Records of "The Commandments of the Seven Wise Men" in the 3rd c. B.C.
The Revered "Greek Reading-book" of the Hellenistic World.

Among the known pupils of Aristotle, a certain Klearchos of Soli in Cyprus seems to have been rather famous in his times.\(^1\) All we know now about this once well known scholar, however, are a few fragments and titles from his lost works and the feeling we get from them that he had travelled extensively in the Hellenistic Near East and as far as India.\(^2\)

Excavating the Greco-Bactrian city at Ai-Khanum in Afghanistan, the French archaeologists of the field-team were extremely happy on the 22nd of October 1966. What they had uncovered on this day was a rather unexpected and very important find. It was a stone base for a stele, with a Greek epigram inscribed in four lines (Fig. 1) and to its right five more lines of ethical commandments.\(^3\) As far as the excavators knew at first sight, this was the first and the earliest (3rd c. B.C.) Greek inscription ever found in this outpost of the Hellenistic world.\(^4\)

The epigram was unpublished and unknown in Greek literature. Its author, Klearchos, was beyond any doubt the far-travelled pupil of Aristotle mentioned above.\(^5\) However, the interesting story that the epigram narrated to us was something that we had never heard before. The stele, once standing on the base with the epigram, was a copy of the "Commandments of the Wise Men" originally inscribed on a stele dedicated at Delphi in Greece. Klearchos assures the reader that he himself copied the "Commandments" very carefully from the original inscription at Delphi, and that this copy was used for reinscribing them on the stele he dedicated in the shrine of the Greco-Bactrian city’s “hero-founder.” What was the

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\[\begin{align*}
2 & Άνδρὸν τῷ σοφῷ ταύτῃ παλαιοτέρον ἀνάξει[τα]\\
4 & ἰσίπτρο τὴλαγη Ἐκείον ἐν τεμένει.
\end{align*}\]

These wise commandments of men of old,
- Words of well known thinkers – stand dedicated in the most holy Pythian shrine;
From there Klearchos copied them very carefully and brought them here in the shrine of Kineas to shine far around it.

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5. L. Robert [note 2], 441-454. Al.N. Oikonomides [note 2], 179 note 5.

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reason for that? Klearchos answers "so that the Commandments will shine far around (to the Asian lands and peoples) the shrine of Kineas." Can we identify these "Commandments" so highly esteemed by Klearchos? Actually the second inscription on the base with the epigram identifies them automatically for us. It seems that the stone-cutter who reinscribed the "Commandments" which Klearchos dedicated at Ai-Khanum had left no space on the stele for the last five of them. So he went on and added these overflown commandments on the base of the stele in his effort to make the text complete.  

Used as a first school book for the Greek world from the 6th c. B.C. down to the fall of the Byzantine Empire [1453 A.D.] and some centuries beyond it, "The Commandments of the Seven Wise Men" is one of the 'didactic' ancient Greek texts that have been preserved by the philological tradition. Basically known to us from an ancient copy of the Delphic inscription by a philosopher named Sosiades, [which Ioannes Stobaeus included in his Anthology] "The Commandments" are now known also from hundreds of Byzantine and later manuscripts originating from other text traditions. 

It was printed for the first time in Venice by Aldus Manutius in 1495 [from a different text tradition than the Sosiades version], reprinted in different "didactic anthologies" later, included in collections of Anecdota Graeca, and attracted some attention by classical scholars, but always as a minor text. Nobody, from the Renaissance down to 1966, really believed that this collection of "Commandments" originated from the text of the early and famous inscription which once stood "in the most holy Pythian shrine" at Delphi. We needed the testimony of Klearchos to awaken us to reality concerning the early date and the real scholarly value of the "Commandments of the Seven." Was our Klearchos the first learned man in the Greek world who spoke so highly of the "Commandments of the Seven?" Not really. Wherever in ancient Greek literature the "Commandments" are mentioned, it is only with words of respect and admiration. Herakleitos praised them, Socrates [according to Plato] bowed to them. 

Τὰ ἐν Δελφοῦς γράμματα τὰ σοφά ταῦτα... τὰ τε Γνωθί σαυτόν καὶ τὸ Μηδὲν ἄγαν καὶ τάλλα τὰ τοιαῦτα. (= These wise precepts inscribed at Delphi... like the 'Know Thyself," ‘Nothing in excess" and the other similar to them).

Sixty-four years before the discovery of the inscribed base at Ai-Khanum, another Greek inscription of the 3rd c. B.C. was published. Found in an excavation at the ruins of Miletopolis (= Ghirmastil) in Asia Minor, this inscription was the first epigraphical record of the "Commandments of the Seven" to become known. Fifty-five "Commandments" were readable on this major fragment from a stele, which in all probability, once stood in the gymnasion of Miletopolis.

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6. It is clear that Klearchos, according to his own words, sees the educational value of the "Commandments of the Seven" as a major power for the Hellenisation of the peoples living beyond the Greco-Bactrian city at Ai-Khanoum.
7. According to L. Robert (note 2) 429-430.
8. According to Plato (Hipparchus, 228c-229) the "Commandments of the Seven" were already established as a basis for Athenian education at the times of the rule of the Pisistratid (before 514 B.C.).
9. Possibly a contemporary of Klearchos, who copied also the stele at Delphi in an effort to circulate an accurate text. As we have learned from the epigram of Klearchos, the name of the copier was noted on a manuscript as a guarantee that the copy was free from later changes and addenda.
10. The enormous number of manuscripts on the "Commandments" in Libraries and institutions has never been used for a critical edition of their text. We know now that we have at least three different text-traditions (Sosiades, Klearchos, Anonymous) and almost 50% of the text circulating in the 3rd c. B.C.
11. Aldus included the "Commandments" and several other opuscula in his first edition of Theocritus (Venice, 1495).
12. Diels lists in Dittb. Syll 1268 the major manuscripts published.
A few years after I studied the *editio princeps* of the epigram of Klearchos and the closing lines from the "Commandments of the Seven" on the inscribed stele-base from Ai-Khanum, I was looking at a dissertation publishing some Greek papyri in the collection of the University of Athens. It was one of the papyri in this dissertation (identified as a 'school exercise') which I had the great pleasure to re-identify as the oldest known manuscript fragment of the "Commandments of the Seven" in an article published in 1980. One of the most interesting elements in this new fragment was that it had partially preserved the second line from the ancient title of the collection and the first eight of the "Commandments." A better edition of this text, however, demanded either an inspection of the original papyrus or a good photograph. Five years lapsed until I was able to obtain a good photograph of *P. Univ. Athen. 2782* (the papyrus itself seems to have been lost) and this did not come as a help from the University library, but from the private files of a personal friend.

In preparing the revised text of the papyrus fragment for publication, I soon came to realize that what I was planning was not what was really needed. From the fragment of the papyrus (Egypt), the inscriptions from Miletopolis (Asia Minor) and the inscriptions from Ai-Khanum (Afghanistan), we are given the rare opportunity to reconstruct part of an older edition of the "Commandments of the Seven" (as they were known to the Hellenistic world in the 3rd c. B.C.) ca. seven hundred years earlier than the date when the *Anthologium* of Ioannes Stobaeus was compiled and introduced to the schools. This was the text really needed by fellow scholars and teachers and by no means some meagre notes on the first ten lines of it!

So I revised my first plans and as a result of this revision, the fragments of this Hellenistic edition of the "Commandments of the Seven" are now grouped together as one "New Text," according to the order indicated in the copy of the "Commandments" of Sosiades as preserved by Stobaeus. Then, when I was arranging the cross-references between the "New Text" and the Sosiades-copy, I realized one more thing. The two reference editions of Stobaeus not only rarely appeared in minor and personal libraries, but in the particular case of the "Commandments of the Seven" both were not prepared to be handy for cross-reference, because the commandments were not individually numbered in them.

Following these observations, a new edition of the Sosiades-copy had to be prepared numbering the commandments in Hense's text. By arranging the Greek text of the 147 commandments in three columns on the same page, I tried to give not only a vague idea of what the arrangement of the commandments on the lost stele from Ai Khanum might have been, but also to provide a visual proof that the whole text of the "Commandments of the Seven" could fit well on one stone stele.

Facing the page of Greek text, also in three columns, an English translation of the commandments is printed. Despite my firm belief that in our times any important Greek text should be accompanied by an adequate English translation, even in articles for scholarly journals, in the case of the "Commandments of the Seven," I have my doubts about the right of an editor to provide one translation for many of them. These thought provoking brief commandments are by no means the type of text that can be assigned easily as having one meaning. By translating them in another language, there is always the danger to push the reader to accept a meaning originating from your own misunderstanding of the text, or not towards the basic meaning but to a secondary one. Even the ancient Greeks had severe difficulties in fully understanding many of the commandments and especially the most 'archaic' ones. We must always remember that the original inscription "in the most holy Pythian shrine" was cut on the stele sometime in the early 6th c. B.C. (if not earlier) and that the Greek language, even in our own times is continuing to grow, change,

cont. on p. 72

18. See: Al.N. Oikonomides [note 2].
19. My thanks are due to Basil Mandilaras for his kindness, and also for permitting the publication of this photograph [Fig. 2].
Fig. 1: *Inscriptio Bactriana* [CRAI 1968, 421-426]. The base for the stele with "The Commandments of the Seven" which once stood in the hero-shrine of Kineas at Ai Khanum. The inscription to the left is the dedicatory epigram of Klearchos (see: p. 67) and the one to the right, the last five "Commandments" which did not fit on the stele (see p. 71: 'New Text' V, lines 69-73).

Fig. 2: *P. Univ. Athen.* 2782, [ZPE 37, 1980, 179-183]. The photograph (by Dr. Basil Mandilaras) reproduces the now lost papyrus at dimensions 1/1. It preserves traces from the second line of the title (see p. 71: 'New Text' I, line 2) and the first eight "Commandments" in the 3rd c. B.C. sequence (see: 'New Text' I, lines 3-10).
**The Commandments of the Seven** (New Text formed from P. Univ. Athen. 2782 and the Inscriptions from Mileopolis in Asia Minor and Ai-Khanum in Afghanistan). 3rd c. B.C.


IV. **Inscr. Mileopolitana.** [Col. II]. Cf. II (above).


A bold star (*) indicates that the commandment marked with it does not appear in the Sosiades-text preserved by Stobaeus (see our p. 74). When the commandment appears, the reference is given with an S (and its No.) e.g., S 44. If an asterisk follows the number (E.g. S 92*), that indicates a slight difference in words but not in meaning.

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<td>Φιλόσοφ[ος γίνον]</td>
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<td>Καιρὸν πορεύθηκα</td>
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<td>27</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>Παῖς ὁν κόσμος γίνον,</td>
<td>Παῖς ὁν κόσμος γίνον,</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>S 146*</td>
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that we presently consider as adequately translated may obtain a better and deeper meaning.

** For the reasons which I have explained above, a complete translation is not provided for the "New Text." By using the cross-reference columns, the reader can find provisional English translations for all the commandments which also appear in the Sosiades copy. In the Commentary, provisional translations of the commandments marked with a bold star (★) have also been added.

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Fig. 4: Inscriptio Therac Insulae. [IG XII 3, 1020 + Dittb. Syll. 3 1268, p. 394, note ★]. Dated by Hiller von Gaertringen in the 4th c. B.C. and identified by the same as originating from the 'ephebion gymnasium,' the inscription (which presently seems to be the oldest epigraphical record of the "Commandments") needs a new reading from the stone (cf. M. Luebke's 'delineatio' above and Hiller's text below):

A. 'Εγγ[ν]ία πάρα δὲ ἄτο[μα]
Σινδράκα μελέτα (?)
Μηδὲν ἄγιαν
Γνώθει ὑμῶν

B. 'Α[ν]το[ι]

My first observation is that Hiller's restoration of line 1 does not fit on the stone (judging from the size of the letters) and the only alternative restoration possible is:

'Εγγ[ν]ία πάρα δὲ ἄτο[μα]
Σινδράκα μελέτα (?)
Μηδὲν ἄγιαν
Γνώθει ὑμῶν

My second observation is that the restoration of line 2 is not one of the "Commandments of the Seven" in the 'New Text,' the Sosiades-copy, or in the best known manuscripts of the 'Anonymous' tradition. If the letter after the Σ is an Ε instead of a Ι (cf. Luebke's drawing), the restorations possible are three:

Σ[αῦτος τοῦ] Sosiades 8
Σ[αῦτον αἴδου] Sosiades 129
Σ[αῦτον εἴ ποίες] Sosiades 96
In a world where for more than two decades of centuries the Judeo-Christian tradition has been proclaiming as the supreme ethical law of humanity, a severe and primitive group of "Ten Commandments," the rediscovery and reevaluation of a more perfect ancient ethical law, based on higher cultural standards, is definitely bound to create some questions not easy to answer. The most important of them already stands in front of us: "How can one believe that the "Ten Commandments" represent the direct words of God to Mankind when the pagan 'Commandments of the Seven' express a higher concept and a more realistic vision of ethical law?"

There is nothing metaphysical or mysterious related to the origins of the material which was used for the formation of the Greek ethical law. Popular wisdom first created proverbs and the best of these proverbs were accepted as major ethical guide-lines. "Seven Wise Men" coming from all parts of the Greek world met at Delphi (early 6th c. B.C.) with the purpose of forming a code from all these ethical maxims. Then, the code they compiled from the maxims they selected was inscribed on a stele of stone erected in front of Apollo's temple, 'publishing' thus the official text for anybody who wished to inspect it.

And the stele stood in its place for centuries and generations of Greek teachers, philosophers and common men copied it. And the copies travelled to every corner of the Greek world and far outside it after the conquests of Alexander the Great. To be a human being and act like one, as far as the Greeks were concerned, needed not a severe god terrifying the crowds and burning bushes demanding respect for himself by threats of destruction and doom. All that was needed for establishing an ethical law for a nation, a people or a city was to teach the younger generations the wisdom of the past on what one should and shouldn't do in a human society.

Behind every "Commandment" stands not a God, but an anonymous sage who is trying to open up in other people's minds a revelation of the nature of life.

* * *

From the Renaissance to our day, classical scholars have tried and continue to try to provide for their students, easy to comprehend books on 'beginning Greek.' It is a real irony that none of those who have tried this task knew anything until now about "The Commandments of the Seven," the work which was used to teach how to read and write, plus how to think in Greek, to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Aeschylus and Aristophanes (to mention a few). We needed to excavate a Greek inscription at a site on the highlands of Afghanistan before we came to the understanding that the manuscript tradition had already preserved for us the most valuable text for 'beginning Greek,' which, in our 'wisdom,' we had never thought or tried to use for the same purpose.

SO WHAT DO WE DO NOW? The answer is very simple: We have to go back to the roots! We know that "The Commandments of the Seven" is the earliest known didactic collection of Greek wisdom and we know also that it has successfully served Greek education for more than twenty full centuries. Regarding its ethical standard, all we can say is that it stands at a higher level than the Mosaic decalogue without claiming to be the word of any god, at the same time that it teaches total respect and obedience to Divine power.

As a text to be taught to students who are just starting to read Greek, we must observe that "The Commandments of the Seven" are very close to the dream-concept of a first reading-book. The sentences are brief and each one of them is dedicated to a different subject in the periphery of ethical conduct. Most of the verbs are in imperative (an easy way out of the complicated verb-forms which confuse the beginner) and the rest of the vocabulary is formed by the most essential words for a sound foundation in the most pure form of the ancient Greek language.

Facing brief sentences and simple vocabulary expressing high values in human ethics, the student will have to study very carefully among the different meanings of each word used in every commandment to fully comprehend its aim. That means not only a very productive use of the Greek-English Lexicon, but also a considerable expansion of the vocabulary controlled by the student if we count the different meanings of the same word he has to learn before he selects the right one.

So, go on and use "The Commandments of the Seven" in class and be amazed what your students will learn from it. Not only will they be saved from studying sentences that work faster than sleeping pills, like "the horses of Alcibiades will not run in the next race," but they will also save the money that they would have to pay for the privilege of studying ancient Greek composed by the dregs of text-book 'writers.'

This article may be reproduced in any number of copies necessary for a class in ancient Greek, with the permission of the writer and the publishers. The permission is given with the hope that teachers of Greek in our educational institutions will start thinking that which costs more is not necessarily the better or the best.

Al.N. Oikonomides

Chicago, Illinois
'Ὑποθήκα τῶν Ἐπτά. (Stobaeus 3.1.173 W. & Hense./ 3.80 Meineke) Σωσιάδου (ἀναγραφή).

10 Καιρὸν γνῶθι
15 Φίλοις βοήθει
20 Φιλίαν ἁγάτα
30 Εὐγένειαν ἄσκει
35 "Ακονεν πάντα
40 "Ορα τὸ μέλλον
45 "Εχθῶν χαρίζον
50 Γνώς πράττε
The Commandments of the Seven (=the copy of Sosiades preserved by Stobaeus)

Follow God.
Obey the law.
Worship the Gods.
Respect your parents.
5 Be overcome by justice.
Know what you have learned.
Perceive what you have heard.
Be yourself.
Intend to get married.
10 Know your opportunity.
Think as a mortal.
If you are a stranger act like one.
Honor the hearth (or Hestia).
Control yourself.
15 Help your friends.
Control anger.
Exercise prudence.
Honor providence.
Do not use an oath.
20 Love friendship.
Cling to discipline.
Pursue honor.
Long for wisdom.
Praise the good.
25 Find fault with no one.
Praise virtue.
Practice what is just.
Be kind to friends.
Watch out for your enemies.
30 Exercise nobility of character.
Shun evil.
Be impartial.
Guard what is yours.
Shun what belongs to others.
35 Listen to everyone.
Be (religiously) silent.
Do a favor for a friend.
Nothing to excess.
Use time sparingly.
40 Foresee the future.
Despise insolence.
Have respect for suppliants.
Be accommodated in everything.
Educate your sons.
45 Give what you have.
Fear deceit.
Speak well of everyone.
Be a seeker of wisdom.
Choose what is divine.
50 Act when you know.
Shun murder.
Pray for things possible.
Consult the wise.
Test the character.
55 Give back what you have received.
Down-look no one.
Use your skill.
Do what you mean to do.
Honor a benefaction.
60 Be jealous of no one.
Be on your guard.
Praise hope.
Despise a slanderer.
Gain possessions justly.
65 Honor good men.
Know the judge.
Master wedding-feasts.
Recognize fortune.
Flee a pledge.
70 Speak plainly.
Associate with your peers.
Govern your expenses.
Be happy with what you have.
Revere a sense of shame.
75 Fulfill a favor.
Pray for happiness.
Be fond of fortune.
Observe what you have heard.
Work for what you can own.
80 Despise strife.
Detest disgrace.
Restrain the tongue.
Keep yourself from insolence.
Make just judgments.
85 Use what you have.
Judge incorruptibly.
Accuse one who is present.
Tell when you know.
Do not depend on strength.
90 Live without sorrow.
Live together meekly.
Finish the race without shrinking back.
Deal kindly with everyone.
Do not curse your sons.
95 Rule your wife.
Benefit yourself.
Be courteous.
Give a timely response.
Struggle with glory.
100 Act without repenting.
Repent of sins.
Control the eye.
Give a timely counsel.
Act quickly.
105 Guard friendship.
Be grateful.
Pursue harmony.
Keep deeply the top secret.
Fear ruling.
110 Pursue what is profitable.
Accept due measure.
Do away with enmities.
Accept old age.
Do not boast in might.
115 Exercise [religious] silence.
Flee enmity.
Acquire wealth justly.
Do not abandon honor.
Despise evil.
120 Venture into danger prudently.
Do not tire of learning.
Do not stop to be thrifty.
Admire oracles.
Love whom you rear.
125 Do not oppose someone absent.
Respect an elder.
Teach a youngster.
Do not trust wealth.
Respect yourself.
130 Do not begin to be insolent.
Crown your ancestors.
Die for your country.
Do not be discontented by life.
Do not make fun of the dead.
135 Share the load of the unfortunate.
Gratify without harming.
Grieve for no one.
Beget from noble routes.
Make promises to no one.
140 Do not wrong the dead.
Be well off as a mortal.
Do not trust fortune.
As a child be well-behaved,
as a youth — self-disciplined,
as of middle-age — just,
as an old man — sensible, on reaching the end — without sorrow.
Commentary to the "New Text" of
The Commandments of the Seven (3rd c. B.C.)
[see: p. 71]

The 'New Text,' formed from the texts of one papyrus and three inscriptions, preserves only 70 commandments. Comparing it with the copy of Sosiades, which preserved 147 commandments, we understand that what we presently have represents almost 50% of the version known in the 3rd c. B.C.

Striking is the fact that from a total of 70 commandments in our text, 17 do not appear in the copy of Sosiades [*] and 10 more are variations of commandments listed in it. Unfortunately, statistics cannot be of much help in this case because the majority of the differences appear in the inscription from Miletopolis (the biggest part of our 'New Text'), while the texts of the papyrus and the two other inscriptions together record only one commandment not in Sosiades (line 4) and one only minor variation (line 72). At this point any further observations may lead to a number of unsupportable speculations and nonsensical conclusions without the help of a new unpublished text of "The Commandments" from papyrus or inscription dating also in the 3rd c. B.C.

* * *

**Line 4:** The commandment is unlisted in Sosiades and the m/s tradition. A possible translation will be: *Obey the virtuous.*

**Lines 6-8:** The sequence of the three commandments (disturbed in Sosiades and the other m/ss) was the same in the early 5th c. B.C. as we learn from a fragment of Euripides (Nauck, *NTG* 853: see *CB* 63, 1987, 66).

**Line above line 11:** The facsimile drawing indicates traces of two letters which I think can be transcribed: [..]ΠΩ[— —] (See our Fig. 3 on p. 72). A possible restoration is [*'Αλυτζός βίου*] from the commandment S 90. Translate: *Live without sorrow.*

**Lines 13-15:** We should note that the three commandments (unlisted in Sosiades and the other m/ss) appear as an interpolation due to the 'editor' of the copy used for the inscription of Miletopolis, who repeated the same in lines 49-51 and 55-57. A translation of the three interpolated commandments will be: *Avoid the unjust. Testify what is right. Control pleasure.*

**Line 22:** Translate; *Praise virtue.*

**Line 24:** Translate; *Return a favour.*

**Line 27:** Translate; *Train your relatives.*

**Line 35:** Questionable restoration. Cf. the facsimile drawing in Fig. 3.

**Lines 49-51:** A second interpolation of a group of three commandments (unlisted in Sosiades and the other m/ss) by the 'editor' Cf. our comm. on lines 13-15 above. Translate: *Act according to the law. Administer justice. Live in concordance.*

**Lines 55-57:** A third interpolation of three unlisted commandments as in the cases of lines 13-15 and 49-51 (see our comm. above). Translate: *Believe in time. Receive for the pleasure. Prostrate before the divine.*

**Line 60:** While the Sosiades copy and all the m/ss say exactly the opposite (S 114 *Do not boast in might*), the 'editor' of the copy used for the inscription of Miletopolis decided that this was not the right commandment to be inscribed in a gymnasium. So by omitting the MH from the original he transformed the commandment to: *Boast in might.*

**Line 62:** Translate; *Use the one who has the same interests as you.*

**Line 64:** Translate; *Be embarrassed to lie.*

**Line 66:** Since the restorations proposed are rather questionable, a sure translation is presently impossible. The commandment seems to try to give a message like: *If you believe in something do not be scared to act for it.*

**Line 68:** Translate; *Be firm on what has been agreed.*

**Line 72:** The difference between a πρεσβύτες εύστοικος (inscr.) and one εύδοκος (Sosiades & m/ss) does not change at all the meaning of the commandment.