

Learning the Alphabet: Abecedaria and the Early Schools in Greece

William C. West, III

LEARNING THE ALPHABET is the first step in becoming literate, and the inscribed abecedarium is tangible physical evidence that learning the alphabet was of interest to someone. Surprisingly, we have very little evidence, with one possible exception, of the process of learning the alphabet for the first time in a Greek school, or of the early stages of the process. The one exception is Herodotus 6.27: the roof of a school-house (on Chios) collapses, killing 119 of the 120 children—cited as a warning of the coming evils to Greece in the Ionian revolt (i.e. early fifth century). The children are said to be “taught their letters” (*grammata didaskomenois*), as I translate the phrase, but it could also be simply “learning their lessons,” as the Loeb translator (A. D. Godley) has it.

There is, however, no doubt that we are dealing here with a building used for the instruction of many students. Another reference to a school as a building, and a large one at that, occurs in Thucydides 7.29.5, where Thracians attack Mycalessus in Boeotia (in 414 BCE) and sack the town without restraint, even falling upon the school-house, into which the children had just gone, and massacring everyone therein—consequently, a building of some size, as in Herodotus. Thucydides designates the school by the term *didaskaleion*. But in Antiphon, *On the Chorister* (6.11), it is a room in a private house, devoted by the *choregos* to training his chorus.¹ We have come

¹ Later references to schools include: Ael. *VH* 7.15 (Mytilene), Paus. 6.9.6 (Amorgos), and Plut. *Them.* 10 (Troezen). On the value of writing cf. Diod. 12.13: “In fact the lawgiver rated reading and writing above every other

to think of a room in the gymnasium of the Sanctuary of the Hero Akademos (later Plato's Academy) as a school. Several tablets were discovered there in the 1950's, some with writing. Of great interest is a stone slab of the fifth century BCE used as a writing tablet:²

ΑΘΙΝΑ ΑΡΙΣ ΑΡΤΕΜΙΣ
ΔΙΜΟΣΘΟΘΕΝΙΣ

Of note are the names of gods and an individual, one Demosthenes, with examples of itacism and also of misspelling (in *Demosthenes*).

We do not know when schools were first established in Greece.³ Certainly they were in existence in the early fifth century. Attic vases of the first half of the fifth century and later provide many examples of school scenes, the most famous of which is the Douris cup in Berlin.⁴ Recitation scenes are de-

kind of learning, and with right good reason; for it is by means of them that most of the affairs of life and such as are most useful are concluded, like votes, letters, covenants, laws, and all other things which make the greatest contribution to orderly life (transl. Oldfather).

² E Vanderpool, *AJA* 63 (1959) 279–280, no. 11 and pl. 75. Full publication: P. Balatsos, “Inscriptions from the Academy,” *ZPE* 86 (1991) 145–154; the largest slab is no. 1, illustrated pl. XI [*SEG* XLI 34.A].

³ See L. H. Jeffery, *Local Scripts of Archaic Greece* (Oxford 1961) 63, citing H.-I. Marrou, *Histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité* (Paris 1948) 76–78, now 6th ed. (Paris 1965) 78–80. On early literacy and learning the alphabet in schools see R. Wachter, “BA-BE-BH-BI-BO-BY-BΩ... Zur Geschichte des elementaren Schreibunterrichts bei den Griechen, Etruskern und Venetern,” *ZPE* 146 (2004) 61–74, pl. xii; H. R. Immerwahr, “Aspects of Literacy in the Athenian Ceramicus,” *Kadmos* 46 (2007) 153–198. On syllabaries in early instruction see Wachter, and W. A. Johnson, “Teaching Children How to Read: The Syllabary,” *CJ* 106 (2011) 445–463. Clay tablet with syllables (4th cent. BCE): A. N. Tsaravopoulos, “Graffiti from the Island of Kythera,” *Horos* 13 (1999) 263–267, pl. 56.

⁴ Attic r.f., Berlin, Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen F2285, ca. 485 BCE: *CVA* Berlin 2, pl. 77; *ARV*² 431.48, 1653. For a recent discussion of the vase see D. Sider, “Greek Verse on a Vase by Douris,” *Hesperia* 79 (2010) 541–554.

picted on both sides. On Side A the teacher holds an open scroll on which is written an epic poem, in hexameter verse. The youth, standing before him, is, presumably, reciting. The pedagogue observes. To the left of this group is a music lesson, in the cithara. On the wall of the building hang various objects: a cup, a cithara, a basket, the sleeve for holding a flute, a second cithara, a second cup. Side B also shows two scenes: instruction in flute-playing and a lesson in writing. The teacher, seated, holds a stylus, as he checks the student's composition. This scene could also be interpreted as a recitation. A pedagogue observes. Objects also hang on the wall: a flute case, a writing tablet, a cithara, an object in the form of a cross, which may be a tuning fork. Two other vases illustrating school scenes are an Attic cup in Basel, ca. 490 BCE, and a skyphos, ca. 470, in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The Basel cup shows a teacher, holding a stylus and tablet, before a naked youth. The New York skyphos depicts an individual scene of youth with teacher.⁵

Many other vases show school situations: scenes of instruction; boys with tablets, accompanied by pedagogues who are taking them to school; girls with tablets, proceeding to school, etc. In particular, Attic red-figure vases show writing tablets in a variety of contexts: hung on a wall in a school scene; held by a teacher while checking writing; carried to school by boys (and girls); boy showing a tablet to his teacher.⁶ The existence of schools may be understood as signifying that they had been established as a formal institution for instruction, beginning with learning the alphabet.

This paper explores the relation between surviving examples

⁵ Attic r.f. cup, Basel, Antikenmuseum 465, ca. 490 BCE: F. A. Beck, *Album of Greek Education* (Sydney 1975) frontispiece. Attic r.f. skyphos, New York, MMA 41.162.5: Beck 19, no. 49.

⁶ Youth carrying tablet to school: Attic r.f. cup, New York, MMA 17.230.10: Beck, *Album* 19, no. 38. Boy showing tablet : Attic r.f. chous, Brussels, Mus. Roy. d'Art et d'Hist. A 1911: Beck 20, no. 59.

of inscribed abecedaria and the rise of schools in Greece, as attested in literature and art. To anticipate a conclusion, it will be shown that there were abecedaria before there is evidence for schools. Consequently, we might speculate about what motivations influenced the first learners of the alphabet. At the end of the paper I present in tabular form a survey of selected abecedaria, from the eighth century BCE to the sixth CE, which shows their continuity and wide distribution. Several, from the eighth into the fifth century BCE, could be interpreted as ‘reference objects’, for instruction. The table shows the continuity of inscribed abecedaria well into Hellenistic and Roman times. I restrict my analysis to the archaic ones (eighth to sixth century), however, because these are seen against a background of illiteracy, which is gradually proceeding to literacy. The archaic segment enriches analysis which focuses on the lead-up to the creation of formal schools. The later ones, with a background of a literate society, pose other problems which are beyond the scope of this paper.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Comp.* 25) distinguishes two stages in the process of becoming literate, as practiced in schools in Hellenistic and Roman times: (1) learning the letters, their forms, their values, combining them in syllables, forming words; (2) writing, reading (syllable by syllable and slowly at first). Once someone had progressed even to the rudimentary first stage, he could do something with his knowledge.⁷ Writing

⁷ Cf. e.g. M. M. Clay, *Becoming Literate* (Portsmouth 1991) 91–93; A. C. Schulze, *Helping Children Become Readers through Writing* (Newark 2006). Early writing begins with labeling. See T. Newkirk, “The Non-narrative Writing of Young Children,” *Research in the Teaching of English* 21 (1987) 126–128; M. J. Adams, *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning about Print* (Cambridge 1994) 426: “Research into young children’s phonological development ... shows that writing does not wait on reading; there is a dynamic relationship between the two, indicating that each influences the other in the course of development.” See also M. M. Clay, *What Did I Write? Beginning Writing Behaviour* (London 1975) 2: “Language can be thought of as a hierarchy of units: sentences can be broken down into phrases, phrases into words, words into sounds. The good reader can work at any of these levels in the

one's name? Writing a label? Dionysius' statement also applies to our sense of logic as to how the alphabet was learned in the early stages of the development of literacy.⁸ Modern studies on the development of literacy emphasize that writing comes before reading in the development of a child's cognitive skills.⁹

In fact, modern methods of teaching the alphabet have not much changed since antiquity, although, in the twentieth century, educators of children have made much use of charts, placards, cartoons, and other visual stimulants. Even here, ancient methodology is relevant; cf. Quintilian 1.1.26: "I quite approve ... of a practice which has been devised to stimulate children to learn by giving them ivory letters to play with, as I do anything else that may be discovered to delight the very young, the sight, handling, and naming of which is a pleasure" (transl. Butler).

The situation at Azoria in Crete, where seventeen sherds with writing have been found, most with only one or two letters, leads us to suppose that they were written by individuals who have learned the alphabet and are beginning to put it to practical uses.¹⁰ Modern studies do not address this aspect of

hierarchy." This analysis parallels closely the remarks of Dionysius of Halicarnassus.

⁸ Dionysius' statement on the teaching of reading is paralleled by modern methods based on a scheme developed in France after the French Revolution and especially prevalent in the nineteenth century. See D. P. Resnick and L. B. Resnick, "The Nature of Literacy: An Historical Exploration," *Harvard Educational Review* 47 (1977) 370–385; F. Furet and V. Sacks, "La croissance de l'alphabétisation en France (XVIII^e – XIX^e siècles)," *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations* 29 (1974) 714–737; C. Read, Z. Yun-Fei, N. Hong-Yin, and D. Bao-Qing, "The Ability to Manipulate Speech Sounds Depends on Knowing Alphabetic Writing," *Cognition* 24 (1986) 31–44; R. W. Barron, "Proto-literacy, Literacy, and the Acquisition of Phonological Awareness," *Learning and Individual Differences* 3 (1991) 243–255.

⁹ W. H. Teale and E. Sulzby, *Emergent Literacy. Writing and Reading* (Norwood 1986) xviii.

¹⁰ The Azoria material is being published in *Hesperia*, to date 73 (2004) 339–400 and (2011) 1–70. The inscriptions are very short, of 7th, 6th, possibly early 5th century.

literacy, namely, what are the expectations of the illiterate person as he or she first comes to learn the alphabet? That is to say, how does the illiterate person think that the alphabet can be used? Modern studies which are most relevant to this question are those that address the problems of the acquisition of literacy in countries where, initially, the rate of illiteracy is very high.¹¹ We suspect that the writer in Azoria is expressing graphically the mental image he has of the spoken sound for each of the letters of his inscription. Children can be our guide in pursuing this question.

For indication of a child's ability to write before reading, George Houston informs me that his grand-daughter, Cleo, aged 3, first wrote her name, CLEO, retrograde. In my own family I recall that my daughter Amanda, when she was 3½, inscribed a Christmas gift to her grandfather with her name, AMANDA, with the second A written upside down. Both these examples are of children who wrote their names before being able to read. Another good example can be cited:¹²

Michelle, age 4, was asked to write her name and anything else she could write. Using English letter forms, Michelle wrote her name M-Y-J-A-E [J upside down]. Underneath she wrote her father's name, Jay, spelling it, J-Y-A [J upside down]. Underneath her Jay she wrote her mother's name, Nancy, spelling it N-A-N-N. In rereading what she wrote, Michelle read, "Michelle, Jay, Nancy," paused, and then, snatching the pen, drew a circle around the three names and announced, "Now that says Morrison," which was in this instance the family's last name.

Nevertheless, the first steps in learning to become literate,

¹¹ Cf. Furet and Sachs, *Annales* 29 (1974) 714–737; E. Ferreiro and A. Teberosky, *Literacy before Schooling* (Portsmouth 1982); T. Nunes, "Illiteracy in a Literate Society: Understanding Reading Failures in Brazil," in D. A. Wagner (ed.), *The Future of Literacy in a Changing World*² (Cresskill 1999) 111–130; Read et al., *Cognition* 24 (1986) 31–44; Barron, *Learning and Individual Differences* 3 (1991) 243–255.

¹² J. C. Harste, V. A. Woodward, and C. L. Burke, *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons* (Portsmouth 1984) 87.

which are discussed by Dionysius, are a tried-and-true methodology. A rock-cut abecedarium, of ca. 550 BCE, from the plain of Vari in Attica bears the Attic alphabet, written retrograde:¹³

ΑΒΛΔΕΖΖΗΘΙΚΑΜΝΟΙΠΡΨΣΤΥΧΦ ←

Also ca. 550 BCE is the message written on a sherd, the base of a skyphos, from the Athenian Agora:¹⁴

[Θαμνε]ϛ : κάθεσ : ηυπὸ τῶι ἠοδῶι τὰς θύρας τὸ κάπο :
πρίον(α).

Thamneus, put the saw under the threshold of the garden gate.

The juxtaposition of these two images, both written by non-elites, provides a striking illustration of the remarks of Dionysius on the steps of learning which lead to literacy. The inscriber of the Vari abecedarium must have been a shepherd. The abecedarium is one inscription among more than fifty, many of them names, cut by passing herders. Two of the inscriptions mention *poimenes* (as the inscriber or the expected audience).¹⁵ Similarly, the note cut on the contemporary skyphos base from the Agora signifies the ability to write and read, as well as the expectation that the intended recipient could read it.¹⁶ The Attic alphabet is displayed in subsequent abecedaria of the late sixth and early fifth centuries.¹⁷

¹³ M. Langdon, “A New Abecedarium,” *Kadmos* 44 (2005) 175–182, fig. 1.

¹⁴ M. Lang, *Athenian Agora XXI Graffiti and Dipinti* (Princeton 1976) 8 “Messages and Lists,” B1, pl. 2.

¹⁵ Langdon, *Kadmos* 44 (2005) 179.

¹⁶ Other, though later, examples of writing by non-elites: letters written on lead (4th cent. BCE), D. Jordan, in D. Jordan and J. Traill (eds.), *Lettered Attica. A Day of Attic Epigraphy* (Athens 2003) 23–39: (1) letter from Pasion (Jordan: from the banker, but *contra* see J. D. Sosin, “The New Letter from Pasion,” *ZPE* 165 [2008] 105–108); (2) D. Jordan, “A Personal Letter found in the Athenian Agora,” *Hesperia* 69 (2000) 91–103; F. D. Harvey, “‘Help! I’m dying here!’ A Letter from a Slave,” *ZPE* 163 (2007) 49–50.

¹⁷ Lang, *Graffiti and Dipinti* 7, “Abecedaria,” A2: amphora, late 6th cent. A3: b.f. cup base, early 5th cent.

An abecedarium is simply a row of the letters of the alphabet, written out, whether in Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, Attic, or in any of the local scripts, serving as a model for those wishing to learn the skills of literacy. Several reasons may be suggested for why abecedaria were created. Each item must be analyzed individually, but speculation is supported by logical clues. Individuals may have created abecedaria for practice of the alphabet. Abecedaria may have been made for learning the alphabet from a tutor or in school. A dedication in a sanctuary indicates an item significant to the dedicator. Grave goods are deposited for the same reason, something significant to the deceased. Some abecedaria had a magical significance, especially those found in Israel.

Abecedaria are known early, from the eighth century on. They pose the question, then, whether schools were then in existence, contemporary with these inscriptions, before we begin to hear of schools in literature or see them represented in art. H.-I. Marrou has discussed the emergence of schools as a formal institution against the background of the aristocratic ideal in which education was imparted by the tutor or lover.¹⁸ The aristocratic ideal was gradually replaced by the creation of a formal institution for education. L. H. Jeffery has written: “The first Greek learners [of the alphabet] may well have been the children of Greek traders ... who learnt it in or out of school, among the children of their fathers’ Semitic business partners.”¹⁹ But can we go back even earlier than this, even to that millennial day on which our Greek trader first inquired about writing?

The initial impulse to learn the Phoenician alphabet by a Greek trader must have been the recognition of its potential usefulness.²⁰ E.g., you could identify objects; you could mark

¹⁸ Marrou, *Histoire de l'éducation* 78–80, cites, among others, Pind. *Nem.* 3.57–58, *Ol.* 8.59–61; Theogn. 1.28, 792, etc.

¹⁹ *CAH III*² Plates (1984) 292.

²⁰ On Phoenicia as the place of introduction of the Greek alphabet see Jeffery, *LSAG* 5: “The Greek letters from *alpha* to *tau* are derived from those

personal property; you could label them to keep up with them, etc.; you could label them for indication of placing, display, etc. In other words the initial impulse to learn the alphabet was recognition of its potential for a variety of practical applications, not all of which were immediately apparent.

The first learners in the Iron Age must also have realized that learning the new alphabet was relatively easy, compared with the specialist-oriented, Linear-B syllabary which they had inherited—if in fact they had any knowledge at all of it and its complexity. But the new alphabet could be taught to one's children or to any young person who was going to carry on the business in the next era, or even taught to adults. On the ease of learning the alphabet cf. Jeffery: "As a skill, it did not need physical strength, or special tools, or long training; any intelligent child could learn it quickly. And so each local script probably preserves in its letter-forms some individual touches made, unwittingly perhaps, by whoever taught the first young literates in that small community" (*CAH* 290). It should, then, come as no surprise that we have a fair number of abecedaria from the eighth century on in a variety of places (see the Table), suggesting the aim of teaching the alphabet. The earliest instances are worth considering further.

The first, of the eighth century BCE, is a small sherd from

of the North Semitic alphabet. This fact has long been established so firmly that to repeat the evidence here in detail is unnecessary. It may be summarized briefly as follows: (1) In the early fifth century B.C. (there is no earlier direct evidence), the Ionians *already* called the letters of the alphabet 'Phoenician' (φοινικία γράμματα or φοινικήια). This is attested by Herodotus [5.58] and confirmed by a fifth-century inscription from Teos [M./L. 30]." This statement may now be modified. A new inscription (legal text) from Eltyna, Crete, of 600–525, calls the letters *poinikeia*: C. Kritzas, "*Phoinikeia grammata*. Nea archaiki epigraphē apo ten Eltyna," in G. Rethemiotakis and M. Egglezou, *To Geometriko Nekrotaphēio tes Eltynas* (Herakleion 2010) *parartema* 1–16, ill. 1. The Spensithios decree attests the presence of a *poinikastas* ("public scribe"), ca. 500 BCE, at Aphrati, Crete (*SEG XXVII* 631). Also note for Phoenicians in Crete the Phoenician tricolunar shrine at Kommos (9th–8th cent.): J. W. Shaw and M. C. Shaw, *Kommos IV.1 The Greek Sanctuary* (Princeton 2000) 21.

Eretria, Sanctuary of Apollo Daphnephoros, inscribed with a partial abecedarium, retrograde. The box-like form is normally *samek*, but can be interpreted in the Euboean alphabet as a dead letter, inherited from Phoenician: hence our inscription is, retrograde, a partial abecedarium.²¹

On a loom weight from the Athenian Agora, of the eighth century, the preserved alphabet is incomplete, but sufficient letters are available to show that we do in fact have an abecedarium. The loom weight could be hung somewhere and the alphabet could be copied:²²

αβγδεϜζ ←
η . . κ λ μ ν ←

Of particularly interest is a sherd from Kyme in Italy (Cumae), of the early seventh century, inscribed with two abecedaria: the Corinthian alphabet above and the Etruscan below (*LSAG* 125, pl. 18.2):

βγδϜ Ϝ(?)ζ
αβγδεϜ Ϝ(?)ζ

The Corinthian script is distinguished by its unique form of beta. The Etruscan language has not been deciphered, but the Etruscans of course used Greek letters. Here we may suppose a mutual interchange for the benefit of trade: Corinthians trying to learn Etruscan, Etruscans trying to learn Greek. Cumae, moreover, was founded in the eighth century and represented Greek interests in the west until the supremacy of Syracuse in the fifth century. An abundance of Corinthian and Corinthian style pottery has been found at the site.²³

²¹ A. Kenzelmann Pfyffer, T. Theurillat, and S. Verdan, “Graffiti géométriques provenant du Sanctuaire d’Apollon Daphnéphoros à Erétrie,” *ZPE* 151 (2005) 60, no. 3.

²² H. R. Immerwahr, *Attic Script* (Oxford 1990) 8, pl. 1.2; Lang, *Graffiti and Dipinti* A1, pl. 1.

²³ For the site and discussion of its history see H. Kaletsch, “Cumae [2],” in *Brill’s New Pauly* (2003) 1049. For the Corinthian pottery see G. Consoli Fiego, *Cumae and the Phlegraean Fields* (Naples 1927) 119–140, and A. Maiuri,

We next turn to Attica, where a sanctuary of Zeus had been established on Mount Hymettus by the seventh century. It was excavated just before the outbreak of World War II by Carl Blegen and Rodney Young and has now been fully published by Merle Langdon:²⁴

βγδεϛ ←
αβγδεϛ ←

Here we have a join of two sherds, which show that two alphabets were written on it, one above the other. This is perhaps an indication of teacher and student, one writing the model, the other copying. Other abecedaria were also found in the sanctuary, raising the question of why abecedaria were dedications, if that is what they were. We are reminded that dedications were objects of value, offered to the deity, and that they had some special relation to the dedicator, who was offering something valuable to, and characteristic of, himself or herself.²⁵

Clear indication of the alphabet as a model for practice is the ivory tablet from Marsiliana d'Albegna, 700–650(?), which has the Etruscan alphabet written retrograde across a moulding at the top of the tablet. Such a writing tablet is indicative of a school, although private instruction is also possible (*LSAG* 236–237, pl. 48.18):

αβγδεϛζ ιθικλμ[ν]ξοπμφορστυφψ ←

Also indicative of a text set for practice is an inscribed cup from the Samian Heraion, of 660–650.²⁶ The date is firmly established by the archaeological context in which the fragments

²⁴ *The Phlegraean Fields* (Rome 1958).

²⁴ M. Langdon, *A Sanctuary of Zeus on Mount Hymettus* (Princeton 1976) 17, no. 20, fig. 7 and pl. 4.

²⁵ For abecedaria as dedications see M. Guarducci, *Epigrafia Greca* III (Rome 1974) 77.

²⁶ H. Walter and W. Verneisel, “Heraion von Samos. Die Funde der Kampagnen 1958 und 1959,” *AthMitt* 74 (1959) 23–27, fig. 3; *LSAG*² 471, pl. 79.7.

were found. The cup bears a virtually complete Ionic alphabet (and, above it, the beginning of another attempt at writing the alphabet):

αβγδεζζ[ηθ]ικλμ[ν]ξοπρ[σ]τυφχψω[– –?]

From Formello we have a bucchero amphora in the Villa Giulia, inscribed with two examples of the Etruscan alphabet, possibly dated 650–600 (*LSAG* pl. 48.20):

αβγδεζηθικλμνξοπΜορστυφψ
αβγδεζηθικλμνξοπΜορστυφψ

A plaque from the Sanctuary of Poseidon and Amphitrite at Penteskouphia, near Corinth, of 575–550, has an abecedarium written boustrophedon (*LSAG* 117, pl. 20.16):

[αβγδ]ειζζ ιθικλ | μν | οπξορστ[υφχψε?]

The alphabet is shown to have reached North Africa by this inscribed sherd from Cyrene, of the sixth century (*LSAG*² pl. 79.6):

αβγδεζηθικλ[– –]

Another object which could serve as a handy stand for displaying the alphabet while students copied is a bird-shaped bucchero bottle from Viterbo, with an abecedarium of the Etruscan alphabet, of ca. 550–500 (*LSAG* pl. 48.22):

αβγδεζζ ιθικλμνξοπΜορστυφψ

From Metapontion comes a stamnos, of 475–450, with an abecedarium painted between the handles (*LSAG* pl. 50.19):

αβγδεζηθικλ
μνοπρΜτυφψχχ

Another interesting object, which could have served as a stand, is a Boiotian cup, of ca. 420, with two abecedaria painted upon it (*LSAG* pl. 10.20). On each side the alphabet is divided into two lines, in order to use the available space, but only on one side (upper image) is the alphabet complete. In one side the first line is A–Λ and the M–Χ. On the other the first line is A–Μ, the second N–Ω:

αβγδεζζ ιθικλμ | νοπρστυξφχψω
 αβγδεζζ ιθικλ | μνοπρστυξφχ

A dipinto on a pyxis from Gravina (Italy), of the late fifth century, provides a interesting insight into the relationship between teacher and learner. The text may be translated: “Markos made (it), Pyllos taught; Markos, Pyllos, (partial abecedarium); Markos dedicated (it) to Gnaia.” The editor supposes “an egalitarian or client relationship in which Pyllos’ teaching must have been a service.”²⁷

ΜΑΡΚΟΣΕΠΟΙΕΠΥΛΛΟΣΕΔΙΔΑΣΚΕ
 ΜΑΡΚΟΣΠΥΛΛΟΣΑΒΓΔΕΖΗΘΙΚΑΜΝ
 ΜΑΡΚΟΣΕΘΗΚΕΓΝΑΙΦΑΙ

When schools were finally established as the principal locus for acquiring literacy and moving on to broader education, it is not surprising that more and more abecedaria are known. The increase in the number of abecedaria parallels the rise of schools, but the fact that there were abecedaria before there were schools reminds us that the abecedarium is a basic tool for learning the alphabet and taking the first step toward becoming literate. Literacy made no distinction between elites and ordinary people. Several practical reasons may be adduced for learning to write: learning to write one’s own name confers a kind of empowerment on an individual, giving permanent expression to “winged words.”²⁸ Objects can be labeled. Craftsmen can serve clients by inscribing names carefully and attractively on dedications, gravestones, etc., or by helping to create a text, even in a short, formulaic expression. The aristocratic ideal of private, personal instruction was gradually replaced by the school, an institution which served a broader constituency.

²⁷ C. Santoro, *Nuovi Studi Messapici* (Galatina 1982–1993) I 169 (photograph), II 81–83, 133–140.

²⁸ Cf. Clay, *What Did I Write?* 44: “It is only a rare child that learns any other words before attempting to write some of his own name.”

We may recall the steps of the learning process outlined by Dionysius. Learning the letters of the alphabet leads to forming words; this leads to writing and reading. Reading comes last in Dionysius' remarks because it is the most difficult skill to achieve, requiring recognition of the letters, understanding of the resulting words and pronunciation of them, whether mentally or aloud.

In this respect we may note what S. R. Fisher says, in reference to the invention of the Carolingian minuscule:²⁹

Minuscule letters proved far more easier to read than earlier hands. This was because of their three levels of height: ascenders (like *b*), standard (*m*), and descenders (*g*). In combined use, minuscules could bestow a graphic 'silhouette' to each word, converting it into a readily recognizable unit, one transcending its individual components. Sighting such a three-level minuscule word, the ninth-century reader no longer needed to deconstruct each word phonetically letter by letter: he immediately recognized the self-contained graphic bundle.

The Greek word for reading itself is *anagnoskein* ('recognize, know again'). It emphasizes the cumbersome process of recognition: reading consisted of 'knowing again, recollecting' what one had surveyed at a glance. The process is threefold: recognition, confirmation, expression. In recognition we discern the text. In confirmation we establish its image in a mental template. In recognition we 'know' it. In confirmation we 'know it again'. In expression we state it either silently or aloud.

I conclude with two quotations from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), which illustrate the effect that learning to read had on him. He notes that he learned to read 'on the sly' at the age of nine, and that literacy was the seed which enabled him to become aware of the outside world and eventually escape from slavery:³⁰

²⁹ *A History of Reading* (London 2003) 161.

³⁰ W. L. Andrews, *The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader* (New York/Oxford 1996) 48 and 50.

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a n_____ an *inch*, he will take an *ell*." ... The first step had been taken. Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the *inch*, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the *ell*.³¹

October, 2014

Department of Classics
University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill, NC 27599
wwest@live.unc.edu

³¹ I thank an anonymous referee of *GRBS* whose careful criticisms have resulted in a revised version of this article.

TABLE: Selected abecedaria, complete and partial

Eretria, sanctuary of Apollo Daphnephoros	Graffito, before firing, monochrome cup	Geometric [800700]	<i>ZPE</i> 151 (2005) 60 no. 3
Athens, Agora MC907	Loom weight	8 th cent.	<i>Agora, Graffiti and Dipinti</i> A1
Cumae	Conical oinochoe	700-675?	<i>LSAG</i> pl. 18.2
Marsiliana d'Albegna	Ivory tablet	700-650?	<i>LSAG</i> pl. 48.18
Samos, Heraion	Cup	660-650?	<i>AthMitt</i> 74 (1959) 23
Caere, Regolini-Galassi tomb	Bucchero bottle	650-600?	<i>LSAG</i> pl. 48.19
Formello	Bucchero amphora	650-600?	<i>LSAG</i> pl. 48.20
Narce	Bucchero goblet	650-600?	<i>LSAG</i> pl. 48.21
Hymettos no. 10	Oinochoe fragment	7 th cent.	<i>AJA</i> 38 (1934) 21, fig. 7
Hymettos no. 20	Two joining sherds	7 th cent.	<i>Sanctuary of Zeus</i> , no. 20, fig. 7, pl.4
Hymettos no. 21	Shallow plate	7 th cent.	<i>AJA</i> 38 (1934) 17, fig. 5
Hymettos no. 22	Sherd	7 th cent.	<i>Sanctuary of Zeus</i> , no. 22, fig. 7, pl. 4
Hymettos no. 24	Sherd	7 th cent.	<i>Sanctuary of Zeus</i> , no. 24, fig. 7, pl. 4
Hymettos no. 25	Sherd	7 th cent.	<i>Sanctuary of Zeus</i> , no. 25, fig. 8, pl. 4
Kommos I 82	Black-glazed sherd	7 th /6 th cent.	<i>Kommos</i> IV.2, pl. 2.1.9, 2.9.9
Vix	Bronze krater	530-520	<i>REG</i> 114 (2001) xv-xvi
Viterbo (NY, MMA 24.97.1)	Bucchero bottle, bird-shaped	550-500?	<i>LSAG</i> pl. 48.22
Athens, Agora P6074, P327	Amphora, shoulder	Late 6 th cent.	<i>Agora, Graffiti and Dipinti</i> , A2a-b

Corinth: Penteskouphia	Sherd	575-550	<i>LSAG</i> pl. 20, 16
Cyrene	Sherd	575-525	<i>LSAG</i> ² pl. 79.6
Argos	B.f. aryballos	575	<i>BCH</i> 97 (1973) 192, fig. 2
Athens, Vari	cut on a rock	Ca. 550	<i>Kadmos</i> 44 (2005) 175-182
Agrigentum	Fr. of a vase	Early 5 th cent.	Arena II 92a, pl. 27.3
Athens, Agora P7247	Bf cup fragment	Early 5 th cent.	<i>Agora, Graffiti and Dipinti</i> , A3
Athens, Agora P13282	Small closed vase fr.	Early 5 th cent.	<i>Agora, Graffiti and Dipinti</i> , A4
Athens, Agora P2707	Black-glazed kotyle fr.	Early 5 th cent.	<i>Agora, Graffiti and Dipinti</i> , A5
Istros	Graffiti on sherds (writing exercises)	5 th cent.	<i>Dacia</i> 51 (2007) 1-4
Siena	Wall of tomb (painted), lost	500-450?	<i>LSAG</i> pl. 48.23
Metapontion	Stamnos with abecedarium painted between handles	475-450	<i>LSAG</i> pl. 50.19
Amorgos	Partial abecedarium, cut on rock	Ca. 450	<i>LSAG</i> pl. 56.23
Gornje Gadimlje (Kosovo)	Plain vase, shoulder, abecedarium painted	Mid 5 th cent.	<i>Arch. Jug.</i> 19 (1978) 35-41, fig. 1-1a; <i>Kadmos</i> 28 (1989) 14-18, pl. 1.1
Boiotia	Two abecedaria painted on cup	Ca. 420	<i>LSAG</i> pl. 10.20
Halicis	Roof tile	5 th cent.	<i>BCH</i> 90 (1966) 791, fig. 7
Motye	Sherd with partabecedarium, 16 letters extant, incl. χ , φ	5 th cent.	<i>Phoinikeia Grammata</i> (1991) 691-696
Corcyra	Marble column member	Second half 5 th cent.	<i>AD</i> 23 B2 (1968) 307; <i>IG IX</i> ² 1137

Tyras	Graffiti on vases, tiles; from 1920-22 excavation, now lost	5 th -2 nd cent.	<i>SEG</i> LIX 864
Gravina (Italy)	Dipinto on a pyxis	Late 5 th cent.	<i>Nuovi Studi Messapici</i> I 169, II 81-82, 133-140
Bari	Black-glazed cup, alphabet incised inside	Late 5 th -mid 4 th cent.	<i>Taras</i> 16 (1996) 37-45
Histria	Graffiti with alphabetic exercises	5 th /4 th cent.	<i>SEG</i> LIX 780
Athens, Sanctuary of Akademos	Schist slab	5 th cent.	<i>ZPE</i> 86 (1991) 145-154
Athens, Agora P18248	Flat-bottomed jug	Early 4 th cent.	<i>Agora, Graffiti and Dipinti</i> , A11
Caulonia	Architrave of a Doric temple, incised top-downward	389-300	<i>SEG</i> LVII 931
Cyprus, Golgol (Hagios Photios)	Beginning of an abecedarium, inscribed on a statue	350-300	<i>Cyprus in the 19th Century</i> (2001) 153-159
Athens, Agora L3773	Black-glazed lamp	4 th cent.	<i>Agora, Graffiti and Dipinti</i> , A6
Athens, Agora P1504	Black-glazed plate	4 th cent.	<i>Agora, Graffiti and Dipinti</i> , A7
Athens, Agora P2210	Black-glazed bowl	4 th cent.	<i>Agora, Graffiti and Dipinti</i> , A8
Athens, Agora L4414	Lamp	4 th cent.	<i>Agora, Graffiti and Dipinti</i> , A9
Athens, Agora P2145	Black-glazed bowl	2 nd cent.	<i>Agora, Graffiti and Dipinti</i> , A10
Bahrein (al-Maqsha?)	Yellowish flask	250-150/100	<i>Syria</i> 67 (1990) 671-672
Jerusalem	Stone vessel, eastern slope of the Tyropocean Valley	1 st cent. BCE / 1 st cent. CE	<i>PEQ</i> 140 (2008) 195-202

Herodion	Graffito incised on plaster in eastern room of theater	15-4 BCE	<i>SEG</i> LIX 1708
Masada	Parts of a Greek and a Latin abecedarium written in charcoal on a wall over a drawing of a ship	Before or after 73/4 CE	<i>Masada</i> II (1989) 213, no. 941
Pompeii	Graffito on wall of lava steps, Casa di M. Fabio Rufo	Before 79	<i>Atti Accad. Pontaniana</i> 39 (1990) 300, no. 122
Dakhleh Oasis (Egypt)	Magical alphabet painted in red on tabula ansata	2 nd cent.	<i>BIAO</i> 99 (1999) 240, no. 6
Yavneh (Israel)	Lamp	Roman Imperial	<i>IEJ</i> 38 (1988) 39, pl. 9D.
Ephesus	Graffito, Hanghaus 2, Hof 21	Roman Imperial	<i>Hanghaus 2 in Ephesos, Wohnheit</i> 4 (2005) 137, no. GR 36
Ephesus	Graffito, Hanghaus 2, Hof 21	Roman Imperial	<i>Hanghaus 2</i> 141, no. GR 76
Ephesus	Graffito, Hanghaus 2, Hof 21	Roman Imperial	<i>Hanghaus 2</i> 142, no. GR 77
Ephesus	Graffito, Hanghaus 2, Hof 21	Roman Imperial	<i>Hanghaus 2</i> 142, no. GR 78
Ephesus	Graffito, Hanghaus 2, Hof 21	Roman Imperial	<i>Hanghaus 2</i> 142, no. GR 92
Ephesus	Graffito, Hanghaus 2, Room 22, on jamb of passage to Room 21	Roman Imperial	<i>Hanghaus</i> 142, no. GR 111
Ephesus	Graffito, Hanghaus 2, Hof 21	Roman Imperial	<i>Hanghaus 2</i> 143, no. GR 124

Ephesus	Graffito, Hanghaus 2, Room 14c, on jamb of passage to Room 14d	Roman Imperial	<i>Hanghaus 2</i> 143, no. GR 128
Antium	Stone slab with abecedarium, followed by personal names. Scholarly or magical exercise?	3 rd cent.	<i>Epigraphica</i> 65 (2003) 109-111, no. 6.
Gudea (Dacia)	Vase fr., rim	3 rd cent.	<i>CIGD</i> no. 42
Gerasa	Abecedarium inscribed on wall of north theater	Late Roman / Byzantine	<i>MEFRA</i> 116 (2004) 567, no. 37
Patara	Abecedarium on floor slab, reused, from another building	Late Roman, before 5 th /6 th cent.	<i>Adalya</i> 5 (2001/2) 139, 144, 150, ill. 11
Dimale (Albania)	Fr. of the foot of a thymiaterion	Undated	<i>Iliria</i> 24 (1994) 126, no. 55, pl. V