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A SCHOOLTABLET FROM THE HEARST MUSEUM

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A Schooltablet from the Hearst Museum (Plates VIII and IX)

This wooden tablet (6-21416) belongs to the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California at Berkeley.¹ It was found in Tebtunis (Umm el Baragat) by B.P. Grenfell and A.S. Hunt in the excavation campaign of 1899 and 1900 which was financed by Mrs. Phoebe A. Hearst. In the University of California archives the tablet is listed among the items of the Roman period handed over in May 1900 to George Reisner, who supervised the excavations of Grenfell and Hunt. It came from Cemetery VIII, presumably the Roman cemetery.

The tablet measures 14.4 cm. by 30.7 cm. and is written on both sides. Warping of the wood has caused a crack off the center from one of the short sides up to about one third of the long dimension. Two smaller oblique cracks can be observed starting from two binding holes, which were bored close to the edge of one of the long sides at a distance of about 4.5 cm. from one another. The thongs, which originally were used to hang or carry the individual tablet or join it to a set, have not survived. It is impossible to tell whether this was a single isolated tablet or if it was part of a notebook of many tablets.² It is likely that it was not the property of an individual student, since it was written on the two sides by different hands. Perhaps it belonged to a teacher who lent it to those pupils who needed to practice their handwriting, but could not afford to own one. Although the wood was not covered by a coat of paint as sometimes happens especially with tablets of beginner students, the two surfaces could still be washed and erased.³ On side A the writing ran parallel to the short dimension, with the student following as a model the first four lines inscribed by the teacher. Side B, instead, was written across the long dimension, parallel to the long sides, in a fashion that was prevalent among students in order to take advantage of the longer lines where a verse could fit. Occasionally one finds students turning around the same tablet, or tablets belonging to the same notebook, already inscribed parallel to the long sides to write across the short dimension.⁴

As the records indicate, the tablet seems to have come from Tebtunis' Roman cemetery. The date can be further specified on the basis of the characteristics of the writing, especially

¹ The museum was formerly called R.H. Lowie Museum of Anthropology. A photograph of the tablet is published courtesy of Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, the University of California at Berkeley. The tablet was cursorily described by Keith Hopkins in "Conquest by book", *Literacy in the Roman World* (JRA Suppl. 3, Ann Arbor 1991) 153.

² I have observed in my dissertation, *Writing, Teachers and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Diss. Columbia University 1993) 52-53 that many individual wooden tablets were found, while usually waxed tablets were bound into a notebook.

³ The white streaks and spots that can be observed on the photograph correspond to the abraded areas of the tablet.

⁴ See e.g. Michigan tablet inv. 764, A.E.R. Boak, *CP* 16 (1921) 191-92 with a list of names written parallel to the short side and numbers across the long dimension, and notebook of tablets Berol. 14000, G. Plaumann, "Antike Schultafeln aus Ägypten", *Ber. Berl. Mus.* (1913) 210-23, all written parallel to the long sides except side 6. For a more thorough treatment of the problem and more examples see Criatore (*op. cit.* [n. 2] 49-50).

the teacher's hand which inscribed the first four lines of side A. A difficulty derives from the fact that the hand is particularly affected and artificial and does not possess the fluency and gracefulness of other teachers' hands.⁵ It is as if this teacher made a conscious and almost painful effort at writing slowly and elaborately with well differentiated strokes. The speed is only slightly accelerated in the round letters. The proportions of the letters, which tend to be tall and rather narrow, the angular *alpha* and *delta* where the third diagonal stroke is prolonged in a crest, the bent terminal part of the first stroke of *kappa* appear similar in the more ornate hand of P. Berol. 9739, plate 19a of Schubart's *PGB*. The date of I-II century AD assigned by Schubart to this text, however, seems too early, as the accounts of 275-76 AD on the verso seem to confirm. The general characteristics of our teacher's hand are found also in Bodl. MS Gr. Class. C. 54, plate 62 of Turner's *GMAW*² whose assigned date is later II century AD. Again similar, but certainly later and with less vertical proportions, is the hand of P. Chester Beatty IX, Seider, *Paläographie* II 54 Taf. XXVIII of III-IV century AD. It seems reasonable to date our tablet to the II-III century AD. The students' hands confirm the general features of the model and this date. Accents and punctuation are editorial.

Side A	1	(m ¹) = ἄρξαι, χεῖρ ἀγαθή, καλὰ γράμματα καὶ τίχον ὀρθόν.
	4	καὶ σοὶ μιμοῦ. <<<<
		(m ²) = ἄρξαι, χεῖρ ἀγαθή, καλὰ γράμματα καὶ τίχον ὀρθόν.
	8	καὶ σοὶ μιμοῦ. = ἄρξαι, χεῖρ ἀγαθή, καλὰ γράμματα καὶ τίχ(ον) ὀρθόν.
	12	καὶ σοὶ μιμοῦ. = ἄρξαι, χεῖ(ρ), καλὰ γράμματα καὶ τίχ(ον) ὀρθόν.
	16	καὶ σοὶ μιμοῦ. = ἄρξαι, χεῖ(ρ), καλὰ γράμματα καὶ τίχ(ον) ὀρθόν.
	20	καὶ τίχ(ου). = ἄρξαι, χεῖ(ρ), καλὰ γράμματα καὶ τίχ(ον) ὀρθόν.
	24	καὶ τίχου.
		4, 8, 12, 16, read cv

⁵ See, e.g., the hand of the first six lines of Brooklyn inv. 37.1724E, a master's copy, *Pap. Flor.* XXII 27 (plate XX) and the model Louvre MND, B. Boyaval, *ZPE* 17 (1975) 225-35 (Tafel VII).

The tablet writing surface was previously ruled with 23 guide-lines to help keep the alignment. Such guide-lines often appear in wooden and wax tablets and are sometimes so crooked as to defeat the purpose. Here they are only partially useful, since they define planes of different height, and the student and the teacher likewise do not seem to have followed them very closely. Moreover, since the teacher had skipped the first plane, the pupil found himself in the necessity of fitting lines 22 and 23 in the same plane.

The model written by the teacher, which occupies the first four lines, consists of a hexameter line, an exhortation to write in a beautiful hand, ἄρξαι, χεῖρ ἀγαθή, καλὰ γράμματα καὶ κρίχον ὀρθόν, “Begin, good hand, beautiful letters, and a straight line.” This hexameter is previously attested on another school tablet, *P. Bad.* IV 111 (approximately the fourth century).⁶ From the description of that tablet it appears that the student was given the hexameter’s words out of order. He had to divide them into syllables and reassemble them into a hexameter. The task was therefore much more complicated than in our tablet where the line was only a model for writing practice. In any case, the line seems to have been part of the traditional material employed for teaching in schools.

The teacher's model was completed by an exhortation to follow the example, καὶ εὖ μιμοῦ, “and imitate it”.⁷ The student, however, as we will see, gives the impression of imitating not so much the model, but his own writing and mistakes. It is curious that also καὶ εὖ μιμοῦ is faithfully copied by the student. This last line can be compared to the exhortation φιλοπόνει which appears frequently at the end of writing exercises as an encouragement to write diligently and well and which was copied from the model by the practicing student.⁸ In both cases, therefore, the words should not be viewed as personal comments of the teacher addressed to a particular student.

The model is defined by signs at the beginning and at the end. The employment of the first mark, two parallel strokes which become shorter and more oblique when repeated by the pupil, is somewhat peculiar in this context. Oblique dashes are generally used in school exercises as division marks between verses when they were written out as prose, without colometric distinctions (R. Cribiore, *GRBS* 33 (1992) 259-60 and note 34). They can also appear at the end of a model to close it and have therefore, when copied by the student, the almost identical function of distinguishing the successive copies.⁹ But a model usually started right away, without beginning marks. Only after the fourth century do we find at the start a cross or

⁶ The tablet was originally in the Universitätsbibliothek at Heidelberg, but now its whereabouts is unknown. It is no. 2733 in Pack². It is listed in G. Zlateo, *Aegyptus* 41 (1961) 180 as no. 125 and in J. Debut, *ZPE* 63 (1986) 260 as no. 148. It was described as no. 21 by E. Ziebarth, *Aus der antiken Schule* (Bonn 1913) 9.

⁷ In the model, and consequently in the student’s copy, the exhortation appears as καὶ εὖ μιμοῦ. It is best to take εὖ as a phonetic mistake, since the interchange of υ and οι is very frequent, cf. F.T. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods* I (Milan 1975) 197-99. Phonetic mistakes appear very often in teachers’ models, see e.g., tablet I of a notebook of tablets of the III AD (Leiden BPG 109) published by D.C. Hesselink, *JHS* 13 (1893) 293-314. It is less likely that εὖ could be a *dativus commodi* with the meaning “and copy it for yourself.”

⁸ See G. Nachtergaeel, *CdE* 66 (1991) 221-25 for an ostrakon with this kind of exhortation, and a complete bibliography in note 6.

⁹ See e.g., the two short strokes at the end of the model, then repeated by the student in Louvre inv. AF.1195, P. Cauderlier, *RA* 2 (1983) 276-79.

8 c ce λυπήσαι μὴ σπεῦδε πλουτῖν νῆ φθόν[ο]
 c ce λυπήσαι μὴ σπεῦδε πλουτῖν μὴ φθόν(νο)
 c ce λυπήσαι μὴ σπεῦδε [π]λουτῖν μὴ [φθόνο]
 c ce λυπήσαι μὴ σπεῦδε πλουτῖν μὴ φθ(όν)
 oc ce λυπήσαι μὴ σπεῦδε πλουτῖν

A different student copies a maxim ten times on the back of the tablet: μὴ σπεῦδε πλουτῖν, μὴ φθόνος ce λυπήσαι, that is, correcting the phonetic mistakes, μὴ σπεῦδε πλουτεῖν, μὴ φθόνος ce λυπήσει,¹⁴ “do not be eager to be rich, lest envy cause you grief.” The exact equivalent of this maxim is not attested. The beginning, though, appears in Menander *Monostichoi* 487 Jaekel, μὴ σπεῦδε πλουτῶν, μὴ ταχὺς πένης γένῃ. The majority of the Byzantine manuscripts, except two, exhibit μὴ σπεῦδε πλουτεῖν, but πλουτῶν seems preferable for the Menander *Monostichos*.¹⁵ The infinitive of πλουτεῖν, on the other hand, seems to suit better the maxim on our tablet where haste and the contrast between speed in becoming rich and poor are not so much in question. Our maxim, in fact, contrasts man’s impatience to become wealthy and the following disappointment and pain caused by envy.

It should also be noted that among the Mss. U shows a different version of the second part of the maxim, μὴ σπεῦδε πλουτεῖν τοῦ τέλους μεμνήμενος, that is “do not be eager to be wealthy remembering your end”. Again another version of the maxim appears in the *Corpus Paroemiographorum Graecorum* II p. 188, n. 89, μὴ σπεῦδε πλουτεῖν καὶ ταχέως πλουτεῖς. The γνώμη, which appears in the Ροδωνιά (Rose Garden) of Makarios Chrysokephalos, an anthology of proverbs and *gnomai* compiled in the XIV century,¹⁶ seems to derive from Menander *Mon.* 487.

The second part of the γνώμη appearing on our tablet does not resemble any of the other versions. Although φθόνος appears several times in Menander as the worst disease and evil and *Mon.* 616 says, οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδὲν ἀγριώτερον φθόνου, a real connection between φθόνος and τὸ πλουτεῖν is only found in the *Comparatio Menandri et Philistionis* II 59-60, ἀεὶ τὸ πλουτεῖν συμφορὰς πολλάς ἔχει φθόνον τ’ ἐπήρειάν τε καὶ μῖκος πολὺ, where envy is mentioned among the other evils grieving a rich man.

Metre, moreover, provides another discrepancy between this γνώμη and the other versions which were all in iambic trimeters. The ending sequel of long syllables, in fact, shows this maxim to be in choliambic verse. This metre had fallen into disuse after Hipponax, who supposedly invented it. It was later revived in the Hellenistic period and used to treat many subjects. Among the poets who cultivated it were Herodas for mimes, Babrius for fables, Callimachus, and Cercidas. Cercidas wrote *Iambi* in choliambic verse of which only one fragment

¹⁴ According to Gignac (*op. cit.* [n. 7]) 247, interchanges of η and αι in final position happen very frequently in the Roman and Byzantine periods.

¹⁵ Meineke, *FCG* IV p. 350, line 358, chooses μὴ σπεῦδε πλουτεῖν, μὴ ταχὺς πένης γένῃ, but the meaning, “do not be eager to be rich, lest quickly you could become poor” seems to me inferior to “do not get rich in haste, lest quickly you could become poor.”

¹⁶ For a detailed description of the codex and generally the work of the metropolitan of Philadelphia see J.B.G. d’Ansse de Villosion, *Anecdota Graeca* II (Venice 1781) 4-79. A quick assessment of his personality and work in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford 1991) 453.

survives, perhaps a diatribe against luxury (J.U. Powell, *Coll. Alexandr.* [Oxford 1925] 213, 14). In his best known work, the *Meliambi*, he violently attacked wealth and greed.

How did the maxim in this form end up on our tablet? Is it likely that the teacher himself misquoted and adapted a Menander *Monostichos*? Certainly teachers, who had to trust their memory most of the time, were rarely accurate and were bound to make mistakes and misquotations. But the mistakes or variants showing up in teachers' models and students' copy do not appear particularly clever. Especially when teaching in the primary school, moreover, they do not seem to have been keen on metre or to have cared or been able to give their students correct verses to copy for practice.¹⁷ Perhaps our teacher was indeed following a different tradition and two different maxims existed and were in circulation. That on our tablet not only concerned the effect of φθόνος on wealth, but also showed πλουτεῖν in the infinitive instead of the participle and a variation in metre.

The first written line of this side of the tablet contains either individual letters or a word inscribed in the upper margin. Perhaps the letters belonged to a previous exercise which was not entirely erased when the tablet was scrubbed clean. It is possible that the word ἔπος followed by the number δ was written at the beginning of the exercise to indicate the source of the maxim or set out some kind of a title.¹⁸

The first, crucial mistake the pupil of side B commits is to start writing immediately from the left edge of the tablet on the space located at the right of the binding holes. He is evidently a beginner, at an earlier stage than the student practising writing on the other side of the tablet. Instead of asking him to copy a line of poetry divided in four different lines, the teacher had given him the whole length of the tablet to use, where the choliambic verse could fit to perfection. But of course the binding holes were in the way, the pupil discovered. Once the verse was split the first time, problems and mistakes carried down the tablet. This pupil was evidently determined to follow his own letters as a model and persisted in dividing the line the way he had done the first time. Only once he reached the last line on the tablet, he became aware that he had left out part of the word φθόνος and he altered his way of splitting the word, incorrectly again.

What mattered to him was to be able to write each letter underneath the identical letter on top. Especially in copying the first half of each row, he proceeded with absolute regularity, στοιχηδόν, as if the tablet had been divided by horizontal and vertical lines in squares where

¹⁷ See e.g., the teacher who inscribed the model Louvre inv. MND (cfr. n. 5) which Papnouthion had to copy. It is very easy to emend his metrically incorrect trimeters. The same is true for the many maxims on γράμματα appearing on what were likely to be books for school use, the codex leaf P. Lond inv. VIII fol. 1a and 3b and the codex published by O. Marucchi, *Il Museo Egizio Vaticano descritto ed illustrato* (Roma 1899) 296-303 and by E. Sarti and V. Puntoni, *Gnomologii acrostichi fragmentum Graece una cum metaphrasi Copto-Sahidica* (Pisa 1883). The clumsy maxims on the value of learning and knowing γράμματα could likely have been made up by a teacher, so D. Hagedorn and M. Weber, *ZPE* 3 (1968) 15-45.

¹⁸ The word ἔπη meaning "epic verses" precedes Homeric verses in a Ptolemaic exercise, O. Guéraud and P. Jouguet, *Un livre d'écolier du III siècle avant J.C.* (Cairo 1938) 18, line 130. In another exercise of the IV century AD, ἔπος, with the general meaning "poetry" is used at the end of a model with five of Menander's Μονόστιχοι and is copied by the student along with the iambics, see tablets Louvre MND and MND 552L in Boyaval (*op. cit.* [n. 5]) 225-35. The number δ after the word perhaps indicated that the student was copying from a model which contained other verses and that he was writing the "fourth" line of poetry.

each letter was inscribed.¹⁹ Here he even gives the impression of copying each letter in a vertical row down the tablet, that is all the Π's, one under the other, all the Η's, and so on. His hand, however, was far from being firm and developed. The first letters up to about half of each row are too large, reaching approximately 1 cm. that is, the size of the hand of a student who was just starting to write down letters of the alphabet.²⁰ For lack of space, the student was forced to decrease considerably the size of his letters in the second half of the row, with repercussions on regularity, alignment, and readability. It is difficult to know exactly how much of the last word fragment, φθόνο, he was able to fit in lines 8-9-10. The space is so limited that he probably left out some letters. The necessity of writing small characters when he was not ready had the consequence of making him multiply the strokes, especially in forming the round, quivering letters. His M's and N's, moreover, became dangerously alike.²¹

In comparison to the student writing on the front of the tablet, therefore, the student of side B appears remarkably correct. As we have seen, however, his lack of mistakes is only the consequence of his orderly, meticulous copying letter by letter and not of his understanding the words or of any capability of reading or writing them independently. The continuous wrong division of the word φθόνος, even when in line 11 the student attempts to correct himself, shows that he did not know how to divide a word in syllables. As the immature look of this hand also reveals, he had just started to write and had not gone through the endless practice of the syllabaries yet. The student of side A is only slightly more advanced in so far as he seems to have copied many models like that on top of his tablet, but understanding and reading seem still out of his reach.

Both sides of this Roman tablet conform to our other evidence showing that, after learning his letter-shapes, a student was supposed to practice his hand endlessly, copying from models which he could not yet read. Only then was he exposed to syllabaries and divisions of words into syllables and started the difficult undertaking of reading words in *scriptio continua*. As generally an examination of the school exercises reveals, writing, in the form of copying words from models, preceding reading in the schools of Graeco-Roman Egypt.²² Basic copying skills could be achieved relatively quickly and, with limited educational oppor

¹⁹ For the use of the stoichedon style in inscriptions see generally R.P. Austin, *The Stoichedon Style in Greek Inscriptions* (Oxford 1938) and R. Seider, *Paläographie der Griechischen Papyri* III, 1 (Stuttgart 1990) 60-75.

²⁰ See in Crihiore (*op. cit.* [n. 2]) 218-20 a discussion of the size of a schoolhand. From about 1 cm. the size decreases gradually as a student progresses and reaches a medium to small size of approximately .2 cm. only when a student writes *Scholia minora*, presumably under the tutelage of the γραμματικός. The student writing on the front of the tablet had already started decreasing his letter size. The teacher's model on side A shows letters approximately as large as those of side B, but all teachers' hands stand out for their large, exemplary size.

²¹ Only at the end of line 7 have I transcribed νη instead of μη, but very often M looks like N in this word, perhaps also because of the preceding N of πλουτῖν.

²² So Crihiore (*op. cit.* [n. 2]) 240-54. Even the literary evidence for teaching writing in the Greek and Roman world does not contradict the evidence of the school exercises, since it seems that the ancients, in describing the sequence letters-syllables-words, had in mind especially reading. The passage in Quintilian, *Inst. Orat.* I 1.27-32 and in Seneca, *Epist. Moral.* 94.51 confirm that, after learning the letters, students were exposed to copying sentences and verses from models.

tunities, were deemed more desirable than the ability to read, which was conquered after a cumbersome, lengthy process.

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A Schooltablet from the Hearst Museum, Side B