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REFLECTIONS ON THE GREEK OF THE NARMOUTHIS *OSTRAKA*

When Rosario Pintaudi and Piet Sijpesteijn published a first volume of the Greek *ostraka* forming part of the large trove uncovered in 1938 at Narmouthis¹, they commented that the texts were «extremely interesting because they are written in a Greek used by persons of Egyptian language» (*O.Narm.* I, p. 17), but they limited their analysis of that Greek to the comment that the types of errors committed in it were known from other papyri and *ostraka*. That was true if one takes the phenomena individually, but it does not quite reflect adequately the peculiarity of the Greek taken as a whole.

The strangeness of the Greek impressed reviewers more strongly. As Guy Wagner put it, «bilingualism is not here a juxtaposition of two languages, nor really a translation, but a mixture of Greek and Egyptian (I will say that they wrote the jargon that they spoke)» («BiOr» 51, 1994, p. 556); he described their Greek as «faulty, often even incomprehensible». Jean Bingen wrote of the «unspeakable poverty of the Greek which often appears in them» («CE» 70, 1995, p. 307), something that he attributed in part to the low socio-economic level of the Egyptian clergy in the period of the *ostraka*, which is the late second and early third century of our era². Bärbel Kramer described the language of the group labeled as «appunti» as being «eine merkwürdige, teils in bis zur Unkenntlichkeit entstelltem Griechisch» («APF» 40, 1994, p. 200). A similar note is struck by Gabriella Messeri and Rosario Pintaudi recently in publishing some additional Greek texts from the find, in their reference to the «incredibile e insospettato mélange linguistico che essi esibiscono» («CE» 77, 2002, p. 209).

¹ Originally 1555 items, reduced by joins to 1471 (P. GALLO, *O.Narm.Dem.* II, p. xli). For an introduction to the bibliography of the *ostraka*, see G. MESSERI-R. PINTAUDI, *Ostraca greci di Narmuthis*, «CE» 77 (2002), pp. 209-237 at 209.

² On the decline of the temples and priesthods in the Roman period, see most recently P. Gallo's discussion in the introduction to *O.Narm.Dem.* II. But we should not be too quick to assume that this economic decline necessarily meant that the clergy were generally ill-educated. Todd Hickey points out that this is not the case at Tebtynis. The attempt by S. PERNIGOTTI, *Qualche osservazione sugli ostraka di Medinet Madi*, «PLup» 7 (1999), pp. 119-130 to date the archive a century later is certainly unfounded; the Greek texts cannot be dated that late palaeographically. Cf. MESSERI-PINTAUDI, *Ostraca greci* cit., p. 210 n. 4 on this point.

Apart from a recent article by Martti Leiwo³, which I shall have occasion to refer to in the course of these remarks, however, there has been hardly any discussion of the character of the Greek beyond such negative and even despairing generalizations. This is a pity, because without it I think it is unlikely that much progress will be made toward understanding the nature of the texts, a subject on which varying opinions have been expressed. It is self-evident that while much of the material remains unpublished – hundreds of Demotic and bilingual texts as well as Greek – any remarks will of necessity be preliminary and susceptible to modification in the light of new evidence. But some aspects of the texts are so striking and consistent that it is unlikely they will disappear even with further publications.

One other preliminary remark is necessary. That is an acknowledgment that the editors worked from black and white photographs, not from the *ostraka* or from color reproductions. At the time the volume was published, the *ostraka* could not be retraced in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The photographs in many cases do not give a very good basis for reading; contrast is often poor, and the curvature of *ostraka* sometimes means that parts are not easily visible. The editors were more conscious than anyone of these limitations. The rediscovery of the *ostraka* in 1994 by Paolo Gallo⁴ has now made it possible for a systematic rereading to be carried out, no longer, alas, with the participation of Piet Sijpesteijn. The results were published by Gabriella Messeri and Rosario Pintaudi in «Aegyptus» 81 (2001), pp. 253-82, which appeared only in 2004, but (as they remark) these are presented only in the form of bare textual corrections, sometimes very extensive, but with no commentary or translation and also without comment on previously proposed corrections, for which they regrettably give the *Berichtigungsliste* reference but not the substance⁵. Some of the strangeness of the Greek in the edition must therefore be charged to the conditions under which the editors originally worked, rather than to the ancient writers of the *ostraka*.

A first essential point about the Greek is that the handwriting of the *ostraka* is generally of a good standard. A range of hands may be found, but little that is truly at a beginning level and much that is fluent (*e.g.*, OMM 344, «CE» 77, 2002, p. 220 fig. 7)⁶. In general, the hands are not those typi-

³ *Scribes and Language Variation*, in L. PIETILÄ-M. VESTERINEN (edd.), *Graptá Poikila I*, Papers and Monographs of the Finnish Institute at Athens, 8, Helsinki 2003, pp. i-ii.

⁴ For which see his account in *O.Narm.Dem.* II, pp. xxxviii-xl.

⁵ Thus on 255 they give in 27, 2-3, in place of the original Ζευτλω Φακίας the reading Ζευτλω Φακίου, but without commenting on the suggestions of Bingen (p. 308) and Wagner (p. 560) that this should be understood as σευτλοφαγάς, «beet-eater» (Bingen) or σευτλοφακίας (Wagner) «beets-and-lentils-cook», or perhaps now with the revised reading as the genitive of σευτλοφάγος, also «beet-eater».

⁶ Todd Hickey remarks that this is also true in the Tebtynis papyri of the Roman period.

cal of professional scribes writing contracts, but of experienced writers producing private letters. Indeed, editors and reviewers alike have commented on the legibility of the hands, which has been a relief for them in the face of the incomprehensibility of much of the Greek. Actually, Messeri and Pintaudi (p. 210) put legibility in first place in the list of criteria they used in choosing *ostraka* to publish. The handwriting is not an argument against the hypothesis that the *ostraka* come from an educational milieu, but it is conclusive evidence that the writers were *not* persons at the beginning of their educations. Rather, they had had plenty of experience in writing Greek, and perhaps in writing generally, given the presence of numerous Demotic texts in the trove.

At the same time, however, these experienced writers make no regular attempt at conventional syllabic division when spreading words or names over two lines. Correct syllabic division is found in plenty of cases, of course, but divisions like τούς (2, 1-2) and φίλους (3, 1-2), which are found throughout, are as common: in the first 13 texts of the volume, for example, the numbers of correct and incorrect divisions are approximately equal. Given the emphasis on learning syllables and on correct syllabic division in Greek education, we must suppose that these writers had entirely missed that part of the Greek educational experience. I shall return to this point.

The orthography of the *ostraka* is marked by a high level of interchange of consonants. There are vocalic shifts as well, particularly replacement of long vowels by short and vice versa, along with the usual confusion of vowels and diphthongs producing an /i/ sound. But the consonants are the more striking, particularly because of the inconsistency within the corpus in the use of voiced and voiceless stops. It is noteworthy, for example, that 12 shows γεωμέτρως surviving with only an omicron for omega, while γεωργούς is transformed into κερκούς, not only both gammas becoming kappas but with omicron for omega as well. And yet κολακεία is sometimes written as κολαγία, with only one of the two kappas becoming a gamma (e.g., 3, 2-3). Delta and tau interchange freely in both directions as well. It is true that these interchanges can all be found in the phonology volume of Gignac's *Grammar*⁷, but the frequency of phonetic spellings and their inconsistency of direction are both at a level that is characteristic of only the worst-spelled private letters of the Roman period.

Spelling, however, is far less noticeable a problem than grammar, as Leiwo has pointed out (2003, p. 9). In part we are often left perplexed by a failure to use Greek case endings in the fashion required by standard practice, a habit eventually to be embedded in much Coptic use of Greek words. Leiwo

⁷ F.T. GIGNAC, *A Grammar of the Non-literary Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods, I: Phonology*, Milano 1976.

mentions that in the 19 «appunti» published as ONarm 1-19, where the apparent recipients of letters to be written are indicated with the preposition *πρός*, the accusative (the correct case) is used with the first name mentioned 11 times, other cases 7 times, with all three of the genitive, dative, and nominative appearing. He comments, «It seems to show that scribes made some effort to choose the case of this most important word according to standard Greek grammar. But the objects of the same preposition later in their sentences show a clearly different distribution ... 3 accusatives, 4 genitives, 3 datives, and 3 nominatives as the next constituents in the sentence». That is, the choice of cases is essentially random once one gets past the first item in the series.

Even that disregard of grammatical rules is far less puzzling to the modern reader of these texts than the general lack of coherent sense produced by the grammar coupled with the extreme brevity of the texts, many of which seem to provide instructions or sketches for longer compositions. (Whether these compositions are for «real» use or belong to an educational milieu may be left aside for the moment.) An example will help to illustrate the problem. I have chosen for this purpose an *ostrakon* not affected by the improvements in readings made possible by the rediscovery of the original *ostraka* in the Egyptian Museum, ONarm 6. I give in parallel columns the text as it stands on the *ostrakon* and the text as the editors would correct it.

πρός π-
 ἄσαν κώ-
 μων καὶ ἀρχῶν
 ἐξουσιῶν καὶ πτοχυ.
 τὸ ἰθ̄. μετὰ κολα-
 κίας καὶ ἀστρο-
 λόγους ᾗ καὶ κανό-
 ν(α) καὶ τὰ κατήκοντα
 τῆς ἀστρολογικῆς.

πρός π-
 ἄσαν κώ-
 μην καὶ ἀρχὰς
 ἐξουσίας καὶ πτωχούς.
 τὸ ἰθ̄. μετὰ κολα-
 κείας καὶ ἀστρο-
 λόγους ᾗ καὶ κανό-
 να καὶ τὰ κατήκοντα
 τῆς ἀστρολογικῆς.

The editors suggest that a *καί* is omitted between *ἀρχῶν* and *ἐξουσιῶν*. That yields, they think, a sense «To the entire village and to the magistrates and authorities and the mendicants». Wagner (p. 558) rejected this insertion. It is hard to see why «To the magistrates and paupers of every village» is impossible, simply making different and equally arbitrary choices about what changes in the case endings to make. I would myself put a period after *κολακίας*, assume the omission of *πρός* before *ἀστρολόγους* and an article before the numeral 30 in the next line, and suppose that a second composition is there directed, one to the astrologers, using number 30 (whatever these numbers refer to). In that case the last two and a half lines will require appending the astronomical table and so forth to number 30.

Thus to make sense out of these nine short lines we have to change five or six case endings and insert perhaps three missing words. One may perhaps second Leiwo's view that «As drafts of a document they seem to represent a very casual register», although they may be more like instructions or assignments, but wonder on what is based the confident statement that «To be sure, later, when the document was written on papyrus, they spent more time with details, and the result is much closer to standard Greek registers» (p. 5). Leiwo cites the introduction to the volume for this claim, but the editors say nothing of the sort, and in fact we know nothing at all of what these sketches on *ostraka* led to later, if to anything at all. There is a considerable risk of circularity of argument here, and we will do better to argue from the form of the *ostraka* to their function than from supposed function to form.

Another striking element of the *ostraka* is the range of their vocabulary. It is hard not to be struck, in looking at the index of Greek words, by the number of ambitious, and even rare words present. These were not always recognized at first, because of misreadings or aberrant spelling; for example, *τενακος* in no. 58 was unintelligible to the editors; Guy Wagner (p. 560) recognized it as *τέναγος*, lagoon, perhaps a topographic reference. Someone struggling with Greek is not likely to have used *ἀντίρρησις*, *ἀστυγείτων*, *ἀφησυχάζω*, *διαχειρισμός*, *εὐηθολογία*, *καθηγησίτιος*, *μονόκλαυτος*, *πολύκλαυτος*, *σύλησις*, or the many other unusual vocabulary items that we encounter. Guy Wagner (p. 561) remarked on the many cases in which words used in the *ostraka* are hardly known elsewhere, except in Hesychius. Much of the vocabulary is in fact learned, belonging to a far higher register than the spelling and morphology, and not the material of everyday speech even for a native speaker of Greek. For this reason, I think that «poverty» is too simple a term to use in characterizing this Greek.

I turn now to a text that is in many ways the opposite of the short *ostrakon* we looked at a few minutes ago. It is long, it has something more nearly resembling sentence syntax, it has been materially improved by rereadings from the original and digital images, and it was the object of discussion by Leiwo in the article I have already mentioned. This is ONarm 103.

δ

ιζ (ἔτει) ὁ πατήρ ἡ-
μῶν ἐτελεύτησεν.
/ τὸ κινὸν εἶπας καὶ τοῦ-
ς νόμους ἔδωκα τῷ ἀτε-
λφῷ μου ἵνα αὐτὸν ἐλα-
ζώσῃ ἄχρι τοῦ κθ (ἔτους). οὐκ ἔ-
κνω τί ἔπραξεν πολλὰ
ἂ {α} ἔπαθον ἀπὸ Σωκωνώπιος

δ

ιζ (ἔτει) ὁ πατήρ ἡ-
μῶν ἐτελεύτησεν.
/ τὸ κοινὸν εἶδος καὶ τοῦ-
ς νόμους ἔδωκα τῷ ἀδε-
λφῷ μου ἵνα αὐτὸν ἐλα-
ζώσῃ ἄχρι τοῦ κθ (ἔτους). οὐκ ἔ-
γνω τί ἔπραξεν πολλὰ
ἂ {α} ἔπαθον ἀπὸ Σωκωνώπιος.

ἀπ' ὅτε ὁ πατήρ ἐτελεύτησε
καὶ ὁ προφήτης, ὡς ἔθος ἐσ-
τίν, ἐμήνυσ(ι) ἔν τὴν τάξιν
τοῦ πατρός μου ὅτι [ὀφίλι]
ὀφείλει πραθῆναι. ὁ ἀτελφό-
ς μου οὐκ (ει) εἶπέ μοι σημά-
νε μετὰ τοῦ προφήτου οὐ-
τε μὴν ὁ προφήτης.

ἀφ' ὅτε ὁ πατήρ ἐτελεύτησε
καὶ ὁ προφήτης, ὡς ἔθος ἐσ-
τίν, ἐμήνυσεν τὴν τάξιν
τοῦ πατρός μου ὅτι
ὀφείλει πραθῆναι, ὁ ἀτελφό-
ς μου οὐκ εἶπέ μοι σημά-
ναι μετὰ τοῦ προφήτου οὐ-
τε μὴν ὁ προφήτης.

Of the 17 lines, 7 had corrections from the recent rereading. One other crucial point, missed by both the editors and by Leiwo, but pointed out by Wagner (p. 563), is that the central issue here is the sale of the father's priestly office⁸. The critical passage may be rendered, «From when my father died and the prophetes, in accordance with custom, proclaimed the office of my father as needing to be sold, my brother did not tell me to give notice with the prophetes, nor did the prophetes himself». It is true that we would rather have a dative with σημάναι than the genitive governed by μετὰ, but that may be regarded as a relatively minor case of unidiomatic usage. Otherwise, there is not much to object to in these lines.

The earlier part of the draft is more difficult. The first sentence, «In the 17th year our father died» is defective only in lacking the dative article before the year number. What follows is far more easily parsed than it was before the rereading by Messeri and Pintaudi, but it is still not free of difficulty. Because of the lack of commentary and translation, it is not obvious what they thought was represented by ελωζωση, which they print with a hyphen indicating that they take it to be a single word⁹. «I gave my brother the common *eidōs* and the laws so that it (?) might – something – him until the 29th year». We may suppose that the 12-year duration was not connected so much with the purposiveness of the act as with its actual outcome, despite the use of the perfect verb. Overall the statement seems intended to suggest that the writer benefited his brother in some fashion. The brother's response, however, was not what would have been hoped: «I do not know why he did many things which I suffered at the hands of Sokonopis». The writing is far

⁸ LEIWO 2003, p. 10 supposes that land was at stake, working from the editors' vague translation «annunciò le disposizioni di mio padre che bisognava vendere». But there can be no doubt that *taxis*, as so often, refers to the priestly position of the deceased father (see PREISIGKE, *WB* III 384). Cf. PTebt II 297, 11-12 for the idiom μηνύειν τάξιν (ἐάν ὁ κ[ωμογ]ραμματεὺς μὴ δεόντως τὴν τάξιν ἢ μεμηνυκῶς). In this context μηνύω is the equivalent of ἀπαγγέλλω, as can be seen by the description of the komogrammateus' actions earlier in the same Tebtynis papyrus: ὃς ἀπήν[γει]λεν τὴν τάξιν ὡς ὀφείλουσαν πραθῆναι, closely resembling the language in the Narmouthis *ostrakon*.

⁹ Unlike the first edition, which prints ἐλῶ ζῶσαι.

from clear, but it is not really ungrammatical, and it is not impossible that it could have been expanded into something clearer.

By this point an indictment of the passage comes down essentially to the one apparently subjunctive verb that we have not succeeded in decoding. It might be suggested that the verb intended is ἐλαττώση, «degrade» or «diminish», in which case we would probably be driven to suppose that a negative had been omitted by mistake. Phonetically, replacement of a dental stop with zeta is entirely possible (Gignac, *Grammar*, I 76). This suggestion may be wrong, but that does not mean that there is not an acceptable verb not yet recognized behind what was written.

I am aware that there is a risk that my remarks might lead you to think that these texts are not as strange as they seem. They do retain many mysteries, like the *epito* of the group published by Messeri and Pintaudi recently, for which no one can offer a persuasive explanation¹⁰. And they have other passages where bilingual code-switching is a more important element than it is in the *ostraka* we have been examining. But I think that what is strange is perhaps more nearly the contents, and thus the purpose, of the *ostraka*, rather than the Greek. Not that the Greek is «normal» or needs no explanation. On the contrary. But it is not to be easily dismissed, for all that the writers mangle case endings, cannot spell to save their lives, and have no idea of syllabication. Their Greek deserves to be approached with more seriousness than it generally has been.

In conclusion, I would offer one more remark on the context in which the texts were produced. The problems in the orthography resemble nothing so much as the habits of other texts usually assigned to a school setting and specifically to one in which copying texts from dictation was central. Johannes Kramer has shown exactly this situation to be present in some of the late-antique texts published by Hermann Harrauer and P.J. Sijpesteijn some years ago, and he posits a school in which Egyptians who did not know Greek very well were being taught in considerable part by dictation of passages they did not fully comprehend, probably by Egyptians who also did not fully understand them¹¹. That, I believe, is also the correct explanation for the Narmouthis Greek *ostraka*¹². But teaching and learning were going on, and the results in the end may well have been better than the discarded exercises would seem to suggest.

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¹⁰ More likely to be found in Egyptian than in Greek, in my view.

¹¹ *Sprachliche Beobachtungen an Schuldiktaten*, «ZPE» 64 (1986), pp. 246-52, discussing *PRainUnterricht* 117-132.

¹² I am grateful to Raffaella Cribiore and Todd Hickey for comments on versions of this paper.