

Contacts linguistiques en Grèce ancienne : diachronie et synchronie (CoLiGA)

Colloque international

7-9 avril 2021

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Greece and Cyprus: regional approaches to the development of writing systems, traditions and practices

We tend to speak about writing systems in the same way as we might about languages: one system can borrow features from another, areal features can spread between them, they can be plotted on a ‘family tree’ determined by shared retentions and innovations, and so on. But writing and language are not the same thing, and in fact, as the growing wealth of literature in writing systems studies has long shown, there can be very wide range of approaches to the study of writing that include not only linguistic ones but also contextual, material and cognitive to name just three. Perhaps some of the most effective studies in recent years have been ones that combine multiple approaches to try to understand writing as not only a means of language encoding but also as a visible and tangible socially-embedded practice that cannot be divorced from its physical and social contexts.

The situation in the Greek-speaking world of the first half of the first millennium BC, which will be the subject of this paper, is one of scriptal diversity: across mainland Greece and the islands and colonies, a number of regionalised ‘epichoric’ alphabets existed, while in Cyprus there were two main variants of a syllabic system whose usage is also regionally determined. In trying to understand this diversity, it has been typical of many studies to try to start from the top and work down – what was the original ‘Urscript’ like, when was it first created and how did it come to diversify? As will become apparent, this is an unhelpful starting bias.

The present paper approaches Greek scriptal diversity from the point of view of contact, which is considered an essential aspect of the history of writing in this area and period. Rather than assuming a process of increasing diversification of the writing systems, we begin by considering how sustained contact between different areas – alongside the changing sociopolitical backdrops within which writing was practised – may have interacted with the development of regional writing system variants. This raises a methodological question, namely the degree to which linguistic approaches to linguistic diversity (dialectology, for example) are appropriate for describing and understanding diversity in writing systems.

*This research is part of the CREWS project (Contexts of and Relations between Early Writing Systems), which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 677758).*

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