Schools and School Exercises Again

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Schools and School Exercises Again

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Twenty years ago in 1996, my book Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt was published and was followed in 2001 by Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt that took into account the corpus of school exercises that I had previously assembled and provided a more detailed view of Greek education in Egypt. It is time now to verify if the conclusions I had reached years ago are still largely valid and to ask questions that I did not ask at the time about what the exercises reveal (or do not reveal) on the actual presence of schools in Egypt. We should notice immediately that in these twenty years not many texts that I can surely identify as originating from education were published. Besides a few exercises among the Kölner papyri or from other collections, most of these have appeared in the volumes containing texts from Oxyrhynchus.[1] In 1996 exercises from Oxyrhynchus were only ten, a minimal number considering how great and cultivated the city was and the existing evidence of schools there. It is clear now that the paucity was due to editorial choices but it is also evident that it is not the publication of a few more exercises that warrants evaluating again the conclusions I had reached then.

In 1996 and in 2001 my aim was to collect and study all the possible school exercises found in Egypt. I was trying to understand how people learned to write, what was the curriculum of schools of various levels, and whether that corresponded to what was revealed by the literary sources from around the Mediterranean. In these two books I had used a terminology such as school, teacher, student, and scribe for sheer convenience and because of the lack of better terms even though I recognize now that more nuances were needed. In Gymnastics I tried to find some more evidence for learning centers and clarified that it is crucial to adopt «a broad definition of 'school' based on the educational activities of teaching and learning rather than on the identity of the person imparting the instruction, the teacher-student relationship, and the premises in which teaching took place».[2] It is worthy now emphasizing that, in monastic settings in particular, it is better to talk about educational texts found there rather than school texts, if by 'school' one usually refers to organized schooling with relatively young pupils and a formal teacher. While in Greek classical education some teachers did not devote themselves exclusively to teaching but wrote letters and petitions (the Or. 52 of the sophist Libanius in the fourth century is further evidence for that),[3] the multifunctionality of certain educated persons in Christian monasteries is especially evident, as Anastasia Maravela is indicating.[4] There, some people took different roles: they taught novices, preached, but also copied books and documents. It is better in my opinion to identify a 'will to learn' as the common link between all the exercises that are extant, as Harrauer and Sijpestijn did in 1985.[5]

[1] I am going to mention only some of the new school papyri, e.g., P.Köln. VIII 352, 353, 328 and perhaps 330. P.Oxy. XLII 3011; LVI 3829; LXI 4099; LXV 4460, and LXVIII 4647. See also Fournet (2009): P.Berol. inv. 16866, Homeric verses written in continuous lines.
[2] Cribiore (2001) 17.
[3] Cribiore (2015a) 199-200.
[4] Maravela (2018).
[5] Harrauer / Sijpesteijn (1985).

In 1996 I compiled a corpus of 412 exercises and examined the documentary sources for evidence of teachers and schools. Though in the introduction to the book I mentioned that «the random chances that determine which texts survive limit our knowledge»,[6] I was satisfied to study the evidence available without seriously asking whether part of it was lost and what were the reasons for its disappearance. I had followed a conservative methodology because I intended to produce a reliable corpus of exercises. When the handwriting, mistakes, and other factors did not point to an exercise beyond any shadow of a doubt, I refrained from including that item and I ended up discarding most of the texts at the higher level of education even if I had strong suspicions that they had originated from there.[7] With respect to teachers (called διδάσκαλοι), I included only those I was certain about without taking into account that more teachers of letters might have existed among them. In 1996 I had found little archeological evidence for schools and I referred only to the few individuals who were mentioned in documentary papyri. In 2001 I tried to go a bit further: I had noticed the very low number of tablets and found it surprising that school ostraca were not more numerous. Yet I did not attempt to go beyond the evidence and did not ask more questions. I will try to remedy that. Going beyond the evidence is an obligation for a historian of antiquity who wants to trace large-scale phenomena. Years ago, Tim Cornell titled an article, in which he responded to the well known book of William Harris on ancient literacy, "The Tyranny of the Evidence".[8] He claimed that relying strongly on the evidence is a positive trait in a historian which, however, becomes a liability when the evidence is biased, misleading, and incomplete. Let us consider now the relation of school exercises with archeology.

1. School exercises and archeology

A great interest in understanding the relationship of archeology and papyrology started in the 1990s. It can be traced first to an article from 1994 in which Peter van Minnen attempted to discuss the papyrological finds in the context of the archeology of the city.[9] The results of his study were later shown to be less secure than they had appeared at first because of problems deriving from the way old excavations were conducted and records were kept.[10] In spite of that, however, scholars enthusiastically tried to connect papyri with their context.[11] I myself was criticized for my lack of interest in this respect and for my inability to bring to life ancient schools. But was the provenance of exercises clear and secure? In the vast majority of cases papyri reached the Cairo Museum and European and American collections without any kind of precise context. A city or large village was specified in about half of them without any further details. The exercises lacked a precise provenance or were purchased illegally on the antiquarian market. Methods of excavation nowadays are more meticulous than in the past. Archeologists can make topographical surface surveys, can collect geographic and special information, and can use aerial photographs and make satellite images that allow to

[6] Cribiore (1996) 4.
[7] Though I had explained my method, this conservative choice caused some confusion: thus Morgan (1998), who had adopted my catalogue, wrongly affirmed that in Egypt rhetorical education was almost nonexistent.
[8] Harris (1989); Cornell (1991).
[9] Van Minnen (1994). More recently on the relationship of archeology and papyrology, van Minnen (2010).
[10] See Nevett (2011). Criticizing the approach taken with respect to Karanis, Nevett points to the more secure results achieved by modern excavations in Kellis (Dakhla Oasis). On the questionable record-keeping and labeling in Karanis, see Landvatter (2014).
[11] See Gagos (1998) and the special thematic section on papyri and context in BASP 42 (2005) 169-272.

examine large areas. The future may yield great results, as it appears from the findings in the Dakhla Oasis.[12]

Past archeological excavations, however, were generally conducted unsystematically and in a country where the antiquities patrimony was already depleted. At the end of the 19th century, the Hellenistic and Roman settlements in Egypt were in the process of destruction because the previous focus of attention had been almost exclusively on the dynastic sites. In addition, the archeological areas were greatly damaged by the building of new canals and the work of the fertilizer-diggers. At the beginning of the 20th century, Egyptian authorities declared that 'sebbakh' (dried organic matter used for fertilizer) was public property and could be collected for a fee. Sebbakhin became veritable treasure hunters making discoveries that sometimes reached the Egyptian Museum in Cairo but often ended in the hands of antiquities dealers. All these papyri and objects, school exercises included, were completely deprived of context.[13]

Well aware of the previous destruction of sites, Grenfell and Hunt, the Dioscuri of papyrology who found, studied, and deciphered so many texts, were concerned with digging up the greatest number of papyri in the shortest time possible. Though the two British papyrologists are very commendable in so many respects, their excavation methods left a lot to be desired. They declared that «the methods of digging for papyri in a town site present some parallels to that of gold-mining».[14] They concentrated on the remains of buildings from which they could get the most texts. They could not distinguish public from private buildings except in the case of temples because they were not interested in excavating and identifying them. They did not keep a stratigraphic record. Papyri were ordered according to type and not provenance so that sub-literary items, school exercises for example, were put under the rubric 'miscellaneous' with no information about context. In the Fayum and in Oxyrhynchus, Grenfell and Hunt excavated with approximately 200 workmen who had no experience in archeological excavations and were told to concentrate exclusively on finding papyri. Photographs from the Egypt Exploration Fund reveal the furious digging of those workmen and the blinding dust that surrounded them.[15]

As a consequence, I feel that school exercises were overlooked. Not only do many exercises occupy small scraps but students rarely used good quality papyrus and reused material that they found at home so that those papyri were already fragile when they were discarded and had less chances to survive. As I said above, very few wooden tablets from Egypt have been preserved. In the past, I thought that their low number depended exclusively on their relatively high cost and thus posited that they were not used much in education and that papyrus was by far the most privileged writing material. I was wrong. Lately Taco Terpstra has provided new evidence showing convincingly that there is a notable discrepancy between preserved styli and wax tablets in Karanis.[16] Styli, which were used to write on tablets and then to erase writing, are considerably more numerous than tablets. Terpstra does not inquire about the reasons for the apparent disappearance of many tablets but the problem is easy to solve. No doubt, styli were of more durable material but it is also important to reflect on the fact that survival of something in Egypt depended on its being thrown away, while tablets could be used by several generations in a family and ended up broken in small pieces.

[12] Right now, however, the areas of the Fayum are seriously threatened by Egyptians in search of antiquities and ancient coins. They go over the sites with metal detectors and sometimes bulldozers.
[13] In order to earn more money, the sebbakhin divided lots of papyri found together and cut some in small pieces.
[14] Grenfell / Hunt / Hogarth (1900) 24.
[15] The destruction continued so that, for example, the layout of the ancient city of Bakchias that was excavated briefly in 1896 appeared completely different in 1993, cf. Pernigotti (2010).
[16] Terpstra (2014). Cf. also Terpstra (2017).

Sebbakhin, moreover, burned as firewood the wood they found on excavation sites including for instance the surviving frames of doors, as they sometimes do today.

The situation in monastic settings in the sixth and seventh centuries was not better. In the Theban necropolis they occupied dynastic tombs and temples. Egyptologists wanted access to the earlier stages of sites so that Christian remains were cleared away. Thus the context and specific provenance of texts could not be recovered. I am now working with Jennifer Cromwell on the Coptic educational ostraca of Columbia University from western Thebes. Most of them come from Deir el Bahri (the monastery of Apa Phoibammon) and in general they are decontextualized. The situation is quite different with regard to the Monastery of Epiphanius that was excavated and documented properly but which represents an exception. Current scholars who are working on educational texts and settings in Western Thebes are making important progress by trying to bring into the discussion reports of excavations and unprovenanced texts found in museums and collections. The title of a paper of Lillian Larsen "Excavating the excavations" shows the direction in which these studies are going.[17] Most of the time the evidence of the school exercises in Egypt that resurfaced from past excavations is so incomplete that a precise evaluation of literacy there is impossible.

2. Where can we find schools in Egypt?

I mentioned previously the important book of William Harris in which he argued that a pervasive system of schools was a *condicio sine qua non* for majority literacy.[18] We all agree that there was no mass literacy in the ancient world,[19] and yet the paucity of the evidence concerning schools in Egypt and elsewhere needs to be explained. An important factor is that in the vast majority of cases, teaching in antiquity did not take place in buildings designed for this specific purpose.[20] While elementary education could take place in the open air, teachers of higher education often used private rooms, either their own or spaces that they rented from others. When a teacher moved, his school generally ceased to exist because a teacher *was* his school. Students might follow him or might change teachers. I have shown in my book The School of Libanius that there are many examples of the fact that schools often were not permanent institutions.[21] The evidence of Athens in the fourth century CE, of Alexandria in the fourth and fifth, and of Constantinople in the fifth century shows that teaching at home was a practical and common solution. As a rule, therefore, schools could not be distinguished from private habitations. In Egypt, moreover, the lack of information regarding the context of papyri, ostraca, and tablets prevents us from identifying specific schools because we do not know if and when a consistent number of exercises was found in a particular location. Even in cases where it might be hypothesized that a building originally presented some distinguishing characteristics such as benches or walls plastered with gypsum and prepared for writing, this information was lost because of the way past excavations were conducted. One wonders, therefore, if some schools in Egypt might have been located in public buildings and yet almost no public buildings from Greek and Roman Egypt have been identified.[22] In 1905 the well-known archeologist Otto Rubensohn excavated houses in the Fayum.[23] His aim, however, was to find papyri, and like all other archeologists of the time, he was not interested in conducting a systematic excavation. After he had entered entering a building and

[17] Larsen (2018).
[18] Harris (1989) e.g. 15 and 233.
[19] One of the great merits of Harris 1989 was to make scholars confront the issue.
[20] Cribiore (2007b).
[21] Cribiore (2007a) 42-82.
[22] I owe this information to Paola Davoli.
[23] Rubensohn (1905).

searched for papyri in one or two rooms, the building was abandoned without attempting to draw a plan. The result was that he did not identify any public building in the Fayum. As the archeologists have now found in Trimithis (modern Amheida), it takes a very long time to identify the nature of a building.[24] In 1929 M. Rostowzew reviewing for Gnomon a book on papyri in the Fayum condemned the hasty excavations in which important information was lost in order to search for papyri in the shortest and most economical way.[25] In 1986 Adam Lukaszewicz listed and studied all the public buildings known from the papyri, but the vast majority of them had disappeared from archeological inquiries.[26] In the Nile valley, therefore, the search for a school in or adjacent to a public building has been so far unsuccessful.

In Alexandria a massive school complex composed of many halls was found in Kom el-Dikka.[27] It supposedly could offer a whole course of higher education with grammar, rhetoric, philosophy, and even medicine. No writing, however, was left on the walls of these rooms, and no papyrus that referred unquestionably to them has been preserved from there.[28] But many texts have emerged from excavations conducted in two locations of the Oasis of Dakhla in Upper Egypt, specifically in Trimithis and Kellis. In Trimithis adjacent to a private residence built around 340, there was a building with at least three rooms that turned out to be a school.[29] Several factors contributed to the unmistakable identification of the nature of the building that was excavated with great care. Benches were built along the walls of the rooms[30] and the walls were plastered with gypsum so that writing could be washed off. Literary texts, moreover, were written on the walls of two rooms, 15 and 19. The text in room 15 consisted of five columns of poetry, hexameters and elegiac distichs. The walls in the other room 19 showed a passage from the Odyssey (4. 221-223) and the paraphrase of an anecdote from Plutarch.[31] Anecdotes of this kind are known to have figured in education at all levels. This school in Trimithis could serve about twelve students, presumably the sons of Serenos and other elite youths from the Oasis. The level of literacy of the place also appears from a line in chalk scribbled on a wall of another room (13) that does not belong to the school. It is uncertain who the writer was but he might have been the teacher of the school or one of Serenos' cultivated guests. The line is part of a verse from Euripides' tragedy Hypsipyle which was little known before the papyri revealed some fundamental fragments.[32] Another piece of plaster with an encomium in verse containing the story of Busiris and Herakles has now come to light from another building in Dakhla. Was this budding poet connected to the school? Did he obtain his education there? It is impossible to know but further excavation may reveal it.

At a distance of forty kilometers from Trimithis, there was the large village of Kellis that has yielded many literary and documentary pieces in both Greek and Coptic.[33] Besides the fact that three papyri (P.Kellis 53, 54, and 69) mentioning teachers were found here, in Kellis the

[24] A building there, B6, appeared to be public, a town council (or even a Christian church). After a couple of years, it became clear that it was the largest bath ever found in the Oasis.
[25] Rostowzew (1929).
[26] Lukaszewicz (1986).
[27] T. Derda et al. (2007).
[28] The condition of the soil was too wet for the preservation of papyri. Some late antique figures such as Zacharias Scholasticus in Ammonios allude to the Kom el Dikka halls.
[29] Cribiore / Davoli / Ratzan (2008).
[30] Benches, however, also appear in town halls and churches so that something else is needed to identify a building as a school.
[31] See Cribiore / Davoli (2013). See also Cribiore (2015b).
[32] See P.Oxy. VI 852, that includes fragment 60, col. ii, c. 916, 86. This line completes an unknown part of a verse vindicating the opinion of the scholar D.L. Page.
[33] P. Kellis. Kellis was a chief village of a toparchy and was occupied from the late Ptolemaic period until the fourth century CE. The papyri and tablets that I will mention all belong to the fourth century.

evidence of education is quite rich though I will not go through it in detail: lists of Greek verbs, Isocrates, Homer, and mythological stories. The editors of all these texts refrained from positing that a school was located in one of the shrines but there is no doubt about it. The variety of the textual material, compounded with the diversity of the hands and of the levels of education strongly suggests the existence of a school but it is important to keep in mind once again that when in antiquity we call a place of learning 'school', we must be open to all scenarios.

I have referred a few times to the 1989 book of William Harris. It was published a few years before my first book. Writing, Teachers, and Students could have been considered some kind of response to the bold quantitative approach of Harris. Though I could not show actual evidence of schools, the exercises testified that Greek education in Egypt was widespread. In a recent article, however, William Harris returned to literacy and considered in passing the discoveries in Trimithis that seemed to him so unusual to the point of not being especially significant. He attributed the evidence to «the intensity of the passion for *paideia*» felt by those Greeks of Egypt who lived at the edges of the Hellenic world.[34] This appears to imply that the findings in the Oasis cannot tell us much about the spread of literacy in the rest of the Greek and Roman world because they are somewhat anomalous. Isn't this the old claim that Egypt was unique? I thought that I had dispelled that notion with my previous work. In addition, studies of the economy of Roman Egypt have pointed out that the evidence was broadly applicable to other Mediterranean societies. How are we going to use this evidence now? We could try to see how it conforms to what we know about the rest of the Mediterranean. But I prefer another way. We can use these remains of ancient education to help us reconstruct the larger picture in the Great Oasis, in the rest of Egypt, and around the Mediterranean, looking for what is not visible right now but may appear in the future.

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