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USING OSTRACA IN THE ANCIENT WORLD: NEW
DISCOVERIES AND METHODOLOGIES

(ABSTRACTS)

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RUPRECHT-KARLS-UNIVERSITÄT HEIDELBERG

**Conference ‘Using Ostraca in the Ancient World:
New Discoveries and Methodologies’**

As has become increasingly clear, the study of ostraca cannot be confined to the preserved texts alone, but must necessarily consider the circumstances in which they were produced and used. The content and types of texts on ostraca, combined with knowledge of their material culture and archaeological context, permit better understanding of the economic and societal conditions in which they were produced. Over the last decades, various approaches were being developed that allow for careful recording and interpretation of the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of ostraca in relation to the archaeological, cultural and economic parameters of the settlements where they are found.

The principal aim of this conference is to bring together scholars of various fields who work with recycled inscribed sherds and address the issue of writing on ostraca as a cultural practice with particular attention to material aspects of the ostraca, the type and purpose of texts, the context in which they were produced (geographical, historical, social, and archaeological).

SFB 933 “Materialität und Präsenz des Geschriebenen in non-typographischen Gesellschaften”

TP A09 “Schreiben auf Ostraka im inneren und äußeren Mittelmeerraum”

Seminar für Alte Geschichte und Epigraphik

Dr. Clementina Caputo

Dr. Julia LOugovaya

Rodney AST (Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, Heidelberg)

Ostraca in Action

Ostraca were used for different purposes in a variety of complex situations. Although it can be difficult to reconstruct these situations, often because of constraints in the archeological record or state of preservation, occasionally we catch glimpse of complex uses that are not necessarily obvious from the ostrakon itself. For example, an ostrakon might serve as a label in a jar, or a draft for a text on papyrus. It might also have been produced together with a copy on papyrus, and thus be part of a complex bureaucratic procedure. Elucidating the set of circumstances behind the use of ostraca is challenging and depends to a large extent on conjecture. This talk entertains just such conjecture by exploring several use case scenarios, primarily among ostraca from Karanis.

Bruno BAZZANI (Reggio Emilia, Italy)

Text, postsherd, and context: the many souls of ostraca. A basic statistical approach

The NYU excavations at Amheida, during eleven campaigns since 2004, has recovered more than 1000 ostraka. Beside the classical philological approach, all of them have been rigorously documented as archaeological objects, collecting a number of information about the context from where they have been recovered, dimensions, potsherd fabrics, etc.

The first part of this paper, far from presenting final results, is intended as a “proof of concept” to demonstrate that common statistical tools, combining data of different nature allow to investigate the intimate relationships between the different “souls” of the ostraka. Simple statistic methods have been applied to various combination of data about the texts, the potsherds and their contexts, getting some interesting results, some rather obvious, others quite unexpected.

The second part focuses on a specific aspect of the textual content, namely the personal and geographical names, to suggest a possible way to graphically represent the relationships and the interactions between different entities.

Adam BÜLOW-JACOBSEN (University of Copenhagen)

Ostraca from the Eastern Desert of Egypt. 30 years and still counting

In this paper, I shall try to show that there was no relation between the type of ceramic used for writing and the type of text which was written on it. Ostraca were used in the desert quarries and *praesidia* because they were easily available and cost nothing, and any kind of pottery that came to the sites could be used for writing.

I shall also speak of some new methods of photography that have given good results with ostraca.

Clementina CAPUTO (Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, Heidelberg)

Pottery Sherds for Writing: An Overview of the Practice

Analysis of the various types of sherds used as writing support not only helps identify the vessels from which they originate, but also sheds light on questions of provenance, chronology and technical production. With my paper, through some observations regarding physical properties of ostraca, I will try to afford a little contribute to identification and better understanding of practices associated with their usage.

James M.S. COWEY (Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, Heidelberg)

Working Together, or Making Best Use of Our Resources

Considerations on how to integrate existing resources in order to avoid duplication of effort and to smooth the path towards making data accessible to others.

Jennifer CROMWELL (University of Copenhagen)

“Forgive Me, Because I Could Not Find Papyrus”: The Use and Distribution of Ostraca in Late Antique Western Thebes

According to the papyrological database Trismegistos, there are 2,116 ostraca from Western Thebes from the mid-6th to the end of the 8th century. This constitutes over 36% of the total number of ostraca from Egypt in this period and far outnumbers the 362 papyri from the region. Consequently, Thebes provides an excellent opportunity to examine the distribution and use of ostraca from a clearly defined region and

chronological period. Three main types of case study will be examined: (i) distribution and use by site (secular and monastic communities, with different local resources); (ii) use for different text types (I will focus on school texts); (iii) use by specific scribes (many Theban writers can be identified by name). However, despite the wealth of material, the study of ostraca at Thebes is not unproblematic. Many items are given a broad ‘Theban’ provenance, and one aim of this study is to refine such provenances, based on the materiality of the ostrakon as well as its content. When examining ostraca in this light, it is key to know the physical properties of the object, but such studies are further hindered by a disconnect between philologists and ceramicists (and many older publications provide little description beyond ‘limestone’ or ‘potsherd’), and I will discuss ways to move forward, to better tackle this situation.

Paola DAVOLI (University of Salento, Italy)

Papyri and ostraka as archaeological objects: the importance of the contexts

The concept of the archaeological nature of papyri and ostraka is a recent acquisition and developed together with the spreading of scientific excavation methods in Egypt. They have been always considered among the most important kinds of objects that can be found in an excavation, for the great deal of information that their texts can provide, but their archaeological nature has been often totally ignored. With the introduction of scientific excavation methods things started to change but archaeologists and papyrologists have now to face new challenges because failing to properly identify and document the stratigraphy from which the objects are recovered can easily result in misleading interpretations and erroneous historical reconstructions.

With this paper, I would like to stress the importance of a rigorous interdisciplinary approach during the excavation and the publication of the objects found, especially of the written materials, in a frame of contextual and reflexive methodology.

Margaretha FOLMER (Leiden University / Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam)

Šlm ʿḥwtb ‘Hi Aḥutab’: Ostraca from Elephantine with Letters in Aramaic (5th c. BCE and beyond)

In this paper, I will address the use of potsherds for the use of writing letters in Aramaic by members of the Judean community at Elephantine (Upper Egypt; 5th c. BCE). More than 300 ostraca were found by the French archaeologist Charles Clermont-Ganneau during excavations at Elephantine at the beginning of the 20th century. Among them are some 260 short messages (letters). Only some of these messages were published by André Dupont-Sommer and Hélène Lozachmeur previous to the publication by Lozachmeur of the complete collection in 2006.

After a brief description of the early excavations at Elephantine and the discovery of a Judean community in the 5th c. BCE, I will discuss the question of the motivation behind the choice to write messages on potsherds instead of papyrus, the presence (and absence) of specific letter formulae, as compared to letters written on papyrus, and several material aspects of writing on potsherds.

Fatma HAMOUDA (Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, Heidelberg)

Some Prolific Letter Writers of the Eastern Desert

The proposed paper will survey individual hands in letters of the Eastern desert of Egypt, focusing in particular on the 2nd century CE. Work on this paper is part of a larger dissertation project that the presenter is conducting on the topic of epistolography in Greco-Roman Egypt.

Ben J.J. HARING (Leiden University)

The Survival of New Kingdom Ostraca: Coincidence or Meaningful Pattern?

It is a truism that modern reconstructions of scribal practice in a remote past depend to a considerable extent on the preservation of written material. Egyptologists are keenly aware that the papyri we have from pharaonic Egypt constitute a mere fraction of what was once produced. Even in relatively favorable conditions, as in the Theban necropolis,

only part of such material has survived. Ceramic and limestone ostraca from the same region seem to present a better basis for quantitative estimates, although these are never without risk. Many thousands of ostraca produced by the administrators of the royal necropolis workmen of the New Kingdom, and by the workmen themselves, have come to us. When comparing their numbers to a 'mere' several hundred papyri from the same community, we seem to be fortunate indeed with these more durable documents. But is this all? Do the ostraca preserved even constitute a representative sample?

Sandra LIPPERT (Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier)

Maren SCHENTULEIT (Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, Heidelberg)

Ostraca and their use in Egyptian Temple Context from the Graeco-Roman Period – Soknopaiu Nesos and Athribis

The focus of the paper lies on the ostraca from the temple complexes of Soknopaiu Nesos (Dime) in the Fayum and Athribis in Middle Egypt (near Sohag) written in Demotic, the indigenous script and language that continued to be used alongside Greek as official administrative language even after 332 B.C. and into the Roman period. The two roughly contemporary ostraca ensembles provide the opportunity to compare the use of demotic ostraca for different text types and the role of potsherds versus other writing materials in the administrative, economic and cultic life of Egyptian provincial temples in the late Ptolemaic–early Roman period.

Julia LOUGOVAYA (Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, Heidelberg)

Why Write Literature on an Ostrakon?

This paper will survey ostraca inscribed with literary, or non-documentary, and question the common assumption that ostraca of literary texts arise apparently only in an educational context (Reviel Netz). It will argue that reasons for choosing sherds to write literary texts could vary depending on period, place, and writing habits, and the function of such ostraca could but was not always confined to education. Untangling the default association of literary ostraca with a school environment may help create a more nuanced picture of ancient

education, while also expanding our knowledge of how literary texts were produced and consumed.

Bérangère REDON (CNRS, HiSoMA, Lyon)

M.-P. CHAUFRAY (CNRS, Ausonius, Bordeaux Montaigne)

The ostraca of Samut North and Bi'r Samut (Eastern desert). Some reflections on type and find location

The French archaeological mission of the Eastern desert started in 2014 a series of excavations in order to study the military control of the first Ptolemies on the commercial road between Edfu, in the Nile valley, and the harbour of Berenike, on the Red Sea, as well as their management policy of the natural resources of the desert (<http://desorient.hypotheses.org>).

The excavation of the mining district of Samut took place between 2014 and 2016. We focused mainly on two sites dating from the beginning of the Hellenistic period (late 4th–3rd cent. BC): North Samut, a gold mine settlement, and the large fortress of Bi'r Samut. Around 1240 ostraca in Egyptian Demotic, Greek and Aramaic were discovered. They come mostly from the dumps of Bi'r Samut, but some ostraca were also found inside the fortress.

Our paper will show how a specific attention to find location and type can help gather dossiers and make hypotheses on the occupation of the sites.

Patrick SÄNGER (Austrian Archaeological Institute, Vienna)

New Ostraca from Late Antique Ephesus

Excavations carried out by the Austrian Archaeological Institute (ÖAI) between the years 2011 and 2015 retrieved approx. 60 incised potsherds from the ruins of late antique Ephesus (5th–7th century). They were found close together at two sites: on the one hand, in the front of the entrance area of the church that was erected in the 4th/5th century on the foundations (within in the cella) of the Serapeion; on the other hand, in the rooms of the newly excavated late antique residence adjacent to the church of Mary to the south. The category to which about one half of the pieces belong might not be surprising: we are dealing with

owners' marks or commercial notations (mostly in Greek, occasionally in Latin) scratched into everyday artefacts (*instrumenta domestica*), in our case into the surface of (once) functioning ceramic products. The other part of the newly discovered potsherds with scratched inscriptions (exclusively in Greek) belongs to a completely different type of epigraphic source because the potsherds, already broken, were clearly used for writing short business letters, instructions or accounts and may therefore be classified as ostraca—and this is remarkable because apart from Ephesus, no ostraca from other regions or cities of Asia Minor have been published so far. This paper aims at giving a systematic overview of the Ephesian ostraca. It will also point out the historical value of the new epigraphic material which is due to two reasons: on the one hand, the new ostraca (and inscriptions on pottery) show that there were lively business activities in the immediate vicinity of ecclesiastical institutions, which is a completely new aspect of late antique city life in Ephesus; on the other hand, the use of ostraca that is documented in this context provides a major contribution to our understanding of the epigraphic habit in late antique Ephesus.

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