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## A NEW GREEK ABECEDARIUM

While walking in recent years in the area of the Attic community of Vari, the undersigned has noticed a number of ancient graffiti cut into level expanses of exposed bedrock.<sup>1</sup> While a full study of them is under way, one inscription is extracted for publication here because of the interest that attaches to it.

The inscription is a complete Old Attic abecedarium of twenty-four letters (Fig. 1). The rock surface bearing it is on the hill Barako or Keramoti, which forms the eastern side of the plain of Vari, some twenty kilometers south of Athens. The hill is composed principally of low quality dolomitic marble that tends to outcrop as irregularly flat expanses of grayish white color with red veining. Ancient passers by, some naming themselves as shepherds or goatherds, were in the habit of scratching their names, short comments and doodles on the rock of the hill. On the piece with the abecedarium, there are more than fifty engravings.

The Barako abecedarium is composed of two undulating lines layed out roughly north-south in the boustrophedon system and running almost entirely retrograde. The inscriber seems to have expected those who looked at the letters to begin by facing west in order to read alpha through omicron right to left,<sup>2</sup> then pass north of the loop, reading orthograde pi and san while facing south, then having shifted position to face east, to finish up with qoppa to phi, reading again right to left. The letters alpha to zeta (Fig. 2) are oriented north to south and run for a length of 26.5 cm. Heta to kappa (Fig. 2) run northwest to southeast for 13.5 cm. Lambda to omicron (Fig. 3) take up 19 cm. They also run northwest to southeast but at less of a departure from north-south than the preceding letters. The following two letters, pi and san (Fig. 4, also showing nu, omicron and qoppa),

<sup>1</sup> SEG 49.2 announces these finds and briefly describes their content.

<sup>2</sup> Alpha faces the other way, as a normal orthograde letter, but it is the only one before the loop to do so.

are oriented northeast to southwest and occupy 8.5 cm. of space. Qoppa is transitional to the remaining letters. It is cut kionedon with respect to the preceding san, but it may as easily be seen as sharing the orientation of rho to phi (Fig. 5), which is the final letter. These last six letters run southeast to northwest for 21 cm. The smallest letter is omicron, 2.3 cm. high, the tallest qoppa, 7.1 cm. Most of the others fall into the range of 3.5–4.5 cm. in height, with a few, rho, upsilon, and phi having stokes that extend up to 6.3 cm.

Most of the letters are conventionally shaped. Phi is not. Its square shape is an uncommon Attic letter form. When it does occur, it is usually because the inscriber had a preference, as here, for squaring the other circular letters, theta and omicron.<sup>3</sup> Our letter cutter's fondness for rectilinearity extended also to qoppa, which has a squarish circle. By contrast, two normally rectilinear letters in the abecedarium are made with curving strokes. One is digamma. The letter has two forms, one shaped like the Latin letter F, with arms that extend either horizontally or diagonally from a vertical stroke, the other resembling an epsilon without a middle arm:  $\sqsubset$ .<sup>4</sup> The Barako digamma's shape is unexampled elsewhere. The inscriber cut a variant of  $\sqsubset$  by curving the bottom stroke rather than squaring it. That this was done intentionally is shown by the fact that the letter is carefully cut. There is no indication of slippage with the cutting tool. Sigma is another angular letter that is here curvilinear. The inscriber was not thinking of angles or counting strokes when he cut it. Instead he incised a squiggly line that represented the letter well enough.<sup>5</sup>

The order of the letters also follows convention except for the final two. The Old Attic alphabet normally ends with chi, but here it and the usual next to last letter, phi, are transposed. This should not be regarded as an inscriber's oversight, for it is found in several other abecedaria: on a black-glazed kylix base from the Athenian Agora of the early 5th century; on a Boiotian cup of ca. 420; and consistently in the Etruscan abecedarium, which originated from a

<sup>3</sup> As in IG I<sup>3</sup> 1514. Square theta and omicron are not uncommon in Attic inscriptions; see Henry R. Immerwahr, *Attic Script: a Survey*, Oxford 1990, p. 146 (theta), p. 153 (omicron); for four-cornered omicron, see also A. Raubitschek, *Dedications from the Athenian Acropolis*, Cambridge, Mass. 1949, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> For discussion of the forms, see Immerwahr (note 3), pp. 140–141. The list of  $\sqsubset$  shaped digammas in Attic inscriptions is considerably lengthened if one accepts Immerwahr's argument that the shape does not normally represent an incomplete epsilon.

<sup>5</sup> Squiggle sigmas not always clearly differentiated into separate strokes are not rare among Attic inscriptions, see Immerwahr (note 3), p. 158.

West Greek alphabet of the Euboean colonies.<sup>6</sup> Some argue that the varying order of these letters reflects the differing phonetic value assigned to chi in the two large families of epichoric scripts:  $\chi\phi$  belongs to the western alphabets, in which chi was vocalized as *ks*,  $\phi\chi$  to the eastern alphabets, where chi stands for *kb*.<sup>7</sup> This is a tidy scheme, which appears to account well for the data. The evidence, however, is insufficient to support any kind of firm conclusion. The two Attic examples of chi preceding phi, occurrences of a supposed attribute of the western alphabet in an eastern one, suggest instead that there was some variability in the order of these supplemental letters among the local scripts. The reason for this was the absence of a Semitic prototype. The Semitic model provided the sequence for the Greek letters adapted from it, but there was no canonical order for the non-Semitic letters. The inventor of the new signs placed them in his prototypical alphabet in a certain order at the end. This did not oblige secondary adapters to follow him strictly. They capriciously arranged the two new letters differently when they adopted them, as the evidence shows.<sup>8</sup> Only later, with the settling in of a *koine* alphabet, did the sequence  $\phi\chi$  become the established order throughout Greece.

At least one letter is upside down, epsilon. Emphasizing that this is an *Attic* abecedarium, I would include another and read after kappa an inverted Attic lambda rather than an upright Ionic form of the letter. After beta, the inscriber engraved a normally shaped Attic gamma, which resembles an Ionic lambda. It is unlikely that he deliberately used the same form for two different letters.<sup>9</sup> Inadvertent inversion is common among Attic vase inscriptions and is the best explanation for the twelfth letter here, as well as for the epsilon.

I do not consider the two letters in the loop to be inverted. As stated earlier, I believe that the engraver inscribed these letters by supposing that anyone who looked at the entire run of letters would change position from facing west to facing east by passing north

<sup>6</sup> Agora abecedarium: M. Lang, *Graffiti and Dipinti, The Athenian Agora 21*, Princeton 1976, p. 7 no. A 3; Boiotian cup: L. Jeffery, *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece*, Oxford 1990, p. 95, no. 20; Etruscan abecedaria: Jeffery, pp. 236–7, 240–41, nos. 18–20.

<sup>7</sup> See Barry B. Powell, *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet*, Cambridge and New York 1991, pp. 48–63, esp. 52.

<sup>8</sup> See R. Wachter, *Kadmos* 28, 1989, pp. 29–34, esp. 33.

<sup>9</sup> The matter is problematic. When we encounter this form in inscriptions written in the Old Attic alphabet, are we seeing Attic lambdas inscribed upside down or intrusive Ionic lambdas? See Immerwahr (note 3), p. 148.

of the loop. He cut pi and san right side up with reference to these movements.

The second of the two orthograde letters in the loop deserves comment. It is a san, the only occurrence of the letter in an Attic inscription.<sup>10</sup> Philologists have predicted that the epichoric Greek alphabets went through two stages of development, a primitive stage in which both san and sigma were present regardless of which one was a dead letter and which one was used to indicate the voiceless sibilant in actual speech, and a developed phase, with only the sign that was used surviving.<sup>11</sup> The primitive stage was previously reconstructed indirectly, primarily from Etruscan abecedaria that are believed to be based on Euboian models and that contain both san and sigma.<sup>12</sup> The present example now gives us a Greek abecedarium with both sibilants.<sup>13</sup> The letter here resembles the san of those Greek scripts in which it was put to real use, except for the diagonal rather than vertical right leg.

Various features of the Barako abecedarium indicate a date for it before 500 BC. Its boustrophedon layout is the strongest chronological clue. Surveys of formal and informal inscriptions on both stone and clay show that after the middle of the 6th century boustrophedon layout became increasingly rare throughout Greece.<sup>14</sup> Analysis of individual letter forms reinforces a pre-500 BC date. Several have shapes that are no longer standard in Attica by the 5th century: alpha, mu, nu, rho, and chi,<sup>15</sup> None of the other letters, mostly having generic shapes that do not allow close dating, precludes an early date.

<sup>10</sup> Although the letter does not occur, its name *σάν* and the derivative *σαμφοράς* are found on a number of inscribed lead strips from Athens that record data about cavalrymen's horses: see J. H. Kroll, *Hesperia* 46, 1977, p. 87 for a list of occurrences from the Agora (correct no. 59 to 58) and further bibliography. It is a real temptation to see san as the letter originally written but then erased and replaced by tau in the name *Netos* painted on the so-called *Nessos* amphora in Athens. Convincing arguments that the erased letter was *sampi*, not *san*, are made by A. Boegehold, *AJA* 66, 1962, pp. 405–6. San in other local alphabets is most recently treated by S. R. Slings, *Mnemosyne* 51, 1998, pp. 641–52.

<sup>11</sup> See M. Lejeune, *Rev. Phil.*, 57, 1983, pp. 7–12; Slings (note 10), p. 648.

<sup>12</sup> For discussion, see Jeffery (note 6), pp. 236–8.

<sup>13</sup> In the only other abecedarium from Attica that preserves this part of the alphabet, on a cup from Mt. Hymettos, san is absent: see C. Blegen, *AJA* 38, 1934, pp. 18–21, nos. 13 and 14. San is also absent in the one complete Attico-Ionic abecedarium that is extant, a lead plaque from the Akropolis dating after 403: *Bollettino dell'Istituto di corrispondenza archeologica per l'anno 1867*, 75.

<sup>14</sup> See L. Threatte, *The Grammar of Attic Inscriptions I*, Berlin 1980, pp. 54–56.

<sup>15</sup> For the standard shapes through time, see Immerwahr, *Attic Script*.

With all due allowance for the uncertainties of any attempt to date an Archaic inscription that has no independently datable context, I would consider the overall aspect of the abecedarium, plus letter forms and layout, as indicating a date around 550 BC, while allowing a liberal margin of time before and after. The small sample of the surviving evidence permits no further narrowing of the time frame for its inscribing.

It was mentioned earlier that more than fifty other graffiti and doodles are cut into the same rock surface as the Barako abecedarium. The graffiti are mostly written retrograde and have letters similar to those in the abecedarium, although I have not been able to identify the abecedarium cutter's hand in any of them. They consist for the most part simply of proper names. One inscriber goes further and identifies himself as a shepherd: [---]σθινο εἰμὶ μνῆμα ποιμαί[νοντος ---].<sup>16</sup> Another seems to address shepherds: [---]γιγνόνσιν, ὃ ποιμένε[ς ---]. I am currently working on the assumption that these and virtually all the graffiti elsewhere on the hill are best explained as the writing of herders idling away their time while their flocks grazed. One of these herders displayed his knowledge of the alphabet by carving an abecedarium on the rock. Precisely how he learned his letters – through formal schooling, from a literate parent or friends – is not known. It does not seem likely that a teacher climbed the hill and left the alphabet as a lesson. This is grazing land. There are no visible remains of ancient settlement or cemetery anywhere near the rock with the abecedarium. Those who came here already possessed some ability to read and write. They acquired these skills elsewhere and then put them to use where they worked.

Dialectical inscriptions give us a reasonably complete picture of the phonetic alphabets in use in various Greek states, but there are too few complete examples of the alphabet written out to afford us much of an understanding of the development of epichoric scripts. If the Barako abecedarium provides any indication, it can reasonably be expected that future finds will show that the complete alphabetic systems of other states also contained letters that do not appear in their early inscribed documents.

<sup>16</sup> The word μνῆμα carries its normal meaning here, “memorial”, but not its usual context of cemetery or sanctuary. Later examples show that μνήμα plus the genitive of a personal name was an idiomatic way in ancient Greek of leaving one's name at a place: cf. B. Lifshitz, ZPE 7, 1971, 151–152, no. 1.





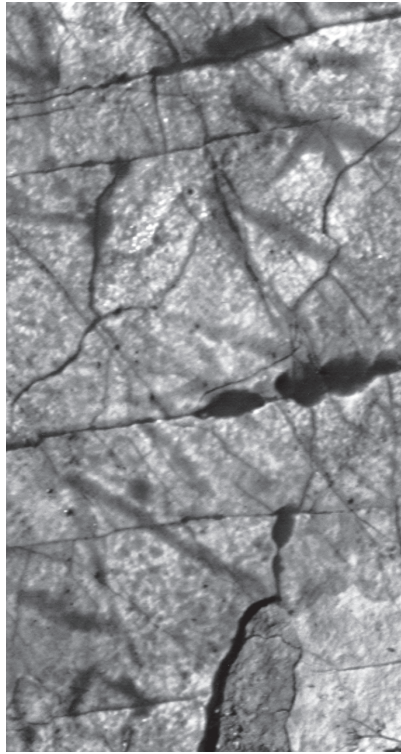


Fig. 3

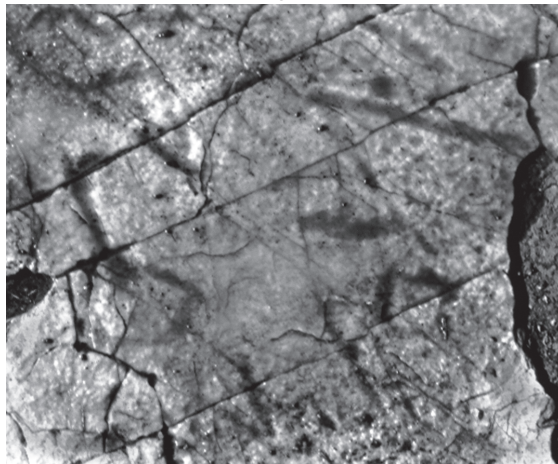


Fig. 4

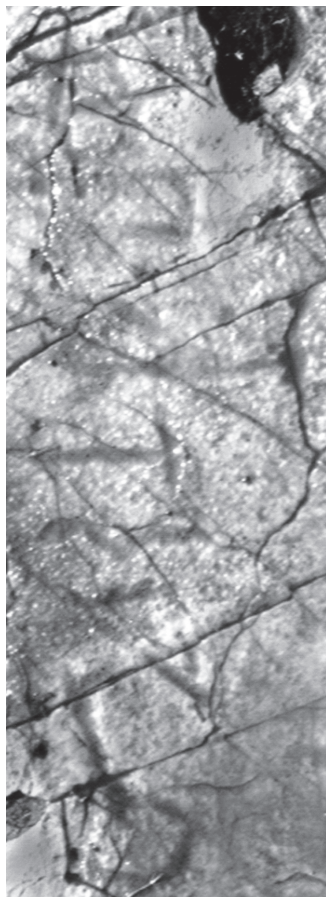


Fig. 5