



UNIVERSITEIT  
GENT

# At school with Ptolemaíos.

Learning Greek in Graeco-Roman Egypt

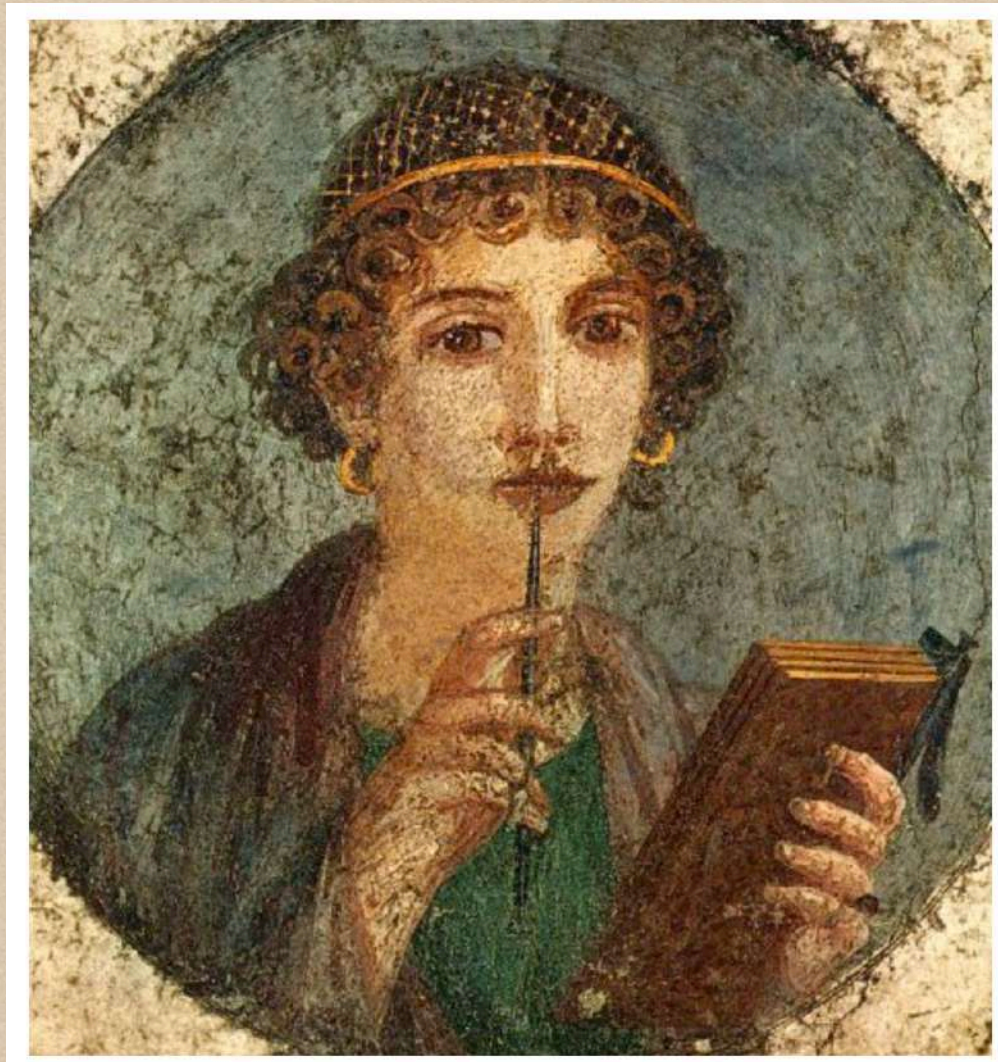
Yasmine Amory

Doorprik de mythe! Onderzoekfestival, March 19 2021



# Why Egypt?

- ◆Ancient education is mainly known from literary and historical sources.





# Why Egypt?

- ◆ The dry climate of Egypt preserved the original school texts, the writing tools, the buildings, and other artefacts...



# Why Egypt?

- ◆ The dry climate of Egypt preserved the original school texts, the writing tools, the buildings, and other artefacts...
- ◆ After the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great, Greek became the official language in Egypt.



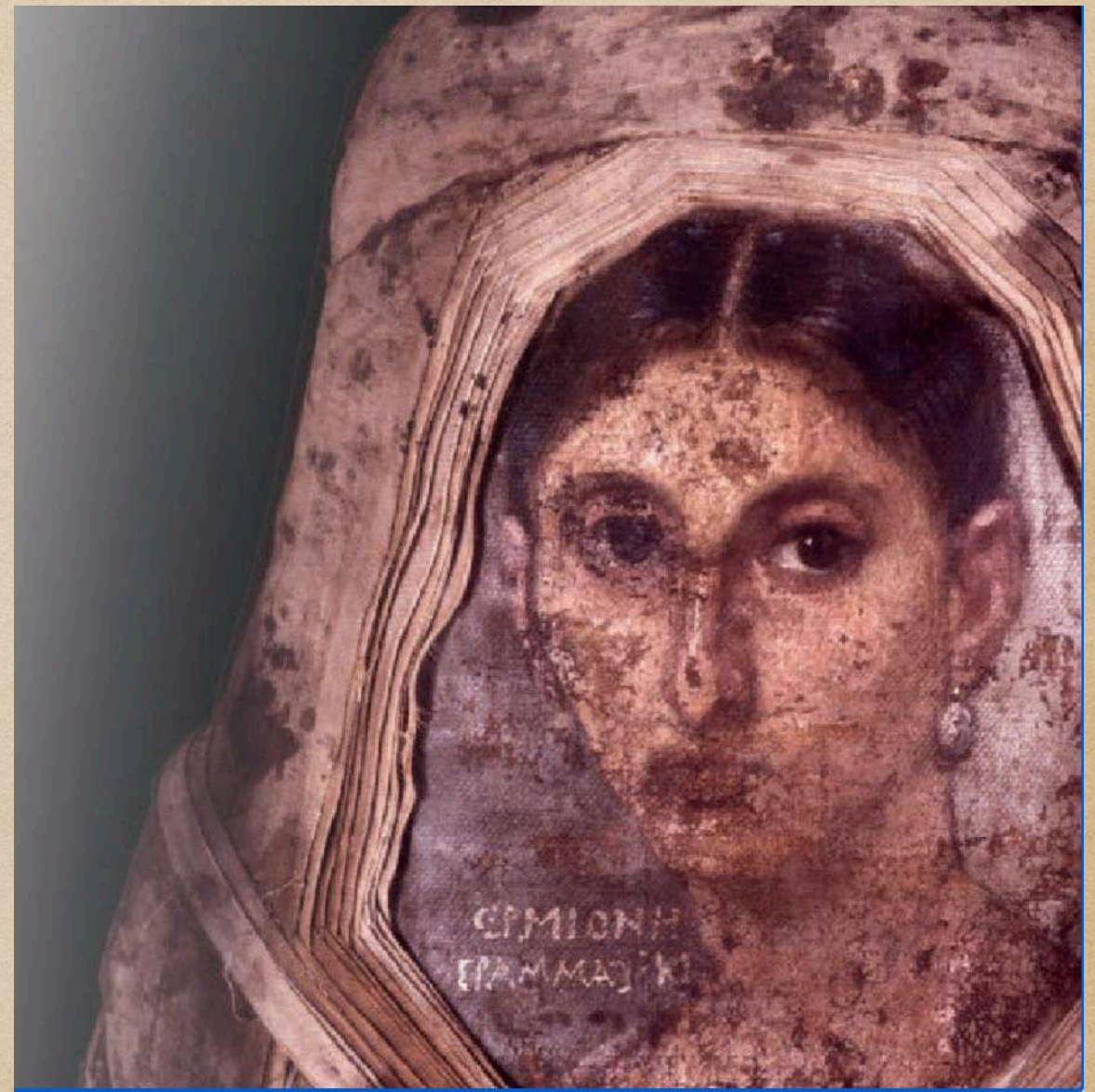
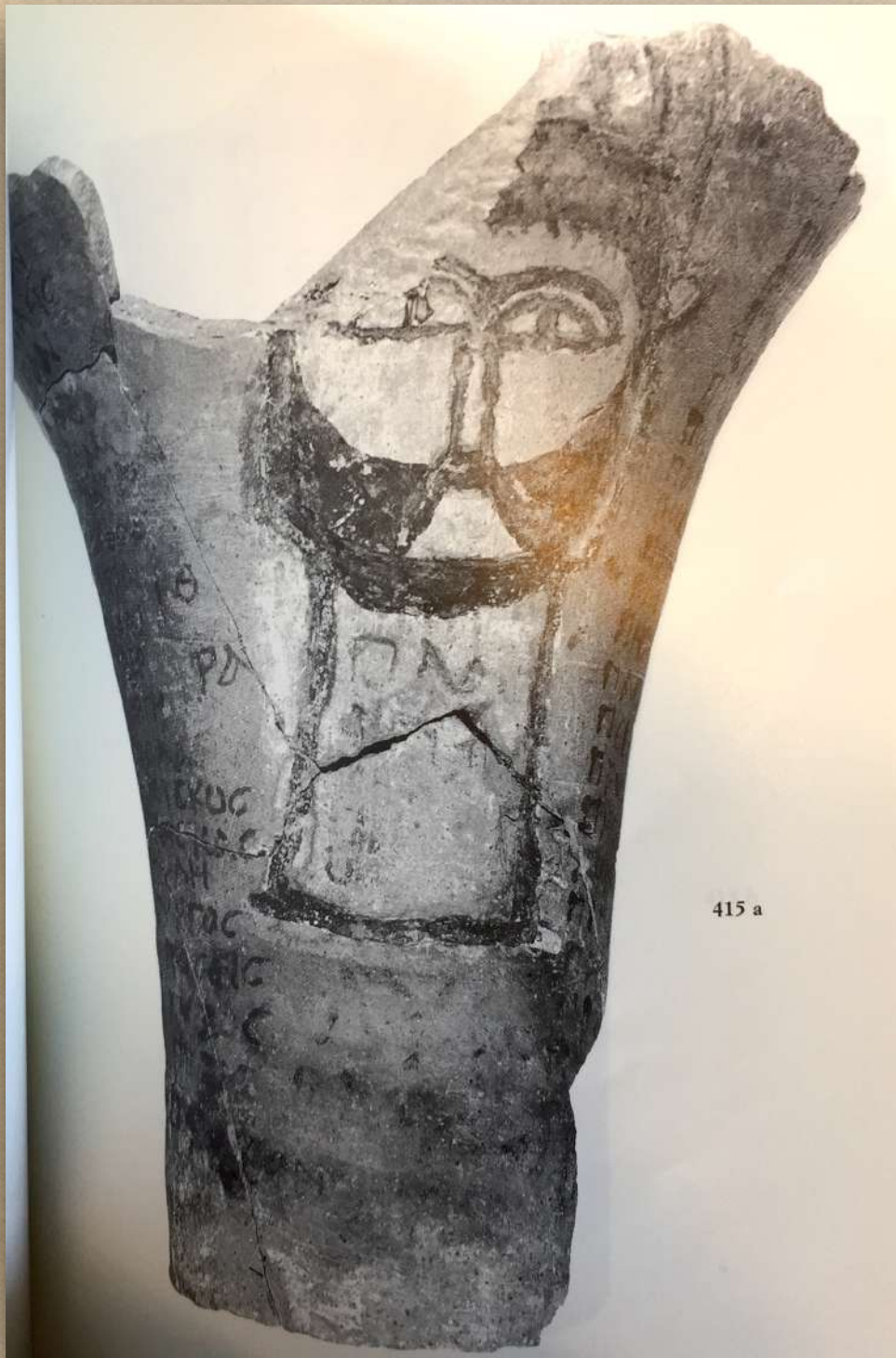
# The ancient education system

Three levels, each supervised by a different teacher:

1. The student learns how to write and read with the γραμματοδιδάσκαλος, γραμματιστής, or διδάσκαλος.
2. The student learns the grammar, the language, and the literature with the γραμματικός.
3. The student studies rhetoric and public speaking with a σοφιστής or ῥήτωρ.



# The teachers



Mummy portrait, 1 CE

A large ostrakon with the drawing of a teacher, 11 CE



# The teacher's name



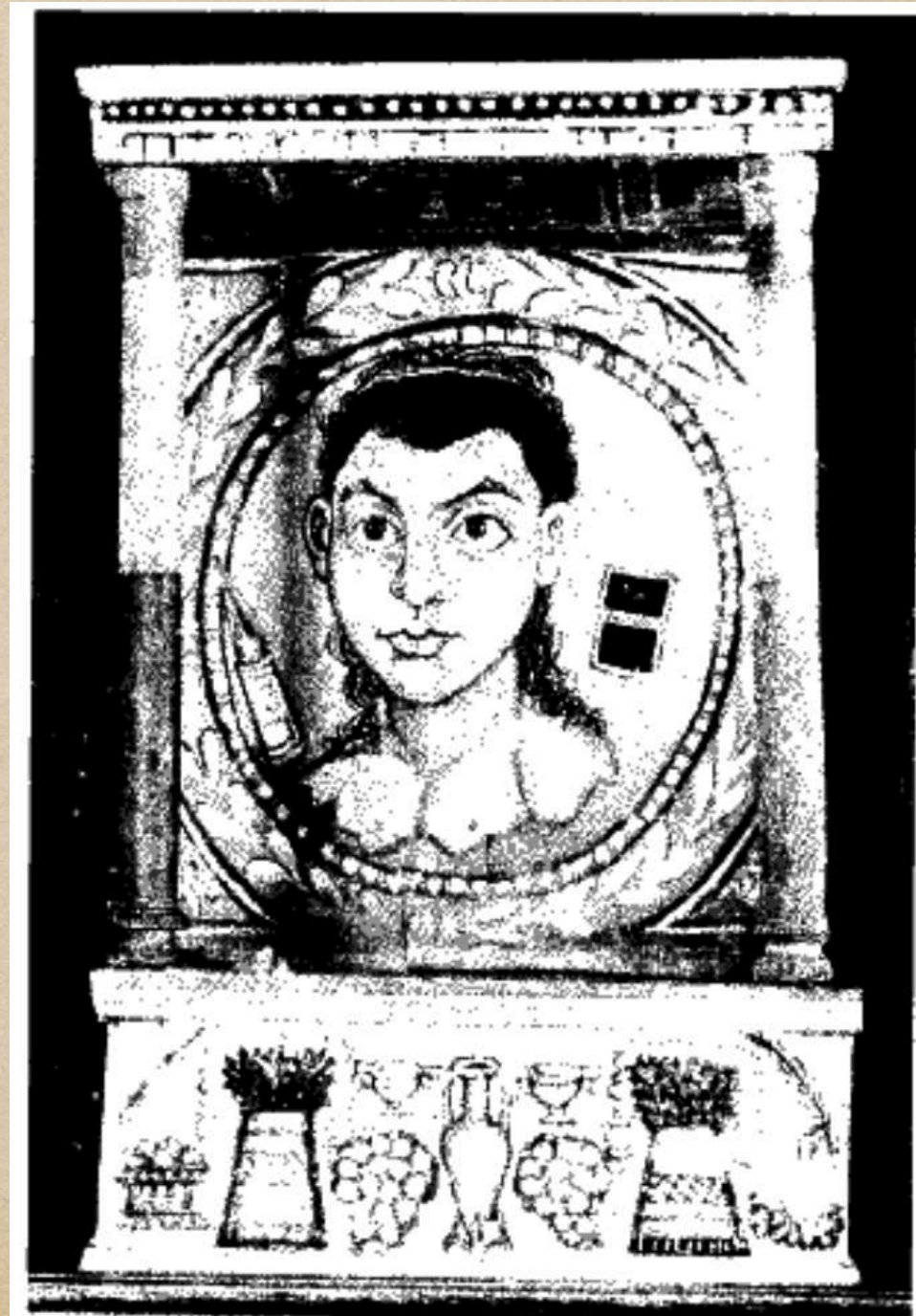
Mummy portrait, 1 CE



# The student Ptolemaios



- ◆ Shrine with the portrait of a boy with writing materials (III CE)





# A typical day at school

Ἀπέρχομαι εἰς τὴν σχολήν.  
εἰσῆλθον, εἶπον.  
Χαῖρε καθηγητά,  
καὶ αὐτός με κατεφίλησεν  
καὶ ἀντησπάσατο.

ἐπιδίδωσίν μοι  
ὁ παῖς ὁ ἐμὸς

καμπτροφόρος  
πινακίδας,  
θήκην γραφείων,  
παραγραφίδα.

τῷ ἐμῷ τόπῳ  
καθήμενος

Eo in scholam.  
introivi, dixi:  
Ave, magister,  
et ipse me osculatus est  
et resalutavit.

porrexit mihi  
puer meus

scriniarius  
tabulas,  
thecam graphiariam,  
praeductorium.

loco meo  
sedens

I go off to school.  
I entered [and] said,  
'Hello, teacher!'  
and he himself kissed me  
and returned the greeting.

My [slave] boy who carries the  
case of books hands  
[Lat.: handed] me

writing-tablets,  
a case of styluses  
[Lat.: a stylus-case], a ruler.

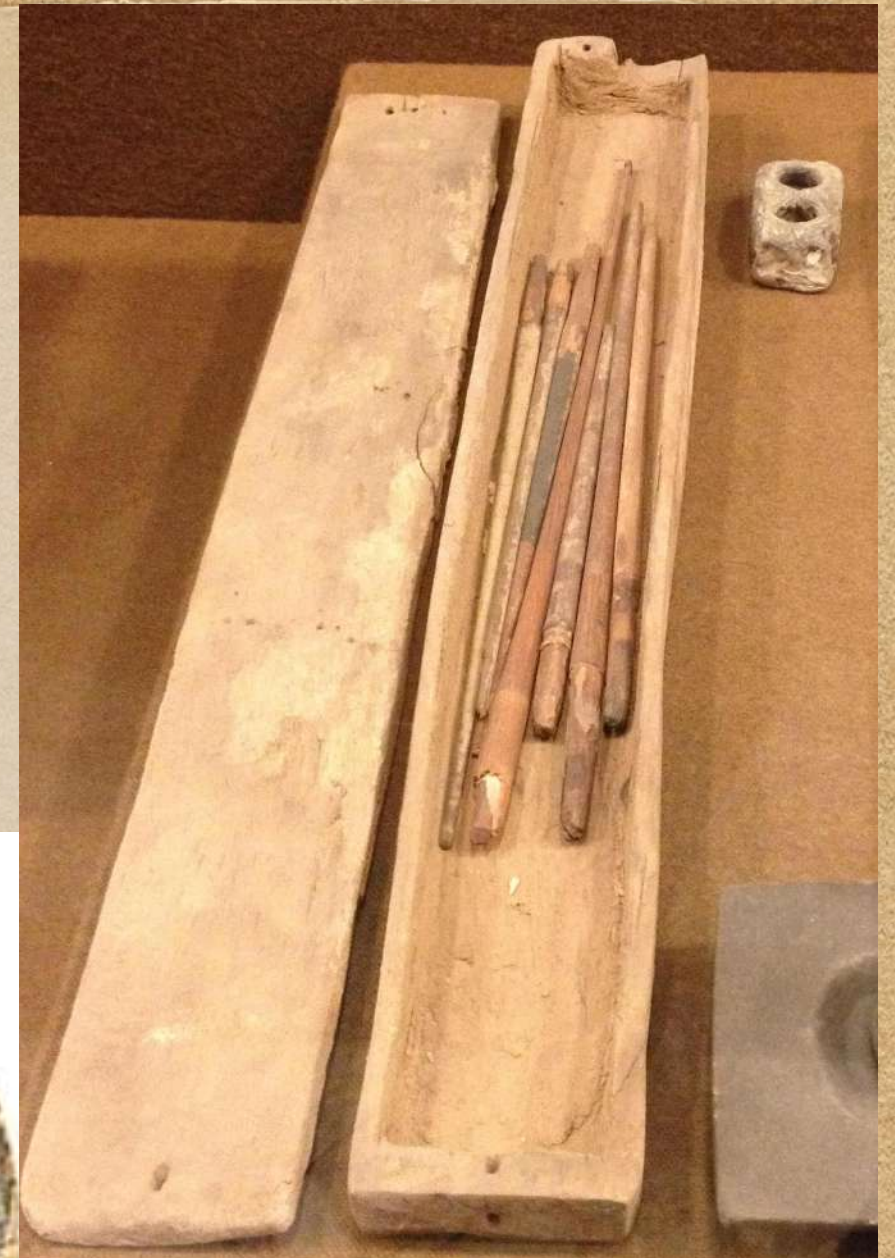
Sitting in my place I rub out  
[the previous contents of my  
tablets].

From the Hermeneumata, a school handbook in  
Latin and Greek from the III CE Gaul



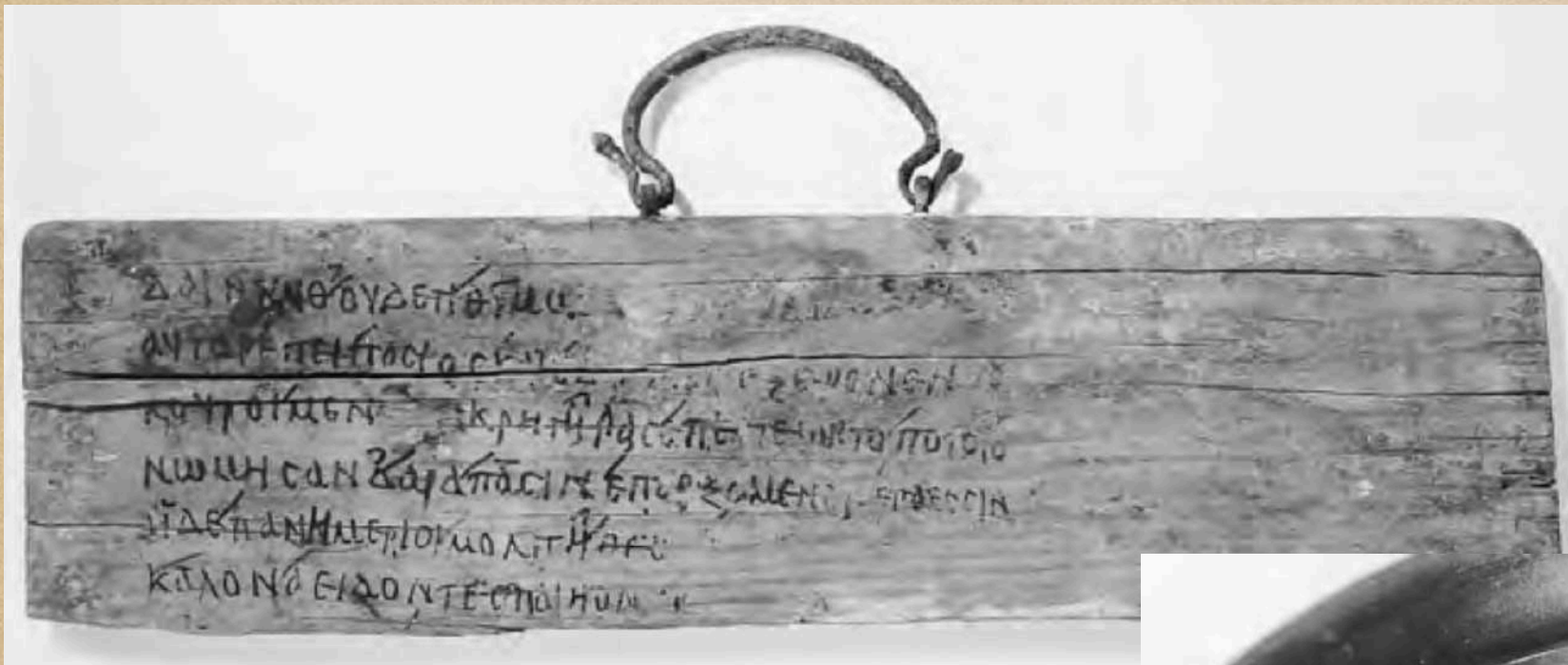
# The writing tools

Wax tablets and stylus





# The writing tools



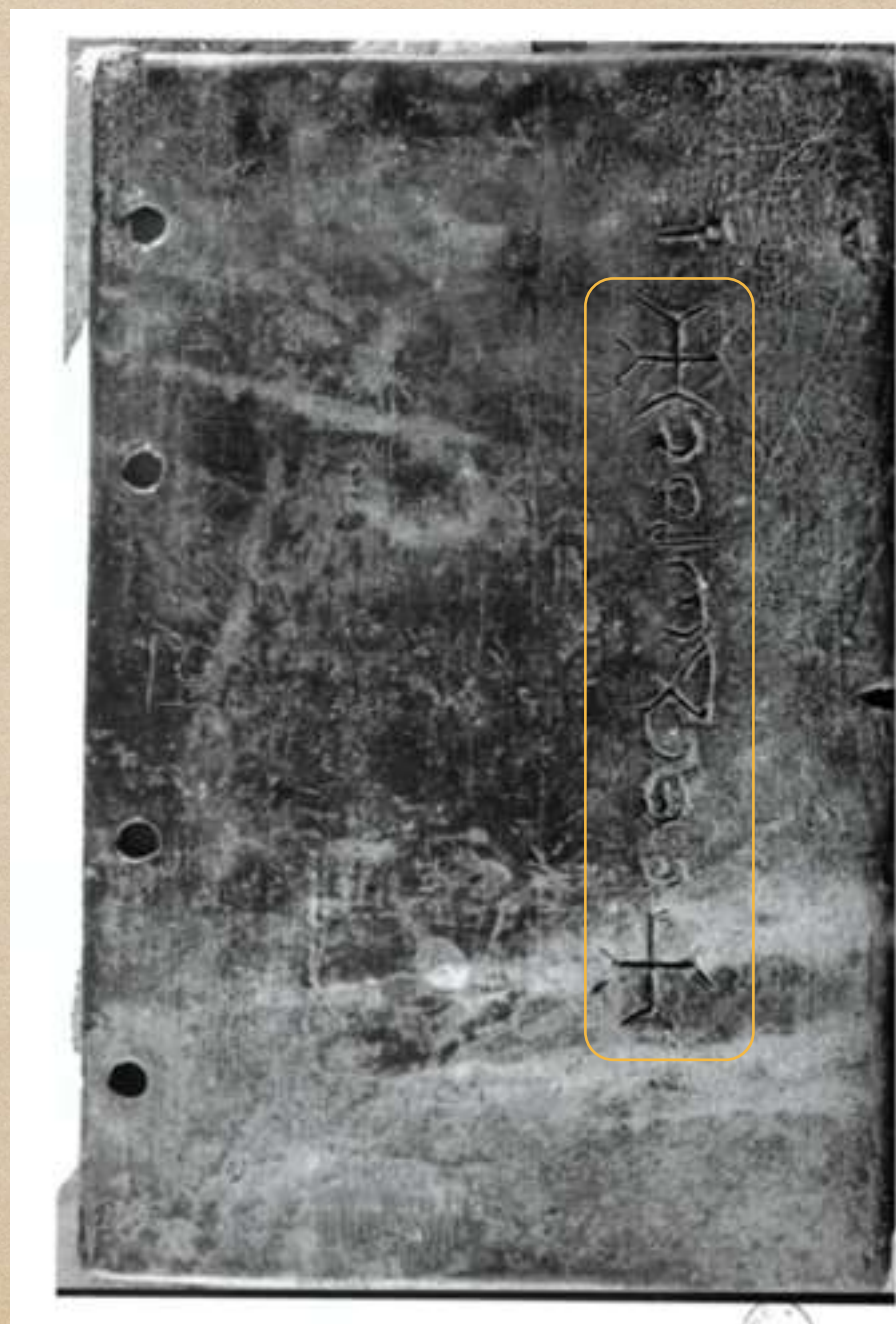
Tablet with bronze handle (V-VI CE)

Attic cup, ca. 460 BCE





# An ancient schoolbook



T.Varie 51-70 (Oxyrhynchites ?, end of VI CE)



# The school

- ◆ In the ancient town of Trímithis at the Dakhla Oasis (western desert of Egypt).





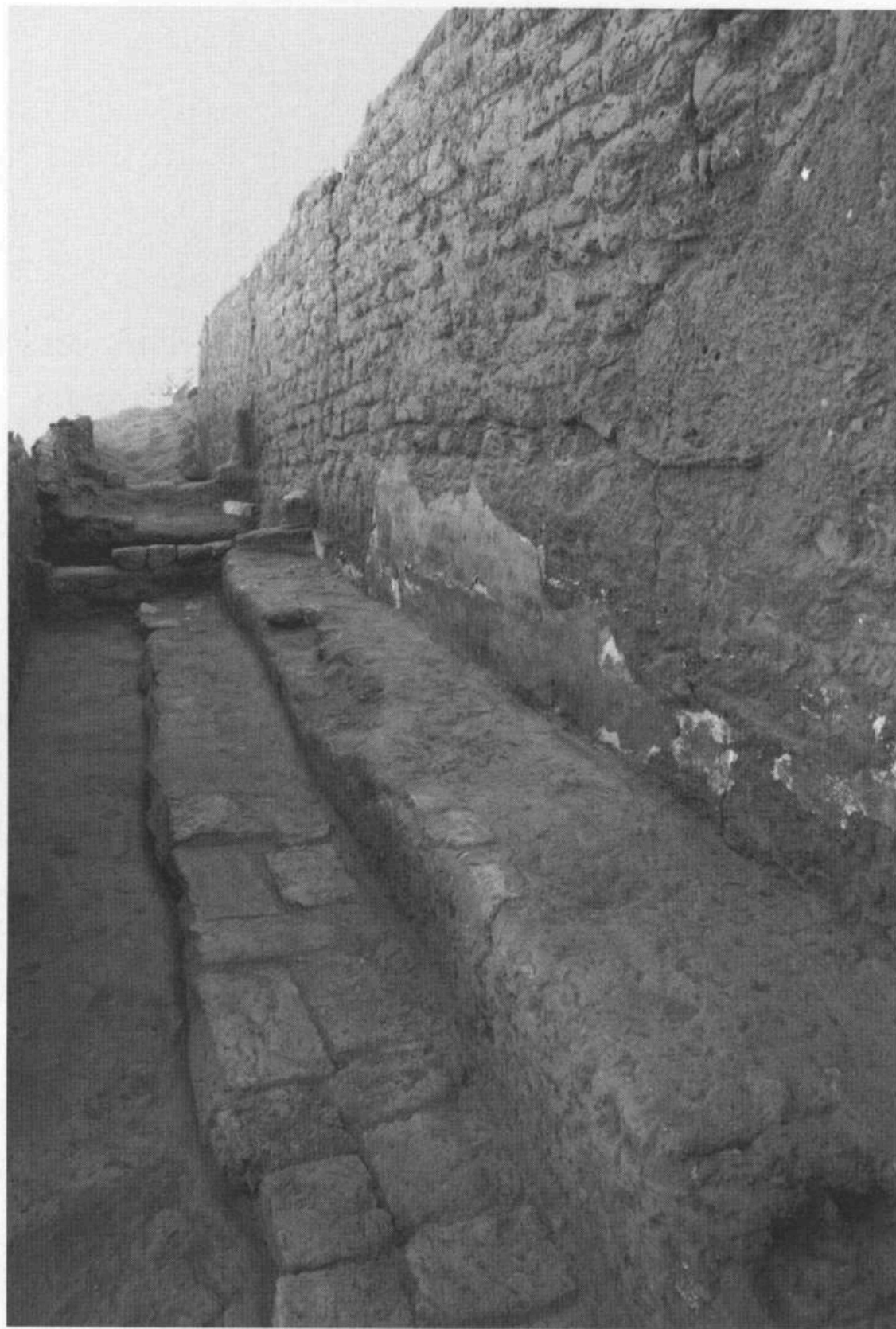


The school consisted of three rooms.  
The walls were plastered in white,  
they were painted in the lower in yellow and red.

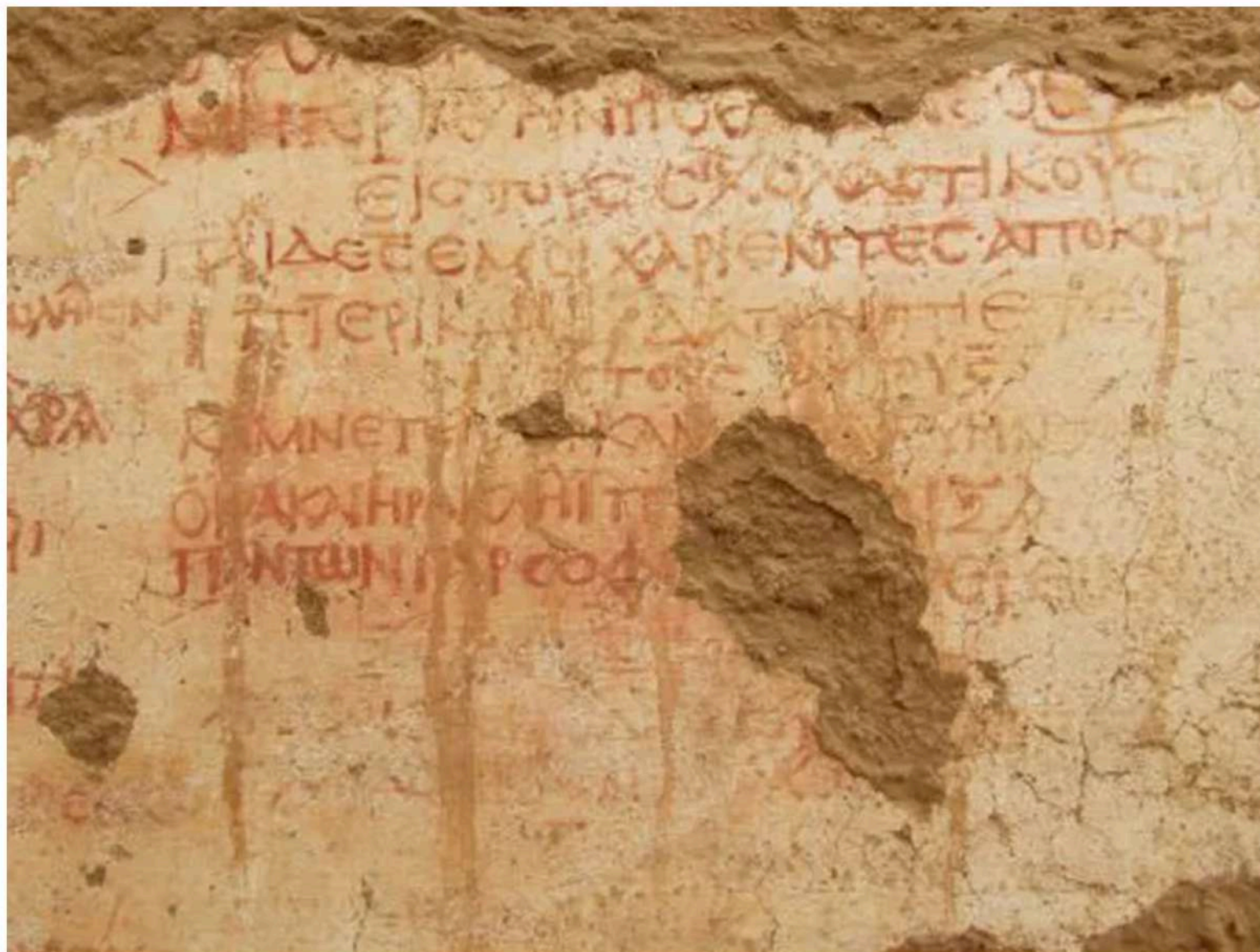


There were benches along  
the walls.

Students could sit on  
them and read, or stand on  
and write on the walls.

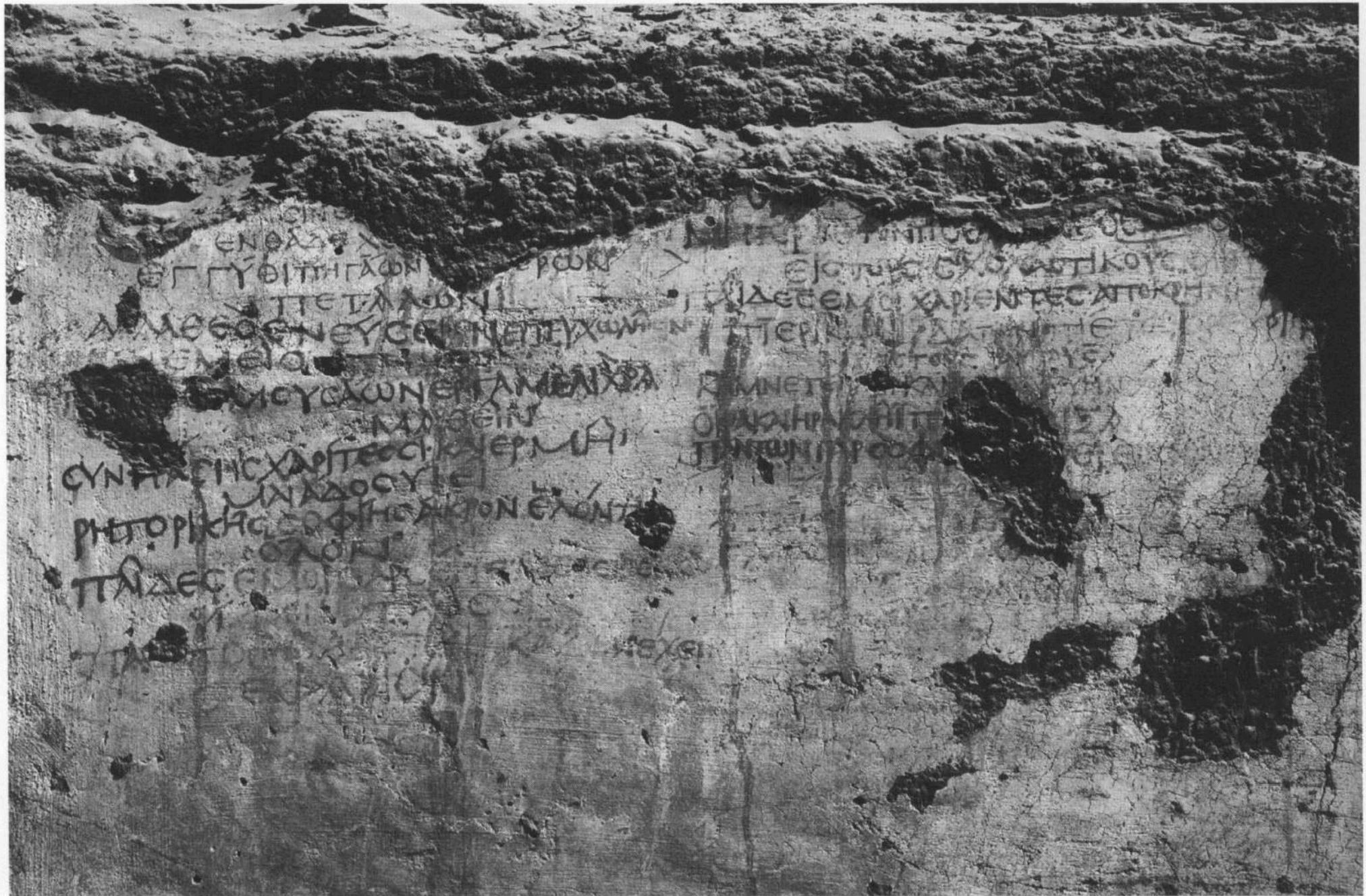






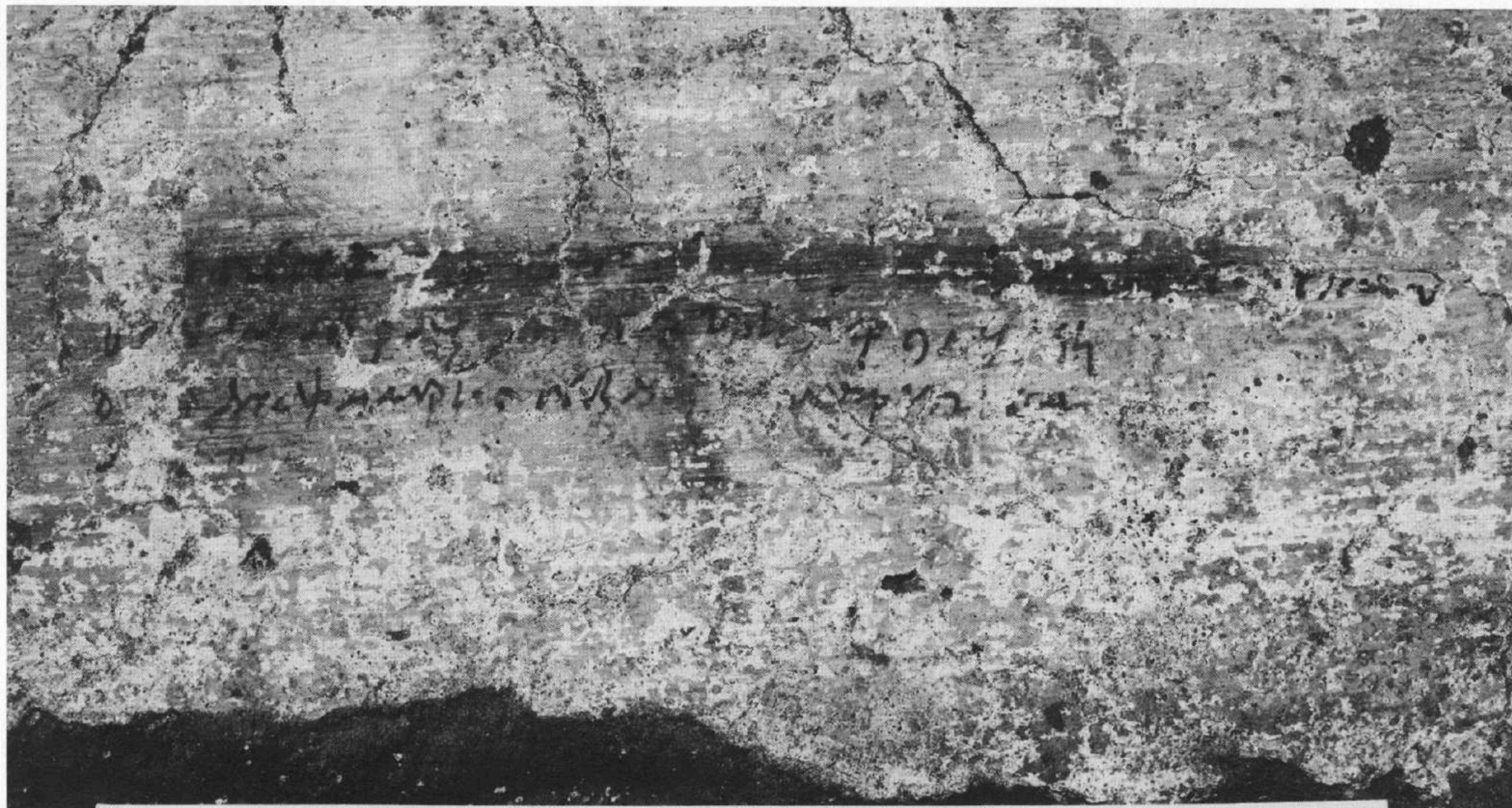
The walls contain texts written with red ink!  
They were plastered with gypsum, so that writing  
could be washed off, like a modern whiteboard!





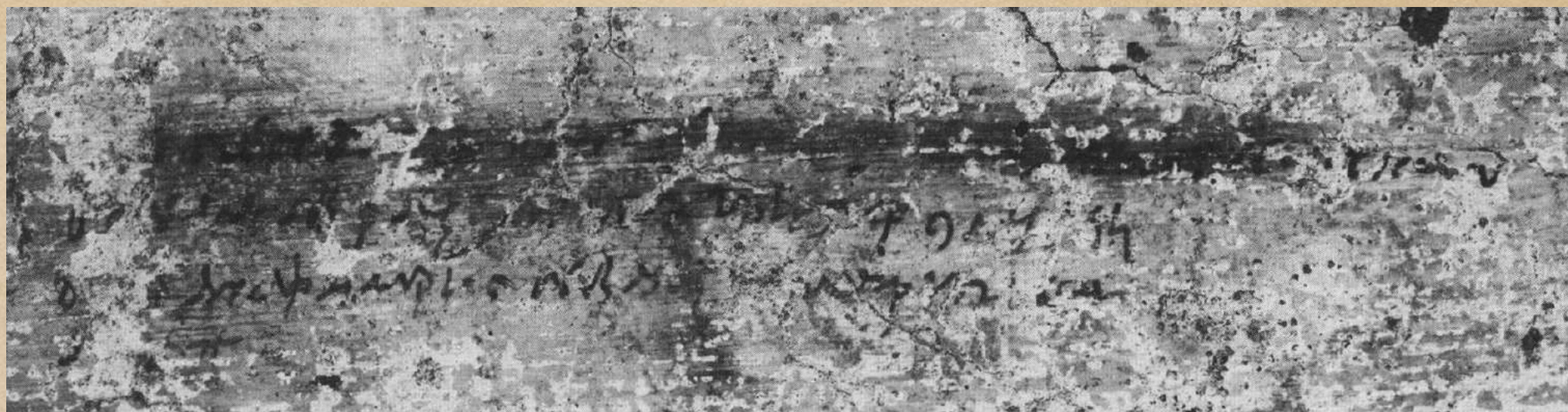
They contain poetry, epigrams in hexameters  
and elegiac distichs.





Homer, Odyssey, book 4, ll. 221-223.



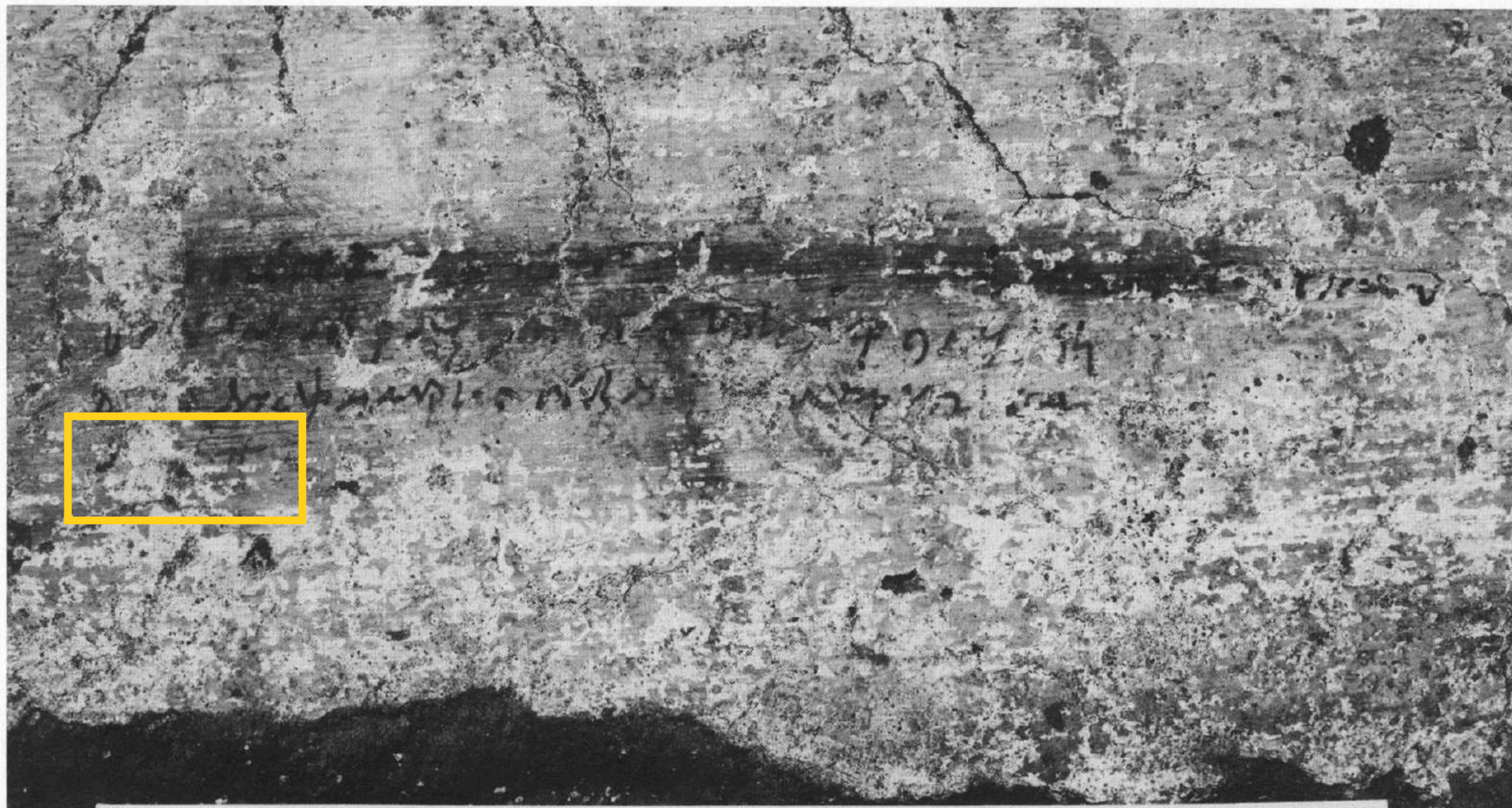


Homer, Odyssey, book 4, ll. 221-223:

[ν]ηπενθεσ ἀχολον τε κακῶν ἐπιλήθον ἀπαντῶν  
ος [τ]ο καταβροξειεν ἐπεὶ κρητερεὶ μίγειη  
οὐδ' ἂν ἐφημεριος γέ βαλοι [κα]τὰ δακρυ παρειῶ[ν]

“(a drug) that takes away grief and anger, and brings forgetfulness of every ill. Whoever should drink this down when it is mixed in the bowl would not let fall a tear down his cheek, in the course of that day at least”





Homer, *Odyssey*, book 4, ll. 221-223.

μ[ι]μειτε, “imitate”



# Copying exercises

Ἀρχὴ μεγίστη  
τοῦ φρονεῖν  
τὰ γράμματα

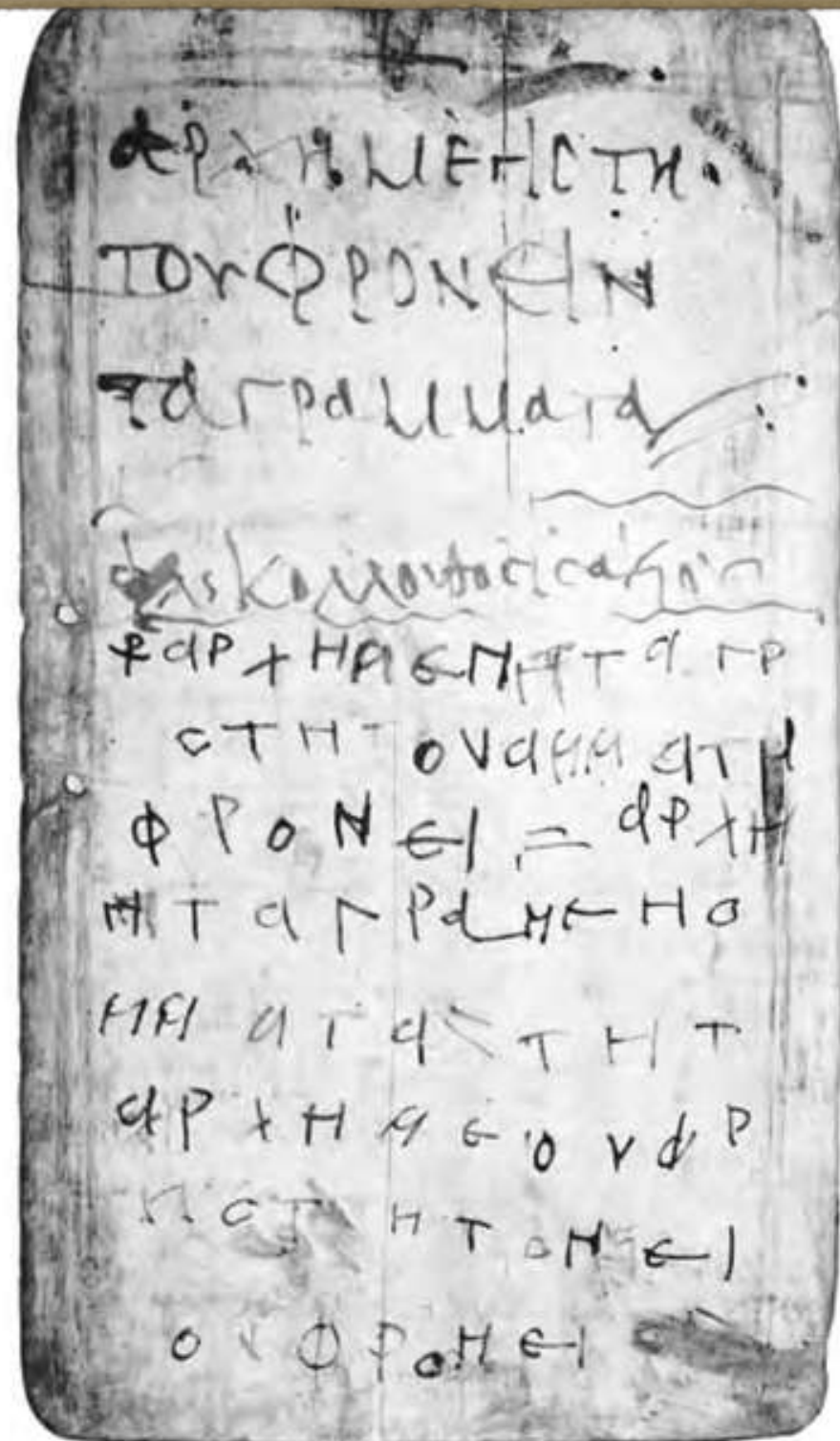
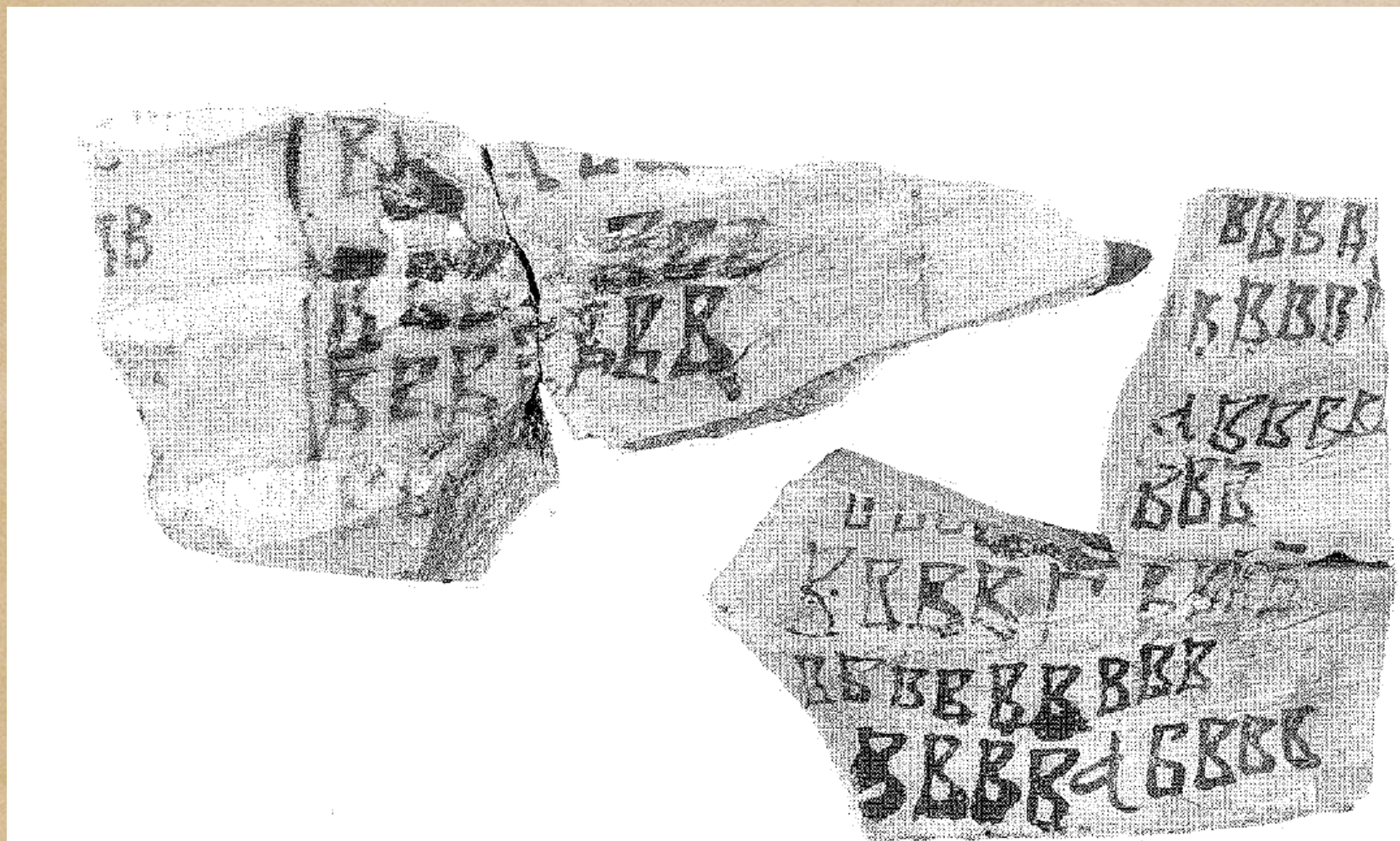
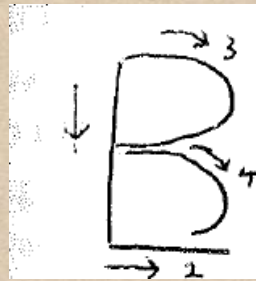


Figure 8. An early Byzantine tablet from Antinoopolis: a teacher's model with a maxim and the copy of the student underneath.



# At school (didaskaleion)

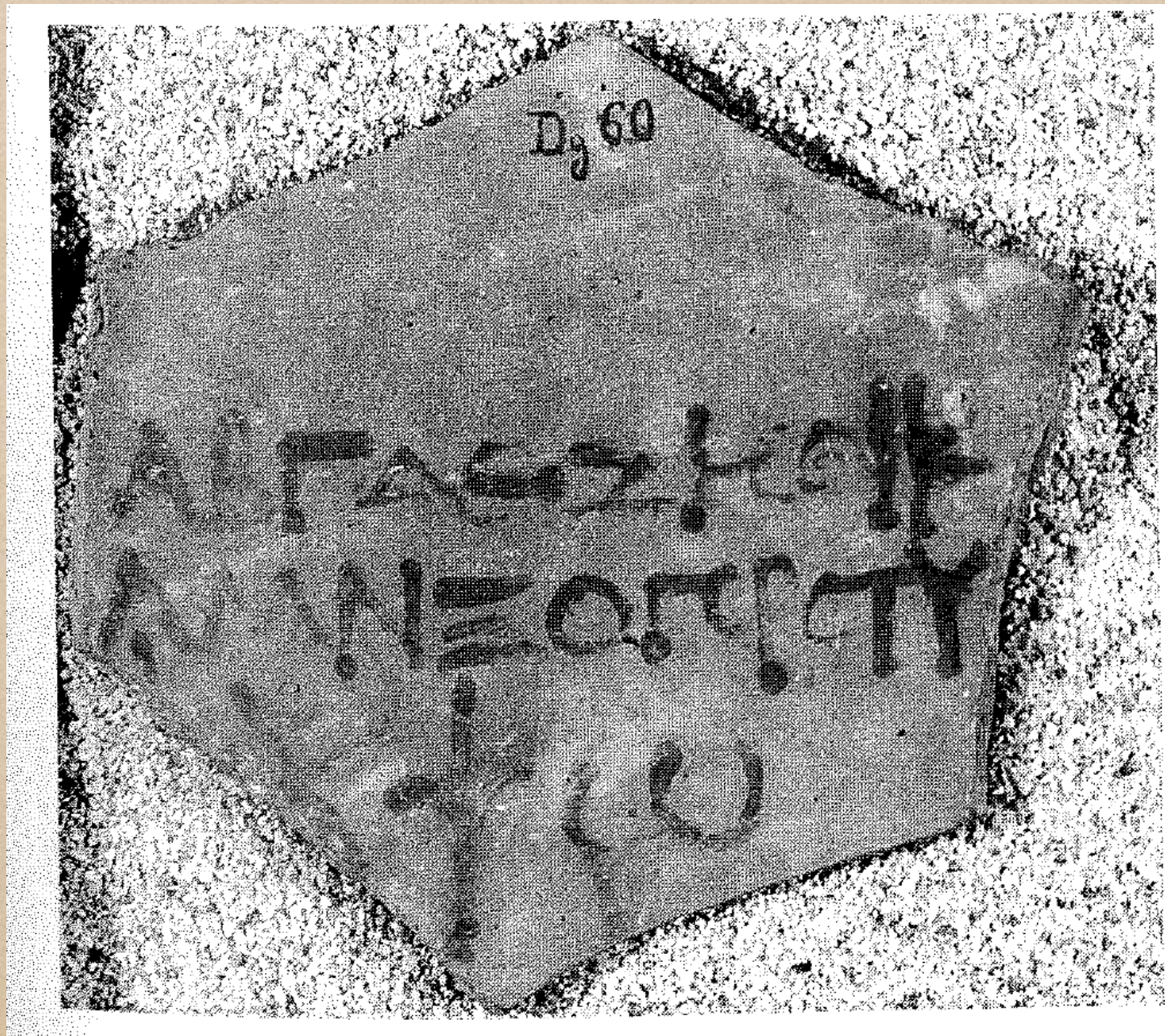
## 1. Learning the letters



Fragment of ostrakon,  
VII-VIII CE



# At school





# At school

## 2. Learning the syllables





# At school

## 3. Learning the words

### Schoolmaster's model book

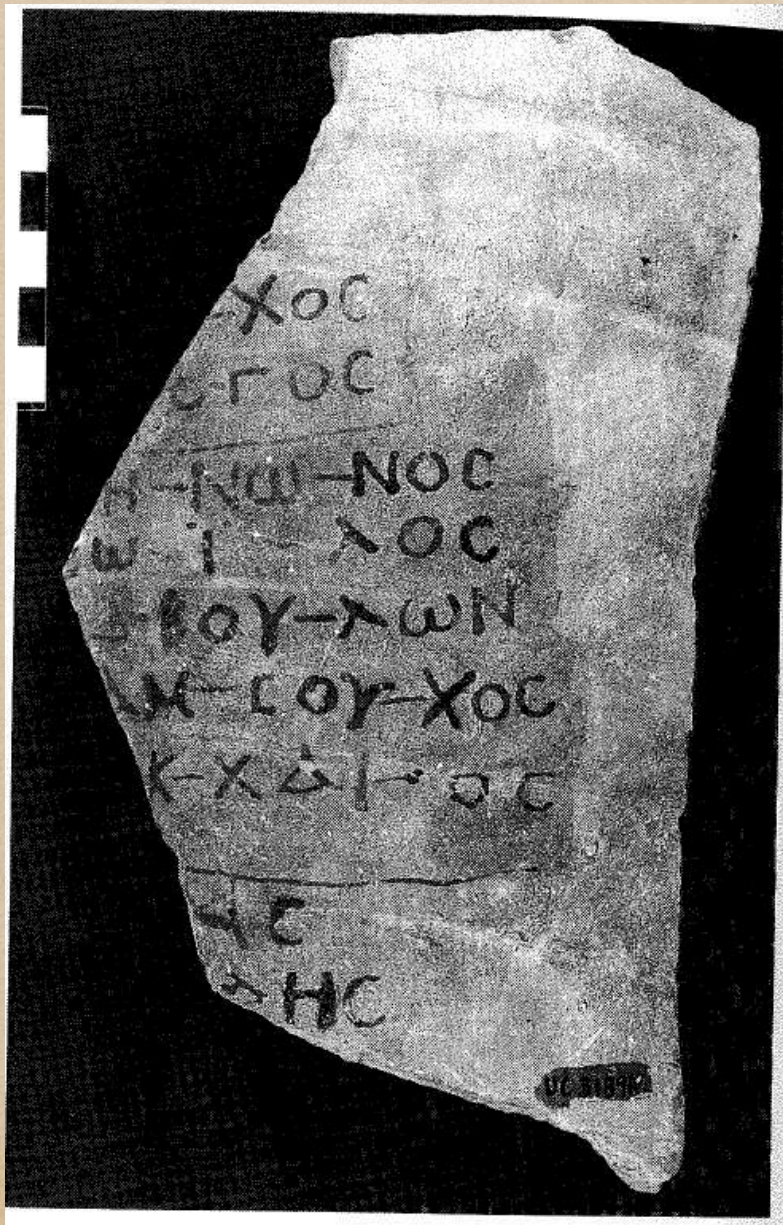


71	AP:KTOC:	81	TI:	91	ME:NE:	101	TO:NI:KOC:	111	NE:WN:CO:ΦΩ:
72	NE:PEYC:	82	O:ΔYC:CEYC:	92	AM:ΦI:MA:	102	TO:NI:KOC:	112	NE:WN:CO:ΦΩ:
73	NEI:AEYC:	83	ΦΩ:KY:ΛOC:	93	AC:KA:AA:Φ:	103	TO:NI:KOC:	113	NE:WN:CO:ΦΩ:
74	NEI:ΛOC:	84	AA:KI:NOYC:	94	AN:TI:MA:XOC:	104	TO:NI:KOC:	114	NE:WN:CO:ΦΩ:
75	ΘO:AC:	85	DE:AI:AC:	95	PO:AY:NEI:KHC:	105	TO:NI:KOC:	115	NE:WN:CO:ΦΩ:
76	FOY:NEYC:	86	I:A:CΩN:	96	E:TE:O:KANC:	106	TO:NI:KOC:	116	NE:WN:CO:ΦΩ:
77	A:KMΩN:	87	TH:AE:ΦOC:	97	IP:PO:ME:ΔΩN:	107	TO:NI:KOC:	117	NE:WN:CO:ΦΩ:
78	ZH:ΘOC:	88	A:XIAAEYC:	98	AN:TI:AO:KOC:	108	TO:NI:KOC:	118	NE:WN:CO:ΦΩ:
79	AI:AC:					109	TO:NI:KOC:	119	NE:WN:CO:ΦΩ:
80	TEY:KPOC:					110	TO:NI:KOC:	120	NE:WN:CO:ΦΩ:
81	ΘH:PWV:					111	TO:NI:KOC:	121	NE:WN:CO:ΦΩ:
82	OP:ΦEYC:					112	TO:NI:KOC:	122	NE:WN:CO:ΦΩ:

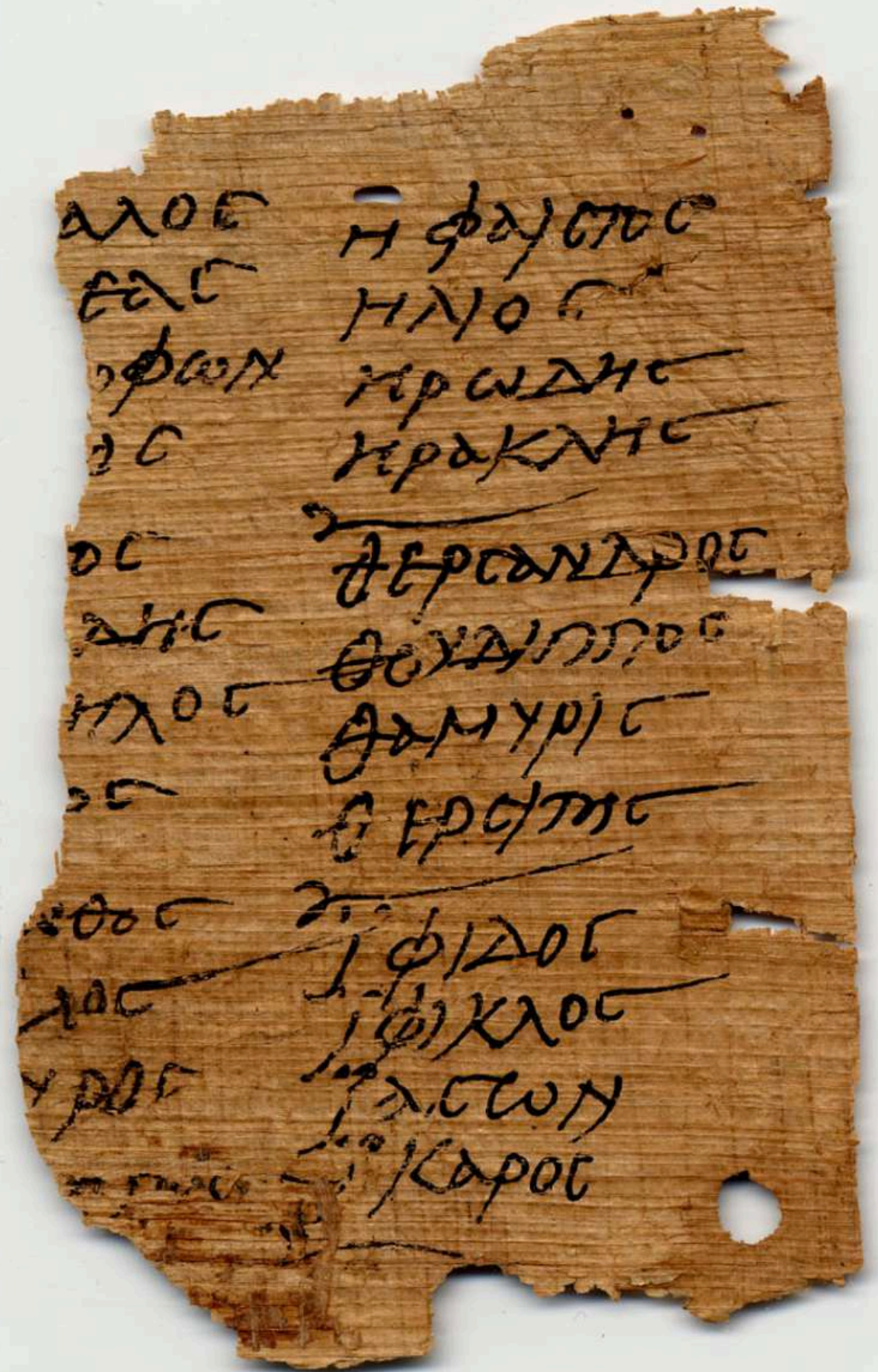


# At school

## 3. Learning the words



Ostrakon, IV CE

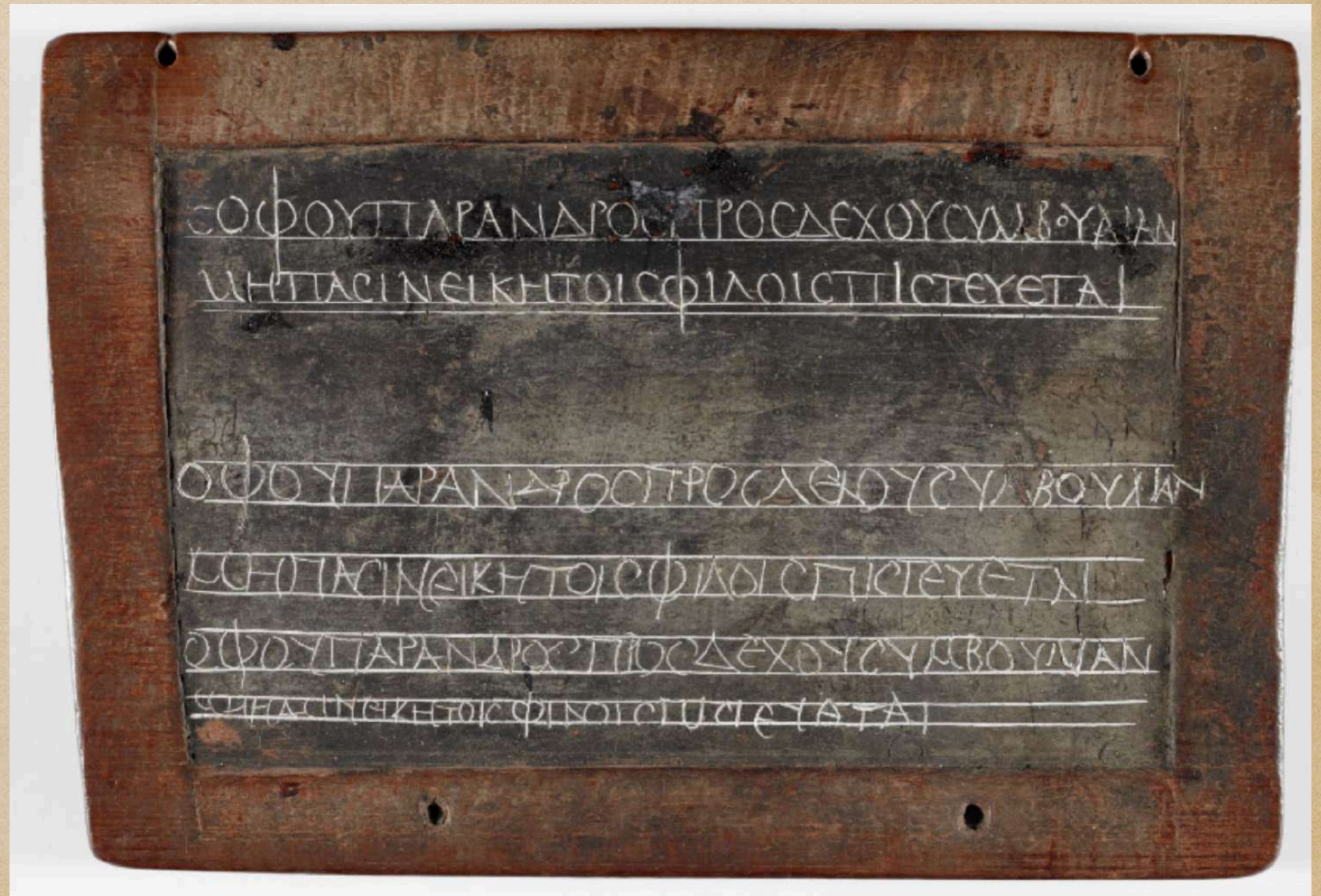


Teacher's notebook on papyrus, V-VI CE



# At school

## 4. Short sentences



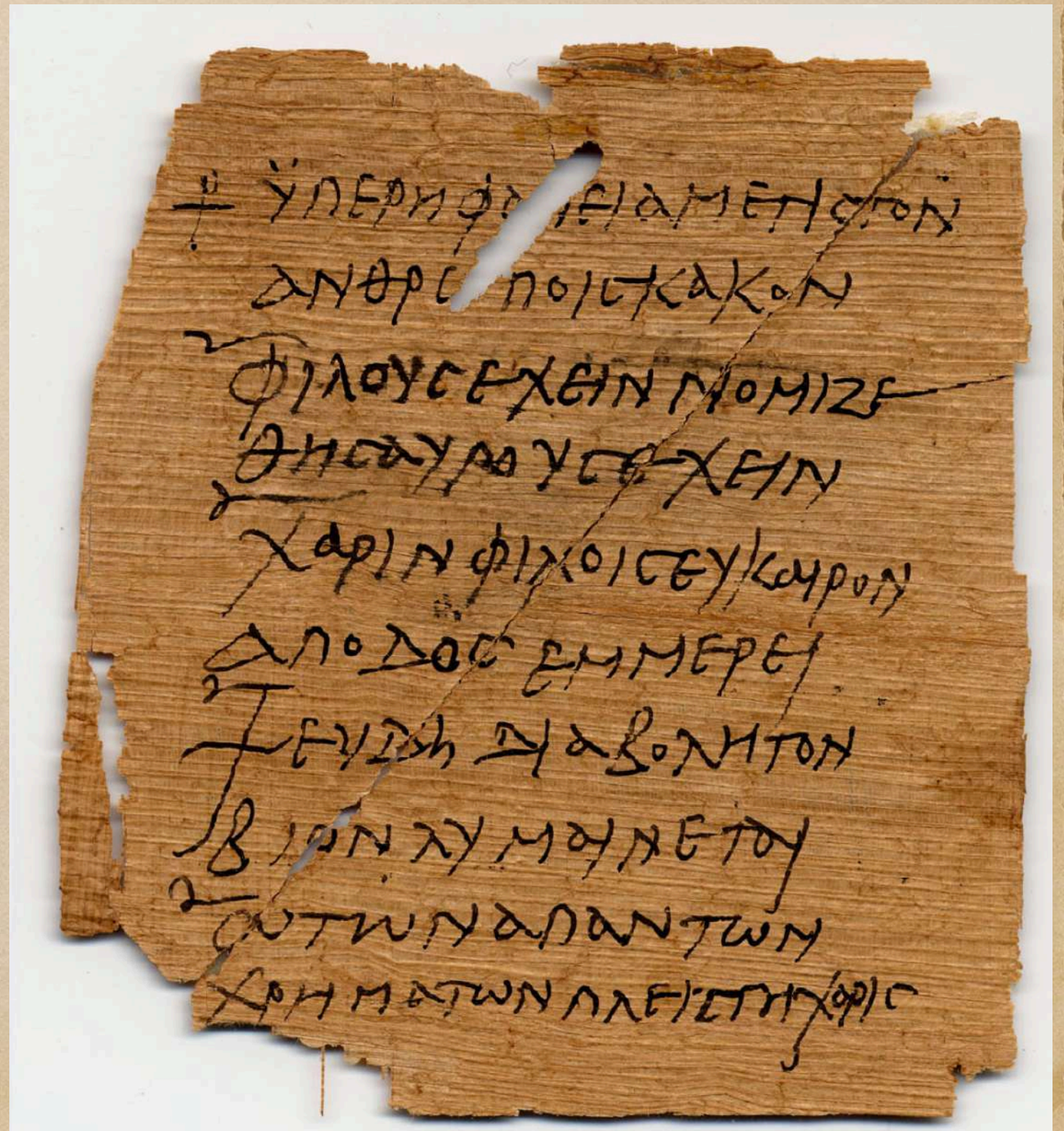
- ◆ Wax tablet, II CE



# At school

## 4. Short sentences

Teacher's notebook on papyrus,  
V-VI CE

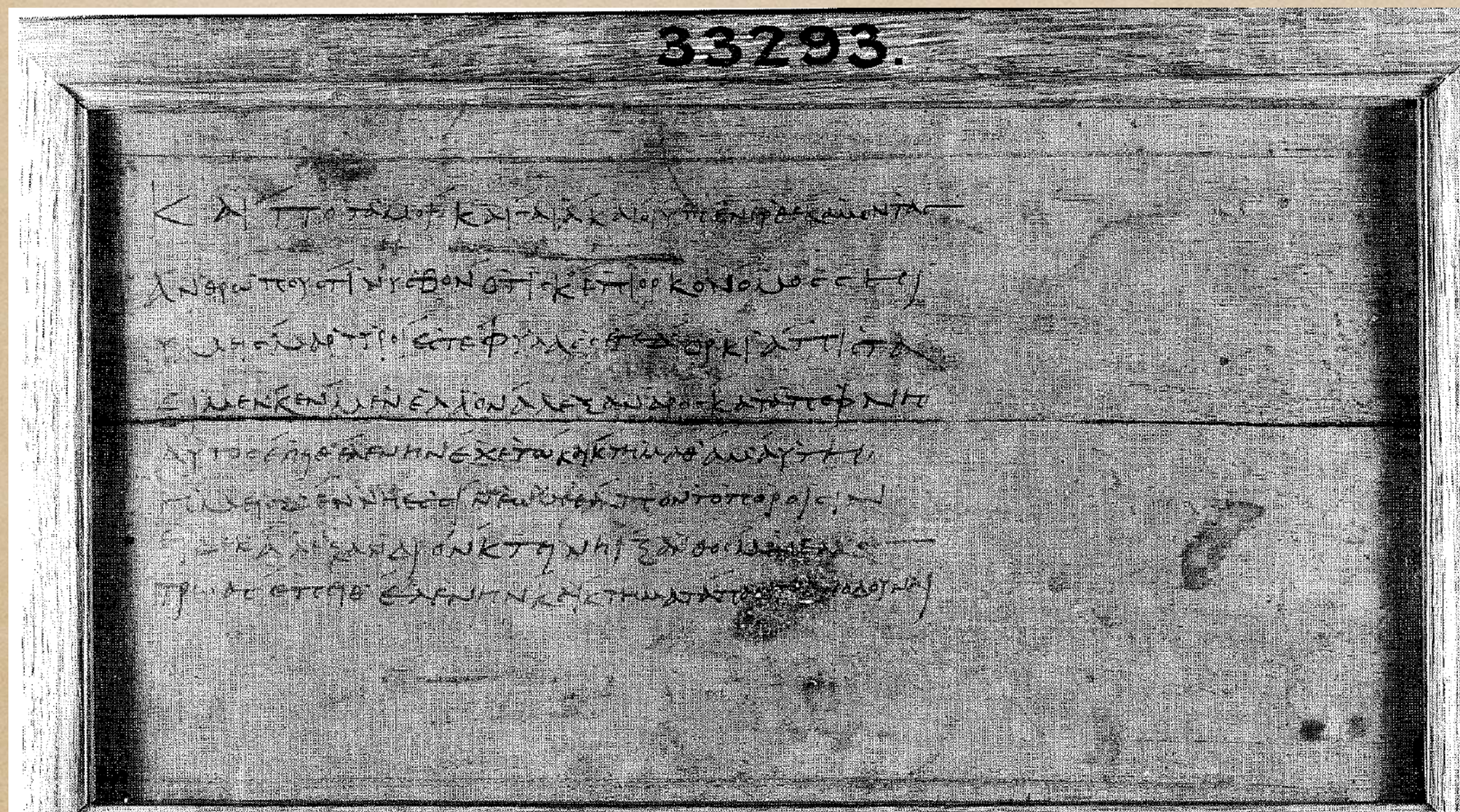


† ὑΠΕΡΗΦΑΝΕΙΑ ΜΕΤΗΣΤΟΝ  
ΑΝΘΡΩΠΟΥΣ ΚΑΚΟΝ  
ΦΙΛΟΥΣ ΕΧΕΙΝ ΝΟΜΙΖΕ  
ΘΗΣΑΥΡΟΥΣ ΕΧΕΙΝ  
ΧΑΡΙΝ ΦΙΛΟΙΣ ΕΥΚΑΡΟΝ  
ΔΟΔΟΣ ΕΜΜΕΡΕΙ  
† ΕΥΔΗ ΔΑΒΟΝΗΤΟΝ  
ΒΙΟΝ ΚΥΜΑΝ ΕΤΟΥ  
ΕΥΤΩΝ ΔΑΝΑΝΤΩΝ  
ΧΡΗΜΑΤΩΝ ΑΛΕΙΕΤΗ ΧΟΡΙΣ



# At school

## 5. Passages of authors (usually Homer)



Iliad, III, ll. 278-285



# At school

ἐν τούτοις  
κελεύσαντος καθηγητοῦ  
ἐγείρονται  
οἱ μικροὶ  
πρὸς τὰ στοιχεῖα,  
καὶ τὰς συλλαβὰς  
κατέλεξεν τούτοις  
εἷς τῶν μειζόνων.

ἄλλοι πρὸς τὸν  
ὑποδιδασκτὴν  
τάξει ἀποδιδούσιν,  
ὀνόματα γράφουσιν,  
ἢ στίχους ἔγραψαν,  
καὶ ἐγὼ  
ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ  
τάξει  
ἄμιλλαν  
ἐξέλαβον.

ἔπειτα  
ὥς ἐκαθίσαμεν,  
διέρχομαι  
ὑπομνήματα,  
γλώσσας,  
τέχνην.

inter haec  
iubente magistro  
surgunt  
pusilli  
ad elementa,  
et syllabas  
praebuit eis  
unus de maioribus.

alii ad subdoctorem  
  
ordine reddunt,  
nomina scribunt,  
versus scripserunt,  
et ego  
in prima  
classe  
dictatum  
excepi.

deinde  
ut sedimus,  
pertranseo  
commentarium,  
linguas,  
artem.

Meanwhile,  
as the teacher orders,  
the little ones get up  
  
to [practise] letters,  
and one of the bigger [pupils]  
gave [Gk: told] them syllables.

Others produce [their work] in  
order to the teaching assistant:  
  
they write names,  
they [Gk: or they] wrote verses.  
And I,  
in the first  
class,  
received an exercise [to do].

Then,  
as we were seated,  
I go through the commentary  
[Gk: commentaries],  
word lists,  
grammar.



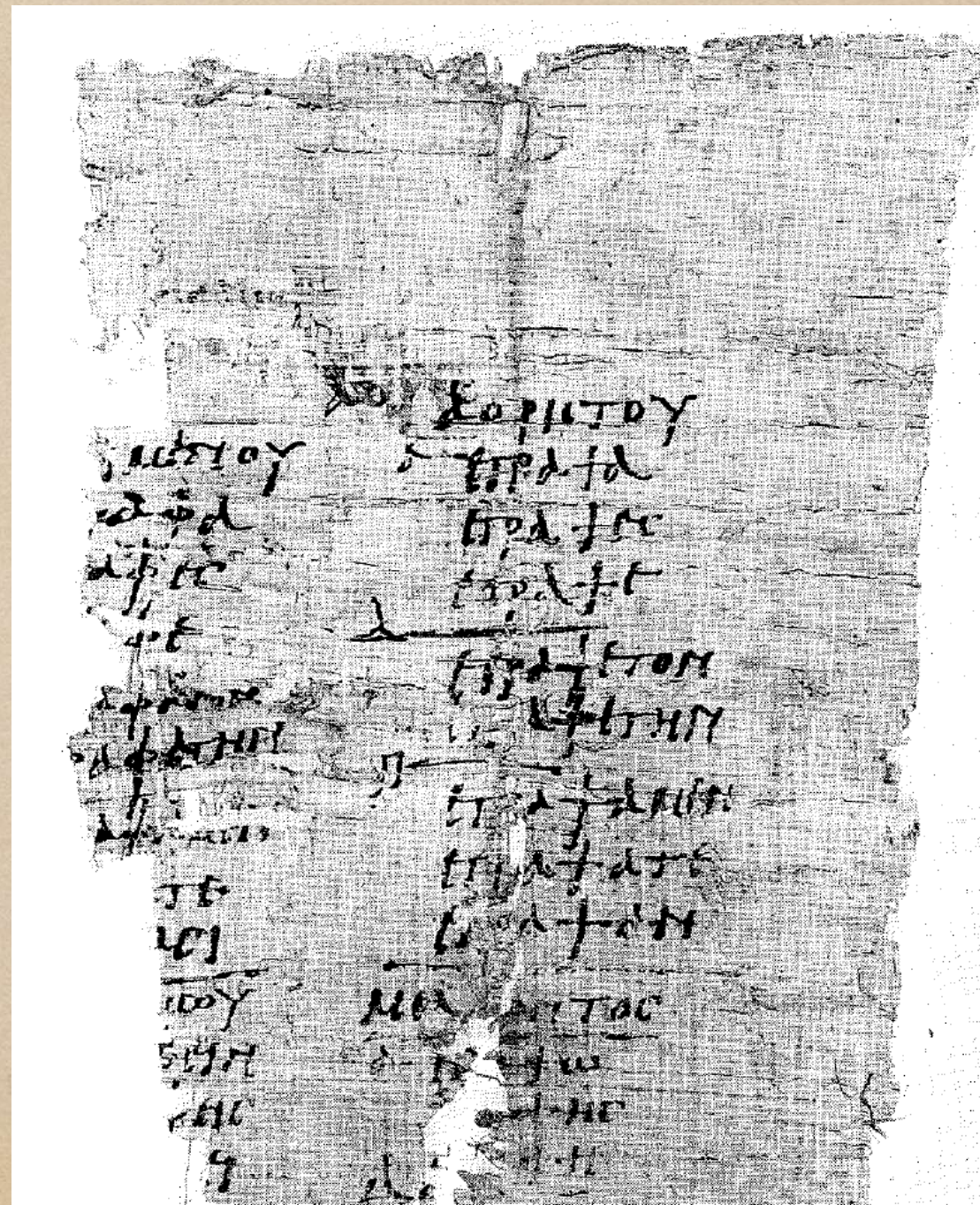
ἐκλινά  
γένη ὀνομάτων,  
ἐμέρισα στίχον.

declinavi  
genera nominum,  
partivi versum.

I declined  
the genders of nouns,  
I parsed a verse.

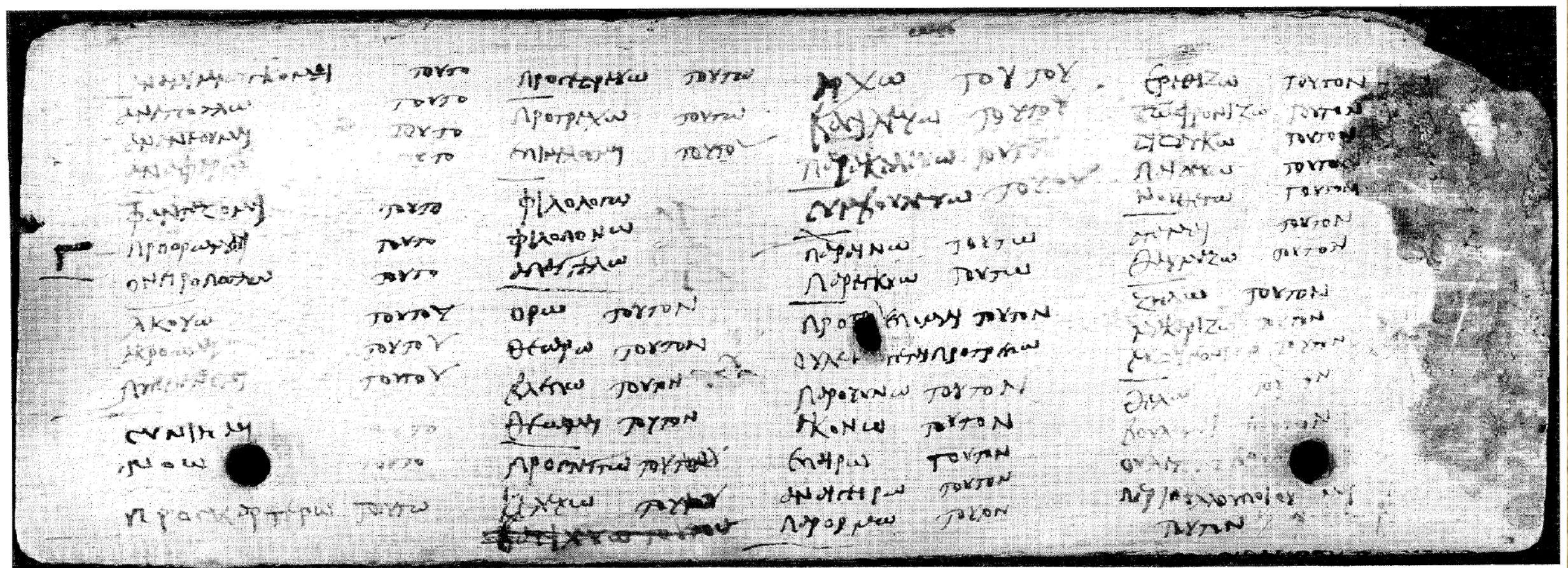
# At school

Papyrus with conjugations  
(III CE)





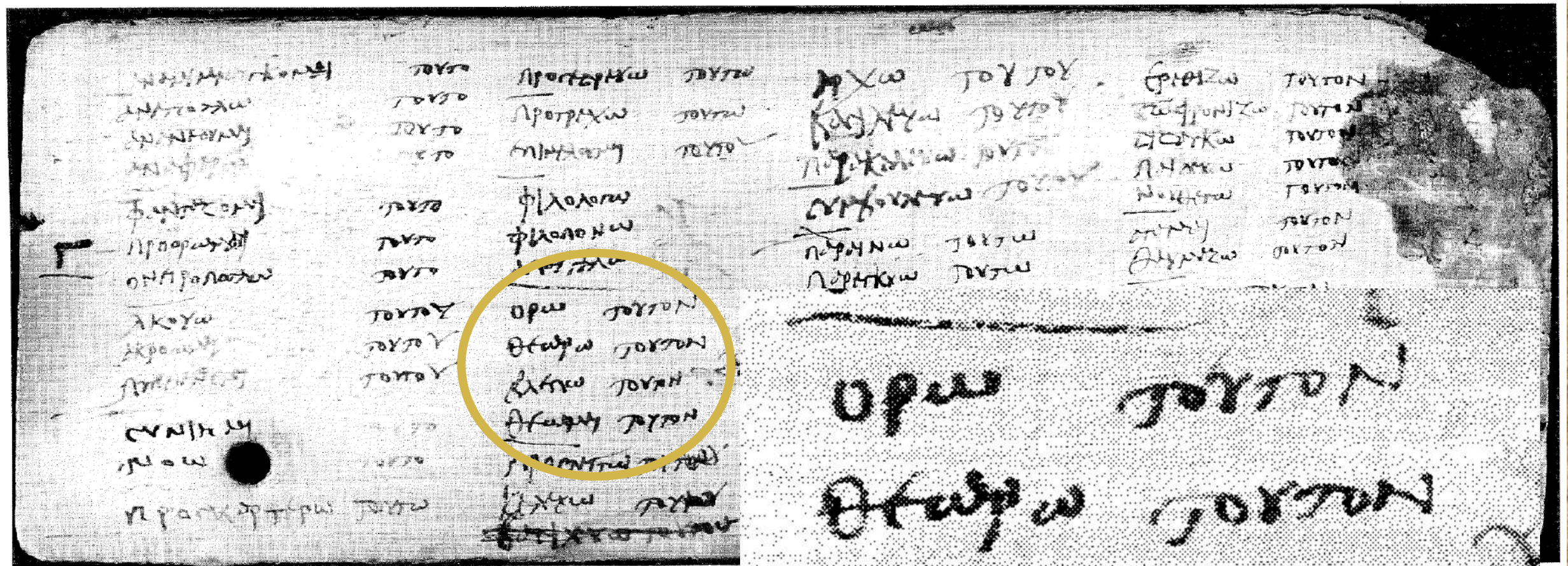
# At school



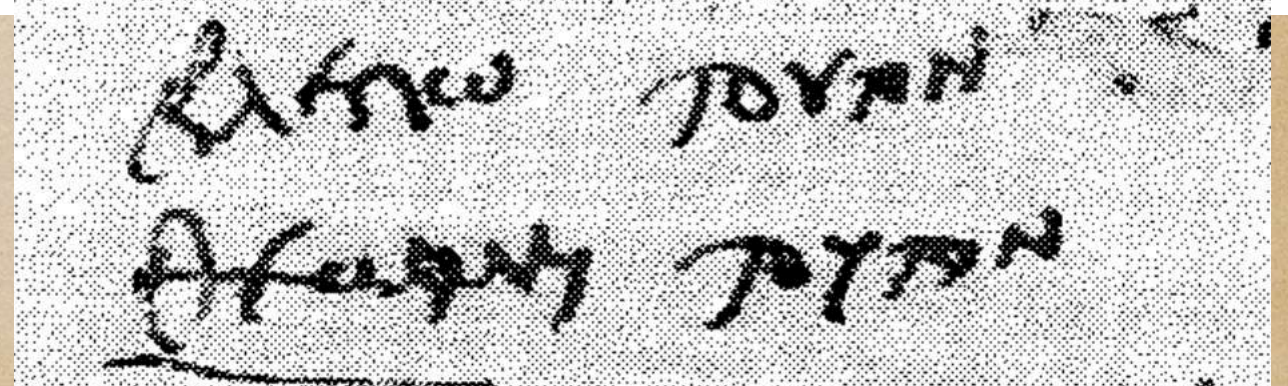
Notebook with list of verbs, III CE



# At school



Notebook with list of verbs, III CE





# Back home!

ὥς δὲ ταῦτ' ἐπράξαμεν,  
ἀπέλυσεν  
εἰς ἄριστον.  
ἀπολυθεὶς  
ἐπανέρχομαι ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ.

ut haec egimus,  
dimisit  
ad prandium.  
dimissus  
venio domi.

When we had done these things,  
[the teacher] dismissed [us]  
for lunch.  
Having been dismissed,  
I come home.

ἀλλάσσω, λαμβάνω  
ἄρτον καθαρόν,  
ἐλαίᾱς,  
τυρόν,  
σχάδια,  
κάρυα.  
πίνω  
ὑδωρ  
ψυχρόν.

muto, accipio  
panem candidum,  
olivas,  
caseum,  
caricas,  
nuces.  
bibō  
aquam  
frigidam.

I change [my clothes], I take  
white bread,  
olives,  
cheese,  
dried figs,  
nuts.  
I drink  
chilled water.



# Far away from home

Alexandria,  
the great  
center of  
learning





# Far away from home

An auditorium in  
Alexandria.  
20/30 seats

The pedestal was  
maybe the bases for  
a wooden lectern  
for reading texts or  
delivering speeches.





# Far away from home



...and a modern one at Ghent University!



# Far away from home

P.Oxy. XVIII 2190 (ca. 100 CE),

Letter to Theon from Alexandria:

ἤλπιζον δὲ φ]θάσας καταπλεῦσαι τυχεῖν λαμπρῶν  
[ἀγαθῶν, καὶ τί ἀ]ντὶ τῆς προθυμίας ἔπρα[ξ]α; νῦν  
[γάρ, ἐπιζητῶ]ν φιλόλογον, καὶ Χαιρήμονα τὸν καθη-  
[γητὴν καὶ Δίδ]υμον τὸν τοῦ Ἀριστοκλέο[υς], παρ' οἷς  
[ἐλπίς ἦν καὶ ἐμ]έ τι κατορθῶσαι, οὐκέτι ἐν τ[ῇ] πόλει  
[εὔρον].

“For my part, I’ve lost no time in sailing down stream to find distinguished... and have achieved something that repaid my eagerness. I was looking for Philologus and Chaeremon the teacher and Didymus the son of Aristocles as I thought that with them I too might still meet with success, but found them no longer in the city.”



# Far away from home

P.Oxy. XVIII 2190 (ca. 100 CE),  
letter to Theon:

εὐξάμενο[ς] δ' ἂν ἔγωγε, εἶπερ ἀξιόους λόγου καθηγητὰς  
εὕροιν, μηδὲ ἐξ ἀπόπτου Δίδυμον ἰδεῖν, τοῦτο αὖ-  
τὸ ἀθυμῶ, ὅτι ἔδοξεν εἰς σύγκρισιν τοῖς ἄλλο[ις]  
ἔρχεσθαι οὗτος, ὃς ἐπὶ τῆς χώρας καθηγεῖτο.

“As for myself, if only I had found some decent teachers, I would pray never to set eyes on Didymus, even from a distance - what makes me despair is that this fellow who used to be a mere provincial teacher sees fit to compete with the rest.”



# A father's advice to his son

- ◆ P.Oxy. III 531, ll. 9-12:

ὄρα μηδε|νὶ ἀνθρώπων ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ  
προσ|κρο[ύ]σης, ἀλλὰ τοῖς |  
βιβλίοις σου αὐτὸ μόνον πρόσεχ[ε]  
φιλολογῶν | καὶ ἀπ' αὐτῶν ὄνησιν  
ἔξεις

“Take care not to offend any of  
the persons at home, and give  
your undivided attention to  
your books, devoting yourself  
to learning, and then they will  
bring you profit.”.





# Far away from home

Anxious parents:

P.Oxy. X 1296 (III CE)

Αὐρήλιος Δῖος Αὐρηλίῳ Ὠρείῳ-  
νι τῷ γλυκυτάτῳ μου πατρὶ πολλὰ  
χαίρειν.

τὸ προσκύνημά σου ποιῶ καθ' ἐκάστην  
ἡμέραν παρὰ τοῖς ἐνθάδε θεοῖς. ἀμερί-  
μνη οὖν, πάτερ, χάριν τῶν μαθημάτων  
ἡμῶν· φιλοπονοῦμεν καὶ ἀναψύχομεν,  
καλλῶ/ς ἡμε[ῖ]ν ἔσται. ἀσπάζομαι τὴν μη-  
τέραν μου Ταμιέαν καὶ τὴν ἀδελφήν μου  
Τνεφεροῦν καὶ τὴν ἀδελφήν μου Φιλοῦν,  
ἀσπάζομαι καὶ τὸν ἀδελφόν μου  
Πατερμοῦ-

θιν καὶ τὴν ἀδελφήν μου Θερμοῦθιν,  
ἀσπάζομαι καὶ τὸν ἀδελφόν μου Ἡρακ(λ )  
καὶ τὸν ἀδελφόν μου Κολλοῦχ(ιν),  
ἀσπάζομαι  
τὸν πατέρα μου Μέλανον καὶ τὴν μητέ-  
ραν μου Τιμπεσοῦρ(ιν) καὶ τὸν υἱὸν αὐτῆς.



# Far away from home

## Anxious parents:

P.Oxy. X 1296 (III CE)

Αὐρήλιος Δῖος Αὐρηλίῳ Ὠρείῳ-  
νι τῷ γλυκυτάτῳ μου πατρὶ πολλὰ  
χαίρειν.

τὸ προσκύνημά σου ποιῶ καθ' ἐκάστην  
ἡμέραν παρὰ τοῖς ἐνθάδε θεοῖς. ἀμερί-  
μνη οὖν, πάτερ, χάριν τῶν μαθημάτων  
ἡμῶν· φιλοπονοῦμεν καὶ ἀναψύχομεν,  
καλῶ/ς ἡμε[ῖ]ν ἔσται. ἀσπάζομαι τὴν μη-  
τέραν μου Ταμιέαν καὶ τὴν ἀδελφήν μου  
Τνεφεροῦν καὶ τὴν ἀδελφήν μου Φιλοῦν,  
ἀσπάζομαι καὶ τὸν ἀδελφόν μου  
Πατερμοῦ-  
θιν καὶ τὴν ἀδελφήν μου Θερμοῦθιν,  
ἀσπάζομαι καὶ τὸν ἀδελφόν μου Ἡρακ(λ )  
καὶ τὸν ἀδελφόν μου Κολλοῦχ(ιν),  
ἀσπάζομαι  
τὸν πατέρα μου Μέλανον καὶ τὴν μητέ-  
ραν μου Τιμπεσοῦρ(ιν) καὶ τὸν υἱὸν αὐτῆς.

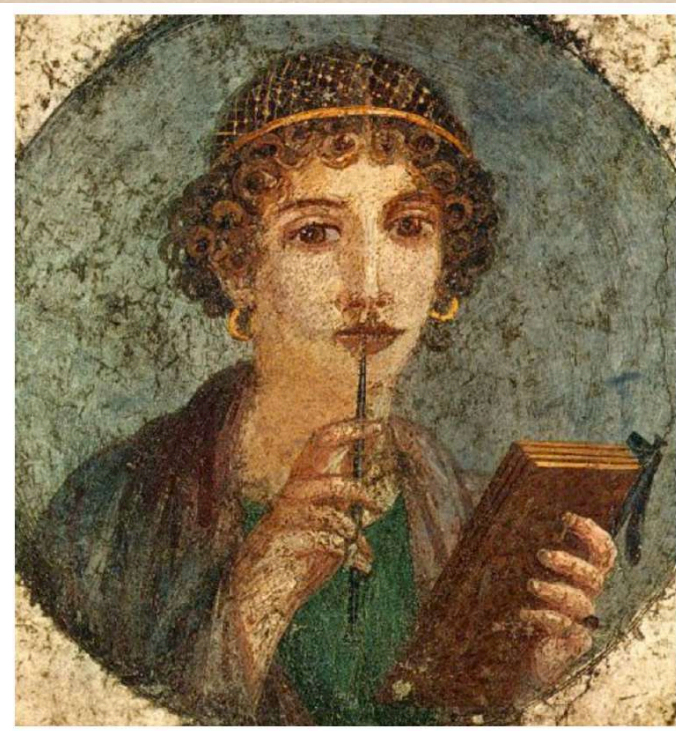
Aurelius Dīus to Aurelius Horion my  
sweetest father, many greetings.

[...]

Do not be anxious, father, about my  
studies; I am industrious and take  
relaxation: all will be well with me.



“Do not be anxious, students;  
be industrious and take relaxation:  
all will be well with you!”



Curious about papyri?  
Write me!  
[yasmine.amory@ugent.be](mailto:yasmine.amory@ugent.be)



A few references on ancient education  
in Graeco-Roman Egypt:

R. Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers, and Student in Graeco Roman Egypt*, Atlanta, 1996.

R. Cribiore, *Gymnastic of the Mind. Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*, Princeton, 2001.

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An ancient schoolbook:

P. Collart, “Cahier d’écopier grec d’Égypte”, in P. Collart, *Les papyrus Bouriant*, Paris, 1926, p. 3-27.

Pictures available here: <http://www.papyrologie.paris-sorbonne.fr/menu1/collections/pgrec/2Sorb0826.htm>