

Clementina Caputo and Julia Lougovaya, Using Ostraca in the Ancient World

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Using Ostraca in the Ancient World: New Discoveries and Methodologies edited by Clementina Caputo and Julia Lougovaya

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This remarkable volume provides the richest introduction ever offered to one of the most widespread but understudied writing technologies of the ancient world.¹ Like many such categories, ostraca are a somewhat fuzzy set, and the term “ostrakon” is often used imprecisely. Properly speaking, the ostrakon is a potsherd or, sometimes, a piece of stone, in a secondary use (i.e., not its original purpose) as a writing surface. But various other objects get included from time to time because they do not form a recognized category of their own, and writing on pottery as part of the primary use of a vessel is sometimes distinguished from ostraca as jar inscriptions and sometimes not. Ostraca were for long treated with disdain or positive horror by most papyrologists, but they have increasingly come into their own; and this set of chapters, based on a conference, represents a kind of coming of age of the study of ostraca.

When I first encountered a Greek ostrakon as a beginning graduate student in 1968, the corpus of published material on ostraca was relatively small: a little over 20 volumes of texts, less than half of them Greek, with the

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¹ I am far from a disinterested bystander when it comes to ostraca, and the reader should be aware that some of the contributors to the volume reviewed here are long-time friends and collaborators. Just to signal the most obvious connection, I have been the director of the excavations at Amheida with Paola Davoli as field director and Clementina Caputo as lead ceramologist, and have collaborated with both on a number of publications.

remainder Coptic, Demotic, and a few with more than one language. Hardly any were illustrated, so there was little to guide the novice in the often-difficult paleography of these texts, full of abbreviations and symbols. Even fewer took any account of the writing support; the sherd (and for Greek and Demotic it is almost entirely sherds) was treated almost as transparent, something with no characteristics that needed to be taken account of. The largest published corpus (the “Bodleian ostraca” now in the Ashmolean Museum) did not even give dimensions, let alone color, fabric, or breakage. This was text-oriented papyrology at its most extreme. And yet the character of the sherd arguably has a greater impact on the writing than does that of a sheet of papyrus: size and surface both help determine the boundaries of the possible. But papyrology was then far less attuned to the materiality of writing than it is today.

About three times as many volumes of ostraca have appeared in the last half-century as in the 70 years before, and the field has been transformed. The ostrakon as a phenomenon of writing technology has itself become an object of study; its geographic range is increasingly recognized; philologists and ceramologists collaborate in many publications, and even where they do not, the papyrologists are more likely to have consulted someone with expertise in ceramics; and the contours of the use of ostraca have started to be described. All of these directions of scholarship can be seen in the present volume, fittingly a product of the Heidelberg Materiale Textkulturen group. I shall take the chapters one by one and then offer a few reflections. The volume is organized into an introduction and three parts containing nine unnumbered chapters. In the introduction, the editors trace the etymology and classical usage of the term “ostrakon” (ὄστρακον). They describe the geographical range of the use of ostraca and discuss the varied techniques (ink and incision) of writing. They sketch the boundaries of what can be called ostraca and, in particular, consider the distinction between ostraca and jar inscriptions, which in some cases may be hard to make. There follows a summary of the chapters that make up the rest of the book.

The first chapter, by Paola Davoli, looks at ostraca from the archaeologist’s standpoint as products of manufacturing and as objects found in archaeological contexts. For older excavations, the findspots have rarely been recorded with enough precision to allow us today to recover the nature of the context, and of course vast numbers of ostraca in collections in the west come from the antiquities trade, particularly at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th century. It is often possible to assign them to particular provenances, but not to more specific contexts. Davoli emphasizes the distinction between

primary and secondary depositions, and the need to try to understand how ostraca came to be where they were found and to share a stratigraphic unit with other finds. She suggests beginning with the stratigraphic contexts rather than the ostraca. The reuse of sherds in construction means that one must be alert to the possibility that an ostrakon could have been used in building a wall or vault, and when that structure collapses they can turn up in a context that is chronologically and even locationally distant from its original place of use. Still, she is optimistic that information of value to both archaeologist and papyrologist can be recovered from sufficiently careful recording and analysis.

Davoli's characterization of ostraca as manufactured objects might be surprising to many, as it has long been believed that sherds were picked up more or less at random to be used for writing. This was not actually the case, as several chapters show. That analysis begins with Caputo's chapter on the use of sherds for writing. She describes five bodies of ostraca that she has looked at: from the Fayyum (especially Soknopaiou Nesos, where she is also the senior ceramologist), the Eastern Desert, the Dakhla Oasis (both Trimithis [Amheida] and Kellis), the Coptic ostraca from the Theban area (treated at some length in Cromwell's chapter), and some late antique ostraca from Elephantine. Surprisingly, perhaps, sherds with a light-colored surface do not seem to have been preferred with any consistency. Experimentation with uninscribed sherds from Amheida allowed her to see that the preferred fabrics were those most readily shaped by blows from a sharp tool; these are largely the thinner fabrics. When we have an extensive series of ostraca to examine, it seems that in fact ostraca were made rather than found: broken vessels of a desired fabric were found and cut into ostraca of the desired size and shape, avoiding parts such as rims that were too hard to write on. Body sherds of amphoras were favored in contexts where they were available. She concludes by emphasizing the need for systematic documentation and study of sherds used for writing.

In the third chapter, Adam Bülow-Jacobsen provides a basic introduction to the photography of papyri and ostraca, focused on the papyrologist's need for legible text. This chapter stands at a slightly oblique angle to the rest of the volume, but even for those who know Bülow-Jacobsen's earlier contributions to this subject, the updated treatment here will be valuable. As the largest part of his photographic work has been on ostraca from the Eastern Desert, and because as a papyrologist he can himself judge the usefulness of the photographs, this chapter is anything but an abstract discussion of the subject. Most directly relevant for ostraca is the section on

digital infrared photography, often (but not always) dramatically helpful, but his introduction to the use of DStretch, especially for red ink texts, is also welcome.

Part 2 moves us into case studies of particular bodies and contexts of ostraca, starting with a chapter by Ben Haring on pharaonic ostraca. Haring points out that whereas Greek (and generally Demotic and Coptic) ostraca were typically ephemeral, a point that later chapters also emphasize, the same was not always true of hieratic and hieroglyphic ostraca, which were sometimes used as miniature monuments. It is not always clear even which uses of vases or pieces of stone are primary or secondary. Like Davoli, he points to the inadequacies of the recording of older excavations for the purposes of analyzing the nature and uses of these objects.

Pharaonic use of ostraca is in general not very extensive. Ostraca are not numerous except in New Kingdom Thebes. Their use for pictorial purposes goes back to the predynastic period, but the numbers at most sites, whether on pottery or limestone, are small right down through the late period. Haring does not try to offer an explanation for the large growth in the use of ostraca beginning in the Hellenistic period. The general pre-Ptolemaic dearth is indeed puzzling because there is proof of existence in the more than 20,000 ostraca, both documentary and literary, from the Theban region in the New Kingdom, above all from Deir el-Medina with its workmen's village, but also from other temple and tomb sites. The connection of ostraca with the building of royal tombs is a phenomenon of the 19th and early 20th dynasties, perhaps linked to an increase in the on-site presence of scribes. It then collapses. Haring is skeptical of attempts to see shifts in preference between papyrus and ostrakon, thinking these fluctuations to be misleading artifacts of ancient situations and the chances of preservation. The reason for the patterns that we see remains elusive in his view. It may yet be that the chances of preservation and publication are in fact largely responsible: Haring reports a substantial find of administrative ostraca from Nadine Moeller's important excavations at Edfu, dating to the Second Intermediate Period and the start of the New Kingdom, but not yet published. Maybe Egyptian archaeologists have mostly been excavating the wrong sort of contexts for finding ostraca. Lougovaya in the next chapter discusses Greek literary ostraca, picking up a subject last surveyed in 1976, when the available body of material was a fraction of its present size. (The numbers are somewhat hard to compare because Lougovaya uses a broader definition than Paul Mertens did then.) It is above all from the sites of the deserts that the growth has come, along with the Fayyum. She surveys categories: magic, medicine, oracles, Christian

study and worship, drafts and note-taking, education, and performance. These are not exhaustive, and the entire concept of “literary” is somewhat nebulous. Are texts of magical or medical practice, for example, “literary”? Or do only more theoretical tracts qualify? And can we always be sure which is which? Often it is difficult to be sure what the original context of an ostrakon was. Mertens’ point that works not attributable to a known author and work are more prevalent in ostraca than in papyri remains true. This may, Lougovaya says, reflect the presence of occasional pieces not intended for any particular durability. Some of the compositions from the forts of the Eastern Desert fall into this category, and one such is published in an appendix to this chapter.

Only gradually have papyrologists working on material from Egypt or other countries that became part of the Greco-Roman world taken note of ostraca in other languages.² The chapter on Aramaic letter ostraca by Margaretha Folmer helps provide a bit of balance in that respect. Her main focus is on texts found in Elephantine and Syene, at the first cataract of the Nile, dating to the Achaemenid (Persian) period. More than 300 of these are known so far. Few can be traced to exact findspots, as they were found a century ago. Unlike the papyri from the Judaeon community in Elephantine, they were left to sit for a century before being edited. The texts are mostly very brief communications, lacking dates and even the names of the senders or an address; recipients’ patronymics are also omitted, which makes it hard to connect them to people known from the papyri. These sherds went back and forth between the island Elephantine and the town on the east bank of the Nile by ferryboat, carried by individuals. Folmer compares them to text messages in their brevity and ephemerality. The niceties of health and welfare of the sender and recipient, familiar to us from papyrus letters, are ignored; emotions are absent. They are very practical in content. Folmer is reserved on the question of who did the writing; there has been no full paleographic analysis of the corpus. She is inclined to see scribal services rather than widespread literacy. She also gives a very brief account of other bodies of Aramaic letters from outside Egypt, mostly similar in brevity if not in all other respects.

² Aramaic ostraca still are not included in the *Checklist of Editions* that serves as the backbone for papyrological reference, although Aramaic papyri are included where part of a larger series or published in a volume that also includes Greek texts: <https://papyri.info/docs/checklist>.

In contrast, the recent French excavations in the Eastern Desert have been carried out to high contemporary standards of stratigraphic documentation, and the results of the study presented by Marie-Pierre Chaufray and Bérangère Redon in the next chapter show both what illumination can result from this and in what circumstances there is no such light. They are looking at the finds from the twin sites (about 10 km apart) of Bi'r Samut and Samut North in the Upper Egyptian desert, on the route between Edfu and the Red Sea port of Berenike. Samut North, a gold mining site, was apparently in use only for a few seasons around 310 BC and only 25 texts were found, of which 21 were jar inscriptions. These included containers for some elite foodstuffs, dried black figs for a banker and honey from Lycia. There is a mix of largely Greek, fewer Demotic, and a couple of bilingual texts. The finds are concentrated in a group of rooms on the south, which are thus identified as food storage areas. Texts with Greek names, on the other hand, come mainly from the northern wing, which suggests that it may have been the quarters of management. Text and context thus work together well in this case.

Bi'r Samut, on the other hand, was a fort occupied for a considerable period, probably from the middle of the third century down to the outbreak of revolt against Ptolemy IV Philopator. More than 1,200 ostraca were found, almost four-fifths from dumps outside the walls. Here, Demotic are a slight majority, bilingual rather common, and even 15 in Aramaic. One dossier can be traced to late layers inside the fort, even though part of it was found outside: a letter in it refers to an extraordinary rainstorm, probably to be dated to 215, which helpfully filled the wells. It is an example of context helping us understand the texts, for the date would otherwise have been hard to pin down. On the other hand, the jar inscriptions of Storeroom 12 do not fare so well because of a tendency at times of periodic rebuilding to clear out everything from earlier decades, thus destroying the stratigraphy that the archaeologist would like to find. In sum, two cases out of three work well for the collaboration of archaeologist and papyrologist.

In the following chapter, Sandra Lippert and Maren Schentuleit look at the finds of Demotic ostraca at two temple sites, one at Soknopaiou Nesos (Dime) in the Fayyum, the other the temple of Repit ("Hut-Repit" in Egyptian) at the site best known as Atripe (near modern Sohag) because of its incorporation into the monastic empire of Shenoute in the fifth century AD. Dime has yielded more than 800 Demotic ostraca, mostly still unpublished; Hut-Repit has produced more than 10,000 ostraca, a mixture of Demotic and Greek, from a dump on the west side of the temple that is the product of sifting activity by those seeking fertile soil from inside the ruins in modern times.

As most of these have been found within the past couple of years, they are not yet fully analyzed, even to the point of counting the language frequency. Even so, the 2,000 known before 2018 give a lot of material to work with.

Much of the chapter is devoted to a detailed enumeration of types of texts. Although both assemblages are largely the product of the administration and economy of temples, they have distinctive characteristics. Soknopaiou Nesos, for example, produces *phyle*-lists, a kind of priestly roster not attested at Hut-Repit, as well as a large quantity of sherds with just a name (or name and patronymic), the use of which remains a matter of speculation. Hut-Repit has much more varied accounts, and women are frequently among the recipients of distributions, something unknown at Soknopaiou Nesos. It also has entire genres missing at Soknopaiou Nesos, including letters and receipts.

More generally, Lippert and Schentuleit stress that these ostraca were for the most part just temporary homes for information that would have been incorporated later into fuller documentation in Demotic on papyrus, and then summarized in Greek, also on papyrus, for the use of the Roman administration. The drafts and school texts (numerous at Hut-Repit) were also ephemeral. The information that we crave was all in the heads of the writers and users of these ostraca; there was no need to put it down on clay.

The final chapter, by Jennifer Cromwell, looks at the use of ostraca in late antique Western Thebes. Papyrus was not scarce there—many texts on papyrus from this area and period survive—but ostraca weather time better, and 85% of the surviving documentation here is on ostraca. Of these, Cromwell calculates that 82% are on ceramic, the rest on limestone. She focuses on six well-known sites, partly monastic, partly a town (Djeme). In a penetrating analysis, she shows that limestone was used almost entirely at a few places close to the New Kingdom temple of Thutmosis III, which had been destroyed by two rockslides that helpfully broke up the nicely finished limestone blocks of the temple into flakes suitable for use as ostraca. The reasons for choosing limestone were thus practical, not ideological. Elsewhere in the region, pottery was used, above all from Late Roman Amphora 7 vessels and other amphora types. But there is one exception, the evidently deliberate use of New Kingdom amphoras with a smooth yellowish surface; these ostraca were reserved for tax receipts written in fast professional hands. As New Kingdom levels were far below the surface by this time, these sherds can have come only from an external dump and must reflect intentional recovery and shaping of these amphora walls, already 2,000 years old, into writing materials. Over 500 of them survive.

Cromwell closes her argument with a plea for better documentation by papyrologists of the material supports of ostraca that they publish, and where possible for close collaboration with ceramologists. Both parties, she says, will benefit from a better understanding of the “pragmatics of writing”. An appendix publishes three ostraca from her target area, now in the collection of Columbia University by purchase in the 1960s from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This is an excellent example of how the proceedings of a conference can, just occasionally, become more than the sum of its parts, and not only as a result of good cross-referencing between chapters. The reader emerges from it with a strong sense of consensus among the contributors about the benefits that have come from a focus on the material basis of texts, as well as a fair dash of realism about the limits placed on our work by the past operations of the antiquities market or the sebbakh-diggers, not to speak of poor recording practices and failure to publish, and lack of interest on the part of past excavators and papyrologists. Of course it is not always easy to do the kind of work needed, in part because of the obstacles thrown up by Egyptian bureaucracy to getting access to the material. On the other hand, it is striking that no Egyptians figure among the authors in the volume. Indeed, despite a considerable renaissance of papyrology in Egypt in recent years, the role of Egyptians in publishing these texts continues to lag. Fixing that is another desideratum.

If there is one significant gap in this volume, it is adequate attention to ostraca from countries other than Egypt. These bearers of script are found across North Africa and through many parts of the Levant and Near East. Of course, one conference cannot do everything, but I would have liked to read some serious thinking about the origins (single or multiple?) and chronology of the habit of using potsherds for writing, as well as the reasons for the pattern of finds that we encounter in time and space. Do we have so few ostraca from some regions because excavators ignored them or were digging with techniques that caused them to be seen as just so many dirty sherds? (It is in fact easy to miss them in the field.) Even for Egypt, the questions raised particularly by Haring’s chapter require more analysis. There is plenty more to be done. But I would conclude with the thought that working on ostraca has been far more interesting and fun since I started taking an interest in the potsherds and working with a ceramologist. I have learned a lot and expect to learn more. I hope that despite the caveats rightly put forward in some of these chapters, others will have a similar experience.