

The Happy Farmer: A Student Composition from Roman Egypt

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THANKS TO ROBERT KASTER'S recent study of grammarians in late antiquity,¹ we now have a better understanding of how these "guardians of language" lived, of their place in society, their social relations, and their economic circumstances. Despite his limited mobility, the grammarian emerges as a formidable *custos* of language and tradition, entrusted with providing a firm base of continuity in a changing world. Language, its conventions, and the texts of the traditional poets were endlessly scrutinized to illustrate and confirm the grammarian's rules. Because the profession was bound by tradition and convention, a grammarian's classroom would not have differed much from one part of the empire to another. Yet little in the literary sources actually tells what went on in his classes. For this we must turn to the surviving school exercises.

These texts have in the past received only marginal attention. As soon as a literary passage was identified as a student's school-room exercise, its value as a witness for a given text was held suspect because of its provenance. When the exercise brought to light a student's effort at original composition, it was treated with even greater disregard.

But the composition on the tablet presented here can claim at least the merit of shedding some light on ancient educational practices. These ten lines, concerning the life of a hardworking but happy farmer, show something of the percolation of ideas and motifs from a higher level of education to the grammarian's classroom; and the cross-shaped signs drawn at the end of each line offer an opportunity for examining the different methods of writing verse in the schools.

¹ R. A. Kaster, *Guardians of Language. The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley 1988).

I

The tablet (PLATE 1),² found in the ruins of Athribis in the Delta in 1853, was published initially in 1865 by G. Parthey,³ who considered it a book cover with an invocation to St George. In 1890 a new text appeared in Wilcken's list of manuscripts of the Prussian Royal Library,⁴ and in 1901 he re-edited the tablet, explicitly rejecting Parthey's identification.⁵ Wilcken confessed that he did not understand the tablet completely, but he regarded it as a school exercise, written in dreadful poetic language, on the trials of a farmer's life. "Vielleicht," Wilcken concluded, "regt meine noch mangelhafte Lesung dieses strafbaren Schülergedichtes einen Anderen zur genaueren Edition und Interpretation an." In 1913 H. Leclercq republished the text.⁶ Without explicitly saying so, he reprinted Wilcken's first text of 1890 with only one change, and that a manifestly incorrect reading— $\alpha\rho\gamma\omicron\iota$ for $\alpha\rho\rho\iota$ at the end of line 5—in effect adding to the student's other mistakes.

The tablet has two holes close to the edge of one of the long sides, in which some thread was found. It was probably part of a notebook. One side is blank, the other carries ten lines of writing, traced with a thick pen, running parallel to the longer dimension. In several places the text is now considerably faded, but Parthey himself lamented the poor condition of the surface. The text is marred by several stains, some of them extensive. It is difficult to say if some words were cancelled or merely smudged. Both Wilcken and Leclercq speak of a composition with teacher's corrections, but the only sign of correction is an expunging dot on top of the ρ of $\epsilon\rho\pi\iota\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\xi\omega$ at the end of line 2, which could have been added by the student. Two acute accents also appear: one, at the wrong place,⁷ in line 3 and another in line 4. Wilcken tentatively dated the hand to the fourth

² Ms. graec. qu. 36 in the catalogue of the Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Pack² 1883); cf. E. G. Turner, *Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World*² (London 1987) Suppl. pl. IIε.

³ G. Parthey, *Abh Berl* 1865, 139f.

⁴ W. Studemund and L. Cohn, *Verzeichnis der griechischen Handschriften der königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin I* (Berlin 1890) 188 no. 339.

⁵ See *Archiv* 1 (1901) 428f.

⁶ *BAnclit* 3 (1913) 209–12.

⁷ The mark may indicate the quantity of the diphthong, but the sign used seems more appropriate for an accent.

century. It is certainly not the hand of a beginner: given its mixture of words written with letters separated and words written cursively and hastily, the writing resembles the school tablets of older students.⁸ The form of some letters (e.g. the v-shaped *upsilon* and *alpha* with the loop open at the top) seems to point to a date close to the fifth century.⁹

The poor condition of the tablet renders autopsy no more fruitful than examination of a photograph,¹⁰ but it is possible to improve the text considerably, despite the student's frequent phonetic spelling, which at times complicates the work of understanding, restoration, and interpretation. Below is an uncorrected transcription of the scribe's text, with accents, breathings, spaces between words, and apparatus, followed by a normalized text and literal translation.¹¹

Μέγας γεωργὸς τῶν ἀνδραγαθι[[ωντ]]ῶν ὁ κατάλωγος +
 δότε μοι λέγιν καὶ στίχοισι μεν ἐπιλέξω +
 πάμπωρος γεωργὸς κἄν αὐτουργὸς σπῖρι γέαν +
 4 γλυκαιρῶν καμάτων τερπόμενος ἐν ἀγροικίαις +
 ζυγῶ δαμάζο βόα καὶ εὐθετο ἀρωτῆριν +
 νυκτὶ μελένη χορτάσασιν ἐπιμελούμενος +
 ἐν ἄμασι ὡσαύτως τὴν ἄσχοισιν ποιούμενος +
 8 αὐτάρκη γεωργὸς εὐρῖν μὴ δινόμενος +
 φροντίδα ἔχων ἀεὶ τῆς γεωργίας χαίρων +
 τῶν καμάτων ἀνώθεν τῶν καμάτων [ἔχει καρ]πίαν +

1 ἀνδραγαθ ... των Wilcken¹, ἀνδραγαθ ... νων for ἀνδραγαθημένων Wilcken². 2 μεν (?) ἐπιλέξω Wilcken¹, μενερτοι λέξω Wilcken², expunging dot on top of ρ. 3 on the first υ of αὐτουργὸς acute accent, σπῖρι γείαν Wilcken¹, σπῖρι ἐαυτῶ Wilcken². 4 on the second α of καμάτων an acute accent, ἀγροὶ ... Wilcken¹, ἀγροῖς

⁸ See e.g. the six tablets, part of a wooden notebook, Bodl. Gk. Inscr. 3019, edited by P. J. Parsons in *ZPE* 6 (1970) 133–49.

⁹ Certain features of the hand appear in *P. Oxy.* XIII 1614, dated to the second half of the fifth century: G. Cavallo and H. Maehler, *Greek Bookhands of the Early Byzantine Period* (London 1987) 48 pl. 20b.

¹⁰ I thank Roger Bagnall for having inspected personally the tablet in April 1991. He reports, however, that its condition did not permit further improvements of the text and that the photograph was superior to the original in most respects.

¹¹ In the apparatus Wilcken¹ and Wilcken² refer respectively to the versions of 1890 (*supra* n.4) and 1901 (*supra* n.5).

Wilcken². 5 ζυγῶν ἀρμαξο Wilcken¹, ζυγῶ διαρμάξο for (διαρμόζων) Wilcken². 8 αὐτός Wilcken¹, αὐτός Wilcken². 9 ἔχων Wilcken¹, init. [οὐδεμίαν], fin. χαρ[άν] Wilcken². 10 ...καμάτων ἄνωθεν Wilcken¹, [.....]των ἄνωθεν τῶν καμάτων.....ϊαν Wilcken².

Text with Revised Orthography

- Μέγας γεωργός. Τῶν ἀνδραγαθῶν ὁ κατάλωγος.
 δότε μοι λέγειν καὶ στίχοισί μευ ἐπιλέξω.
 πάμπορος γεωργός κἂν αὐτουργός σπείρη γαίαν
- 4 γλυκερῶν καμάτων τερπόμενος ἐν ἀγροικίαις
 ζυγῶ δαμάζων βοῦν καὶ εὐθετῶν ἀροτήριον
 νυκτὶ μελαίνῃ χορτάσμασιν ἐπιμελούμενος
 ἐν ἅμασι ὡσαύτως τὴν ἄσκησιν ποιούμενος
- 8 αὐτάρκῃ γεωργός εὐρεῖν μὴ δυνάμενος
 φροντίδα ἔχων ἀεὶ τῆς γεωργίας χαίρων
 τῶν καμάτων ἄνωθεν τῶν καμάτων [ἔχει καρ]πείαν.

Translation of Emended Version

Great is the farmer. A list of his noble virtues.
 Grant me to speak and I will address (them) in my verses.
 Well provided is the farmer even if he sows the land all by
 himself,
 enjoying sweet toils in the country,
 taming the ox with the yoke and setting it there to plow,
 in the dark night taking care of the fodder,
 during the days as well practicing his trade.
 Even when the farmer cannot find sufficiency,
 ever devoting his care, with joy, to farming,
 he has the fruit of toils upon toils.

Commentary

1 Wilcken translated the first line: “great is the list of the good deeds of the farmer.” ἀνδραγαθημένων, the passive participle of ἀνδραγαθέω=‘behave in an upright manner’, seems a very unlikely reading, since it is practically impossible to identify the proposed letters underneath the extensive cancellation. In addition, this reading forced Wilcken to suppose that the student had wrongly written γεωργός for γεωργοῦ. An examination of this student’s many ‘mistakes’, however, shows that they consist largely of phonetic spell-

ing errors, common from the beginning of the Roman to the end of the Byzantine period. Most are itacistic mistakes, interchanges due to the loss of quantitative distinction, and omission of final consonants, which were frequently dropped in pronunciation. The student does not, however, seem to have specific problems with morphology or syntax and presumably would not have confused the nominative γεωργός with the genitive. It is better to suppose a pause after γεωργός and to read what follows as the genitive plural of ἀνδραγαθία. Originally the student may have written the active participle of ἀνδραγαθέω, which he then corrected. The first line thus forms a 'title' for the composition.

2 Here the author of the composition is probably addressing the Muses, asking for inspiration and assistance. He is using a solemn style well suited to a prayer. The form στίχοισι is an Ionic-Aeolic dative plural, and the following μεν can be regarded as an Ionic formation. As we shall see, the composition includes several poetic terms and forms that can be regarded as specifically Homeric. Wilcken added a question mark after μεν; and the word also puzzled Leclercq. With the verb ἐπιλέγω, which also has the meaning 'repeat, pronounce a spell' (e.g. K. Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae* [Leipzig 1931] I 3.273, 410), the student meant perhaps to allude to the rhythm of the composition.

3 πάμπωρος is unattested. Wilcken argued that, since πῶρος is glossed as ταλαίπωρος by Hesychius, the term could mean *ganz elend*, 'totally miserable'. This meaning was in keeping with Wilcken's pessimistic interpretation of the composition as a whole. On the other hand, although the text clearly emphasizes the toils of the farmer, we are repeatedly told that they are easy to bear. Line 4 makes this quite clear. The obscure πάμπωρος was perhaps written with *omega* instead of *omicron* (a spelling with exchanged vowel quantity that this student appears to use several times, as in line 1 and three times in line 5) and would in this case be an adjectival compound of πόρος like εὐπορος, with the meaning 'bountifully endowed, well provided'. The word αὐτουργός appears in Menander (*Dysk.* 369) in reference to a poor farmer. At Eur. *Or.* 920 it appears in the context of a positive evaluation of farm life. After ἐάν, in the same line, one would expect a subjunctive. The word σπιρι is probably to be regarded as an itacistic mistake for σπείρη (F. T. GIGNAC, *A Grammar of Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods* I [Milan 1976: hereafter 'Gignac'] 235f). There is also the possibility that σπιρι stands for the indicative σπείρει. The construction of ἐάν with the indicative, rare in the Ptolemaic period, was used quite frequently after the second century A.D. (E. Mayser, *Grammatik der griechischen Papyri aus der*

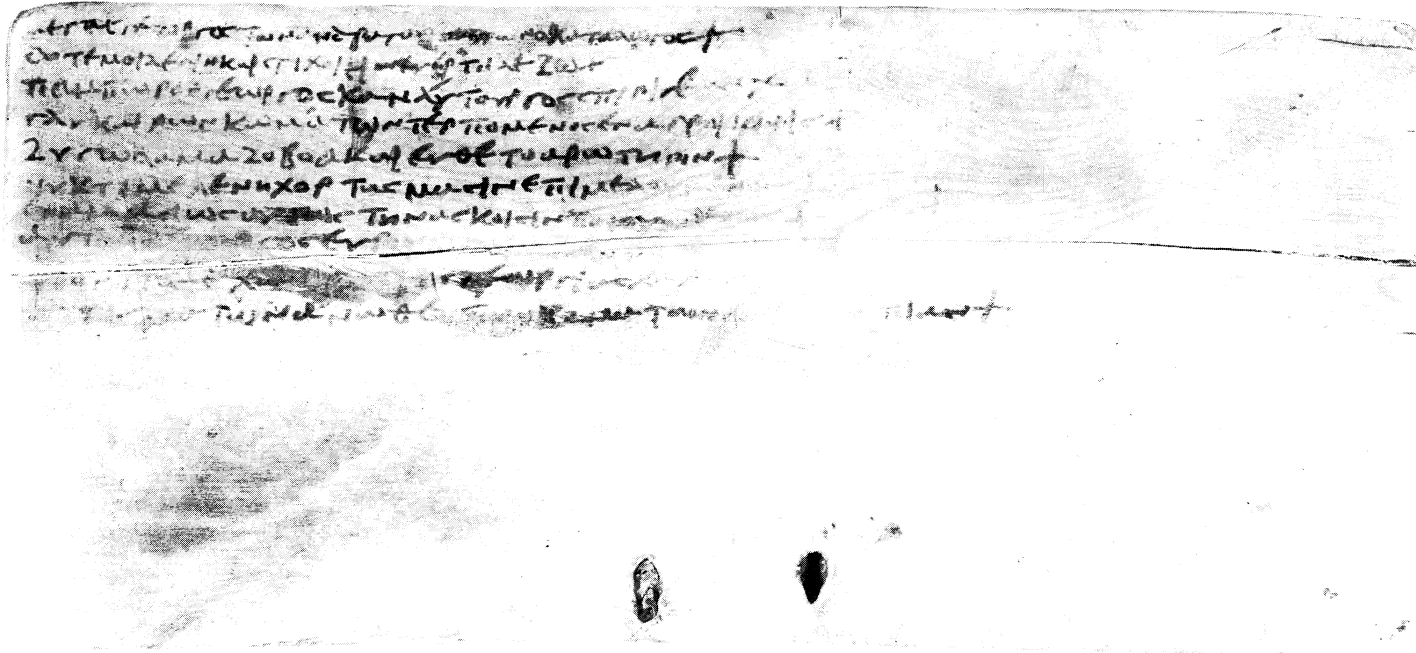
Ptolemäerzeit II.1 [Berlin 1926] 284f). Because the student seems to know his syntax but often spells words phonetically, I prefer to regard the σπιρι as an itacism. The word γέαν at the end of the line seems reasonably certain, if quite faded. It probably represents the phonetic spelling of γαῖαν, a poetic word common in Homer. It is also possible that the student meant to use the uncontracted form of γῆν. Such uncontracted forms as γέαι, γεῶν, γέας were used frequently, although the accusative singular—τὴν ψιλογραφουμένην γέαν ἥς συναίρεμα ἡ γῆ (Herodianus, *Περὶ ὀρθογραφίας* 3.2.409.26)—appears only once, in an anonymous epigram of the *Greek Anthology* (7.131.2).

4 At the end of the line Leclercq read ἀργοι. The word ἀγροικία is used more commonly in the singular. In the plural (e.g. *Diod.* 1.36.9, *Plut. Mor.* 311B) ἀγροικίαι can mean 'farmhouse' or 'the country'.

5 A line that Leclercq pronounced *désastreuse*. It is certainly difficult, although once again the student can be partly rehabilitated. The line gave some problems to Wilcken. His first, unsatisfying version ζυγῶν ἀρμάξο βόα καξευθετο ἀρωτήριον was simply adopted by Leclercq, who tried in vain to explain it. The reading δαμάξο, however, is quite certain. The verb was frequently used in relation to animals, especially by Homer, who seems to have been a source of special inspiration for the author of this composition. δαμάξο and εὐθετο represent two present participles that were written with an exchange in vowel quantity and omission of final ν, both phenomena being quite frequent in the Roman and Byzantine periods (Gignac 111–14, 325). The accusative βόα (for βοῦν) is Ionic, poetic, and exceedingly rare. ἀρωτήριον stands for ἀροτήριον. Wilcken explained the unknown words as the equivalent of ἀροτήσιον, an adjective meaning 'for ploughing'. The whole expression would correspond to βοῦν ἀροτήρα (used e.g. by *Hes. Op.* 405).

7 At the beginning of the line Wilcken read ἐν ἄμασι and explained the form as a Doric dative of ἦμαρ. Certainly this is an unexpected form here, but the contrast with νυκτί of the preceding line is attractive. Another possible reading might be ἄρμασι. The word ἄρμα, in addition to having a certain heroic ring, is used in documentary papyri also in connection with agriculture (e.g. *SB XVI* 12381 col. ii 14).

8 Wilcken read αὐτός as the first word and considered the following γεωργός a mistake for the accusative plural γεωργούς. The farmer was unable to find fellow workers. But as in line 1, there is a risk of accusing a student of committing mistakes of which he was not guilty. First of all, a longer word is needed at the beginning, since the space before γεωργός is quite extensive. The word αὐτάρκης gives a much



Inscribed Wooden Tablet, Staatsbibliothek Preußischer
Kulturbesitz, Berlin, Ms. graec. qu. 36
(photo museum, reduced to 77%)

better meaning. The adjective was used occasionally as a noun (e.g. Eur. fr. 29 Nauck). The adjective appears with the meaning 'independent' at Men. *Dysk.* 714. The last word of the line, after ι, is extremely faded. Although Wilcken read δινόμενος, apparently without hesitation in either edition, I have preferred *alpha*, as equally possible. We know from the documentary papyri that thematic forms of δύναμαι were used frequently side by side with the athematic forms (B. G. Mandilaras, *The Verb in the Greek Non-Literary Papyri* [Athens 1973] 74ff, esp. section 102).

9 At the beginning of the line (which he could not read) Wilcken supplied [οὐδεμίαν] and at the end χαρ[άν]. The farmer has no joy in farming. The word φροντίδα is still visible, though very faded. At the end of the line after χα an *iota* seems visible. It is possible to read χάριν, which would provide easier grammar and, together with the preceding genitive, the meaning, 'always taking pains for the sake of his farming' (suggested by P. J. Parsons per litteras, 19 April 1992). But the space requires a longer word, and I prefer to read χάρων.

10 At the end of the line the restoration καρπίαν seems the only possibility, considering the width of the lacuna. The word καρπεία, which the student wrote with itacism, appears at Polyb. 31.21.8 and the *Testamentum Epictetae* (IG XII.3 330) col. iii 5, with the meaning 'usufruct, enjoyment, profit'. The word appears frequently in documentary papyri with the meaning 'payment', and always governs the genitive.

As we have seen, Wilcken assumed that a pessimistic vision of farmers' lives was central to the composition. His interpretation of the word πάμπωρος (line 3) gave the whole a dark coloring. Restoring οὐδεμίαν at the beginning of line 9, Wilcken emphasized that farmers took no pleasure in farming. The image was completed by the notion of solitude conveyed for the scholar by line 8: a lonely farmer unable to find other fellow workers. The composition in fact reminded Wilcken of the older Egyptian representations of wretched farmers' lives.¹² According to my reading, however, the picture presented by the exercise is less gloomy. The farmer works hard in the field, but such toils are sweet to bear. A farmer is bountifully endowed, even if he

¹² The life of a farmer is often presented in dark colors in ancient Egyptian school exercises. The student is invited to be diligent and to love learning. His future life as a scribe is compared to the wretched life of the farmer (and to other professions as well), who is poor, sick, and tired. See e.g. A. Erman, *The Ancient Egyptians*, tr. A. H. Blackman (London 1927) 69, 193.

has to work the land by himself. Generally his efforts pay well. But when the field is ungenerous, the joy and satisfaction farmers find in their work compensate them for their toil.

Such were for Horace the farmers of the past: *agricolae prisci, fortes parvoque beati* (cf. *Ep.* 2.1.139). Vergil (*G.* 2.472) praises farmers' endurance and lack of greed, *paciens operum exiguoque adsueta iuventus*. Farmers are occasionally portrayed as blessed human beings who enjoy a quiet and active life in an enchanting environment (*G.* 2.467f, *secura quies et nescia fallere vita, dives opum variarum*). Even in the *Georgics*, however, the farmer's lot is often hard and sometimes tragic. Tibullus (1.1.25), on the other hand, seems to have envied that life—*iam modo iam possim contentus vivere parvo*—although his assessment of the pleasures of country life must be judged in the light of his nostalgia for a distant Golden Age.

Farming is praised in various ways by the agricultural Latin writers.¹³ For Cato, agriculture is not only the most respected occupation but also guarantees the highest earning.¹⁴ Varro considers it the most ancient and the best activity both for the individual and the community (*Rust.* 3.1.4, 2 praef. 2). Columella, who writes in a period of agricultural crisis, defends farming especially forcefully as the only really just activity (*Rust.* praef. 7–10). Although these writers are ostensibly concerned with helping farmers reach prosperity through their advice, they do not dwell on farmers' happiness.

A poem of the third century (?) on the success of a Roman farmer (*ILS* 7457) is particularly relevant to the essentially encomiastic tone of our composition. The Latin inscription represents the incessant work and social advance of a small farmer who was able to improve his condition. Like his father he lived and worked in the country all his life.¹⁵ His strenuous work as a reaper *rabido sub sole* can be compared with the toils of our farmer, even if there is no suggestion that such toils could be in any way 'sweet' to bear.

¹³ Their Greek sources are mostly lost. Cf. the survey of Greek agricultural works in Varro *Rust.* 1.1.8ff; Columella *Rust.* 1.1.7–11.

¹⁴ *Agr.* 1.4: *Maxime pius questus stabilissimusque consequitur.*

¹⁵ Line 4: *Nec ruri pausa nec mihi semper erat.*

But what of Greek authors?¹⁶ Where could a student find inspiration for his assignment? Hesiod of course sings of farmers and of their unrelenting toils. Only for a moment (*Op.* 225–37) is his vision less harsh: at least farmers endowed with justice may enjoy a more satisfying life, θαλίης δὲ μεμηλότα ἔργα νέμονται (*Op.* 231). We know that Epicharmus wrote a play about farming, Ἀγρωστῖνος, and that Sophron composed a mime, Ἀγροιώτας, but only their titles remain. Aristophanes displays an ambivalent attitude towards farmers and country life. Farmers may be rough and uncouth, but life in the country is often irresistibly attractive because of its strong association with peace. The country is praised especially as the ideal place where one can avoid the troubles of the ἀγορά (fr. 387). In Menander the country appears again as a peaceful place (cf. fr. 556 Koerte) where even poverty is more bearable (frr. 336, 401 Koerte; *Georg.* 79–83). The poet wrote two plays specifically about farmers, Γεωργός and Ἄγροικος, of which fragments are extant. Although the farmer has no experience of city life, he is endowed with another kind of wisdom (*Georg.* fr. 3 Koerte). But his life is unmistakably harsh: in the Γεωργός Cleaenetus has a taste of σχολή only when he is sick and freed from the burden of the mattock and many evils, ἀπαλλαγείς δικέλλης καὶ κακῶν (*Georg.* 64ff). In the *Dyskolos*, Cnemon cultivates by himself a considerable estate. A farmer's life is toil and “war waged against rocks, reaping pain and getting no profit” (*Dysk.* 604ff). Sostratus, who is in love with the farmer's daughter, decides to show the old man that he can work in the field too. The experience is presented as excruciating (*Dysk.* 522–45). Only occasionally in Menander can the country be more tame and forgiving. In the Γεωργός we have a sudden glimpse of a wonderful land, producing myrtle trees, flowers, and every kind of crop (*Georg.* 35–39). In the *Dyskolos* (775) Sostratus' father, moreover, is a rich, successful, and unrivalled farmer, a γεωργὸς ἄμαχος. Two fragments tell us that not everything is bitter in farming (558 Koerte, ἔχει τι τὸ πικρὸν τῆς γεωργίας γλυκύ) and that country life can have its own enjoyment (559, ὁ τῶν γεωργῶν ἡδονὴν ἔχει βίος, ταῖς ἐλπίσιν τάλγεινὰ παραμυθούμενος.)

¹⁶ For a summary of Greek views of the country life, especially as opposed to life in the city, see R. Reinhardt, *Die Darstellung der Bereiche Stadt und Land bei Theokrit* (Bonn 1988) 1–18; cf. J. M. Hurwit, “The Representation of Nature in Early Greek Art,” in D. B. Oliver, ed., *New Perspectives in Early Greek Art* (= *Studies in the History of Art* 32 [Washington, D.C., 1991]) 33–64.

Beyond Comedy we first discover definite and extensive praise for country life in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*. The reason is exquisitely economic: the cultivation of the fields is reputed as the most lucrative source of revenue. Xenophon, however, is speaking from the point of view of gentlemen farmers, for whom the best occupation and the best science is husbandry.¹⁷ His landowners do not really get their hands dirty, and perhaps for this reason toil in the field is presented here only in passing.

The evaluation of the life of herdsmen, especially in the bucolic tradition, is radically different. The herdsman watches his sheep while lying softly under a tree, with time for reveries, song, and especially love. In Theocritus the only farmer in love, a reaper, is harshly reproached for not working hard enough. His love song is out of place in the field, and another reaper more fittingly sings a work song: ἄρχεσθαι δ' ἀμῶντας ἐγειρομένῳ κορυδαλλῶ καὶ λήγειν εὐδοντος.¹⁸

In the fourth century, Libanius' *Progymnasmata* offer a close parallel to the idealized vision of farmers' lives in our student's composition. Farmers are often present in this rhetor's exercises on set themes, and his Σύγκρισις ναυτιλίας καὶ γεωργίας and Σύγκρισις ἀγροῦ καὶ πόλεως idealize farmers and country life.¹⁹ Farmers must work very hard but as a consequence enjoy good health and prosperity (354.3 Foerster, ἰδρῶσι τὰς εὐπορίας κτώμενοι). Cities are full of depravity and vice, but farmers enjoy a true love (355.6, ἐρῶσι δὲ οἱ τοῦτον οἰκοῦντες ἀρότρου καὶ βοδὸς καὶ ἀμάξης καὶ αὐλάκος).

Libanius also composed an Ἐγκώμιον γεωργίας in which he rates γεωργία as highest among human activities:²⁰ Μυρία μὲν οὖν ἐπιτηδεύματα κατὰ ἀνθρώπους, ἄριστον δὲ ἡ γεωργία. τὸ γὰρ μέγιστον κέρδος δίδωσι τοῖς γεωργοῦσι. Τοῦτο δὲ ἔστιν

¹⁷ *Oec.* 6.8: ἀνδρὶ καλῶ τι κάγαθῶ ἐργασίαν εἶναι καὶ ἐπιστήμην κρατίστην γεωργίαν.

¹⁸ Theoc. *Id.* 10.50f. The pastoral tradition in poetry about farming is anticipated by Hes. *Op.* 582–96, the inspiration for Alcaeus fr. 347. For a full survey of precursors of the pastoral, see K. J. Gutzwiller, *Theocritus' Pastoral Analogies* (Madison 1991) 23–79.

¹⁹ R. Foerster, ed., *Libanii Opera* VIII (Leipzig 1915) 349–60. The *topos* is of course already present in Dio Chrysostom's *Euboian Discourse* and the Greek novel.

²⁰ For the rhetor Hermogenes' comparison of the ἔπαινος with the more developed and extensive form of the encomium, see D. A. Russell and N. G. Wilson, *Menander Rhetor* (Oxford 1981) xxvii.

αὐτοὺς ἀγαθοὺς εἶναι.²¹ Libanius repeatedly insists on the magnitude of farmers' πόννοι, among which one is surprised to find not only sowing and reaping but also herding oxen, sheep, and goats (263.4). Towards the end of the encomium the identification is clear: country life seems to consist especially of lying under a tree, of surveying the cornfields, of hearing oxen bellow and sheep bleat (266.11):

εἰ δέ τις οἶται τερπνότερον εἶναι τὸν ἐν ἄστει βίον, ἐνθυμηθήτω πρὸς ἑαυτόν, οἶον μὲν ἐστὶν ἄμπελον ὄραν καὶ βότρυσ κρεμαμένους, οἶον δὲ ὑπὸ πίτυι καὶ πλατάνῳ μεσημβρίας κείσθαι, οἶον δὲ ἰδεῖν λήια ζεφύρων αὔραις κινούμενα, οἶον δὲ ἀκοῦσαι βοῶν μυκωμένων καὶ προβάτων βληχωμένων, οἶον δὲ θέαμα δαμάλεις σκιρτῶσαι καὶ ἔλκουσαι γάλα.²²

Was the happy farmer of our composition also a herdsman? An ox and fodder are mentioned here, but we do not know if more animals were involved. The tablet was found at Athribis in the Delta, a region known for animal husbandry. On the other hand, it is not strictly necessary for our farmer to have tended cattle. He was perhaps merely involved in traditional farmers' activities, and his ἀνδραγαθίαι are extolled by a student who was perhaps more influenced by literary precedent than the world around him.

It is conceivable, if by no means certain, that the composition was among the first poetical exercises attempted by this student, probably when he was still under the tutelage of a γραμματικός.²³ Wilcken noted that the text aspired to be a poetic composition, but he did not expand on the subject. Certainly

²¹ 262.4 Foerster; cf. the first line of the present exercise.

²² "If anyone believes that life in the city is more pleasant, let him ponder within himself what a thing it is to see the vine with hanging grapes, to recline beneath a pine and a plane tree at noon, to watch the cornfields stirred by the zephyr's breezes, to hear oxen bellow and sheep bleat—and what a sight are the heifers springing around and sucking milk."

²³ The level is certainly not high. Elementary compositions were normally done in the grammarian's schoolroom (Quint. *Inst.* 1.9). Although compositions were in theory the province of the rhetor, some of the preparatory exercises were often handed down to the grammarian. For the encroachment of one level of education upon the other see H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (Madison 1956) 160f, 172–75. For a discussion of the indirect evidence of grammarians teaching verse-writing see D. L. Clark, *Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education* (Westport 1957) 176–79.

there seems to be no attempt at meter beyond a vague iambic rhythm. According to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, "No passage which is composed absolutely without meter can be invested with the melody of poetry or lyric grace, at any rate from the point of view of the word-arrangement considered in itself. No doubt the choice of words goes a long way, and there is a poetical vocabulary consisting of rare, foreign, figurative and coined words in which poetry takes delight."²⁴ We can say positively that this student makes an effort in that direction. Such words as κάματος, which is used repeatedly, γαῖα, γλυκερός, δαμάζω, τερπόμενος, and the forms στίχοισι, μευ, βόα are exclusively poetic. We may regard the composition as something of a Homeric pastiche. The self-contained lines also speak in favor of poetry. Perhaps the exercise was the first draft of a poetic composition, in which the student set up the vocabulary, sketched the *cola*, but had not yet worked on the *metra*. We know little of such practices occurring in the process of composition,²⁵ but in a well known passage of his *Vergilii vita* Donatus reports that Vergil initially wrote out the *Aeneid* in prose and only later set various sections in verse.²⁶

An alternative hypothesis²⁷ would interpret our ten lines not as a composition, but as a much-corrupted passage of poetry, perhaps a speech from New Comedy, written from memory. The student was able to recover some of the poetic diction, but only hints of the original meter were left. As we noted earlier,²⁸ Comedy usually presented the type of hard-working farmer who had no rest from toil. Occasionally, however, a 'happier' country life is extolled. We might also suppose that, if the lines were New Comedy, the whole effect of presenting a happy farmer might be intentionally ironic: the farmer recounts 'advantages' that the listener will hardly recognize as such.

²⁴ Tr. W. R. Roberts, *Dionysius of Halicarnassus, On Literary Composition* (London 1910) 253.

²⁵ The exercise of prose paraphrase of poetry represents the same process in reverse.

²⁶ *Aeneida prosa prius oratione formatam digestamque in XII libros particulatim componere instituit* (A. Rostagni, *Suetonio De Poetis e Biografi Minori* [Torino 1956] 87).

²⁷ P. J. Parsons per litteras 19 April 1992.

²⁸ Cf. *supra* 255 on Menander's two plays with rustic subjects. Frr. 558f seem particularly close to the general tone of our text. Consider also αὐτουργός and αὐτάρκης, which also appear in Menander.

But this attractive hypothesis seems unlikely. Although the content of the text recalls comic motifs, the diction is generally closer to Homer than to New Comedy. We would have to imagine that the student began with one or more lines of Comedy, possibly even a whole passage, and then reworked the whole to make it his own.

II

Roughly-drawn crosses conclude each line of the text. Previous editors have reproduced them without explanation, although one may suspect that Parthey's enthusiasm for St George depended on the interpretation of them as real crosses, and that they were also so regarded by Leclercq, who speaks of a Christian schoolboy. Marks at the end of each verse occur sometimes in poetic texts written continuously like prose. An examination of the various methods of writing verses common in school exercises may offer some explanation of the signs used in this tablet.

Although professional copyists from the middle of the third century B.C. generally write verse with line-breaks, poetic texts sometimes appear without them. The latter treatment was reserved especially for lyric poetry and choral portions of tragedy and comedy, which had a complex metrical structure. Less commonly, hexameters and iambics were written without separating one line from the next.²⁹

The practice of inscribing poetry in continuous lines, regardless of verse-units, is common in school exercises. A fair number of examples from the Ptolemaic period are written in

²⁹ See Turner (*supra* n.2) 12 with n.57. Some of the texts cited here as occasional instances of the survival in the Roman period of the practice of writing verses in continuous lines were considered by their editors possible school exercises (eg. *P.Haun.* 4, *P.Oxy.* VI 864, *P.Turner* 5). They are not written in unpracticed hands but they could be a product of rhetorical schools. In addition to the texts cited by Turner, there are a few other examples of this practice: *P.Lond.Lit.* 51 (second century) appears to contain an anapestic composition on the Sun's grief for the death of Phaethon. The first four verses are transcribed according to colometry; the rest are written in continuous lines, with the breaks often marked by oblique dashes. *P.Lond.Lit.* 53 (third century) contains iambics (Semonides of Amorgos?) written continuously, with the verses marked by two oblique strokes. *MPER* N.S. I 2b (inv. 19794) and III 1 (inv. 19791, first or second century) contain fragments of a roll of *Iliad* 10, where the hexameters were probably written continuously. The only two line-ends preserved show oblique dashes.

this way.³⁰ Generally there is no distinction between Homeric hexameters, iambic, and lyric verse.

The practice of writing verse as prose is occasionally found in schools in the Roman and early Byzantine periods until the fourth and fifth centuries.³¹ Here too the lines are simply written one after the other, as in the previous period.³² Many exercises, however, display division marks between individual verses.³³ These consist generally of single or double oblique or horizontal strokes similar to the marks that sometimes divide clauses in literary texts.³⁴ In *T. Varie* 24–25, however, the oblique dashes are sometimes accompanied by two dots, producing a mark (·/·) resembling a percentage sign. A few of these exercises are in hexameters or lyric meters, but the great majority are iambs.

One can only speculate about the reason for writing verses as prose in the routine of the schools, given the possibility of bilingual interference, orthographic problems, and difficulties caused by disregarding word-division (*scriptio continua*). Even when marks dividing lines do appear they are not always accurate. For some students the practice was a burden, as one can infer from the faltering performance of the pupil who wrote the exercise of *P. Ross. Georg.* I 12. The model of the master, which occupies the first five lines of the tablet, consists of two maxims in iambic trimeters, separated by two short oblique lines. The student, who copies the lines of his master three times, is apparently unable to distinguish the appropriate metrical break, and after several mistaken attempts he finally gives up altogether and proceeds without separation.

³⁰ See e.g. *P. Mil.* II 15, *P. Freib.* I 1b, *P. Köln* III 125, and *O. Bodl.* II 2172.

³¹ The most recent of the very few texts cited for this practice by Turner (*supra* n.2: 12) belongs to the third century.

³² See e.g. *P. Oxy.* III 425, *P. Yale* II 135, *O. Wadie Hanna* (H. Henne, *BIFAO* 27 [1927] 79–82), and *Bodl. Gk. Inscr.* 2941+2942 (J. G. Milne, *JHS* 28 [1908] 126 no. VIII, 130–31 no. XV).

³³ See e.g. *P. Ross. Georg.* I 12, 13; *P. Flor.* XVIII 23–32; *P. Leid. Inst.* 16; Louvre MND 552_{E-F} (B. Boyaval, *ZPE* 17 [1975] 145–50).

³⁴ See Turner (*supra* n.2) 144, commentary on pl. 86. The sign seems to occur especially in dramatic and biblical texts, and may have facilitated dramatic delivery and reading aloud. See also *P. Oxy.* LV 3812 (a private letter with an oblique stroke used for strong punctuation); M. Manfredi, “Alcune considerazioni su *PSI* I 65,” *Miscellanea Roca Puig* (Barcelona 1987) 185. The text in question is a prayer, with several oblique strokes that mark the pauses in the recitation.

The principal reason for writing poetry in continuous lines may have been a practical one. The length of the line was dictated by the shape of the sherd or by the width of the papyrus scrap a student had been able to put his hands on. When writing on a tablet, one still had to deal with the limits of the writing surface (most tablets were smaller than the tablet considered here).³⁵ Thus it seems that writing verses as prose, with or without division marks, created fewer practical problems for the student.³⁶ On the other hand, poetic exercises written as prose on materials that offered no apparent limitation of space seem to consist either of texts with complex metrical patterns or of short anthologies intended for memorization or of drills to acquire special proficiency in writing.

When the verse-unit corresponded to the written line, there was no need of dividing marks. Besides the composition we are considering, with its crosses drawn at the end of each line, several other exercises with line-by-line separation of verses show curious signs by the right margin at the conclusion of each verse.³⁷ In *P.Oxy.* LIII 3712 oblique strokes appear at the conclusion of two lines, and the editor suggests that each line was so terminated. In *MPER* N.S. III 24 and 25, each line of verse terminates with the sign '·. This mark sometimes appears in literary texts³⁸ at the left margin or, more rarely, in the body of the text. Not all the meanings of this sign are clear, but it was apparently not meant to indicate a separation or pause.³⁹ In

³⁵ Besides, the letters of a model and of a 'school hand' were larger than normal, sometimes reaching a line height of 1.5 cm.

³⁶ It is easy to see the difficulties encountered by the student of *T. Varie* 24–25, who started inscribing the verses one per line. Since the length of the verse and the space he had at his disposal did not coincide exactly, he used several tricks to fit a verse that was too long or employed fillers, where some space remained. After line 12, however, he gave up and wrote the verses continuously.

³⁷ Cf., in a Latin text, the poem *De bello Actiaco*, where each verse is marked by a sign of *distinctio* that resembles a wedged line-filler but occurs at the conclusion of each line: R. Seider, *Paläographie der lateinischen Papyri* II.1 (Stuttgart 1978) 35f nr. 4.

³⁸ See Turner (*supra* n.2) 14 with n.75.

³⁹ P. J. Parsons (per litteras, 20 May 1991) notes the oddity of the use of the sign here, with the apparent meaning of separation or pause, given that oblique strokes were available for that.

exercises, however, the ∙/∙ seems to have had precisely this use.⁴⁰

It is still unclear just why signs were used to mark verse-ends even when the text was written as verse. M. W. Haslam, the editor of *P.Oxy.* LIII 3712, noticed in this text a misdivision between lines 56 and 57 and suggested that “perhaps the object of the exercise was articulation of the text into its constituent verses, whether from dictation or from a text written out as prose.” The proposal is attractive, though such a practice is not attested in the schools. It is also possible that the practice of marking regularly verse-ends was related to ἀναγνώρισις. We know that the art of reading aloud was much prized in antiquity and that expressive reading was part of the regular curriculum under the γραμματικός.⁴¹ There is some evidence that the hexameter and other poetic meters were meant to be read with a pause at the end of each verse. Such pauses were mandatory and particularly long when there was a sense-boundary at the end of the verse.⁴² The signs at the end of each verse perhaps served to remind the students to pause. It is also possible that the signs were specific marks for poetry and indicated that a line was poetic. In *MPER* n.s. III 25 only the first column displays these marks; the next two columns of prose do not. It may be that in schools, where verses were often copied in continuous lines with dividing marks separating them, the inexperienced student regarded the signs / or ∙/∙ or perhaps even crosses as part of the verse, in contrast to prose.

Our composition seems not to belong to either of the two categories considered so far: of verses written continuously with dividing marks and of poetic texts where the correspondence of the individual line to the verse-unit is emphasized by a mark at the end of each verse. Although the verses seem to

⁴⁰ In *MPER* n.s. III 28 the sign is visible twice at verse ends, probably to mark a pause in the lyric meter. In Bodl. Gk. Inscr. 3019 (Parsons [*supra* n.8]) the sign appears several times on sides 1b and 4a, always indicating a strong pause. In BM Add.Ms. 37533 (F. G. Kenyon, *JHS* 29 [1909] 32–39) the ∙/∙ alternates with an oblique stroke and indicates separation. That ∙/∙ and / were used in school exercises with an identical meaning is also shown by *T.Varie* 24–25, where they are employed interchangeably in separating verses copied in continuous lines.

⁴¹ See R. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship. From the Beginning to the End of the Hellenistic Age* (Oxford 1968) 268f.

⁴² See S. Daitz, “On Reading Homer Aloud: To Pause or Not to Pause,” *AJP* 112 (1991) 149–60.

have been dictated or copied in both cases, the student who wrote our exercise may have been influenced by this practice. Choosing poetic vocabulary, he had jotted down lines in semi-rhythmical fashion. He still needed to revise the lines to make them truly poetic, but he nevertheless concluded each one with a sign in the shape of a cross,⁴³ a seal guaranteeing that these were indeed verses. It is also possible that the crosses indicated the sense boundary at the end of each of the lines and therefore the strong pause that should be made in reading them aloud.

Paul Collart's view of this tablet offers a fitting conclusion.⁴⁴ He considered the lines a student's composition, the result of improvisation. The teacher had left the pupils the freedom of composing verses freely, perhaps saying something like (in Rostand's words)

*Allez, partez sans bride
Improvisiez ... soyez splendide.*

This was the result.⁴⁵

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⁴³ V. Gardthausen, *Griechische Palaeographie* II (Leipzig 1913) 402, remarks that crosses divide the *cola* in certain medieval manuscripts. The codices he cites belong to the ninth and tenth centuries and include the Gospels. See e.g. *Cod. Vat. Graec.* 351, where the *versiculi* all end with a golden cross. Signs in the shape of crosses occur also in *P. Mich.* inv. 4936, a leather Byzantine Trishagion soon to be published by D. Martinez in *ZPE*. In the text, the crosses distinguish the different paragraphs, while the verses are separated by double oblique strokes

⁴⁴ *ChrEg* 11 (1936) 489–507.

⁴⁵ A version of this paper was delivered at the 1991 meeting of the American Philological Association in Chicago.