

Posted on the 23 January 2006, Updated 14 June 2007

Erasmianism in New Garb: The Chimera of the 'Reconstructed' Pronunciation of Greek

It is, I think, crystal clear that the evidence that we have on the pronunciation of Greek in antiquity accounts only for one of the two aspects of the pronunciation question. In pronunciation two things are important: the sound of each letter or combination of letters and the intonation, the fluctuation of the voice (pitch). As I have pointed out in "The Error of Erasmus" and *The Development of Greek and the New Testament*, this second aspect, the intonation, is for ever lost to us and beyond the possibility of recovery or reconstruction. What we have is the value of the letters. Here we are quite certain, because we have a reference point, and that reference point is Neohellenic. For example, confining ourselves to Greek alone,¹ when we say (and everybody agrees on this, even the Erasmians) that ε + ι in time came to assume the sound of ι, we would not know with absolute certainty what that sound was either in Demosthenes' time or the time of the New Testament unless we could refer that sound to the living language in Hellas today, whereby we know that ι is pronounced like Latin 'i'.

The reason why this is so, is the historical continuity of the pronunciation of Greek. That is, we may start with the 'methodological ignorance' of the pronunciation of 'ι' say, at the time of Homeros or Platon, or of the New Testament, when purely hypothetically ι could have been the equivalent of Latin *e*, *a*, or *o*. Today, however, we know that ι in Neohellenic is pronounced as Latin 'i'. Now the sound of ι is perhaps the most important sound as far as vowels are concerned, because it functions as a reference point for other vowels or diphthongs, and no one (including the Erasmians) has ever doubted its pronunciation. The Greek ι, therefore, must have had in ancient times the same sound as it has today in Hellas. And since ε+ι are confused with it, the only reasonable conclusion is that these letters would not have been confused with ι unless they had taken a sound that was either identical or very similar to it. Here we see how important Neohellenic pronunciation is at least as a reference- and starting-point. Without it, we would have to look into other languages for similar Indo-European words and try to ascertain or rather guess their sound. And since the sounds of other languages do not necessarily correspond to Greek sounds, we would never be sure. Consequently, such a procedure would be highly speculative. On the other hand,

¹ I.e. not taking account of Latin or other Indo-European languages.

when it comes to Neohellenic, we have the same people with historical continuity, which has spoken and written the Greek language every single day from the beginning to the present. To neglect this evidence would be the height of folly.

The bottom line is that, no matter what the pronunciation in classical times might have been (to speak hypothetically with our methodological ignorance!), we know what it is today! This means, that whatever changes were taking place in classical times (and this has been amply documented in *The Development of Greek and the New Testament*), they were moving toward the pronunciation obtaining in Hellas today. This is indisputable and is accepted by all. Now it is important to emphasize that there have never been any intermediary stages in pronunciation, since this would have been recorded in writing; that is, that a word would have been first spelled with an $\alpha + \iota$, later with an $\epsilon + \iota$ and finally with ι . There is no evidence for such a thing! No, the orthographical mistakes that we meet in the inscriptions from the beginning change from one way of writing to another, never three times. Thus we have $\epsilon + \iota$ instead of ι , or ι instead of $\epsilon + \iota$. Or, $\alpha + \iota$ instead of ϵ , or ϵ instead of $\alpha + \iota$. But we never find, for example, a word spelled in three successive ways, such as the case would have been if e.g. $\acute{\alpha}\gamma\acute{\alpha}\pi\eta$ was first spelled as $\acute{\alpha}\gamma\acute{\alpha}\pi\iota$, then as $\acute{\alpha}\gamma\acute{\alpha}\pi\epsilon\iota$ and finally as $\acute{\alpha}\gamma\acute{\alpha}\pi\eta$ (i.e. ι becoming $\epsilon + \iota$ and ending up as η). I repeat, this state of things has never obtained. The fact is that the Greeks of the past 25-26 centuries confused exactly the same letters and combinations of letters with their corresponding equivalents as do the Greeks of today!² This is an infallible rule!

The pronunciation of Greek in antiquity is connected with another event of momentous importance: the formation of the Greek alphabet. The Mycenaean script was very imperfect lacking a one to one correspondence to the sound of the words. That is also the reason why the Greeks adopted the Phoenician script, which was a superior device, and which, by adding the vowels, they turned into the first true alphabet. This development of the script went hand in hand with the definitive orthography (spelling) of words. Now the orthography has not changed since classical times! That is, an ancient word occurring in Homeros or Aischylos or any other classical author, (e.g. $\acute{\alpha}\gamma\gamma\epsilon\lambda\omicron\varsigma$, $\mu\omicron\iota\acute{\rho}\alpha$, $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\epsilon\iota\tau\alpha$, $\omicron\tilde{\iota}\kappa\omicron\varsigma$), is spelled today in both *Katharevousa* and *Demotic* exactly as it was spelled in ancient times. This is so because, following the establishment of the final form of the alphabet, the orthography froze. Of course, a number of words have received another form in Neohellenic (esp. in *Demotic*), e.g. $\theta\rho\acute{\iota}\xi > \tau\rho\acute{\iota}\chi\alpha$, $\kappa\omicron\rho\acute{\alpha}\xi > \kappa\omicron\rho\acute{\alpha}\kappa\alpha\varsigma$, $\acute{\alpha}\pi\omicron\lambda\acute{\upsilon}\tau\rho\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma > \acute{\alpha}\pi\omicron\lambda\acute{\upsilon}\tau\rho\omega\sigma\eta$, but that is another matter altogether. Thus, the third declension word $\acute{\eta}$ $\pi\omicron\lambda\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ has in the *Demotic* form of Neohellenic (not in *Katharevousa*, which

² Of course, I here refer to uneducated Greeks, who write as they pronounce, that is, exactly as their counterparts in ancient times.

keeps to the classical form) become a first declension word and taken the form ἡ πόλις, albeit the meaning is the same. Now in a Neohellenic text a Modern Greek has the choice of using either the classical (= NT, and *Katharevousa*) form of a word (e.g. ἡ πόλις) or the *Demotic* form (e.g. ἡ πόλη). As a matter of fact, in many a modern text one will find both forms occurring side by side and the same applies to most words that have a classical and a *Demotic* form (cf. *The Development of Greek* ch. I). As already hinted at, in Neohellenic very many words, such as Θεός, ἀγάπη, πνεῦμα, σωτηρία, σῶμα, πρᾶγμα, ἐργάζομαι, λαμβάνω, ἔρχομαι, πιστεύω, etc. etc. (See *The Development of Greek* ch. I and III) have in *Demotic* the same form as in classical Greek. Now this continuity in orthography has its own contribution to make in the pursuit for the establishment of the Greek pronunciation. (See the Greek article on “Koros, Hybris, Ate” (Κόρος, Ὕβρις, Ἄτη) under [Popular Scientific Studies](#) and, as an exercise, try to identify how many of these words are classical or occurring in the NT. The article is written in simple *Katharevousa* or literary *Demotic* and has been published in the Athens journal Ἄσπὴρ τῆς Ἀνατολῆς, Ἔτος 149, Ἰούνιος 2006, pp. 183-87).

These facts leave no doubt that once the process began (and we do not know when it began, we only know that it was under way at the time when inscriptions become frequent, i.e. from around 600 B.C. on), the pronunciation moves forward inexorably without break or retrogression, toward the pronunciation used in Hellas today. This is the hard core. This is the hard reality. And this is the only certain ground that we have to stand on.

Those who, under the weight of the evidence of the inscriptions, the papyri and the Neohellenic witness (I have shown the importance of all three in *The Development of Greek*), can no longer maintain with intellectual integrity the correctness of the Erasmian pronunciation, but who, nevertheless, are unwilling to acquiesce to the Historical Greek Pronunciation, have adopted one of the two possible alternatives open to them. ***The first group has given up as false the claim that the Erasmian pronunciation is the scientifically correct pronunciation of ancient Greek, which Friedrich Blass thundered about him in his day and made every one tremble before his great ‘authority’, and has now changed the argument claiming that although the Erasmian pronunciation has never been used by Greeks, it helps us spell Greek correctly!*** Here not only the earlier claim that the Erasmian pronunciation was the correct pronunciation has been given up, but also the scholarly integrity that keeps to what is scientifically correct has been abandoned. The advocates of this point of view have simply changed ground and now put forth the utilitarian argument, that our wrong, Erasmian, un-Greek pronunciation helps us spell Greek correctly. This is how low scientifically some are prepared to sink in compromising scientific integrity. Here it is no longer a question of what science has proven correct; it is a subterfuge to avoid owing to

four hundred years of hybristic behavior toward the language they purportedly admired and its speakers, whom they portrayed as half-barbarian (μιξοβόρβαροι, Blass' own word) (see *The Development of Greek* ch. VI). However, is this new subterfuge correct? In *The Development of Greek* ch. VI (where see for evidence), I have shown that even the claim of “helping us spell Greek correctly” is not entirely true, since the Erasmian pronunciation leads to other spelling errors! But quite apart from that, could not we, who do not have English as our mother-tongue, by the same token argue similarly in order to pronounce English according to its spelling, since English spelling is the most aberrant among the languages of Europe, followed closely by French? The skewing between spelling and pronunciation in Greek does not come anywhere near the skewing that exists in the case of English and French. But then, what would become of the respect due for the integrity of each language and its speakers?

The second group of Erasmian die-hards, who refuse to capitulate to the Historical Greek Pronunciation, have chosen the other alternative open to them, namely, they have sought refuge in imaginary reconstructions of the pronunciation of ... what? what place? what period? According to them, the ancient Greek pronunciation, of course, finally led to the pronunciation used in Hellas today—this cannot be denied. But they claim to be able to reconstruct the intermediate stages. Now this is an even greater hybris than that perpetrated by the first group. As we have seen there is no evidence in the inscriptions and the papyri of any intermediary stages in the pronunciation of Greek. All of the changes were introduced before the end of the classical period (see the clear evidence in *The Development of Greek*, ch. VI) and they progressively spread across the entire Greek-speaking world. The evidence does not allow any stratification of changes according to place and time, so that we might be able to say with any degree of certainty, for example, that in Athens in the year 300 B.C. the pronunciation of this or that letter or diphthong was such and such, in Alexandria such and such, while in Antioch it was such and such. Then in the year 250 B.C it became such and such in Athens, such and such in Alexandria, and such and such in Antioch, and so on every fifty years down the centuries, not to speak of smaller places like Jerusalem and Tarsus, the various cities of Ionia, the villages of the Eastern Roman empire, and why not Rome itself (?) — from which places we have no evidence at all on which to base such reconstructions. ***Those who make the preposterous claim of being able to tell us exactly how Greek was pronounced in a particular place and at a particular time, in the face of utter lack of evidence for such reconstructions, simply cannot be taken seriously. Their concoction is a Chimera. It is self-illusion and it leads others astray.***

Both of the above positions are desperate attempts to avoid acquiescing to the Historical Greek Pronunciation. But, as I have said elsewhere, these last throblings

of Erasmianism are an indication that the error of Erasmus is dying the death of a thousand qualifications. There are many today, and they are constantly increasing, who are dissatisfied with this 'scientific fraud', which has reigned supreme for almost five centuries. These are now turning to the genuine pronunciation of the people who have spoken the language continuously down the centuries.