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EARLY ALPHABETIC INSCRIPTIONS FROM ERETRIA, GREECE 8TH CENT. BC GRAFFITI FROM THE SANCTUARY OF APOLLO DAPHNEPHOROS

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RÉSUMÉ : *La transmission de l'alphabet aux Grecs est un sujet encore très débattu. Les plus anciennes inscriptions alphabétiques grecques datent du VIII^e s. av. J.-C. et une majorité d'entre elles a été trouvée dans des sites eubéens. Une trentaine a été mise au jour à Erétrie, dont 26 proviennent du sanctuaire d'Apollon Daphnéphoros. Ces inscriptions, pour la plupart inscrites sur des coupes à boire, contribuaient à personnaliser des offrandes ou à leur donner de la valeur. Le sanctuaire et les pratiques rituelles qui s'y déroulaient offraient un cadre propice à l'usage précoce de l'écriture, au moment où la polis grecque se constituait.*

MOTS-CLÉS : *écriture, alphabet, Grèce, Eubée, Erétrie, sanctuaire, banquets, offrandes, céramique*

ABSTRACT : *The transmission of alphabet to the Greeks is still a much debated issue. Earliest alphabetical inscriptions date from the 8th cent. BC and a great number of them has been found in Euboean sites. About thirty are known from Eretria, twenty-six of which come from the sanctuary of Apollo Daphnephoros. These inscriptions, most of them written on drinking cups, helped personalize offerings or gave them value. The sanctuary and the ritual practices held there constituted a propitious framework for an early use of writing, at a time and a place where the identity of the polis was taking shape.*

KEYWORDS : *writing, alphabet, Greek, Euboean, Eretria, sanctuary, symposion, offerings, pottery*

Greek alphabetic writing was borrowed from the Semitic peoples of the Syrian-Palestinian coast whom the Greeks commonly called Phoenicians. This borrowing probably took place around 800 BC in places where Phoenician and Greek traders met, though we do not know precisely when or where. A majority of the earliest inscriptions in the Greek alphabet has been found in Eretria, in Pithekoussai, a Euboean trading post on the island of Ischia (in the Gulf of Naples), and recently in Methoni, a colony founded by Eretria in the Thermaic Gulf¹.

In Eretria, more than 60 graffiti on pottery from the 8th cent. BC are known, most of them coming from the main sanctuary of the city devoted to Apollo Daphnephoros. Nearly half of them are in alphabetic script, the other half consisting in marks, which will not be discussed here, although they appear to have played a meaningful role in the early usage of writing in Greece.

CONTEXT

The earliest constructions in the sanctuary appear before 750 BC. Although ritual practices such as sacrificial meals were held there, it remains uncertain whether or not it was a place of cult from its origins. In Late Geometric, the construction of a monumental building, closely connected with an altar, testifies without doubt of the foundation of the sanctuary. The spatial distribution of the graffiti does not reveal any significant pattern: a majority of them were found in pits – yet most of the material comes from pits –, as well as outside and within the buildings.

CHRONOLOGY

Only two inscriptions can be dated from the first period of the sanctuary (~800-750 BC). Interestingly, the earliest one is a graffiti in semitic script written on local pottery (cat. No. 7), whereas the other is clumsily written in Greek alphabet on an *ostrakon* (cat. No. 3). Twenty-five alphabetic inscriptions date from the second period of the sanctuary (~750-700 BC). A similar

1. Eretria: KENZELMANN PFYFFER *et al.* 2005; THEURILLAT 2007. Pithekoussai: BARTONEK *et al.* 1995. Methoni: BESIOS *et al.* 2012.

increase may be observed elsewhere in Greece, but it might also stem from the changes that we notice within the sanctuary itself.

POTTERY

All but two alphabetical inscriptions appear on locally made pottery. The vast majority is placed on drinking cups, most of them monochrome, as it is the case in the sanctuaries of Kalapodi and Mount Hymettos. The other graffiti are inscribed on jugs or oenochoai, amphorae, krater, handmade cauldron, *ostrakon* and spindle whorl. In the sanctuary's context, plain drinking cups which probably belonged to individuals appear more likely to be inscribed than richly decorated pottery and vases devoted to the community, such as kraters, jugs or cauldrons.

CATEGORY

Most inscriptions are too fragmentary to propose a clear-cut interpretation, or even to categorize broadly, they show nevertheless a variety of use: ownership (cat. No. 1 and 6), abecedary (cat. No. 5), votive (cat. No. 2), poetry, trade. Although eventually most of material found within the sanctuary was probably consecrated, the primary reasons that motivated the inscription on vases are not necessarily unique, which eludes any tentative to single out an original motive behind the adoption of the alphabet and its diffusion in early Iron Age Greece.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, less than 1 % of the pottery found in the sanctuary is inscribed: writing is still a rare practice in 8th cent. BC Eretria. All the more outside the sanctuary, where only three inscriptions are known. None have been found either in burials or in the few other sacred places that have been excavated. Although it is partially a consequence of the state of research, we argue that places of cult or specific ritual practices provide conditions favourable to the early use of writing. Inscriptions might have added value to an offering and/or individualized the drinking cup that each participant brought with himself to the communal meals. Writing appears in Eretria at a time and a place where the identity of the polis was taking shape, focused around a common place of cult, the sanctuary of Apollo Daphnephoros.

CATALOGUE

1. Λεβετος [εμι]

Although the inscription can be read with certainty (it is the genitive of λέβης), it remains difficult to interpret it. Taken literally, λέβητος might indicate that the jug on which the inscription is inscribed 'belonged' to a cauldron, i.e. it was used in serving from the latter. It could also be the name of a person called 'cauldron' – proper names inspired by vessel's names are relatively common.

2.]ηιερε[

This is the only inscription found in the Sanctuary of Apollo that is undoubtedly religious in character. The final letter that can be read at the right, even though truncated, is closer to an *epsilon* than to an *alpha*. Therefore the word might be a feminine adjective, here referring to a vase: *ηιερή κοτύλη*. It is also possible that the inscription refers to a priest or priestess (*ηιερεύς* or *ηιερεία*).

3.]θοι[

According to its archaeological context, this is probably the oldest inscription in Greek alphabet from Eretria. It is incised on the inner surface of an amphora and thus could have been made only after the vessel was broken. A possible interpretation is to read *θοι*, for *θεῶι*, a dedication to a god. The author of the inscription might have elided the *epsilon* (already present phonetically in the *theta*), in accordance with the principles of abbreviated writing².

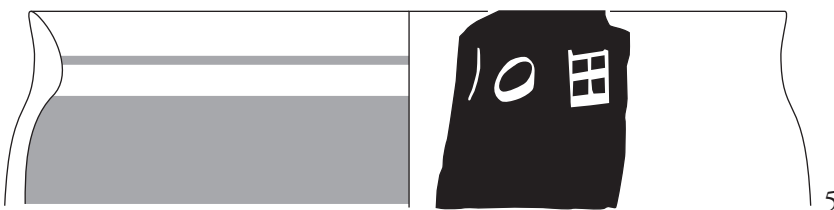
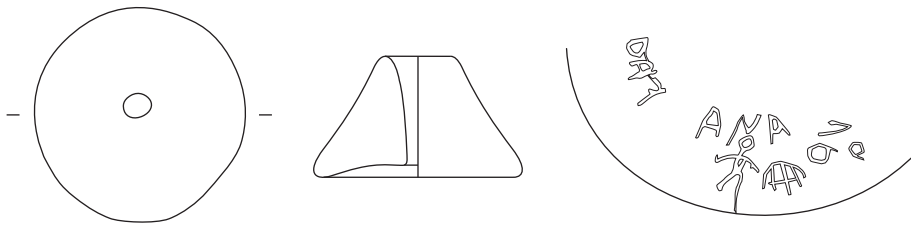
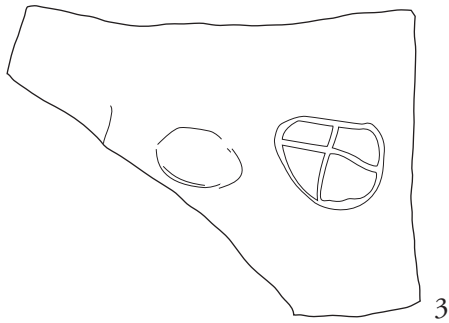
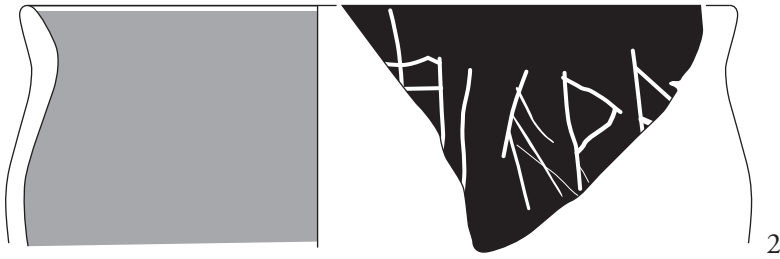
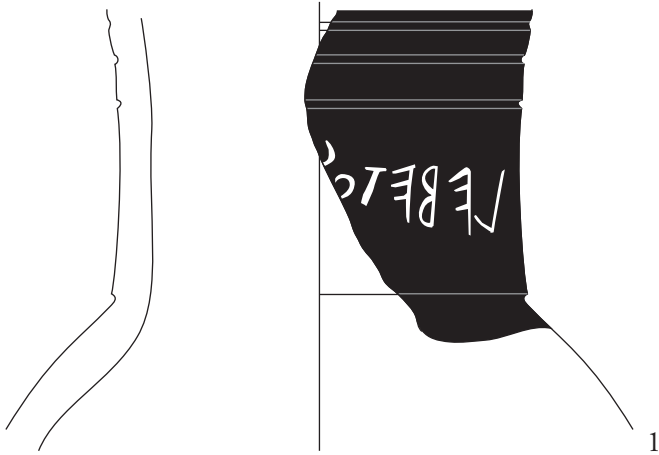
4. δαι ανα

During the Geometric period, inscriptions on objects other than pottery are rare. Hence, this graffito made of six letters, a human or divine figure, together with several signs incised before firing on a spindle whorl is all the more exceptional. The inscription and the signs are hard to interpret. The first word, *δαι* (?), can be connected with several different roots; its meaning remains obscure. The second word, *ανα*, might be the old vocative of the word *ἄναξ*, which is often used as an epithet of Zeus and Apollo. The figure drawn beneath the word *ανα* might thus be a representation of a divinity or of the person dedicating the object.

5.]Ξοπ[

The letters were incised on the clay before it was fired. The piece has one peculiarity: the closed form of the Phoenician *samek*, 𐤌, which figures in several Etruscan abecedaria, had not been attested in any inscription

2. WACHTER 1991.



Drawings are at scale 1:1.



6



7



Drawings are at scale 1:1.

previously known from Euboea or its colonies. This form, inherited from the Phoenician alphabet, was never used to transcribe the sound 'ks'; in the pre-classical period the Euboeans used the letter-form X. This letter is attested only in abecedaria, of which this graffito is a new example, one of the oldest known in Greece. Of the twenty-six letters traditionally included in abecedaria, only the *samek*, the *omicron*, and the *pi* are here conserved; the complete alphabet must originally have run all around the circumference of the vase.

6.]λχαδεοεμι

This inscription was painted on the vase before firing, a technique rarely attested during the Geometric period. Several characteristics make this graffito typical of the Euboean alphabet: the shape of the letter *chi*, the *mu* shaped with five strokes, and the 'Chalcidian' *lambda*. The inscription is a property mark, composed of a proper noun in the genitive form followed by the verb ε(i)μί. The suffix in -άδης added to the proper noun is characteristic of the way patronymics are formed. We might be dealing here also with a case of abbreviated writing (as above), the *iota* being phonetically included in the *chi* that precedes the *alpha*. According to this hypothesis, we should read -λχιάδεο εμί. A possible reconstruction of the name of the owner inscribed on the vase might be *Χαλκιάδης, i.e. 'someone from Chalcis', a city nearby Eretria.

7. KPLŠ [

This inscription written in Semitic alphabet is the very oldest inscription in this corpus, to judge by the decoration of the vase (late 9th – early 8th cent. BC). It consists of four letters: from right to left, a *kaf*, a *pē*, a *lāmed*, and finally a *šīn*. Although written using Semitic letters, it does not mean anything in Phoenician or Aramean.

It looks much more like a Greek or Asianic word or name, as seen in the early inscriptions from Cilicia, where Semitic script was used in the 8th cent. BC to transcribe Greek-like names³. If proved right, this hypothesis would have important historical consequences for the transmission of the alphabet to the Greeks.

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PHOTO CREDITS

All pictures and drawings by the authors.

3. BRIXHE 2006.