THE STRASBOURG PAPYRUS OF EMPEDOCLES: SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS

BY

N. VAN DER BEN

It was early 1994 when the announcement was made of “un nouveau texte d’Empédocle révélé par un papyrus de la Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire de Strasbourg” to be made public at the Strasbourg University Library April 14th 1994. As it turned out, the papyrus was ‘new’ in the sense of being ‘unknown’, but it had been found, that is, bought, no less than 90 years earlier in 1904. It had been bought in Egypt by the German archaeologist Otto Rubensohn Nov. 1904 for das Deutsche Papyruskartell and was allotted to the Strasbourg University Library Sept. 1905. Its 52 fragments were “vorläufig regellos unter Glas gebracht”. It had been collecting dust for 85 years before the papyrus was entrusted to Alain Martin for study and publication. Its identification as a carrier of text of Empedocles was achieved in 1992. And now, in 1999, we have this book, magnificently edited and published (with excellent photographs), under the, perhaps somewhat ambiguous, title L’Empédocle de Strasbourg. Its authors include not only Alain Martin but also Oliver Primavesi. Broadly speaking, Martin is responsible for everything papyrological, Primavesi for the commentary. As to the book’s core part, the publication of the papyrus, it has been done most admirably and I think it is definitive in the sense that everything discernible, both as far as the letters and as far as all other physical features are concerned, has been described in a full, comprehensive and perfectly explicit fashion.

The very peculiar state the papyrus appears to have been in when it was bought can no longer be observed, unfortunately; it has to be understood from Rubensohn’s diary, where the object he had

acquired was described as: a collar-shaped, stiff strip of papyrus serving as a support to (gilded) copper leaves; the whole object was designed as a wreath, probably a funerary wreath; and it had come quite possibly from a necropolis at Panopolis. The copper leaves had been removed (probably by Rubensohn himself) and were lost, and the papyrus strip disintegrated. The number of fragments preserved at the Strasbourg Library is 52; all of these contain one or more letters, so all other pieces may have been thrown away at some point. This history shows that, as is so often the case, the papyrus’ survival is due to reuse, which, in this particular case, means that only small parts of the whole text enjoyed reuse and survival, as a mere two or three small cuttings out of a whole papyrus roll suffice to make a wreath for the head. I will quote briefly from Martin’s elaborate description and characterization of the papyrus. Each line coincides with a hexameter, and there are no textual elements not belonging to the hexameters; therefore, the papyrus clearly contained the text of Empedocles as opposed to a text in which Empedocles was merely quoted. The papyrus, therefore, is a witness to the direct transmission of the text, and is as such an absolute first for Empedocles and the pre-Socratic philosophers generally. The writing is only on the recto; the verso contains no letters. Therefore, the manuscript was a roll, not a codex. There was a single scribe, who probably worked towards the end of the 1st c. A.D. The individual, uncial, letters are well-written and perfectly clear. There is no word-division; nor are there punctuation marks.

An element of exceptional importance is to be observed in front of the line which is at the bottom of column ii of ensemble a: the letter Γ. Its meaning emerges from E.G. Turner, *Greek Papyri: an Introduction* (Oxford 1968), 95: “stichometrical letters, usually placed in the left-hand margins of texts (…) denote each hundred lines of verse (….) the twenty-four letters of the Ionic alphabet are used (….). Their origin (…) lies in the professional scribe’s counting of verses in order to reckon what his fee will be. If they are present in a text, we may be sure the copy was professionally made and paid for”. Therefore, although this gamma does not strictly mean that the line in front of which it was put, was line 300 (these letters were not used for reference or quotation purposes), one may safely assume of course that this professional scribe started his copy-