

A PARADIGM SHIFT IN THE STUDY OF EARLY GREEK WRITING

ELVIRA ASTORECA (N.) *Early Greek Alphabetic Writing. A Linguistic Approach*. (Contexts of and Relations between Early Writing Systems 5.) Pp. x + 150, ills, colour maps. Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2021. Cased, £38. ISBN: 978-1-78925-743-4.

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This book, which is available in print and as an open access PDF version (https://books.casematepublishing.com/Early_Greek_Alphabetic_Writing.pdf), is a revision of E.A.'s 2020 Cambridge dissertation. It opens with an excellent contextualisation of the topic as E.A. aptly scrutinises the most pressing and controversial questions surrounding the advent of alphabetic writing in Greece (Chapter 1). This is followed by the book's briefest chapter, an attempt to embed the study in a grapholinguistic framework both theoretically and methodologically (Chapter 2). What ensues is an analysis of abecedaria as vital epigraphic evidence (Chapter 3), after which the crux of E.A.'s enterprise is located in Chapters 4 and 5, namely in-depth examinations of vocalic and consonantal notation in epichoric alphabets, respectively. The book ends with a concise conclusion.

'The emergence of the "Greek alphabet" is still today one of the main mysteries faced by those interested in the history of Greek writing' (p. 1) reads the first sentence of E.A.'s book. Setting the frame in such a way represents a clever move, as it lays the groundwork for the highly readable first chapter, which promotes the argument that almost all of the central questions surrounding Greek writing remain without conclusive and/or convincing answers: where Semitic writing was first adopted for Greek ('Place', Section 1.1), when this happened ('Date', Section 1.2), which script served as the model for the creation of 'the' Greek alphabet ('Model', Section 1.3), the Greeks' motivation behind adapting alphabetic writing in the first place ('Earliest use', Section 1.4) as well as miscellaneous remaining questions ('Other related questions', Section 1.5).

Rounding off the introductory chapter, E.A. argues for the importance of new perspectives and situates her approach in the CREWS (Contexts of and Relations between Early Writing Systems) project. Specifically, detailed information on the archaeological and material contexts of recently unearthed alphabetic inscriptions ushers in a shift towards interdisciplinarity that 'sees Greek alphabetic writing as a comprehensive phenomenon which brings together more aspects than just a script' (p. 20). At least as significant, however, is E.A.'s adoption of the epichoric approach (following A. Kirchhoff, *Studien zur Geschichte des griechischen Alphabets* [1826], and L.H. Jeffery and A.W. Johnston, *Local Scripts of Archaic Greece* [1990], among others). She argues that the difficulty in providing satisfying answers to questions relating to early Greek alphabetic writing stems from its treatment as one unity; against this background, describing local alphabets individually is expected to prove more revelatory. This is already the gist on which the rest of the book builds its impressive linguistic analysis. In sum, this first chapter wastes no time to establish E.A.'s confident voice; it is evident from the very first pages that she has studied the relevant scholarship in every detail, and her engagement with it is critical and innovative to such a degree that it exceeds one's expectations of a literature review.

The question of how to study local Greek alphabets sees E.A. adopting a grapholinguistic approach in the book's shortest chapter (Chapter 2). As grapholinguistics is a still-young discipline devoted to the comprehensive study of writing as a complex phenomenon, a welter

of conceptual and terminological issues remain contentious. E.A. does not claim to settle them, yet they are inevitably invoked by various of her choices. In her version of a multi-modular model of writing systems, inspired by M. Neef ('Writing Systems as Modular Objects', *Open Linguistics* 1 [2015]), they comprise, firstly, a graphic system (including scripts as sets of characters, which she calls 'graphemes', and their variants, which she calls 'allographs' or, on occasion, 'allomorphs'). In combination with the second module, a language system (its grammar and lexicon), they constitute the notation system, at the heart of which are 'graphematic relationships', i.e. relations between material graphemes and, as in the Greek alphabets, phonemes; these relationships are at the centre of the book's main chapters. Crucially, this model allows E.A. to conceptualise the different epichoric alphabets not merely as different scripts that materialise one and the same writing system ('the' Greek alphabet), but, given the significant graphematic differences that she focuses resolutely on, as distinct notation systems. She thus cements that, from a (grapho)linguistic point of view, analysing these local alphabets individually is not just possible – it is essential. The second part of the chapter is devoted to the extensive database that E.A. amassed, which includes – without geographical constraints – all to date available eighth- and seventh-century inscriptions that show alphabetic writing for varieties of Greek. After a discussion of the 'unified' Greek phoneme inventory used as the basis for the ensuing analyses, this culminates in two useful tables that provide lists of characters with their allographs (Table 2.3) and with their possible phonetic values (Table 2.4).

In the third, brief but indispensable, chapter E.A. presents the different scripts used for the various alphabets, with 'scripts' understood as graphic repertoires of characters that at this point in the analysis are still devoid of linguistic value. They are reconstructed using abecedaria, which are informative not only as regards the characters employed (i.e. their shapes and variants) but also their sequence. If compared and analysed diachronically, differences between them indicate important changes, which E.A. calls 'reforms'. From a synchronic grapholinguistic perspective, this term is commonly applied to deliberate changes of codified orthographic regulations implemented by authorities of linguistic policy; while E.A. provides possible explanations for the structural aspect of what she calls 'reforms', the motivation behind them and the agents driving them are not addressed, leaving open important sociolinguistic issues, as these changes point to relevant but ultimately difficult-to-answer questions of agency – how decisions were made, including how conscious they were, how democratic or top-down. Notably, this only underlines E.A.'s commitment to a structural perspective, which runs consistently through the entire book and could (and should) be supplemented by other perspectives in future studies. As a graphetic analysis systematising epigraphic data, this chapter is highly valuable, especially the final section (3.4), in which *Reduktions-* and *Additionsreformen* (terms adopted from R. Wachter, 'Zur Vorgeschichte des griechischen Alphabets', *Kadmos* 28 [1989]) applied to the Northwest Semitic model are summarised.

With more than 60 pages (over half the volume), the following two chapters on vocalic and consonantal notation represent the book's main achievement. Including detailed analyses enriched with clearly presented and helpful tables and maps, they allow E.A. to draw conclusions that will stimulate further discussion: concerning vowel notation, which was already present in Northeast Mediterranean (NEM) writing, she posits that the Greeks did not invent an entirely new type of writing system (p. 82), and she also rejects the assumption of a monogenesis of Greek writing (pp. 85–6), given that an 'Uralphabet' would not only be difficult to attest with current evidence but also that two different branches of core vocalic letters point to two different alphabetic traditions, which already existed in the Aegean/NEM at the time of the earliest Greek inscriptions. Furthermore, E.A. continues to press that notable innovations (such as different signs

for /ɔ:/) warrant an epichoric approach and, more specifically, that *Funktionsreformen* call for a comparative graphematic analysis. Consonantal notation on the whole raises fewer controversial issues, and E.A. again focuses on individual traits, found mostly in the notation of aspirated voiceless stops and consonant clusters. However, all consonant phonemes and their notation(s) receive fine-grained treatments that make for an overall enthralling read (e.g. the discussion of /s/). It is notable that, throughout, E.A. expresses opinions on controversial matters, scrutinising, for example, the theory that Greek vowel letters were created to record Homeric poetry (p. 82) or the influential categorisations in Kirchhoff's coloured maps (pp. 124–6) – not without providing solid argumentation and alternative solutions.

Judging from an outside(r) perspective (as a grapholinguist rather than a classical philologist), I would recommend the book to scholars of early Greek writing but also to grapholinguists of all backgrounds who are interested in the application of a diachronic comparative approach. At 138 pages and with a reader-friendly structure, the book is highly digestible despite the density of information; if pressed for time, readers are well advised to read at least the conclusion thoroughly, as there the book's numerous merits are pointedly collected. In sum, it does no less than call for a paradigm shift in studying early Greek alphabetic writing – and convincingly so.

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