

# Three Coptic Letters on *Ostraka*\*

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## Abstract

This paper presents the edition of three Coptic letters on potsherd *ostraka*. Although the content of each *ostrakon* is different, they are all mentioning a visit. The sender of the first *ostrakon* asked the recipient to visit him for a certain task while the sender of the second *ostrakon* mentions that the recipient will not come again to visit him. In the third *ostrakon*, the sender mentions his previous visit to the recipient.

## Keywords

*Ostraka*, Letter, Visit

## Introduction

These *ostraka* represent part from a collection of Coptic, Greek and Demotic *ostraka* kept in one of the stores of the Cairo Museum (Tahrir Square), Egypt. This collection has special Registration number because there is no information about excavation or provenance or date, however the date can be suggested from the 6th-8th A.D. (according to some formulas mentioned in them). Generally this collection of Coptic *ostraka* includes letters, contracts, accounts and school exercises.

### 1. O. Cairo Mus. 62<sup>1</sup>

Pl. 1.

Registration number: SR 18953

Description: Ribbed potsherd, reddish brown coated with pitch from inside, part from amphora, 13 lines are written with black ink on the outer part.

Dimensions: 15 x 9 cm

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\* I am grateful to all the staff of the Congress of Papyrology, Lecce 2019 especially Prof. Mario Capasso and also I thank the reviewer of this paper for his valuable additions in transcription and translation.

<sup>1</sup> All the inventory numbers of this collection are given by me.

Provenance: Unknown, perhaps from a monastery in Upper Egypt.

Content: A Coptic letter sent from Paul to a cleric, his name is missing in the text. The sender asks the recipient a visit for a certain task and mentions a wage for him. I suggest this task to be looking after (or healing in a certain way) the foot of the sender or another person (for lacuna in the text).

Dialect: Sahidic.

**Text**

[ϫⲧⲁⲁϭ ⲛ]

[ ]<sup>2</sup>.ⲉⲧ-

[ ]<sup>3</sup>ⲁⲡⲁ

[ⲚⲚ] ρⲓ ⲁⲧⲛ.

5 [ⲁⲡⲁ (?)ⲡⲁ]ϣⲗⲟϭ ϣⲡⲛ[ⲁ]

[ⲛⲓⲧⲓ]ϭⲉ (?) ⲉⲣⲟⲕ.ⲛⲓ-

[ϣⲓϭⲉ ⲙ]ⲙⲟⲕ ⲛⲓⲉⲓ ⲁⲧ ⲛⲓ-

[ ]ⲁⲟⲓⲣⲏⲧⲉ ⲛ.[ ]

[ ..ⲉϣⲁ]ⲣⲓϭⲁ ⲛⲓⲟⲟⲧϭ

10 [ⲛⲓⲉⲕⲙ]ⲛⲧⲉⲓⲱⲧ ⲁϣⲱ

[ ]ⲡⲉⲕⲱⲉⲕⲉ

[ ]. ⲉⲡⲉⲕⲓⲛⲧ

[ ⲟ]ϣⲁⲓ ⲁⲧ

<sup>2</sup> ⲡⲉⲓⲱⲧ ?

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps ⲉⲧ-ⲟϣⲁⲁⲱ «holy» (or ⲉⲧ-ⲧⲁⲛϣ «honored» as epithet for clerics & officials, Crum 1939, 390 b).

### Translation

«[ⲓ]Give it to]  
[.....]  
[ ... ]<sup>4</sup>Apa  
[NN] from  
5 [Apa (?)Pa]ulos, do favor  
[and give trou-]ble to yourself and  
[trouble (?)] yourself and come and  
[....] foot [...]<sup>5</sup>  
[.... th]ank<sup>6</sup>  
10 [your] fatherhood / paternity and  
[...]<sup>7</sup> your wage / reward<sup>8</sup>  
[...]<sup>9</sup> your heart<sup>9</sup>  
Farewell»

### Comment

Sometimes the Coptic letters started with the address.<sup>10</sup>

ⲣⲡⲛⲁ «do favor» and replaced by «do charity» in many cases.<sup>11</sup>

ⲓⲃⲈⲈ ⲈⲣⲐⲕ mentioned sometimes but usually it is mentioned as ⲓⲃⲈⲈ ⲛⲁⲕ<sup>12</sup> and this sentence known in letters including request for visiting or meeting.

ⲓⲃⲈ written also as ⲓⲐⲈ (S) and I remark that this later form is still known now in common Arabic as *hosah* which means also «problem, trouble» and from it the word *mehtas* «someone is in troubles».

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<sup>4</sup> The holy or the honored father.

<sup>5</sup> I suggest two possibilities, the 1<sup>st</sup> is: ⲛⲓⲣⲓⲉⲱⲣⲉ ⲛⲉ- ⲓⲁⲟϥⲣⲏⲧⲉ ⲛⲓⲛⲛⲓ «and look after the foot of NN» (ⲉⲱⲣⲉ ⲛⲉⲁ means «look after» in: Crum 1939, 85a), in this case the sick foot may be of a cleric. The 2<sup>nd</sup> suggestion is: ⲛⲓⲣ [ (verb) ⲧⲓⲁⲟϥⲣⲏⲧⲉ ⲛⲓⲣ (verb)] «and ... my foot and ...» in this case he asked to heal his foot by specific way (Compare a medical recipe mentioned feet and something with bitumen perhaps for applying on it: P.Sarga, no. 20).

<sup>6</sup> Literary «thank the hand of your fatherhood». Now in Egypt, «may your hand be safe» means thank you!

<sup>7</sup> Pay, give or send?

<sup>8</sup> Crum 1939, 30 b.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps it was written here «in a way makes your heart satisfied / pleasant», compare with another *ostrakon* mentioned «and I will pay your hire to you in the way which you desire», Ahmed 2009, 165.

<sup>10</sup> O.Crum ST, 199, Ahmed 2008, no. 3.

<sup>11</sup> OMH, 145.

<sup>12</sup> O.Crum, 241, 401, 325.



Pl. 1.

## 2. O.Cairo Mus. 120

Pl. 2.

Registration number: SR 18953

Description: Non-ribbed potsherd, light brown, remains of 9 lines are written with black ink on the outer part and it is faded now, the *ostrakon* has lacuna in the top. There are traces on the other side perhaps written on two sides.

Dimensions: 7 x 9 cm

Provenance and date: Unknown.

Content: incomplete Coptic private letter, the sender asked sending the wheat to him because the recipient has not the power (or ability) to come to him again.

Dialect: Seems to be Sahidic.

**Text**

-----  
[ ] ... [xO-]  
OY (?) NCOYO  
NAI AN MN-  
BOM ETP-  
5 EKEI NAI  
KESOP  
[O]YXAI  
ZMPX-  
OEIC

**Translation**

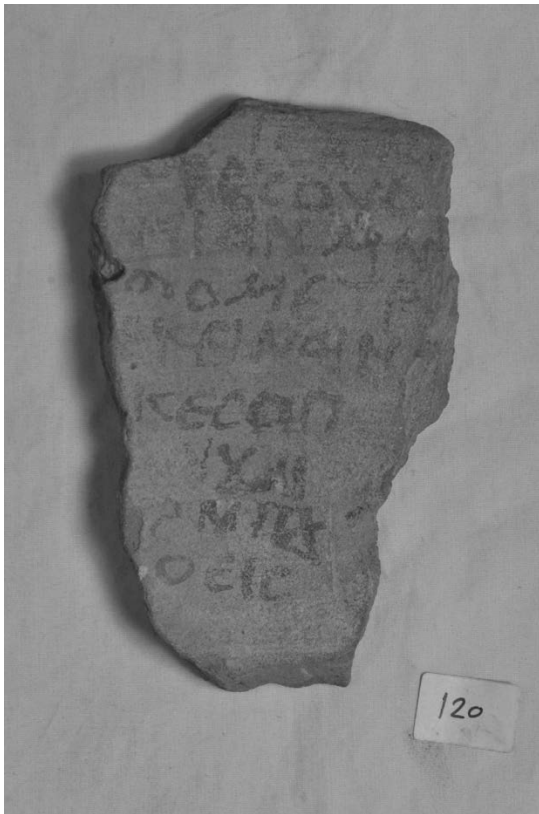
-----  
[.] ... [se-  
nd] (?) the wheat  
to me again<sup>13</sup>. It is not  
possible<sup>14</sup> that  
you come to me  
again  
farewell  
in the  
Lord<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> AN for ON?

<sup>14</sup> It is not possible = (One) has not the power, strength, ability, see Crum 1939, 816 b.

<sup>15</sup> Biedenkopf-Ziehner 1983, pp. 104-106.



Pl. 2.

### **3. O.Cairo Mus. 40**

Pl. 3.

Registration number: SR 18953

Description: Non-ribbed potsherd, part from amphora, light brown pottery, written on the outer part, coated with pitch in the inner part.

Dimensions: 11 x 5 cm

Provenance and date: Unknown

Content: Coptic ecclesiastical letter written to superior, the sender mentions (previous) visit of him and mentions: a seal, person(s) and jar(s)?

The sender didn't use the honorable plural when he called the recipient perhaps he was also of high rank.

Dialect: Seems to be Sahidic.

**Text**

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[ ] ΝΤΕΚ[ΜΝΤ-]

[ΕΙΩ]ΤΨΛΗΛ ΕΧΩΙ<sup>^</sup>

[ ] ΝΤΔΕΙ ΝΑΚ

[ ] ΤΟΒΕ ΔΙΤΝ-

5 [ΝΟΟΥ ... ]ΕΒΗΝ ΔΙΤΝ-

[ΝΟΟΥ... ]ΚΑΛΗ ΕΙΣ

[ ] Δ ΤΡΕΓΛΙΤΑ?

[Χ]Ω ΜΜΟΣ

[ΨΛΗ]Λ ΕΧΩΙ<sup>^</sup>

10 [Τ]ΕΚΜΝΤ[

[ΟΥΧΑΙ ΖΗΤΕΤ]ΡΙΑΣ

[ΕΤΟΥΔΑ]Β.<sup>16</sup>

**Translation**

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[ ] to your

[fatherhood] pray for me

[ ] I came to you

[... the] seal, I se-

5 [nt ...] poor man (?), I se-

[nt...] Jar(s) / Kale<sup>17</sup>, behold

] ..... [

[s]ay it

[pr]ay for me

10

.]your[...

[farewell in holy T]rinity

---

<sup>16</sup> Biedenkopf-Ziehner 1983, 106, this formula is mentioned followed by address, in Ahmed 2008, no.1

<sup>17</sup> The same word is mentioned as a personal name in a contract of sale on *ostrakon* kept in the hall of Coptic Museum (Cairo) while this word is mentioned again with the indefinite article ζΝ in another *ostrakon* (from Cairo Museum and under publishing by me) to refer to an object (not proper name) and I suggest it to be var. of ΚΕΛΗ or ΚΛΕ «vessel of liquids like honey, water & oil» and container also, see Crum 1939,102 a.

## Comment

ΤΟΒΕ Perhaps the scribe means ΤΩΩΒΕ «stamp, seal»

ΕΒΗΝ Usually as ΕΒΗΝ «poor, wretched person»,<sup>18</sup> the poor people were sent for helping them by clerics and helping the poor people and orphans by monasteries is mentioned in some Coptic letters.<sup>19</sup> It is so difficult to be ΑΙΤΝΝΟΥΓ [ ... ]ΕΒΗ ΝΑΙ for the translation «I sent ... to me»! it must be «to you».

ΚΑΛΗ This word is mentioned as a personal name in a contract of sale<sup>20</sup>. And sometimes the ancient Copts derived their personal names from the terms for vessels like this name which is referring also to the water jar called ϸΙΡ.<sup>21</sup>

The same word ΚΑΛΗ is mentioned again with the indefinite article ϺΝ in another *ostrakon*<sup>22</sup> to refer to an object (not proper name) and I suggest it to be var. of ΚΕΛΗ or ΚΛΕ «vessel / container of liquids like honey, water & oil».

<sup>18</sup> Crum 1939,53 a.

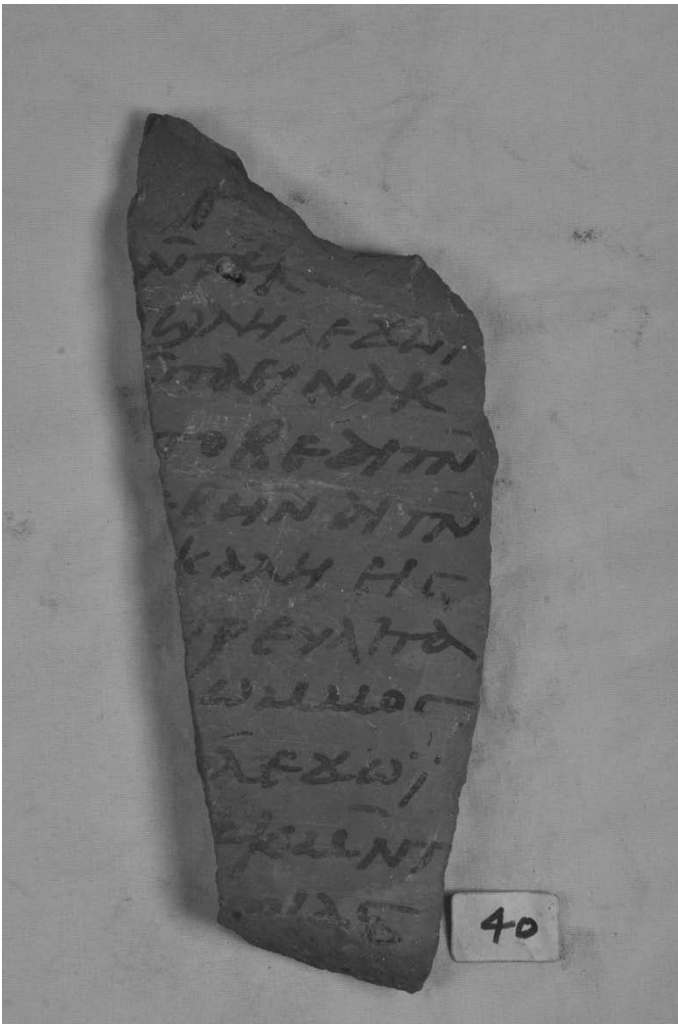
<sup>19</sup> For example see O.Theb. IV, no. 32.

<sup>20</sup> It is written on *ostrakon* shown in the hall of Coptic Museum (Cairo).

<sup>21</sup> Ahmed 2017, 26-27.

<sup>22</sup> It is kept in the Cairo Museum and under publishing by me in the proceeding of the congress of IACS, Claremont University, 2016.





Pl. 3.

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