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NEW LITERARY TEXTS FROM AMHEIDA, ANCIENT TRIMITHIS
(DAKLA OASIS, EGYPT)

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The archaeological mission (now based at New York University) directed by Roger Bagnall is excavating the site of Amheida, the ancient Trimithis, in the Western part of the Dakhla Oasis in the western desert of Egypt¹. The site has a long history that goes back to at least the Old Kingdom. During the Roman Period the settlement flourished and at the beginning of the 4th century Trimithis became a πόλις; it was abandoned around the end of the 4th or the beginning of the 5th century like a number of other Dakhla settlements. One of the three areas of excavation to date has been a fourth-century private residence and the buildings surrounding it. This house belonged to an upper-class family, that of the landowner and city-councilor Serenos.² Adjacent to the house in its first phase (second quarter of the fourth century) there was a school building. Both the house and the school were built on top of debris layers originating from a dump and the demolition of an earlier Roman bath complex, and under this debris the remains of the *thermae* themselves.³ Serenos' house underwent three stages: this sequence has been recognized through the stratigraphy of the floors, of the wall plaster and of the restorations of parts of the building. The date of each phase of the house has been established through the numerous *ostraka* and coins found in the stratigraphy. Thus we argue that the house was occupied by Serenos' family for about 25 years, which is a rather short period of time: it was built around 340 AD or slightly earlier and abandoned soon after 365 AD. The extension of the house towards the North with the acquisition of the school building occurred during the second phase.

The archaeological context (P. Davoli)

Serenos' house is located in a central residential area, East of the main temple of the city (Fig. 1). The house is a mud-brick building of 15.3 × 15.3 m, preserved at ground floor level to about 2.5 m in height. It was originally composed of 11 rooms and a staircase connecting the ground floor with the terrace or upper rooms of which nothing remained. It had two entrances on the west and the east alleys, and a central room (R2) working as a hub. Some rooms were richly decorated with painted plaster; the most impressive was the domed dining room (R1), with geometrical paneling at the base of the walls surmounted by figured registers with scenes from Greek mythology.⁴ Each scene on the east wall has a sort of caption painted in white color on the black band that divided the registers. The two sides rooms (14 and 11) were also painted, but with a sort of repetitive "wall-paper" decoration respectively on red and green ground.⁵

Room 13, located immediately North of the West *vestibulum* (R12) and connected with it, was also painted: on a purple ground a series of rectangular panels were traced with cornices in yellow and white (Figs. 4–6). They were decorated with crossing linear garlands and with a central figure placed in a square, which is not preserved. Painted captions – usually names – were probably related to these lost figures. The panels were separated by a stylized palm tree and covered only the lower part of the walls for about 1.5 m. The upper parts and the vault ceiling were painted in white. The room then became a storeroom with the

¹ P. Davoli is the archaeological director since 2005; the excavation in Serenos' house and in the school was supervised by Eugene Ball. The field reports and published articles can be found at: www.amheida.org.

² Cf. R. S. Bagnall and G. R. Ruffini, *Amheida I. Ostraka from Trimithis, Vol. 1*, New York 2012, pp. 42–48. This is the first volume of the *ostraka* published for the seasons 2004–2007.

³ P. Davoli, A New Public Bath in Roman Trimithis (Amheida, Dakhla Oasis), in *Current Research on Bath in Egypt. New Archaeological Discoveries. Proceedings of the International Conference, Cairo October 26, 2010* (IFAO in press).

⁴ S. McFadden, Art on the Edge: The Late Roman Wall Paintings of Amheida Egypt, forthcoming in *Akten des AIPMA (L'Associazione Internazionale per la Pittura Murale Antica) XI-Kolloquiums in Ephesos 2010*.

⁵ R. S. Bagnall, P. Davoli, O. E. Kaper, H. Whitehouse, Roman Amheida: Excavating a Town in Egypt's Dakhleh Oasis, *Minerva* 17/6 (Nov.–Dec. 2006), pp. 26–29. On similar paintings see: C. A. Hope and H. Whitehouse, A Painted Residence at Ismant el-Kharab (Kellis) in the Dakhleh Oasis, *JRA* 19 (2006), pp. 312–328.

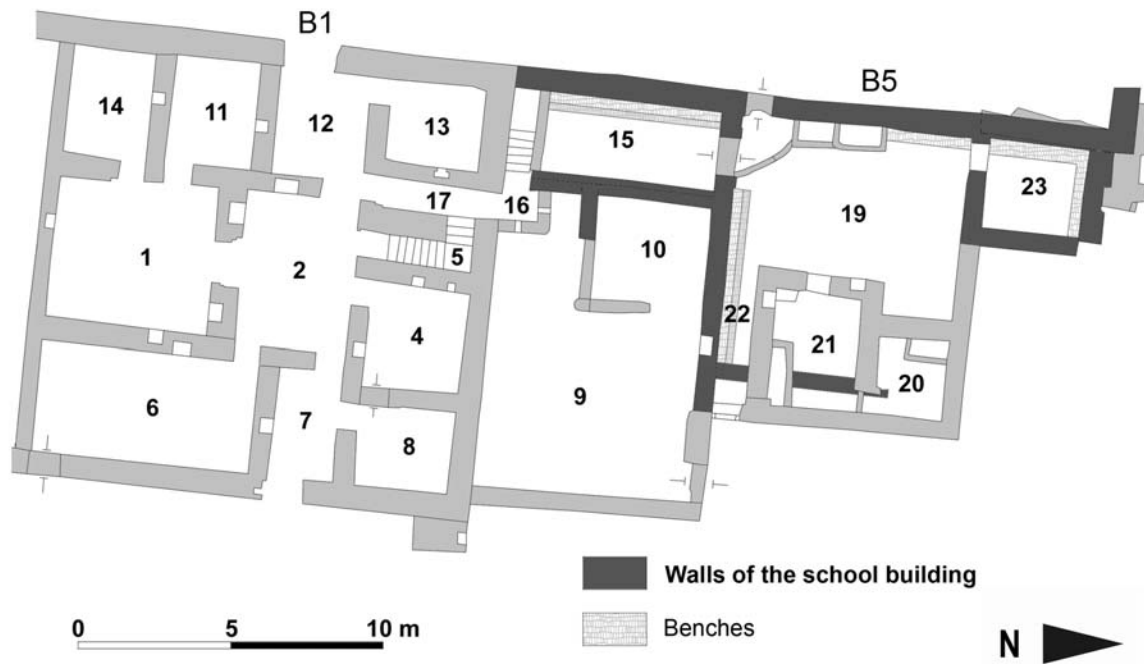


Fig. 1. Plan of Serenos' house (B1) and the North building (B5), with a preliminary interpretation of the walls of the school



Fig. 2. Room 15 looking South-East

building of a double bin on the North side. The purple decoration was partly covered by white bands painted horizontally on the walls. The room underwent structural damage due to the shifting of the West wall which in consequence was heavily restored. Some short texts were written in white chalk or in black ink on the purple or on the white wash. They are very faint but somehow legible and interesting, as Criore shows in the following pages. It is difficult, however, to know when these short texts were written and on what occasion. Few other Greek graffiti⁶ have been recognized in other rooms of Serenos' house: rare examples are found on the white cornice surrounding the door in room 6 (inv. 13657) and on the East jamb of room 1.

It is tempting to connect the high cultural level of the inhabitants of the house, attested by the paintings in R1, with the presence of a school right to the North of Serenos' house, but there is no direct evidence that can support this idea. Moreover, the interpretation of the *graffiti* and *dipinti* traced on the walls in different rooms must take into consideration the different phases of the plaster/painting of the walls and thus of the house. However, the state of preservation of the facings of the walls, mostly damaged by termites actions, does not always allow a precise phasing.

After few years after initial construction, Serenos' house was enlarged towards the North by incorporating a room (R15) that was part of the school building (B5). Other spaces of the same building were rearranged and used by Serenos' family as working spaces (Fig. 7).

The first room of the school that the team investigated was room 15 (in season 2006), on whose East wall the text of a *dipinto* in elegiac distichs was written in red ink (Figs. 2–3).⁷ The original room 15 was 6.8 m long and 2.6 m wide with the entrance in the middle of the North wall. The remarkable width of the doorway (1.25 m), its central position and its decoration with two small pillars or cornice on its North side suggest an important function for the room within the school. In its first stage, R15 was plastered with white gypsum plaster, which continued in the doorway and in R19. The white plaster is only partially preserved in half the room, and on it various red ink inscriptions were traced. These inscriptions are strictly connected with the teaching activities within the room and the building. After the abandonment of the school and its transformation into a working space by Serenos' family, the door in R15 was then completely bricked up.⁸ A new entrance was placed in the southeast corner and a new suspended wooden floor was built in order to transform the room into a storeroom. At present the room is preserved to a height of 2.2 m and it is certain that it was flat roofed.

The following seasons reserved more surprises. Two more rooms of this school complex were discovered in 2008 North of R15. The changed function of the school building into a work space required its complete renovation, with new floors and a different partition of the spaces. Several walls were demolished (like those in the area of R9, 10, 22 and 21), and others were built in R19. These substantial changes in the building prevent the full comprehension of its original plan, but it is almost certain that it was built at the same time as Serenos' house, with a perimeter wall in common (Fig. 1). The school thus consisted of at least three large rooms (R15, 19, and 23) that covered a space of about 20 × 9 m. The original entrance was probably located on the West side, but it was subsequently bricked up. Low benches along the perimeter walls of all the rooms of the school distinguish the building. These benches are made of mud brick and

⁶ A graffito showing a frontal face was traced very high on the East wall in R14, but probably after the abandonment of the house.

⁷ The original white plaster is preserved only in few patches on the East and the West walls. Other inscriptions were painted in red on the West wall, but are too faint to be readable. The room was re-plastered with simple mud when it was transformed into a store and it is not clear if the white plaster was left on view or if it was covered. The termites affected the mud plaster in a way that it is not possible to be sure of its original extension. R. Criore, P. Davoli, and D. M. Ratzan, A Teacher's Dipinto from Trimithis (Dakhleh Oasis), *JRA* 21 (2008), pp. 170–191; P. Davoli and R. Criore, Una scuola di greco del IV secolo d.C. a Trimithis (Oasi di Dakhla, Egitto), in M. Capasso (ed.), *Atti del Primo Congresso Nazionale dell'AICC "Leggere greco e latino fuori dai confini nel Mondo Antico" Lecce 10–11 maggio 2008, Quaderni di Atene e Roma* 1 (2010), pp. 73–87; P. Davoli, Amheida 2007–2009: New Results from the Excavations, in R. S. Bagnall, P. Davoli, C. A. Hope (eds.), *The Oasis Papers 6. Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference of the Dakhleh Oasis Project, Lecce 20–24 September 2009* (Oxford 2012), pp. 263–278.

⁸ Several *ostraka* found on the floor in the renovated building (B5) bear the name of Serenos. Those found in 2008 will be published in the second volume of the *Ostraka from Trimithis*.

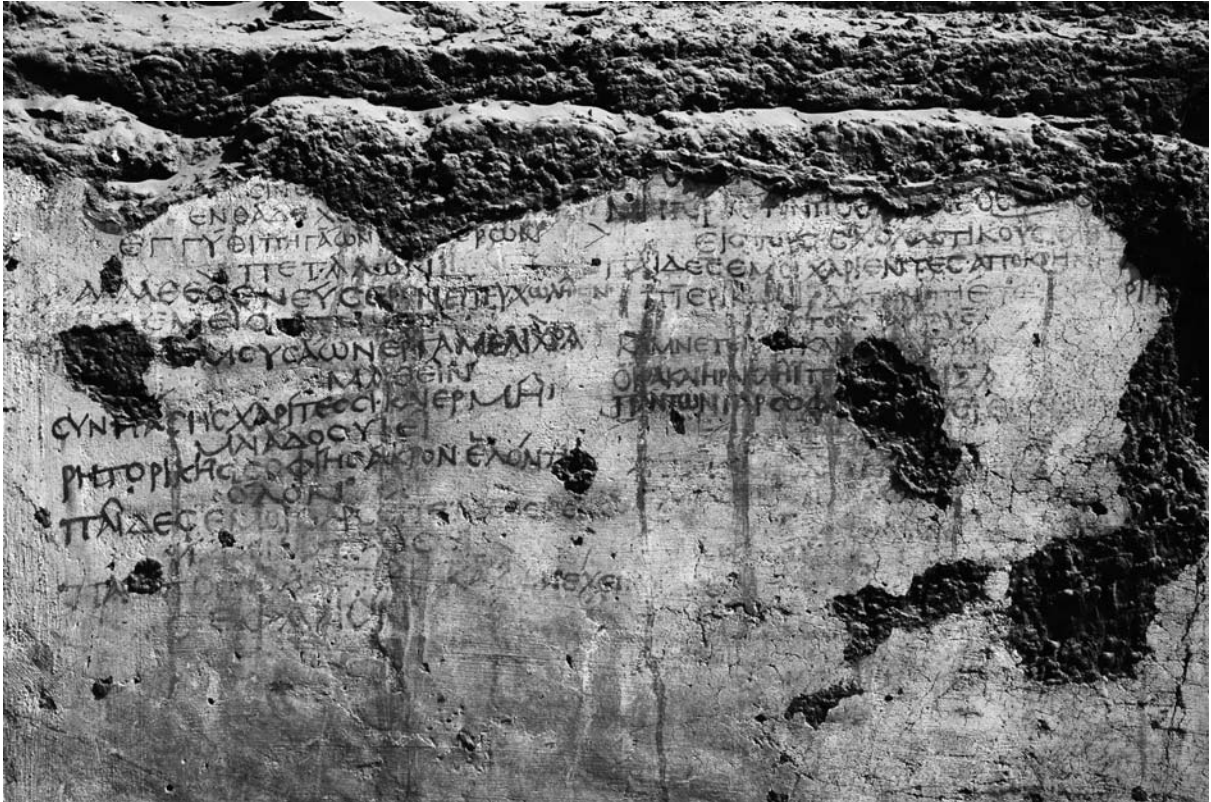


Fig. 3. Painted text in room 15



Fig. 4. Room 13, the northeast corner

baked brick and have a mud facing. Some of them were cut into the baked brick walls of the *thermae*, like those in R15 and in the North-West corner of R19. Those built along the South wall of R19 (and R22) are the best preserved, having been covered by debris and by a new floor during the renovation of the building (Fig. 8). These benches are made of two steps perfectly plastered in mud (5.9 m long, 38 and 47 cm wide and 7–8 cm high), which is the same that forms the floor of the school all over the area of R19. The school floor was very simple: it was made of 4–7 cm thick compacted mud that was smeared directly on the previous floor of the bath in baked brick. The same kind of mud floor was found in R15, 19 and 23.

The walls of the school were plastered with a thin layer of gypsum plaster that was left white on the upper part of the walls and was painted in the lower. Faint traces of yellow and red colors were found in R15, while R19 was painted in plain purple. The texts related to the school activities are all traced in red ink on the white plaster. Two texts survived on the West wall of R19, but others were certainly present in the upper part of the same wall, as collapsed fragments of plaster testify to (Figs. 9–11). Both these texts, which are at about 2.8 m above floor level, were probably written by people standing on a bench; its presence is highly probable below the later bin (which was not removed during the excavation). A bench is actually still visible North of this bin (2.3 × 0.34 × h 0.22 m). It was made into a cut baked brick wall of the bath and coated by mud plaster for the use of the school. It probably continued in room 23, where a similar wall in baked brick from the *thermae* was cut and reused as a bench (3.10 × 0.7 × h 0.28 m) along the West wall.

More data on the school building could be recovered on the outer West side of the building, which will be explored in a future season.

The texts (R. Criore)

After the closure of the school, room 15 was annexed to Serenos' house and became a sort of magazine, while the other rooms became part of a separate building used as a working space. The life of the school was apparently very short (less than 20 years); it is natural to wonder if this could be related to the presence or the active lifespan of the teacher. In antiquity often schools did not have a separate existence from teachers, particularly at lower stages of schooling. A school *was* a teacher and ceased to exist when the latter moved or died. The school of rhetoric of Antioch in Syria where the sophist Libanius taught had had a few teachers in succession but apparently disappeared at Libanius' demise.⁹ In the case of the school in the Oasis, it is uncertain if the same teacher (a grammarian, perhaps, or less likely a rhetor or an itinerant teacher, a *καθηγητής*) taught in the three rooms there.

The first room of the school that the team investigated was room 15, on whose wall the text of a *dipinto* in elegiac distichs was written in red ink.¹⁰ The five columns of the text, some of which were mutilated, consisted of exhortations to students to reach the summit of rhetoric in the company of the Muses, the Graces, and Hermes; to drink at the Pierian waters; and especially to work hard, imitating the toils of Heracles. The diction of these didactic epigrams was heavily literary and especially epic and employed terms (sometimes rare) taken from Homer, Apollonius of Rhodes, and late antique epic. A unique feature of this *dipinto*, moreover, was the heavy and unusual presence of lectional signs. The teacher who wrote (and maybe composed) the epigrams intended them to be models for composition. The unusual presence of accentuation and lectional signs also suggests a lesson in accentuation now that the pitch accent prevailed. It seems that the occupants of the house maintained the *dipinto* in spite of renovations to the room that transformed it into storage space, probably because they valued its appearance and content, which could appear as signs of their cultural sophistication. The excitement at the discovery of room 15 was great because a real schoolroom had come to light that presented a lesson of ancient pedagogy in the making.

The discovery of two more rooms of the same scholastic building would have been exciting even if no new texts had appeared. The literary sources show that teaching in antiquity – particularly secondary teaching – was mostly done in private residences or at least in buildings that are extremely difficult to

⁹ On this school, see R. Criore, *The School of Libanius in Late Antique Antioch*, Princeton 2007.

¹⁰ Criore, Davoli, and Ratzan, *A Teacher's Dipinto*, cit., pp. 170–191.



Fig. 5. Room 13, North wall. Text inv. 13488, *Hypsipyle*



Fig. 6. Room 13, South wall. The name *Hephaestus* (inv. 13469)

identify as such. In the fourth century, for example, teachers of advanced education might use a room at home, space in the city hall, or pagan temples that were desacralized.¹¹ The rooms found at Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria are exceptional and represent classrooms of the resurrected University that was especially famous in late antiquity. They owe their identification as schoolrooms to their number and concentration but do not exhibit any surviving writing on the walls.¹² In the case of the rooms found in Amheida, however, texts written on the walls are a further proof that teaching and learning took place there and confirm that they belong to the only building so far discovered from antiquity that was certainly a school and showed educational activities. As in room 15, the new rooms (R19 and 23) have a series of benches for students along the walls. The students of R15 could sit on the benches to view the epigrams or stand on them to be able to write on the whitewashed wall behind those. In the same way, students in room 19 had to stand up on the benches there to write on the part of the wall that was plastered with white gypsum, above a board painted in purple. In what follows, we will present two short literary texts that were found together on a wall in room 19. In addition we will look at another room of the house, room 13, which shows mythological names and a line from Euripides.

Room 19 (Figs. 9–11)

Two texts are written in different hands side by side on the West wall of this schoolroom. They consist of a few lines from the *Odyssey* and of a more problematic and lacunose text that appears to be the reworking of a passage from Plutarch's *Moralia*. While the *dipinto* in room 15 seems to refer to the level of education taught by the rhetor, literary instruction went on in this room either at the hands of the same teacher or by someone else who taught at the level of the grammarian.

The first text (inv. 13471) (Fig. 10) was written in red ink. Its dimensions are 14 × 3 cm and the letter height is 0.6 cm. It preserves lines 221–223 of Homer, *Odyssey*, book 4. During the visit of Telemachus and his companions to Sparta, Helen mixed into the wine for her guests a powerful drug (opium, incense, or something similar):

Text 1

1 [ν]ηπενθεσ ἀχολον τε κακῶν ἐπιλήθον ἀπαντῶν
 2 ος [τ]ο καταβροξείεν ἐπει κρητερει μιγυει
 3 ουδ ἀν ἐφημεριος γε βαλοι [κα]τὰ δακρυ παρειῶ[ν]
 4 μ[ι]μειτε

1. T is missing after νηπενθέσ. 2. καταβρόξειεν as in the best Mss. This verse is shorter than the others so that the writer enlarged the spacing between letters for the sake of symmetry. κρητερει for κρητήρι with exchange in vowel quantity and iotacism. 3. ουδ ἀν seems to be a simplified version of the Mss. οὐ κεν.

“(a drug) that takes away grief and anger, and brings forgetfulness of every ill. Whoever should drink this down when it is mixed in the bowl would not let fall a tear down his cheek, in the course of that day at least. Imitate.”

Book 4 of the *Odyssey* contains numerous references to Egypt, so that it is not too surprising that it aroused some interest there. Mertens–Pack³, in fact, includes twenty one references to this book, yet only two early Roman papyri contain these precise verses (1044, *P.Oxy.* VI 953, with only a few letters from lines 222–223; 1047, *P.Harr.* I 124, which includes all these lines). It should be noticed that a *hapax legomenon* from *Odyssey* IV 820 (the verb ἀμφιτρομέω, “to tremble for”) occurs in col. 5 line 7 of the *dipinto* in room 15. This confirms that students in the school of the Oasis paid attention to this book. The numerous *hapax legomena* that lines 221–223 contain may have been the main reason why they aroused the interest of a teacher who wanted his students to practice on glosses.¹³ This passage, moreover, especially line

¹¹ See R. Criboire, Spaces for Teaching in Late Antiquity, in *The Auditoria of Kom el-Dikka, Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplement VIII*, Warsaw 2007, pp. 143–150.

¹² On the use of these rooms, see E. J. Watt, *Riot in Alexandria*, Berkeley 2010, esp. pp. 1–22.

¹³ See C. Faraone, Taking the ‘Nestor’s Cup Inscription’ Seriously: Erotic Magic and Conditional Curses in the Earliest Inscribed Hexameters, *Classical Antiquity* 15.1 (1996), pp. 77–112 at 90.



Fig. 7. B5 looking towards southwest



Fig. 8. B5, benches of the school in room 19–22

221, was extensively quoted and paraphrased in antiquity.¹⁴ Homeric verses might be chanted and used in magic. Iamblichus (*De vita Pythagorica*) told a story about Empedocles, who was able to calm an enraged youth by reciting these verses to the sound of the lyre; modern scholars have therefore associated them with healing, magical power.¹⁵ It is clear that this *dipinto* was written down on the school wall for didactic purposes. The fourth line, which contains only the exhortation μι[ι]μειτε (imitate), is a further indication of its purpose¹⁶ and calls to mind a writing exercise that appears on a tablet.¹⁷ A further suggestion that links these verses with education comes from the rhetor Himerius in the fourth century who referred to them in *Oration 16*.¹⁸ Like Plutarch, Himerius thought that Helen's words were the drug that healed her guests and furthermore like Empedocles he tried to use the Homeric verses and specifically his own words to pacify the anger of his students. Himerius ostensibly gave this oration when discord arose in his classroom.¹⁹ "Does my rhetorical skill aim at achieving the kind of dazzling results" of Homer? He asks, putting himself in direct competition with the Epic poet. It seems likely that at least in the fourth century this was the interpretation of the verses in the schools so that their appearance in Amheida is less surprising. And yet, some uncertainty remains on how the lines were used. In which respect were students supposed to imitate the verses? This text is written in a minute and fast documentary hand, which is difficult to read and is radically different from the clear and large hands of school models. It seems hardly possible that the lines had to be copied as a writing exercise, but perhaps a teacher scribbled the verses for students to paraphrase or expand into a composition. One is even tempted to see an ironical message in the whole, considering this passage as a subversive *dipinto* of a student inviting his companions to drugs offering oblivion. We are of course in the realm of supposition.

On the right of this text, there is a passage in prose also written in red ink. Its size now is 64 × 16 cm and the letter height is 1 cm on average but sometimes going up to 3 cm. It originally occupied a larger part of the wall, starting much above. It now includes the remains of seven lines. This time the large book hand does not offer the same challenges of the quotation from the *Odyssey*, but the writing is very badly preserved, with whole lines almost obliterated and a large part of the plaster missing in the central part. This text appears to be a reworking of an anecdote that occurs in Ps.-Plutarch, *Regum et imperatorum apophthegmata* (174E–F) and more precisely in Plutarch, *De Alexandri Magni fortuna aut virtute* (334B). It seems to be closer to the latter version, where the story is more developed and contains a final moral remark.

ὁ δὲ τῶν Σκυθῶν βασιλεὺς Ἀντέας Ἴσμηνίαν τὸν αὐλητὴν λαβὼν αἰχμάλωτον ἐκέλευεν αὐλῆσαι παρὰ πότον. Θαυμαζόντων δὲ τῶν ἄλλων καὶ κροτούντων, αὐτὸς ὤμοσεν ἀκροᾶσθαι τοῦ ἵππου χρεμετίζοντος ἴδιον. Οὕτω μακρὰν ἀπεσκηνώκει τὰ ὄτα τῶν Μουσῶν, καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἐν ταῖς φάτναις εἶχεν, οὐχ ἵππων ἀλλ' ὄνων ἐπιτηδειοτέραν ἀκούειν.

"Anteas king of the Scythians, who had captured the flute player Ismenias, ordered him to play the flute over the wine. While everyone else marveled and applauded, he swore that hearing his horse neigh was more pleasant: for so long he had kept his ears away from the Muses. His soul was in the stables and was more accustomed to hear not even horses but asses."

Plutarch then commented that the king's ears were far from the Muses and that kings did not care about promoting and honoring the arts and music and oppressed real artists.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Dio, *Or.* 12.52; Lucian, *Salt.* 79; and Plutarch, *Quaestiones convivales* 614C.

¹⁵ See, besides Faraone, Nestor's Cup Inscription, cit., D. Collins, *The Magic of Homeric Verses*, *CP* 103.3 (2008), pp. 211–236, at 213–214.

¹⁶ This deponent verb is used in the active form as it happened with other deponents in the Roman period, cf. F. T. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods*, vol. 2, Milan 1981, pp. 325–327.

¹⁷ See R. Criboire, *A Schooltablet from the Hearst Museum (Plates VIII and IX)*, *ZPE* 10 (1995), pp. 263–270; R. Criboire, *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, Atlanta 1996, no. 136; a writing exercise in line 4 of the tablet reads: καὶ κοὶ μιμοῦ. A student copied the exhortation several times down the tablet.

¹⁸ I owe this valuable suggestion to Robert Penella. The translation of *Or.* 16.1 Colonna appears in his book *Man and the Word: The Orations of Himerius*, Berkeley 2007, p. 77, from which I quote.

¹⁹ On rebellion in Himerius' classroom, see Criboire, *School of Libanius*, cit., pp. 193–195.

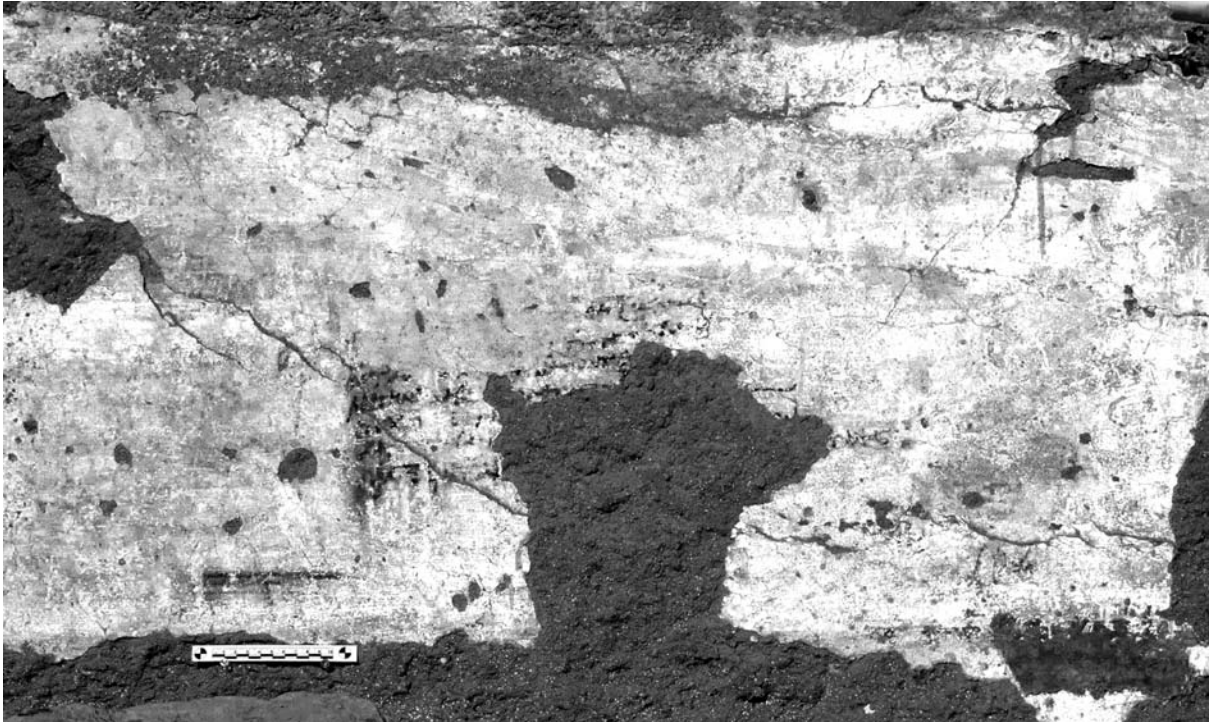


Fig. 9. R19, the two painted texts on the West wall

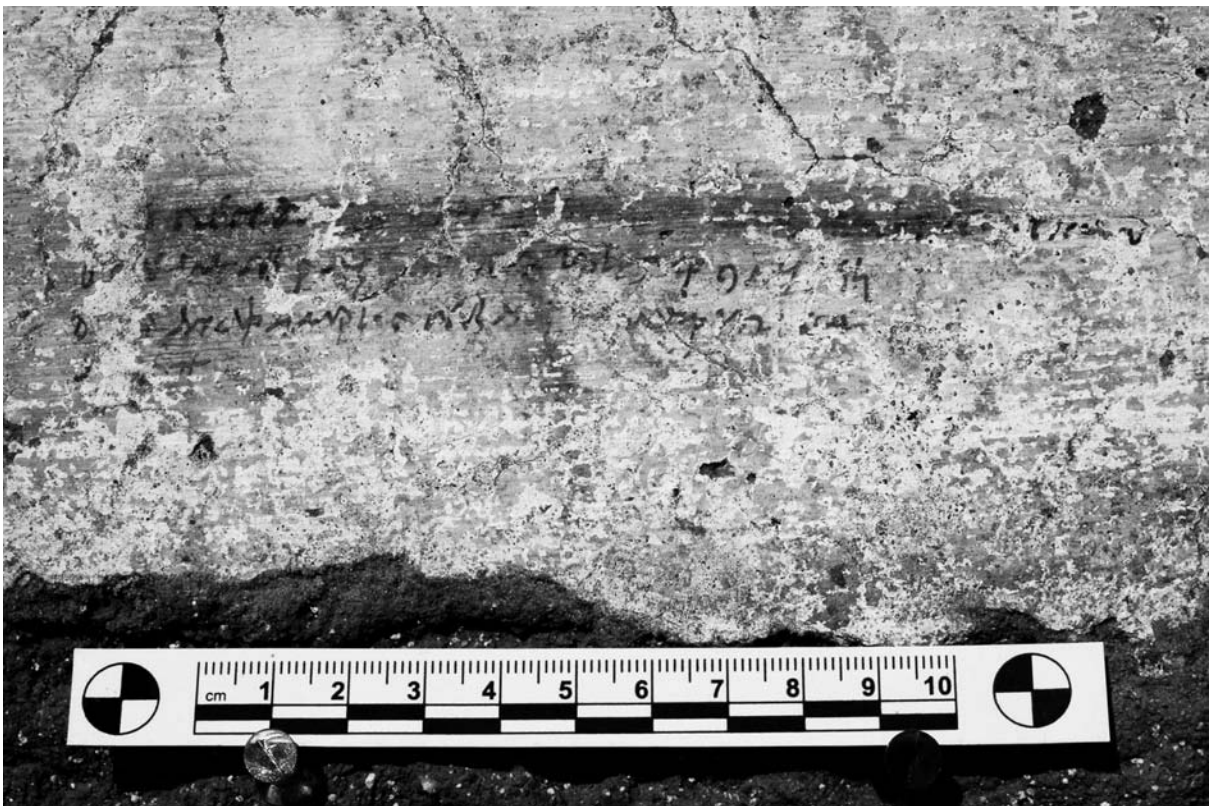


Fig. 10. R19, text 1 (inv. 13471), *Odyssey* book 4

Text 2 (inv. 13468) (Fig. 11)

- 1 [traces of red] φευξομενος
 2 [traces of red] κτ]ρατηγειται ...
 3 εις θοινα[θαι α]λλα τη[ς] [μ]ου[ς]κη[ς] ελλιποντε[ς ca. 10 αυ]
 4 λητην λαβ[-5-] μεθυο[υ]ςι . . [-16-]ς
 5 ετυχε τ[ιμη]αμε[νος ca. -22-] ...
 6 αριστον ο βασιλ[ευς ca. -25- Α]γταια
 7 πραξηται[

1. The verb may refer to the hope of the flute player to escape.

3. The verb θοινᾶσθαι as, e.g., Cratinus fr. 175.2 K–A. Another possibility is the noun θοινας in the plural, referring to the feast. Before ελλιποντε[ς, everything is tentative, including the reconstruction “lacking the music”. It is also possible that οὐδέν or οὐδ’ ἄλλον (*exempli gratia*) was there, “Lacking nothing else but ...” The traces of the letters are too faint to allow any certain reading. The general meaning seems to be that they had everything to celebrate a feast, but no music.

4. Two letters are visible after μεθυο[υ]ςι. The second, which looks like a *tau*, is high up on the line and disproportionate in size. It was probably a correction written above the faulty letter.

5. This line seems to refer to the choice of the king.

6. The name of the king at the end of the line could be Ανταια or Αταια (that is, Αντέα or Ατέα), because the first letter after the lacuna could easily be an *alpha* or a *nu*. Nackstädt followed some Mss. and adopted Anteas, but both spellings seem to occur in Plutarch.

7. Probably to be read πράξητε, an aorist subjunctive, a mistake of phonetic spelling. This line seems to be part of the moral.

There is no doubt that the text on the wall refers to such an anecdote, but it does not represent a quotation from Plutarch. It is either another version of the story or a rewriting of the passage. Even though only single words are preserved due to the deterioration of the wall, enough survives to define the setting: at the beginning the verb τρατηγεῖν, to make an expedition, a banquet (θοῖνα) with a flute player (ἀυλήτης), people drinking wine (μέθυ), a king who is asked what is “the best” for him, and finally his name, Ateas or Anteas. One wonders what the missing ending of the story was. Was it simply a confirmation that the Muses and paideia need to be cultivated, or did it include Plutarch’s message, which was a bit subversive, that rulers are an ignorant lot?

Passages written side by side as school exercises on the same papyrus or tablet are often unrelated and function as anthologies of diverse writing,²⁰ but in this case some kind of a connection – albeit tenuous – might have existed between the two texts. In *Quaest. conv.* 614C, Plutarch discusses topics of conversation that are suitable for symposia and center on philosophy, piety, and great or humane deeds. Those who use drugs to make their parties more cheerful – he says – do so in imitation of Helen in the *Odyssey*, but they do not realize that the story of mixing a drug to wine, which came a long way from Egypt, was only the prelude to the tale of Odysseus’ adventures. Thus a story was the νηπενθὲς φάρμακον, “a drug that takes away grief”. This anecdote about Anteas on the wall might have been another of those pleasant and cheerful stories that education appropriated.

Room 13

Euripides *Hypsipyle* on the North wall (inv. 13488) (Figs. 4–5)

Before some papyri were discovered, this lost tragedy of Euripides was known only partially because of some short citations in the literary sources. In addition, conjectures regarding the plot were formulated on the basis of a comparison with Statius’ *Thebaid*. An extensive part of the play, however, came to light with the publication of *P.Oxy.* VI 852 (Mertens–Pack³ 438, II–III century AD), which included fragment 60,

²⁰ Cf. for example *P.Köln.* III 125 (Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers and Students*, cit., no. 250), a fragment of papyrus roll with two exercises, a passage from the *Iliad* and part of a chorus from Aeschylus written into two different hands.



Fig. 11. R19, text 2 (inv. 13468), Plutarch

column ii, where the line written on the wall of room 13 (c. 916, 86) appeared.²¹ The papyri of this play of Euripides, in any case, are not numerous in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods and concern either different parts of the text or especially its *ὑπόθεσις*: Mertens–Pack³ 439 from cartonnage belongs to the III century BC; Mertens–Pack³ 452.1, III–II BC, contains *ὑποθέσεις* of various tragedies; 453 dated to the II AD with *ὑποθέσεις* of more plays; and 454.2 of the III AD with two *ὑποθέσεις*.²²

This late tragedy of Euripides revolved around the fact that Hypsipyle, formerly queen of Lemnos, became a servant in the king of Nemea’s palace and caused involuntarily the death of baby Opheltes, the son of queen Eurydice and king Lycurgus. At that time the march of the Seven against Thebes was taking place through Nemea. One of the Seven was the seer Amphiaraus, who asked Hypsipyle to show him a stream of water for a sacrifice. To do so, Hypsipyle left the child on the ground for an instant, and he was stung and killed by a serpent. In fragment 60, Amphiaraus relates to queen Eurydice the episode, which he considers as the beginning of many evils. Of the seven commanders – he says in the verse scribbled on the wall of R13 – only “Adrastus will return to Argos from Thebes”.

In considering in 1987 all the fragments appearing on papyrus, W. Cockle remarked: “Further advance will largely depend on the discovery of new papyri”,²³ but until now the situation has remained unchanged. Even though the contribution of room 13 of Serenos’ house is modest, consisting of only one line written in chalk on a wall, the discovery is valuable for several reasons. The second column of fragment 60 of *P.Oxy.* VI 852 was very lacunose, missing the right side of the lines. Scholars’ conjectures tried to fill the lacuna in line 86, but now the verse as it appears on the wall vindicates the opinion of D. L. Page versus that of Murray (see below). The *Hypsipyle* was not particularly popular in Egypt, and the citation of one random

²¹ G. W. Bond published an edition of this tragedy, *Euripides: Hypsipyle*, Oxford 1963, repr. 1969; W. E. H. Cockle reviewed all the papyri and made many new joins between fragments, *Hypsipyle: Text and Annotation Based on a Re-examination of the Papyri*, Rome 1987.

²² It is very doubtful that Mertens–Pack³ 440 belongs to this tragedy.

²³ Cockle, *Hypsipyle*, cit., p. 20.

line is difficult to explain. One wonders whether this line had acquired some proverbial signification and/or alluded to a specific, contemporary situation, such as someone arriving or departing. Some mythological names are written on the walls of the same room 13, so that it is possible that there was some indirect connection between the verse and the names written on the purple plaster that were painted and were part of the decoration. It is also unclear whether the person who scribbled this verse had any relation with the school. Was he the teacher of room 15 or 19 or was he an educated person who was a guest in the house at that time? And in general one would like to know how the room was used and whether it was devoted to reading and recitations of the classics. Originally more was written on the walls, but what remains is not much, due to the restorations made to the room in antiquity and to its general state of preservation.

1 ηξειαργ
2 εκθηβω[v

Ἄδρακτος] ἥξει Ἄργ[ος
ἐκ Θήβω[v πάλι

ξ in line 1 is written with an extra right stroke. We consulted Guglielmo Cavallo, who agreed on the reading, attributing the stroke to the random use of the chalk. *Iota* seems to be clear, though one cannot categorically exclude that the horizontal of a possible τ was erased. In the edition of *P.Oxy.* 852 G. Murray conjectured:

Ἄδρακτος ἴξετᾶρ[α πάτριον αὖ πέδον

The verse on the wall corresponds to Page's conjecture:²⁴

Ἄδρακτος, ἥξει τ' Ἄργ[ος ἐκ Θήβων πάλι

In the same room, there are names and words written on the walls, sometimes the remains of mere letters. We will make some attempt to connect them with the *Hypsipyle* and with themselves, but it should be clear that these explanations are tentative also because some appear as captions and it is unclear when some were written. There is a possible connection between this verse of the *Hypsipyle* and the name Hephaestus (inv. 13469) (Fig. 6), which is painted on the South wall in one of the decorative paneling with garlands and a bird, which may be only decorative. This bird appears larger than those depicted in the frieze in room 11 and seems of a different kind, with a longer tail, but is certainly not a crane or a vulture, birds that were supposedly sacred to the god.²⁵ It should be noticed that on the West wall there is written:

ΟΡΝΙΘΑ.. (inv. 13486)²⁶

This word appears a few lines up in the same passage of the papyrus of the *Hypsipyle* line 80: ὄρνιθα δ' Ἀργείο[ις] but the remains are too scanty to relate them securely to the same tragedy. In any case, there the word would mean 'a portent for the Argives', rather than 'bird'.

When the god Hephaestus was hurled down from Olympus by Zeus, he fell for a whole day and landed then on the island of Lemnos, where he was worshipped in a special way.²⁷ The former king of the island was Thoas, Hypsipyle's father. Thoas was the son of Ariadne and the god Dionysus, whose name is painted on a panel on the East wall of R13 (inv. 13467), which is marked by a top border and under which there is a wreath. When Hephaestus fell on Lemnos, Dionysus intoxicated him with wine and brought him back to Olympus, a story that is depicted in many Attic vases. The presence of the god of fire might also be in relation with the story of the love of Aphrodite and Ares that was depicted in paintings running on the top register of the walls in room 1.²⁸

²⁴ See D. L. Page, *Select Papyri: Literary Papyri, Poetry*, Cambridge, Mass. 1970, pp. 102–103.

²⁵ Criboire, Davoli, and Ratzan, *A Teacher Dipinto*, cit., p. 179 fig. 6.

²⁶ On the West wall of the room other Greek writing appears in chalk and black ink (inv. 13483–13485 and 13489). It consists of the names of two months, Athyr and Epeiph, and of other cursive writing that is difficult to understand, κομπτρα (chest?) τηβα.

²⁷ Cf. W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, Cambridge, Mass. 1985, iii.2.ii.

²⁸ See Criboire, Davoli, and Ratzan, *A Teacher Dipinto*, cit., pp. 172 and 179 fig. 5.

On the East wall the name Πολυδευκης is visible (inv. 13466), one of the Dioscuri. It was a caption for the decoration. When his mortal brother Castor died, the immortal Polydeuces obtained from Zeus to live one day with him in Hades, and another day in Olympus. Finally the word καιρος, that is “opportunity”, “advantage”, is written on the North wall and is a caption for something in the decoration (inv. 13487). This term appears very often in Euripides with various meanings.

All together, the house in Amheida and the school adjacent to it are wondrous testimonies of how paideia was alive and well in Egypt and not only in the Nile Valley.

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