CHAPTER EIGHT

‘SLOW WRITERS’—ΒΡΑΔΕΩΣ ΓΡΑΦΟΝΤΕΣ:
WHAT, HOW MUCH, AND HOW DID THEY WRITE?*

The phrase βραδέως γράφοντες—‘slow writers’ is often used as a classification of a specific class of people in documentary papyri in order to distinguish them clearly from the literates and the complete illiterates. To use this classification for the hands of literary papyri or school exercises could mean mixing things up, because then at least one of the features of the category ‘slow writers’ would be neglected. With regard to what and how much someone wrote (contents and extent of writing) and how someone wrote (the paleographical description of somebody’s writing) this study has a twofold intention: (a) to depict the possibilities and limits of the usage of βραδέως γράφων for different kinds of papyri, and (b) to suggest a practicable distinction between judging the ‘slow writer’/βραδέως γράφων on documentary papyri and the paleographical circumscription of a specific way of writing, such as ‘written slowly’ and the like.

Much is said about a certain Petaus, the village scribe (κωμογραμματεύς) of Ptolemaïs Hormou in the south of the Fayûm from A.D. 183/4 to probably 186/7. His archive exhibited a curiosity: this scribe could neither read nor write.¹ This sounds paradoxical, but all he did was to sign his documents with a fixed formula,² which he tried to train and

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¹ The case of Petaus, a κωμογραμματεύς, is exhaustively discussed by Youtie, ‘Pétaus’, 127–43 (= idem, Scriptiunculae II, 677–95); “En effet, il ne sait ni lire ni écrire.” (134); Turner, ‘Village Administration’, 37–45; Youtie, ‘Βραδέως γράφων’, 239–44 (= idem, Scriptiunculae II, 629–66); Harris, Ancient Literacy, 278. See also the introductory chapters in the editio princeps (P Petaus) and the commentaries on the documents of main interest for Petaus’s illiteracy.

² Seven papyri preserved his signature in two different forms. P Petaus 46 (Köln Inv. 311), 47 (EMich. Inv. 6875), and 77 (P Köln Inv. 310b) carry the short Πετάος ἐπιδέδωκα, while on P Petaus 49 (P Köln Inv. 340), 60 and its three preliminary works (P Köln Inv. 312, 395, 397 recto) the longer form Πετάος κωμογραμματεύς ἐπιδέδωκα was employed. That the identification of a signature with that of a specific hand could be misleading and that caution is advised in this respect, might be obvious. See on that: U. Hagedorn, P Petaus, 34–5, and the instructive article by Förster, ‘Das Verlangen der Elenden hört du, Herr’, 141–6.
memorize. His hand was described as “...stiff, awkward, uneven, kept on the line with obvious effort...”, an indication that he lacked practice of writing at all. Petaus, who must have written very occasionally and then only a few words, could be listed among those writers who are known as ἑρεθεός γράφοντες, i.e. people ‘writing slowly’.

The term ἑρεθεός γράφον can be found many times in non-literary papyri from Graeco-Roman Egypt. The formula ὑπὲρ ἰμύ τοῦ ἑρεθεός/ἐφεθεό γράφοντος (and its variants) is added as part of a subscription. And this is written by somebody on behalf of someone else who is illiterate or semi-literate, a ὑπογραφευκός, mostly a friend, a close relative, or a professional scribe. In these documents the reason is given why one person, who participates in a legal or contractual proceeding, did not write the indispensable subscription on his own. Thus, ἑρεθεός γράφον does not only supply us with any information about a person’s poor and limited literacy but at the same time this qualification serves to justify why a ὑπογραφευκός was employed. Thus, in these non-literary documents someone is directly denominated as a ‘slow writer’, while in the aforesaid example of Petaus the designa-

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3 PPetaus 114 (PKöln Inv. 366) and above all PPetaus 121 (PKöln Inv. 328) are two writing exercises, on which Petaus trained his signature. Albeit the first one mentioned only carries the short Πεταθ λος κωμογραμματευχ. interrupted at the right margin of the papyrus, the latter reveals that Petaus was incapable of reading and writing. The twelve lines, each with Πεταθ λος κωμογραμματευχ. ἐπιθέδικα, reveal so many mistakes that it becomes apparent that Petaus always copied the letters from the previous line. Furthermore, PPetaus 11 (PKöln Inv. 337)—Petaus had to check if his colleague Ischyrion was illiterate and thus incapable of being a κωμογραμματευχ—shows that he regarded himself fit for his office, because he as Ischyrion could sign the documents which he had to produce to his superior.


5 Cf. Youtie, ἑρεθεός γράφον, 239–61; Turner, Greek Manuscripts, 2: Here, E.G. Turner refers to papyri printed and discussed in his own work, which do not explicitly denominate someone as being a ἑρεθεός γράφον. The change of writing styles caused by high and low speed are of great interest to him. Therefore, he employed the qualification ‘writing slowly’ and ‘slow writer’ from the contracts as a similarity to the samples he discusses.