

HOMER IN HERODIUM: GRAFFITO OF *IL*. 6.264*In memoriam Ehud Netzer*

A few years ago the late Professor Ehud Netzer, with the Hebrew University Expedition team to Herodium, discovered King Herod's mausoleum on the north-eastern slope of the mountain. West of the tomb, separated from it by a monumental staircase, lay a small theatre, built circa 15 BCE, and intended for about four hundred spectators. It came no less as a surprise when the team discovered that Herod dismantled and covered the theatre and other adjacent buildings (including the original staircase leading up the mountain) sometime during his remaining lifetime (he died in 4 BCE), to create the artificial mountain cone seen today.¹

A row of rooms crowns the theatre: a central room called by the excavators "the Royal Box" (fig. 1.1) opens to the cavea and is decorated with the most fantastic Pompeian style wall paintings in *secco* and *stucco*.² The "Royal Box" is flanked by two symmetrically arranged rooms: the western³ one opens through a doorway to the theatre and the eastern one opens to the "Royal Box" and has a window overlooking the theatre. These rooms were decorated with *stucco*. Further east, not connected to them, there is another room abutting on the monumental staircase leading up to the mountain fortress which belonged to the building's first phase (fig. 1.2). Its door opens to the theatre's portico, at the top of the cavea, on one side and to a long east-west rectangular room on the other.

This room, the immediate context to the subject of this article, was not decorated. A graffito was found etched into the plaster of its southern wall about 1 meter above its floor (fig. 1 marked by an arrow),⁴ and imprinted once the plaster dried with muddied hand-prints.⁵ The inscription (figs. 2, 3) incised with a stylus or another sharp instrument into the moist plaster, contains two parts: the first part is composed of two lines: the first is 22.5 cm long and the second is 15 cm long and the letters are 1.1 cm-high (fig. 4); the second part, written probably by the same hand about 3 cm below the first one, is a 1.1 m long line which contains a reverse Greek Abecedary (from *Omega* to *Alpha*) with 5–7 cm high letters (figs. 2, 3).

The first editor read the first part as follows, while admitting the incongruity of the reading with the immediate archaeological context:⁶

Μημόρι(ο)ν ὄν ἀεὶ ἠπότινι⁷ Ἀμ[--]
A tomb for which Am[] paid for ever.

Indeed this is not a tomb, nor is there one in the vicinity. Herod's mausoleum was probably built several years after the theatre and this scratching could not have anything to do with it; to begin with there are a

¹ E. Netzer, Y. Kalman, R. Porath and R. Chachy-Laureys, Preliminary Report on Herod's Mausoleum and Theatre with a Royal Box at Herodium, *JRA* 23, 2010, 84–108; E. Netzer, Y. Kalman, R. Porath, R. Chachy, L. Di Segni and E. Eshel, Two Inscriptions from Herodium, *Judea and Samaria Research Studies* 18, 2009, 85–103 (Hebrew).

² Many of the wall paintings and decorations are still under reconstruction and conservation by teams of the Israel Museum. Recent architectural reconsiderations of the "Royal Box" view the room as an *aula* (R. Porath, personal comm.). I use the term here in congruence with previous publications.

³ "East" and "West" are used for simplification – in fact the room is oriented, as the theatre, towards north-west, and the rooms accordingly.

⁴ Ed. pr.: L. Di Segni in: E. Netzer *et al.*, *Judea and Samaria Research Studies* (n. 1), 91–4.

⁵ There seems to be no coherent explanation for these hand imprints; they may belong to the "dismantling" phase of the theatre.

⁶ Di Segni (n. 4), 91

⁷ ἠπότινι = ἀποτίνει.

few letters that were not recognized earlier; but then the new reading presented here offers mainly a different division of the letters.

It reads as follows:

ΜΗΜΟΙΟΝΟΝΑΕΙ+ΗΠΙΟ
ΤΙΝΙΑΜΗΤΗΡ

Μή μοι οἶνον ἄειρε¹ ποτίνια (sic!) μήτηρ

Translation

Bring me no wine, honored mother.

This is nothing less than a verse from Iliad, book 6, line 264.

Commentary

In the verse Hector refuses the wine Hecuba offers him before he goes on to meet Andromache and little Astyanax and proceeds to battle:

μή μοι οἶνον ἄειρε μελίφρονα, πότνια μήτηρ.

Bring me no honey hearted wine, honored mother (Il. 6.264, trans. A. T. Murray, *LCL*).

Due to carelessness or forgetfulness our scribbler omitted the wine's epithet μελίφρων from the verse, thus reducing it by one dactyl; adding the *Iota* after the *Nu* in ποτίνια left the *omicron* short thus producing a spondee – three dactyls – spondee line of verse.⁸

The *Nu* of οἶνον in l. 1 is etched over the *Omicron*, and the *Iota* is missing. It may be a haplology, but the overlap of letters suggests a “scribal” error. *Epsilon* is replaced by *Eta* in ἄειρη, but a switch between these letters in an un-accented final position is common in Roman and Byzantine papyri (hence the *Eta* is counted as short in the scansion).⁹ In line 2 a *Iota* is added between the *Tau* and the *Nu* in ποτίνια, as a “helping vowel”, often found in the papyri between two consecutive consonants.¹⁰ Finally, μήτηρ is written in the nominative and not in the vocative as in the standard Homeric text – a variant/mistake which occurs in fact in one of the Homeric Papyri (P. Köln 1.27 inv. 3326; 2nd c. CE), unless there is an interchange of *Epsilon* and *Eta* as before. Notwithstanding the omission, the variations or mistakes, this is still a citation, albeit a poor one, of Homer.

A search through the *SEG*'s online-indices reveals that in the Roman period citations of verses from the Iliad and the Odyssey are common in mosaics, epitaphs, dedications and other solemn locations, but not so common in graffiti on walls. In the West, more precisely in Pompeii, where there are 35 different quotations from Virgil's *Aeneid* (more than half are the first line of either the first or the second book), there is but one graffito quoting Homer, below a wall painting (*CIL* IV 4078, but this is less than half a line in length, containing a Homeric formula which cannot be associated with a specific book).¹¹ A quotation of Iliad 7.264 is found near a wall painting in the “House of the Muse” in Assisi.¹² In the East, with the exception of the graffiti on the Memnon Colossus, such citations in graffiti are rare.¹³

⁸ For this epithet in Homer, see: B. Graziosi and J. Haubold, *Homer, Iliad Book VI*, Cambridge 2010, *comm. ad loc.*

⁹ F. T. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods*, Milan 1976, 245, section 2.iv. Especially relevant is χάρη (for χάρη) in *SB* 5856.2.

¹⁰ Gignac (n. 9), 311–12, section 2.

¹¹ A. E. Cooley and M. G. L. Cooley, *Pompeii: A Source Book*, London 2004, 220–21. *CIL* IV 4078: καί μιν φωνή[σας ἔπεα περόντα προσηύδα] – the formula appears more than forty times both in the Iliad and the Odyssey. The graffito is written below a wall painting of a Satyr and Maenad.

¹² *SEG* 30.1138 (in fact there is a discrepancy between the text and the painting); M. Guarducci, *Le epigrafi della Domus Musae ad Assisi e qualche osservazione nuova*, *ZPE* 63, 1986, 163, no. 4.

¹³ A. Bernard and E. Bernard, *Les inscriptions grecques et latines du Colosse de Memnon*, Cairo 1960, esp. no. 37 (a Homeric cento).

Our verse, which does not convey a specific “moral” message has not been found so far anywhere else. A search of the *TLG* reveals that it was quoted solely by grammarians and lexicographers from the second century BCE¹⁴ all the way up to the *LSJ* (s.v. αἰρῶ, I.3) as an example for the use of αἰρεῖν in the sense of προσφέρειν, “to bring”.

This scene of Hector and Hecuba was not conventionally expressed in art either. Only four examples are listed in the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (s.v. Hécube, 15–19), two on archaic vases, one in a Flavian period stucco from *casa del Sacello Iliaco* in Pompeii, and a miniature in the fifth century *Ilias Ambrosiana*. The Roman and Late Antique examples incorporate Hecuba within a larger scene representing the departure of Hector and including Andromache and Astyanax.

The inscription was written while the plaster was still wet: the inscriber must have been present during the construction, or at least during the decoration of the rooms. Unlike the adjacent rooms, the room in which the inscription was incised shows no signs of having been decorated after being covered with white plaster. Hence it does not seem likely that the text was put there in order to comment on or plan any such painting.

The line itself may be taken in the context of a quip on the effects of alcohol on virility. Ancient and modern commentators used the dialogue of Hecuba and Hector to discuss the dangers of ill timed drinking of alcohol and the contrast between the maxim, pronounced by Hecuba: “wine greatly strengthens might for a toilsome man” (Il. 6.261), and Hector’s turning it down lest it unnerve him and cause him to forget his might and valor in battle (Il. 6.264–5).¹⁵ But there is no context to support this or similar reflections on the evils of drinking. On the other hand the abecedary may well serve as a key to understanding the verse. Abecedaries are used in two ways for education and magic. A Homeric verse followed by a reverse abecedary could be used for both.

The use of the Alphabet for magical purposes has long been known to modern scholarship.¹⁶ Ben Ami and Tchekhanovets lately listed the abecedaries found in Israel and its surroundings, and put special stress on the magical/apotropaic nature of those found in sepulchral and cultic contexts.¹⁷ For whatever it is worth, it may be recalled that in the room just east of our inscription there is a Hebrew abecedary scratched on the dry plaster – but it could have been written anytime from hours to years later than the one in “our” room.¹⁸

The quotation of Homeric verse may also be viewed in the context of magic, either as isopsephisms,¹⁹ or as astragalomancy.²⁰ While the former may be no more than a game, the latter is an actual “oracular” activity based on the throwing of dice or *astragali*. A third century CE magical papyrus (*Pap.Graec.Mag.* 7.1–148) contains two hundred and sixteen verses from the Iliad and Odyssey, one verse for three dice combination. Each verse is preceded by a set of three numbers so that one chooses the right verse for the right throw.²¹ In *Pap.Graec.Mag.* 7.63 our citation follows the dice combination 2-5-3. This is, so far as I am aware, the only citation of this verse in a non-grammatical context. However, all that can be said is that

¹⁴ Apollodorus Gramm. (Atheniensis) fragment 192.2 in: K. Müller, *Fragmenta historicorum Graecorum*, vol. 1, Paris 1853, 463.

¹⁵ J. A. MacPhail Jr. (ed. and trans.), *Porphyry’s ‘Homeric Questions’ on the ‘Iliad’*, Berlin/New York 2010, Z 265, 116–19; M. van der Valk (ed.), *Eustathii archiepiscopi Thessalonicensis commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem pertinentes*, Leiden 1971, Z 640, 304–5 (see also comment *ad loc.* about the Christian attitude towards moderation in wine); B. Graziosi and J. Haubold (n. 8), 152–53.

¹⁶ F. Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie*², Leipzig/Berlin 1925, 69ff.

¹⁷ D. Ben Ami and Y. Tchekhanovets, A Greek Abecedary Fragment from the City of David, *PEQ* 140, 3, 2008, 195–202; see also: *CIIP* I.1 699 (and comments *ad loc.*).

¹⁸ Ed. pr.: E. Eshel, in: E. Netzer *et al.*, *Judea and Samaria Research Studies* (n. 1), 94–100; also E. Netzer *et al.*, *JRA* (n. 1), 102; corrected into an abecedary by: D. Amit, An Abecedary from Herodium, *Qadmoniot* 140, 2010, 135–37 (Hebrew).

¹⁹ Isopsephic verses are those of equal numeric quantity after the conversion of Greek letters into numerals. F. Dornseiff (n. 16), 97; see Gellius, *N. Att.* 14.6.4 *istic scriptum fuit, qui sint apud Homerum versus isopsephi*.

²⁰ For the practice of astragalomancy and other magical activities of dice and letters see F. Dornseiff (n. 16), 151 ff.

²¹ H. D. Betz (ed.), *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, Chicago/London 1986, 118–19.

although not attested elsewhere in magic, we cannot exclude the possibility that this verse was inscribed in the Herodium for a magical purpose.

Aside from the *interpretatio magica*, the combination of the alphabet and Homeric verses sends one “back to school” so to speak. Forty of the school texts from Egypt gathered by Cribiore are writing exercises of the alphabet. Writing the alphabet from end to beginning was one form of exercising it (as was the alternation between first and last letters).²² Books 1–6 of the Iliad were the most read books in schools. Of the four hundred and twelve school texts on papyri and ostraca gathered by Cribiore, fifty six contain verses from the Iliad (ca. 14% of the entire corpus), three texts come from book 6 – a significant number considering that books 1–3 consist of more than half of the Homeric school texts (31 texts).²³ Though none of these texts contains a copy of our specific verse, there is no doubt that the sixth book of the Iliad was part of the *enkyklios paideia*.²⁴ The repeated citation of this verse by grammarians implies that it was used as an educational exemplum. Finally, the omission of a word from our verse, suggests a person writing from memory; despite the strong mnemonic power of the dactylic hexameter, words are occasionally omitted from verses in ancient school notebooks (as in other Homeric papyri), as happened in this case.²⁵

Thus it is impossible to determine whether the inscription was written for magical or literary reasons. The verse itself is from the exact middle of the sixth book (line 264 out of 529).²⁶ This, once more, may support either interpretation or may be arbitrary. Then again, the writer, like those who wrote lines of Virgil on the walls of Pompei, may have meant to show off his education or simply prove his literacy to a small crowd demanding an ad hoc proof. The location of the inscription, a meter above ground, near the corner of the room, written while sitting or bending down, means that it was not intended to be prominent, and it was not meant for an anonymous, future audience.

Be this as it may, the inscription fits well within the context of the inscriptions from the fortress palace and complex of Herodium. Though not even one *Memorialinschrift* was found on the site, several inscriptions of a somewhat poetic nature were found on walls or ostraca in contexts that date to the Herodian period.²⁷ Greek learning was prominent in Herod’s court, above all in the presence of intellectuals like the teachers and ambassadors Andromachus and Gemellus (Jos. *Ant.* 16.241–245), Diophantus the secretary (Jos. *BJ* 1.529; *Ant.* 16. 319), Nicolaus of Damascus the historian,²⁸ and several others.²⁹ The architecture and art of the Herodian palaces show a mixture of imported and local technologies:³⁰ local and foreign

²² R. Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, Atlanta 1996, catalog numbers 40–77, for reverse alphabets see numbers 43, 45 and 64

²³ R. Cribiore (n. 22), 173–284.

²⁴ R. Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*, Princeton/Oxford 2001, 194–97; see also: T. Morgan, s.v. Education, Homer in, in: M. Finkelberg (ed.), *The Homer Encyclopedia*, Oxford 2011, 234–38.

²⁵ E.g. R. Cribiore (n. 22), catalog number 382; A search for variants in The Harvard University Center for Hellenic Studies “Homer & the Papyri” Database (<http://www.stoa.org/homer/homer.pl>) reveals many instances where words are omitted from verses, also in papyri not written by students.

²⁶ The twenty four book division of the Iliad is attested at least from the end of the third century BCE: M. L. West, s.v. Book Division, in: M. Finkelberg (n. 24), 140–42.

²⁷ E. Testa, *Herodium IV: I graffiti e gli ostraka*, Jerusalem 1972, no. 1 (possibly an abecedary), no. 2 (not necessarily pornographic), n. 49 (perhaps should be re-read, but still contains a poetic nature).

²⁸ B.-Z. Wacholder, *Nicolaus of Damascus*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1962.

²⁹ See the prosopographical list of Greek intellectuals in ancient Palestine in a book recently published in Hebrew: J. Geiger, *The Tents of Japheth: Greek Intellectuals in Ancient Palestine*, Jerusalem 2012, 306–9; see also: J. Geiger, Ptolemy of Ascalon, Historian of Herod, *SCI* 31, 2012, 185–90.

³⁰ A. Lichtenberger, Herod and Rome: Was Romanisation a Goal of the Building Policy of Herod?, in: D. M. Jacobson and N. Kokkinos (eds.), *Herod and Augustus – Papers presented at the IJS Conference, 21st–23rd June 2005*, Leiden 2009, 43–62; E. Netzer, Palaces and Planning of Complexes in Herod’s Realm, *ibid.*, 171–80, esp. 179; E. Netzer, *The Architecture of Herod, the Great Builder*, Tübingen 2006, 288–95, 309–20.

work teams must have worked side by side. Other graffiti from the theatre area in the Herodium, not yet published, which contain a mixture of Greek, Latin and Hebrew/Aramaic, imply the same.³¹

Finally, this is the only citation of Homer known in the epigraphic record of Judaea/Palaestina and the surrounding region. *Aeneis* 4.9 was found on a papyrus from Masada, probably written by a Roman soldier.³² Ancient graffiti could range from the most sordid pornographic expressions to the most venerable poetry, but were more often than not acceptable forms of expression.³³ It is quite fitting to find Homer in a Herodian context, where Greek learning was esteemed and taught.

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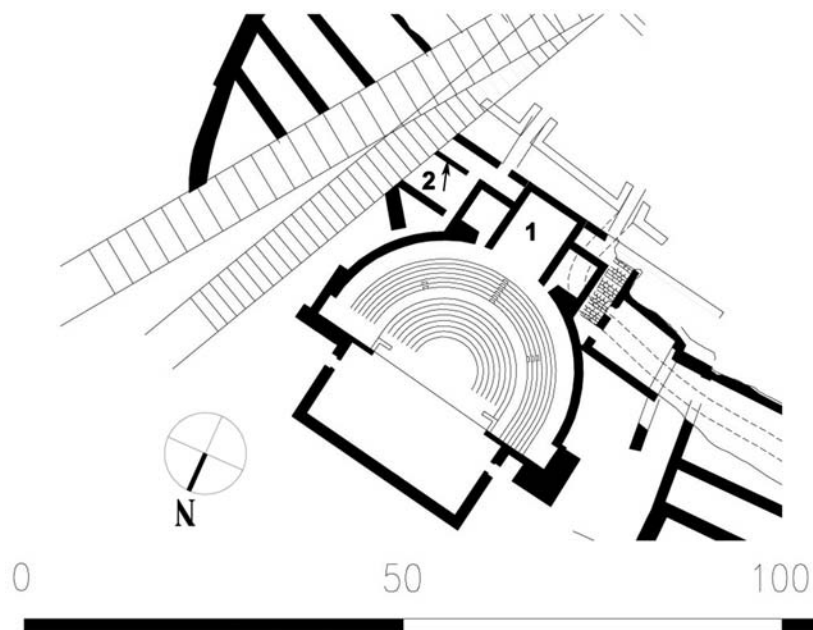


Fig. 1. Plan of the theatre in Herodium: 1. The Royal Box. 2. The room with the inscription (location of the inscription marked with an arrow). On the East the two phases of the monumental staircase and the mausoleum terrace

³¹ The publication of the inscriptions from Herodium is a work in progress: workers who were lodged in the “royal box” during the “dismantling phase” covered the walls of the theatre rooms with about 30 graffiti, out of which only 8 are verbal; though the inscriptions can hardly be deciphered it is clear that at least one is in Latin, one is in Aramaic and the rest are in Greek.

³² H. M. Cotton and J. Geiger, *Masada II: The Latin and Greek Documents*, Jerusalem 1989, no. 721.

³³ See the compendium: J. A. Baird and C. Taylor (eds.), *Ancient Graffiti in Context*, New York/London 2011; within see especially the introduction (1 ff.); R. R. Benefiel, *Dialogues of Graffiti in the House of the Four Styles at Pompeii* (20 ff.); and A. Chaniotis, *Graffiti in Aphrodisias: Image – Texts – Contexts* (191 ff.).



Fig. 2. Photo of the inscription (by G. Laron)

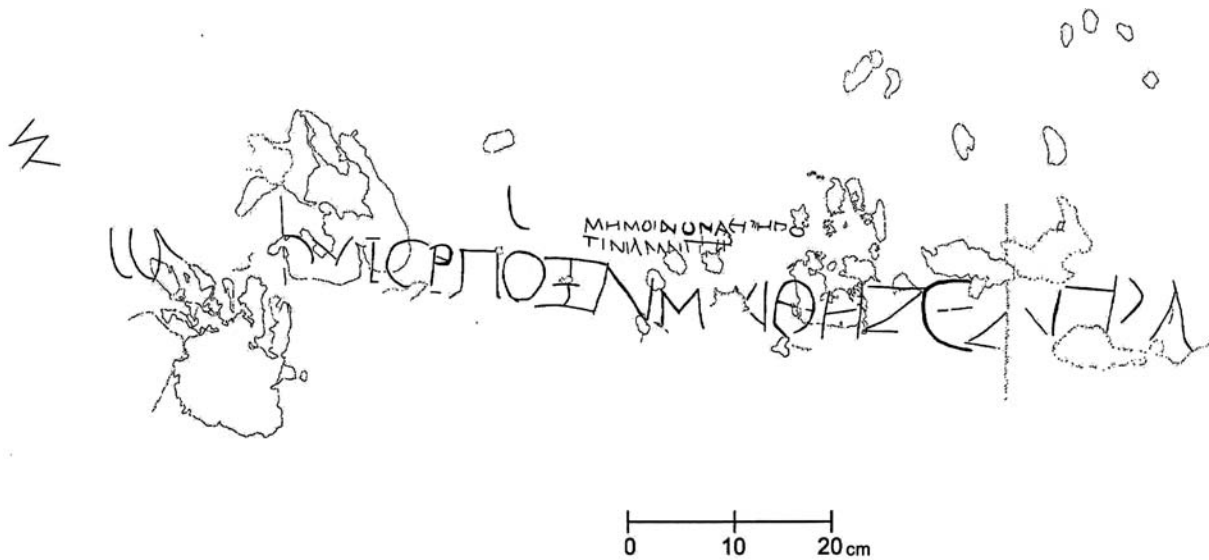


Fig. 3. Drawing of the inscription (by R. Chachi-Laureys)



Fig. 4. Close up photo of the Homeric lines (by G. Laron)