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Muhammady Fathy

A Coptic School Exercise on a Wooden Tablet at the Museum of Mallawi*

Introduction

Tablets played the role of writing materials for several kinds in Egypt, such as documents and school exercises.¹ The wooden tablet published here for the first time is a rectangular wooden piece with letters in the Coptic language and was in custody of Islamic Antiquities at the el-Ashmunein magazine, hall no. 1. It was transferred to Mallawi museum in 2016 where it is currently preserved and bears number 1678 (T. Mallawi inv. no. 1678).² There is another number, however, 6641,³ written on the right side. According to the information contained in the museum records it measures 28.1 × 10 cm, however, measured by me on March 10th, 2021: 26.5 cm × 9.7 cm with a thickness of 1 cm. Possibly it is made of local wood. No further information in either the catalogue of the magazine or the museum is available about how it was found. It has two holes in the upper left part, on contrary to other wooden tablets, which have holes in the middle top of the long side, these holes are for hanging the tablet, or for joining few tablets together, there is a small broken part at its lower right part. It has some damage on the lower right corner, and traces of cutting in wood, near

* I would like to thank Mr Sayed Abdelmalik, chief of the inspectors of Mallawi, Mrs Gihan Nasseem, General Director of the Museum of Mallawi, Mr Osama Talaat, Director of the Museum of Mallawi, and both of Mr Mohammed Hassan and Mohammed Ali, curators of the Museum of Mallawi for their help and time. I am also so grateful to Barbara Tratsaert for proofreading and checking the English. I should also thank Mr Khaled Ismael, curator in GEM, Miss Eman Abdelhamid, Dr Misr Ismael, Miss Fatma Othman Tawfik, currently is a curator of Akhenaten Museum, Mr Ahmed Nagy, in Museums Sector, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities. I am very grateful to Dr Heba Abdelaziz, inspector at the Department of Archeology Awareness in Historic Cairo, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, for the assistance with getting permission to study the current tablet and for the photos that provided me the opportunity for publishing it.

¹ R. Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (ASP, 36), Atlanta, Georgia 1996, p. 65.

² This abbreviation according to articles publish Demotic and Greek texts at the same museum, e.g. P.Mallawi inv. no. 602/7: El-Hussein Zaghloul, "An Agreement for Sale from the Reign of Ptolemy IX Sôter II in the Museum of Mallawi," *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale* 91 (1991) 255-263.

³ Perhaps this number is its inventory number in the magazine of el-Ashmunein, where it was previously preserved, or may be the excavation number.

the holes which was used to bound tablets together, two of the holes were made before the exercise was written because the last column on recto was written at a lower level than the others.

The remaining traces of white color indicate that this tablet has been coated with a white layer, to adapt it for ink writing. This would have allowed the writing to be smoother, in addition to making it easier wash away the writing, as we can appreciate in the three wooden school tablets, two of which are Greek, the other Coptic. These are stored in the University of Michigan (nos. T.Mich.inv. 763).⁴

So, there were two ways to make the wooden tablets suitable for writing on, the first way was by coating with a white layer (gesso) in the case of using ink, as tablets nos. EA54036,⁵ EA54037⁶ and EA53950,⁷ kept in the British museum. The other way was by adding a layer of wax and writing on it with a sharpened metal pen in bas-relief and since it was erasable, it could be used several times. These could be joined together to form a set of wooden tables, called a codex, or to form a notebook, according to the view of Criore,⁸ as a set of four waxen wooden tablets nos. 14.2.4 a-d, the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁹

The Text

This tablet is interesting for a number of reasons. It contains a school exercise in columns, rather than the usual lines, it is inscribed in black ink with a simple writing exercise of the seven vowels, biliteral, and tripartite syllables on recto. The verso side merely contains a writing exercise of tripartite syllables and date formula. There are many parallels for such school exercises from Egypt, on different writing materials, on papyri, tablets, and ostraca.¹⁰

⁴ A.E.R. Boak, "Greek and Coptic School Tablets at the University of Michigan," *Classical Philology* 16/2 (1921) 189-194; 189.

⁵ See https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA54036 [accessed on January 6, 2021].

⁶ See https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA54037 [accessed on January 6, 2021].

⁷ See https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA53950 [accessed on January 6, 2021].

⁸ R. Criore, *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, p. 65; 74-75.

⁹ See <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/473393> [accessed on January 6, 2021].

¹⁰ For example: T.Duk.inv. 7 = P. van Minnen, "A Late Antique Schooltablet at Duke University," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 106 (1995) 175-178; T.Mich. inv. 763 = R. Criore, *Writing, Teachers and Students*, p. 192, no. 83; O.Deir el Gizaz 14 (MPER NS XVIII 82) = M.R.M. Hasitzka, *Neue Texte und Dokumentation zum Koptisch-Unterricht*, Mitteilungen aus der Papyrussammlung der Nationalbibliothek in Wien, Neue Serie (= MPER

Recto

It consists of 10 vertical columns, the first contains the vowels, columns 2-6 is an exercise on biliteral syllables. It consists of vowels followed by a letter derived from Demotic in the sequence Ϸ, ϣ, Ϸ, Ϻ, ϫ, while the correct order should be Ϸ, ϣ, Ϸ, Ϻ, ϫ. As on verso, there is no column with the letter †, that also unwritten at the bottom of recto. Columns 7-10 contain tripartite syllables with the first four letters derived from Demotic, Ϸ, ϣ, Ϸ, Ϻ at the beginning and end of the syllable, the vowels in the middle. In the right margin, there are traces of scratches which may have been intentional. Notice the writing of the letter ϫ as γ.



Row no. 6, two-letters syllable, recto

A wavy line has been drawn underneath the tenth column.

At the bottom of the recto, we can see the five letters of Demotic appearing to be in the order Ϸ, ϣ, Ϸ, Ϻ, ϫ, in two columns, then a Greek text in two lines, the first line reads φιλω τὰ γράμματα¹¹ “I love the letters”. Then there are probably καί and traces of letters.

In the second line, τ[ᾶ]ς πλυγὰς, perhaps followed by a cross and two names, the second would be Ἰωάννου written in a somewhat surprising spelling.¹²

NS) 18, Wien 1990, n° 82; P.Sorb.inv. 2074 = P. Collart, “À propos de quelques exercices scolaires,” *Bulletin de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale* 30 (1930) 417-23 and R. Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers and Students*, p. 196, no. 96; P.Lond or 4721 (25) V = W.E. Crum, *Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts in the British Museum*, London, 1905, no. 1215; O.IFAO s.n. = J.-L. Fournet, “Nouveaux textes scolaires grecs et coptes,” *Bulletin de l’Institut français d’archéologie orientale* 101 (2001) 169; P. Vindob K. 02030 = M.R.M. Hasitzka, *Neue Texte*, p. 55, no. 73, Tafel. 27; *MPER N.S. XXV* 017 = H. Buschhausen, U. Horak, H. Harrauer, *Der Lebenskreis der Kopten. Dokumente, Textilien, Funde, Ausgrabungen. Katalog zur Ausstellung im Prunksaal der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek*, Wien, 1995, Nr. 17 and R. Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers, and Students*, no. 94, pl. VIII; T.Mich.inv. 763 = A. E. R. Boak, “Greek and Coptic School Tablets at the University of Michigan,” *Classical Philology* 16/2 (1921) 189-194; T.Würzburg K 1017 = W.M. Brashear, “Holz-und Wachstafeln der Sammlung Kiseleff, 2. Teil,” *Enchoria* 14 (1986) 3-5; P. Vindob.K 2030 = M.R.M. Hasitzka, *Neue Texte*, p. 73; P.Lond or 4721 (25) (*MPER NS XVIII* 80) = W.E. Crum, *Catalogue of the Coptic Manuscripts in the British Museum*, no. 1215; a school exercise book no. 926 in the University of Michigan = E.M. Husselman, “A Bohairic School Text on Papyrus,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 6.3 (1947) 129-151.

¹¹ Thanks to Prof. Dr. Alain Delattre for his observations on the Greek texts on both recto and verso. He provides a reference for φιλω τὰ γράμματα to a sentence of Menander. See *Corpus dei papiri filosofici greci e latini*, Parte II.2, p. 242-244.

¹² Thanks again to Prof. Dr. Alain Delattre for this observation.

Verso¹³

The Verso side is a school text on tripartite syllables in six columns, rather than the usual lines. The first column consists of seven syllables combining two consonants that starts with the Greek consonant letter Γ in the first position and ends with the letter χ , followed by the seven vowels of the Greek alphabet $\alpha, \epsilon, \eta, \iota, \omicron, \upsilon, \omega$: $\Gamma\alpha\chi, \Gamma\epsilon\chi, \Gamma\eta\chi$, etc. However, the other five columns combined of two consonants start with the consonant letter Δ and end with five of the six additional letters used for Sahidic Coptic texts, and the seven vowels of the Greek alphabet: $\Delta\alpha\varphi, \Delta\alpha\psi, \Delta\alpha\zeta, \Delta\alpha\sigma, \Delta\alpha\chi$.

This sequence supports the assumption that the tablet is part of a textbook with a number of tablets containing exercises on triple syllables consisting of consonants and vowels from the Greek and Demotic alphabet respectively. If this assumption is correct, then we can infer that this tablet is the third tablet in the set, and so the second tablet would have contained six columns consisting of β + vowels + χ , Γ + vowels + φ , Γ + vowels + ψ , Γ + vowels + ζ , Γ + vowels + σ , Γ + vowels + χ respectively, and the first would have started with β skipping α because it is a vowel.

It is clear from this tablet that the aim of the exercise was to pronounce the letters of Demotic because the syllables start with a consonant letter of the Greek alphabet with vowels and end with five letters of Demotic. After finishing the exercise, the scribe drew three wavy lines as an ornament which may indicate the end of the exercise. On the right side are traces of black ink, suggesting that the tablet was reused.

The scribe wrote the syllables in columns, parallel to the long side, leaving almost equal space between all the columns without either drawing vertical lines for division as in other exercises,¹⁴ or by dots as O.Deir el Gizaz 14.¹⁵ The syllabaries were written by a skilled hand: the letters are clear, separated, and all are of equal size. Consequently, we could conclude that it is a teacher's model, to be copied by students.

In the lower part of the right blank, there is a drawing of cross P with a long vertical stroke that seems to be the last tablet in the set, followed by a date and another cross.

¹³ It is noticeable that this wooden tablet is displayed in the museum in a wrong way, since it is displayed in such a way that verso appears, it should be displayed so that both sides are visible.

¹⁴ As in T.Duk. inv. 7 and in Coptic Syllabary no. 765 at the University of Michigan: A.E.R. Boak, "A Coptic Syllabary at the University of Michigan," *Aegyptus* 4 (1923) 296-297.

¹⁵ S. ed. pr. A. Di Bitonto Kasser, "Ostraca scolastici copti a Deir Gizaz," *Aegyptus* 68 (1988) 167-175; 169-175, 3; 170.

Ⲫ
 . . . ἔγρά(φη) Ἐπιφ .
 πέμπτ(ης) ἰ[ν]δικ(τίωνος) †

“Ⲫ Written in the month of Epeiph,¹⁶ the . . ., of the fifth (year of the) indiction †”

At the end of some models the students prepared, the teachers added a date, although sometimes incomplete, that indicate the day of week or month of completion at the end of the exercise, either beneath or on the side, if there is space.¹⁷ On this tablet, the month is still remnant, while the year is broken. For determining the date of the tablet, one can use parallel texts such as T.Duk. inv. 7, that has merely the month and is dated to the seventh-eighth century.

This wooden tablet used to record a school exercise in the Coptic language indicates the existence of an educational system, a settlement, and religious practice in Hermopolis Magna, although no archaeological evidence was found. Moreover, the exercise reflects the educational level, which belongs to the elementary one.

Mallawi Museum 1678 (6641), wood

26.5 × 9.7 cm VII/VIII AD ?

Hermopolis Magna (al-Ašmūnayn)

Recto

ⲁ	ⲁⲗ	[ⲁ]ϣ	[ⲁ]ϣ	[ⲁ]ϩ	ⲁⲭ	ϣⲁϣ	ϣⲁϣ	ⲗⲁⲗ	○ ○
[ⲉ]	ⲉⲗ	[ⲉ]ϣ	[ⲉ]ϣ	[ⲉ]ϩ	ⲉⲭ	ϣⲉϣ	ϣⲉϣ	ⲗⲉⲗ	ⲟⲁⲟ
ⲛ	ⲛⲗ	[ⲛ]ϣ	ⲛϣ	[ⲛ]ϩ	ⲛⲭ	ϣⲛϣ	ϣⲛϣ	ⲗⲛⲗ	ⲟⲉⲟ
ⲓ	ⲓⲗ	ⲓϣ	ⲓϣ	ⲓϩ	ⲓⲭ	ϣⲓϣ	ϣⲓϣ	[ⲗⲓ]ⲗ	ⲟⲛⲟ
ⲟ	ⲟⲗ	ⲟϣ	ⲟϣ	ⲟϩ	ⲟⲭ	ϣⲟϣ	ϣⲟϣ	ⲗⲟⲗ	ⲟⲟⲟ
Υ	Υⲗ	Υϣ	Υϣ	Υϩ	Υⲭ	ϣΥϣ	ϣΥϣ	ⲗΥⲗ	ⲟϣⲟ
ω	ωⲗ	ωϣ	ωϣ	ωϩ	ωⲭ	ϣωϣ	ϣωϣ	ⲗωⲗ	ⲟωⲟ

Ⲡ ρ ρ φιλω τὰ γράμματᾶ και . . .

ϣ ρ τ[ᾶ]ς πλυγᾶς . . . Ἰωάννου

¹⁶ The month of Epeiph/Abib corresponds to the days from 25 June to 24 July. See R. Bagnall, K. Worp, *Chronological Systems of Byzantine Egypt*, 2nd edition, Brill, 2004, p. 164.

¹⁷ R. Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, pp. 88-91. There are few dated tablets such as T.Louvre inv. MND 552c, which is dated with the month: P. Cauderlier, “Deux tablettes parisiennes en provenance d’Égypte, pour illustrer l’apprentissage des lettres grecques,” *Mélanges Étienne Bernand* (Annales Littéraires de l’Université de Besançon, 444), ed. par N. Fick, J.-C. Carrière, Besançon, 1991, pp. 141-154: pp. 148-153 and T.Duk. inv. 7, which is dated on 16 March of an unknown year: P. Van Minnen, “A Late Antique Schooltablet at Duke University,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 106 (1995) 175-178.

Verso

ΓΔΧ	ΔΔΩ	ΔΔϚ	ΔΔϘ	ΔΔϙ	ΔΔΧ	
ΓΕΧ	ΔΕΩ	ΔΕϚ	ΔΕϘ	ΔΕϙ	ΔΕΧ	
ΓΗΧ	ΔΗΩ	ΔΗϚ	ΔΗϘ	ΔΗϙ	ΔΗΧ	†
ΓΙΧ	ΔΙΩ	ΔΙϚ	ΔΙϘ	ΔΙϙ	ΔΙΧ	. . ἔγρά(φη) Ἐπιφ ζ.
ΓΟΧ	ΔΟΩ	ΔΟϚ	ΔΟϘ	ΔΟϙ	ΔΟΧ	πέμπτ(ης) [ν]δικ(τίωνος)
ΓΥΧ	ΔΥΩ	ΔΥϚ	ΔΥϘ	ΔΥϙ	ΔΥΧ	†
ΓΩΧ	ΔΩΩ	ΔΩϚ	ΔΩϘ	ΔΩϙ	ΔΩΧ	

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Recto



Verso

