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A New Greek Musical Papyrus (Beinecke CtYBR inv. 4510)

Greek papyri with musical notation are exceedingly rare. To date only 15 such papyri have been published; a further 8 papyri are known to exist; and there are 5 published inscriptions, as well as 2 short collections that come to us through the medieval tradition. In this paper I will present a report on the final stages of my work on Beinecke papyrus CtYBR inv. 4510, a fragment containing parts of two or more Greek poems with interlinear vocal musical notation.

Music and Rhythm: The Beinecke papyrus, from a preliminary study, seems to be musically unusual, in that it is broader in range than most of the pieces previously known. The Beinecke piece also exhibits unusual use of musical and rhythmical sigla in the musical notation. Preliminary study suggests then that the Beinecke piece may well add significantly to our detailed understanding of the nature of ancient Greek music. Inasmuch as the musical background to Greek lyric is among the most important aesthetic losses from antiquity, any new contribution to the subject is important.

Text and Context: The poetic text of CtYBR inv. 4510 is of uncertain genre, but contains several interesting (and some unusual) details, including references to names from mythology (Narkissos, Muses, Tempe); an odd syntactical sequence (five first-person futures); and exceptional use of repetition and even rhyme. The format and social context of the papyrus are also of exceptional interest. The wide-columned format is almost unexampled among literary papyri generally (as can be demonstrated by the data in my book on the Ancient Book Roll, in progress); but the column format finds easy parallel among the very few other papyri with music. This odd circumstance demands further study, and may well allow the localization of such papyri to musical guilds. Of broader significance, the very fact of a musically-notated papyrus of the late first or early second century feeds into a large set of questions about ongoing use of Greek lyric texts in the Roman period: how and by whom was such a text used? was the text a performance text or an aide-memoire? inasmuch as the music seems to be post-classical, are the poems new compositions or has new music been fashioned for old poems? what then might the piece imply about the transmission of ancient music? what do such papyri tell us about the nature of performance in this period? were papyri with musical notation used only by professionals, or also by amateurs? In addition to the detailed presentation of the text and music, the paper will address at least some of these broader questions.