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Giulio Vallarino, *An Abecedarium from Satyrion and the Corinthian Alphabet*

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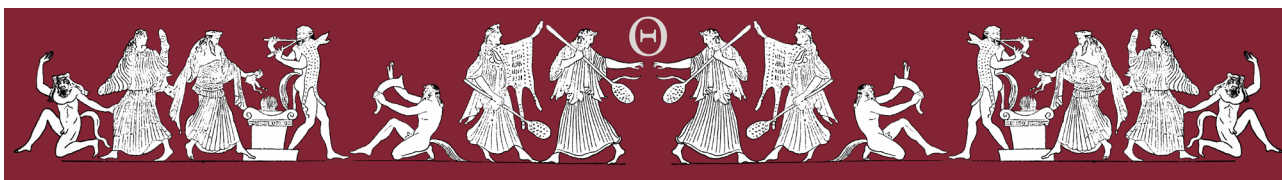
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## AN *ABECEDARIUM* FROM SATYRION AND THE CORINTHIAN ALPHABET

Giulio Vallarino\*

**Key words:** history of Greek alphabet, Corinthian alphabet, Corinthian phonology, archaic letters form.

**Parole chiave:** storia dell'alfabeto greco, alfabeto corinzio, fonologia corinzia, paleografia arcaica.

### Abstract:

*A Mesocorinthian kotyle recently rediscovered in the storerooms of the Archaeological Service at Taranto, originally found in the excavations of the archaic sanctuary of Saturo, bears an uncomplete Corinthian abecedarium, one of the few known so far. The paper presents the inscription in detail and provides a list of the other Corinthian abecedaria, in order to discuss problems related to the positioning of some characteristic letters which seem to vary quite a bit in the alphabetic series. Finally, an overall interpretation of painted abecedaria's function is proposed.*

*Una kotyle mesocorinzia recentemente riscoperta nei magazzini della Soprintendenza Archeologica di Taranto, originariamente rinvenuta negli scavi del santuario arcaico di Saturo, reca un alfabetario corinzio incompleto, uno dei pochi finora conosciuti. L'articolo presenta l'iscrizione nel dettaglio, nonché una ricognizione degli altri alfabetari corinzi, al fine di discutere i problemi relativi al posizionamento di alcune lettere caratteristiche, che sembra variare non poco nella serie alfabetica. In conclusione viene proposta un'interpretazione complessiva della funzione degli alfabetari dipinti.*

In 1976, during the excavations of the so-called Santuario della Sorgente (i.e. “Spring Sanctuary”) at the ancient site of Satyrion in Leporano, along the southside coast of Taranto, F.G. Lo Porto brought to light a fragment of a Mesocorinthian *kotyle*, preserved only in the bottom side. The sherd (diameter: 8.8 cm; thickness: 0.5 cm; inv. no. 179761) is still bearing the decoration of the lower side: a classic rays pattern, originally made up with thirty-eight/forty rays, over a wide-splayed foot dark painted on both sides; the interior vessel's surface is all dark painted too. Under the bottom, there are six concentric circles, three bigger, close to the maximum circumference, and three smaller, close to the circle centre. In the middle the painted inscription (letters height: 0.7-1.2 cm) runs circularly from left to right. Most of the letters' paint is vanished, but the traces are quite easily readable and reveal a series of seventeen Greek letters forming an incomplete *abecedarium*.

This inscribed sherd has been kept in the storerooms of the local archaeological service and has remained unpublished for more than forty years. When I first briefly presented the *abecedarium* in a catalogue of Satyrion's inscriptions<sup>1</sup>, I was not allowed to see the piece directly, due to the pandemic restrictions, but now, during the survey of the epigraphic material from Satyrion for the update of *IG's* fourteenth volume<sup>2</sup>, I finally saw the *kotyle* and can provide new pictures, a drawing and other details (figg. 1-3).

As mentioned, the vase belongs to a Mesocorinthian production, as suggested by the wide-splayed foot and by the number of rays, normally increasing during the middle period<sup>3</sup>. The closest comparisons date from 580-570 BC<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See VALLARINO 2021, no. 1.7. Major epigraphic studies are quoted in notes according to the *AIEGL List of Abbreviations of Editions and Works of Reference for Alphabetic Greek Epigraphy*. I sincerely thank

Elisabetta Bini and Roberta Fabiani for their kind help.

<sup>2</sup> More information on this project at [www.officina-igxiv2.org](http://www.officina-igxiv2.org).

<sup>3</sup> See WEINBERG 1943, no. 367.

<sup>4</sup> See LO PORTO 1959-1960, p. 142, fig. 118 b, p. 143 fig. 119, p. 155, fig. 132, p. 156, fig. 133, p. 200, figs. 176-177.

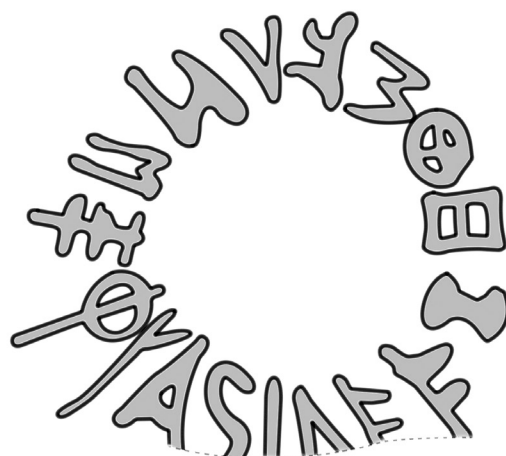
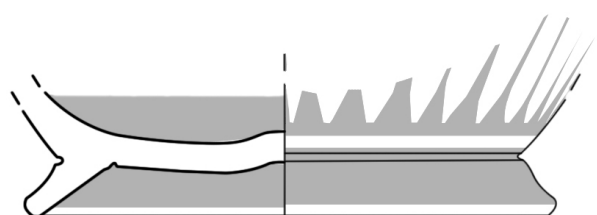


Fig. 1. Mesocorinthian *kotyle* from Saturo with painted abecedarium, bottom view (Author's photo, courtesy of the SABAP).

Fig. 2. The *abecedarium* painted under the foot of the *kotyle* (Author's drawing, not in scale).

Fig. 3. Mesocorinthian *kotyle* from Saturo with painted *abecedarium*: profile and section (Author's drawing).

to the mid-sixth century<sup>5</sup>, as far as one can tell by the foot shape and the poorly preserved painted decoration. From a brief note provided by F.G. Lo Porto, still kept in the store box, we know that the inscribed *kotyle* was found accidentally among the soil moved after some clandestine excavations in the area of the Spring Sanctuary<sup>6</sup>.

The letters were painted before firing, with the same darkish-brown paint used for the decoration. The inscription, written from left to right, is complete in itself, because none of the signs conceived by the writer are missing, taking up the entire available space. The first twelve signs follow the standard order, then there is the inversion of *mu* and *nu*, followed by the lack of some letters, to be discussed later. Despite some peculiar letter forms, the alphabet appears to be a Corinthian “dark blue” (according to Kirchhoff's classification), as the *samek* sign for [ks] confirms, as well as the “S-shaped” *beta*<sup>7</sup> and the four-bars *iota*. The linear *gamma* (i.e. “Achaean” *gamma*) is apparently divergent from the Corinthian alphabet, although some specimens are known in Corinthian inscriptions too<sup>8</sup>. It is without doubt a variant, quite rare, that should be explained as a simplification of the normal curved-shaped *gamma* (C) and, not surprisingly, it occurs only in case of fluid tracking painted inscriptions, characterized by a quick and secure writing gesture. Finally, we can read the series as follows:

α β γ δ ε ζ η θ ι κ λ ν μ ξ ρ υ

In the transcription *e* indicates E, a grapheme used in Corinthian writing to express [e:]<sup>9</sup>, here written with the three bars inclined downwards like, more slightly, the *digamma*. The *het* still in “close” form (Θ) and the vertical dash

<sup>5</sup> PELAGATTI, STIBBE 2001, p. 386, tab. XVIII, 3.

<sup>6</sup> The note reads: “Saturo, proprietà Longo Lucia, sbancamento del tratto centro-sud del lato ovest di zona A verso ingresso grotto. Da m 1,50 a m 1,70 riferito al piano di campagna del lato nord di area A. Terreno sconvolto dai clandestini (27/09/1976)”.

<sup>7</sup> The characteristic Corinthian *beta* is the so called “meander-type” (J) of which this “S-shaped” *beta* from Satyrior is an evident variant (see Guarducci, *Epigrafia greca* I, pp. 170-171). I wasn't able to find a precisely fitting parallel in Corinthian letterings, but a close example may be in ARENA 1967, no. 46, fig. 42 (inscription however considered false by AMYX 1988, vol. 2, p. 558).

<sup>8</sup> Above all the Late-corinthian *pyxis* signed by Chares (575-550 BC; *LSAG*<sup>2</sup>, p. 114, n. 19, pl. 20.19; Wachter, *Non-Attic Vase Inscr.*, COR 57d and 57m). See also the so-called Troilos *aryballos* (ca. 575 BC; *LSAG*<sup>2</sup> pp. 440-441, no. 19, pl. 74.2-3; Wachter, *Non-Attic Vase Inscr.*, COR 51b transcribed the letter as C, but looking at the picture the stroke is almost completely straight) and another Corinthian *aryballos* from Boeotia (Wachter, *Non-Attic Vase Inscr.*, COR 50A). These are all painted inscriptions. About this letter shape see Wachter *Non-Attic Vase Inscr.* § 103, pp. 227-228.

<sup>9</sup> *LSAG*<sup>2</sup>, p. 114; see also further.



of the *koppa* extending into the circle are also remarkable features that confirm the dating to the mid-sixth century or a few years earlier.

From *alpha* to *lambda* the sequence is traditionally displayed and is followed by the rather frequent inversion between *mu* and *nu*<sup>10</sup>. After the *xi* there is a leap omitting *omicron* and *pi*, then the sequence restarts with *koppa* and jumps over *rho*, *san* and *tau*<sup>11</sup> to a two stroke *hypsilon*<sup>12</sup>.

Disruptions and omissions in the alphabetic sequences, especially in the second half of the series, are quite common in the epigraphic *abecedaria*, either with scratched or painted letters<sup>13</sup>. In the present case the alphabetic series has been deliberately written in an uncomplete form, probably due to the lack of available space. In fact, uncomplete and irregular sequences can be seen also in painted and scratched before firing *abecedaria*<sup>14</sup>, that are documents for which we would expect special care in the preparation of the inscription. Considering the other eleven “intact” samples—undamaged inscriptions whose lack of some letters is not imputable to losses of the written surface—that I was able to collect, the sequences witnessed are in three cases interrupted before the end of the traditional local series<sup>15</sup>, but there is no other *abecedarium* that ends at *hypsilon* as the one from Satyrion.

Nevertheless, before discussing the communicative function of the alphabetic series painted on this *kotyle*, it is best to dwell on some points relating to the shape, function and position of individual letters and, more generally, on the overall appearance of the Corinthian alphabet, which emerge from the comparison between this series and the other Corinthian *abecedaria* preserved so far.

To begin, the linear (or “Achaean”) *gamma*. As discussed, this form is not totally lacking in Corinthian script<sup>16</sup>, although the most common form happens to be the curved one (C) or even the less-spread angular one (<)<sup>17</sup>. The one from Satyrion is the fourth clear example of l as *gamma*<sup>18</sup>, while a wider range of, so to say, “almost-straight curved-*gamma*” is available among painted Corinthian inscriptions<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, the ideotype of Corinthian *gamma* could be conceived as a somehow flexible line modelling from C to l, or stiffening to <. Since the adopted sign for [i] is Σ, a tendency to easily interpret the simple vertical line as a *gamma* is totally comprehensible, since this latter grapheme is left unused by Corinthian writers. For these reasons, calling this linear Corinthian *gamma* “Achaean” seems inappropriate.

A second consideration concerns the vowel timbre /e/, its graphic representation and the placement of the relative graphemes in the Corinthian alphabetic series. We know that Corinthians used two letters to express those sounds: the characteristic B/B used for [ε:] and [ē], while, as mentioned, E serves for [e:]<sup>20</sup> (and [ē] only as second member of a diphthong<sup>21</sup>). The association between B/B and the /e/ timbre is peculiar and clearly identifies the Corinthian script among others, being specifically created to meet the needs of local vocalism<sup>22</sup>. However, the position of this grapheme in the alphabetic order is not clear. Therefore, it is useful to provide a brief list of the other examples of Corinthian *abecedaria* known so far.

Including the one from Satyrion, only six letter series attributed to the Corinthian script—two of which with a significant degree of uncertainty—are currently recognized and just one is complete. The earlier is scratched under the foot of a Protocorinthian *lekkythos* found at Kyme<sup>23</sup>, along with another graffito of a different hand (fig. 4), and dates to ca. 700 BC. This series is quite peculiar, because it starts with the first eight letters of the Euboic alphabet, written from left to right, then the graffito turns back, in a sort of *boustrophedon*, displaying the first six consonants of an *abece-*

<sup>10</sup> See e.g., GHINATTI 2004-2005, nos. 3.1, 3.3; BOFFA 2017, p. 301. The *mu* shows equal length external strokes (M, close to the Jeffery μ<sup>2</sup> Corinthian type: *LSAG* p. 114, fig. 33), instead of the more common shapes M and M'. In this position it does not seem like there is any valid reason for reading this letter as a *san*. For a very close example see note 24.

<sup>11</sup> The *koppa-rho-san-tau* sequence seems traditional in Corinth, according to others preserved *abecedaria* (see further, p. 25).

<sup>12</sup> I was initially open to the possibility that this letter could be also interpreted as a miswritten *rho* with the upper stroke missing (VALARINO 2021, pp. 91-92), but now I can reject this hypothesis.

<sup>13</sup> GHINATTI 2004-2005, 3.1, 3.3, 3.6.1, 3.6.3, 3.6.4, 3.10, 3.11 etc.

<sup>14</sup> See *IG Puglia* 20 (= BOFFA 2017, pp. 295-299); *IG Puglia*, 12;

<sup>15</sup> *I.dial. Grande Grèce* I, 73 (α β γ δ ε ε η ζ θ ι κ λ μ ν; from Adria, graffito, 4<sup>th</sup> cent. BC); *IG Puglia*, 12 (α β δ η θ ζ ε φ μ ν; from Canosa, graffito before firing, end of the 4<sup>th</sup> cent. BC); *IG Puglia*, 20 (α β γ δ ε ζ η θ ι κ λ μ ν; from Gravina, painted, end 5<sup>th</sup> – beginning 4<sup>th</sup> cent. BC).

<sup>16</sup> See note 8.

<sup>17</sup> See Wachter, *Non-Attic Vase Inscr.* § 103, note 702.

<sup>18</sup> The others being Wachter, *Non-Attic Vase Inscr.* COR 50A, 57d, 57m.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Wachter *Non-Attic Vase Inscr.* COR 68j, whose *gamma* is transcribed as Γ in the *fac-simile*, but the picture clearly shows a straighter stroke, and COR 41 that has a very open angle *gamma*, almost straight.

<sup>20</sup> This sound is also rendered in the form BΣ = <εi>, as in the “traditional” spelling (see CASSIO 2019, pp. 101-102).

<sup>21</sup> Serving the characteristic diphthongs’ opening of the local dialect from [i] to [e], like, e.g., in Περαιόθεν (Wachter *Non-Attic Vase Inscr.*, COR 85) = att. \*Περαιόθεν. See also Wachter, *Non-Attic Vase Inscr.*, § 219, pp. 243-244; CASSIO 2019, p. 101.

<sup>22</sup> The same solution, however, is used by Megarian, Sikyonian and Aetolian alphabets; see also ASTORECA 2021, p. 64.

<sup>23</sup> *IG Campana* I, no. 73.b (with bibl.). I owe my thanks to Paola Lombardi for having shared with me her considerations about this document before the publication of her major book.

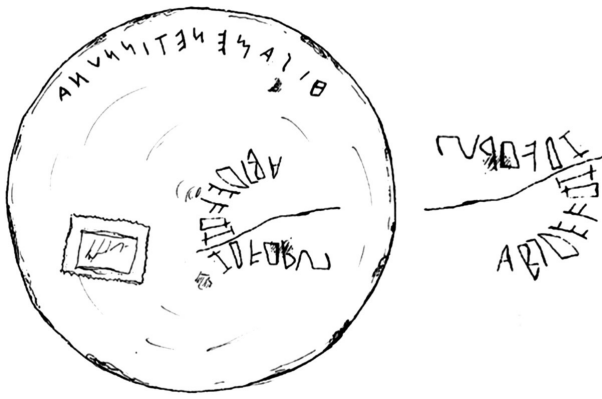


Fig. 4. Two *abecedaria* graffiti under the foot of a *lekythos* from Kyme, ca. 700 BC (after BOFFA 2016).

Fig. 5. Painted *pinax* with *abecedarium* from Penteskouphia, 600-550 BC (after BOEHEGEHOLD 1992).

Fig. 6. Drawing of the *abecedarium* and the label inscription painted on the “Troilos aryballos”, ca. 575 BC (after LEJEUNE 1983).



*darium*, written backwards from *zeta* to *beta*, interpreted as Corinthian due to the very shape of this last letter. The Euboic series reads: Α Β Γ Δ Ε Φ Ξ Ι (with inverse *gamma* and the last two signs misplaced, according to the normal sequence); then the Corinthian: Ζ Ι Δ Γ Ξ Ι, to read backwards. The whole series can be transcribed as follows:

α β γ δ ε ς ζ η θ ι κ λ μ ν ξ ο π ρ σ τ υ φ χ ψ ω

It is difficult to know the reason of why writing this double abecedarium, but what can be said is that the author wanted to show his writing skills in both the local scripts, the one used in the place the vase arrived to, Kyme, and the one of where the vase came from, Corinth<sup>24</sup>. What complicates even further the Corinthian series scenario is the lack of vowels, quite impossible to explain, and the shape used for *gamma* with an almost closed eyelet, unattested elsewhere in Corinthian writing. The belonging of this short series to this local script is in fact based only on the meander *beta*.

The second *abecedarium*, in chronological order, is present on a *pinax* from Penteskouphia (fig. 5), dating 600-550 BC<sup>25</sup>, that has seventeen letters preserved, from *e* to *tau*. The traditional sequence is respected except for the posi-

<sup>24</sup> See BOFFA 2016, p. 345, note 68. ASTORECA 2021, pp. 50-51, explains these *abecedaria* as a clear “exercise of digraphy”.

<sup>25</sup> LSAG<sup>2</sup>, p. 117, pl. 20, no. 16; Wachter, *Non-Attic Vase Inscr.*, COP 86.

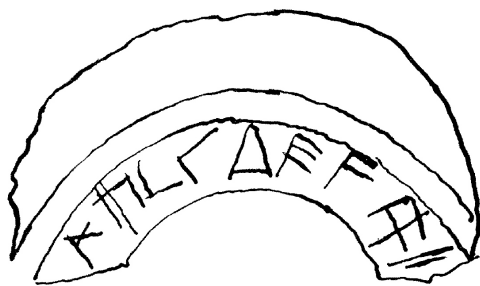


Fig. 7. Graffito on the shoulder of an Athenian black glazed lamp from the Athenian agora, 510-480 BC (after BOEHEGEHOLD 1992).

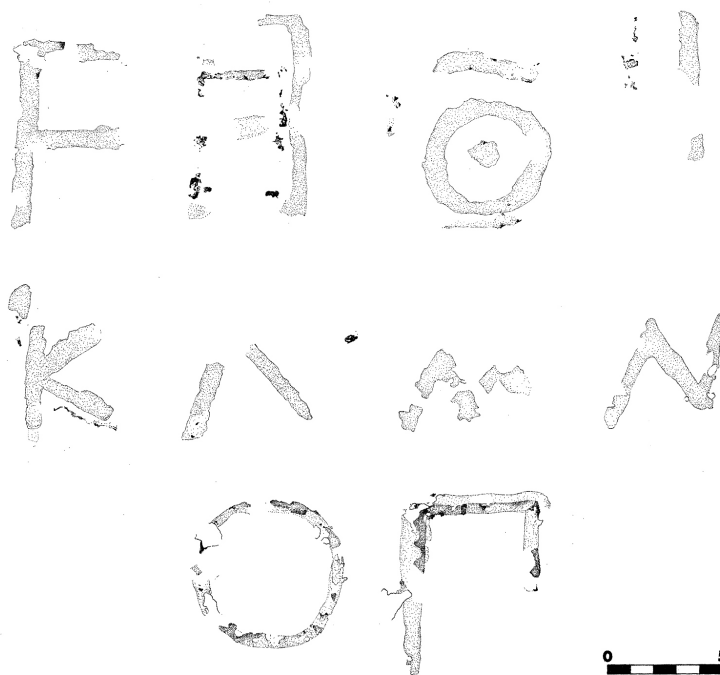


Fig. 8. Letters painted over the 5<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C. starting platform of the raceco urse in the Corinth forum (after WILLIAM, RUSSEL 1981).

tion of the *xi*, placed between *pi* and *koppa*. The series reads: Ε Φ Ι Θ Σ Κ Λ Μ Ν Ο Γ Ξ Ρ Π Τ (with reverse *pi*), to be interpreted as:

[---] ε φ ι κ λ μ ν ο π ξ ρ σ τ [---]

The letters follow a “false-*boustrophedon*”, while after *pi* the inscription curves backwards due to the end of the writing space. The *abecedarium* was painted before firing, along with the decorations representing an armed man with a spear and a flower.

A third example, more or less coeval with the previous one (ca 575 BC), is readable on the mentioned Troilos *aryballos*<sup>26</sup> and is the only one bearing an (almost) complete series of signs (fig. 6). The *abecedarium* is preceded by a label inscription describing the depicted human figure as the Trojan prince Troilos, then the series reads: Α Γ ( Δ Ε Ϝ Ι Θ Σ Κ Λ Μ Ν Ο Γ Ρ Π Μ Τ Ν Δ ↓ : Χ Β that is an almost complete *abecedarium*:

α β γ δ ε Ϝ θ ι κ λ μ ν ο π ρ ρ σ τ υ φ ψ : χ ε

This vase inscription bears twenty-five letters, with the omission of *xi*, and presents a disruption in the very end of the series, where a probable cross-*chi* is postposed after *psi* and preceded by a three-dot interpunction; then the series finishes with a Corinthian beta-shaped *epsilon*<sup>27</sup>. All of these final features will be discussed in detail.

<sup>26</sup> See note 8.

<sup>27</sup> The end section of this *abecedarium* is quite unreadable because the paint has almost vanished.

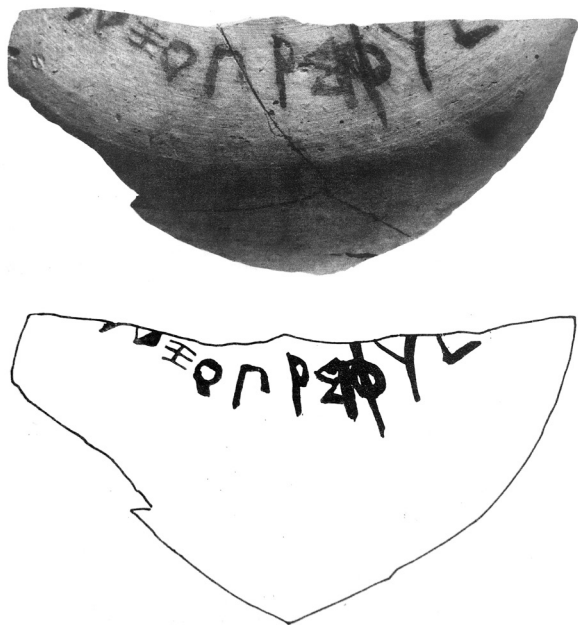


Fig. 9. Painted *abecedarium* on the shoulder of an unidentified amphora from Gadime e Epërme, half of the 5<sup>th</sup> cent. BC (after PAROVIĆ-PEŠIKAN 1978).

The attribution to the Corinthian script is due solely to the form of the *beta*, drawn with great hesitation, that is made up of a set of at least six strokes which, intersecting each other, recalls a meander-beta. The *gamma* shape is not decisive because, due to the curved baseline of the graffito, could be explained as < (Corinthian) or Γ (non-Corinthian). On the other hand, the presence of the one-stroke *iota* leads either to date the *abecedarium* to the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC<sup>31</sup>, despite the earlier dating of the finding context, or to exclude the Corinthian origin for this script altogether.

The last set of letters considered here is painted on the shoulder of a small amphora found at Gadime e Epërme (Kosovo, fig. 9), bearing nine readable signs that M. Lejeune<sup>32</sup> has brought back to the Corinthian script. The chronology of this abecedarium is not clear: the first editor<sup>33</sup>, who initially read the inscription as Euboic, dated it to 530-500 BC, but Lejeune, due to substantial historical and palaeographic arguments, preferred the half of the following century. The series reads: Ν Ξ Ο Π Ρ Σ Τ Φ Υ . (*koppa* is missing, *tau* is inserted, *phi* is between *tau* and *hypsilon*; at the end of the series a part of a letter is preserved, but unreadable), that is:

[ - - - ] ν ξ ο π ρ σ τ φ υ . [ - - - ]

The sequence shows a dark blue *xi*, but also lacks *koppa* and presents the letter Σ as sibilant, therefore a single-stroke *iota*, not preserved, has to be assumed for this abecedarium: these features, compatible with a late 5<sup>th</sup> century Corinthian script, led Lejeune to his later dating. Unfortunately, the amphora type is unidentified and the lack of this information is particularly serious, especially in the case of a painted alphabet, created at the very moment of the vase making.

As we saw in this list, the Β/Β sign appears only in the unique complete series from the Troilos aryballos and finds its place at the end. On the other side we have four examples of Ε, including the one from Satyrion, always positioned in the traditional sequence between *delta* and *digamma*.

The last certain Corinthian letters series, not properly an *abecedarium*, is partially depicted over the 5<sup>th</sup> cent. BC starting platform of the racecourse in the north-east corner of the Corinthian forum (fig. 7)<sup>28</sup>. The series, hardly legible on the stones, reads: Φ Ι Κ Λ Μ Ν Ο Π (*xi* is missing), to be interpreted as:

[ - - - ] φ [ ζ ] η θ ι κ λ μ ν ο π [ - - - ]

The letters' sequence has for sure an ordinal value, labelling the races' starting posts. It is conserved from *digamma* to *pi*—with *zeta* lacking due to the stone conditions—and, also in this case, *xi* is omitted too. Of the originally preserved eleven letters only a few are still readable. Notably *iota* does not show the characteristic Corinthian shape Σ, but is written with a simple vertical stroke as expected in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC<sup>29</sup>.

The following two incomplete alphabetic series here below are attributed by their editors and other scholars to the Corinthian script, but this ascription seems quite uncertain. The first one is scratched on a black glazed Athenian lamp from the Athenian Agora<sup>30</sup>, found in a context dating to 510-480 BC (fig. 8). The reading of the preserved series is quite uncertain (Α Τ[?] <, or Γ, Δ Ε Ξ Η[?] Ι, *zeta* and *theta* are missing) and could be represented as follows:

α β γ δ ε ς η(?) ι [ - - - ]

<sup>28</sup> WILLIAM, RUSSEL 1981, pp. 7-8.

<sup>29</sup> See Guarducci, *Epigrafia greca* I, p. 172;

<sup>30</sup> BOEGEHOLD 1992, pp. 410-412.

<sup>31</sup> See Guarducci, *Epigrafia greca* I, p. 172.

<sup>32</sup> See LEJEUNE 1989.

<sup>33</sup> See PAROVIĆ-PEŠIKAN 1978.



These evidence seems to confirm once more the hypothesis of the dislocation of the so-called “non-Phoenician” letters at the end of the Corinthian series, as initially supposed by L. Jeffery<sup>34</sup> and later reiterated by M. Lejeune<sup>35</sup>. But the very notion of “non-Phoenician” letters must be clarified. Even the so-called meander *beta* (𐀀 or 𐀁) is “non-Phoenician”<sup>36</sup>, while in most of the Greek local alphabets 𐀂/𐀃 (= [b]) is normally taken as an adaptation/development of the Phoenician *beth*<sup>37</sup>. Therefore, according to the dislocation theory, 𐀃 should also be at the end of the series as a non-Phoenician letter. But clearly it is not so.

The dislocation theory may perhaps be further specified, making it clear that it does not deal with a graphemic question but a phonemic one. The alphabetic series is conceived as a series of phonemes—inferable from the letter names that recall the related sounds, according to the acronymic principle<sup>38</sup>—not as a series of signs. And this is clear when one looks at the so-called traditional sequence, where the same (or quite the same) series of sounds listed in order occurs, even if the graphemes used to represent them are different. For instance, Attic Α Β Γ, Corinthian Α 𐀀 Δ and Cretan Α 𐀁 𐀂 are all graphemic solutions of the same phonemic values [a] [b] [g], placed at the beginning of every Greek alphabet. Thus, the Corinthian 𐀂/𐀃 could not find a place in the traditional series—if not at the end of it—as the specific sound it represents was either not available in the conventional sequence, nor specifically expressed. The traditional alphabetic series is an adaptation of the Phoenician one serving the phonetical needs of the local Greek dialects, but the Corinthian alphabet—along with others—felt the need of one more phoneme to be written down. Therefore, it was placed at the end of the series<sup>39</sup>.

Back to the Troilos’ aryballos, the presence of the three-dot interpunction at the end of the *abecedarium* needs to be explained. As mentioned, the interpunction stands between *psi* and *chi*, written in inverse order: 𐀡 ↓ : 𐀢 𐀣, while the sequence 𐀡 X ↓ 𐀣 is expected. Probably we are facing a case of expunctive punctuation: the writer, realising their mistake, marks it by putting a punctuation before the letter to be corrected<sup>40</sup>. This rather rare practice is especially known in Italic inscriptions, where it happens to be mostly present in the case of objects of particular value<sup>41</sup>. As a fine depicted *aryballos* is. So, the three-dot punctuation could be used for ideally repositioning the miswritten *chi* in the right place before *psi*, and does not affect at all the final 𐀣.

A further question concerns the presence of the *xi* in the documents referred to above. The Penteskouphia plaque, the Satyrion *kotyle* and the problematic amphora from Gadime e Epërme are the three *abecedaria* presenting this letter in their sequence, however in different positions<sup>42</sup>. In the other ones the letter is totally missing, also in the complete series of the Troilos *aryballos*. The reason for this “intermittence” is probably due to a sort of instability in the phonetic interpretation of this sign, especially in the earlier times.

The standard value of Corinthian 𐀤 is [ks] and it works as a consonant cluster, an innovation of the dark blue alphabets<sup>43</sup>. But along with the standard value [ks], some occurrences of different phonetical interpretation of this sign can be easily found: three times is used for [dz] in the spelling <Ξεύς><sup>44</sup> and its main use for [ks] is sometimes paradoxical, or appears as a “graphic compromise”<sup>45</sup>, when it is flanked by a sign for sibilant, as proved by spelling like <Ξσάνθος><sup>46</sup> and <Φόραξ><sup>47</sup>. Generally speaking, out of twenty-four occurrences of 𐀤 in Corinthian 6<sup>th</sup> century vase inscriptions, five diverge from the standard value, that is more than 20%. Consequently, such uncertainty in the use of this grapheme may have been the cause of its unstable placement within the alphabetic order<sup>48</sup>.

In conclusion, we can now go back to the question of the communicative function of a painted *abecedarium*. Most of the preserved *abecedaria* are graffiti after firing<sup>49</sup>. These kinds of inscriptions are mostly interpreted in two

<sup>34</sup> LSAG<sup>2</sup>, p. 117. The arguments provided by GHINATTI 2004–2005, pp. 37–38 in opposition to this reconstruction seem weak (see further).

<sup>35</sup> AMANDRY, LEJEUNE 1973, p. 202; see also A. Johnston in LSAG<sup>2</sup>, p. 441 and BOEGEHOLD 1992.

<sup>36</sup> For the origin of this letter form see Guarducci, *Epigrafia greca* I.

<sup>37</sup> LURAGHI 2021, p. 43.

<sup>38</sup> LSAG<sup>2</sup>, pp. 21–22; POWELL 1991, pp. 38–42; WACHTER 2021, p. 22.

<sup>39</sup> The process reminds the introduction of the *omega* in eastern Ionian script, a new vowel used for local vocalism that took place at the end of the series (Wachter, *Non-Attic Vase Inscr.*, § 106, p. 228).

<sup>40</sup> See AMANDRY, LEJEUNE 1973 p. 203. The expunctive punctuation is especially attested in Italic epigraphy and widely discussed in MARAS 2015.

<sup>41</sup> See MARAS 2015, p. 115.

<sup>42</sup> Between *pi* and *koppa* on the Penteskouphia *pinax*, between *mu* (misplaced itself) and *koppa* on the Satyrion *kotyle*, between *nu* and

*omicron* on the Gadime e Epërme amphora.

<sup>43</sup> On the introduction of this letter and its position in the alphabetic series see WACHTER 1989, pp. 49–57 and WOODARD 1997, pp. 137–138.

<sup>44</sup> Wachter, *Non-Attic Vase Inscr.* COP 42b, 75, COR 28Aj, but <Δεύς> in COP 78a. On the graphemic interpretation of the sibilants in general see LSAG<sup>2</sup>, pp. 25–28; POWELL 1991, pp. 46–48 and, specifically on Greek *xi* (with different conclusions), WOODARD 1997, pp. 147–156.

<sup>45</sup> Wachter, *Non-Attic Vase Inscr.*, p. 36.

<sup>46</sup> Wachter, *Non-Attic Vase Inscr.* COR 57b.

<sup>47</sup> Wachter, *Non-Attic Vase Inscr.* COR 70f.

<sup>48</sup> LEJEUNE 1973, pp. 202–203, on the other hand, explains the lack of *xi* from the Troilos *aryballos* as a mere mistake. This could be also possible, but does not explain the different placement of *xi* in the Corinthian series.

<sup>49</sup> LEJEUNE 1983; GHINATTI 2004–2005; WEST 2015, pp. 67–71.

ways: as writing exercises<sup>50</sup> and as the will of the vase's owners to testify their writing skills, in a context where this ability can be relevant. The first explanation is valid in a few cases and must be considered with caution: pottery is not the most common medium for someone who is learning how to write, while clay and wax tablets, although less preserved due to their deterrability, are doubtless the normal graphic surfaces for learning<sup>51</sup>. On the other hand, artisans and potters might have played a significant role in the introduction of the alphabetic script and in the spread of writing skills<sup>52</sup>, thus, writing *abecedaria* on pottery could be part of this complex process.

Sanctuaries and sacred places, with their role as cultural activators, are normally the place elected for displaying writing skills. This happened, for instance, with one of the oldest known letter series, scratched on a *pyxis* from Samos found in the *Heraion*<sup>53</sup> and dedicated by the writer to the goddess. Similar *abecedaria* were found in many other sanctuaries and they reflect a particular way of expressing piety by dedicating the writing skill itself.

This can be true in case of a graffito-*abecedarium*, probably created by the writer in the very moment of consecration of the object bearing it, or a little earlier. But when we are facing a painted *abecedarium* (or one scratched before firing) this reconstruction does not work anymore. Like every painted decoration, a painted vase inscription is conceived by the potters even before the vase is sold and used by the owner for their needs. A painted *abecedarium* does not deal with any religious practice, unless it is made on an object intended for religious use only, such as the *pinakes* from Penteskouphia. More frequently, when one finds a vase with a painted alphabetic series in a cult place—like this one from Satyrion—its presence has to be interpreted as accidental, solely motivated by the use of the inscribed vessel in a sacred context, and not of the inscription itself. From this perspective, an alphabet painted on a vase could have a pre-eminent decorative function<sup>54</sup>, or at most it could be part of that complex communicative dynamic, halfway between writing education<sup>55</sup> and sympotic play<sup>56</sup>. This seems especially possible in the case of sympotic vessels, like our *kotyle*, bearing the painted *abecedarium* under the foot, invisible when the vase is left in place, but readable when handled. While or after drinking the wine inside the *kotyle*, the alphabetic series, although incomplete, could be used for one of the games that often took place during the symposium, whose reconstruction is a matter for other studies.

<sup>50</sup> WEST 2015.

<sup>51</sup> See WACHTER 2004.

<sup>52</sup> See BOFFA 2016; 2017; 2020.

<sup>53</sup> See Guarducci, *Epigrafia greca* I, pp. 265-266.

<sup>54</sup> See, e.g., Guarducci, *Epigrafia greca* I, pp. 115-117.

<sup>55</sup> See BOFFA 2016, pp. 344-345; BOFFA 2017, p. 307.

<sup>56</sup> This has been suggestively proposed also for the so-called nonsense inscriptions, quite regularly inserted among the elements of the vase decoration on a par with all the other non-literary elements (see HARRIS 1989, p. 52 and now, especially, CHIARINI 2018, pp. 218-224).

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