

The Camel-driver in Late Antique Egypt based on unpublished Coptic ostraca from Shutb Storage Museum

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Abstract: The Camel-driver was one of the most common titles and professions in Coptic documentary texts, especially those originating in monasteries. This profession was primarily associated with economic and social life, especially during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. Although camels were not as common as donkeys for daily transportation, they were valuable for trade and long-distance travel, especially in desert regions, as well as for transporting people, goods and letters. They were also symbolically significant, appearing in religious contexts/ narratives, such as with Saint Mina and on Coptic icons. This research paper aims to publish three Coptic ostraca related to the camel-driver profession for the first time, which are kept in the Storage museum of Shutb in Assiut. The present ostraca are part of six artifacts from the excavation work at Deir el-Gandala by the Egyptian archaeological mission season 1985 with the same number.¹ This study suggested that these ostraca can be dated back to the 6th–8th century CE, based on the provenance, paleography, and formulae.

Keywords: Coptic, Camel, ostraca, monastery, transportation, Late Antique.

مهنة سائق الإبل في مصر في العصور المتأخرة
استناداً إلى نصوص قبطية غير منشورة من مخزن شطب المتحف

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المخلص: كانت مهنة سائق الإبل من أكثر المهن شيوعاً في النصوص القبطية، لا سيما تلك التي صدرت من الأديرة. ارتبطت هذه المهنة ارتباطاً وثيقاً بالحياة الاقتصادية والاجتماعية، خاصة في الفترة البطلمية والرومانية. ورغم أنَّ الإبل لم تكن شائعة الاستخدام في النقل اليومي مثل الحمير، إلّا إنها كانت ذات قيمة كبيرة في التجارة والسفر لمسافات طويلة، وخاصة في المناطق الصحراوية، بالإضافة إلى نقل البضائع والرسائل. كما لها دلالة رمزية، حيث ورد ذكرها في النصوص الدينية والقصص المقدسة، كقصة القديس مينا، وفي الأيقونات القبطية. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى نشر ثلاثة نقوش قبطية لأول مرة تتعلق بهذه المهنة، وهي محفوظة في متحف شطب التابع لوزارة الآثار في أسيوط. وتشكل هذه النقوش جزءاً من ستة قطع أثرية تم اكتشافها خلال أعمال التنقيب التي أجرتها البعثة الأثرية المصرية في دير الجندلة عام ١٩٨٥. وتشير الدراسة إلى أنَّ هذه النقوش تعود إلى القرنين السادس والثامن الميلادي، استناداً إلى موقع اكتشافها ونمط الخط المستخدم فيها والصيغ.

الكلمات الدالة: قبطي - جمل - أوستراكا - النقل - العصور المتأخرة القديمة.

¹ The researcher got the acceptance of publication from The Permanent Committee for Islamic and Coptic Antiquities on 05.03.2024.

Introduction

Camels were uncommon throughout the pharaonic period, as they were not native to Egypt. They may have been brought to Africa through the narrowest section of the Red Sea, situated between the Arabian Peninsula and present-day Eritrea/Djibouti, highlighting why some were observed by the ancient Egyptians.¹

The precise chronology of the camel in ancient Egypt remains uncertain. However, after its introduction to Egypt, it became one of the most significant long-distance pack animals, being-adapted to desert condition. Any consideration of transportation in Roman Egypt, particularly the Eastern Desert, provides enough material for discussing the usage of camels. Camels were introduced to Egypt to serve many purposes, particularly for land transportation and trade. “The practice of camel breeding began in Egypt in the desert east of Thebes ...for purpose of trade, developed in a military as well as a commercial direction, and spread southward...”.² Cromwell³ argues that possibly the first confirmed pharaonic attestation of a camel is a dish from Qantir in the Delta belonging to the late 18th or 19th Dynasty, published in Pusch 1996 (fig. 1).⁴ Although they are occasionally mentioned in Egyptian history prior to this, camels were not widely brought to Egypt until the Persians (starting in 525 BC). Camels took over as the primary desert transport animal during the Ptolemaic era (323–30 BC), a testament to their adaptability and utility. The written and literary evidence of the first to eighth century CE, long after the final pharaohs, shows the highest number of camels. In Egypt, the evidence is primarily for one-humped dromedaries, while two-humped Bactrian camels were also utilized.⁵

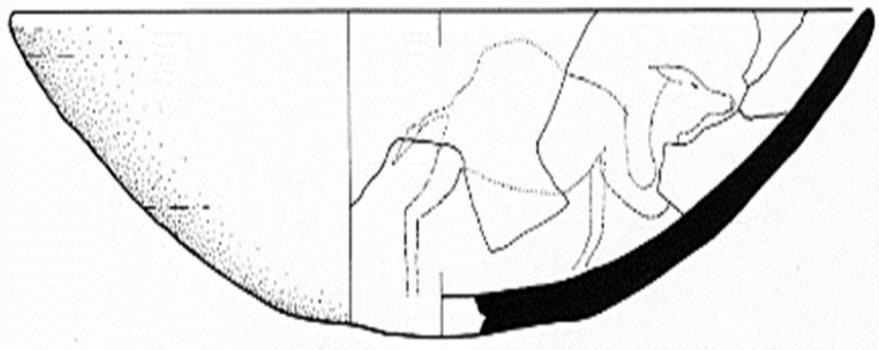


Figure 1: A dish from Qantir [After Puch 1966: 111]

¹ Richard W. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 116; Papyrus stories, accessed July 02, 2025, <https://papyrus-stories.com/2019/01/15/camel-o-camel-from-playmobil-to-reality/>.

² Roger S. Bagnall, “The Camel, the Wagon, and the Donkey in Later Roman Egypt,” *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 22 (1985): 2.

³ Papyrus stories, accessed July 02, 2025, <https://papyrus-stories.com/2019/01/15/camel-o-camel-from-playmobil-to-reality/>.

⁴ Edgar B. Pusch, “Ein Dromedar aus der Ramses-Stadt,” *Ägypten und Levante* 6 (1996), 107–118.

⁵ Jennifer Cromwell, “Camel, O Camel, Come and Fetch and Carry: On Two Camels,” *The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology* (2015), 98.

By the Roman Egypt onwards even after the appearance of wagons, camels remained present alongside vehicles until the seventh or eighth centuries CE, as stated in P.Cair.Zen II 59207 and P.Apoll. 98, which has two camel-drivers with three wagon-drivers.¹

By the third century CE, camels had become symbolically associated with the Coptic saint Menas. According to a narrative, following his death, the camel transporting his remains fell in the desert south of Alexandria and refused to move. Thereby determining that spot as the burial site. In the fourth century, ‘the home of Mena’ (Karm Abu Mena) was established to accommodate the hundreds of pilgrims who visited the place. Many would have received terracotta ampullae, like the example illustrated, depicting St. Menas standing between two camels, which might be used to draw water from a healing spring near Alexandria (fig. 2)²



Figure 2: Ampullae Abu Mina. Dating from the 6th-7th century CE. After [https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky_Institute/courses/afterpharaohs2010/13172.html]

The Camel in Coptic Documentary Texts

The Coptic wording of camel is ⲥⲁⲙⲟⲩⲗ (S, B, A, F), Sahidic female: ⲥⲁⲙⲁⲩⲗⲉ, ⲕⲁⲙⲟⲟⲩⲗⲉ, ⲕⲁⲙⲙⲗⲉ, Bohairic female: ⲭⲁⲙⲁⲩⲗⲓ, ⲥⲁⲙⲁⲩⲗⲓ, ⲭⲁⲙⲉⲩⲗⲓ.³ The word ⲥⲁⲙⲟⲩⲗ inherited from Demotic *gmwl*,⁴

¹ Bagnall, “The Camel, the Wagon, and the Donkey in Later Roman Egypt,” 2–3.

² Cromwell, ‘Camel, O camel, come and fetch and carry,’ 98.

³ Walter Ewing Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), 818b.

⁴ Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae, accessed July 1, 2025, <https://thesaurus-linguae-aegyptiae.de/lemma/d679>.

also it is written γαμιλ, and καμιλ,¹ Arabic جمل. Plural form Sahidic: βαμαγλε, βαμογλε, καμοογλε, καμαγλε; plural Bohairic: χαμαγλι, βαμαγλι, plural Faiyumic: βαμεγλι.²

The one humbled camel in Coptic, rarely referred to dromedary in Coptic by the swift camel as βαμογλ ἡγερες “camelus dromas(?)”,³ represented in a Coptic terracotta UC 48033 (fig. 3).



Figure 3: Hollow mouldmade representation of a standing camel.

The camel has one hump and wears a saddle. After [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/memphis/uc48033.html]

Coptic texts provide significant evidence of the camel's presence in many aspects of daily life. Camels were crucial in the transportation of people and goods since they could carry enormous weights such as agricultural crops, wine jars, commodities, and correspondences between monasteries, as well as grains to the granary. In Coptic literature, camel drivers are frequently referenced as porters or postmen.⁴ Camel drivers worked mainly in monasteries during the Byzantine era, delivering correspondence inside them, based on the account of Palladius, who visited Egypt in the fourth century CE, and found 12 camel drivers in one of the monasteries.⁵

¹ W. E. Crum and H. I. Bell, *Wadi Sarga: Coptic and Greek Texts from the Excavations Undertaken by the Byzantine Research Account* (London: British School of Archaeology in Egypt, 1922), 21.

² Crum, *Coptic dictionary*, 818b.

³ Crum, *Coptic dictionary*, 612b.

⁴ Sohair Ahmed, “Unpublished Coptic Ostraca from Cairo Museum”, *After Constantine* 2024 (1), 9.

⁵ سهير أحمد، "المراسلات القبطية - دراسته تحليلية مقارنة لشكل ومحتوى بعض الرسائل غير المنشورة" (رسالة ماجستير غير منشورة، كلية الآداب، جامعة عين شمس، ٢٠٠٨)، ١١١.

Ahmed, S. "al-Murāsālāt alqḅtyh-dirāsah taḥlīlīyah muqāranah lshkl wmlḥtwā ba‘ḍ al-rasā’il ghayr al-anshūrah" (unpublished Master thesis, Ain Shams University, 2008), 111.

Monasteries, such as the monastery of Apa Thomas in Wadi Sarga,¹ along with the monastery of Apa Epiphanius and the monastery of Apa Phoibammon (Deir el-Bahri) in western Thebes,² offer excellent opportunities for studying daily and economic life in the seventh and eighth centuries CE. The corpus of Coptic daily life documents emanating from these monasteries that relate to camels includes correspondence requesting camel loans for various purposes, wine receipts, and legal contracts.

For example, a letter from the monastery of Apa Thomas at Wadi Sarga, the senders whose names are unfortunately missing asks:

“... send 8 [camels], that we may (?) load them with fodder (?). ... And provide 3 good camels for wine for us ... When the camels come up (? down) loaded with fodder, send them out to us, that we may (?) load them (with the wine) for coming down (?up). Farewell in the Lord.” ***O.Sarga 93 ll. 15-21***

In another letter, including a request for a favor, monks from another monastery write to the superior of the monastery in Wadi Sarga requesting an undefined number of camels for a different reason, the letter reads as follow:

“Give it to the Father, Apa Justus, from the brethren of Pohe. Be so kind, send us all the camels, that they may clear out these palm-branches. For we will come up (?down) on the night of the feast.” ***O.Sarga 94, ll. 1-6***

In addition to these letters, wine, and fodder³ and corn⁴ receipts from Wadi Sarga provided information on the large number of people who worked as camel drivers. The wine receipts indicated that vast quantities were transported to Wadi Sarga, usually by camel daily for a month after the grape harvest. The letters confirmed that some wine was owned by the monastery and used for various purposes, including transportation and cleaning for festivals. A wine account from Wadi Sarga reads:

“By the same, 11th, 1st convoy, by C . . ., camel-driver, 28 phorai of wine. By the same, 11th, 2nd convoy, by John of Parou, 16 phorai of wine. By the same, same day, 2nd (convoy), by Phoebammon, camel-driver, 30 phorai of wine. By the same, 2nd convoy, by Macarius(?), camel-driver, .. phorai⁵ of wine.” ***Sarga 121, ll.1-4***

Further, O.BawitFribourg,⁶ a bilingual Coptic/Greek, transport order dated to 7th-8th century CE.⁷ from the monastery of Apa Apollo in Bawit, includes a request of four sacks of

¹ “Wadi Sarga is located in Middle Egypt on the west bank of the Nile 25km south of the contemporary regional capital, Lykopolis (modern Asyut)”. Elisabeth R. O’Connell, “R. Campbell Thompson’s 1913/14 Excavation of Wadi Sarga and Other Sites,” 122.

² Camels were donated to the holy *topos* a long with donkeys, sheep, goats, and houses. P.KRU 65. Leslie S. B. MacCoull, *Coptic Legal Documents: Law as Vernacular Text and Experience in Late Antique Egypt* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2009): 36-41.

³ Cf. Sarga 139.

⁴ Cf. Sarga 138.

⁵ Crum and Bell, *Wadi Sarga*, 110.

⁶ Cf. Sandro Lopizzo, *Les ostraca grecs et coptes du monastère de Baouît conservés à la Fondation Bible + Orient de l’université de Fribourg (Suisse)*, 64.

⁷ Papyri.info, accessed July 17, 2025,

https://papyri.info/ddbdp/o.bawit.fribourg;;55?rows=3&start=53&fl=id,title&fq=series_led_path:O.BawitFribourg***&sort=series+asc,volume+asc,item+asc&p=54&t=67.

seeds to the infirmary by a camel-driver called Phoibammon:¹ [... ϩⲓⲧ]ⲛ ⲫⲟⲓⲃⲁⲙⲙⲟⲛ
[ⲡⲙⲁⲛⲃⲁⲙⲟ]ϣⲗ ⲛⲛⲧⲉⲱⲟⲛⲉ “by Phoibammon the camel-driver of the infirmary”.²

Camel Driver Responsibilities according to Coptic Documents

The camel driver in Coptic is ⲙⲁⲛⲃⲁⲙⲟϣⲗ (ⲡ)³ or ⲡⲕⲁⲙⲓⲗⲓⲧⲏⲥ,⁴ from Demotic *mnj-gmwł*,⁵ equivalent to Greek καμηλιτης.⁶ Abbreviated to ⲕⲁⲙⲓⲗ/⁷ ⲕⲁⲙ/⁸ and ⲕⲁⲙⲓⲗ/⁹ ⲕⲁⲙⲁⲗ/¹⁰ ⲕⲁⲙⲁⲗ/¹¹ plural: ⲕⲁⲙⲁⲗⲓⲧⲟϥ.¹² The one who nominated the drivers had the title ⲥⲟⲥⲧⲁⲧⲏⲥ¹³ means “organizer, creator”.¹⁴ Another title of Camel-driver in Coptic is ⲥⲁⲕⲃⲁⲙⲟϣⲗ (ⲡ).¹⁵

The title ⲙⲁⲛⲃⲁⲙⲟϣⲗ also indicates to the official postman who related to the public post office or sometimes to the private letter holder “Postman of public mail service”,¹⁶ whose duties were to deliver heavy stuff, not only letters.¹⁷ Like other professions the camel-driver had a wage. According to texts from Wadi Sarga (*P. Sarga* 167; 172) the wage of the camel-driver was 8 *phores* and 12 small *lahê* of wine. Evidence (*O.Brit.Mus.Copt.*, 120) attested one solidus as a part of his wage. Other Greek evidence attested that three camel-drivers got 4.5 solidi and 48 artaba of wheat annually.¹⁸

¹ Mona Sawy, *Treatment by Medicine and Magic in Coptic Texts* (PhD diss., University of Göttingen, 2022), 32.

² Author's own translation.

³ Crum, *Coptic dictionary*, 818b.

⁴ O. Crum ST. 319.

⁵ Coptic dictionary online, accessed July 01, 2025, <https://coptic-dictionary.org/entry.py?tla=C7739>.

⁶ Crum, *Coptic dictionary*, 818b.

⁷ Cf. Sarga 121, 362.

⁸ Cf. Sarga 211.

⁹ Greek καμηλιτης.

¹⁰ Cf. Sarga 201, 205, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 219, 220, 221, 222, 223, 224, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 231, 232, 233, 234, 235, 236, 237, 238, 239, 241, 242, 243, 244, 245, 246, 247, 250, 251, 253, 255, 256, 257, 258, 259, 262, 263, 264, 265, 266, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 276, 277, 290, 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 298, 299, 300, 301, 302, 303, 304, 305, 307, 308, 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 314, 315, 318, 320, 321, 322, 323, 324, 325, 326, 327, 328, 350, 351, 354, 371, 372, 380.

¹¹ Cf. Sarga 297.

¹² Cf. Sarga 329; 366, 368.

¹³ سهير أحمد، "المراسلات القبطية" ١١٧.

¹⁴ Cf. Logeion

[<https://logeion.uchicago.edu/%CF%83%CF%85%CF%83%CF%84%CE%AC%CF%84%CE%B7%CF%82>], (accessed 08.08.2025).

¹⁵ Sohair S. Ahmed, “Professions, Trades, Occupations, and Titles in Coptic (Alphabetically),” *Journal of Coptic Studies* 13 (2010): 115-148, 192.

¹⁶ Ahmed, “Professions, Trades, Occupations, And Titles in Coptic,” 131.

¹⁷ سهير أحمد، "المراسلات القبطية" ١١٧.

¹⁸ سهير أحمد، "المراسلات القبطية" ١٣١.

Other occupation that took responsibility for the delivery or transport was the donkey driver $\text{ONE}\lambda\alpha\Delta\text{HC}$, $\text{ZON}[\text{JEC}(\pi)]$,¹ who is an official postman of express post, and gets paid annually half solidus, or 800 myriads, and sometimes half yearly 22 artaba of wheat.² Further, Coptic texts mention the ox-driver $\text{TA}\gamma\text{PH}\lambda\alpha\text{TEC}$, Greek $\text{taupe}\lambda\acute{\alpha}\text{της}$,³ who was probably responsible for threshing.⁴

Coptic literature provides us with various texts concerning camel driver, specifically letters, delivery, invoices, receipts of goods and transport orders. Thus, almost all evidence shows that the primary function of the camel driver was to deliver or transport people, goods, or consignment to and from the monasteries. In this case, the camel-driver was usually given receipts either when the goods were received for transport or when they are delivered to their destination. Sometimes, there are documents such as a bill of lading or a logbook, attested that the camel driver handed to the recipients as a guarantee of proper delivery. In Wadi Sarga receipts, a camel driver worked predominantly in the monasteries loading heavy commodities like fruits, grains, stones, and amphorae. He also delivered letters of monks from one monastery to another. It was a massive and hefty load for one camel since the camel-load average was 6 artabai of grain, or around 180 kilograms, with some camels occasionally carrying as much as 550 kilograms for relatively short distances.⁵

Some monasteries such as Wadi Sarga monastery, receipts of wine from the monastery showed that the receipts were meant just for the camel-drivers, absolving them of responsibility for the wine, and not for the senders. Furthermore, they very certainly included the names of the sender and recipient, or their representatives.⁶

From Western Thebes, several legal contracts were formed between people and camel herders to take care for and work with the animals. The contents of each of these contracts varied depending on the needs and expectations of the parties interested. In one ostrakon, a man named Sacou was hired to look after two camels and their equipment. In exchange, he would receive a mixture of wheat, wine, and other commodities. One particularly crucial incidental aspect was that Sacou's payout would vary depending on whether the inundation was high or low, and hence whether the ensuing crop would be good or bad:

“I, Isaac, hired Sacou for the camels, to tend the two camels, their equipment, and their accessories. If I find any negligence on his part, he will swear an oath to me about my cattle and the work [for] the monastery. I, myself, am ready to pay him twenty *artabai* of wheat in the high-yield year, plus twenty-five jugs of wine, an *artaba* of dates, and two *lakane* of oil. In the low-yield year, sixteen *artabai* of wheat, plus twenty jugs [of wine], and two *lakane* of oil.” *O.Lips.Copt.* 28.⁷

¹ Ahmed, “Professions, Trades, Occupations, And Titles in Coptic,” 136.

² Ahmed, “Professions, Trades, Occupations, And Titles in Coptic,” 136.

³ Hans Förster, *Wörterbuch der griechischen Wörter in den koptischen dokumentarischen Texten*, Texte und Untersuchungen 148 (Berlin and New York, 2002), 797.

⁴ Ahmed, “Professions, Trades, Occupations, And Titles in Coptic,” 200.

⁵ Sohair S. Ahmed, “Study of Four Coptic Texts Relating to Date Fruits,” *al-Majalla al-‘Ilmiyya li-Kulliyyat al-Ādāb, Jāmi‘at Asyūt* 31, no. 92 (2024), 2: 1903–18, 1906. https://journals.ekb.eg/article_380972_c65ef13fbf8628ab81b41.

⁶ Crum and Bell, *Wadi Sarga*, 163.

⁷ Papyrus stories, accessed: July 10, 2025, <https://papyrus-stories.com/2019/01/15/camel-o-camel-from-playmobil-to-reality/>.

Other texts indicate what the camels were doing. According to a letter from the monastery of Epiphanius, written by a woman called Mariam, two camels were used to carry a loom:¹

“I will take the two camels and will come and load (thereon) the loom...”² *P.Mon.Epiph. 352*

Moreover, a bilingual Greek/Coptic (Fayumic) contract between two women from Herakleopolites (Inhnasya el-Medina), from the church of St. Mark on Gurnet Mourrai, records that the terms of employment of a camel herder include drawing water one day a week *SB Kopt. IV 1803*.³

Ostraca of the Shoutb published here are belonging to the texts concerning transport orders from Wadi Sarga, with some minor deviations, adhere to a consistent pattern: The date, location, the quantity of wine, and the name of camel driver.

191/1

Fragment of transport order

Material: Brown pottery inscribed on one side in black ink

Condition: Fragment broken from all sides, 3 lines are preserved

Script: Semi-cursive script, irregular some letters are big

Dialect: Sahidic

Subject: Transport order

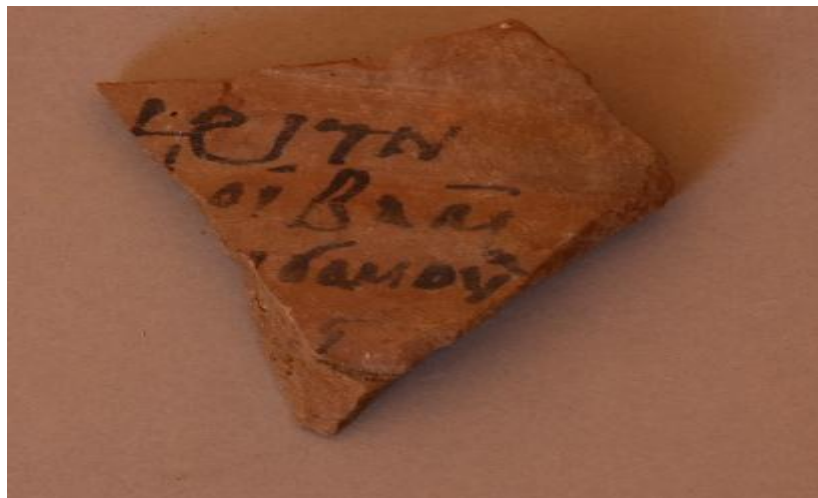


Figure 4

Text

| | |
|----------------|------------------|
|] ḡṭṭṇ | [day...] by |
| [ϕ]οιβᾶμ [ον] | Phoibammon |
| [πμαν]βαμοϥ[λ] | the Camel-driver |

¹ Papyrus stories, accessed: July 10, 2025, <https://papyrus-stories.com/2019/01/15/camel-o-camel-from-playmobil-to-reality/>.

² W. E. Crum and H. G. Evelyn White, *The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes, II: Coptic Ostraca and Papyri, Greek Ostraca and Papyri* (New York: 1926), 247.

³ Papyrus stories, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://papyrus-stories.com/2019/01/15/camel-o-camel-from-playmobil-to-reality/>.

Commentary

A text is on one side. It is broken off from on all sides. The first part of the text is lost. It has irregular script, much smaller in some lines than in others.

l.1 The extend of the lacuna at the beginning of the ostracon can't be estimated. It is broken off from the top, but it is clear that the in the lost part of the ostraca the text would have started with the date; thus, one could presume that the missing word is $\kappa\epsilon\omicron\gamma\omicron$, which is well attested in many receipts and orders of transportation from Wadi Sarga¹ and Bawit.² The date is followed by the preposition $\xi\tau\tau\eta$ which introduces the name of the person who is usually is a camel driver through whom the consignments (wine, corn) are delivered.

l.1 $\xi\tau\tau\eta$: Preposition, means “by the hand of, *so* through, by”.³ It is always precedes the name of the camel driver.

l. 2 $[\Phi]\omicron\iota\beta\alpha\mu\bar{\eta} [\omicron\eta]$: The personal name Phoibammon as a camel driver occurs in Sarga 121, 154.

l. 3 $[\pi\mu\alpha\eta]\beta\alpha\mu\omicron\gamma[\lambda]$: From the third line, we can read clearly $\beta\alpha\mu\omicron\gamma[\lambda]$, after the proper name. Here $[\pi\mu\alpha\eta]$ can be confidentially reconstructed.

191/2

Material: Brown pottery inscribed on one side in black ink

Condition: Well preserved, 6 lines

Script: Regular small

Dialect: Sahidic

Subject: receipt

¹ I assume that this text belongs to receipts from Wadi Sarga which start with a date.

The vast majority of receipts Nrs.218—339 are organized in the scheme: «Date; place-name; amount of wine; name of camel-driver without $\delta(ia)$; no signature by the clerk». Crum and Bell, *Wadi Sarga*, 155.

² Cf. O. BAWITFRIBOURG 1—25. Lopizzo, *O. Bawit Fribourg*.

³ Crum, *Coptic dictionary*, 428b.

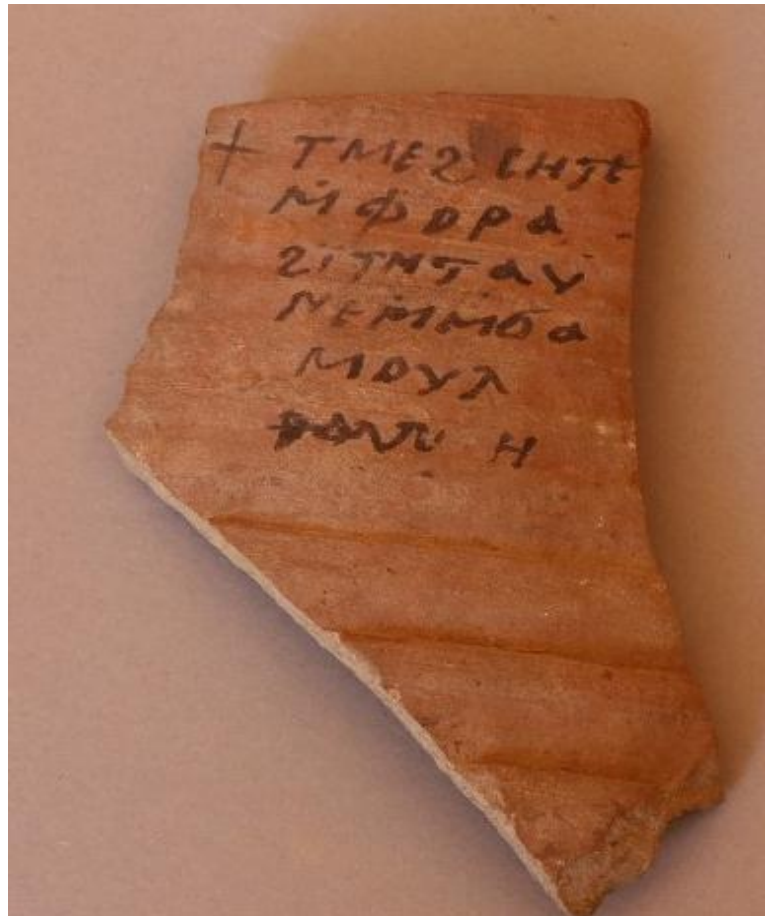


Figure 5

Text

| | |
|--------------|------------------|
| † ΤΜΕΖCНTE | + The second |
| ἰφορα | load/ delivery |
| ΖΙΤΗ ΤΑΥ[ΡΙ] | by Taurinus (?) |
| NE ἰ Ἰσα- | the |
| ΜΟΥΛ | camel-[driver] |
| θαλλ Η | 8 <i>thallia</i> |

Commentary

l. 1 The same opening is close to the one found in O.BawitFreibourg 62.¹ It belongs to the collection of Wadi Sarga receipts, such as Sarga 365, which starts with defining the φορα, followed by the date and the clerk signature.²

¹ The scribe inserted the word φορα between the ordinal number ΤΜΕΖCНTE. See Lopizzo, *O. Bawit Fribourg*, 71.

² Crum and Bell, *Wadi Sarga*, 208-209.

1.2 φορα is a Greek word φορά,¹ which means load, delivery, or convoy.¹ It occurs in various receipts and is used for both dry (Sarga 196, 198) and liquid (for wine as in Sarga 121, 123, 366).

1.3 ταϋρινε: The name of the transporter/ camel driver here is doubtful. It possibly reads ταϋρινε. It is attested two times as a camel-driver in Bawit, i.e., O. BawitFribourg 7, and O. BawitFribourg 15.² It bears nr. TM NamVar 55380, Greek Ταυρίνος.

1. 4 ἡ: it is doubtful, possibly η is a plural article referring to "camel (-loads)".

1. 7 θαλλ supposed to be θαλλ/ the simple form of θαλλια, θαλλικ, Greek form is θαλλίν;³ θαλλίον occurs in many texts from Wadi Sarga as a dry measure for date, vegetable seeds, corn and wheat, it means "basket (made of palm leaves) or sack".⁴ Unfortunately the type of the dry portion is missing, it is supposed to be corn or wheat. The text is supposed to end with the date, but in this ostrakon, it is missing.

191/3

Material: Limestone

Condition: Fragment broken from all sides

Script: Small, few ligatures.

Dialect: Sahidic

Subject: transportation order/receipt

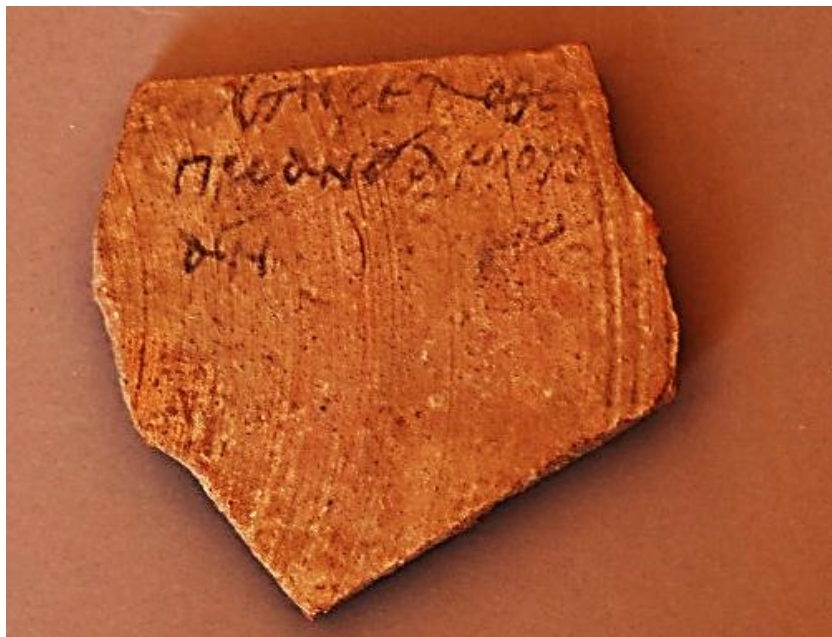


Figure 6

Text

| | |
|-------------|------------------|
| ΖΙΤΗ ΦΕΛΟΘΕ | by Philotheos |
| ΠΑΝΔΑΜΟΥΛ | the camel-driver |
| ΑΓΝ ... | vessel (?). |

¹ Förster, *Wörterbuch der griechischen Wörter*, 854.

² See Lopizzo, *O. Bawit Fribourg*, 17.

³ Crum and Bell, *Wadi Sarga*, 21.

⁴ Crum and Bell, *Wadi Sarga*, 21.

Commentary:

The handwriting on this receipt is very poor, and the ink has run, so the last line is questionable to read. Individual letters are still visible, but the sequence is indecipherable. I think it follows the style of receipts from Wadi Sarga which starts with the load amount followed by the name of the camel-driver who had brought portions of the consignment, then ends with the date.

1.1 Ⲫⲓⲧⲛ: Although the first letters are not clear, it certainly reads the preposition Ⲫⲓⲧⲛ like the other ostraca from Wadi Sarga. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the preposition is followed by the personal noun.

1.1 ⲫⲉⲗⲟⲥ: Proper name, is a variant of ⲫⲉⲗⲟⲥⲉⲟⲥ; ⲫⲓⲗⲟⲥⲉⲟⲥ “Philotheos”, Greek Φιλόθεος, means God-loving.¹ ⲫⲉⲗⲟⲥ appears also in P.lond. 4 1599.² Attested in Trismegistos TM NamVar 55507.³

1. 2 ⲁⲣⲛ: it is not clear, possibly refers to ⲁⲣⲣⲓⲟⲛ, ἀγγεῖον “vessel, flask, amphora, container”.⁴ It is container of wine.⁵ But the amount of the load is missing due to the condition of the ostraca.

Conclusion:

Summarizing these various reconstructions, comparison with the other ostraca from Wadi Sarga shows that the present ostraca would have contained the same formulae of orders of transportation originating from the Wadi Sarga collection. In addition, the three ostraca can be dated to the 6th–8th century CE.

The ostraca published here also share the wording of receipts and transport orders issued by the same monastery. They also highlight the presence and importance of the camel driver, as a profession, responsible for overland transportation and short journeys. They are evidence of the widespread profession of camel driver in Wadi Sarga Monastery. Camel drivers are frequently mentioned at Wadi Sarga Monastery, unlike other animal drivers, such as donkeys and oxen.

The prevalence of the camel driver profession indicates that it was cheaper and more readily available than a donkey or an ox, as express mail service was expensive.

¹ TM Nam 3263, Trismegistos, accessed August 08, 2025, <https://www.trismegistos.org/name/3263>.

² Bilingual Greek/Coptic papyrus, dates back to 8th Cent. CE. Metadata at Papyri.info, accessed August 09, 2025. <https://papyri.info/ddbdp/p.lond;4;1599>.

³ Trismegistos, accessed August 08, 2025. <https://www.trismegistos.org/namvar/55507>.

⁴ Coptic Dictionary online, accessed August 15, 2025, <https://coptic-dictionary.org/entry.py?tla=C8064>.

⁵ Sawy, *Treatment by Medicine and Magic in Coptic Texts*, 82.

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