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Epicharmus, Simonides, and the ‘invention’ of the Greek alphabet

By Andreas Willi, Oxford

Abstract: Various ancient sources name the poets Epicharmus and Simonides (alongside the mythical figures Palamedes and Cadmus) as ‘inventors’ of certain letters of the Greek alphabet. After reviewing the evidence, and arguing that in the original version the letters in question must have been ΗΩ and ΕΨ for Simonides and ΦΧ for Epicharmus, the present article suggests that this tradition goes back to early Athenian scholarship and ultimately arose from the circulation in Athens of early written texts of these two poets; by implication, a written text of Epicharmus must have reached Athens already in the first half of the fifth century, long before the time of Plato.

1. The question if, or in what form, the Sicilian comic poet Epicharmus’ works were known already in mid-fifth-century Athens – during or shortly after Epicharmus’ lifetime (c. 540–450 B.C.) – has been fiercely debated for more than a century now. According to one extreme position, first advanced by T. Zieliński but defended more fully by G. François,¹ a text of Epicharmus’ comedies was imported to Athens only by Plato, whose journey to Sicily would therefore constitute a definitive *terminus post quem* in the fourth century. By implication, when Xenophon in the *Memorabilia* (2.1.20, with Epich. *fr.* 271 and 236) and Plato himself in the *Gorgias* (505e, with Epich. *fr.* 161) put one or two quotations from Epicharmus into the mouth of Socrates, this would constitute a literary anachronism, be it a conscious one or not, and similarly Aristotle’s claim that Sicilian, i.e. Epicharmian, drama first influenced Attic comedy at the time of Crates (*Poet.* 1449b5–10 = Epich. *test.* 5) would have to be rejected as an erroneous educated guess. On the opposite side, scholars like A. von Salis, A. Körte, or more recently A.C. Cassio have seen no reason to disbelieve Aristotle and have even tried to detect a number of direct traces of influence from Epicharmus in extant Attic comedy.² Still others, notably E. Wüst and R. Kerkhof, have scrutinised these alleged traces and rejected virtually all of them as unsubstantiated, without however embracing wholesale the Zieliński/François position.³ Instead, they have occupied the middle ground

1 T. Zieliński, *Die Gliederung der altattischen Komödie* (Leipzig 1885) 243; G. François, “Epicharme et Cratès”, *AC* 47 (1978) 50–69.

2 A. von Salis, *De Doriensium ludorum in comoedia Attica vestigiis* (Diss. Basel 1905); A. Körte, Art. “Komödie”, *RE* XI/1 (1921) 1207–1275, at 1224–1225; A.C. Cassio, “Two studies on Epicharmus and his influence”, *HSPH* 89 (1985) 37–51, at 39–43.

3 E. Wüst, “Epicharmos und die alte attische Komödie”, *RhM* 93 (1950) 337–364; R. Kerkhof,

either by advocating a *non liquet* answer (and therefore accepting in principle the possibility of an Epicharmian literary presence in mid-fifth-century Athens) or by explaining the above-mentioned Socratic references (and perhaps the odd Epicharmian reminiscence in Euripides)⁴ as arising from the early circulation in Athens of a collection of famous sayings attributed to Epicharmus; such a collection (Epicharmus' Γνώμῃα) certainly existed later on, and it may well have contained a core of genuine material, even though an otherwise unknown 'Axiope' of Lokroi or Sicyon was eventually identified as its true 'author' by the historian Philochorus (Athen. 14.648d, with Philochorus *fr.* 328 F 79 Jacoby = Ψευδεπιχάρμεια *test.* i K.-A.).

Although the Athenocentric refusal to accept that classical Athenian literature or culture might owe anything of substance to a foreign playwright is no longer as strong as it used to be, the matter just sketched will remain *sub iudice* as long as no truly probative evidence is produced to show that Epicharmus was read (if not staged) outside Syracuse and Sicily well before the age of Plato. It is one thing to suggest, for literary reasons, that – even before Crates – already Aeschylus may have been influenced by Epicharmian stagecraft,⁵ but quite another therefore also to suspect that either Aeschylus himself or a contemporary of his might have brought to Athens an Epicharmian text, i.e. copies of (at least some) Epicharmian plays. Of course, such a theory would fit in well with the timing of Crates' overhaul of Attic comedy according to Aristotle, but a sceptic will take little comfort in this kind of reasoning. What we really need, therefore, and what the following pages will try to put forward, is a completely separate, as it were 'non-literary', line of argument to lend support to any literary pointers one may be prepared to accept.

2. The crucial piece of evidence to be reassessed here consists of a handful of texts, which have long been known and are grouped together in the latest edition of Epicharmus' fragments, but whose apparent silliness has so far condemned them to scholarly disregard. In *Poetae Comici Graeci* I, Epich. *test.* 28 consists of the following four sources referring to both Simonides and Epicharmus as 'inventors' of certain letters of the Greek alphabet:⁶

- Dorische Posse, Epicharm und attische Komödie* (München/Leipzig 2001) esp. 133–177.
- 4 Cf. W. Nestle, "Untersuchungen über die philosophischen Quellen des Euripides", *Philologus Suppl.* 8 (1899–1901) 557–655, at 621–628; U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Einleitung in die griechische Tragödie* (Berlin 1910) 29–30 n. 54; A. Pickard-Cambridge, *Dithyramb, Tragedy and Comedy*, 2nd edn., rev. T.B.L. Webster (Oxford 1962) 241–245.
- 5 A. Willi, "Epicharmus, the *Pseudepicharmeia*, and the origins of Attic drama", to appear in S. Chronopoulos and C. Orth (eds.), *A Fragmentary History of Greek Comedy* (Heidelberg 2014); cf. also A. Veniero, "Epicarmo e la commedia dorica siciliana", *Archivio Storico per la Sicilia Orientale* 3 (1906) 214–250 and 382–413, esp. at 392, on Aeschylean satyr-play.
- 6 R. Kassel and C. Austin, *Poetae Comici Graeci, I: Comoedia Dorica, mimi, phlyaces* (Berlin/New York 2001) 14; these testimonia are omitted in G. Kaibel, *Comicorum Graecorum Fragmenta, I/1: Doriensium comoedia, mimi, phlyaces* (Berlin 1899), but (partly) printed also in L. Rodríguez-

- (1) Plin. *NH* 7.192: *litteras semper arbitror Assyriis fuisse, sed alii apud Aegyptios a Mercurio, ut Gellius, alii apud Syros repertas uolunt; utrique in Graeciam attulisse e Phoenice Cadmum sedecim numero, quibus Troiano bello Palameden adiecisse quattuor hac figura †NYΦX [ZYΦX Mayhoff, ZΨΦX Detlefsen], totidem post eum Simoniden melicum, †ΨξΟΘ (R) / †VξϞΘ (D) / †YEΘ€ (FE) [ΨΞΩΘ Mayhoff, YEΩΘ Detlefsen], quarum omnium uis in nostris recognoscitur. Aristoteles [fr. 501 Rose] decem et octo priscas fuisse et duas ab Epicharmo additas XZ [F², Mayhoff; om. codd. cett., ΨZ Detlefsen] quam a Palamede mauult.*

‘I think that the Assyrians always had letters, but some people, like Gellius, want them to have been invented among the Egyptians by Mercury, others among the Syrians; both groups think that Cadmus imported 16 of them to Greece from Phoenicia, and that Palamedes, at the time of the Trojan War, added four of this shape, †NYΦX [ZYΦX Mayhoff, ZΨΦX Detlefsen], and after him the melic poet Simonides the same number, †ΨξΟΘ (R) / †VξϞΘ (D) / †YEΘ€ (FE) [ΨΞΩΘ Mayhoff, YEΩΘ Detlefsen]; the value of all of these is still found among our letters. Aristotle, meanwhile, holds that there were 18 original ones and he prefers that two, namely XZ [ΨZ Detlefsen], were added by Epicharmus rather than Palamedes.’

- (2) Hygin. *fab.* 277: *Palamedes autem Nauplii filius inuenit aequae litteras undecim <...>, Simonides litteras aequae quattuor ΩEZΦ, Epicharmus Siculus litteras duas, Π et Ψ.*

‘But Palamedes son of Nauplius also invented eleven letters <...>, Simonides equally four, ΩEZΦ, and the Sicilian Epicharmus two, Π and Ψ.’

- (3a) Schol. Dion. Thrac., *Gr. Gr.* I 3, p. 185.3–7 Hilgard: εὑρεταὶ δὲ τῶν λοιπῶν [τῶν] χαρακτήρων, τουτέστι τῶν ὀκτώ, οἷον τῶν δύο μακρῶν καὶ τῶν τριῶν διπλῶν καὶ <τῶν> τριῶν δασέων, δηλονότι Σιμωνίδης μὲν ὁ Κεῖος τῶν δύο μακρῶν [i.e. ΗΩ] καὶ τοῦ Ξ καὶ τοῦ Ψ, Παλαμήδης δὲ τῶν δασέων [i.e. ΘΦΧ] καὶ τοῦ Ζ, ἢ, ὡς φασὶ τινες, Ἐπίχαρμος ὁ Συρακούσιος.

‘The inventors of the remaining letters, the eight additional ones, that is – namely the two long-vowel letters and the three bi-phonemic letters and the three aspirate letters –, were apparently Simonides of Keos for the two long-vowel ones [i.e. ΗΩ] as well as for Ξ and Ψ, Palamedes for the aspirate ones [i.e. ΘΦΧ] and also for Ζ, or, as some say, Epicharmus of Syracuse.’

Noriega Guillén, *Epicharmo de Siracusa: Testimonios y Fragmentos* (Oviedo 1996) 12 (with test. 50). See further O. Poltera, *Simonides lyricus: Testimonia und Fragmente* (Basel 2008) 69 (with test. 78); F. Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie*, 2nd edn. (Leipzig/Berlin 1925) 9–10 n. 6 (with further, and later, sources not mentioning Epicharmus).

- (3b) Schol. Dion. Thrac., *Gr. Gr.* I 3, p. 320.20–26 Hilgard (~ Tzetz. *Chil.* 5.806–813, 12.36–51): Παλαμίδης δ' ὕστερον ἐλθὼν, ἀρξάμενος ἀπὸ τοῦ ἄλφα, δεκαεὶς μόνον τοῖς Ἑλλήσιν εὗρε στοιχεῖα, ΑΒΓΔΕΙΚΑΜΝΟΠΡΣΤΥ· προσέθηκε δὲ αὐτοῖς Κάδμος ὁ Μιλήσιος γράμματα τρία, ΘΦΧ, διὸ καὶ πολλῶι τῷ χρόνῳ τοῖς δεκαεννέα ἐχρῶντο· ὅθεν οἱ ἀρχαῖοι μὴ ἔχοντες τὸ Ψ τὴν ψαλίδα σπαλίδα [v.l. ψαλίδα] ἔγραφον καὶ ἔλεγον, ἀλλὰ καὶ πολλὰ ῥήματα ἄλλως ἐξεφώνουν καὶ ἔγραφον. μετὰ ταῦτα Σιμωνίδης ὁ Κεῖος εὐρῶν προσέθηκε δύο, Η καὶ Ω, Ἐπίχαρμος δὲ ὁ Συρακούσιος τρία, ΖΞΨ, καὶ οὕτως ἐπληρώθησαν τὰ εἰκοσιτέσσαρα.

‘Later on, beginning from *alpha*, Palamedes invented only 16 letters for the Greeks, namely ΑΒΓΔΕΙΚΑΜΝΟΠΡΣΤΥ. To these Cadmus from Miletus added three letters, ΘΦΧ, so that they used 19 letters for a long time; hence the ancients, who did not have the letter Ψ, wrote and said σπαλῖς [or: ψαλῖς] instead of ψαλῖς “scissors”, and they also pronounced many words differently from how they wrote them. Subsequently, Simonides of Keos invented and added two letters, Η and Ω, Epicharmus of Syracuse three, ΖΞΨ, and so a total of 24 came together.’

3. Admittedly, all of this looks extremely confusing and confused at first sight; and the matter is not helped by the fact that textual corruption is obvious here or there. However, things can be cleared up a bit, if one starts by tabulating the information:

	Palamedes	Cadmus	Simonides	Epicharmus
(1)	†ΝΥΦΧ	16 letters	† <i>varia</i>	
Arist.:		18 letters		ΧΖ
(2)	11 letters		ΩΕΖΦ	ΠΨ
(3a)	ΘΦΧ (+ Ζ?)		ΗΩ, ΞΨ	(Ζ?)
(3b)	16 letters	ΘΦΧ	ΗΩ	ΖΞΨ

The first thing to be noted is that, as divergent as these sources may seem, they all start from a sound premise: that the alphabet, when it was ‘invented’ (by a mythical figure such as Palamedes) or brought from Phoenicia (by someone like ‘Cadmus’), had not yet reached its classical extent. Moreover, many of the letters which are named time and again as additions *are* in fact additions compared to the original West Semitic alphabet (which ended with *taw* for /t/, the source of T): namely ΥΦΧΨΩ. Also, two of those letters which are not truly additions are in other ways peculiar to Greek:

- H, formally continuing Phoenician *ḥēt* for /ḥ/ and initially used for /h/ also in the Greek world, was redeployed as a vowel sign in the classical (< East Ionic) alphabet and in that sense an ‘addition’ parallel to the addition of Ω (but *not* parallel to the vowels AEIO, which had been exclusively vocalic since the beginnings of the Greek, as opposed to Phoenician, alphabet).
- Ξ, formally continuing Phoenician *samk* for /s/, was endowed with a new (bi-phonemic) value /ks/ and in that sense an ‘addition’ parallel to the addition of bi-phonemic Ψ. Importantly, the situation for the equally bi-phonemic Z for /zd/ (or /dz/?) was somewhat different because various local alphabets, including the Attic one, did not use Ξ (or Ψ) before the adoption of the classical (< East Ionic) alphabet (using, respectively, ΧΣ and ΦΣ instead). By contrast, Z was always used in all Greek alphabets right from the start (continuing Phoenician *zayin* for /z/).

Further to be taken into account is the fact that Greek Θ, though formally continuing Phoenician *tēt* and being used throughout the local alphabets for /t^h/, phonemically forms a triad together with the other voiceless aspirate signs (δασειζ χαρακτῆρες). Hence, if ΦΧ were recognised (correctly) as additions, it was easy (mistakenly) to add Θ to this group.

Overall then, however distorted the primary evidence in § 2 may be, it clearly contains a kernel of historical truth as well as sound classificatory thinking. This being the case, it is wrong to brush aside these sources as sheer nonsense or to dismiss them as purely fictional because they mention mythical figures like Palamedes and Cadmus. Instead, we should rather try to explain why two distinctly historical figures are made to join the mythical ranks, and why the two men so chosen should be Simonides and Epicharmus (and not, for example, the canonical authorities Homer or Hesiod).⁷

4. In order to do so, it is best to start from what sources (3a) and (3b) have to say about Simonides. On Simonides’ addition of Ω they agree with (2) and at least

7 As we shall see (§§ 6, 8, 9), the statement by M. Kremmer, *De catalogis heurematum* (Diss. Leipzig 1890) 82, “Simonidem autem et Epicharmum poetas procul dubio eam ob causam honore inventorum ornaverunt viri docti, quia in eorum operibus prima illarum litterarum exempla deprehendisse sibi videbantur” (cf. similarly already G. Bernhardt, *Grundriss der griechischen Litteratur*, 3rd edn., II/2 (Halle 1880) 521), contains some truth, but it neither clarifies how and where the tradition arose, nor does it plausibly identify the ‘Epicharmian’ letters in question. For more dismissive comments see e.g. Veniero (n. 5 above) 244, Dornseiff (n. 6 above) 11 (“Simonides, der manche palamedeisch-sophistische Züge zeigte und sich grossen Rufes als Gedächtniskünstlers erfreute, und Epicharmos, der ἀρχηγός einer wichtigen literarischen Gattung, sollen dem anfangs unvollkommenen Schriftsystem noch Zeichen hinzugefügt haben”), W. Schmid, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur, I/1: Die griechische Literatur vor der attischen Hegemonie* (München 1929), 651, A. Olivieri, *Frammenti della commedia greca e del mimo nella Sicilia e nella Magna Grecia, I: Frammenti della commedia dorica siciliana* (Napoli 1946) 8, and Poltera (n. 6 above) 69 n. 116 (“Gehört gesamthaft der späteren Legende an”).

the modern editions of (1) with its garbled manuscript situation;⁸ and since the long-vowel signs H and Ω form a ‘natural’ pair (cf. § 3), it is likely that H too was enumerated as ‘Simonidean’ not only in (3a) and (3b), but also in the original versions of (1) and (2). Most probably, H is hidden behind Θ (mss. RD) or € (mss. FE) in (1) and behind E in (2).⁹ At the time when Simonides was active, around 520 or 500 B.C., the old letter shape H for H was still used on the Ionic islands;¹⁰ but later on, of course, H had no chances of surviving as such in the manuscript tradition, and the two letters that resemble it most are Θ, which looks like its rounded equivalent, and E, which merely misses the second vertical hasta. The reason why the letter shape used at the time of Simonides himself should be of relevance here will become clear later (§ 6), but note already that both Θ in (1) and E in (2) are dubious anyway, since neither is an added letter and both are pan-Greek from the start.¹¹

5. Next, (3a) attributes ΞΨ to Simonides as well. This is not replicated in (3b), but it brings the number of ‘Simonidean’ additions to four, in line with the number mentioned in (1) and (2), and at least Ξ is also consistently given in (1). Furthermore, the remaining ‘Simonidean’ Y ~ V in (1) (mss. FE, D) is implausible *a priori*, since Y is already listed as a ‘Palamedean’ addition in the same source. Once again, the letter shape of Ψ (cf. ms. R in (1)) provides a clue to how the error must have arisen. In earlier times Ψ is commonly unrounded, and something like Y resembles Y about as much as it resembles the later shape Ψ. What seems to have happened in (3b), meanwhile, is that the second pair of Simonides’ additions was mistakenly transferred to Epicharmus, perhaps from a source similar to (3a) in which ἦ, ὥς φασί τινες, Ἐπίχαρμος ὁ Συρακούσιος was taken to refer not only to Z, but also to the aforementioned bi-phonemic signs ΞΨ.¹²

8 It is conceivable that Ω is lurking at least behind (unexpected) O in ms. R and behind (fanciful) ⊙ (≠ Θ!) in ms. D, perhaps also behind Θ in mss. FE; Pliny’s comment *quarum omnium uis in nostris recognoscitur* was certainly not helpful for the faithful conservation of a letter that was not part of the Latin alphabet.

9 A less attractive possibility would be that, when iotacism became widespread, a scribe mistakenly replaced H by Y in (1), whereas the *e*-vowel quality of H was responsible for its turning into E in the Latin text (2); but ‘Simonidean’ Y in (1) is a much more plausible distortion of (an archaic version of) Ψ than Θ would be (if H were hidden behind Y): cf. § 5 below.

10 Cf. L.H. Jeffery, *The Local Scripts of Archaic Greece*, rev. edn. with a supplement by A.W. Johnston (Oxford 1990) 289 (“The earliest inscriptions to show the later form 2 [i.e. H] appear to be Paros 28 and 29, here conjecturally assigned to the middle and third quarter of the 6th. c.”).

11 The situation for Θ in (3a) and (3b) is different because, as already highlighted (§ 3), Θ appears there in a phonemically justified triad together with ΦΧ. E, of course, was not vocalic in Phoenician (< *hē* for /h/), but this is irrelevant since the parallel ‘old’ vowels AIO (from non-vocalic Phoenician ‘*alp*, *yōd*, ‘*ayin*, respectively) are not listed.

12 Similarly, H and Ω (but no other letters) are suddenly cited as ‘Epicharmian’ in *Suda*, ε 2766, s.v. Ἐπίχαρμος (p. 2.393.27–28 Adler), and *An. Ox.* 4.319.29–31 is extremely vague about which letters exactly are considered as ‘Epicharmian’ by ‘some’. I feel less confident about explaining the distortions in (2), which may involve both letter shape confusions as in (1) (e.g. Z for an archaic

6. Thus, it is likely that the original idea behind all this was that Simonides ‘invented’ ΗΩ and ΞΨ, exactly as still presented in (3a) and at least inferable from (1).¹³ How could such a conception have arisen? That Simonides really invented any of these letters is out of the question: they are all attested well before his lifetime. However, none of them would have been written in a place like Athens around 520 B.C. (cf. § 3 on ΧΣ, ΦΣ, as well as Η for /h/). This was the time when, according to Aristotle, the Peisistratid Hipparchus invited Simonides (as well as Anacreon and other poets) to Athens (Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 18.1; cf. [Pl.] *Hipparch.* 228bc, Ael. *VH* 8.2 = Simonides *test.* 63, 77 Poltera). In other words, it stands to reason that a wider literate public in Athens should have come into contact with the (‘East Ionic’) letters ΗΩ and ΞΨ for the first time when Simonides visited the city and when written versions of his poems (naturally containing some older letter shapes) began to circulate there. The tradition behind the above sources may therefore be anachronistic in speaking of Simonides as the πρώτος εὑρετής of ‘his’ four letters, but it turns out to preserve a precious record of how the East Ionic alphabet became known in Athens through Simonidean mediation.¹⁴ We do not know what ancient scholar first investigated all this (or paid attention to local oral traditions that still knew of Simonides’ orthographic novelty), but to locate it all in Athens, and perhaps suspect Aristotle’s school behind it, is certainly as reasonable a guess as can be.

7. So much for Simonides: but what about the other letters? In (3a) and (3b), ΘΦΧ are (understandably, though given the different status of Θ, wrongly: cf. § 3) regarded as a coherent group. Leaving aside the special case of the so-called ‘green’ alphabets (of e.g. Crete), where *no* additional letters after Υ are found, ΘΦΧ were in use throughout the Greek world, including both East Ionia and Athens. The situation was therefore different from that of ΗΩ and ΞΨ, and if one was looking for an inventor at all, a mythical person – not someone on a par with Simonides or Epicharmus – was a logical candidate.

By contrast, ‘Simonidean’ Θ and Φ in sources (1) and (2), respectively, have already been questioned and removed from the record (§ 4 and n. 12 above), and ΘΧ are not mentioned in (2) at all. As for (1), ΦΧ are here regarded

Ξ = Ξ?) and misplacements as in (3b) (note ‘Epicharmian’ Ψ, perhaps triggering a replacement of ‘Simonidean’ Ψ by Φ?).

13 Cf. also Schol. Dion. Thrac., *Gr. Gr.* I 3, p. 191.30–31 Hilgard; *Suda*, σ 439, s.v. Σιμωνίδης (p. 4.361.7–8 Adler): προσεξεῦρε δὲ καὶ τὰ μακρὰ τῶν στοιχείων καὶ διπλᾶ ‘he invented both the long letters and the double letters’.

14 This is not the place to explore the implications of all this for the ways in which the Homeric poems reached Athens, if indeed “the earliest texts of Homer were in East Ionic script” (R. Janko, *The Iliad: A Commentary, IV: Books 13–16* (Cambridge 1992) 37); it certainly lends support to the eclipsing importance of the ‘Peisistratean recension’ in the history of the Homeric text (cf. S. West, “The transmission of the text”, in A. Heubeck, S. West and J.B. Hainsworth, *A Commentary on Homer’s Odyssey, I: Introduction and Books I–VIII* (Oxford 1988) 33–48, at 36–39), whether or not this ‘recension’ itself already used the newly-introduced East Ionic script.

as ‘Palamedean’ in agreement with (3a), but since Θ does not *really* parallel ΦX (*not* being an addition: cf. above), this should not automatically make us suspect Θ behind the equally ‘Palamedean’ N of (1). To be sure, this N must be corrupt, for it too has no entitlement whatsoever to occur in a list of alphabet additions. However, the logic of (1) demands that it be emended (with Mayhoff and Detlefsen) to Z, not Θ : only if Z and X were initially given as ‘Palamedean’ does it make sense for Pliny to add that Aristotle ‘prefers that XZ were added by Epicharmus rather than Palamedes’ (*ab Epicharmo additas XZ quam a Palamede mauult*). At this stage, an emended version of (1) should therefore look as follows (though I would hesitate to assume that Aristotle really named Cadmus as the originator of his ‘original stock’):

	Palamedes	Cadmus	Simonides	Epicharmus
(1)	ZY Φ X	16 letters	$\Psi\Xi\Omega\text{H}$	
Arist.:		18 letters [incl. Y Φ ? ¹⁵]	[sc. H Ω , $\Xi\Psi$]	XZ

Given the absence of Θ (and the concomitant inclusion of Y instead), Pliny (1) and his sources, including Aristotle, thus turn out to be superior to (3a) and (3b) from a modern alphabet-historical point of view.

8. All the more, we must also try to make sense of Aristotle’s ‘Epicharmian’ letters XZ. Once again, the comparison with (2) is of little help. Not only is (2) the odd one out when it attributes Ψ to Epicharmus, instead of Simonides where its placement makes sense (cf. § 6), the mention of Π is equally unjustifiable since Π is another straight descendant of Phoenician *pē* for /p/. (1) and (3a)/(3b), on the other hand, agree at least on ‘Epicharmian’ Z. As already mentioned (§ 3), Z continues Phoenician *zayin* for /z/, and it is found throughout Greece (originally for /zd/ or /dz/). Hence, it too is difficult to account for in a list of alphabet additions. If there were other pieces of maverick information in (1) and (3a)/(3b), that might not worry us, but by now we have seen how much sensible data these sources contain.

In line with some of the preceding arguments, I would therefore suggest yet another misidentification (in the post-Aristotelian manuscript tradition) of what had become an unfamiliar archaic letter shape. In archaic and classical times, Z would regularly be written in the shape I , a vertical hasta with two

15 From Pliny’s text it is not clear whether Aristotle named *any* ‘Palamedean’ additions, nor can we tell whether he explicitly gave the number 18 for the original stock: Pliny could have inferred this number from the fact that the total number of letters in the classical alphabet is 24, of which two would be ‘Epicharmian’ and four ‘Simonidean’. As we shall see shortly (§ 8), Aristotle may in fact not have dealt with the classical alphabet alone, but included letters such as F in his discussion. Note also that, for the reasons given below (§ 9), X (= /k^h/) will have figured in Aristotle’s ‘Cadmean’ stock as well.

horizontal bars at each end. The same description fits archaic F (*vau* or *digamma*), except that here (a) the vertical hasta forms the left boundary of the letter, (b) the same hasta may (but need not) reach further down than the lower horizontal bar, and (c) the horizontal bars themselves may (but need not) be slightly inclined (i.e. approximately F , F , L). An early copyist for whom L (= F) was an unfamiliar sight could hardly be blamed for misinterpreting this, as best he could, as I (= Z).¹⁶ Admittedly, F is not truly an addition either, going back to Phoenician *waw* for /w/. From a sixth-, fifth-, or fourth-century Athenian perspective, however, it *was* an addition since F had not been used (and continued not to be used) in normal Athenian texts of any period.¹⁷ By contrast, the – at least partial – retention of F in original Epicharmian phonology (and hence no doubt also original Epicharmian orthography) is safely inferable from our evidence:

“In frühen Inschriften aus Syrakus und Umgebung wird [w] noch graphisch mit F wiedergegeben, später nicht mehr. Das sprachliche Schwinden des Lautes kann ungefähr auf die Schaffenszeit Epicharms datiert werden. Vor allem am Wortanfang mag [w] noch gelegentlich gesprochen worden sein, aber die neue Aussprache ohne [w] war offensichtlich auf dem Vormarsch. Die Fälle ohne Positionsbildung oder mit Elision bzw. Kontraktion am Wortanfang und im Wortinnern deuten jedenfalls auf eine weitgehende Schwächung von [w] hin. Allerdings sind zwischenvokalische Sandhi- und Kontraktionsphänomene noch nicht konsequent durchgeführt. Ein solches Schwanken ist im Syrakusanischen des frühen 5. Jh. aber anders zu beurteilen als in der epischen Kunstsprache, deren ionischer Grunddialekt den Laut [w] zumindest in nachhomerischer Zeit bereits vollständig aufgegeben hatte. Der Epicharm-Text bietet vielmehr einen synchronen Einblick in das allmähliche Fortschreiten eines Lautwandels.”¹⁸

So, we should expect that an early-fifth-century manuscript of Epicharmus still contained instances of F and would therefore have been as unusual and memorable a sight to the contemporary Athenian eye as a manuscript of Simonides containing H and Ω was.

9. This, then, leaves only Aristotle’s ‘Epicharmian’ X to be explained. Once again, it is impossible to believe that Aristotle, or indeed any other ancient scholar, really

16 The misinterpretation of a shape like L could in principle also account for the erratic attribution of Γ and E to Epicharmus in *An. Ox.* 4.400.12–15; other things too have gone wrong in this late source, since Simonides is here given, apart from H and Ω, also Σ and Υ (no doubt in lieu of Ξ and Ψ, respectively: cf. § 5).

17 Cf. Jeffery (n. 10 above) 66: “Though it does not occur in the normal script of Attica, *vau* is written in the early abecedaria [...] and twice in the diphthong *αυ* in metrical inscriptions”.

18 A. Willi, *Sikelismos: Sprache, Literatur und Gesellschaft im griechischen Sizilien (8.–5. Jh. v. Chr.)* (Basel 2008) 135–136, with a full list of the Epicharmian evidence; cf. already F. Solmsen, *Untersuchungen zur griechischen Laut- und Verslehre* (Strassburg 1901) 154–156, and A. C. Cassio, “The language of Doric comedy”, in A. Willi (ed.), *The Language of Greek Comedy* (Oxford 2002) 51–83, at 64.

thought that pan-Greek X as such was ‘Epicharmian’ in any meaningful sense. If he had anything to say about it, Aristotle too must have regarded the aspirate X as a companion of Φ, exactly like Pliny’s unnamed alternative source(s) and the sources of (3a) and (3b). But if ΦX are ‘Palamedean’ or ‘Cadmean’, X cannot at the same time be ‘Epicharmian’.

There is, however, a – from an Athenian point of view – noteworthy *use* of X that could be associated specifically with Epicharmus by an ancient scholar who was interested in the history of the alphabet (but who disregarded the epigraphic record). As is well-known, the Athenian and East Ionic alphabets are both so-called ‘blue’ alphabets, in which the supplementary letter X stood for /k^h/. By contrast, in the so-called ‘red’ alphabets X was used for /ks/, i.e. given the value that Ξ had in the ‘dark blue’ East Ionic alphabet (whereas the ‘light blue’ Attic alphabet had no separate letter at all for /ks/; cf. § 3). Now, in the Doric colonies of Sicily the distribution of the blue and red alphabets is still as confused as it was when L.H. Jeffery summarized it as follows:¹⁹

“The alphabets of the districts whence the colonists came are known in all cases (Corinthian, Megarian, Cretan, Rhodian), but in no case does the colony appear to use all the characteristic letter-forms. The present views of their origins are that the Megarian colonies (Megara Hyblaia and Selinous) took their script from Megara Nisaia, because the Selinountine shows a freak *beta* and ‘blue’ *xi* and *chi*; and that the Cretan-Rhodian colonies (Gela and Akragas) took theirs from Rhodes, because of their ‘red’ *xi* and *chi*. Syracuse, however, whose alphabet as we have it lacks all the peculiar characteristics of Corinthian, is held to have borrowed a ‘red’ script from some other source, such as Delphi or Lokroi Epizephyrioi. But none of these theories is satisfactory. Syracuse and her colonies between them produce examples of both ‘red’ and ‘blue’ *xi* and *chi*, and we cannot yet say certainly which type was used in Syracuse herself; but the balance of the evidence appears to me to incline slightly towards the hypothesis [...] that Syracusan used the ‘blue’ letters”.

Three decades later, A.W. Johnson still notes in his *Supplement* to Jeffery’s work that “[u]ncertainty surrounds the early scripts of Syracuse and Megara”;²⁰ but if Jeffery’s inclination had been towards blue, on the basis of tenuous evidence from *outside* Syracuse (Delphi, Syracusan colonies), a rare find of an early-fifth-century gravestone from the city itself displaying red X = /ks/, and thus adding to a previously known late-sixth-century funerary inscription from the Syracusan colony Akrai with red Ψ = /k^h/, has now not only tilted the general balance towards red, but also proved beyond doubt that at least *some* people *in* Syracuse used the red alphabet in the early decades of the fifth century.²¹

19 Jeffery (n. 10 above) 263–264.

20 A.W. Johnson in Jeffery (n. 10 above) 462.

21 IGASM V (= R. Arena, *Iscrizioni greche arcaiche di Sicilia e Magna Grecia, V: Iscrizioni di Taranto, Locri Epizefiri, Velia e Siracusa* (Alessandria 1998)) nos. 71 (gravestone from Syracuse) and 77 (funerary inscription from Akrai). Note that Jeffery’s (n. 10 above) 268, ‘blue’ evidence

It is therefore reasonable to assume that a Syracusan text of Epicharmus’ plays would also have been written in a red alphabet. This being the case, such a text with X = /ks/ inevitably caused as much surprise in early-fifth-century Athens as a Simonidean text with Ξ = /ks/ etc. What appears to be at stake in the case of this last ‘invented’ letter is therefore not so much its existence as such (since the *shape* X was already ‘Palamedean’), but its ‘novel’ value. How exactly Aristotle expressed this, we cannot tell, but one may imagine something along the lines of οἱ μὲν ἀρχαῖοι γράμμασι ὀκτώκαιδέκα ἐχρῶντο, Σιμωνίδης δὲ ὁ Κεῖος καὶ τοῖς δύο μακροῖς [i.e. ΗΩ] καὶ τῶι Ξ καὶ τῶι Ψ· τῶι δὲ X (ἀντὶ τοῦ Ξ) ἐχρῆτο Ἐπίχαρμος ὁ Συρακούσιος, ὃς καὶ τῶι F. Once the literal meaning of (something like) ‘(ἀντὶ τοῦ Ξ)’ was no longer understood because any memory of the ‘red’ alphabet had disappeared, later scholars – knowing that X as such was of course used well before Epicharmus – could not but amend the theory, by transferring X to the ‘Palamedean’ or ‘Cadmean’ stock (and thus producing the versions offered by (1) and (3a)/(3b)²²). A similar fate also awaited F as soon as it had erroneously been misread as the better-known Z (cf. § 8; hence the doubts about its correct allegiance in (3a), and its transfer again to Palamedes in (1)).

10. If all of this is accepted – and it seems difficult to build another rational account for both the sources’ data *and* the place of honour they assign to Simonides and Epicharmus –, one major corollary follows for our knowledge of the reception of Epicharmus. The specifically Athenian perspective informing all of the above letter-invention theories has already been highlighted (§§ 6, 8, 9). From the perspective of, say, East Ionia or Syracuse (to name but two other intellectual hotspots of the fifth century), they would not have made sense with their singling out Simonides and Epicharmus, and e.g. Ξ or F respectively. Meanwhile, the Epicharmian text that was feeding into this Athenian strand of

from Akrai has disappeared because the text is now read as Τιμάδου or Τιμάρου (*IGASMG* V, no. 76; L. Dubois, *Inscriptions grecques dialectales de Sicile: Contribution à l'étude du vocabulaire grec colonial* (Rome 1989) 112–113, no. 107), rather than Χιμάρου. Thus, for whatever it is worth when there is so little evidence, both Akrai and Syracuse are now entirely ‘red’ in the time just after 500 B.C., unlike Helorus (*IGASMG* V, no. 74, c. 500 B.C.). The ‘blue’ evidence from Imachara (*IGASMG* V, no. 83) is slightly later (475–450 B.C.?), and Kasmenai poses problems of its own, while again rather pointing towards red nowadays (cf. Jeffery (n. 10 above) 268, with A.W. Johnson’s note on p. 458: “if 15, with blue script, is not known to be from Kasmenai, why should it not be Selinuntine, c. 460?”; by contrast, “15b [also from Kasmenai/Monte Casale, c. 475] has red *chi*”). Cf. further M. Guarducci, “Epigrafi arcaiche di Siracusa e di Megara Iblea”, *Archeologia Classica* 38–40 (1986–1988) 1–26, esp. 20–26, who argues that Syracuse took over the ‘red’ Locrian alphabet instead of its original ‘blue’ Corinthian one already during the 7th century; the above-mentioned text from Helorus is considered a “sopravvivenza” of the older state of affairs in a more remote locality.

22. An intermediate stage, when the reasons for classifying X as ‘Epicharmian’ were no longer understood, but when the letter had not yet been transferred to another inventor, may be reflected in *AP* 5.192 (Meleager), where διπλοῦν γράμμα Συρηκοσίων must refer to X: cf. Veniero (n. 5 above) 244–245.

scholarship must have been roughly contemporary with the Epicharmian original; for later on, from the middle of the fifth century onward, Syracuse and other ‘red’ parts of Sicily switched to the blue Ionic alphabet, and F disappeared from the Sicilian record as much as it did in most other regions of the Greek world.²³ By implication, by 430 B.C. at the latest, a Syracusan edition of Epicharmus’ plays would have looked fundamentally different from an Epicharmian autograph or a Syracusan copy made in the 480s or 470s; and, crucially, its orthography (as opposed to its dialect) would no longer have raised any eyebrows in Athens – or triggered the idea that Epicharmus was not only an ‘inventor’ of comedy, but also of certain letters. From this unexpected angle we therefore obtain a vindication of the previously controversial notion that Epicharmus’ plays reached Athens not only well before Plato, but in fact as early as the age of Aeschylus.

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23 Cf. Jeffery (n. 10 above), 267: “The Ionic letters *eta* and *omega* appear on Syracusan coinage in the die-engravers’ names, c. 430–420 [...]. The matter must remain open, but we have seen signs to imply that others of the western colonies changed to Ionic script c. 450 or early in the third quarter of the fifth century; it may be [...] that Syracuse had adopted the Ionic script by the late 440’s.”