

A writing exercise from Oxyrhynchus

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A Writing Exercise from Oxyrhynchus

By E. G. Turner, London

The distinguished Hellenist honoured in this volume has spent his academic career in fruitful contact with Greek papyri, whether documentary, literary or Biblical. The high quality of his editorial work was first revealed in 1915 in the Second Volume of the *Catalogue of Greek Papyri in the Rylands Library*, on the title page of which his name stood in company with J. de M. Johnson and A. S. Hunt. It is therefore with some confidence of his interest that I dedicate to him this tiny note which draws attention to a neglected field of Greek palaeography, and that I offer a particular illustration of the points made from a text in the John Rylands Library.

It should not be necessary to emphasize the value to the palaeographer of examples of writing exercises. Our colleagues who study Humanistic hands are well aware of the preciousness of their manuals of instruction. Nevertheless students of the ancient world, though they are not without such exercises, have neglected them. Two reasons can be suggested at once for this neglect. In the first place, texts of this kind are rarely illustrated on publication; secondly, the word 'exercise' rarely fails to attract to itself the word 'school', used as an adjective *in malam partem*. The process of degradation may be illustrated by successive descriptions of P. Ryl. I 59 (see Fig. 1). A. S. Hunt, its first editor, applied to these six lines which repeat, as if in a copy-book, the opening words of Demosthenes' *De Corona* *πρῶτον μὲν ὃ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι τοῖς θεοῖς εὐχομαι*, the careful description 'writing exercise'; and prompted by that palaeographical sense that made him outstanding as a papyrological scholar, he thought it worth while to add a brief characterisation of the hand, and the comment 'the letters are quite well-formed'. The text bears the same label 'writing exercise' in C. H. Oldfather, *The Greek Literary Texts from Greco-Roman Egypt* (1923) 12 no. 152, but for R. A. Pack, *The Greek and Latin Literary Texts from Greco-Roman Egypt* (1952) 19 no. 182 it has been demoted to the status of "school exercise".

The accompanying plate will, however, confirm that the writing on this scrap of papyrus is remarkably well executed, and that its proper classification is as 'official Roman chancery hand'. This imposing and grandiose manner of writing, of interest to Latin palaeographers as well as to Greek because of its influence on the subsequent development of handwriting, is now securely acknowledged¹ as an independent style. But it was not recognised as such until in 1910 (the year of

¹ W. Schubart, *Gr. Paläographie* 60ff.; H. Gerstinger, *Wien. Stud.* 47 (1929) 168ff.; *P. Oxy.* XIX 2227 and introduction.

publication of P. Rylands I) F. Zucker edited the now famous letter of Subatianus Aquila². This letter is still the most striking example of the style. Comparison of the Rylands fragment with it shows the same exaggerated narrowness and tallness of letters like *o*, *ϑ*, *σ* (while *η*, *ν*, and *τ* are allowed to remain fairly broad), a compression probably governed by the desire to keep all the letters within the limits



Fig. 1. Papyrus Rylands I 59. Courtesy of the John Rylands Library, Manchester.

of two generously spaced parallel lines and at the same time to make them fill the vertical distance between these lines. Again, in both examples, the pen has been allowed to rest for a moment at the instant of contact, forming oblique series or circlets in the Rylands text, hooks in that in Berlin. Two letters in the Rylands exercise have a form closer to that of bookhand than their counterparts in the Berlin order: *a* (which unlike the Berlin *a* remains firmly planted on the lower line and does not float to the surface of the upper line) has no loop or cross-bar and is strikingly like a contemporary Roman *a*; *ε*, if less elongated, could be paralleled from many an example of the so-called 'severe' style, e.g. the hand of

² Berl. Sitz.ber. 1910, 710 = W. Schubart, *Papyri Graecae Berolinenses* 35.

Antiphon's Apologia at Geneva. Probably the Rylands and the Berlin texts are not far removed from each other in date.

Now Greek palaeographers are conscious of the meagreness of the objective data which support their attempts to classify and order their material. This text offers them new and welcome evidence in three respects. First, its regularity of execution shows that it is work that aims at professional competence: from such well-written practice-pieces it is legitimate to form an opinion of the standards expected of professional calligraphers, and (as has been attempted in the last paragraph) to analyse the script itself. Secondly, the text which was found at Oxyrhynchus, is most reasonably interpreted as written by an apprentice scribe at Oxyrhynchus. Whether it was carried out in a private writing school or under official or semi-official supervision in a 'government' office, it is the first evidence of the presence of apprentice scribes³ at Oxyrhynchus, though it has been tempting to guess at their presence by extending the inference from P. Oxy. 724, a contract of apprenticeship to a shorthand-writer. Possibly a search among other pieces mistakenly damned as 'school exercises' may reveal other examples⁴ and help to display some of the characteristics of Oxyrhynchite scriptoria. Thirdly, the fact that a budding chancery scribe should practise by copying a line of Demosthenes seems to confirm that principle of the absence in the ancient world of a sharp division between bookhands and documentary hands which has recently been taken by C. H. Roberts as basis for a notable handbook on Greek literary palaeography⁵. To urge that the model chosen is only a tag, the equivalent of a 'copy-book' quotation, does not invalidate this conclusion; what is remarkable is that the scribe was not set down to copy, say, an imperial rescript.

³ The documentary evidence for the presence of professional calligraphers and apprentice scribes in Oxyrhynchus is set out in *JEA* 38 (1952) 90.

⁴ In *Studi in Onore di A. Calderini e di R. Paribeni* I have discussed a remarkable Latin example from Hawara.

⁵ C. H. Roberts, *Greek Literary Hands 350 B.C. to A.D. 400*.