

AN UNEDUCATED HUMAN BEING IS A TREE WITHOUT FRUIT

This proverbial phrase is famously known from a manuscript of Giovanni Boccaccio, who transcribed it on the last folio of his autograph copy of the *Bucolicum Carmen*, written between 1367 and 1368 (now Firenze, Biblioteca Riccardiana, MS 1232).

According to Oskar Hecker, the scholar who discovered the transcription, the phrase was written in the Greek language but in Latin script as follows: *Antropos agramatos fylon acarpon*, standing for ἄνθρωπος ἀγράμματος φυτὸν ἄκαρπον. Hecker was unable to identify its source (“wo dieser Spruch herkommt, habe ich nicht ergründen können”), but he pointed to a similar thought in the *Decameron*, where (VI, 9) it is said that *uomini idioti e non litterati* are *peggio che uomini morti* (“idiotic and illiterate men” are “worse than dead men”)¹.

The phrase has recently received new attention. Giuseppe De Gregorio, who examined the manuscript afresh, transcribed the words slightly differently, *An{r}joppo agramatos fylon acarpo*, and offered a corrected interpretation, ἄνθρωπος ἀγράμματος ξύλον ἄκαρπον². He compared it with an adage mentioned later in the work of Lucius Vitruvius Roscius, published in 1536 in Bologna: *bene usurpant Graeci vetus illud adagium*, ἄνθρωπος ἀγράμματος ξύλον ἄκαρπον ἐστὶ, *idest homo illitteratus infructuosa est arbor* (“The Greeks well use that old adage, an uneducated human being is a tree without fruit”). De Gregorio then associated it with the modern Greek proverb ἄνθρωπος ἀγράμματος ξύλο(ν) ἀπελέκητο(ν) (“an uneducated human being is an unplanned wood”). In the latest contribution on the matter, Augusto Guida has shown that the same phrase occurs somewhat earlier in the writings of the humanists Francesco Filelfo (1398-1481) and Agostino Dati (1420-1478)³.

The question about the origins of the phrase therefore remains unsettled. The object of this contribution is to make known the fact that a version of the phrase was in circulation before Boccaccio.

¹ O. Hecker, *Boccaccio-Funde*, Braunschweig 1902, 43. One might also compare Dante, *Inf.* III, 64 *Questi sciaurati, che mai non fur vivi* (“These wretched men, who never were alive”), as suggested in V. Branca, *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, vol. IV, Milan 1976, 1344.

² G. De Gregorio, *A proposito del detto greco nell'autografo riccardiano del Bucolicum Carmen di Giovanni Boccaccio*, “Aevum” 92, 2018, 459-474.

³ A. Guida, *Un proverbio greco registrato dal Boccaccio*, “Prometheus” 46, 2020, 280-285.

The famous Syrian scholar Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (d. 873) is usually regarded as the author of a work titled the *Kitāb ādāb al-falāsifa* (“Book of the Sayings of the Philosophers”), a gnomological collection of wise dicta. This work survives in a few Arabic manuscripts, as well as in various Spanish and Hebrew translations, and the text of the work differs between them⁴.

One of these Hebrew translations, by the celebrated scholar-poet Yehuda Alharizi (1170-1235), survives in Paris ms. 896. An edition of the Hebrew text has been published without translation (*Sēfer Mūsre haf-ḥilōsōfīm*, Luneville 1807). Now, one of the sayings of the philosophers in this particular manuscript, attributed to the wise man Luqman, reads as follows (p. 19):

ושכל עם מוסרכאילן פרי כאילן בלא פרי שכל בלי מוסר

“The mind without education is like a tree without fruit, the mind with education like a tree with fruit”⁵.

This is self-evidently the same saying as the one written down by Boccaccio, the minor variant being “mind” for “human being”. The word *sékhel* (שכל) can be translated in different ways, not only as “mind”, but also as “brains”, “intelligence”, “intellect”, and so on. A different translation of this line is only available in A. Pichard, *Le livre d'Hénoch sur l'amitié*, Paris 1838, 86, where it is interpreted in this way: “L'esprit sans instruction est comme un arbre sans fruit, tandis que l'esprit réuni à l'instruction est semblable à un arbre fruitier”.

Clearly then a version of this proverbial phrase was in circulation before Boccaccio, and in languages other than Greek. One can only guess at the processes of transmission by which it came to be written in Boccaccio's pen. This example can therefore serve as an illustration of the vast and sometimes unexpected textual transmission of sayings of this kind, and as a reminder that it can be profitable to look for evidence beyond Greek and Latin texts.

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ABSTRACT:

No prior source has yet been discovered for the proverbial phrase transcribed by Boccaccio in his autograph manuscript of the *Bucolicum Carmen*, ἄνθρωπος ἀγράμματος ξύλον ἄκαρπον (“an uneducated human being is a tree without fruit”). This paper provides new evidence from medieval Hebrew, which shows that a version of the saying was in fact in circulation prior to Boccaccio.

KEYWORDS:

Boccaccio, proverbial saying, textual transmission, Greek, Latin, Hebrew.

⁴ On the manuscripts, see A. Loewenthal, *Honein Ibn Ishāk, Sinnsprüche der Philosophen. Nach der hebräischen Übersetzung Charisi's ins Deutsche übertragen und erläutert*, Berlin 1896, 36-44.

⁵ Translated by the author.