



Twelve Coptic Documentary Ostraca

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ملخص:

تعرض هذه الورقة نشر اثني عشر نصًا قصيرًا بالقبطية مكتوبة على اوستراكا، كلها قطع فخارية، تُنشر هنا لأول مرة، وقد تم منحي الإذن بدراسة هذه النصوص من الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية في عام ٢٠١٩ بعد الحصول على خطاب رسمي من أمين المتحف. تتكون هذه المجموعة من ٢٥ شقفة لقد قمت بنشر ١١ منها من خلال مشاريع بحثية أمريكية (٢٠٢٠-٢٠٢٢). وهناك ١٢ كسرة فخارية منشورة في هذا البحث. تم التقاط جميع الصور هنا بواسطتي في عام ٢٠٢٢ (بعد إذن). وأنا مدينة بالشكر للبروفيسور الأمريكي وينترموت الذي أعطاني ملاحظاته عن بعض هذه القطع وسمح لي بنشرها.

Abstract:

This paper presents publishing twelve short texts written on Coptic ostraca, all are potsherds, they are publishing here for the first time, and I have given the permission to study these texts from the USA in 2019 after obtaining an official letter from the curator. This collection consists of 25 ostraca. I have published 11 ostraca through an American research projects (2020-2022). And there are 12 potsherds published here. All the photos here are taken by me in 2022 (after a permission). I owe thanks to Prof. Wintermute who gave me his notes on some of these ostraca and permitted me publishing them.

Keywords: Coptic, Letter, Potsherd, Reed, Visit.

Introduction:

The topics of these ostraca here are various but the majority is letters but there are other texts like part from a loan contract and part from a list of personal names or may be an account, moreover a short text perhaps as an invocation. The texts here are short and not complete because of the broken ostraca. The letters presented here are private except one letter only is uncertain. The texts doesn't contain any title of clerics. Also they keep little of formulas like the introductory, greeting and address formulas. Some titles are mentioned like scribe or master and butcher. These ostraca are inscribed from one side only except the contract was inscribed from both sides.

The colors of potsherds here are either brown or red, all are written with black ink, no names of any official scribes are preserved here. There is no information about the provenance or the date but usually the Coptic ostraca are dated from the 6th to the 8th centuries AD and the majority found from Upper Egypt especially Thebes.

Signs used for publishing:

[ΔΒΓ]: Letters missing from the original text due to lacuna, restored by the editor.

Δ(ΒΓ): Abbreviation / symbol in the text, expanded by the editor.

ΔΒΓ: Letters not clear entirely in the text

<ΔΒΓ>: Letters omitted by scribe

?: Uncertain reading/ translation.

{ΔΒΓ}: Letters written as mistakes

1. *Private letter concerning a butcher for slaying and cutting a sheep*



1. [.....]
2. [ϵ] ϣ<N>αϥϣα [i n̄NN]
3. ϣαϣ [αϣ⁽¹⁾ ϵωωωτ⁽²⁾]
4. [πϵ]ϥΟΥ⁽³⁾ ναϊ [....]
5. ϵκ<N>αϵ[i ?]
6. [.....]

1. [.....]⁽⁴⁾
2. you will write [to NN]
3. the butch [er to slay/cut]

⁽¹⁾ Butcher, lit. “meat-cutter” (CD, 23b, Ahmed 2011, p.204) while the slaughter/butcher who cooked the meat called μαγίρος (Ahmed 2010, 130) and the meat seller called ϥαναϣ (Ahmed 2011, 192).

⁽²⁾ Means slay or cut especially for sacrificing, CD, 592a.

⁽³⁾ Perhaps written here as ϵϥο or ϵϥΟΥ (mentioned as ϵϥω & ϵϥΟΥ in: CD, 61a, from Egyptian origin (CED, p.38).

⁽⁴⁾ The introductory formula of the letter is missing here for that the names of both sender and recipient are missed.

4. [the sh] eep for me [.....]⁽⁵⁾

5. you will [come?]

6.[.....]⁽⁶⁾

2. Private letter concerning reeds and mats



1. ANOK M̄AKAPIOC

2. OYŃT[ΔI] K̄M̄ ⁽⁷⁾

3. TH ⁽⁸⁾ NMTOY

4. NCΩ ZMP

5. MOY T[ΔAC M̄?]

6. BIKTΩP

7. P̄

⁽⁵⁾ In a certain date/ place/ occasion or may be “for offering” (Compare a letter sent to a priest asking him to send a pair of pigeons with boy /servant southward for sacrifice/offering, in ostracon, no. 4610 (Cairo Coptic Museum- translated by me).

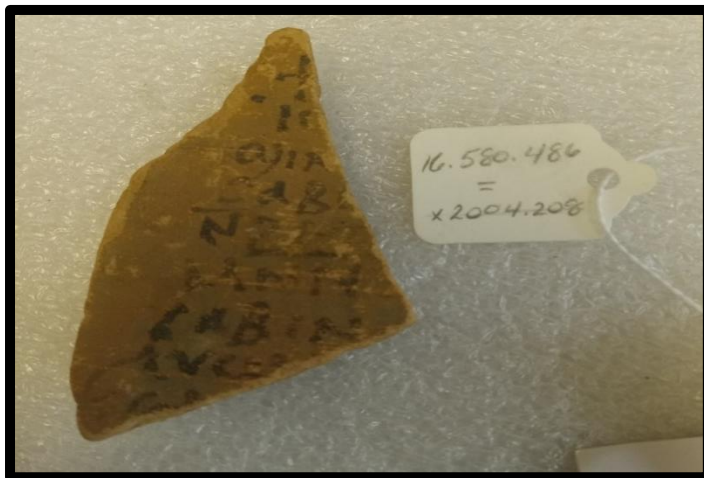
⁽⁶⁾ Perhaps the text was: “you will come with the butcher to me”, or perhaps “you will bring the butcher to me”.

⁽⁷⁾ Usually as KAM or SEM (CD,108a).

⁽⁸⁾ Adverb means “there” (CD,392a).

1. I am Makarios
2. [I / you] have reeds
3. there, and mats⁽⁹⁾
4. from the soaked reeds in the
5. Water [give⁽¹⁰⁾ it to?]
6. Victor
7. ₰

3. Private letter asking a visit⁽¹¹⁾ northward for doing something



⁽⁹⁾ It was a rule of monks to weave a mat daily while others were sent to gather reeds. Mats, ropes and baskets were woven of reeds or palm leaves (Johnson & West 1949, p. 68), more about mats in: Ahmed 2023, pp.113-114.

⁽¹⁰⁾ There are two probabilities here, the first is: he means giving the letter to Victor as a recipient and in this case the translation will be “I have reeds and mats”, and this letter is considered as a reply on a previous message from Victor, the other probability is: “you have reeds and mats..., give/ pay it to Victor”, in this case the recipient was maker of the mats of reeds.

⁽¹¹⁾ Compare asking a doctor to travel for healing sick feet of someone with paying his wage (Ahmed 2022, no.1)

1. ⲫ
2. ⲓⲱ[ⲥⲏⲥ? ⁽¹²⁾ ⲉⲥⲥⲁⲓ ⲉⲥ-]
3. ⲱⲓⲛ[ⲉ ⲉ-NN ⲙⲏ-]
4. ⲥⲁⲬⲒ[ⲛⲐⲥ ⲁⲣⲓ ⲡⲏⲁ ⲛ̄ⲧⲉⲧ̄ⲛ̄ⲉⲓ]
5. ⲛ̄ⲗⲏⲧ̄ [ⲛ̄ⲁⲡⲁ NN? ⁽¹³⁾]
6. ⲙⲏ̄ ⲛ̄[ⲉⲥⲏⲏⲥ?]
7. ⲥⲁⲬⲒⲛ[Ⲑⲥ⁽¹⁴⁾]
8. ⲁⲎⲱ [.....⁽¹⁵⁾.]
9. [ⲉ]ⲱ[ⲱⲡⲉ?.....]

1. ⲫ
2. Jo[sef ?, he writes and]
3. greets [NN and]
4. Sabi[nos , do favor ? and come]
5. Northward [to (Apa?) NN]
6. and [the brothers?⁽¹⁶⁾]
7. Sabin[os⁽¹⁷⁾]
8. and [.....]
9. if? [.....]

⁽¹²⁾ Or: ⲓⲱⲗⲁⲛⲏⲏⲥ “Youhanna”

⁽¹³⁾ Another reading as: ⲛⲁⲓ ⲗ̄ⲛⲟⲩⲥⲏⲏⲡⲏ “to me, quickly”, cf: O. Medin. Habu
Copt, no.146

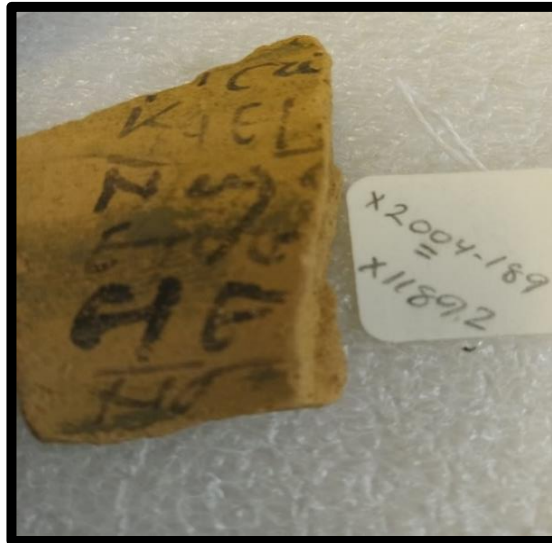
⁽¹⁴⁾ Hasitzka 2007, p.87b

⁽¹⁵⁾ Verb is missing here

⁽¹⁶⁾ Or: fathers?

⁽¹⁷⁾ Perhaps: Sabinos came (to the same place) and did something (before) or
Sabinos will come in order to do something.

4. Letter asking someone to visit a certain place for a certain matter



1. [ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ⲚⲚ ⲉⲧϥⲗⲁⲓ ⲙ̄]
2. ⲡⲥⲁ[. ⁽¹⁸⁾ ⲚⲚ]
3. ⲕ<Ⲛ>ⲁⲉⲓ [ⲉ....]
4. ⲛ̄ⲟⲩⲟ̄[ⲣⲡ]
5. ⲉⲧ[Ⲗ]ⲉ? [... ⲛ̄ⲟ̄]
6. ⲉⲓ ⲉ[.....]
7. ⲛ̄ⲟ̄ ⁽¹⁹⁾ [.....]

⁽¹⁸⁾ The rest of title is missed here , there are many titles in Coptic started with ⲥⲁ, for example” doctor, scribe, seller, weaver, oil dealer (Ahmed 2011, 190-197).

⁽¹⁹⁾ Conjunctive, usually as ⲛ̄ⲣ̄ or ⲛ̄Ḳ̄ (Layton 2007, p.100) but I found the same form in unpublished ostrakon kept in the Cairo Coptic Museum.

1. [I am NN who writes to]
2. The [NN]
3. You will come [to (a place name)]
4. Early⁽²⁰⁾(or at dawn) ⁽²¹⁾ []
5. Concerning? [(something) and you will]
6. Come to [a place name)]
7. And you will [⁽²²⁾]

5. Letter or contract (for work) mentioned the sender as a servant /assistant



- 1.....
- 2.....
3. [N]ΔΙ ΕΞΟΜΝΤ []
4. ΔΙΩΞΕΧΕ ΕΙΝΑ[]
5. [P]ΩΜΩΕ ΧΕ ΔΙ[PΩΒ?]
6. [EYΠO]PΩΤΗC ⁽²³⁾ Ἰ[]

⁽²⁰⁾ CD, 587b.

⁽²¹⁾ O. ThebIFAO, no.17

⁽²²⁾ Do something.

⁽²³⁾ A Greek word means servant/assistant, see Förster WB,834, Ahmed 2011, p.208 , Coptic-Dictionary.org

7. [] ⲉⲱⲱⲡⲉ []
8. [] ⲒⲮⲡⲠⲮ [ⲡⲚⲓ⁽²⁴⁾?.....]
9. [] .ⲛⲛⲉ []
10. [] ⲁⲓ []

1.
- 2.....
3. to me money? ...⁽²⁵⁾
4. I said (that) I will []
5. serve and I [worked as]
6. [a ser]vant⁽²⁶⁾ of [....⁽²⁷⁾]
7. if [I/ you?]
8. [] serve/help []
9. [the] sailor?⁽²⁸⁾ .. []
10. I.....?.⁽²⁹⁾[]

⁽²⁴⁾ Greek verb means: to assist/help/serve: Coptic-Dictionary.org

⁽²⁵⁾ Verb is missing here.

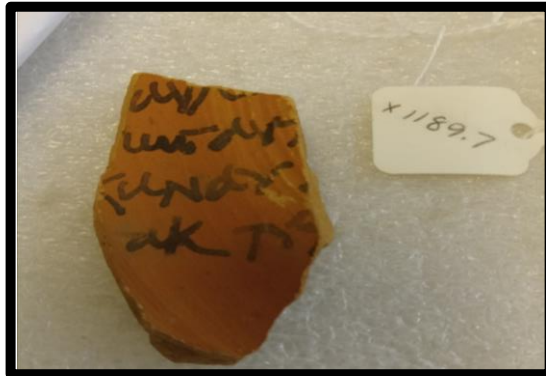
⁽²⁶⁾ Servant cut trees for his master and brought them by boat, O. Edfou Copt, no.67.

⁽²⁷⁾ Somebody written with his name or title.

⁽²⁸⁾ As ⲛⲛⲉⲥ, perhaps he worked with him.

⁽²⁹⁾ Another verb is missing here.

6. *Private letter concerning trouble because of payment*



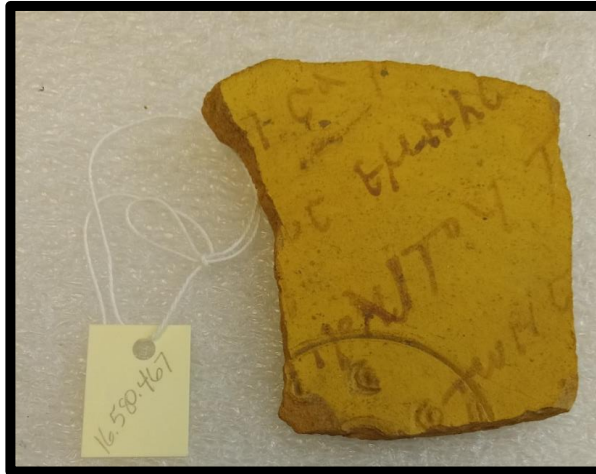
1. ἀγῶε[χε]
2. [ἦ]μῶς⁽³⁰⁾ ἀγῆ[ε ...]
3. [ἦ]τᾶναδγ [χε]
4. ἀκτε [...]

1. They said
2. it, they paid [...⁽³¹⁾]
3. and I saw [that]
4. you paid [it]

⁽³⁰⁾ Mentioned with the verbs of saying: ὡαχε and χε (CD,613a).

⁽³¹⁾ Perhaps a price, interest, debt, or tax.

7. Letter mentioned a builder (?)



1. [ε]ιϛ⁽³²⁾ αρ[...]
2. οϛ εμνη⁽³³⁾ ϛ[αρα-]
3. π̄ιο<Ν>⁽³⁴⁾ ντοϛ τ[εκ-]
4. τω(Ν)⁽³⁵⁾ ειϛ []
5.

1. [B]ehold Ar[...⁽³⁶⁾]?
2. os there, S[ara-]
3. pion⁽³⁷⁾ , he is a b[uild-]
4. er , behold [.....]⁽³⁸⁾
5.

⁽³²⁾ Compare the same word in the 4th line here.

⁽³³⁾ Adverb means “there, thither”, CD, 174b.

⁽³⁴⁾ He mixed the double Ν as one letter, and this was popular.

⁽³⁵⁾ τεκτ/ or τεκτων: a Greek title means builder written in examples after the personal name without definite article (in: Förster, WB, 799).

⁽³⁶⁾ A personal name, compare: Arianos, Arabikos (Hasitzka 2007, p.16b, a).

⁽³⁷⁾ Sarapion a common name (mentioned in: Ibid, 89a).

⁽³⁸⁾ The topic here is missing perhaps he took this person for Sarapion the builder to work for him or to assist him or to pay for him.

8. Fragment of letter (?) sent from Tsophia



1. Ꝁ τσοϥφι[α⁽³⁹⁾ ετςζαϊ]
2. μ []
3. πϣ []
4. χε []
5. [χ]εϣαϥ
6. Ωινε []

1. Ꝁ Tsophi[a who writes]
2. To [NN]
3. The [...]⁽⁴⁰⁾
4. That [.....]⁽⁴¹⁾
5. Because [.....]
6. Seek/ ask/greet? [.....]⁽⁴²⁾

⁽³⁹⁾ A personal name means “the wisdom”, Coptic –dictionary online, Hasitzka 2007, p.103a.

⁽⁴⁰⁾ Title of recipient is missing here.

⁽⁴¹⁾ Starting the topic of letter with χε to inform something.

⁽⁴²⁾ Something or someone.

9. *An address of private letter from a father to his daughter*



1. [τὰὰς ἡ]
2. [] βαλ⁽⁴³⁾ ριτ[ἡ]
3. [π]εσειωτ

1. [Give it to]
2. Bal from
3. Her father⁽⁴⁴⁾

⁽⁴³⁾ I didn't find this fem. personal name, lit. means "eye" (CD, 31b).

⁽⁴⁴⁾ Cf.: A letter from a daughter to her father concerning dividing a quantity of wheat, in: O. Cairo Mus., no.3.

10. Fragment of an invocation?



1. παειω{τ} ⁽⁴⁵⁾
2. ςθ

1. My father
2. Amen

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Written as η instead of τ.

11. Fragment contains personal names, perhaps account



1.
2. ακουι
3. συμω[η]
4. αμμω[η]
5. . []

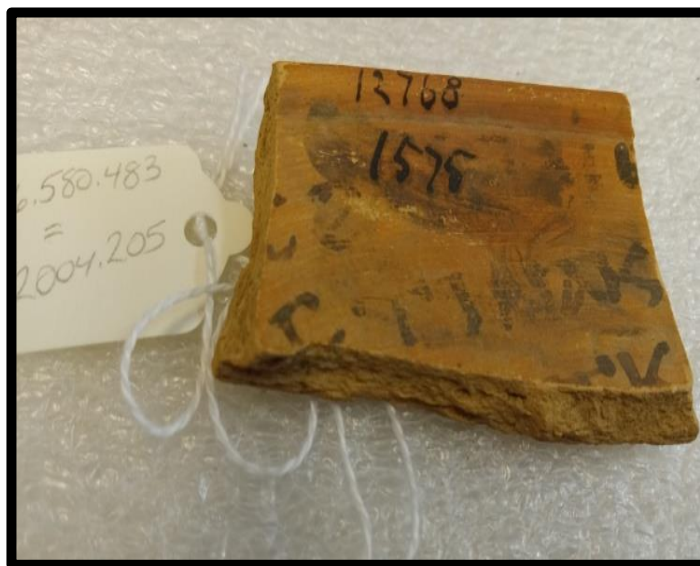
1.
2. Akoui⁽⁴⁶⁾
3. Simion⁽⁴⁷⁾
4. Ammw[η]⁽⁴⁸⁾
5. [...]

⁽⁴⁶⁾ Mentioned in: Hasitzka 2007, 8b, varied as Pakoui in: Ibid, 68b .

⁽⁴⁷⁾ Ibid, 92b, 96a.

⁽⁴⁸⁾ Ammon or Ammonios (see: Ibid, 9b).

12. Fragment of a loan contract



Recto



Verso

Recto

1. [ΔΝΟΚ]...Μ⁽⁴⁹⁾ €[Τ]
2. €[ΔΙ Ν̄ ΝΝ ΤΙΧΡΩ-]
3. €ΤΙ ΝΔΚ [...ΔΙΧΙΤΟΥ]
4. [€ΙΤΟΟ]Τ̄Κ
5. [€Μ̄....]
6.

Verso

1. ΔΛΛΑ €[]
2. Ν̄Τ̄[Δ†...]

Translation

Recto

1. [I] NN who?⁽⁵⁰⁾
2. Wri[tes to NN I ow]e⁽⁵¹⁾
3. you (something) [I took it]
4. [Fro]m you
5. [in (month name)]
6. [And I am ready to repay it in]

Verso

1. But if [I⁽⁵²⁾]
2. I will [pay.....⁽⁵³⁾]

⁽⁴⁹⁾ A personal name missed here.

⁽⁵⁰⁾ Or: he (= €ϩ).

⁽⁵¹⁾ I owe you..., a formula also mentioned in: Ahmed 2020, no.1 & Ahmed 2023, no.2.

⁽⁵²⁾ delay?

⁽⁵³⁾ fine or penalty.

Conclusion:

- Some letters talking about sacrificing the animals as offering (προσφορά) such as sacrifice with a pair of pigeons (mentioned in a text from Coptic Museum) or with a sheep (as here). The butcher who slayed and cut the meat called ϩⲁⲧⲁϩ but when he acted as butcher and cooker of meat, he called ⲙⲁⲓⲣⲟⲥ while the seller of the meat called ϥⲁⲛⲁϩ.
- The reeds used for making the mats and ropes, the mats were used for sleeping and eating on it and used also as covering for windows. It was used to soaking the reeds for making the mats. Both words ⲧⲙⲏ and ⲧⲟⲙ mean “mat of reeds”.
- Asking visit was either friendly or officially, sometimes mentioned the place name and other times referred to the direction only like northward or southward. Usually asking the visit for certain matter or doing a service or for bringing something to the sender or just for meeting only.
- Some Coptic letters present the tasks of servants in this period like: home service, helping the patients, delivery the letters, and cutting the trees.
- Usually the financial texts were signed by some witnesses but sometimes there was a payment without documentation and this may cause a problem (like no. 6 here).
- Some Coptic letters are addressed to a daughter from her father.
- The personal names were of various origins such as Ancient Egyptian, Greek, Hebrew and Arabic.
- The principal formula of the loan contract is “I owe you with... I took it from you and I am ready to repay it in the month of...”, sometimes there was a penalty for delay in repayment like fine or extra interest.

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