

A Neglected Arabic Testimonium on Greek Tachygraphy with a New Fragment of Galen

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The best known reference to Greek shorthand writing (tachygraphy) comes in a passage from Galen, *De libris suis* XIX 14–15 Kühn, dated to around 164 AD.¹ Galen says that a friend of his tricked him into dictating to a shorthand-scribe a lecture attacking the Erasistratean physician Martialus, so that the friend might be able to quote Galen's words while visiting patients. Having done this and gone away for some time, Galen returned to Rome and discovered that this friend had died, but that many people were now in possession of the text of his lecture, presumably having obtained a version of it through the shorthand copy. The shorthand writer employed by Galen's friend was a scribe specifically trained in the skill: *διὰ σημείων εἰς τάχος ἠσκευμένῳ γράφειν.*²

Another fragment of Galen on the subject of shorthand writing exists, embedded within an Arabic discussion of Greek scripts. It has however been overlooked by modern scholarship. The object of this paper is to bring this new material to attention.

Abū al-Faraj Muhammad ibn Ishāq ibn Muhammad ibn Ishāq, otherwise known as al-Nadīm (d. 995 AD), was a scholar from Baghdad, hailing from a family of bookdealers. His best known work is the *Kitāb al-Fihrist* ('The Book Catalogue'), a fascinating collection of information about scribal culture in the tenth century, which was probably compiled in 987 or 988 AD.³ In part of this work al-Nadīm provides an outline of different types of Greek script, including a discussion of what is clearly shorthand writing.

The relevant passage of text reads as follows:

[The Greeks] have a script known as the *Sāmīyā*, which does not resemble anything of ours, for a single one of its letters combines many ideas and abbreviates a numbers of words. Galen (*Jālīnūs*) has mentioned it in his book *Phoenix*. The meaning of the name is "fixing of writings". Galen said: '*In a public session I gave a comprehensive account of anatomy. When a friend met me some days later, he said to me, "A certain man has recorded that you said thus and*

¹ See Gomperz (1880) 2–3, Wessely (1895) 3–4.

² Discussion of the passage in Gomperz (1880) 2–3. For more general introductions to Greek shorthand, see e.g. Boge (1974) and Boge (1976), Teitler (1985). Other older literature on the subject is summarized in Foat (1901).

³ For background on author and text, see the introduction to Dodge (1970).

thus in your public session." Then he repeated my exact words. I said to him, "From where did you get this?" He replied, "I met a scribe skilled in the *Sāmīyā*, who kept abreast of you in writing down your words." This script is learned by the kings and most eminent scribes. The rest of the people are prevented from using it because of its great significance. In the year forty-eight (959 AD) a man practicing medicine came to us from Baalbek. As he asserted that he could write the *Sāmīyā*, we tested what he said. We found that if we spoke ten words, he would pay attention to them and then write down one. When we asked him to repeat [the words], he did repeat them as we had rendered them.⁴

Dodge, the editor and translator of the Arabic text, observed that the name *Sāmīyā* appears to be a form of the Greek word *σημείον*.⁵ It is in fact more likely to be a direct transliteration of the plural *σημεία*, which is the term used by some ancient writers to refer to shorthand writing-symbols, a usage attested in evidence stretching from the Roman to the Byzantine period. Some examples: Cic. *ad Att.* 13.32 (305 S-B) *quod ad te de decem legatis scripsi parum intellexisti credo; quia διὰ σημείων scripseram*, Plut. *Cat. Min.* 23 *Κικέρωνος τοῦ ὑπάτου τοὺς διαφέροντας ὀξύτητι τῶν γραφέων σημεία προδιδάξαντος ἐν μικροῖς καὶ βραχέει τύποις πολλῶν γραμμάτων ἔχοντα δύναμιν*, Basil. *Ep.* 333 *οἱ λόγοι τὴν φύσιν ὑπόπτερον ἔχουσι. διὰ τοῦτο σημείων χρῆζουσιν, ἵνα ἵπταμένων αὐτῶν λάβῃ τὸ τάχος ὁ γράφων*, Psell. *Chron.* 2.6.18–20 *πρὸς τὸ τάχος τῶν λεγομένων ἀποναρκοῦντες σημείοις τιτὶ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν τε ἐννοιῶν καὶ τῶν λέξιων ὑπικήμενον*.⁶ No Greek source, however, tells us that *σημεία* was in fact *the name of the script*, and therefore this Arabic testimonium has particularly special value. There is in any case no doubt that al-Nadīm is referring specifically to tachygraphy, since he is explicit that in this *Sāmīyā* script one letter can express several words.

The fragment of Galen that follows is enigmatic. There is no other evidence for a work of his entitled *Phoenix*, and the title is unusual indeed. The contents of the fragment at first glance seem rather similar to the scenario of *De libris suis* XIX 14–15 Kühn, in that Galen has given a lecture which is recorded in *σημεία* script by a scribe skilled in such writing, and this abbreviated record has been read by others who were not present at the lecture. It is clear however that the details are very different. Whereas in *De libris suis* XIX 14–15 Kühn Galen is criticizing other physicians, here he is lecturing on anatomy. There is no mention of a departure from Rome, or a dead friend, or of a widespread public reading of the text. We are only told that one of Galen's friends got a copy of the text from the scribe and then asked Galen about the lecture some days after it was given, much to Galen's obvious surprise. This seems to be a different scenario, one not attested in Galen's surviving corpus. If one were

⁴ Dodge (1970) 1.29–30.

⁵ Dodge (1970) 1.29 n. 63.

⁶ For more Greek testimonia, see Stephanus (1848–1854) 7.188A.

extremely skeptical, however, one might suppose that this story has been simplified by Arabic scholars from the version given in *De libris suis* XIX 14–15 Kühn, but that is a conjecture difficult to prove, and it would be strange to find the original details altered so greatly.

Al-Nadīm then offers a personal anecdote, about a doctor visiting from Baalbek. It is not made absolutely clear whether we are to understand that the doctor was a Greek speaker. This however seems to be implied by context, for it is decidedly unlikely that an Arab speaker would have been trained in the art of Greek *σημεία*. Al-Nadīm might well have received such a visit from a bilingual traveller, not least because a bookstore is a place where a learned scholar might visit when travelling to Baghdad from Baalbek. In any case, there is no way to test the veracity of this story.

The origin of al-Nadīm's information is not known. Serikoff has made the reasonable suggestion that Hunayn Ibn Ishaq (d. 873), the famous Nestorian translator of Greek texts into Arabic and Syriac, may have been the source of al-Nadīm's discussions of Greek script.⁷ If so, then this testimonium and fragment are valuable indeed, possibly stemming from Greek (or Syriac) originals now lost. Greek shorthand was of course still in use in the tenth century,⁸ and so one cannot rule out the possibility that some of this information was taken from scribes themselves, at which time the name of the script, *σημεία*, would presumably have still been in use. This is therefore a new testimonium worthy of the attention of modern scholars.

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⁷ Сериков (2019).

⁸ The evidence is collected in Foat (1901) 243–244. See also Gitlbauer (1878).

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