Twelve Coptic Documentary Ostraca

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DOI: 10.21608/aakj.2023.238699.1563

Date received: 24/9/2023
Date of acceptance: 27/9/2023
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. Winternute 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:

[\[\text{\&}\text{\&}\text{\&}\text{\&}]: Letters missing from the original text due to lacuna, restored by the editor.
\(\text{\&}(\text{\&})\): Abbreviation / symbol in the text, expanded by the editor.
\(\text{\&}\text{\&}\text{\&}\text{\&}\): Letters not clear entirely in the text
\(<\text{\&}\text{\&}\text{\&}\text{\&}>\): Letters omitted by scribe
?: Uncertain reading/ translation.
\{\text{\&}\text{\&}\text{\&}\text{\&}\}: Letters written as mistakes
1. Private letter concerning a butcher for slaying and cutting a sheep

1. [………]
2. [ε] ⲞⲧⲰⲱⲣⲱ [ι นำเสนอ]
3. ⲡⲟⲩⲧ [ⲧⲓ (1) Ⲇⲡⲟⲩⲧ (2)]
4. [Πⲧⲣⲟⲩⲣ] ⲥⲓⲧⲓ […..]
5. Ⲥⲟⲩⲧⲱⲩⲧ [ι ؟]
6. […………]

1. […………] (4)
2. you will write [ to ΝΝ]
3. the butcher [er to slay/cut]

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

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

(3) Perhaps written here as ⲡⲟⲩⲧ or ⲡⲟⲩⲣⲓ (mentioned as ⲡⲟⲩⲧ & ⲡⲟⲩⲣⲓ 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. ἀλοκ ἡaucoupς
2. οὐγε[σι] ἐκ\(^{(7)}\)
3. τῇ\(^{(8)}\) ἡντόμ
4. νῶμ ἡμ
5. ημοῦ τ[ασ ει?]\(^{(9)}\)
6. βικτὼρ
7. Ἡ

\(^{(5)}\) 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 καμ or σεμ (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)
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1. ⲫ
2. ⲟⲩⲃⲛⲁ ⲡⲣⲁⲡⲟⲩⲧ ⲡⲣⲁ-]
3. ⲡⲓⲁ ⲡ-ⲡⲡ ⲡⲣⲁ-]
4. ⲡⲓⲁⲛ ⲡⲣⲁⲧ ⲡⲣⲁⲥⲧ ⲡⲣⲁ-]
5. ⲡⲣⲁⲧ ⲡⲁ ⲡⲡⲧⲟⲩ ⲡⲣⲁ-] (12)
6. ⲡⲓⲁ ⲡ-ⲡⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧⲧ涞

1. ⲫ
2. ⲡⲟⲩⲃⲛⲁ ⲡⲣⲁⲧ ⲡⲣⲁ-]
3. ⲡⲣⲁⲧ ⲡ-ⲡⲟⲩ ⲡⲣⲁ-]
4. ⲡⲟⲩⲃⲛ ⲡⲣⲁⲧ ⲡⲣⲁⲧ ⲡⲣⲁ-]
5. ⲡⲣⲁⲧ ⲡⲧ ⲡⲟⲩ ⲡⲣⲁ-] (13)
6. ⲡⲟⲩ ⲡ-ⲡⲟⲩ ⲡⲣⲁ-]
7. ⲡⲟⲩⲃⲛ ⲡⲣⲁ-] (14)
8. ⲡⲟⲩ ⲡ-ⲡⲟⲩ ⲡⲣⲁ-] (15)
9. ⲡ-ⲡⲟⲩ ⲡⲣⲁ-] (16)

(12) Or: κόσμηνς “Youhanna”
(13) Another reading as: υπάγων “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. [ ανοκ NN ετεραι ṵ]  
2. ησα[..(18) NN]  
3. κ<ν>αει [ε....]  
4. ηωο[ρε]  
5. ετ[β]ε? [… νό]  
6. ει ε[.........]  
7. νό (19) [……]  

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

(19) Conjunctive, usually as νι or νι (Layton 2007, p.100) but I found the same form in unpublished ostracon 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. \([\text{something}]\)
4. \(\text{something}\)
5. \([\text{something}]\)
6. \(\text{something}\)

\(^{(20)}\) 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. [ ] Ⲟ ωⲧⲪ军官
8. [ ] ⲜⲧⲣⲟⲩⲧⲱⲧⲡⲡⲈ (24) ⲡⲥ…..
9. [ ] Ⲟ ⲟⲧⲪ军官
10. [ ] Ⲡ ⲟⲧⲪ军官

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 Ⲟⲧⲡⲥ, perhaps he worked with him.
(29) Another verb is missing here.
6. *Private letter concerning trouble because of payment*

1. δυο[ε]
2. [ⲉ]ⲡⲟⲩⲧ(30) ⲣⲧ[ε …]
3. [ⲉ]ⲡⲟⲩⲧ Ⲣⲧ[ε]
4. ακτε […]

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

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

(31) Perhaps a price, interest, debt, or tax.
7. Letter mentioned a builder (?)

1. [ε]ις(32) ἄρ[...]
2. ὡς ἡμ[33]ή c[άρα-]
3. ἡπο<ν>(34) ἄφο τ[έκ-]
4. τω[ν](35) ε[ ]
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 η as one letter, and this was popular.
(35) τέκτων or τέκτων: 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. ⲍⲩ ⲧⲧⲩⲧⲪ ⲟⲧⲉ ⲟⲧⲩⲧⲣⲓⲧⲧⲧⲓ/>
2. Ⲩ  
3. Ⲩ  
4. Ⲩ  
5. Ⲩ ⲧⲧⲧⲩ ⲧⲣⲓⲧⲧⲧⲓ  
6. Ⲩ ⲧⲧ ⲧⲣⲓⲧⲧⲧⲓ  

1. ⲍⲩ Tsophi[a who writes]  
2. To [NN]  
3. The [….]  
4. That [………….]  
5. Because [……………]  
6. Seek/ ask/greet? [……………]  

(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 Ⲩ to inform something.  

(42) Something or someone.
9. An address of private letter from a father to his daughter

1. [ⲧⲁⲥ ⲉ]  
2. [ ] ⢨ⲧⲧⲧⲧ[ⲓ]  
3. [ⲃⲥⲉ ⲱⲧ]  

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

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(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. ἡμέρα {τ}  
2. τ责任制

1. My father
2. Amen

(45) Written as η instead of τ.
11. *Fragment contains personal names, perhaps account*

![Fragment Image]

1. ........
2. ἀκοῖ
3. σῆμω[ν]
4. ἀμω[ν]
5. [ ]

1. ............
2. Akoui\(^{46}\)
3. Simion\(^{47}\)
4. Ammw[ν]\(^{48}\)
5. [ …]

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\(^{47}\) Ibid, 92b, 96a.

\(^{48}\) Ammon or Ammonios (see: Ibid, 9b).
12. Fragment of a loan contract

Recto

Verso
Recto


Verso


Translation

Recto

1. [I] NN who?\(^{50}\)
2. Writes to NN I owe\(^{51}\)
3. you (something) [ I took it]
4. [From 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 (= ⲧⲏ).  

\(^{51}\) 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 (προσφορα) 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 ωιτω but when he acted as butcher and cooker of meat, he called Μαγιος while the seller of the meat called Καβα.

- 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 ΤΗ and ΤΟ 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.
References:

Ahmed, S. 2023. Publishing Coptic Loan Contracts on Ostraca (in Arabic), JCRAS 12, Minia University, pp.110-121


O. Edfou Copte= Bacot, S. 2009, Ostraca Grecs et Coptes de Tell Edfou, Le Caire


WEBSITES:

- WWW.COPTIC DICTIONARY.ORG
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