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THE TEXT OF THE ILLIAD.

Mr. Grenfell, who has been exploring in Egypt last winter, brought last week to Dublin the many fragments he had discovered and transcribed, and among them are several passages in iambs, one in anapests, and some in prose, which he has not yet been able to assign to any known Greek author. There is one prose passage so like Plato in style that it seems hardly possible it can belong to any one else. But we have not yet identified it. These fragments are in very old hands, as old as the classical fragments in the Petrie papyri, and therefore dating from early in the third century B. C., perhaps even earlier. Every syllable we can recover of Greek writing so ancient as this has, at any rate, a great palaeographical interest. But there are a good many of these fragments representing an early copy of some books of the Iliad—I hesitate to say the whole Iliad, from the size of the writing. For the professional book hands of this date are (so far as we know) much smaller. The fragments in Mr. Grenfell's possession amount to about eighty lines or parts of lines, and come from various books, iv., viii., xxi., xxii., and xxiii. There is no doubt whatever that the writing is of the earliest kind we know and thus undoubtedly dates from before the days of the Alexandrian critics. To me, therefore, who published the first scrap of such a text in the Petrie papyri, it was naturally of the highest interest to learn whether the newly discovered text presented the same peculiarities.

It will be remembered that the former scrap from the eleventh book showed beginnings and endings of lines not in our texts, and this so frequently as to amount to a surplus of one-sixth. Mr. Grenfell had already examined his fragments from this point of view, and showed me that out of about eighty lines thirteen are not to be found in our vulgate. The conclusion, therefore, which I had drawn, that before the recension by the Alexandrian critics the Iliad presented a very different appearance, is hereby confirmed, in spite of the adverse criticism of some learned Germans. They held that the Petrie text was an accidentally bad and slovenly copy with many variations from the texts received even in that day. In the face of the new discovery I am disposed to maintain my original conclusion, and now prophesy that whatever new texts of the Iliad, in hand-writing of this great age, are hereafter found, the additional lines will amount to 15 per cent. I may not be right in every case, for in the present group of fragments those from the twenty-first book show hardly any departures from our text, but the general result will, I believe, corroborate the facts now ascertained. When Mr. Grenfell publishes these fragments, the critics will have ample opportunity of examining this interesting question.

We already possess a very large number of specimens of the Iliad from the second to the fourth century A. D. Every year adds to them. But they all represent (discounting mere blunders) the vulgate text of our printed editions. The solitary exception is the Genévan fragment published by Prof. Nicole. This has many additional lines like the old texts, but a glance at the writing will show any palaeographer that it must have been written (in the second century A. D.) three or four hundred years after the pre-Alexandrine fragments. The considerable variants in this fragment show that the old, perhaps loose and prolix, text still survived. It affords us, at all events, a third witness to the fact, and makes it well-nigh impossible to deny that the labors of Aristarchus and his great predecessors were not so conservative as has usually been assumed.—[Prof. J. P. Mahaffy in London Athenæum,