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## The Coptic School Exercises in the Collection of Columbia University

In 1959–60 Columbia University purchased from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York some 3500 ostraca, of which about 3300 are written in Coptic. The great majority of these ostraca come from the Museum's 1913–14 excavations of the Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes. Ostraca from the Metropolitan's excavations of the Monastery of Cyriacus in 1913–14 and of the Monastery of St. Phoibammon at Deir el Bahri in 1911–31 are also included. In addition, the collection contains some ostraca that came to the Museum through various gifts such as those from T. M. Davis's excavations at Medinet Habu in 1912–13. Some 130 of the Coptic ostraca contain exercises that appear related to education on one or both sides<sup>1</sup>. Since all these texts result from a desire to learn, practice, and improve, I will call them "school exercises", even though I am fully aware that many of them originated in informal situations. I will give an overview of this collection of school ostraca, and I will then focus on an interesting group of ostraca from Deir el Bahri that were found in the same site or in sites nearby.

It is instructive to compare the Columbia collection with the collection assembled and studied by M. Hasitzka in 1990 in MPER XVIII, which presents a comprehensive survey of material concerning Coptic education<sup>2</sup>. Whereas MPER XVIII includes material whose provenance is various and often impossible to determine, the Columbia collection offers a rare opportunity to survey Coptic education in a relatively limited geographical area, that around Western Thebes, and sometimes allows one to locate ostraca with great precision in specific sites. The archives of the Metropolitan Museum have yielded interesting notes and sketches done by H. E. Winlock in the course of the excavation at Epiphanius. In terms of chronological distribution, the New York collection embraces the sixth and seventh centuries, whereas the school exercises in MPER XVIII — when they can be dated at all — span from the fourth to the twelfth centuries. With regard to writing materials, the Columbia collection includes only ostraca. It is noteworthy that the majority of these ostraca — over eighty pieces — are of limestone even though the rest of the collection shows a majority of pottery sherds. It appears that teachers and students appreciated the superiority of limestone over clay because it offered a smoother writing surface, and the ink stood in sharper relief against the whitish background. Types and characteristics of exercises more or less correspond, with the exception of arithmetical and grammatical exercises, and extensive bilingual lists of words that do not appear in the Columbia collection. It should be noted, however, that only a few grammatical exercises are included in MPER XVIII and that long bilingual lists, whose school provenance is often dubious, appear usually on papyrus<sup>3</sup>. Overall — and I will return to this point — the educational material both in MPER XVIII and in the New York collection pertains to an elementary stage of education, whose emphasis was on penmanship and on learning to write a formulaic letter.

The Columbia school ostraca include exercises with letters of the alphabet; whole alphabets; two incomplete syllabaries; individual names written for practice; lists of names and words; epistolary formulas; incomplete letters; and religious texts and phrases. A few apprentice scribes' exercises, which consist mostly of formulaic expressions, are also present. The two most common school exercises consist of practicing letters of the alphabet and learning to write a letter. The high number of ostraca with letters of the alphabet is not surprising, because this type of exercise can easily be distinguished as the work of a beginner. Since exercises with whole alphabets are far less common, it appears that Coptic education put more emphasis

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<sup>1</sup> Not infrequently two different writers used the front and back of an ostrakon. The collection also includes some writing exercises in Arabic; cf. W. Godlewski, *Le monastère de St. Phoibammon*, Warsaw 1986, 59.

<sup>2</sup> M. Hasitzka, *Neue Texte und Dokumentation zum Koptisch-Unterricht*, MPER XVIII, Vienna 1990.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. MPER XVIII 256 in the hand of Dioskoros of Aphroditopolis.

than Greek education on practicing individual letters versus writing the alphabetical sequence. Learning to write a personal letter was also a major component of Coptic elementary instruction. In Greek schools, this exercise was almost non-existent at an initial level, when it involved only memorization of formulas and penmanship<sup>4</sup>. Coptic education, however, seems to have been more in touch with the practical needs of a person acquiring some literacy, who wished to learn to correspond. Distinguishing letters written as an exercise from real letters may sometimes be problematic. I have, therefore, included in my consideration only texts that do not seem to have been authentic letters and likely were never sent: they are abruptly interrupted and/or contain repeated expressions and formulaic parts. Relying solely on the immaturity of the handwriting is not sufficient since there were people who could put together a letter in an intelligible way but whose handwriting skills left much to be desired.

As a rule, in both Greek and Coptic education much is uncertain about the exact provenance of exercises, the individual students who penned them, and the supposed location or even existence of a school<sup>5</sup>. When more information of this sort comes to light, it is exciting because it allows one to visualize education more precisely and concretely. This is what happens in site XX, in the hillside “about 200 meters East of the upper terrace of Deir el Bahri”, (Tomb 310 Porter-Moss)<sup>6</sup>. In the course of the exploration of some tombs of the XI Dynasty cut in the rock, which were inhabited again in the sixth and seventh centuries, some very interesting Coptic ostraca were discovered: letters addressed to Epiphanius himself<sup>7</sup> and some practice ostraca. It is unclear where Epiphanius had his permanent residence, maybe in the tomb of Daga. In order to explain his presence in tomb 310, H. E. Winlock thought that, overburdened with the direction of the monastery, he might have withdrawn to the cave in search of some seclusion. In the same site nine ostraca were found, written by a certain Pleine. To these, Winlock added one more ostrakon in the same hand that was found in site XXI (Tomb 312 Porter-Moss), about 100 meters from the previous site<sup>8</sup>. Winlock thought that these practice texts had “amused the leisure of a hermit”, who wrote epistolary formulas and short religious expressions in the tomb’s seclusion. It is with Winlock’s words in mind that we should review this evidence and that of other exercises in different hands found in the same place.

We do not know much about Pleine except that he sometimes signed his exercises as Pleine the Young (ϠHM), wrote in large and uncertain letters, and committed the same phonetic spelling errors in every text he wrote. Literacy must have been a relatively recent acquisition for him. Pleine’s handwriting is very inconsistent in terms of letter shape and size. Some characters are “multistroke” and/or are retraced, and others are written reasonably well<sup>9</sup>. He seems to have used a thick pen, which he was not always able to handle as large inkblots and stains testify<sup>10</sup>. He wrote on limestone pieces only twice, and for the rest he employed sherds of ribbed ostraca. His intention to write for practice only part of the text of a letter can be also detected by the fact that he sometimes picked small ostraca on which more text could not be fitted. In any case, his efforts in learning to write seem to have been crowned with some success because two of the ostraca reveal a definite improvement and some confidence in wielding the pen.

We meet Pleine the Young at the stage when he was learning to write a letter. Several of his attempts at practicing the initial formulaic expressions are preserved. Sometimes he even started the body of the text but was never interested (or able) to produce a coherent and complete letter. His favorite way to begin was “Before everything, my insignificance salutes the sweetness of your paternity” but he could also be more adventurous and vary the formula. A few times he also wrote religious expressions and short Biblical passages<sup>11</sup>, but it is difficult to say whether these stood by themselves or were part of a letter.

<sup>4</sup> On letter writing in Greek schools, see R. Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*, Princeton 2001 (hereafter Cribiore 2001), 215–19.

<sup>5</sup> See Cribiore 2001, 21–34.

<sup>6</sup> H. E. Winlock and W. E. Crum, *The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes*, New York 1926, I, p. 20. B. Porter and R. L. B. Moss, *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs, and Paintings, I, The Theban Necropolis. Part 1, Private Tombs*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Oxford 1960.

<sup>7</sup> The tone and content of these letters show that the addressee was the well renowned Epiphanius.

<sup>8</sup> Careful inspection of the handwriting clarifies that only ten of the ostraca found in this site were written by Pleine.

<sup>9</sup> On school hands, see R. Cribiore, *Writing, Students, and Teachers in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, Atlanta 1996 (hereafter Cribiore 1996), 102–18.

<sup>10</sup> Cf., e. g., Apis. 3132 (Col. Inv. 23.3.713).

<sup>11</sup> In addition to those cited, see Apis. 3137, Col. inv. 23.3.711, from the Book of Revelation.

In any case, in his most ambitious attempt — Apis. 1902, Col. inv. 23.3.701 — the beginning of the *Acts of the Apostles* is incorporated into the text of a letter. The content clearly reveals that the text on this very large, ribbed ostrakon is an exercise. Pleine writes: “Before everything, my insignificance greets your brotherhood that is good, God-loving, and kind. Please then, send me some corn out of love, because it is needed. Did you not know that this year has been hard? Pray for me in the love of God forever and send (?)...”. Then he inserts *Acts* 1. 1 or at least what he remembered of it: “The first word I made, O Theophilus, concerning everything that Jesus Christ did”. After this, the previous letter seems to continue, “Be so kind and remember God who is good (?)”. But then a new letter starts with the formula, “Before everything”. In the last two lines Pleine identifies himself, “I am Pleine the Young who is writing”.

Pleine does not seem to have copied the texts of his incomplete letters from models; in that case one would expect more uniformity in writing and perhaps some copying errors. One has the impression that he memorized some epistolary formulas and that he sometimes attempted to produce his own text. The Columbia collection includes some teachers’ models of alphabets and lists of words divided into syllables but does not seem to show examples of letters written out as models in the clear and exemplary hand of a teacher<sup>12</sup>. The same appears to be true of Coptic exercises in other collections. Of course it is always possible that a beginner followed the example of a real letter put in front of him. It seems likely, however, that writing a letter was part of the experience of a true beginner, who learned writing as composing relatively early, when his handwriting was still quite uncertain.

A list of the ostraca sold to Columbia by the Metropolitan Museum, which contains indications about their provenance, shows that other school ostraca were found in the same site where Pleine’s exercises and the letters to Epiphanius were discovered. One of these is a teacher’s model with disyllabic words divided into syllables<sup>13</sup>. It is unfortunately mutilated and displays only remains of six words (e. g. ⲁⲁⲁⲘ, ⲁⲠⲛⲒⲛ, ⲁⲠⲪⲒⲛ). The hand is large, graceful, and smooth. Another ostrakon written in a very skilful hand might have been a model or was at any rate a text written for practice. It contains an extensive passage from *Corinthians* that is followed by very large individual letters of the alphabet<sup>14</sup>. Other ostraca show random letters of the alphabet that are extremely large and, in one case, written epigraphically<sup>15</sup>. Two more ostraca contain alphabets<sup>16</sup>. In one the alphabet is written in reversed order, starting from the end, and the other shows three alphabets in regular order written in three different lines. Several different hands appear to have written all these ostraca, which were certainly not the work of Pleine.

If we now review Winlock’s hypothesis that the monk Pleine wrote his texts in a moment of boredom, we see that the reality seems to have been different and somewhat more complicated. More people besides Pleine left traces of their work in the same tomb, where even the presence of a teacher is attested. We can only guess who these “students” were. Monasteries attracted a large number of people of every age and level of literacy. These students might have been monks or apprentice monks who felt the need to learn some writing or children who lived in the monastery because they had been dedicated to it. The latter might become monks in the future or simply remain in the monastery to do some work<sup>17</sup>. One should keep in mind, moreover, the bilingual educational scenario of this area. Even though education was not organized on the grand scale of some Western monasteries, both Coptic and Greek education left recognizable traces in the monastery of Epiphanius and Phoibammon. Greek school exercises of elementary character came to light in the monastery of Phoibammon. Exercises in Greek were found in the monastery of Epiphanius itself, in cells outside of the main boundary walls with a few verses of Homer and some *gnomai* of Menander. In cell A, for example, the monk Moses, who copied a large number of Greek and Coptic liturgical and Biblical texts, also wrote Menander’s *sententiae* on a large ostrakon<sup>18</sup>.

One might even venture a hypothesis in trying to identify the expert writer who wrote the model and perhaps the beautiful text from *Corinthians*, which were found together with the other exercises in site XX. Was this Epiphanius himself? Since the presence of letters addressed to him assures us that Epiphanius resided in the cave at certain times, one wonders whether seclusion was his reason to remain there: after

<sup>12</sup> On teachers’ hands in Greek exercises, see Cribiore 1996, 97–102, and on models, Cribiore 1996, 121–128.

<sup>13</sup> See Apis. 3255, Col. inv. 23.3.718.

<sup>14</sup> See Apis. 1905, Col. inv. 23.3.705.

<sup>15</sup> Apis. 3144, Col. inv. 23.3.748; Apis. 3147, Col. inv. 23.3.710; Apis. 3273, Col. inv. 23.3.743.

<sup>16</sup> See Apis. 3143, Col. inv. 23.3.741 and Apis. 3270, Col. inv. 23.3.738.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Godlewski 1986, 46; A. Steinwenter, *Das Recht der koptischen Urkunden*, München 1955, 17–18.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Cribiore 2001, 24–25.

all, the cave seems to have been frequented by others. It might be that in that place Epiphanius filled the function of teacher or at least supervised some teaching. In this case, we would be able to experience this imposing figure in a different dimension.

To conclude, I would like to say a few words about Coptic education in general. As I have said above, the school ostraca of Columbia University present a scenario more or less similar to that of the ostraca assembled by M. Hasitzka. It should be emphasized, however, that Coptic education was on the whole much more restricted than Greek education and did not include the same extensive range of exercises. At the beginning, and with the exceptions that I have pointed out above, the instructions in both scripts more or less corresponded. Hasitzka considered lists of words a distinctive feature of Coptic education. But they are also present in equal number in Greek education, provided that one looks at the whole scenario and goes beyond the material contained in MPER XV, the Vienna publication of Greek school exercises.

Once we move to the level of instruction covered by the Greek grammarian, however, we do not find any comparable material in Coptic education. The very few Coptic grammatical exercises in MPER XVIII appear to be mostly exercises to reinforce penmanship, and in Coptic the systematic study of the language implied by the Greek grammatical treatises (*technai*) did not leave any trace. From the material found so far, it is also evident that Coptic education did not regularly embrace more advanced material as did Greek rhetorical education. Elementary instruction was its only objective<sup>19</sup>. But it is probably unfair to compare Coptic education in late antiquity with Greek education which persisted for a much longer period and in a wider geographical area that included Greek *metropoleis*. After all, the level of the Greek exercises that came to light in the Monastery of Epiphanius and Phoibammon is also elementary and does not imply a real knowledge of literary texts or a refined study of the language. In late antiquity in Upper Egypt education concentrated on a package that helped people cope with the everyday demands of literacy and reinforced their handwriting skills<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. R. Cribiore, *Greek and Coptic Education in Late Antique Egypt*, in: *Acts of the Sixth International Congress of Coptic Studies*, forthcoming.

<sup>20</sup> This paper was written and delivered without the opportunity of seeing the dissertation of S. J. Bucking, *Education in Greco-Roman, Byzantine, and Early Arab Egypt: Assessing the Primary Evidence*, Cambridge University 1998. Later on, I had the opportunity of seeing this work where the author somewhat discussed the ostraca of Pleine. I am not going to comment on this work because it is not generally available.