

SCHOOL EXERCISES ON WAX TABLETS

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The collection of the Leiden Papyrological Institute includes parts of four wax tablet school books which were bought from an antiquarian in 1971¹. They probably all date from the fourth century A.D. Their provenance is an unknown place in Egypt. The tablets all measured, in their original complete state, approximately 14 by 18 cm ; the thickness of the tablets varies from 3,5 to 8 mm. All the wood has been identified as beech, a tree which was not indigenous in Egypt. It is therefore likely that the wood (in the form of tablets ?) was imported into Egypt from Europe.

The first school book is entirely complete. Five tablets (inventory number V 16-20) constitute the schoolbook of Aurelius Antonius, son of Nemesion, which was presented by Dr. E. Boswinkel at the Fourteenth International Congress of Papyrologists in 1974². The tablets were bound together with strings passing through two sets of two holes in one of the longer sides. The surface of all tablets is deepened out on both sides and coated with black wax, except for the outer covers which were waxed on one side only. The eight inner pages contain writing. Seven of them each have the name of the schoolboy in cursive handwriting, followed by a writing exercise in large uncial characters, all written on lines drawn without a ruler : οἱ μὲν γὰρ τοὺς φίλους παρόντας μόνον τιμῶσιν, οἱ δὲ καὶ μακρὰν ἀπόντας ἀγαπῶσιν, « for some people honour their friends only when they are present, other people also love them when they are far away » (Isocrates, Ad Demonium 1).

From the apparent difference in handwriting it seems likely that the first tablet was written by the teacher as an example and copied by the schoolboy in the rest of the book. On this first

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1. The Leiden tablets described below will be published in full with photographs in F.A.J. HOOGENDIJK-P. VAN MINNEN, *Papyri, Ostraca, Parchments and Waxed Tablets in the Leiden Papyrological Institute*, Papyrologica Lugduno-Batava, vol. XXV, Leiden, 1991, n° 15-18. This paper is a summary of the article.

2. See E. BOSWINKEL, *Proceedings of the Fourteenth International Congress of Papyrologists*, 1975, p. 25-28.

tablet only, the writing exercise is followed by the assignment of the teacher : « (this exercise has to be done) on Wednesday (by) Antonius, Macarius and Paulus ».

In order to be able to copy the exercise our schoolboy presumably loosened the bindings, for otherwise it would not have been possible for him to consult the teacher's example for every new copy ; which is, in fact, what he did, as appears from the variation in his copying mistakes. This loosening of the bindings would also explain the strange phenomenon, that the schoolboy would otherwise have been compelled to turn his book 180 degrees after every single page of writing ; for all sides of the tablets, except the teacher's example and the adjoining tablet, have their writing upside down as compared to the writing on the other side of the same tablet, as well as to the writing on the adjoining side of the next tablet .

It would also account for the totally different page in the middle of the Isocrates exercise, on the first side of the fourth tablet. This page has three columns of cursive writing. The second and third contain the multiplication table of forty. The first column consists of seven three-syllabic words beginning with ν , the syllables of which are separated by spaces : six names and the word $\nu\omicron\mu\iota\sigma\mu\alpha$. Two of the names help dating the tablets in or shortly after A.D. 350 : Nestorius could be the *praefectus Aegypti*, who was in office from A.D. 345 to 352 ; Nounechius is probably the senator, sent by the usurper Magnentius to Constantius in A.D. 350 to arrange a peaceful settlement, but arrested by Constantius.

Of the second school book only one tablet is preserved (inventory number V 11) : the front cover and first page of it. One long side has two sets of two holes ; the opposite side has one hole in the middle, probably for a string to tie the book up with. The wooden surface of the outer side is ornamented with three sets of concentric circles, drawn with the help of a pair of compasses. The waxed surface of the other side contains 12 lines of Greek in an experienced cursive fourth century handwriting. The text was presumably written by a schoolmaster and meant to be copied by a pupil on the next page or pages of the book.

The reading of the text is obscured by the presence of many traces of a previous text which was not entirely effaced. Still, it is clear that the tablet contains a more or less coherent mythological story. The story is split up by diagonal strokes into nine sentences, the first letters of which constitute an alphabetic acrostic (from *alpha* up to *iota*). The form of the alphabetic acrostic was no doubt used for didactic purposes : to facilitate learning the story by heart.

The story appears to be an elaborated version of the creation of mortals out of clay by Prometheus. This story has been a theme in four other school texts from Egypt, two London ostraca and two papyri, from Cairo and Strasbourg respectively. They were all apparently based on a version by Philemon, unlike the present text. In fact no version of this story has come down to us which is as detailed as this text, where the successive creation of separate parts of the head is singled out.

The text may originally have been metrical. If so, our text was an extremely corrupt version of the original didactic poem, possibly copied from an anthology of school texts.

The third school book is represented by two tablets (inventory numbers 12 and 13+14) which must have come somewhere from the middle of the book. In the wooden edge of one of the tablets the name Paulus is inscribed. All four waxed sides contained writing, though the text on two sides has become illegible.

One tablet contains, in a rather experienced cursive fourth century handwriting, the text of a loan of a hundred myriads of denarii. This text presumably was not legally valid, because it was a school exercise, probably a draft or faulty copy of a real contract.

Documents were often used as models for training in Graeco-Roman education, as is shown by the numerous documentary texts on wooden and waxed tablets used in schools. In the case of wax tablets from Egypt, if they were not used as a notebook or as traditional Roman documents (like the well-known testaments, contracts, and birth certificates), one may even suppose that every document of a different nature written on wax was a school exercise.

The contents of the other tablet of this book are unparalleled in school exercises or in any other text. A rectangle has been drawn, almost filling the page, with a panel above it containing nine signs, and a panel below with traces of similar signs, but upside down. The signs might be read as large, rather clumsily drawn letters recalling archaic Greek letter forms. But how does one explain archaic Greek on a fourth century wax tablet from Egypt? The signs do not look like any known symbol or stenographic sign. Perhaps, then, this is a kind of schoolboy's cryptography or, otherwise, possibly a kind of game. No satisfactory explanation of this tablet has yet been given.

Of the last book, we only have half of what must have been the cover (inventory number V 15). The one waxed side only has illegible traces of script.