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Greek Literary Ostraca Revisited

In 1976 Paul Mertens produced a survey of previously published Greek literary ostraca, arranging them chronologically and indicating their provenance.¹ In his selection Mertens followed the catalogue of literary papyri compiled by Roger Pack, who defined literary texts as “most or all of the texts that were intended to reach the eyes of a reading public or at least possessed a more than ephemeral interest or usefulness.”² Although, as Pack noted, in practice this selection meant that only documents and private letters ought to be excluded; however, with some exceptions, he also left out magical as well as “Biblical and other Jewish and Christian” texts, not because they were deemed not literary, but because separate catalogues existed or were being prepared for them.³ Exclusion of these kinds of texts from Mertens’ survey in turn had consequences for both his statistical observations on the chronological distribution of literary ostraca (because a lot of specimens from the Byzantine period were left out) and for his discussion of practices associated with them (because the notion of a Christian text does not correspond to any single distinct practice). Yet Mertens’ short study has remained the sole attempt at a comprehensive approach to Greek literary ostraca, and many of his observations have been further supported by new findings and publications.

Mertens lists 143 ostraca, both pottery sherds and limestone fragments inscribed mostly in ink but also incised. He observes that, of the approximately datable ostraca, Ptolemaic pieces comprise 24%, while Roman and Byzantine amount to 35% and 41%, respectively. Upper Egypt is clearly the source of the majority of extant finds: 84% of ostraca with attested or determinable provenance come from that part of Egypt. In terms of text types, most could be associated with educational contexts, but Mertens also points out that medical recipes and drafts of inscriptions are also recognizable categories, while a few more literary texts, including five ‘lyriques et épigrammatiques’, remain outside of these categories. Furthermore, Mertens makes an interesting observation that the share of adespota among literary ostraca is much higher than it is in the overall papyrological evidence.⁴

² Pack 1965, 1.
³ Pack 1965, 1.
The task of surveying literary ostraca is much easier now than it was in Mertens’
days because of the existence of online catalogues and other kinds of registries. The
third iteration of the Mertens-Pack catalogue (MP³) exists in electronic form. It is based
at CEDOPAL (Centre de Documentation de Papyrologie Littéraire at the University of
Liège) and provides bibliographic and other information for literary texts attested in
papyri, ostraca, and other supports; as with its printed predecessors, however, it does
not include biblical or magical texts.⁵ A very helpful resource for gathering primary
textual evidence is the Trismegistos Texts initiative, which assigns unique identifi-
cers to published or described papyrological documents dating between 800 BCE and
800 CE from Egypt and the Nile valley, and increasingly to those from outside Egypt
as well.⁶ Its subset, the Leuven Database of Ancient Books (LDAB), brings together
“information on all ancient literary texts, as opposed to documents”,⁷ which date from
the fourth century BCE to ca. 800 CE while also incorporating or linking to the data in
other catalogues such as Mertens-Pack or Joseph van Haelst’s catalogue of Jewish and
Christian literary papyri.⁸ LDAB thus allows for the widest approach to the subject of
literary ostraca, and it has been used to compile the evidence discussed here.

A search run in LDAB in May 2018 for “Material” = “ostracon” and “Language/
script” = “Greek” alone or along with other ancient languages, such as Egyptian
Demotic or Coptic, but not “Greek or another language”,⁹ resulted in a pool of 501
ostraca, that is more than three times the number of Greek literary ostraca in Mertens’
survey. This drastic difference is explained largely by the kinds of text that Mertens left
out (e. g. Biblical etc.), but also by new findings and publications. The biggest gains
since 1976, when Mertens published his catalogue, have been seen in the Eastern and
Western Deserts and in the Fayum. The material from the two deserts comes primarily
from excavations conducted since the 1980s in the Roman military camps and mining
sites of the Eastern Desert and in the settlements of the Great Oasis in the West.¹⁰

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⁶ For a brief description, cf. https://www.trismegistos.org/tm/about.php (last accessed: 30.1.2020);
on the crucial importance of unique identifiers, cf. also Reggiani 2017, esp. 56–58.
⁷ See the description at https://www.trismegistos.org/ldab/about.php, where the issue of what is
considered a literary text in the database is also addressed (last accessed: 30.1.2020).
⁸ Haelst 1976; for the description of LDAB and its relation to other catalogues of literary papyri, cf.
Reggiani 2017, 47–56. The Digital Corpus of Literary Papyri (DCLP), which draws on metadata in LDAB,
provides transcriptions for a growing number of literary texts; it can be accessed at papyri.info.
⁹ This is mostly the case with Greek or Coptic texts; the exclusion is somewhat arbitrary, since a fair
number of texts designated as Greek and Coptic or even Greek alone could be categorized as Greek or
Coptic.
¹⁰ A list of literary ostraca from the Eastern Desert, though with some omissions, can be found in Ast/
Lougovaya 2015, 676–678. For editions and descriptions, cf. above all Cuvigny/Wagner 1986, 71–72,
no. 13, with Handley 1987; Fournet 2003; Cuvigny 2010; Bülow-Jacobsen 2011, with Benelli/Lucarini
2017; and editions in O.Claud. I and II; further literary ostraca from Didymoi, Um Balad, Xeron, and
Maximianon await publication. For the Western Desert, consult the series O.Douch, O.Kellis, and
O.Trim.
Conversely, the increase in literary ostraca from the Fayum is due largely to the publication of earlier excavated finds. Most significant in this respect is the site of Medinet Madi, ancient Narmouthis, where in 1938 Achille Vogliano found 1,555 ostraca, which did not begin to be edited until the 1980s, and over half of which remain unpublished. The LDAB currently gives information for 47 literary ostraca, with 29 of them featuring Greek.\(^\text{11}\)

Ostraca from outside Egypt deserve a separate mention because of their heterogeneous character. While it has increasingly become apparent that they should not be ignored, it remains unclear whether and how to integrate them in papyrological studies. To begin with, there is a problem of definition: ostraca used in the procedure of ostracism in ancient Athens are traditionally not considered ostraca in a papyrological sense. When Mabel Lang edited pottery sherds inscribed with alphabets or messages from the Athenian Agora—precisely the type of material that would be deemed ostraca had it been found in Egypt—she included them in the volume of *Graffiti and Dipinti*,\(^\text{12}\) while keeping the volume *Ostraca* for the sherds used in ostracism.\(^\text{13}\) Whereas this kind of categorization may be useful for the classification of finds from the Athenian Agora, it is less so for a study of writing practices in Athens or in the larger Hellenic world.

A seemingly obvious difference between sherds inscribed with texts in Egypt and in Hellenic Greece is that the former tend to be written with ink, while the latter are more often scratched.\(^\text{14}\) Yet, when the same type of text (e.g. a receipt, a letter, or letters of the alphabet) is inscribed on the same type of portable support (a sherd) for the same purpose (e.g. communication between two parties or learning to write and read), one wonders whether a distinction based upon the mode of inscribing does more to obscure than to elucidate.\(^\text{15}\) Moreover, more sherds inscribed in ink are gradually coming to light from outside of Egypt, a fact that highlights further the artificial nature of separating documents from Egypt from those in the rest of the ancient Mediterranean. Yet, it remains difficult to gain an overview of texts on sherds found outside Egypt and, consequently, to develop a more meaningful classification. Trismegistos

\(^\text{11}\) Not all of these are published. For the summary of findings in the House of Ostraca (TM ArchId 534) and further bibliography, consult Vandorpe/Clarysse/Verreth 2015, 395–400, available also online at https://www.trismegistos.org/arch/archives/pdf/534.pdf (last accessed: 30.1.2020). There, the number of ostraca inscribed with texts vaguely described as school texts or writing exercises and featuring Hieratic, Old Coptic, or Greek, is said to be 76.

\(^\text{12}\) Lang 1976. This volume also includes jar inscriptions, that is, inscriptions written not on sherds but on complete vessels.

\(^\text{13}\) Lang 1990.

\(^\text{14}\) It would perhaps be more accurate to say that those that survive tend to be incised rather than inscribed with ink, because ink may have a smaller chance of survival outside of Egypt.

\(^\text{15}\) A good illustration of the arbitrariness of this distinction is provided by the sherds published under the heading “Messages and Lists” in Lang 1976, 8–11, B1–B21, or an account published in Johnston 1985, which would most likely be included among ostraca in the papyrological sense had they been found in Egypt. They are all, however, documentary, and thus not of immediate concern here.
now aims to extend its coverage to “all texts from antiquity”, but relatively few texts of non-Egyptian origin have so far been added. At present, only sherds from outside Egypt inscribed in ink, that is, ostraca in the traditional papyrological sense, tend to be consistently included in both TM and LDAB, and the latter has about half a dozen of them, not many, but enough to indicate that the practice of writing literary texts on sherds was not confined to Egypt. LDAB also includes a few incised ostraca from outside Egypt, but those form just a fraction of the total surviving. Thus it seems wise to postpone any generalizations about this data.

Recent discoveries and publications have also contributed to changes in how scholars view the possible circumstances in which literary ostraca were produced and circulated. Earlier certainty regarding what could or could not be inscribed on a piece of broken pottery has yielded to appreciation of hitherto unattested functions of literary ostraca, as well as to the possibility of their multi-functionality. The story of one ostracon, O. Florida inv. 21, is illustrative of this change. In the fall of 1973, the Strozier Library of Florida State University acquired 32 ostraca, which had come to the Netherlands in the early twentieth century, reportedly from Edfu. When the ostraca arrived in Tallahassee, they were accompanied by notes of the Dutch papyrologist P. J. Sijpsteijn, who labeled one of the pieces, an erotic text with orthographic mistakes inscribed in an unskilled hand, as a “fake?” Roger Bagnall, the editor of the batch, saw no reason to doubt Sijpsteijn and left the ostracon out, since it indeed looked like no other piece known at the time. Thirty years on, and after hundreds of documentary and a handful of literary ostraca from the Eastern Desert were published, Bagnall realized that the piece was no forgery. Working together with Raffaella Cribiore, he concluded that the sherd likely originated in one of the military forts in the Eastern Desert, possibly Maximianon, and that a text that seemed so outlandish just a few decades earlier could in fact be associated with other pieces of erotic musings in the desert. What originally seemed to be a fake was now recognized as a type.

All these developments warrant taking stock of literary ostraca with a view to the circumstances in which they were produced and used, to the extent that these

17 Remarkable is an ostracon inscribed with an erotic epigram found on Rhodos and dated to mid-3rd–mid-2nd c. BCE, cf. Dreliosi-Irakleidou/Litinas 2009–2011; those from Palestine display either abecedaria or disparate letters, cf. for example, O. Masada 782 and 783 (before 74 CE), O. Maresha 3 and 4 (336–27 BCE); an ostracon from Elousa (5th–7th c. CE) in Verreth/Goldfus 1999, discussed below, may be magical.
18 For example, two sherds found in Lattes (ancient Lattara) on the outskirts of Montpellier, and incised with letters of the alphabet in the conventional as well as permuted order, Py/Adroher Auroux/Sanchez 2001, 555–556, nos. 2932–2933, are taken up by LDAB under nos. 322171 and 322172 correspondingly; for these ostraca, cf. also Lougovaya 2017.
19 Bagnall/Cribiore 2010.
20 Bagnall in O. Florida, p. 1; Bagnall/Cribiore 2010, 213.
processes can be discerned. Since a type of text does not necessarily entail a certain practice and the same type can be associated with various circumstances of usage, the survey is not intended as a means of classification, nor does it aim to be exhaustive. It rather offers a set of examples of distinct practices in which ostraca bearing literary texts are attested; these are meant both to illustrate the range of possible usages of literary ostraca and to highlight instances of their liminal or multifunctional character.

1 Magic

For some of the practices in which ostraca were used the very distinction between documentary and literary texts is difficult to make. Magic is a good example: magical formularies or handbooks are conventionally grouped with literary texts and included in LDAB, but magical texts whose “aim is purely practical” are not taken up by the database.22 Ostraca appear to be occasionally used for both types of texts, and as I am concerned here with activities and practices in which sherds could be used as writing material, my survey straddles this distinction.

Magic may well be the only area where we find explicit instructions for using a pottery sherd for writing. The reasons for such instructions lie in the fact that manuals for performing magic, themselves most often written on papyrus, routinely specify which material to choose for various actions related to the ritual performance. They might say what shape an ostracon should be (triangular),23 or what the contents of the vessel that produced the ostracon should have been (salted fish).24 They might also require instructions to be written on an ‘unbaked ostracon’, presumably meaning a clay vessel or plaque that has not been fired.25 Several further formularies prescribe using a sea-ostracon, which is commonly understood to mean a seashell, but there has so far been no archaeological evidence to illustrate the use of this material.26 Magic manuals may then include an instruction for what should be done with the inscribed ostracon, as, for example, in the following entry of a formulary on a papyrus in Suppl.Mag. 2.977–9:

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22 Cf. https://www.trismegistos.org/ldab/about.php (last accessed: 30.1.2020), where it is acknowledged that “the dividing line is often subjective” (last accessed: 30.1.2020). For the distinction between magical handbooks and texts used in actual rituals, see in particular the recent study of the use of ostraca in magical practice in Martín Hernández/Torallas Tovar 2014, esp. 788–799.
25 Cf. Pap.Graec.Mag. 36.187–188, for a love spell for attraction, and 46.6, for a spell to silence.
Invocatory spell: [sc. take] blood of a mouse and write on a triangular potsherd and bury it in the house: thrax trax brax.

Despite occasional prescriptions to use ostraca for magic spells, the number of actual examples is not large. It could be that the instructions to use sherds for magic spells were only seldom followed or that the inscribed spells were not likely to endure the subsequent handling of the sherd. One can presume, for example, that mouse blood would fade relatively quickly from a buried ostracon. All in all, Raquel Martín Hernández and Sofia Torallas Tovar compile a list of 13 ostraca inscribed in Greek and Coptic, which were produced specifically for being used in an act of magical performance, and argue that ostraca were used mainly for aggressive magic. Love charms and binding spells comprise the main types of texts in this category. Among particularly interesting examples I would point out an ostracon from Oxyrhynchus, now in Oslo, P.Oslo 2.15 (2nd c. CE). It is a roughly triangular sherd, perhaps deliberately chosen for that shape, on which lines of voces magicae are written, followed by a spell aimed to ensure separation of Allous from her husband Apollonios.

Binding spells of the silencing type can be illustrated by an ostracon in the Bodleian Library, Suppl. Mag. 2.58 recto (4th–5th c. CE). It is a sherd of a ribbed vessel, the concave side of which (verso) bears an account of wheat and wine, while the convex side (recto) has a spell meant to silence and subdue all adversaries. It invokes the

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27 In Suppl. Mag. 2.97 Robert Daniel translates “spell for calling in customers (?)” on analogy with Pap. Graec. Mag. 4.2373, κατακλητικὸν καὶ κατακλητικὸν ἐργαστηρίου ἢ οἰκίας ἢ ὅπου ἐὰν αὐτὸ ἱδρύσῃς, “Charm for acquiring business and for calling in customers to a workshop or house or wherever you put it” (trans. Betz 1986, 81). The original editor of the papyrus, Franco Maltomini (1979, 102), suggests that κατακλητικὸν may be a misspelling for κατακλιτικόν, that is, a spell to cause illness, but concedes that there is not enough evidence to decide between the two possibilities. I thus opt for the vaguer translation.

28 The list excludes ostraca whose association with magic cannot be unambiguously ascertained, such as, for example, those inscribed with citations from Psalms, which could serve as amulets but also be school exercises, cf. Section 3.1 entitled “Dubious Material”, 789–794, and below.

29 Aggressive magic is defined as “every charm that intends to manipulate and control someone, his/her belongings, and his/her feelings, usually by inflicting damage to him or her in every sense”, Hernández/Torallas Tovar 2014, 781–782, fn. 7.


31 It is conventional to describe the convex and concave sides of an ostracon as the recto and verso, a designation that implies that the writing on the convex side precedes that on the concave, even if this is not always the case.
voiceless and speechless ‘stone’ on which it is written as a comparison to the voicelessness and speechlessness called upon the opponents (lines 7–11):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ιαω Σαβαωθ Αδωναϊ Αβρασαξ,} \\
\text{ὡς ὡ λίθως οὗτος ἄφονος} \\
\text{καὶ ἄλαλος, οὕτω καὶ πάντες} \\
\text{10 οἱ κατὰ μιᾷ ἄφωνοι καὶ ἄλαλοι} \\
\text{καὶ ἐπήκοοι μοι γένωνται.}
\end{align*}
\]

8 l. ὁ λίθος, ἄφωνος 10 l. κατά με, ἄφωνοι 11 l. ἐπήκοοι

Iao Sabaoth Adonai Abrasax, just as this stone is voiceless and speechless, so let also all who are opposed to me be voiceless and speechless and obedient to me.\textsuperscript{32}

The performer of the ritual may have felt that a clay sherd was no different from a stone as far as its voice and speech were concerned and so chose a material easier to write on.

Whereas extensive manuals concerned with various rituals were written on papyri, formularies concerned with particular needs could apparently be inscribed on ostraca, too. Thus, we find two binding spells against a scorpion’s bite, a significant concern in the desert, inscribed on a sherd now in the Ashmolean Museum, Suppl. Mag. 2.89 (4th c. CE). The charms are separated from each other by a horizontal stroke and by the heading ἄλλο, and one of them preserves a place-holder reference, τοῦ δ(εῖνα), ‘of NN’, to be substituted with the name of the actual victim of the bite. These features show that the texts are formularies to be invoked when needed, and it could be that carrying them inscribed on an ostracon was considered practical.\textsuperscript{33}

There also survive instances of what appear to be magic texts, although their exact purpose is unclear. Thus, a sherd found in the sanctuary in Narmouthis bears on its concave side (A) one of the most frequent magical palindromes αβλαναθαναλβα in a symmetrical Schwindeschema.\textsuperscript{34}

## 2 Medicine

Most examples of ostraca associated with medical practices are recipes for drug composition, which are also preserved on papyrus. They usually list ingredients, with indication of their weight, for one or more remedies, sometimes under a heading.

\textsuperscript{32} Trans. Daniel, Suppl. Mag. 2.58, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{33} There is one further example of a spell against a scorpion’s bite among unpublished ostraca from Didymoi in the Eastern Desert.
\textsuperscript{34} Suppl. Mag. 2.67 (1st–2nd c. CE). The text on the concave side (B) might be related to magic, but it also could be an independent medical prescription, see below.
About a dozen such ostraca have been published to date. Of these, O.Bodl. 2.2182
(2nd–3rd c. CE), is a good example:

\[ \text{στακ(τὸν) } [\ldots] (\text{κακιαίς (δρ.) ἦ}) \]
\[ \text{χαλκὸ(ν) (δρ.) ἦ} \]
\[ \text{αἰρίκα καρπο(ής) (δρ.) ἦ} \]
\[ \text{όπιο(υ) (δρ.) ἦ} \]
\[ \text{ζυ[ύρ(νης) (δρ.)] δ} \]
\[ \text{κόμε(ως) (δρ.) ς} \]

2 l. καδμεία 5 l. ἐρείκης 8 l. κόμμεως

A runny ointment. Of calamine 12 dr., acacia 12 dr., burnt copper 8 dr., erica fruit 8 dr., opium
4 dr., myrrh 4 dr., gum 6 dr.

The recipe comes from a cache of nine prescriptions, all likely from Dios Polis in the
region of Eastern Thebes. These have been published as O.Bodl. 2.2181–2189. Six of
them, including the one just cited, are for an eye-salve. O. Stras. 1.619 (2nd c. CE), O. Leid. 2 (1st–3rd c. CE), or O. Trim. 2.536 (ca. 350–370 CE) all contain lists of ingredients used in medicine and are likely to be medical
recipes, too, as is the much later and poorly preserved P.Mon.Epiph. 622 (6th–7th
C.E.). A special case is that of an ostracon from Narmouthis, Suppl. Mag. 2.67
(1st–2nd c. CE), mentioned earlier, which bears a magical palindrome on one side and
a list of ingredients on the other, all in the same hand. Whether the latter is an instruction
for a magical potion or a medical recipe, is perhaps the wrong question to pose,
as the ostracon rather makes manifest how porous the line between medicine and
magic could be.

37 These are O.Bodl. 2.2181 (2nd–3rd c. CE), 2182 (2nd–3rd c. CE), 2184 (4th c. CE?), 2185 (4th c. CE?), 2187 (3rd c. CE?), and 2188 (4th c. CE?). For basic ingredients of an eye-salve, cf. Youtie 1976. The frequency
of prescriptions for eye-treatments is surely explained by the fact that ophthalmia, an eye-disease characterized by running or bleary eyes and probably caused by Chlamydia trachomatis, was prevalent in antiquity; for a medical overview of eye diseases in ancient Egypt in particular, see Andersen 1997.
38 P.Mon.Epiph. 574 and 575 (7th c. CE) are medical prescriptions in Coptic, which also contain instructions for preparation of the medicine.
3 Oracle Consulting

As with magic, the consultation of oracles presents an interesting case because texts associated with it also straddle the divide between literary and documentary. Conventionally, questions to an oracle are considered as documentary, since they were not meant “to reach the eyes of a reading public” and pertained to concerns of a particular individual on a certain occasion.39 While many survive, written on thin sheets of lead or, in Egypt, on small pieces of papyrus, sometimes recycled,40 ostraca do not seem to have been used for the purpose.41

Oracular responses, one may expect, should likewise be considered documentary since a response would have been drawn for a concrete situation, in which the particular question was asked, and it generally would not have been meant for the eyes of “a reading public.” In practice, however, responses surviving in papyrological or epigraphical evidence seem to be drawn from chresmologies, that is, from set series of oracular responses, and such series are reasonably counted with literary or paraliterary texts.

Oracular responses survive either as individual answers, which were presumably handed out to the inquirer, or as chesmologies, which probably were consulted by those in charge of the oracle. Four papyri have so far been assigned to the former category,42 and it is possible that a Roman-period ostracon from the sanctuary of Amenhotep in Deir el-Bahri also bears an individual oracular response.43 The upper part of the text on the ostracon is lost and its precise meaning is unclear:

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[ ... ] ΚΑΙΤΟI
[ ... ] του πᾶσι
[ ... ] αἱρετως τὸν
4 πατέρα[ν] εἰς
Κόνα — ὧδε
παρὰ τοῦ κυρί-
ου Ἀμενώ-
8 θου θεοῦ
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39 Cf. LDAB: “we have excluded . . . oracle questions (e.g. Pack2 2492–2493, Van Haelst 954, 958) and horoscopes, which we consider documentary texts,” https://www.trismegistos.org/ldab/about.php (last consulted: 30.1.2020).
40 For a recent survey of Greek oracle questions, or ‘tickets’, preserved on papyri with further bibliography, see P. Ripat’s introduction to texts 5017–5019 in The Oxyrhynchus Papyri LXXIV (2009), 157–158. For texts outside Egypt, see foremost the corpus of lead tablets from Dodona, Dakaris/Vokotopoulou/Christidis 2013.
41 Perhaps, the impossibility to keep information confidential prevented the use of sherds for this type of communication.
μεγίστου.

3 ἐξαιρέτως?

... to (or, ‘for’) all... especially (?) the father to Kos. Here, by the Lord Amenophes, the greatest God.

It is plausible that the ostracon records an oracular response of Amenhotep (Amenophes) in which someone’s father is perhaps told to go to Kos. The toponym Κῶς might refer to one of at least three known places in Egypt. One of them, also known as Apollonopolis Parva (modern Qus), is located relatively close to the sanctuary—about 30 km north of Deir el-Bahri—rendering it an attractive possibility.\(^{44}\)

Most preserved chresmologies are inscribed on papyrus and contain a variety of possible answers to pre-existing questions. The oracle book known as the *Sortes Astrampsychi* is the best example of this kind of chresmology. In addition, there survive collections of pronouncements that could be interpreted in various ways, in order to answer almost any question.\(^{45}\) To this latter group belong nine ostraca found in the military station of Dios in the Eastern Desert and dated to ca. 200 CE.\(^{46}\) All of them contain headings featuring a number and an indication of when the oracle is to be consulted or an instruction to refrain from consultation (μὴ χρῶ, “Do not consult!”). Since in some cases the same sherd is inscribed with entries for several consecutive numbers and some entries have an indication of the auspiciousness of the consultation expressed through the adverb ὁμοίως (‘the same’), it is certain that the sherds were not meant to be given out to the inquirers in response to their queries. Rather, they formed a continuous series in which the prophecy was dispensed through some mechanism of allotment. The texts vary in length and style, and some are metrical. I reproduce one of the best preserved below, which consists of pronouncements of both Apollo and Leto. That of Apollo features three iambic verses; the beginning of the oracle of Leto was apparently also meant as an iambic trimeter:

\[\begin{align*}
β \text{ Ἀπόλλωνος, ὀμ(οίως).} \\
πύλας άνοιγε εὐλύτους \\
te άτραποὺς ἔχεις· πορεύ\- 
ou τὴν προκειμένην ὁ-
δόν, ταχέως δὲ ἔργοις \\
mὴ λόγοις γείνου βροτοῖς. \\
γ̅ μὴ χρῶ. Λητοῦς. \\
ἄπελθε· λοιπὸν μηδὲν ἀ`ν´τει-
\end{align*}\]

\(^{44}\) For other possible interpretations of the toponym, cf. Łajtar 2006, 404–405.


\(^{46}\) Cuvigny 2010, 258–276.
The choice of sherds as opposed to papyrus for the chresmological series in Dios may have been owed to the common practice of using ostraca for various types of texts in the Eastern Desert, or perhaps also to the ease of filing the sherds (one can think of a comparison with modern index cards).

A small set of three chits found in Xeron, another praesidium in the Eastern Desert, may have been associated with the process of consulting an oracle.\(^48\) Two of the sherds contain a number and the name of a god in the genitive, presumably designating the oracle,\(^49\) while only the reference to the “underworld deity” is preserved on the third one.\(^50\) Hélène Cuvigny, who edited both the Dios and Xeron sets, suggests that the ostraca from Xeron may have served as allotment tokens referring to oracular responses in a series such as those from Dios.

### 4 Christian Worship

Ostraca inscribed with texts related to Christian worship are particularly heterogeneous in their content and appearance. They comprise passages both from the Old Testament, especially the Psalms, and from the New Testament, as well as prayers, hymns, and moralizing maxims, often in various combinations and featuring both Greek and Coptic. Some are inscribed in a fluent professional hand abounding in diacritical signs, while others are written in clumsy and uneven script; both pottery sherds and limestone ostraca are attested, and their sizes vary.

While it is often difficult to ascertain the function of a certain ostracon, some potential contexts present themselves. Large, sometimes reworked sherds with smooth surfaces inscribed in neat and rapid hands with texts meant for recitation or singing,
such as hymns or prayers, could be envisaged as being used in the liturgy.⁵¹ Among
eamples, one can point to P.Mon.Epiph. 600 (6th c. CE), an ostracan bearing a hymn
to Mary (Theotokion),⁵² or P.Mon.Epiph. 598 (6th c. CE), with the Trisagion prayer and
three short hymns (troparia),⁵³ both from Cell A in the Monastery of Epiphanius in
Thebes. It has been argued that the accentuation-like marks employed on these two
pieces served as rhythmic separations between textual units to help the singer at the
service to align them with the melody.⁵⁴ Another example is a spectacular ostracan
datable to the sixth or seventh century, now in the British Library, inscribed with the
Greater Doxology, which would be at home at a matins service.⁵⁵

Other sets of ostraca may have been produced for personal study or perhaps as
preparatory material for composing larger works or sermons. This may have been the
case with a series of twenty ostraca inscribed with passages from the Gospels, which
were bought in Upper Egypt by Urbain Bouriant in the late nineteenth century and
published by Gustave Lefebvre in 1904.⁵⁶ Most of the sherds have a reference to the
Gospel from which the text comes and a number; ten of them (nos. 7–16) are num-
bered consecutively from one to ten and contain passages from Luke 22.40–71, with
the text continuing from one sherd to the next. While Lefebvre opined that the ostraca
belonged to a series that originally encompassed the entire text of the four Gospels
and constituted a library of a man who could not afford other writing materials,⁵⁷ Corn-
nelia Römer demonstrates that the Luke series is rather a product of excerpting than
a part of the complete Gospel.⁵⁸ A similar, although small, set of only two ostraca,
P.Naqlun 2.16 and 17 (6th–7th c. CE), was found in Naqlun in the Fayum; the pieces
have almost contiguous passages from Matthew (7.18–20 and 7.29–8.4) and at least one
of them seems to have a number, 21.⁵⁹ Tomasz Derda, the editor of the pieces, supposes
that they were written by a monk for personal use, perhaps for studying.⁶⁰

Particularly interesting are two related sets of ostraca, probably from Dendera,
dated to the fifth century, now kept in the Petrie Museum. The groups A and B are
distinguished on the basis of paleography, with each apparently forming a library of

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⁵¹ For the use of texts inscribed on limestone or pottery sherds in liturgy or as “aids for performing
the service”, see now Mihálykő 2019, esp. 166–167, 188–190, and 210–219.
⁵² Photos of the ostraca are available at https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/473397
(last accessed: 30.1.2020).
⁵³ A black and white photo can be found in Gampel 2012, 15.
⁵⁴ Gampel 2012, esp. 14–18.
⁵⁵ The ostracan, inv. 5878, is unpublished, but a 3D image is available at https://sketchfab.com/models/
d70e0f6ced0b47f4a5a0d7f7a69acfb (last accessed: 30.1.2020).
⁵⁶ Lefebvre 1904; the actual pieces appear to have long gone missing. For this series and other ostraca
inscribed with passages from the New Testament, see Head 2013, 433–438.
⁵⁷ Cf. Lefebvre 1904, 1–2.
⁵⁹ Derda 1995, 42–44.
⁶⁰ Derda 1995, 42.
related sherds. Ostraca in group A are inscribed with texts ranging from the liturgical, such as prayers or excerpts from Psalms, Acts, or Epistles, to passages from Homer and gnomic anthologies. In her discussion of the possible Sitz im Leben of these ostraca, Cornelia Römer suggests that the context that best explains the presence of both Christian and pagan texts would be an educational environment. Römer proposes that the texts were not part of copying exercises, an educational process so often postulated, but were rather used for memorization training. Since Homer was memorized in ancient schools and there is evidence that monks were expected to learn by heart passages from the scriptures, this is a compelling proposition. Yet it is also conceivable that the same person (such as the one designated as Hand A in the Petrie ostraca) inscribed different texts for different purposes.

The hypothesis that ostraca were used for texts meant for training in memorization was also proposed by Lisa Ullmann in an edition of two unrelated sherds inscribed with the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed. Ullman suggests that they were produced to help a convert memorize the creed, which was an essential part of the catechism. She adds by way of explanation that “ostraca, as the cheapest writing material and the easiest to come by, were well suited for writing out copies of the text to be learned.” In this particular case, however, it may be countered that the choice of material would suit well the purpose of propagating the creed, since a sherd would be a fitting support for an important text meant to be passed around and consulted by many without risk of being easily damaged. Furthermore, since from the sixth century the creed was incorporated into the liturgy, ostraca bearing it, all of which date to the sixth through the eighth century, could be used directly in the service, even if reciting by heart was common. Or, the situation could well have been all of the above: the ostraca were created to disseminate an essential matter of belief, for which they had to be memorized by some, consulted by others, or recited from during the mass or in a private act of devotion. Scott Bucking’s exploration of the multifunctional character of at least some ostraca from the Monastery of Epiphanius, where, he suggests, “a text produced as a result of private study or devotion could also be used as recitation material for monks engaged in weaving or other industrial activity”, seems to be a more promising

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61 Group A includes ostraca O.Petrie Mus. 21–31, while O.Petrie Mus. 40, 41, 43, 45–49 have been assigned to group B. Cf. Funghi/Martinelli 2003, esp. 142, Funghi/Martinelli 2008, 63–64.
64 Ullmann 1996, 194.
66 Cf. Derda’s remarks in P.Naqlun 2.18.
interparietive approach to the study of late antique ostraca than attempts at defining more narrow contexts of their usage.\footnote{Bucking 2007, 36.}

\section{Drafts and Preparatory Material}

Although it is rarely possible to ascertain whether a text preserved on a movable writing support was a final or a preliminary version, a draft can sometimes by recognized through a combination of textual and extra-textual features. Thus, a presence of several iterations of the same text, deletions and corrections, or marginal notes can all be signs of an authorial revision; marginal marks indicating passages to be excerpted as well as compilations of excerpts may document preparatory stages in the composition of a literary or scholarly work.\footnote{For a discussion of signs of revision and composition, see Dorandi 1991; Cribiore 2019; for the mechanics of composition in antiquity in general, cf. Dorandi 2000.} Although these stages were perhaps usually carried out on papyrus, there survive several ostraca that reveal an editing process. For example, two ostraca from Saqqara preserve successive drafts of a composition based upon an oracle of Hermes Trismegistos apparently given to Horus, a pastophoros of Isis in the city of Isis in the nome of Sebennytos. The last of the five drafts takes the form of a letter from Horus to “King Ptolemy, King Ptolemy the Brother, and Queen Cleopatra the Sister,” that is, the joined rulers Ptolemy VI Philometer, Ptolemy VII, and Cleopatra II.\footnote{Skeat/Turner 1968; Ray 1976, 1–3. Cf. also Renberg 2017, 439–443.}

A limestone ostracon from the sanctuary of Amenhotep in Deir el-Bahri contains an account of a miraculous cure of an illness experienced by a certain Polyaratos.\footnote{Łajtar 2006, 399–403, no. A 2.} It opens with a regnal date corresponding to 261/260 BCE, and its content and phrasing make it clear that the text was meant for inscribing on a stele to be set up as evidence of the powers of the god. Numerous corrections, erasures, and changes, however, indicate that the version written on the ostracon is a working draft, possibly to be followed by a ‘clean’ copy. Another limestone ostracon from the same sanctuary and of similar appearance lists moral maxims under the heading “The Precepts of Amenhotep (sc. Amenhotep).”\footnote{Łajtar 2006, 393–399, no. A 1.} These maxims, variously ascribed, circulated all over the Greek world, and are attested in the form of monumental inscriptions in several sanctuaries. Thus, it is a distinct possibility that this ostracon was a draft for an inscription, too.

As with the texts related to magic and oracles, the cases just described call into question the traditional divide between literary (including para-literary) and documentary texts. Should the revised versions of a divinatory dream eventually incorporated...
into an apparent letter be classified as literary or documentary? And what about the detailed list of woes suffered by Polyaratos? Does the very process of reworking and editing a text bring it into the realm of literary? As my concern here is a general survey of the use of ostraca for writing literary texts, I take the easy path of following the choices made by LDAB, while hoping that more thought will be given in the future to the production, use, and perception in antiquity of these kinds of ‘liminal’ texts.

Besides drafts of inscriptions, ostraca appear to have been occasionally used at a preliminary stage of collecting or studying passages for a future work. Their distinctive features include confident and fast handwriting, which is too professional for a student, yet too fluid for a teacher’s model; revisions and corrections; visual signs of text organization; the choice of excerpts from texts not associated elsewhere with, or difficult to relate to, a school environment. A case in point is the set of three anthologies and a composition on advantageous behavior found in Philadelphia in the Fayum, all of which give the impression of preliminary material assembled for some future work. A somewhat mysterious text on the convex side of O. Leid. 1 (2nd c. BCE), which the editors call “a prescription for calming a distressed mind,” might be another example:

Whenever you wish to be calmed in spirit and you know what is troubling you, drink before dinner, and when you eat dinner, eat eggs together with your dinner, and vomit up most of your dinner, and on the next day perform an examination.

The passage may have come from a treatise of the medico-philosophical tradition, and one can imagine that writing it down on a sherd was done in the process of taking notes while reading or listening to it read. This practice, albeit perhaps at a higher socio-economic and intellectual level, is described by Pliny the Younger when he narrates the habits of his uncle: “in summer when he was not too busy he would often lie in the sun, and a book was read aloud while he made notes and extracts. He made extracts of everything he read, and always said that there was no book so bad that some good could not be got out of it.”

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72 Cf. Lougovaya 2019 with further bibliography.
74 Translation is that of the ed.pr., adjusted to reflect the corrections of the text by Daniel 1984, 416.
75 Cf. Daniel 1984, 416.
76 ... aestate si quid otii iacebat in sole, liber legebatur, adnotabat excerbebatque. Nihil enim legit quod non excerperet; dicere etiam solebat nullum esse librum tam malum ut non aliqua parte prodesset. Plin. ep. 3.5.10, trans. Betty Radice.
To a scholarly rather than a school context one should perhaps also assign a series of ostraca found in Elephantine and dated to the third century BCE, which are inscribed with geometrical explications related to topics discussed in Book XIII of the *Elements* of Euclid.\(^7\) These include the construction of the icosahedron enclosed in a given sphere, the subject of Proposition 16, and the relationship between an equilateral pentagon, hexagon, and decagon inscribed in a given circle, expounded in Proposition 10.\(^7\) The explications on the ostraca may have been an original work or a set of notes, which someone wrote out in an effort to understand a difficult subject.\(^7\)

### 6 Education

Although far from pandemic, sherds were often used for writing in an educational context. In some cases, this usage is made manifest by the types of text inscribed, the exclusive purpose of which was learning to read and write or to calculate. In other cases, when the type of the text is more ambiguous, an educational environment might be suggested by other features, such as handwriting, extra-textual marks, or certain kinds of mistakes.\(^8\) The following types of texts associated with school and learning are well represented by ostraca:

a) Letters of the alphabet, inscribed either in alphabetic order or in various permutations of the alphabet, and pangrams.\(^8\)

b) Syllabaries.\(^8\)

c) Lists of words.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) For the ed.pr., see Mau/Müller 1962.  
\(^8\) Mathematical texts inscribed on the ostraca are concerned with complicated formal proofs and could hardly serve any practical purpose, such as to make an actual icosahedron. The latter is not difficult—can be done with a bunch of sticks of the same length and requires little or no understanding of geometry—and must have been routine since numerous examples of dice in the shape of icosahedra (and other regular polyhedra) survive, used probably for both divination and games in the Greco-Roman world, cf. Chaniotis 2006; Minas-Nerpel 2007; Platz-Horster 2017.  
\(^7\) Cf. David Fowler’s remark that "the fact that the texts are on potsherds and are not the received text of the *Elements* suggests that this may be an attempt to understand the mathematics, and not a slavish copying or learning of the material", Fowler 1999, 209.  
\(^8\) E. g. O.Claud. 1.179 (2nd c. CE), O.Kellis 157 recto (3rd–4th c. CE), or O.Bachit 21 (6th–8th c. CE), and cf. Cribiore 2008.  
\(^8\) E. g. P.Bagnall 10 (4th c. CE) with a list of three-syllabic words; O.Claud. 2.415 (2nd c. CE), a part of an amphora inscribed with a long list of disyllabic words all starting with the letter *pi*; or Milne 1908, 122, no. 2, an alphabetic list of mythological names (2nd c. CE).
d) Maxims or *sententiae*.

e) Anecdotes, fables, or *chreiai*.

f) Elementary arithmetical tables or calculations.

g) Glossaries or other auxiliary material.

h) Quotations or excerpts from larger literary texts often used as educational material.

While syllabaries, elementary arithmetical tables, or *chreiai* may have been used exclusively in educational contexts, the function of other types of texts on the list was not confined to a school environment. Even letters of the alphabet, the most elementary units of a language, could be inscribed as a school exercise, but also as a pen trial, a magic spell, or for some other purpose, as writers of Greek, from the archaic to the Byzantine period, seem to have had some remarkable affinity for penning the alphabet and its various permutations. Most lists of words were probably connected to school, but a list of martyrs’ names, in particular of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, could also be apotropaic. At least seven ostraca with their names survive; five of them are likely to have been amulets, but in two other cases the names are inscribed along with texts of an educational nature. The same is true for quotations from the scri-
tures: ostraca featuring citations from the Psalms along with apparent school texts likely come from an educational environment; yet, others could have been amulets, while those inscribed with longer passages might have been used for recitation.93

A few tendencies in the usage of ostraca in connection with education can be observed. There are few, if any, ostraca dated to the Ptolemaic period that can be unambiguously identified as school exercises. Alphabets are rare,94 and there are no ostraca inscribed with syllabaries, lists of words, sententiae or anecdotes that date to before the Roman period. Current evidence thus suggests that ostraca were not used, or at least not widely used, in the Ptolemaic period at the level of elementary education.95

Starting in the Roman period, however, the numbers of ostraca inscribed with apparent school exercises begin to rise and they become easy to identify both by the type of inscribed texts and by formal aspects of writing. Also from the Roman period on, the chronological distribution of the ostraca associated with education follows the overall distribution of literary ostraca and papyrological evidence in general: there seems to be a peak in the second century and then again in the late antique period.96 Yet, while there is general agreement about which ostraca from the Roman period constitute school texts, classification of the late antique ones is often a matter of dispute, as has been indicated above in the discussion of the Christian material.97 As religion permeates education, the distinction between, for example, artifacts inscribed with texts for learning and those meant as expressions of devotion, may not be obvious to the modern observer from their texts and physical parameters; in fact, such a distinction might not have existed for those who inscribed and used them either.98

with the names of these martyrs and considered Christian amulets are P.Leid.Inst. 12 (7th–8th c. CE); an ostracon from Upper Egypt published in Gallazzi 1988 (7th–8th c. CE); SB 28.17249 (6th–7th c. CE); and O.CrumST 443 (6th–8th c. CE). Curiously, the two ostraca interpreted as coming from educational settings, MPER N. S. 18.248 (7th–8th c. CE) and MPER N. S. 18.265 (7th–8th c. CE), are limestone ostraca.

94 Possible examples are an ostracon from Karanis, O.Mich. 3.1099, dated to the Ptolemaic period; O.Bodl. 2.2191 (1st c. BCE–1st c. CE); and a piece found in Bakchias and said to be dated by its archaeological context to 150–50 BCE, cf. Cribiore 2006.
95 Cf. Lougovaya 2019.
96 Cf. Habermann 1998 for the chronological distribution of papyrological evidence. Ostraca inscribed with educational texts are difficult to date, so it is also possible that the overall distribution of the papyrological evidence influences the dating of the ostraca, especially those whose provenance is unknown.
97 For an overview of the disputes regarding the classification of the late antique educational material, cf. especially Larsen 2018 and Maravela 2018, with further bibliography.
7 Performance and Occasional Poetry

The possibility that a literary text inscribed on an ostracon might have been meant for performance has been intimated by the editors of O. Florida inv. 21, the erotically themed piece once thought to be a fake (see above). Considering its genre, they suggest that “the mime may be a possibility” or else “but perhaps less convincingly, erotic epistolary fiction.”99 The sherd, as Bagnall and Cribiore demonstrate, likely comes from a military camp in the Eastern Desert, with Maximianon being a particularly suitable candidate. Notably, it was in Maximianon that a set of ostraca associated with a soldier named Sosianos and inscribed with what Jean-Luc Fournet has called “essais érotico-bacchiques” was found.100 Fournet prints an excerpt from one such composition:

φειλῶ, καίμαι
καὶ οὐκ ἐστέναζμεν.
φανερῶς πορνεῖει δειά
τὸν ὑπορήψαντον Ἕρωτα.
καὶ Ἰλιά Διενυσθέα Βάκχαι
[ἡλ]αιρέ, εἰ στεφανώσεται
̣[σ]τεφάνους ῥεδέιους

4 1 l. φιλῶ 2 l. ἐστέναγμαι 3 l. διὰ 4 l. ὑπερήφανον 5 l. καλαὶ Διονυσίαι 6 l. ἱλαρά, στεφανώσετε 7 l. ῥοδέος

I love, I burn and I don’t moan about it: I fornicate openly because of overwhelming Eros. And you, Dionysiac Bacchants, merry and beautiful, if you crown [...] with crowns of roses [...]101

The first person speech and exuberant emotionality of this text, which is similar to the Florida ostracon, may fit well the discourse of an exaggerated theatrical performance. Roman-period mimes were not the witty verse compositions of the Hellenistic era, but rather lowbrow paignia, performance pieces marked by “a combination of indecency and sweetness”102 and played without masks by a few performers or even by a single actor. An interesting attestation of such skits in association with entertainment of the Roman army comes from Dura Europos, where a series of dipinti listing names of performers was discovered.103 There are both men and women, though more women, and most of them bear epithets likely related to the roles they played, for example μωραί,

100 Fournet 2003, 466. Apparently, about half a dozen of such ostraca might be associated with the soldier.
102 Davidson 2000, 55.
103 The dipinti come from House G5C and date to the mid-3rd c. CE, see Immerwahr 1944.
must have played parts in which they were ridiculed; καλαί could be dancers; and the παλαιοπόρνη was probably an old hetaera; there is also a reference to mimes.\(^\text{104}\) Some of the records register the arrivals and departures of the performers, suggesting that there was a business in supplying the army with small troupes of itinerant entertainers. Perhaps something similar was taking place in the Eastern Desert, too, even if on a smaller scale. Curiously, in the præsidium of Dios a letter of a certain Serapias, a prostitute, was found, in which she complains that the soldiers in the camp hassle her demanding her services, behaving as if in a theater, so much so that the horsemen coming through the camp have mimes to watch.\(^\text{105}\) The comparison that Serapias draws between her bickering with the soldiers and a scene in a mime may have fallen flat had the mimes never been performed in the camps.\(^\text{106}\)

Several further literary ostraca inscribed with excerpts from dramatic works might have been also associated with performance. Thus, an ostracon published as P. Reina-ach Gr. 1 (2nd–1st c. BCE) bears a dialogue in verse in which one speaker is in love, and the other seems to warn him to be careful; the passage has been attributed to Herodas (Herod. Fr. 3 Cunningham). Although the ostracon is sometimes classified as a school text,\(^\text{107}\) there is no evidence for similar texts in educational settings to support this; it is conceivable that it was a draft or an excerpt, but a performance context is also a possibility. Similarly unclear is the function of an ostracon inscribed on both sides with a dialogue between Antigone and the old servant from Euripides’ Phoenissae, lines 106–118 and 128–140,\(^\text{108}\) or of PSI 13.1300, an ostracon bearing verses of Sappho. Dated approximately to the 2nd c. BCE, both are inscribed in confident but not easy to read cursive, and while quotations from Euripides are attested in school texts on papyri and ostraca, poetry of Sappho does not seem to be associated with education.\(^\text{109}\)

In a few instances a literary text on an ostracon appears to have an immediate connection to the surroundings in which it was produced. For example, the ostracon inscribed with an obscene epigram, which is styled as an epitaph for a man named Kleitorios, mocks a real person who is mentioned in several documents found along with it.\(^\text{110}\) Was it just for fun that the person responsible for the archive composed

\(^{104}\) Immerwahr 1944, 217–218, Fr. V, col. 21. 8.

\(^{105}\) Cuvigny presented the ostracon in her talk delivered in Collège de France on March 30, 2016. The recording of her talk can be accessed at https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/jean-pierre-brun/symposium-2016-03-30-11h30.htm (last accessed: 30.1.2020).

\(^{106}\) In the Appendix, I present an edition of an ostracon found in Didymoi, which also may have been associated with a mime performance.


\(^{108}\) Mastronarde 1982.


\(^{110}\) Viereck 1925, 257–259, no. 3 (P. Berol. 12309). The same stash of ostraca (TM ArchId 160) includes three with anthologies and one with an excerpt from political protreptics (cf. fn. 73 above), as well as about 60 documentary texts. For this peculiar assemblage of texts, cf. also Lougovaya 2018, 55–61, and 2019, 277, with further bibliography.
or copied the epigram? Perhaps the ostracon was easy to pass around to others who might have shared the author’s feelings about Kleitorios.

From the Eastern Desert, we have an ostracon with a poem celebrating Athena and the waters of Xeron found at the site of Xeron Pelagos. Another ostracon from the same site, O.Xer. inv.995, is said to contain a verse narrative of a trip from Koptos to Berenike; it is apparently spoken in the first person and describes stations on the route, listing their natural resources, with each vignette separated from the next by an oblique stroke. Was there a poet stationed at Xeron? Or perhaps someone travelled through the desert and composed as he went through the stations? And were these poems written down on the sherds for a performance there? It might become easier to address these questions when more material from the Eastern Desert is published, a slow going work precisely because it is often difficult not only to decipher but even to interpret the typology of a literary text inscribed on an ostracon. I take the opportunity to include in the Appendix below an edition of one such piece, which was found at Didymoi, another praesidium in the Eastern Desert. It appears to be similar to the two Xeron ostraca as well as to O. Florida inv.21.

This survey of literary ostraca is not exhaustive and there remain plenty of texts that elude unambiguous classification even more than some of the typologically ambiguous cases discussed above. What is clear, however, is that ostraca were used for writing a wide variety of literary, or non-documentary, texts and that many of these texts may have originated and circulated differently than those inscribed in and transmitted as books. Mertens’ observation on the particularly high percentage of adespota among literary ostraca continues to be borne out as more examples are being found and published: occasional pieces rooted in the immediate surroundings, passages unparalleled by anything transmitted in the manuscript tradition, or simply strange compositions grow in numbers, whereas attestations of known authors do not. Using sherds for writing thus seems to have played a significant role in production of what Luigi Enrico Rossi defines as “submerged literature”, that is, texts which may have been composed for immediate consumption but were not meant for wider transmission or were simply ignored by the tradition. Consequently, literary ostraca may provide a window to the tastes, abilities, and aspirations of a larger strata of people than those professional and well-educated writers whose works have been enshrined in the literary tradition, while also offering a modern observer an opportunity of looking at texts that must have been enjoyed without being meant for preservation.

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111 For ed.pr., see Bülow-Jacobsen 2011, who dates it to 175–225 CE; cf. also Benelli/Lucarini 2017.
112 The ostracon, which has not been published yet, is mentioned in Cuvigny 2013, 410–412.
113 It is perhaps no coincidence that most of the published literary ostraca from the Eastern Desert are school texts from Mons Claudianus, that is, texts of fairly clear typology.
114 Cf. “texts which were mistreated from the very beginning of their transmission, and even texts which were not transmitted at all,” as cited in Ercolani 2014, 7.
Appendix

A Bucolic Scene on an Eastern-Desert Sherd

D 445 – CSA 476  
Fort SW – US 13501  
W. 14 × H. 13 cm  
discarded c. 250–c. 270

The ostracon published here (Fig. 1) was found in the fort of Didymoi, which lies on the Koptos to Berenike road.115 It was unearthed in Room 35a in the south-west part of the fort, in a stratigraphic unit that yielded several literary pieces, as well as documentary ostraca and tituli picti.116 These findings are dated to the last phase of occupation and are believed to be discarded sometime between c. 250 and c. 270, when this part of the fort was being gradually filled by dumped material.117

The sherd was probably chosen for its form and further shaped into an approximately rectangular, slightly widening towards the bottom, format. The person who inscribed it must have been accustomed to writing, as his (or her?) hand is rapid and fluent, even if not particularly nice, but the spelling is poor. The writing on the right-hand side of the sherd is smeared and very difficult to make out, and the lower right-hand corner is missing. All this makes understanding the text challenging and interpretations offered below are far from certain.

Both the genre and the content of the text are puzzling. The first 11 lines seem to belong to a monologue directed to a male character who is addressed as a country-dweller in l. 1 and a shepherd in l. 10; although the epithet ἀγρότης is often applied to Pan (see note ad loc.), and Pan, identified with Egyptian Min, was the patron of Koptos and the Eastern Desert, I hesitate to see him as the addressee here because his cult in the area had declined by the time our ostracon was written.118 Perhaps it is likelier to be a man, whose name, Lykon, appears in l. 8. The speaker, who, I think, is a woman at least in this part of the text, implores the man to lead her away to dwell with him in the country and makes a slew of promises. She begins by declaring that she would do everything for him, whatever a woman is to supply. The language of this general promise and of its further specifications is reminiscent of that in which

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115 The excavations of the fort were undertaken in 1998 and 1999 within the project Les praesidia du désert Oriental and directed by Hélène Cuvigny, to whom I am grateful for the invitation to work on literary pieces from the fort and for sharing her field notes with me.
116 For Room 35a, cf. Didymoi I, 29–30. The documentary ostraca found in the same stratigraphic unit as the piece published here include documents related to official correspondence, O. Did. 24, 25, 30 (descr.); those connected to administrative and legal matters, O. Did. 62, 126–129, 135; and tituli picti, O. Did. 238, 249, 267.
117 For this revised dating of the abandonment of the forts on the Koptos to Berenike road, including Didymoi, see Brun 2018, §§ 27–31 with fn. 62.
obligations of a party in a contract can be stated, in particularly, those of a husband to a wife in a marriage contract (see note ad loc.). Here, however, the roles are reversed since it is the woman who lists what she will provide her addressee with. The promises seem to pertain to the man’s shed and bed, to taking care of the flocks, and to making a syrinx, but since many readings are uncertain, the details remain unclear.

In line 11, there is a slash-mark which appears larger than similar marks elsewhere in the text, raising a possibility that what follows belongs to a different unit of text, for example, a part spoken by another person. Since the sherd breaks off on the right at the level of line 11, only parts of that and the following seven lines survive, making it very difficult to gain any continuous sense. There is a verb of motion, ἐπέβην, in line 13, and if line 11 should be restored as containing ἀπὸ Κόπτου, then perhaps we are dealing with an account of a journey from the valley down the Berenike road. In this case, εἰς Ἀφροδίτην in line 17 is likely to indicate another station on this road, Aphrodite of the Desert, Ἀφροδίτης Ὅρους. ‘Good water’, mentioned in line 13, would be of paramount importance for the traveler of the desert road, whereas the adjectives in line 16, ‘bitter’ and ‘salty’, which are often used of sea-water, might perhaps also describe brackish water available at some of the stations.119

119 Cf. the poem about the waters of Xeron, which seems to refer to means of improving bitter or brackish water, Bülow-Jacobsen 2011, esp. 6–7; cf. also Benelli/Lucarini 2017.
The first-person speech and general erotic theme of the first part of our ostracon suggest that it may belong to the same genre as O. Florida inv. 21, though the language of the Didymoi piece is not nearly as crude as that of the Florida ostracon; it also features a somewhat more literary bucolic vocabulary. Although the monologue does not appear to be metrical, it may have some rhythmical pattern, set off in units of six to seven syllables (cf. ἄπαγε με μετ’ ἐσοῦ, ἐν ἀγρῷ καταμένειν, μὴ με λυπήσῃς, etc.). Slashes, or tick-looking marks, used throughout the text may have been meant to help articulate these and other textual units, particularly if the piece was meant for a performance. Although the sizes and position of these marks vary, I render them all with the same tick ′, except for a large sinusoidal stroke (§) in line 11.

1 ἀγρότα′ ἄπαγε μαί μετ’ ἐσοῦ ′ ἐν ἀγρῷ χαταμένειν ″ μὴ μαί λυπήσῃς′ πάντα σοι ποίησο′ ὡσα δεὶ χορεικὴν γυναίκαν ἀυτόπλεκτον καλύβην ἐς ′ βρώδον ποίησο
5 στρόσο′ δὲ πατικῶς′ ἀγρότα . . φ , βοη′ . ὀ′κ’ ωποσ′ ὀ μετ’ ἐσοῦ′ ἐμὴ τρυφὴ γενήσεται′ ἀγέλας′ ἐλάσο′ κλαδεύσο′ . . ἔριν ἀνατρήσεο′′ συρίγγει πέξω’ μονηωλυκον’ μῶνον ἄ- παγε με μετ’ αἰσοῦ′ ἐν ἀ(γ)ρῷ καταμένειν′
"μὴ με λυπήσῃς′"
10 βοῦτα′ πάντα σοι πωήσω′ ὡσα δεὶ χορεικήν γυναίκαν ἕις ἀπὸ Κόπτον . . . [ τιαν′ ἐπέβην′ φ][ καλὸν υδωρ′ ἐχε[ οὐκ ἐμελλέ μοι[ 15 κοῦκ ἐστεζάμην[ ἐπια πικρὸν ἄλφιμ[ρ εἴς Ἀφρωδείτην[ [ ἄν′ ηκα[ .[,] .......

1 l. με, l. καταμένειν  2 l. με  3 l. ποιήσω, l. ὡσα, l. χορηγεῖν, l. γυναίκα  4 l. βρόδον, l. ποιήσω  5 l. στρώσω, l. παθικῶς?  6 l. ὀ καὶ ὑπόσο(ν)?  7 l. ἐλάσω, l. κλαδεύσω, intr. l. ἀνατρήσω?  8 l. συρίγγα, l. ὡ Λύκων, l. μόνον?  9 l. μετ’ ἐσοῦ, l. καταμένειν  10 l. ποιήσω, l. δεὶ χορηγεῖν  11 l. γυναίκα  12 οὐ γαν?  14 l. οὐκ ἐμελέ μοι?  17 l. Ἀφρωδείτην

120 For the slashes as possible stage directions for performance of a mime, cf. Tsitsiridis 2011, based on a detailed study of P. Oxy. 3413.
Country-dweller, lead me away to live with you in the country. Do not let me down! I will do everything for you, whatever a woman is to provide. I will transform your hut into a rambling-rose and make a bed for you pathically (?), country-dweller, [...] whatever and however much with you, will become luxury for me. I will drive herds, I will cut off wooden sticks and those that I make hollow (?) I will fasten into a panpipe, all alone, o Lykon, only lead me away to dwell with you in the country! Herdsman, do not let me down! I will do everything for you, whatever a woman is to provide [...] When from Koptos [...] I went [...] good water [...] I did not care to [...] (or, ‘he/she/it was not to [...] to me’?) and I have not covered (?) [...] I drank bitter and salty [...] in Aphrodite [...]
goes with αὐτόπλεκτον ‘self-twined’, thus, ‘a rambling-rose’. Is she promising to have a rose entwine the shed? Epsilon in what I transcribe as ἐς is quite clear, but the letter afterwards is less so; it might be compatible with a sigma. αὐτόπλεκτον: the only other attestation of the word occurs in the description of a squid entangling its body into a specially devised snare in Oppianus, *Hal. 4.449.*

βρώδ ̣ ον (l. βρόδον): what I transcribe as beta is not incompatible with this letter in general, but does not look like other instances of it on the ostracon; one can best describe it as a dollar-sign. If it is a beta, the Aeolic form suggests literary ambitions on behalf of the author.

στρόσο (l. στρώσω): the verb is usually transitive, but for an absolute construction, cf. Hom. *Od. 19.599,* χαμάδις στορέσας, “having made his bed on the floor”. πατικῶς: the adverb, which here must describe how the speaker will make the bed, is otherwise attested only by O. Florida inv. 21, lines 7–9, δώσω πατικῶς (l. παθικῶς?), ω|ς τηλ σην κε|παλην (l. κεφαλην), και ξένως, which the editors translate “I’ll give (myself) pathically, in a way you don’t know, by your head, and in a strange way” and interpret—in sum—as an offer of sex by the speaker who seems to be a woman, though a man cannot be excluded. While the interchange of theta with tau is per se not uncommon, the Florida text has no other instance of such an exchange, although it has four words featuring theta (Θέλω in l. 5–6, ἄνθρωπε for ἄνθρωπε in l. 6, πθάσω for φθάσω in l. 9, and αἰσθάνομαι in l. 13); there is no theta in the Didymoi ostracon, and it is not clear whether there is any word that would require it, but see 7n. Despite the parallel phrasing and the similar erotic overtones in the two ostraca, the meaning of the adverb is no clearer.

ι̣κ ̣ φ̣ : kappa is fairly certain, but the rest is difficult. What I transcribe as a dotted iota can also be an epsilon because the lower end of the vertical bends to the right, somewhat like the first epsilon of the γενησε in l. 6; phi may be perhaps a psi, which does not otherwise appear on the sherd.

βοη ̣ : it is not clear whether there is another letter squeezed in after the eta, perhaps a sigma or a nu. It is possible, though perhaps less likely, that the word continued in the next line, βοησ |ο for βοήσω, even if such a word division is not conventional.

όκ’ωπον |ο: if the first omicron does not belong to the last word of the previous line, then perhaps ὃ καὶ ὁπόσο(ν)? Is the general meaning of this sentence that whatever there is for the speaker at the country-dweller’s side, it will be luxury for her?

123 A search in the Text Irregularities database in Trismegistos on April 10, 2019, produced 398 results for ‘τ instead of θ’ in various positions; for the interchange in the intervocalic position in particular, cf. Gignac I, 92.
δένδρη, κλαδεύσω ’, ‘ἐαν ἀνατρέξω’: δένδρη is quite certain, as is κλαδεύσω, but it is not clear whether there is a letter in between; the space suggests that there might be one, but no trace of it can be made out; if there was one, one can think of the relative ἀ. The interlinear insertion is partially illegible; traces on the photo are compatible with one or two letters followed by ‘ἀνατρέξω, while Cuvigny’s field notes suggest τὲρν or ἀνάζεων. Thus, we have ‘trees’ and two verbs, one of which derives from the word for a branch or twig (κλάδος) and usually means ‘to prune’ (κλαδεύω), and the other ‘to bore through’ or ‘perforate’ (ἀνατρίτω or ἀνατετραίνω). What immediately follows, συρίνγει πέξω “I will fasten into a syrinx,” suggests the making of the panpipe is described here, yet it is difficult to reconstruct the text. Firstly, panpipes were normally made from rushes or reeds, not wood; then, pipes in a syrinx, unlike those of an aulos, are not perforated. Could it be that δένδρη refers to twigs or even stick which the speaker will cut off (κλαδεύσω) and then make hollow (ἀνατρίτω)? If so, perhaps one can entertain a restoration like δένδρη [ἀ] κλαδεύσω ‘τε ἀν ἀνατρέξω’ | συρίνγει πέξω, “twigs that I cut off and make hollow, I will fasten them into a panpipe,” though this is not graceful Greek.

5 μονηωλυκον: ἐ. μόνη, ὦ Λύκων? If so, the line confirms the gender of the speaker and supplies the name of her addressee. A Lykon is mentioned in Theocritus Idyll 5, where he is said to have given the shepherd Lakon a syrinx, which the latter accuses the goatherd Komatas of stealing from him (lines 3–10), a conflict that serves as the starting point for the ensuing singing competition. μωνον: presumably, the adverbial μόνον, “only take me […].”

βούτα: similar to ἀγρότης, which is mostly poetic, βούτας seems to be confined to poetry.

8 ὡς ἀπὸ Κόπτος: letters beyond tau are hardly visible. The toponym would make sense in connection with the verb ἐπέβην in the next line and would fit well with the provenance of the find.

10 ἐπέβην: the verb has a range of possible meaning, but can indicate simply coming, cf. ἀπὸ πρώτης ἡμέρας ἄφ’ ἢ ἐπέβην εἰς τὴν Ἀσίαν […] “from the first day when I came into Asia […]” (Acts 20:18).

14 οὐκ ἔμελλέ μοι: perhaps likelier that the double lambda is due to dittography and we are to read οὐκ ἔμελλέ μοι, “I did not care,” cf. e. g. Hom. Od. 16.465, οὐκ ἔμελλέν μοι ταῦτα μεταλλήσαι, “I did not care to ask about this”, than a construction with μέλλω, “he (or she, or it) was not about […]” with μοι depending on the lost verb in the lacuna.

16 ἔπια: cf. Hesych. π (1527) πέπωκα· ἔπια, and also Johannes Malalas’s (Chronographia 10.10) story of Alexander’s visit to Antioch where, having drunk from the
spring of Olympias, he allegedly said, ἔπια γάλα τῆς ἐμῆς μητρός, “I’ve drunk the milk of my mother.”

πικρὸν ἁ‵λ′μυ: lambda is inserted between alpha and mu, leaving little doubt that the word should be a form of ἁλμυρός, ‘salty’ or ‘briny’, though ἁλμυρίς, ‘salty land’ might also be a possibility. Both adjectives can describe the seawater, cf., e. g., Arist. Pr. 935a, διὰ τί ἡ θάλαττα ἁλμυρά καὶ πικρά ἐστιν; “Why is the sea salty and bitter?” The dactylic poem about the waters of Xeron inscribed on an ostracon found at that praesidium seems to speak of the bitterness of the water, πικρία (l. 5), that comes to the surface there.¹²⁴

εἰς Ἀφρωδείτην: l. εἰς Ἀφροδείτην. Ἀφροδίτη(ς) Ὄρους, Aphrodite of the Desert, was the praesidium located after Didymoi going from Koptos to Berenike. Although the full toponym appears to be Ἀφροδίτη (or Ἀφροδείτης) Ὅρους (cf. O. Did. 430.7–8, ἐν πραισειδίῳ Ἀφροδίτης Ὅρους), Cuvigny reports that it is listed simply as [Ἀφ]ροδείδη in the list of praesidia on O. Dios inv. 18. It might be particularly significant that the unpublished poem about wells on the Koptos to Berenike road apparently also points to the station as ἰς Ἀφροδείτην (O. Xer. inv. 995 fr.c, l. 5; early 3rd c.).¹²⁵

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**Concordance of Papyrological Sources**

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¹²⁴ See fn. 119 above.

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