

# PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON THE COPTIC OSTRACA FROM SEASONS 2003 AND 2004

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During fieldwork in 2003 and 2004, over a hundred Coptic ostraca were discovered at the site of the Coptic hermitage in Sheikh abd el-Gurna in West Thebes.<sup>1</sup> They were found scattered throughout the hermitage, but the majority came from the dump below the presumed tower.<sup>2</sup>

The ostraca are inscribed mainly on amphora sherds; still there is a certain number

of texts inscribed on limestone flakes. Almost all were written in Sahidic dialect and most are in fragmentary condition. The group is generally dated to between the 6th and 8th centuries. One ostrakon needs to be mentioned in particular:<sup>3</sup> It is K.O.10, which contains the name of a well-known personality,  $\varphi\rho\alpha\nu\rho\epsilon$ <sup>4</sup> whose period of activity has been précised to the



Fig. 1. Ostrakon K.O.10 with the name of Frange, 7th-early 8th century  
(Photo T. Górecki)

- 1 For the report on the Polish Centre's excavations at the site, cf. T. Górecki in this volume.
- 2 For the plan of the hermitage complex, see the first interim report by T. Górecki, in *PAM XV, Reports 2003 (2004)*, 173-179 and Fig. 1.
- 3 I would like to thank Jacques van der Vliet for his kind help.
- 4 Chantal Heurtel, "Que fait Frange dans la cour de la tombe TT 29? Fouilles dans la cour de la tombe TT 29", *Études Coptes VIII* (2003), 177-204.

7th and beginning of the 8th century [Fig. 1].

The texts are diverse in terms of their content. A number of the ostraca bear the Coptic alphabet [Fig. 2], as well as different kinds of school exercises. They were written apparently for the sake of writing practice.

Few of the ostraca bear biblical texts, but among these one seems to be particularly intriguing (K.O. 77) [Fig. 3]. On one side there is a biblical text written in Greek, and on the other the Coptic alphabet and a partly preserved text inscribed in Coptic. The hand on both sides appears to be the same.

Most of the ostraca concern "business" and legal matters. They mention sending

money, constitute "payment certificates" or refer to a sale (of camels frequently). Some are a good example of "promise of protection" documents ΠΛΟΓΟΣ ΠΠΝΟΥΓΕ.<sup>5</sup> It is regrettable, however, that due to the fragmentariness of most of the sherds found so far, often an essential part of the text, like the subject of a transaction for instance, is missing.

Regarding prosopography, apart from the above-mentioned Frange, there are some popular and widespread names, such as ΑΒΡΑΗΑΜ, ΙΩΗΑΝΝΗΣ and ΙΣΑΑΚ, appearing in the texts. As most of the ostraca are addressed to one ΑΠΑ ΙΩΣΗΦ, I dare say that he must have been the monk inhabiting the hermitage.

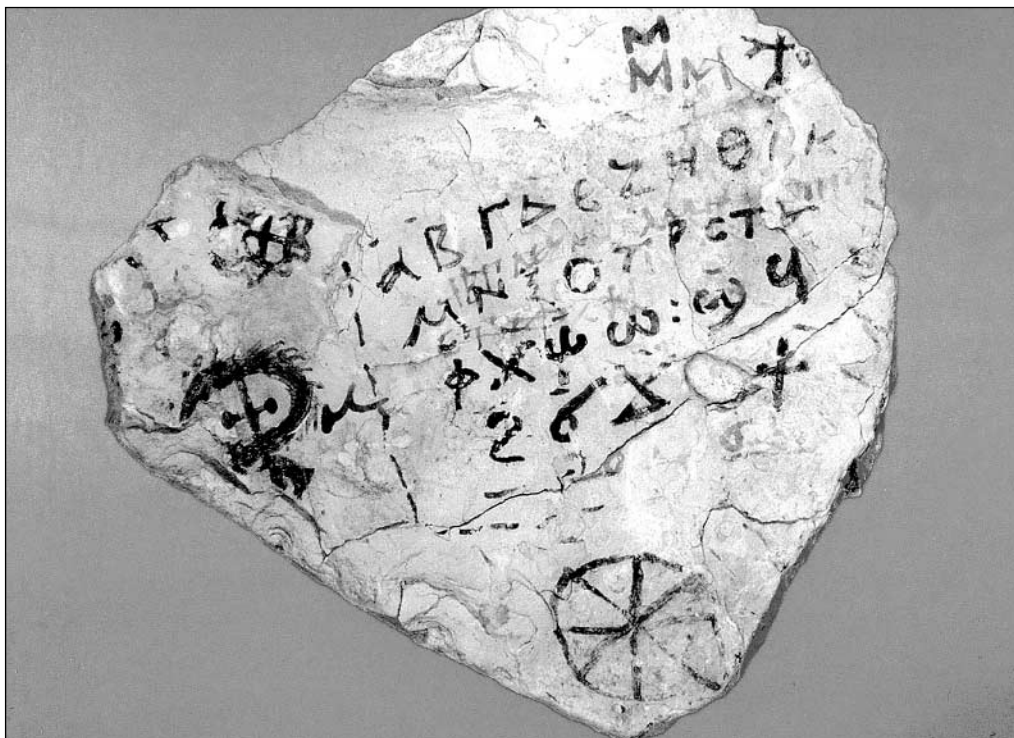


Fig. 2. Ostrakon with the Coptic alphabet  
(Photo M. Jawornicki)

5 Regarding texts using this formula, see Walter C. Till, "Koptische Schutzbriefe", *MDAIK* 8 (1938), 71-146.



This set of texts (which will hopefully be augmented in the course of further excavations carried out on the site) will be studied not only with regard to form and substance, which are obviously essential for a better understand of the spiritual and

economic existence of the monks. Another objective is to situate the hermitage within the Christian landscape of Djeme and to cognize its relations with the other hermitages and monasteries known from the area.