The Textualization of the Greek Alphabet

In this book, Roger D. Woodard argues that when the Greeks first began to use the alphabet, they viewed themselves as participants in a performance phenomenon conceptually modeled on the performances of the oral poets. Since a time older than Greek antiquity, the oral poets of Indo-European tradition had been called “weavers of words” – their extemporaneous performance of poetry was “word weaving.” With the arrival of the new technology of the alphabet and the onset of Greek literacy, the very act of producing written symbols was interpreted as a comparable performance activity, albeit one in which almost everyone could participate, not only the select few. It was this new conceptualization of and participation in performance activity by the masses that eventually, or perhaps quickly, resulted in the demise of oral composition in performance in Greece. In conjunction with this investigation, Woodard analyzes a set of copper plaques inscribed with repeated alphabetic series and a line of what he interprets to be text, which attests to this archaic Greek conceptualization of the performance of symbol crafting.

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The Textualization of the Greek Alphabet

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University of Buffalo
With a chapter by DAVID A. SCOTT
FOR ED BROWN, TEACHER AND FRIEND, AND TO THE MEMORY
OF HIS BELOVED NICKEY
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Homer, heroes' bard, was deathly vexed in Ios
When by the Muses some boys did a riddle weave;
With Nectar, Nereids of Sea anointed him and laid
Him dead beneath a rocky ledge on shore,
For Thetis he had glorified, her son as well, and other
Heroes' fights, and deeds of Laertes' son of Ithaka.
Blessed among the islands of the sea Ios is, for it has hid,
The tiny isle, the Muses' and the Graces' star.

Greek Anthology 7.1 (Alcaeus of Messene)

The story goes that Homer died when fisher boys on Ios posed him a riddle that he could not unknot. Something like this: “Those we caught we left behind; those we did not catch we brought back with us. What is it?” It was no fish, as Homer seemed to imagine, but lice. And they say that this cleverly woven web – its creation inspired by the very Muses – proved to be Homer's undoing when he could not tease apart its fibers.
But I think not. It was no weaving of a riddle that was Homer's bane – but the weaving of the alphabet – when the Muses began to show their favors far and wide – to practically anyone who could scratch out its symbols – not just to some boys on Ios. It was a woven viral hexameter that did him in.

There are many indications of this, not least of which is the great variability of letter shapes that were employed in early Greek inscriptive writing, within individual inscriptions, producing variegated graphemic patterns – text, literally. This variability has long been noticed. The prominence of the back-and-forth twining lines of boustrophedon is another indication. But the triad of copper plaques with which this study begins and that provides a continuous thread passing through the narrative of this work, I will argue, drags this metaphoric weaving out and lays it before us, making it unmistakably recognizable, gathering our attention to the alphabetic fabric that might have otherwise escaped our attention.

A word about that. While (1) the set of copper plaques etched with abecedarium after abecedarium and (2) the concept of the weaving of alphabetic strands are interlinked in this work, each is a distinct phenomenon. The investigation of each of the two constitutes a separate study. Each forms the centerpiece of a separate thesis. One thesis does not depend on the other, but one informs the other. One thesis concerns the interpretation of a particularly unique set of documents; the other thesis addresses the earliest Greek conceptualizations of alphabetic writing. The thoughtful reader is asked to evaluate them separately.

This book has affiliated with it a dedicated Cambridge University Press Web site: www.cambridge.org/9781107028111. There the reader will find the following images: (1) my hand-annotated X-ray images of each side of each plaque; (2) scans of the surface of each side of the plaques in the collection of Martin Schøyen, which were produced at the University of Oslo with the assistance of Professor Jens Braarvig; and (3) the three tables and seventeen figures that are referenced by Professor David A. Scott in Chapter 3.
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As always and for all of the usual reasons the full measure of my debt to Katherine and Paul defies expression.
Abbreviations

AJA  American Journal of Archaeology
AJP  American Journal of Philology
AR  Archaeological Reports
BASOR  Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research
BASP  Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists
BCH  Bulletin de correspondance hellénique
BDB  Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1976)
CEG  Carmina epigraphica graeca (Hansen 1983–1989)
CIL  Corpus inscriptionum latinarum
CIS  Corpus inscriptionum semiticarum
CJ  Classical Journal
C Phil.  Classical Philology
CQ  Classical Quarterly
CR  Classical Review
DAA  Dedications from the Athenian Acropolis (Raubitschek 1949)
Dietz  Ὄνοματα τῶν ἰατρικῶν ἐργαλείων κατά στοιχεῖα σιγήν ταῖς χειρουργίας χρώμεθα (Dietz 1836)
Dübner  Scholia graeca in Aristophanen (Dübner 1969)
EG  Epigrafia Greca (Guarducci 1967)
FD  Fouilles de Delphes
FGrH  Fragmente der griechischen Historiker (Jacoby 1954–1969)
FHG  Fragmenta historicorum graecorum (Müller 1841–1870)
Gr. Gr.  Griechische Grammatik (Schwyzer 1939)
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* Abbreviations

IC        Inscriptiones Creticae (Guarducci 1935–1950)
ICS       Les inscriptions chypriotes syllabiques (Masson 1983)
IF        Indogermanische Forschungen
IG        Inscriptiones graecae
IGA       Inscriptiones graecae antiquissimae (Roehl 1882)
JAOS      Journal of the American Oriental Society
JHS       Journal of Hellenic Studies
KAI       Kanaänäische und aramäische Inschriften (Donner and Röllig 1966–1969)
Kock      Comicorum Atticorum Fragmenta (Kock 1880)
Kühn      Medicorum graecorum opera (Kühn 1964–1965)
KZ        Kuhns Zeitschrift (= Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung auf dem Gebiete der indogermanischen Sprachen)
LIV       Lexicon der indogermanischen Verben (Rix 2001)
L-P       Poetarum Lesbiorum fragmenta (Lobel and Page 1955)
LSAG      Local Scripts of Archaic Greece (Jeffery 1961)
LSAG³     Local Scripts of Archaic Greece (Jeffery 1990)
LSJ       Greek-English Lexicon (Liddell, Scott, and Jones 1996)
MSL       Mémoires de la Société de Linguistique de Paris
MSS       Münchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft
NRSV      Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version
OLD       Oxford Latin Dictionary
PRU       Le Palais royal d’Ugarit (Schaeffer and Nougayrol 1955–)
RÉS       Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique
SEG       Supplementum epigraphicum graecum
Walde-Pokorny  Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der indogermanischen Sprachen
             (Walde and Pokorny 1927–1930)
ZPE       Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik

ANCIENT AUTHORS AND WORKS

AESCHYLUS (Aesch.)

Choe.      Libation Bearers (Choephoroe)
PV         Prometheus Bound (Prometheus Vinctus)
Supp.      Suppliant Maidens
Abbreviations

ANTHOLOGIA PALATINA (ANTH. PAL.; THE GREEK ANTHOLOGY)

ANTHOLOGIA PLANUDEA (ANTH. PLAN.; THE GREEK ANTHOLOGY)

ARISTOPHANES (AR.)
Eq. Knights (Equites)
Thesm. Women at the Thesmophoria (Thesmophoriazusae)

BACCHYLIDES (BACCHYL.)
Epigr. Epigrams

CALLIMACHUS (CALLIM.)
Epigr. Epigrams

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA
Protr. Protrepticus

CORNUTUS (L. ANNAEUS)
Theol. Graec. Ἐπιδρομὴ τῶν κατὰ τὴν Ἑλληνικὴν Θεολογίαν παραδεδομένων (“Summary of the Traditions concerning Greek Theology”)

DIONYSIUS OF HALICARNASSUS
Comp. De compositione verborum

EROTIAN
Voc. Hippoc. col. Vocum Hippocraticarum collectio

EURIPIDES
IIT Iphigenia Taurica
Phoen. Phoenician Women (Phoenissae)
* Abbreviations

**EUSTATHIUS**

Od. Ad Odysseam

**GALEN (GAL.)**

De anat. admin. De anatomicis administrationibus
De loc. aff. De locis affectis

**HERODAS (HEROD.)**

Op. Works and Days (Opera et dies)
Theog. Theogony

**HIPPOCRATES (HIPPOC.)**

Fist. De fistulis
Morb. De morbis
Nat. mul. De natura muliebri
Ulc. De ulceribus
VC De capitis vulneribus

**HOMER (HOM.)**

Il. Iliad
Od. Odyssey

**HOMERIC HYMN TO APOLLO (HYMN. HOM. AP.)**

**LUCIAN**

Apol. Apologia
Catapl. Cataplus

**NICANDER**

Alex. Alexipharmaca
Ther. Theriaca
Abbreviations

NONNUS
Dion. Dionysiaca

OXYRHYNCHUS PAPYRI (P OXY.)

PHILOSTRATUS
Imag. Imagines

PINDAR (PIND.)
Isthm. Isthmian Odes
Nem. Nemean Odes

PLATO
Alc. Alcibiades
Resp. Republica

PLINY
HN Naturalis historia

SCHOLIA IN ARISTOPHANEM (SCHOL. AR.)
Thesm. Women at the Thesmophoria (Thesmophoriazusae)

SCHOLIA IN LYCOPHRONEM (SCHOL. LYCOPH.)

SCHOLIA IN NICANDRUM (SCHOL. NIC.)
Ther. Theriaca

SOPHOCLES (SOPH.)
Ant. Antigone
Trach. Women of Trachis (Trachiniae)
**Abbreviations**

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**THEOPHRASTUS**

*Hist. pl.*  
*Historia plantarum*

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**XENOPHON**

*An.*  
*Anabasis*