Olga Tribulato

Learning to Write in Indigenous Sicily
A New Abecedary from the Necropolis of Manico di Quarara
(Montelepre, South-West of Palermo)

Learning to Write in Indigenous Sicily
A New Abecedary from the Necropolis of Manico di Quarara (Montelepre, South-West of Palermo)[1]

1. Introduction

In August 2015 the Soprintendenza dei Beni Artistici e Culturali of Palermo retrieved a number of archaeological objects which had been part of private collections in Montelepre (south-west of Palermo). Among them was a late-archaic black-glaze 'type C' cup, probably produced in Sicily. The vase is likely to have been unearthed by grave robbers in the necropolis of Manico di Quarara, situated on the Monte d'Oro in the area of today's Montelepre, a Hellenized indigenous site.[2] The foot of the cup bears a graffito, which adds to the small *corpus* of short inscriptions engraved on Greek vases unearthed in the same necropolis.

The cup is now at the Museo Civico di Montelepre, where I examined it in June 2016. A preliminary description of the inscription and its support is due to appear in the *Notiziario della Soprintendenza di Palermo* 2016 (Cucco, Polizzi, Tribulato forthcoming). The present article offers an expanded epigraphic study of the graffito and discusses its importance for the spread of the Greek alphabet and of Greek writing habits among the non-Hellenic peoples of ancient Sicily.

2. The graffito

The graffito is 2 cm long and consists of four signs, lightly incised from left to right, with an average height of 6 mm (fig. 1). It is undoubtedly the beginning of an abecedary, which the engraver voluntarily interrupted after *delta*: the foot of the cup is intact. Palaeographically, the graffito can be dated to the first half of the 5th century; it is likely to have been produced in the early decades of the century. The shape of the signs is compatible with the local alphabets circulating in Sicily – particularly its western part – in this period.

The *alpha* was traced in two strokes: the first traced the two slanting bars, the second traced the crossbar. The left slanting stroke is 9 mm long. The crossbar is perfectly horizontal and at the midpoint it protrudes slightly to the right. This type of *alpha* is common in Sicilian scripts: in western Sicily it is documented at Selinous, for instance in the 'Great inscription' from temple G (*IGDS* I 78). It is also common in Elymian epigraphy.[3]

The *beta* takes the characteristic 'reverse *ny*' shape which in Sicily is used only in the Selinuntine script, and in the Elymian alphabet derived from it.[4] The first two strokes were incised together, while the writer added the right stroke after raising the incising tool. The left stroke, which is quite vertical, is 5.6 mm high. A similar type is documented in the Elymian graffito published in Agostiniani (1977), no. 190.

---

[1] My warmest thanks to Stefano Vassallo, who most generously invited me to publish the graffito, and to him and Rosa Maria Cucco for their kind hospitality in Palermo. I have profited greatly from the talks I had with Stefania De Vido, who has shared all the phases of the present research with me.

[2] On this site, see Greco (1991) and Ferreri (2012). The necropolis was used between the 6th and the 3rd centuries BC: see Ferreri (2012: 251).

[3] Agostiniani (1977: 110).

[4] This 'freak' *beta* was also used in the second alphabet of Megara Nisaia, metropolis of the Sicilian Megara Hyblaia. The latter, Selinous' metropolis, does not actually appear to have employed the sign: inscriptions from Megara Hyblaia have so far documented at least one instance of a 'normal' *beta* (Brugnone 1995: 1311). It is still unclear how one should judge the only instance of a 'reverse *ny*' *beta* from Syracuse, since it is attested on a sherd from a Protocorinthian *pyxis*, probably belonging to the early 7th century. Guarducci (*EG* I 340) interpreted this text as proof that the earliest Syracusan inscriptions used a Corinthian variety endowed with this 'freak' *beta*, but the vase may of course have been engraved in Corinth and imported to Sicily afterwards (for this hypothesis, see *LSAG*² 264). Outside Sicily the 'reverse *ny*' *beta* is documented in Acarnania, Corinth, Leucas and Melos. For its use in the Elymian alphabet, see Agostiniani (1977: 112, 115–118).

Fig. 1. Graffito from Manico di Quarara. Photo courtesy of Stefano Vassallo

The *gamma* (height: 6 mm) has the 'half-diamond' shape in use at Selinous: it is a variant of the semicircular *gamma* common in both the Chalcidian and Doric scripts of Sicily.[5] In the graffito the 'half-diamond' *gamma* takes an almost vertical shape, either because of the engraver's lack of skill or because the surface of the vase is not even; a small angle on the left-hand side of the letter, however, was visible upon closer examination. The 'half-diamond' variant is the only type of *gamma* attested in the graffiti from the Elymian area, whereas Elymian coin legends also use the right-angled *gamma*.[6]

The fourth sign, which at first sight may seem more controversial, is a *delta* with a circular loop. The vertical left stroke is 6 mm high. The oblique line inserted on the lower right hand side of the letter is not an accidental scratch on the surface of the vase: it appears to have been engraved with the same stroke which completed the letter. In all likelihood, this line is a 'slip of the pen', caused by the unevenness of the surface in this section of the foot of the cup: traces of the wheel are still visible.

The *delta* with a circular loop was typical of the Chalcidian script, but in Sicily it spread to the Doric varieties too: it prominently features in the alphabet of Gela and its environs and it is also documented in the indigenous graffiti from Castiglione di Ragusa bearing the inscription ΝΕΝΔΑΣ.[7] This type of *delta* is sporadic at Selinous, where the letter has the angular loop instead.[8] Elymian inscriptions usually employ the isosceles *delta*: the sole instance of a circular-looped *delta* is documented in the graffito published in Agostiniani (1977), no. 288.[9]

It is noteworthy, therefore, that the Manico di Quarara graffito features a type of *delta* which was not common in the scripts of the area. On the other hand, the co-occurrence of the 'reverse *ny*' *beta* and the 'half-diamond' *gamma* suggests that the person who incised the graffito was acquainted with the Selinuntine or Elymian script. The graffito may have been produced *in situ* at Monte d'Oro di Montelepre; or it may have been brought to Monte d'Oro di Montelepre from a site located within Selinous' sphere of influence. Given its likely provenance (a burial in an indigenous site) it seems more probable that it is the writing exercise of a native rather than of a Greek. The indigenous interpretation of the abecedary is encouraged by the fact that the necropolis of Manico di Quarara has yielded three other texts, unanimously interpreted

---

[5] The introduction of the right-angled *gamma* into the Sicilian varieties is dated around twenty years before the so-called 'Euclidean' reform at Athens: see Brugnone (1995: 1298).

[6] Agostiniani (1977: 112).

[7] On these graffiti and their script, see Cordano (1993: 155).

[8] Brugnone (1995: 1310). See e.g. the funerary stele *IGDS* II 23 and the *defixio IGDS* II 27.

[9] See Agostiniani (1977: 112).

as documents in the Elymian language.[10] Scholars tend to describe the archaeological culture of Manico di Quarara as 'Sicanian', but the site is located in an area which must have had intensive contacts with the Elymians, who may have been responsible for the spread of writing among the local community.[11] As far as one can tell, the epigraphic habit in the area between Segesta and Montelepre is unitary.[12]

3. The Sicilian abecedaries

Although limited to the first four letters, the Manico di Quarara abecedary – the third known example of such an item from Sicily – is a document of great importance for the study of the diffusion of writing on the island. The first of the other two abecedaries is inscribed on a sherd of a Samian amphora unearthed in a pottery workshop at Motya and dated to the first half of the 5th century.[13] The letter sequence, which ends with *qoppa*, features an unusual array of alphabetic types: alongside a 'red type' *chi* (= /ks/) one finds the right-angled *gamma*, which is not typical of Sicily where, as stated above, this letter usually has the 'half-diamond' or half-circular shape. Other noteworthy features are the squared *digamma*, the roughly outlined shape of the *zeta*, the lack of *theta* and *pi*, and the fact that in the alphabetic sequence *ksi* and *omicron* are inverted. Following the interpretation of the *editores principes*, Dubois (*IGDS* II 79, p. 156) describes this mixture as the result of "un exercice scolaire fait par un jeune punique dont les modèles grecs pouvaient être nombreux dans ce comptoir carthaginois".[14]

The second Sicilian abecedary is engraved on a sherd from a black-glaze vase unearthed in tomb 113 at Montagna di Marzo (central Sicily, north-west of Piazza Armerina).[15] The text, of which Manganaro (1999: 95, fig. 51) provides the first photograph, does not feature in the usual epigraphic *corpora* from Greek Sicily, probably because it is interpreted as an indigenous product.[16] An element in favour of this interpretation is the shape of the *alpha*, which has a vertical stroke in place of the central bar. This type of *alpha* is common in indigenous inscriptions from the Sicel area and is viewed by some scholars as a marker of cultural identity.[17] Another noteworthy feature of this abecedary is the isosceles *delta*, a type which is rare in Sicilian epigraphy before the mid-5th century but is often employed in the non-Hellenic texts from Montagna di Marzo.[18]

The abecedary from Manico di Quarara too features a sign endowed with cultural significance. The 'reverse *ny*' *beta* is characteristic of the Elymian script and, as noted above, it may well be that the inhabitants of the site on the Monte d'Oro had become acquainted with writing through Elymian intermedia-

---

[10] The first two are published in Agostiniani (1977), no. 283 (ΠΙΝΑΣ) and no. 319 (ΑΤΑΤΥΚΑΙΕΜΙ, an ownership inscription?); the latter was interpreted as Elymian already in Tusa (1970: 248). On the third graffito, interpreted as KYTENHOY, see the brief account in Ferreri (2012: 253).

[11] See Greco (1991: 199), who endorses the identification of the site with the Sicanian centre of Hykkara proposed by Di Stefano (1988–1989). Ferreri (2012) is more cautious and avoids using ethnic labels. Much has been written on the complex question of the individuation and interpretation of 'Sicanian' and 'Elymian' sites. For the archaeological side of this question, Albanese Procelli (2003) is still a fundamental work, whereas the epigraphic and linguistic aspects are discussed by Poccetti (2012: 70–74) and Tribulato (2012: 7–10), with further bibliography.

[12] Agostiniani (1988–1989: 180) advances an interesting interpretation of the discrepancy between the archaelogical description of certain sites as 'Sicanian' and the 'Elymian' epigraphic remains by suggesting that this area of Sicily was characterized by a state of diglossia, whereby Elymian was the high language, and therefore the only one which was recorded in writing.

[13] Falsone and Calascibetta (1991) = *IGDS* II 79. That the abecedary was produced on site is suggested by the fact that it was not inscribed on the intact vase, but directly on the sherd: see Falsone and Calascibetta (1991: 696).

[14] See Falsone and Calascibetta (1991: 697).

[15] See the brief description in Agostiniani (1980–1981: 512) and Agostiniani (1988–1989: 189). The alternative interpretation given by Manganaro (1999: 25) that the four letters should be read as the beginning of the name Ἀβιδᾶς (*sic*) "derivato da Ἄβιδα· ἀνδρεῖον, glossa in codici di Esichio" is fanciful.

[16] It is therefore incorrect to state that the Motya abecedary "è il primo alfabetario greco finora trovato sia nel mondo punico che in Sicilia, inclusa la parte greca" (Falsone and Calascibetta 1991: 691).

[17] For this interpretation of the '*alpha siculum*', see Agostiniani (1988–1989: 189), Agostiniani (2012), Tribulato (2015).

[18] See e.g. *IGDS* I 166–168 and *IGDS* II 70–72. Montagna di Marzo has also yielded Greek texts.

tion. This text may offer decisive proof in favour of the hypothesis that in the Elymian alphabet the sign representing the phoneme /b/ was the 'reverse *ny*' and not the normal *beta* (<B>), which is also sometimes employed in Elymian inscriptions.[19] If it is an indigenous product, the abecedary disproves the idea that the 'reverse *ny*' sign was a mere variant of a 'normal' *ny*, written incorrectly.[20]

4. Learning to write the Greek way in non-Greek Sicily

The three Sicilian abecedaries have one thing in common: they come from non-Hellenic centres which were in close contact with the Greeks.[21] The alphabetic mixture of the Motya abecedary does not support the idea that writing came to Motya from a particular Greek city: on the contrary, it is indicative of a mixed context in which Punics cohabited with Greeks from Selinous, Gela, Himera and Syracuse, as well as from the mainland.[22]

In this respect, Motya is comparable to other ancient maritime sites, in which contact between languages and peoples was the means through which writing and its learning could spread. Aside from the classic, and controversial, hypotheses concerning the role of Al-Mina and Crete, a more fitting parallel might be Lattes, the site of an ancient port in southern France which has yielded two abecedaries. These texts have been interpreted as evidence of the teaching of Greek in a Gallo-Greek environment.[23]

By contrast, the evidence offered by the abecedaries of Manico di Quarara and Montagna di Marzo partly defies this somewhat strict theoretical model. In both cases, the sites are located in the interior and at a certain distance from prominent Greek cities. Of the two, only the site on the Monte d'Oro is relatively close to the coast: in the archaic age it was probably connected to a sort of emporium situated at the mouth of the Nocella river, an area of importance for the indigenous peoples living in the environs of modern-day Partinico (south of Palermo).[24] These two sites, therefore, call for a more nuanced approach to the issue of the circulation of writing in multiethnic environments.

In spite of its brevity, the Manico di Quarara graffito features an interesting blend of alphabetic types. As mentioned above, the circular-looped *delta* is not a common sign in Elymian or Selinuntine epigraphy and may rather derive from knowledge of the 'red' variety. It is not impossible that Himera – the only Greek city on the north coast and a fundamental cultural and commercial hinge between the Greeks and the indigenous peoples of central-northern Sicily – played a role in the spread of the sign to the Montelepre area.[25] The fact that some vases currently at the Museo Civico of Montelepre are made with a type of clay which may be Himeraian (S. Vassallo, personal communication) suggests that direct contacts between the two sites may have been common.

The 'indigenousness' of these three Sicilian abecedaries and the alphabetic blend they contain opens up several questions concering the circulation of Greek culture and writing between the more Hellenized areas and those which were less exposed to contact. It may be that the individuals who incised these abecedaries were just learning to use writing, an acculturation marker which played an important role in the linguistic Hellenization of the indigenous peoples, probably completed by the end of the 5th century (after which date we no longer find any epigraphic records in the indigenous languages).

As concerns Manico di Quarara, the dating of the graffito is compatible with the period in which the site increased its contacts with the coastal area.[26] This economic and cultural change is visible in the

---

[19] The alternation between the 'reverse *ny*' sign and normal *beta*, and the question of their exact phonetic value, are central to the scholarly debate on the linguistic interpretation of the Elymian language. Luciano Agostiniani has devoted many contributions to this issue; in particular, see Agostiniani (1977: 115–118) and Agostiniani (1990: 356–357).

[20] For this original interpretation of the 'reverse *ny*' sign, see Marchesini (2003) and Marchesini (2012: 109–110).

[21] For an overview on these sites and their epigraphic record, see Moreschini (1992) and De Vido (1993).

[22] Falsone and Calascibetta (1991: 698).

[23] On the texts, see Bats (2004: 10, 17). On this interpretation of Lattes, see Mullen (2013: 112).

[24] Ferreri (2012: 254).

[25] On the role of Himera, see Vassallo (2002) and Vassallo (2015).

[26] Ferreri (2012: 253) gives an account of the Greek vases, especially of Attic import, found in tomb XII.

evolution of funerary practices, where Greek-type individual burials occur alongside indigenous tombs containing several depositions.[27] The grave goods, sometimes rich in Greek pottery, identify the burials of those who had attained a high role in the local indigenous society and had begun the process of Greek acculturation, which may further be signalled by the displaying of writing.[28]

Other studies have already noted that in indigenous burials there is a correlation between the presence of inscriptions in the Greek alphabet and other elements suggestive of social prestige. Work carried out on the necropoleis of Balate di Marianopoli (central Sicily, north of modern-day Caltanissetta) and Montagna di Marzo has documented the elite's appropriation of writing as a marker of status.[29]

The fact that the necropolis of Manico di Quarara, just like the one at Montagna di Marzo, has yielded an abecedary could now further confirm this theory: the abecedaries, incomplete as they might be, have ended up in burials because they carry a significance which goes beyond the value of their support. The Manico di Quarara graffito therefore adds precious information about the presence of individuals who knew or wished to learn how to write in indigenous areas which have yet to be adequately surveyed: it contributes to widening our knowledge of the cultural dynamics at play in western Sicily, where ethnic and linguistic cohabitation was a particularly complex and varied process.

References

Agostiniani, L. (1977) *Iscrizioni anelleniche di Sicilia. Le iscrizioni elime*. Firenze.

– (1980–1981) Epigrafia e linguistica anelleniche di Sicilia: Prospettive, problemi, acquisizioni. *Kokalos* 26–27 (1), 503–530.

– (1988–1989) I modi del contatto linguistico tra Greci e indigeni nella Sicilia antica. *Kokalos* 34–35 (1), 167–208.

– (1990) La lingua degli Elimi: per uno stato della questione. In G. Nenci, S. Tusa, V. Tusa (eds.), *Gli Elimi e l'area elima fino all'inizio della prima guerra punica. Atti del seminario di studi* (Palermo – Contessa Entellina, 25–28 maggio 1989). Palermo, 345–368.

– (2012) Alfabetizzazione della Sicilia pregreca. *Aristonothos: Scritti per il Mediterraneo antico* 4, 139–164.

Albanese Procelli, R. M. (2003) *Sicani, Siculi, Elimi. Forme di identità, modi di contatto e processi di trasformazione*. Milano.

– (2012) Sepolture di guerrieri nella prima metà del V sec. a.C. nella Sicilia interna. L'evidenza da Montagna di Marzo. In C. Miccichè, S. Modeo, L. Santagati (eds.), *Diodoro Siculo e la Sicilia indigena*. Atti del convegno (Caltanissetta, 21–22 maggio 2005). Caltanissetta, 109–120. http://www.siciliantica.eu/writable/allegati/Scarica+volume3656.pdf (15-06-2016).

Bats (2004) Grec et gallo-grec: les graffites sur céramique aux sources de l'écriture en Gaule méridionale (IIe–Ier s. av. J.-C. In M. Fèguere, P.-Y. Lambert (eds.), *L'écriture dans la société gallo-romaine*. Paris, 7–20.

Brugnone, A. (1995) Gli alfabeti arcaici delle *poleis* siceliote e l'introduzione dell'alfabeto milesio. *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* (s. III) 25 (4), 1297–1327.

Cordano, F. (1993) Coppe ioniche usate dai Siculi. *Bollettino d'Arte* 80–81, 155–158.

Cucco, R. M., Polizzi, G., Tribulato, O. (forthcoming) Nuovo recupero di reperti archeologici da Montelepre (PA). *Notiziario archeologico della Soprintendenza di Palermo* 2016.

De Vido, S. (1993) Mozia. Fonti epigrafiche. *Bibliografia topografica della colonizzazione greca in Italia e nelle isole tirreniche* 12, 80–82.

Di Stefano, C. A. (1988–1989) Insediamenti indigeni ellenizzati in territorio palermitano. In G. Nenci, S. Tusa, V. Tusa (eds.), *Gli Elimi e l'area elima fino all'inizio della prima guerra punica*. Atti del seminario di studi (Palermo – Contessa Entellina, 25–28 maggio 1989). Palermo, 247–258.

EG = M. Guarducci, *Epigrafia greca*. 4 vols. Rome, 1967–1978.

Falsone, G., Calascibetta, A. B. (1991) Un abecedario greco su un ostrakon di Mozia. In Cl. Baurain, C. Bonnet, V. Krings (eds.), *Phoinikeia grammata. Lire et écrire en Méditerranée*. Namur, 691–699.

---

[27] Ferreri (2012: 254). The coexistence of the two types of burials in indigenous sites is discussed in Albanese Procelli (2003: 164–175).

[28] Ferreri (2012: 254).

[29] Albanese Procelli (2003: 238, 242); Ferreri (2012: 256 nos. 56–57). At Montagna di Marzo this is especially true of the grave goods of the notable tomb 31, of which Albanese Procelli (2012) gives an excellent socio-historical reinterpretation. On the socio-linguistic meaning of its inscriptions, see Agostiniani (2012: 149–150), Tribulato (2015: 65–68).

Ferreri, G. (2012) Monte d'Oro di Montelepre. La necropoli di Manico di Quarara. Nuovi dati. In C. Ampolo (ed.), *Sicilia occidentale. Studi, rassegne, ricerche*. Pisa, 251–259.

Greco, C. (1991) Monte d'Oro e la necropoli in località 'Manico di Quarara'. In AA.VV., *Di terra in terra. Nuove scoperte archeologiche nella provincia di Palermo*. Palermo, 196–202.

IGDS I = L. Dubois, *Inscriptions grecques dialectales de Sicile*. Rome, 1989.

IGDS II = L. Dubois, *Inscriptions grecques dialectales de Sicile. Tome II*. Genève, 2008.

*LSAG*² = L. H. Jeffery, *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece. A Study of the Origin of the Greek Alphabet and Its Development from the Eighth to the Fifth Centuries B.C.* Revised Edition with a Supplement by A. W. Johnston. Oxford, 1990.

Manganaro, G. (1999) *Sikelika. Studi di antichità e di epigrafia della Sicilia greca*. Urbino.

Marchesini, S. (2003) Il segno И in Elimo: una nuova proposta. *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa* (s. III) 1–2, 289–301.

– (2012) The Elymian Language. In O. Tribulato (ed.), *Language and Linguistic Contact in Ancient Sicily*, 95–114.

Moreschini, D. (1992) Montagna di Marzo. Fonti epigrafiche. *Bibliografia topografica della colonizzazione greca in Italia e nelle isole tirreniche* 10, 229–230.

Mullen, A. (2013) *Southern Gaul and the Mediterranean. Multilingualism and Multiple Identities in the Iron Age and Roman Periods*. Cambridge.

Poccetti, P. (2012) Language Relations in Sicily. Evidence for the Speech of the Σικανοί, Σικελοί and Others. In O. Tribulato (ed.), *Language and Linguistic Contact in Ancient Sicily*. Cambridge, 49–94.

Tribulato, O. (2012) "So Many Sicilies". Introducing Language and Linguistic Contact in Ancient Sicily. In O. Tribulato (ed.), *Language and Linguistic Contact in Ancient Sicily*. Cambridge, 1–45.

– (2015) Interferenza grafemica ed interferenza linguistica nella Sicilia antica. In D. Baglioni, O. Tribulato (eds.), *Contatti di lingue – contatti di scritture. Multilinguismo e multigrafismo dall'Età antica alla Cina contemporanea*. Venice, 59–83.

Tusa, V. (1970) Frammenti di ceramica con graffiti da Segesta V. *Kokalos* 16–17, 223–249.

Vassallo, S. (2002) Himera. La colonia greca e gli indigeni. In F. Spatafora, S. Vassallo (eds.), *Sicani Elimi e Greci. Storie di contatti e terre di frontiera*. Palermo, 37–55.

– (2015) Oggetti in movimento in età arcaica e classica ad Himera, porto sicuro per uomini, merci, idee. In E. Kistler, B. Öhlinger, M. Mohr, M. Hoernes (eds.), *Sanctuaries and the Power of Consumption. Networking and the Formation of Elites in the Archaic Western Mediterranean World*. Proceedings of the International Conference (Innsbruck, 20th–23rd March 2012). Wiesbaden, 153–164.

Olga Tribulato, Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Dorsoduro 3484/D, 30121 Venezia, Italia

olga.tribulato@unive.it