A PERSONAL LETTER FOUND IN THE ATHENIAN AGORA

ABSTRACT

A lead tablet found in the Athenian Agora, presented here for the first time, preserves the text of a personal letter inscribed in the 4th century B.C. by a professional. It is from a boy, his non-Attic name suggesting perhaps a metic background, who complains that the master of the foundry to which he has been sent, evidently as an apprentice, is mistreating him. The question raised concerning the legal rights of (metic?) apprentices is of special interest, as is the location of the text, at least part of which is in the boy’s own excited words.

Excavation in 1972 of the well beside the orthostate shrine at the crossroads near the Royal Stoa in the Athenian Agora (Fig. 1) proved to be remarkably fruitful, especially in its small finds of terracotta and lead, for the epigraphical record of the city. Among the terracotta pieces were several stamps, presumably military passes, and among the lead were not only other military stamps but also the strips that have preserved for us much of the roster of the Attic cavalry. There was also a lead tablet inscribed with what seem to be Bacchic shouts. The few other inscribed lead pieces from the well are the written debris of private rather than civic or organized religious life: a pot-mender and fifteen curse tablets of the 4th century, and the document that I present here, a personal letter of the 4th century, addressed by one Lesis to his mother and to one Xenokles (Figs. 2–4).

Private letters on lead constitute a small but interesting genre within Greek epigraphy. Eight have been published in full, a ninth in part.


2 Berezen or Olbia, 4th century. Ed. pr. Latyschev 1904 (drawing), Wilhelm 1909 (phot., fig. 64), cf. Syll. 3 1260. See Dubois 1996,
The extant lead letters are so few, Ju. G. Vinogradov argues, because the lead, once the letters were received, was reused for other purposes or dis-

Figure 1. Crossroads, shrine, and well, with Royal Stoa at upper left and Painted Stoa at upper right. Drawing by W. B. Dinsmoor Jr.

[ἐκ-]τος Τεγέας χαίρειν.

6. Vinogradov 1971, pp. 95–96; Bravo (1974, p. 113), *contra*, remarks, interestingly, that the reason why we find no lead letters after the 4th century is that by then papyrus, itself obviously easier to handle than lead, had become more generally affordable.

7. The one clear exception is 8, of which the last preserved line ends γρ. Both left- and right-hand edges of the text of 3 are lost, but its editor, A. Henry (1991), without noticing the apparent scribal habit of not dividing words at line-ends, has offered quite plausible restorations that do not require such division. The unpublished Athenian example (see note 5 above) has word-divisions.

8. Turner 1968, p. 83: “The mark of the public letter-writer, making articulate the fears and only half-expressed thoughts of his clients, is to be seen everywhere in the platitudes and clichés of which so many private [papyrus] letters are composed.”

9. For the chronology of these conventions, see Thrette 1980, pp. 172–176, 238–258.

10. To put it somewhat more scrupulously, these features may show no more than that our scribe learned to write in the earlier part of the century. The sender of the letter was fairly young, but there is no reason why he could not have employed a scribe considerably older. In other words, letter-forms and spelling need not force us to assume the earlier rather than the later 4th century as the actual time of writing.

11. I regret that in my tracing (Fig. 2) I have not been able to show any of this splitting.

carded: the examples that we have today would be chiefly those that were never delivered.⁶

All of the letters with published illustrations have writing that is crisp and sure and most of them have no word-divisions at line-ends within their main texts; 1 and 4 do have word-division in the addresses on their backs. To B. Bravo this style of writing without word-division suggests the work of the professional scribe. Our letter too shows no word-division. The evidence that we have, beginning a few generations later, for letter-writing on papyrus among the Greeks in Egypt shows that it was usual to employ scribes to write one’s letters.⁸ Our relatively few examples on lead do not allow any generalization for Greek-speaking areas elsewhere or in earlier periods, but the text of our letter (see below), like those from Berezan (1), Torone (3), and from Attica (4, 5), opening as they do in the third person, may well show a formulaic distinction between scribe and sender.

The writing in the letter presented here is in a good 4th-century hand, the spelling, in every word but one, impeccable. The sounds /ɛ/ and /o/ are written ε and ο if they result from contraction (περιμένειν [1], ελθεῖν [1], αὐτόν [2]) or compensatory lengthening (τός [2]), while only inherited diphthongs appear as ει (ἐπιστέλλει: ξενοκλεῖ [1], χαλκεῖον [2]; the text has no example of a word that might be spelled with ου).⁹ A date in the earlier 4th century is indicated.¹⁰

The tablet is apparently opisthographic and is unusually well preserved, with all edges intact except for a slight tear near the right-hand end of Side A. The edges themselves are not flat and straight but crinkled and have traces of pinking that suggest the use of shears rather than a knife for cutting the lead sheet. The main text (Side A) is in four lines. Splits within the individual strokes of the letters, particularly noticeable at the beginning of line 1, suggest the use of a splaying reed stylus (Figs. 3–4); experiment shows that fresh thin lead sheets are in fact soft enough to be inscribed with reeds. The purpose of such splits in still evidently being to control the flow of ink, we may speculate that the scribe normally wrote not on lead but on papyrus or some other material that accepted ink, such as a potsherd, and that he used the instrument that he had at hand, a stylus that had already begun to show wear. He seems to have sharpened it from time to time, at any rate: there are no splits in the strokes of Ωι in ἀνθρώπωι in line 3 or in the strokes in line 4.¹¹

The tablet was rolled up, with the writing on the inside (Side A, Fig. 2), from the direction of the left-hand ends of the lines of the text; this no doubt explains the slight damage at the right, which would have been the outer flap of the resulting scroll. That area of the outer side (i.e., Side B) shows, some 0.05 m from and parallel to the right-hand edge of Side A (i.e., at right angles to its writing), a row of faint scratchings, with shapes slightly larger than the letters of Side A; there may have been more. That they are neatly aligned suggests that they are deliberate, but the area is corroded, encrusted, and badly worn, this being the exposed part of the scroll, and I cannot confidently identify any one cluster of scratchings as a letter. If the marks are deliberate, they are no doubt the remains of what was once an address; indeed 1 and 4 each has an address on its back, in-
Figure 2. Agora II 1702, Side A.
scribed, as here, on the exposed flap and at right angles to the writing on the other side.

A final word, before we turn to the text, about the findspot, the well beside the orthostate shrine. In the Classical and Hellenistic periods the shrine evidently received so many votives—more than any other in the Agora—that they must have had to be cleared out from time to time and discarded, for the well itself had thousands of such votives, most of them suggesting a female cult. Some of the inscribed objects listed at the beginning of this article are obviously appropriate as offerings and may have come from the shrine: for example, the tablet with the Bacchic syllables, whatever its precise significance, and, if the deity is chthonian, the fifteen curse tablets.12 Other inscriptions were clearly not votives: the cavalry tablets and the military stamps evidently come from the Hipparcheion, which has been assumed by C. Habicht to have been located nearby.13 From the text of Lesis’s letter it should, I think, be obvious that if that tablet was in any sense in situ when it was found among the votives in the well, it was so only in that the person whom Lesis had commissioned to deliver it considered it simpler to drop it down the well or into the shrine than to complete the errand. The letter was not, in other words, a votive at the shrine. This I stress only because, when I was preparing this article, I showed the text of the letter to a friend specializing in magic who, thinking of the texts of certain lead curse tablets with quasi-epistolary formulae addressing the dead,14 at once assumed Lesis’s letter to be a curse tablet, Xenokles the ghost addressed, and the “mother” the Earth herself. It is not; it is a personal letter that was never delivered.

Agora inv. IL 1702

Figs. 2–4

H. 0.050, W. 0.134 m
Early fourth century B.C.

Side A

1 Λήσις [ίς] επιστέλλει Ξενοκλῆς καί τῇ μητρὶ μηδαμῶς περικεῖν
2 αὐτὸν ἀπολόμενον ἐν τοῖς χαλκεῖωι, ἀλλὰ πρὸς τῶν δεσπότας αὐτὸν ἐλθέν
3 καὶ ἐνευφέσθαι τι βέλτιον αὐτῷ.` Ἀνθρώπωι γάρ
4 παραδέδομαι τὰν πονηρῶν. μαστηγόμενος ἀπόλλυμαι δέδεμαι προπηλαχίζομαι μᾶλλον μᾶλλον μᾶλλον

“Lesis is sending (a letter) to Xenokles and to his mother by no means to overlook that he is perishing in the foundry but to come to his masters and find something better for him. For I have been handed over to a man thoroughly wicked;

I am perishing from being whipped; I am tied up; I am treated like dirt—more and more!”

12. In all, sanctuaries of Demeter and of Demeter and Kore have yielded some forty curse tablets, from Selinous (Jameson et al. 1993, pp. 125–131, late 6th[?]-5th century); Rhodes (Zervoudaki 1973, p. 622; cf. Jordan 1985b, p. 168, 4th century); Mytilene (Curbera and Jordan 1998, 4th century); Knidos (DT161 1–13, Hellenistic); Morgantina (SEG XXIX 927–932, Hellenistic); and Corinth (Corinth XVIII.3, pp. 281–291, Roman Imperial?).


14. For a helpful discussion of such “letters” see Bravo 1987, pp. 196–200.
Λῆσις (ς). The name Λῆσις is new and certainly not Attic. Like the masculines Λύσις/Λυσίας/Λυσίων from λύω, Ζεύξις/Ζεύξιας/Ζεύξιων from ζεύγνυμι, Φείδις/Φείδιας/Φείδων from φειδομαι, and so on, it is evidently formed from a verb, in this case no doubt λῶ (= Att. θέλω), attested in Doric and probably that underlying the name Λησίςς, even though the apparently single instance of this last, IG V.2 439.31 (Megalopolis, 2nd century), is from Arcadia. Further, the masculine ending -ις being preponderantly Doric, a Doric origin of the name Λῆσις can probably be assumed. We may compare the Doric name Βόλις, from βόλομαι (= Att. βούλ-) , a near-synonym of λῶ. As for the superfluous (ς), it conceivably results from the unfamiliarity of the name Λῆσις in Athens.

έπιστέλλει. We may compare the use of the verb in the opening for-

mula of 4, as a parallel to which W. Crönert16 adduced Selene’s lines in Aristophanes’ Clouds (608–610):

‘Ἡ Σελήνη ἔμνηστικά ἡμῖν ἐπέστειλεν φράσαι
πρῶτα μὲν χαίρειν Ἀθηναίοις καὶ τοῖς ἑμμάχοις
εἶτε θυμαίειν ἔφασκε.

The similarity suggests that the formula with which Lesis’s letter opens would have been familiar in Athens.17 An opening of a message with the verb ἐπιστέλλειν is indeed found on an earlier graffito from the Agora, with the message Σωσίνεος ἐπέστειλεν Γλαύκοις ἐς ἀστυ ἐν δεσμῷ (Agora XXI, p. 9, no. B9, last quarter of 5th century).18

Ξενοκλῆς καὶ τῇ μητρί. Lesis complains to Xenokles and his mother, as we see, of mistreatment by his masters. His request that together with the masters they should “find something better for him” (line 3) implies a previous agreement. We may at the outset rule out the possibility that Xenokles is Lesis’s father, for if so Lesis’s mother has no legal standing in the negotiations with his δεσμότα. Lesis’s father, we have to conclude, is no longer on the scene or in a position to conduct transactions. In deducing the relation between Lesis and Xenokles we should begin by asking if Lesis is a slave or free. If he is a slave, Xenokles must have contracted the apprenticeship as his owner or conceivably as his owner’s representative, to whose compassion, in either case, the boy may, let us concede, be in a position to appeal. If he is a slave, though, his master can have no legal part in the arrangement with the δεσμότα. Yet Lesis writes to her as well as to Xenokles and, if the letter expresses his instructions accurately, asks them both to come to the δεσμότα and to make a new arrangement. It seems to me therefore unlikely that Lesis is a slave.19

I cannot determine, from what we know of Athenian law, whether Lesis and his mother are of the citizen or the metic class. His non-Attic name points to the latter, in which case Xenokles is presumably the mother’s prostatēs, her citizen patron, who acts on her behalf in the polemarch’s court if she ever needs to undertake a legal action,20 for example, if Lesis’s masters should default on their part of the arrangements;21 Xenokles will have been present at the negotiation, then, as prostatēs.

μηδαμῶς περιδέν ἰ αὐτὸν ἀπολομένον. Spelling at the time would have been the same for a future participle (ἀπολομένου, contracted from -λομ-) and an aorist (-λομ-). That standard grammars, on the other hand, give several examples of the verb περιοράω with present or aorist but never future participles no doubt reflects usage, and the use of the present ἀπολλύμαι below probably argues against a future participle here.22 In any case, we may compare the location μὴ περιδεῖν ἀπολομένους at Demosthenes 50.5.

ἐν τῷ χαλκείῳ. A χαλκείον, its etymology notwithstanding, need not be a foundry specifically for bronzeworking; we may compare the latitude of the use of the word χαλκείως, which could refer to a coppersmith but also to a goldsmith (Od. 3.343), an ironworker (cf. Arist. Poet. 1461a29 χαλκέας τοὺς τὸν σίδηρον ἑργαζομένους; Gen. 4.22 LXX χαλκέως χαλκοῦ καὶ σίδηρου—examples from LSJ). We need not assume that the
letter was actually sent from the χαλκεῖον or from anywhere near the crossroads well. In any case, Lesis is unlikely to have worked in any of the three excavated bronze foundries in use in the Agora in the 4th century (see below, note 25).

ἀλλὰ πρός τὸς δεσπότας αὐτὸ ἔλθεν ἢ καὶ ἐνευρέσθη τι βέλτιον αὐτῷ. The word δεσπότας means “master,” usually in the sense of “owner,” according to the evidence assembled s.v. in LSJ and DicGE. If this were the sense here, with Lesis literally belonging to these δεσπόται, it would have been pointless for him to write to his mother, Xenokles, or anyone else for help. Here the word evidently has a looser sense. His situation may remind us of Lucian’s, in the 2nd century of our era, whose father, not a rich man, sent him to the shop of his wife’s brother, a sculptor of some reputation, to learn the art. Lucian’s words (Somn. 3) are παραδεδόμην τῷ θείῳ, not much different from Lesis’s ἀνθρώπῳ . . . παραδέδομαι below; conceivably the verb was a terminus technicus for such occasions. The uncle gave Lucian the chisel and a slab of marble and told him to strike. Lucian did, too enthusiastically, and broke the slab, whereupon the uncle beat him with a stick. Lucian went home in tears and complained to his mother, who heaped abuse on her brother, no doubt using such terms as πάνω πονηρός. Here the similarities end, though. Lucian was able to go home to complain; Lesis has to write to Xenokles and to his mother. What is Lesis’s status vis-à-vis his masters?

We have virtually no direct evidence for the institution of apprenticeship in 4th-century or earlier Athens—in fact, other than the “manumission cup” inscriptions (IG II² 1553–1578, SEG XVIII 36, all from the 320s), the present letter is the only real testimonium. I quote from Alison Burford’s useful summary:

Few details are known of the apprenticing system in Greece. . . . Indeed we know little beyond the fact that it existed, as it had in earlier urban (and to that extent industrialized) societies. There is a reference to ‘competent didaskaloi’—instructors—for ‘the lowest mechanics’ in Xenophon’s Memorabilia [4.2.2], and Plato [Meno 91d] makes a comparison between the master of rhetoric and his fee-paying pupil, and the sculptors Pheidias and Polykleitos and their fee-paying pupils; a little further on he refers to Zeuxis of Herakleia who gave painting lessons. A formal agreement of some kind was made between the parents or guardians of the prospective apprentice and the master-craftsman who had consented to take him on; the only surviving records of such agreements, from Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, suggest that the terms would have been of the simplest; although the political and economic organization of Egypt differed in many ways from that of the rest of the ancient world, the conditions of apprenticeship cannot in the nature of things have varied much.23

For 4th-century Attica, we may go a bit farther than this. In the “manumission cup” inscriptions a slave, once freed, receives a civic nomenclature in the form Φυλίστη ταλασσ(ωργός) ἐμ Μελ(ίτη) οἰκοίδα (SEG XVIII 23. Burford 1972, pp. 88–89.
36 A, lines 213–214) or Ἄριστομένης ἐμ Ἔλεότριαν σιωτοῦτος (lines 216–217), the mention of the profession being apparently optional. The professions, all of which were necessarily learned before the manumissions, are from a wide spectrum of Attic economic life. The ἀπελεύθεροι include wool-workers, farmers, cloggers, shopkeepers, merchants, and also persons with skills that could hardly have been gained in the masters’ households but would have required apprenticeship elsewhere: a gem-cutter, a goldsmith, a citharode, a flute-player, a potter, another specializing in amphoras, a χαλκεός. In the papyrus contracts we see that owners could apprentice their slaves, guardians their wards, parents their sons and daughters to learn professions, and that there were generally two types of contracts: apprentices either worked by day and came home at night or remained with their teachers/masters until the term of instruction (which could be as long as several years) ended; Lesis had to send a letter home, which shows that his contract was of the latter type.

Ἀνθρώπων γὰρ παρασέκουσαν τὰς ζωὴν πολιτοὺς. In contrast to the plural δεσπόται of line 2, with whom Xenokles and Lesis’s mother have made the arrangement, stands the singular here, referring no doubt to the man in charge of some particular branch of work within the χαλκείον. It is he to whom the δεσπόται of the χαλκείον have handed Lesis over for personal instruction.

μαστιγώμενος ἀπόλλυμαι δέδεμαι προπηλακίζομαι. The Old Oligarch speaks of the Athenian sanction on striking a slave or a metic ([Xen.] Ath. Pol. 1.10). The evidence is contradictory, though, for at [Dem.] 53.16 the speaker tells of his neighbors’ ruse of sending a young Athenian boy (παιδάριον ἄστον) to destroy a rose-bed, “in order that if I caught him and in a fit of anger put him in bonds or struck him, assuming him to be a slave (πατάξαμι ὡς δούλον εἶναι), they might bring an indictment for assault ἔγραφην ὄβρεως” (transl. A. T. Murray); presumably the speaker is not aware of the prohibition that the Old Oligarch refers to. The matter of the ἔγραφην ὄβρεως is indeed complex. Whether the law deterred or was meant to deter corporal punishment of young persons during apprenticeships is a question for which there is no evidence, as far as I know, to guarantee an answer. Several centuries later, the question of the legal rights of the apprentice was still debated by Roman jurists. Burford27 refers to an opinion of Ulpian (3rd century A.D.) in Justinian’s Digest, 9.2.5.3:

24. For the evidence from Graeco-Roman Egypt for apprenticeship there, see Westermann 1914; Zambon 1935, 1939.
25. If this idea is right, the letter concerns none of the 4th-century bronze foundries in the Athenian Agora, which are too small for such divisions of labor; see Mattusch 1977, pp. 358–363.

If a teacher kills or wounds a slave during a lesson, is he liable under the lex Aquilia for having done unlawful damage? Julian writes that a man who put out a pupil’s eye in the course of instruction was held liable under the lex Aquilia. There is all the more reason therefore for saying the same if he kills him. Julian also puts this case: A shoemaker, he says, struck with a last at the neck of a boy (a free-born youngster) who was learning under him, because he had badly done what he had been teaching him, with the result that the boy’s eye was knocked out. On such facts, says Julian, the action for insult does not lie because he struck him not with intent to insult, but in order to correct and to teach him; he wonders whether there is an action for breach of contract for his services as a teacher, since a
teacher only has the right to administer reasonable chastisement, but I have no doubt that action can be brought against him under the *lex Aquilia.*

As an instance of the brutality that could take place in a workshop in Greece, Burford cites a scene on a late-5th-century imitation black-figure skyphos found at Abai in Lokris (National Museum, Athens, inv. 442); the painter is conceivably relying on first-hand knowledge of life in the pottery works. He depicts an assistant, a stack of three skyphoi with horizontal handles in his right hand, walking away to the left (Fig. 5). In the middle of the scene a seated person of undetermined gender, the only clothed figure in the picture, holds a triangular object (a fan?) in one hand, a kylix in the other. To the left of the stool at which the figure sits is another stack of three skyphoi, these with upturned handles. Farther to the right there is a shelf, presumably on the back wall, with a kantharos, another horizontal-handled skyphos, and two small sticks that may be paintbrushes (Fig. 6). On the floor is a potter's wheel, behind which crouches another worker, holding in his raised left hand a skyphos with upturned handles that he inspects (Figs. 7–8). Standing on the wheel, within easy reach of his right hand, is a horizontal-handled skyphos with what is evidently a paintbrush in it. The scene is obviously a pottery workshop. Above the painter who sits peacefully at the wheel we behold something gruesome. No doubt as punishment for some wrongdoing, one of the workers has been suspended face down from the ceiling. His left foot is tied against the ceiling itself; his right foot hangs lower, from a cord. His hands also hang from cords. Another cord from the ceiling is around his neck, strangling him so badly that his tongue hangs out. As if this were not enough, another cord, attached to his penis, is stretched tight and tied to a ring or a hook in the floor. In front of the victim and facing him stands another worker swinging a long, thin object, a leather thong or a stick, in his upraised right hand.

Blümner and all others who have discussed the figure suspended from the ceiling have assumed that he is a slave, Blümner adducing, from Roman comedy, several examples of slaves being whipped while tied up and suspended. (As an Attic example we have a lively description by Aristophanes, *Frogs* 618–822.) But is this assumption necessary? May he not be an apprentice—slave, metic, or free—here *in statu pupillari?*

The second sentence of the letter, with its first-person verbs, is in contrast to the first, with verbs in the "epistolary" third person. It is evidently intended to be read as Lesis’s own words. The verbs in the last line are in an almost staccato asyndeton. We may compare the asyndeton of the Spartan Hippokrates’ letter that the Athenians intercepted in 410 (Xen. *Hell.* 1.1.23), ἔφερε τὰ κάλα: Μίνδαρος ἀπεσαῦρα: πενώνυτι τῶνδρες ἀπορύσμες τί χρή δρᾶν, and what Aristotle offers as an example of a vivid peroration at the very end of his *Rhetoric:* εἰρήκατα: ἐκείνως ἔνθαα: ἐκείς: ἐνθα: χώισκε. This latter is itself an echo of the end of Lysias’s *Against Erotosthenes:* ἐκείνως ἐκείς ἐνθα: πενώνυσατε ἐκεῖς δικάξετε. J. Gordon Howie, who has been kind enough to point me to these passages, concludes that the composer of the second sentence of Lesis’s letter must have

30. A man, according to Blümner, Collignon and Couve, and Walters; the wife of the naked man at the wheel (see below), according to Scheibler; the female owner of the shop, according to Halm-Tisserant.
31. Blümner and Walters describe it as a leather sheet, with which the seated figure was in the act of striking the departing assistant; for Collignon and Couve it is a rhyton. That it may be a fan is the suggestion of Susan Rotroff.
32. Blümner, Collignon and Couve, and Walters assume that the right hand is free and is begging for mercy. There are two cords, and admittedly neither is attached to the right hand, but the artistry is crude, and I think that we are meant to understand both hands to be bound.
33. Halm-Tisserant (1998, pp. 44–45) alone assumes that the victim is vomiting into the skyphos that the man at the wheel is obligingly holding up. The man at the wheel seems not to have envisaged this possibility.
34. Blümner 1889, p. 156.
had some education in rhetoric and therefore would not be Lesis himself but presumably the professional scribe. I myself would keep open the possibility, however, that Aristotle recommended asyndeton precisely because persons in such situations as those of Hippokrates or Lysias or our Lesis would naturally, and effectively, use it to urge attention.

35. For discussion, see Arnott 1996, p. 126.
REFERENCES

Almagro Basch, M. 1952. Las inscripciones amparitanas griegas, ibéricas y latinas (Monografias amparitanas 2), Barcelona.
D’Aud = A. Audollent, Defixionum tabellae quotquot innotuerunt . . . , Paris 1904.
Latyschev, V. V. 1904. “Inschriften Found in Southern Russia, 1901–
A PERSONAL LETTER FOUND IN THE ATHENIAN AGORA


David R. Jordan

AMERICAN SCHOOL OF CLASSICAL STUDIES AT ATHENS

54 SOUDIADIS STREET
106-76 ATHENS
GREECE

JORDAN@HOL.GR