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THE ENCOMIUM OF AN OFFICIAL

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THE ENCOMIUM OF AN OFFICIAL

The archaeological mission based out of New York University is excavating the site of Amheida, ancient Trimithis, in the Western part of the Dakhla Oasis in the Western desert of Egypt. During the Roman Period the settlement flourished, and at the beginning of the fourth century Trimithis became a πόλις; like a number of other Dakhla settlements it was abandoned around the end of the fourth or the beginning of the fifth century.¹ Between 2004 and 2010 the team excavated a fourth-century private residence adorned with frescoes built around 340 and belonging to an upper-class family, that of the landowner and city councilor Serenos. Adjacent to this house was found a school with writings on the wall.² With papyrus so far undiscovered in Amheida because of the humidity of the terrain, at first it appeared that information on the existence and activities of πεποιδευμένοι (cultivated persons) would be severely curtailed. And yet the house itself showed how people came into contact with culture through the mythological frescoes on its walls. Most importantly, the writings on the school walls, consisting of literary texts and poetry, testify to an interest in literature and rhetoric. Schools are extremely rare in the Greek and Roman worlds. The school found in Amheida can be compared in certain respects with the halls found in Kom el-Dikka, Alexandria.³ The Amheida school is on a less grand scale and would have offered only grammar and perhaps some rhetoric to a limited number of students.

The new text I am presenting (inv. 2026) was written on plaster, measures 18.1 × 21.5 cm. and is 1.9 cm. thick and came to light in 2005. It is important to try to understand where it originated. When Guy Wagner visited the Oases of Dakhla and Kharga in 1975, he jotted down some inscriptions (a few of them metrical) that he found in Amheida intending to publish them later, though he never did.⁴ One (SB 20.14876) was an acclamation of the βασιλικὸς γραμματεὺς, three lines, two of which were identical (Εὐτυχῶς τῷ καλῷ βασιλικῷ), in large elegant chancery letters adorned with finials. A second text (SB 20.14877) was another acclamation, this time of Aristéas, Titus the freedman, and Aristonikos the βασιλικὸς γραμματεὺς (Εὐτυχῶς Ἀριστέα Τίτῳ ἀπελευθέρῳ Ἀριστονίκῳ βασιλικῷ). No βασιλικὸς γραμματεὺς with this name is known, but we know that this official resided in Dakhla. A third mutilated metrical text (SB 20.14878) seen by Wagner concerned Ammon the giver of gold (χρυσοδότην Ἄμμωνα), and probably mentioned the islands of the blessed. The last piece (SB 20.14879) he reported was also poetical and Homeric, in the form of a lacunose epigram. In it, someone who spoke in the first person had come to a holy plain (δάπεδον) in the middle of the desert (ὄρεων), and then words like ἀγλάα δῶρα were plainly visible and perhaps Ὀάσεως (splendid gifts of the Oasis). The letters were quite large, and the fragment had become detached from the cornice. Wagner took these texts away from the site himself, and they now cannot be found.

This scholar missed a large and broken piece of plaster, the piece I am presenting, whose shape shows that it was also detached from the cornice. From the top to the bottom left there is a large and dark humidity stain that seems also to affect the first line. A local boy who brought in this fragment indicated approximately where he picked it up and that seemed to be what we now call Area 8.⁵ The one large house in that area to contain a lot of gypsum plaster molding is what we now call B10, distinguished informally as “the house of the poet”. We surmise that this was the source of the piece even though we have not found

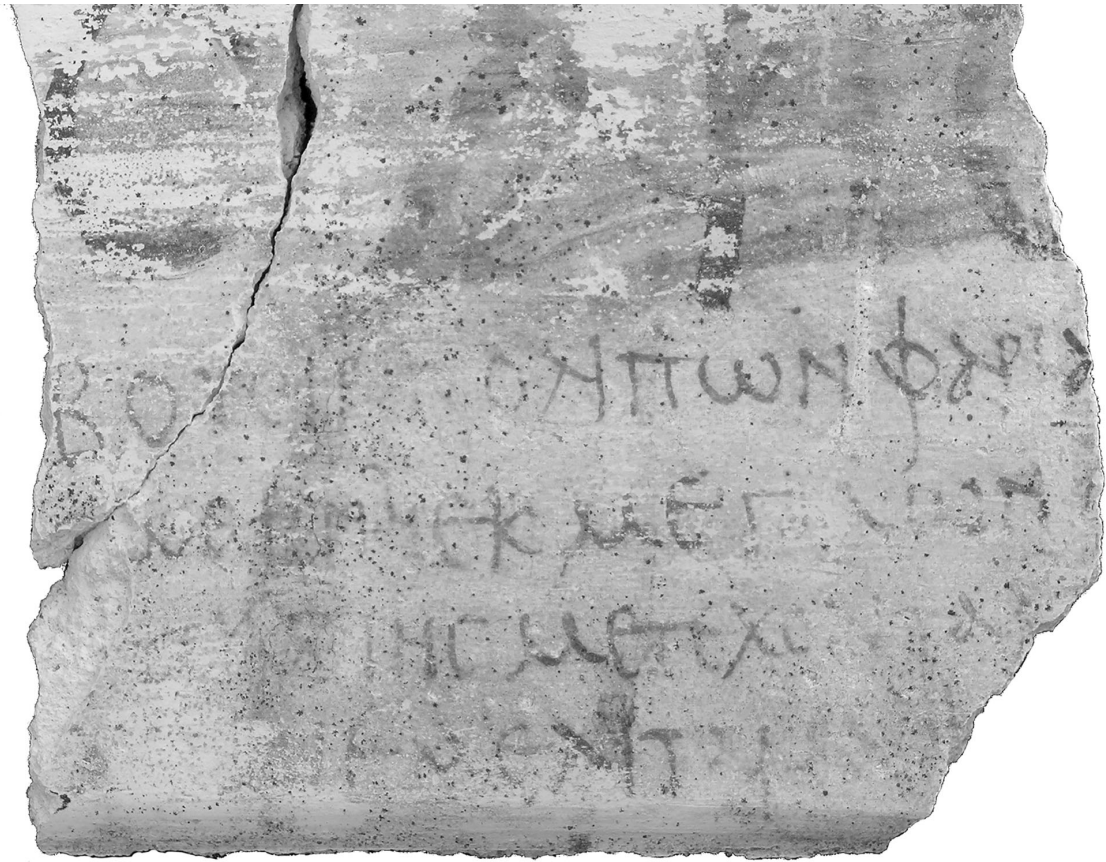
¹ For an overview of the place and excavations see R. S. Bagnall et al. (eds), *An Oasis City* (New York 2015).

² R. Cribiore, P. Davoli, and D. M. Ratzan, A Teacher’s Dipinto from Trimithis (Dakhleh Oasis), *JRA* 21 (2008) 170–91; R. Cribiore and P. Davoli, New Literary Texts from Amheida, Ancient Trimithis (Dakhla Oasis, Egypt), *ZPE* 187 (2013) 1–14; R. Cribiore, Literary Culture and Education in the Dakhla Oasis, in R. S. Bagnall et al. *op. cit.* (fn. 1) pp. 179–92.

³ T. Derda et al. (eds), *Alexandria: The Auditoria of Kom el-Dikka, Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplement* (Warsaw, 2007). On the use of these halls, see E. J. Watts, *Riot in Alexandria: Tradition and Group Dynamics in Late Antique Pagan and Christian Communities* (Berkeley 2010).

⁴ G. Wagner, *Les oasis d’Égypte à l’époque grecque, romaine et byzantine d’après les documents grecques* (Cairo 1987) 77–80 plate XXXIV. See previously *BIFAO* 76 (1976) 287–88.

⁵ The database can be found at www.amheida.com. It has minimal and technical information.



any plaster around B10 that matches it in character, thickness, or writing, so it is still a hypothesis that the fragment comes from this location. Excavations there started in 2015 but were unfortunately interrupted. This hexametric text is quite mutilated on the right and on the bottom. It is written on white plaster in a large and elegant hand with letters mostly separated and upright, resembling the hand of a teacher's model. It is reminiscent of the hand of *P.Herm. Rees 4*, which is a little later and is somewhat inclined to the right.⁶

εἰς Ἀρισ[τόνικον
] Βούσιρις ὁ λιπὼν Φαρία[-
 σ]ωθῆναι ἐκ μεγάλων [.
 4 εὐ[τυ]χίης μετέχοντα [.
]νε μελιττη . . [

1. Thus the piece was dedicated to the βασιλικὸς γραμματεὺς Aristonikos.
2. On Φαρία, an island or a sea, see Strabo, 1.2.23, who says that people wrongly call it Pelagia. The whereabouts of Busiris are unknown. It cannot be determined what he was doing in Pharia.
3. Only the right part of the first ω is clearly visible. Μεγάλων would refer to πόνων, that is to Heracles' labors. This combination occurs very often in some writers but sometimes the adjective is associated with κινδύνων. There is, however, another possibility. At the end of the line there is the curved stroke of a letter that could be ο as in ὄρεων (see above the discussion of the inscriptions found by Wagner). In this hypothesis Heracles escaped from "the vast desert or (less likely) mountains".
4. At the beginning of the line the text is unclear, and the reconstruction is uncertain. The word εὐτυχία occurs frequently in Euripides, e.g. *HF 774; Heracl.* 611 or *Ion 508*. It is peculiar that the writer uses the

⁶ G. Cavallo and H. Maehler, *Greek Bookhands of the Early Byzantine Period* (London 1987) 2a. The link to a digital image of the papyrus can be found at www.papyri.info/ddbdp/p.herm.;4.

Ionic form of the genitive, but this feature was common in some of the Wagner pieces. Perhaps he thought he was writing an epigram.

5. The mention of μέλιττη (a bee) makes one suspect that the writer is turning to the second part of the encomium, that is, the praise of Aristonikos. The bee was often associated with poetry, see Aristophanes, *Aves* 748 and *Eccles.* 973 where the bee is identified with the Muse, μέλιττα Μούσης.

Translation:

“To Aristonikos. Busiris leaving Pharia ... [Heracles?] safe from his great labors ... obtaining (no) good luck ... the bee ...”

We have here a text dedicated to Aristonikos, βασιλικὸς γραμματεὺς, starting with a mythological narrative in verse. Since the office of the βασιλικὸς γραμματεὺς disappeared in the middle of the third century CE, the text should be dated before then.⁷ There are only five lines preserved, so it is impossible to be certain of the identity of this piece, but several hypotheses need to be considered. All are within the realm of προγυμνάσματα. These preliminary exercises were usually done at the beginning of an education in rhetoric under the guidance of the rhetor.⁸ They were like building blocks for the construction of speeches. The sophist Libanius, who lived and practiced in the fourth century in Antioch, left a huge corpus of *Progymnasmata* and taught these exercises himself rather than leaving the task to his assistants.⁹ The text in question is probably an encomium of Aristonikos preceded by an enterprise of Heracles. After escaping from the evil Busiris, Heracles continues to show his strength and engages in further labors. It is likely that the mythological part was followed by an encomium proper of Aristonikos. This exercise did not have a standard length. There are, however, other possibilities of προγυμνάσματα to consider at least in passing, for example an exercise of narration (διήγησις), which would normally be much shorter. In Libanius' *Progymnasmata* there are some narratives concerning Heracles's birth and infancy.¹⁰ The text inscribed on our piece of plaster might also be a description (ἔκφρασις). Libanius' *Progymnasmata* include three ἔκφράσεις on Heracles. In one he is standing on the lion's skin.¹¹ The other two concern his struggle with the giant Antaeus.¹²

A papyrus from the third century, *P.Oxy.* 22.2331, preserves parts of three columns of a text on Heracles, with some illustrations of the labors of the hero. The fragment contains only the part concerning the Nemean Lion. Some sketches with remnants of color had easily readable large handwriting and gaps between some words, making the text suitable for a young audience.¹³ Another papyrus text should be compared with Amheida inv. 2026, the *Encomium on Theon*, *P.Oxy.* 7.1015, which should be dated to the later third century.¹⁴ That encomium consists of twenty-two hexameters and is complete. It appears to be an autograph judging from corrections in the text and titles. In the left margin and at the bottom the text is defined as an encomium of Hermes, but the word Hermes was rightly expunged. The text was in fact an encomium of the gymnasiarch Theon, a young man described in line 20 as “learned in the wisdom of the Muses”, which had been taught to him by his father. Thus, the first nine lines are a celebration of the virtues of Hermes and of some myths that concern him and culminate in an evocation of the god. The first

⁷ See T. Kruse, *Der königliche Schreiber und die Gauverwaltung. Untersuchungen zur Verwaltungsgeschichte Ägyptens in der Zeit von Augustus bis Philippus Arabs (30.v.Chr.–245 n.Chr.)* (München 2002) 940–54.

⁸ R. Cribiore, *The School of Libanius in Late Antique Antioch* (Princeton 2007).

⁹ R. Foerster, *Libanius Opera* vol. VIII (Hildesheim 1998).

¹⁰ C. A. Gibson, *Libanius's Progymnasmata: Model Exercises in Greek Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (Atlanta 2008) nos 23–24, p. 29.

¹¹ Libanius *progymn.* 15 (vol. 8, pp. 500–501 Foerster).

¹² Libanius *progymn.* 13–14 (vol. 8, pp. 492–99 Foerster).

¹³ R. Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton 2001) 138–39.

¹⁴ See E. G. Turner and P. J. Parsons, *Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World* (London 1987) no. 50, pp. 90–91. Cf. L. Miguélez Cavero, *Poems in Context: Greek Poetry in the Egyptian Thebaid 200–600 AD* (Berlin 2008) 43.

part of the encomium of Theon would somehow correspond to the Trimithis text in which a celebration of Heracles would precede the praise of Aristonikos.

According to the myth, when Eurystheus did not want to recognize one of the labors, he imposed one more upon Heracles: to bring him the golden apples of the Hesperides. Heracles walked through Illyria, and then to Libya where he encountered Antaeus. From there he went to Egypt where he met Busiris. There are many points of similarity between the myths of Antaeus and Busiris. Like Busiris, Antaeus was a son of Poseidon who challenged foreigners traversing his land to wrestling matches and ended up killing them.¹⁵ According to Pindar, Antaeus filled the temple of Poseidon with the skeletons of his victims. Antaeus' mother was Gaea, the Earth, and as long as he was in contact with her, he was safe. Thus, to kill him, Heracles lifted him from the earth. Heracles' struggle with Antaeus in Libya preceded his encounter with Busiris in Egypt. The myth of Busiris and Heracles is well known. A seer from Cyprus said that king Busiris could put an end to a terrible famine that had lasted for nine years by sacrificing a foreigner to Zeus each year. After beginning by sacrificing this prophet, Busiris tried to do the same to Heracles, who had come from Libya on his quest for the golden apples. The hero was captured and brought to the altar but managed to break free and killed the king and his son.

The story appears in many sources, for example in Diodorus Siculus 4.18.1 and 4.27.2–3; Pseudo-Plutarch, *Parallela minora* 38; Ovid, *Met.* 9.182 and *Ars amat.* 1.645–650; and Herodotus.¹⁶ Herodotus 2.45 rejected the Greek story of the attempted sacrifice of Heracles on the grounds that the Egyptians were forbidden to sacrifice not only men but also animals, and Isocrates in his essay *Busiris* 37 claimed that Heracles was four generations younger than the king, and that therefore the story was impossible. Frazer, however, looked at other sources, for example Plutarch (*De Is. et Os.* 73), and concluded that the story was substantially correct.

The plaster piece found in Amheida is another testimony of the popularity of Heracles in the Roman period. We have discussed one papyrus on the labors of Heracles as well as the attention that Libanius devoted to the hero in his *Progymnasmata*; in the same period, the rhetor Himerius, in a dirge composed for the death of his son Rufinus (*Or.* 8), focused on Heracles and his labors. In Amheida, Heracles and his labors are present also in the second column of the *dipinto* from the school and again in the mutilated third column.¹⁷ In the nearby village of Kellis, a list of names with that of Heracles repeated was found among school exercises in shrines 2 and 3 of the temple of Tutu.¹⁸ In Kysis in the great Oasis the name Heracles in the dative was scribbled in inscription A27.¹⁹ Heracles, therefore, was present in both the Dakhla and Karga Oases. In Egypt, moreover, the myth that he had consulted the oracle of Ammon in Siwa was well known. In late antiquity Heracles was a beloved demi-god. Glen Bowersock has shown the many mosaics that portray him and Dionysus around the Mediterranean, for example in Antioch, Sepphoris, and Madaba.²⁰ He was also a favorite character in late antique theater, where tragedies and comedies were little represented, but mimes and pantomimes were very popular.²¹

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¹⁵ Ps. Apollodorus *Bibl.* 2.5.11; Pindar *Isthm.* 4.52–53.

¹⁶ See J. G. Frazer, *Apollodorus, The Library* (Cambridge, Mass. 1921); Italian translation and introduction, G. Guidorizzi, *Apollodoro Biblioteca* (Milan 1995). For the commentary on Apollodorus, see Guidorizzi, pp. 250–252.

¹⁷ Cribiore, Davoli, and Ratzan *op. cit.* (fn. 2), pp. 183–84, col. 2, l. 8 and col. 3, l. 10.

¹⁸ School exercises *O.Kellis* 153, 154, 157, 161.

¹⁹ Wagner *op. cit.* (fn. 4), p. 58 (no. iv.1) = *SEG XXXVIII* (1988) 1809, and p. 340.

²⁰ G. W. Bowersock, *Mosaics as History: the Near East from Late Antiquity to Islam* (Cambridge, Mass. 2006).

²¹ R. Webb, *Demons and Dancers: Performance in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass. 2008).