroke in the margin will be an easy mark to spot as the reader looks back to his text.

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⁶ Dionysius Thrax, *Ars grammatica*, ed. G. Uhlig, *Grammatici Graeci* vol. 1.1 (Leipzig 1883) 7-8 (if, as Uhlig suggests on p. 1xxix, parts of the passage are interpolated, the interpolation is nonetheless early, given the translation into Latin by grammarians of the fourth century: cf. H. Keil, *Grammatici Latini* vol. 1 [Leipzig 1857] 437,14 [item VI 192,8; VII 324,13]). The same attitude underlies Satyrus's account of Sophocles' death (*Vita Sophoclis* 14), which he says to have been the result of declaiming a lengthy sentence without μέγην ἢ ὑποστιγμὴν πρὸς ἀνάπαυσιν. Similarly for Herodian the στιγμή governs the rise or fall of the voice: cf. e.g. ed. A. Lentz, *Grammatici Graeci* vol. 3.1 (Leipzig 1867) 10. Instructive by way of contrast is the strictly syntactical viewpoint of Photius, writing in the ninth century, who discusses στιγμή and ὑποστιγμή in terms of their usefulness for marking ellipsis, the end of a period, and the like; cf. e.g. *Fragmenta in epistulam ii ad Corinthios*, ed. K. Staab, *Pauluskommentar aus der griechischen Kirche aus Katenenhandschriften gesammelt* (Münster 1933) 587-588 (*ad 2 Cor.* 1.21-22).