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AN OLD COPTIC OSTRACON FROM ISMANT EL-KHARAB?

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The on-going excavations at Ismant el-Kharab (ancient Kellis) continue to recover substantial amounts of textual material¹, principally dating from the second to fourth-century CE. As the principal editor for the Coptic finds, working on site each season, I have been 'on watch' for any discoveries of Old Coptic, anything that might help to illuminate that curious transition or void between Demotic (also present at Ismant el-Kharab) and the fluid Coptic² that has been found in some abundance. On 22nd January 1997 Colin Hope, excavating in the north-west corner of the inner temenos, recovered an ostracon from a barrel-vault³; and this piece I publish here as first evidence of Old Coptic from the site.

Dr. Hope has kindly provided the following details and description of the ostracon. The decorated side is illustrated in Fig. 1, and a photograph of the text itself provided on Pl. X.

The ostracon was found lying vertically in mud-brick rubble (deposit 12) underlying the collapse (deposit 8) of the badly eroded, barrel vault of a brick chamber which is one of two lying to the south of the remains of a circular, mud-brick well in the north-west corner of the inner temenos of the Temple of Tutu. The brick rubble probably also derives from the vault of the room. Although eroded and badly weakened by the effects of salts and moisture, the majority of the vault was in place.

The two rooms form part of a complex of storage chambers surrounding the well, built upon two levels. These structures were certainly erected while the cult of Tutu was still being celebrated within the Temple. During work in the area conducted in 1998 fragments were found from several small, mud sealings bearing the impressions of a seated griffin with its front right paw upon a wheel and its tail ending with a crowned serpent's head. The device clearly represents Nemesis. In the decoration of the temple's mamissi (Shrine I), and upon other monuments, a figure of Nemesis accompanies that of Tutu⁴. Judging from their shape, the sealings were probably once affixed to the door into the chamber wherein the ostracon was found; they were discovered lying on the floor immediately outside the door sill into the room⁵. Present evidence indicates that the cult of Tutu was

¹ The excavations are directed by C. A. Hope (Monash University) and are held under the aegis of the Dakhleh Oasis Project (DOP). The principal funding body has been the Australian Research Council. A series of annual archaeological reports are published in the *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities (JSSEA)*; also, more immediately but with less detail, in the *Bulletin of the Australian Centre for Egyptology (BACE)*. The textual editions are published in the DOP monograph series (Oxbow Press), with P. Kell. I – IV already in print.

² The great majority of the Coptic has been recovered from residential sites (Area A), and is to be dated from the mid- to late fourth-century. This is almost entirely in dialect L. Relatively small quantities, but including some Sahidic, have been found in the Temple (Area D). There is no evidence to suppose that these are earlier. Certainly, it is well possible that some pieces amongst this total mass of material may be from the first half of the fourth-century, they are found in context with Greek texts of that date, but the point here is that there is no overt sign of an earlier stage of linguistic development.

³ The inventory number is D/1/234; the find site is D/1 zone 20, deposit 12. C. A. Hope has previously published an account of the excavation, a description of the find site, and some comment on dating this piece; cf. C. A. Hope and G. E. Bowen, The Excavations at Ismant el-Kharab in 1995/6 and 1996/7: A brief report, *BACE* 8, 1997, 49–64 (see 54–56). He has also been kind enough now to provide some more detailed remarks, which I reproduce verbatim *infra* together with figure 1. My thanks are due to Dr. Hope for entrusting the publication of this piece to myself; all remarks made here regarding the archaeological excavation and ceramic evidence are based on discussions with him, and have been confirmed prior to publication. My thanks also to Anthony Alcock and Klaas Worp, for our initial attempts to read the ostracon in the work-room at Bashendi; and also to Wolf-Peter Funk for valuable comments on a first draft of this article which I acknowledge below.

⁴ See O. E. Kaper, The God Tutu (Tithoes) and his Temple in the Dakhleh Oasis, *BACE* 2, 1991, 59–67, especially figures 3 and 4.

⁵ Visible on the extreme left of plate 6 in *BACE* 8.

practised until at least 335⁶; this provides an approximate *terminus ante quem* for the construction of the rooms. They are undoubtedly considerably earlier than this, however; for ceramics found within the area, some at floor level, are certainly distinct from types found in secure fourth-century contexts elsewhere at the site. They may be dated to the second half of the third-century. That additions and alterations were made to various parts of the temple complex during the third-century is indicated by inscriptional, archaeological and ceramic data.

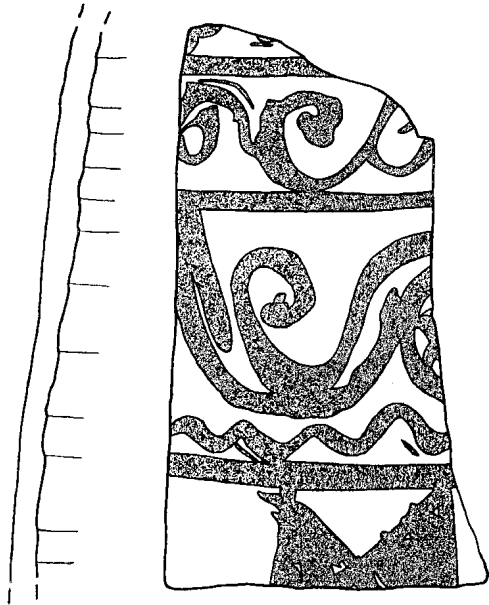


Fig. 1: Decoration on 31/420 - D6 - 1 / D / 1 / 234

The decoration upon the unscribed surface of this piece (Fig. 1) is of a type which is frequently encountered in the fourth-century at Ismant el-Kharab and throughout Egypt. Commonly it is found upon two-handled flasks with long cylindrical bodies (*gargoulette*) executed in bichrome red and brown. In the case of this ostrakon, however, the sherd is from a jar type common in fourth-century contexts but also known at the site in what are probably late third-century contexts. It derives from a rare, monochrome red, painted example of this jar type which is normally undecorated. Its material is also quite distinct from that in which the flasks are made.

All of these considerations indicate a dating of the ostrakon within the second half of the third-century and that it had been used as a chinking sherd during the construction of the vault of the storage chamber, hence its positioning in the brick collapse. The use of potsherds is a common practice in the construction of vaults and domes.

In sum: The physical evidence as regards the archaeological context would well suit a third-century date; that is, it belongs to Phase 3 of construction in this part of the Temple complex. Similarly, the decoration on the exterior of the potsherd (the text is on the interior) can be ascribed to the late third-century. As regards the actual text, I will argue here that the forms of the Coptic letters evidence a transitional stage from Demotic (or better: they evidence a form closer to their Demotic prototypes), and thus are most likely to be prior to the essentially fixed character of the mature Coptic script. In addition to orthography, the lexicon of the piece is best understood as pre-dating the establishment of a standard Coptic dialect in this area⁷. Thus, it also evidences an earlier stage in the development of Egyptian in the oasis⁸. For these various reasons a mid- to late third-century CE date is most probable.

I am aware that my use of the term Old Coptic (O or OC) needs justification. For instance, in the standard summary of the subject found in the *Coptic Encyclopaedia*⁹, Helmut Satzinger asserts that it is the script of a number of pagan texts; and that these can be grouped as either magical or astrological. The piece published here is very different. It is essentially a brief message, a documentary text of only immediate purpose; and whilst it is quite possibly of pagan origin (but this can not be known), it consists only of a few short greetings. Thus, if the OC category can be justified, the new find is of radi-

⁶ See P. Kell. I Gr. 13, where a priest of the god named Stonios witnessed a contract in that year.

⁷ As Coptic dialects became established, certain words of native Egyptian origin became obsolete; that is, they failed to thrive in the face of competition from alternatives, whether those were of Greek or native origin. Thus, the lexicons of different dialect regions show significant variation.

⁸ In view of the most disposable nature of the piece, it is highly unlikely to be an import. Some features of dialect also suggest a local (or at least southern) context; and its provenance can be presumed to be the oasis itself. C. A. Hope: Indeed, the raw pottery fibre was made from a local clay.

⁹ Ed. A. Atiya, 1991, appendix: 169–175.

cal importance as for the first time evidencing the secular development and usage of the script¹⁰. To do this, one must remove the question of content (magical / astrological) from the definition, and focus instead (and more logically I would argue) on matters of orthography, lexicon and date.

In the same summary, Satzinger comments: “OC texts are written with Greek characters supplemented by a number of signs of demotic origin that resemble rather closely their demotic prototypes. This is the most conspicuous feature of OC”¹¹. Such would also serve as a basic definition of the piece published here. At more length: J. Quaegebeur, in his article ‘De la préhistoire de l’écriture Copte’¹², argues for a three stage development of Coptic. The first need not concern us here, for it is the simple transcription of proper names and such like from Egyptian into Greek letters, whereas the piece published here is most certainly a freely-formed text. The third stage (i.e. mature Coptic), Quaegebeur argues, is the creation of a standardised script during the course of the third-century. Here, in comparison to the varieties of Old Coptic (he emphasises the invention and use of a number of different systems): “. . . le système graphique est beaucoup plus uniforme et le nombre limité de signes empruntés au démotique est adapté au ductus de l’écriture onciale grecque”¹³. Thus OC, his stage two, is precisely defined in terms of the non-standardised form and number of characters derived from Demotic. This will certainly serve to define this new piece as OC.

Text:

D/1/234: Ostrakon; text on interior of sherd, decoration on exterior. 148 x 80mm; lower 25mm blank. Complete.

1	ΤΙ ΞΙΝΑ ΔΨΕ	ΤΙΨΙΝΑ ΔΨΕ
2	.. ΜΝ Ν̄	.. ΜΝ Ν̄
3	ΥΡΩΤ	ΩΡΩΤ
4	ΜΝ 408Τ	ΜΝ 208Τ
5	ΜΝ Ν̄ΥΡΩΤ	ΜΝ Ν̄ΩΡΩΤ
6	ΤΙ ΞΙΝΑ Δ	ΤΙΨΙΝΑ Δ
7	ΜΟΝΙ ΜΝ Ν̄	ΜΟΝΙ ΜΝ Ν̄
8	ΧΒΑΝΕ Δ	ΩΒΑΝΕ Δ
9	ΙΜΟΘΘΗC	ΙΜΟΘΘΗC
10	Τ̄C̄5ΔΕΙ	Τ̄Ν̄C̄5ΔΕΙ
11	ΝΕΤ̄Ν̄ ΗΔ	ΝΕΤ̄Ν̄ ΧΔ
12	ΗΝΤ̄Ν̄Π . . .	ΧΝΤ̄Ν̄Π . . .

Translation:

I greet Pse- and his children, and Hout and his children.

I greet Moni and his servants.

(I greet) Imouthes.

<We> are writing to you, since we . . .

Commentary:

Alphabet: It was assumed from the start that the scribe worked with a consistent and coherent alphabet, although the graphemes derived from Demotic differ substantially from standardised Coptic orthogra-

¹⁰ In general, the substantial finds of Coptic documentary texts at Ismant challenge the prevailing orthodoxy that the development and spread of Coptic was driven by an urban and (Christian) monastic elite.

¹¹ Op. cit. p. 171.

¹² *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 13, 1982, 125–136.

¹³ *Ibid.* 132; and similarly see his summary of Vergote, pp. 129–130.

phy. Indeed, they tend to betray their origins, being in general closer to Demotic than the Coptic letters. A number of the forms can be paralleled from other OC scripts, but the present example can not be said to be the same as any one of these. Consistent with the other OC scripts, it would appear that there are (at least) both ϱ and \mathfrak{S} ($h / \text{ḥ}$ and \underline{h}), and that \dagger is absent¹⁴. It is argued (see: *infra*) that the alphabet utilised an equivalent to \mathfrak{G} .

\mathfrak{J} – \mathfrak{W} : A similar form is exemplified in other OC scripts, and it is close to the Demotic original. The identification is also unavoidable from context. One can see how the Coptic letter is adapted to a Greek uncial hand.

\mathfrak{Z} – \mathfrak{Y} : Ditto.

\mathfrak{L} – \mathfrak{S} : A distinct representation of the Egyptian \underline{h} is characteristic of OC; this is found also in Bohairic (\mathfrak{S}) and dialect *I* (\mathfrak{Q}). The identification of the words ($\mathfrak{S}\rho\omega\tau$ and $\mathfrak{C}\mathfrak{S}\mathfrak{A}\mathfrak{I}$) resolves the phonetic value of the grapheme. It is noticeable that the shape of the grapheme appears to vary from lines 3 to 5 to 10, and it is only on the last occasion that it significantly resembles the standardised \mathfrak{S} . A similar phenomenon is found in the OC Thebes horoscope¹⁵; and indeed two different shapes for the *hai* were used in Bohairic through the medieval period¹⁶.

\mathfrak{H} – \mathfrak{Q} : I presume that this sign is for the Egyptian ḥ , due to the etymology of the name $\mathfrak{Q}\mathfrak{O}\mathfrak{O}\mathfrak{T}$. However, the actual form of the sign does not resemble other OC scripts for the *hori*.

\mathfrak{H} – \mathfrak{Z} : This (initially) curious form was resolved as equal to \mathfrak{Z} from the sense of the text; but note a somewhat similar representation in the OC script of the third-century Mimaout papyrus, and this would seem to conclude the matter. It is in fact clearly derived from the Demotic¹⁷.

\mathfrak{X} – \mathfrak{G} : The most problematic grapheme in the text is at the start of l. 8. When Anthony Alcock, Klaas Worp and myself first looked at the piece, we considered whether the scribe might have corrected a \mathfrak{T} - to an \mathfrak{A} -, or vice-versa; but the failure of these options to resolve any sense from the line caused me subsequently to consider a \mathfrak{G} - (or even a \mathfrak{K} -¹⁸). This provides a mostly satisfactory resolution to $\mathfrak{G}\mathfrak{B}\mathfrak{A}\mathfrak{N}\mathfrak{E}$ (for $\mathfrak{G}\mathfrak{A}\mathfrak{O}\mathfrak{O}\mathfrak{N}\mathfrak{E}$, see *infra*); but it is still uncertain whether the grapheme appears here in its ‘normative’ form, or if it may in some way combine the \mathfrak{A} -. This can not be answered where there is but one single instance.

Dialect: Whilst it would be foolhardy to draw too many conclusions from such a short text, and indeed the very notion of dialect with reference to an OC text is problematic, it is nevertheless worth pointing to a couple of features. The representation of the unstressed auslaut vowel as \mathfrak{A} ($\mathfrak{W}\mathfrak{J}\mathfrak{N}\mathfrak{A}$) is characteristic of early ‘Theban’ dialect (i.e. P, see here P. Bodmer VI); and whilst one would not wish to take such terminology in a strict geographical sense (the feature is found in other texts from Ismant el-Kharab¹⁹), it is one of a number of southern elements apparent here (particularly the form $\mathfrak{M}\mathfrak{N}$ and perhaps more generally \mathfrak{A} for the preposition ‘to’). These points, together (of course) with the find site, make most unlikely any supposition of $\mathfrak{S}\rho\omega\tau$ as some kind of Bohairic ‘tendency’²⁰. The same term is

¹⁴ There is a convenient (but incomplete) chart in Satzinger (op. cit. p. 173), also a table of the OC alphabets by R. Kasser in the same volume (p. 42); and see W. E. Crum, An Egyptian text in Greek characters, *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 28, 1942, 20–31 (p. 21). Of relevance, see also W.-P. Funk, Die Zeugen des koptischen Literaturdialekts 17, *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache* 114, 1987, 129.

¹⁵ Crum, op. cit. p. 21 col. 4.

¹⁶ My thanks to Wolf-Peter Funk for reminding me of this point.

¹⁷ Cf. ed. of the Mimaout papyrus (P. Louvre 2391) by G. Möller, *PGM I*: 48–49 (K. Preisendanz, rev. A. Henrichs, Stuttgart 1973).

¹⁸ It should be noted that most OC alphabets do not include a \mathfrak{G} -, and even P. Bodmer VI uses a \mathfrak{K} - instead. However, the exceptions show that this can not be taken as an inflexible rule.

¹⁹ See the discussion of this by W.-P. Funk in P. Kell. V § 6, eds. I. Gardner, A. Alcock & W.-P. Funk (forthcoming).

²⁰ Cf. Crum, op. cit. p. 23 n 2. Of course, Crum may well have based his judgement on the occurrence of the letter *hai*, this prior to the appearance of P. Bodmer VI (which evidences the letter in a southern context).

found in the OC horoscope²¹, which text Crum states otherwise to evidence S and A features; and this leads one to understand it as a part of the OC lexicon which was rendered obsolete in the face of **ϣⲏⲣⲉ** throughout the southern dialect regions. A further point of note is the plural possessive article without **-ⲉ-**, i.e. **ⲛⲓ̄**-. Before the finds from Ismant el-Kharab, P. Bodmer VI was the only literary text known to use such forms.

Text:

1–2 **ⲧⲓⲱⲓⲛⲁ ⲁⲱⲉ** . . . : 1st present with the standard verb of greeting²², followed by preposition ‘to’ and then a name. The representation of the first person as **ⲧⲓ-** strongly suggests that this alphabet, as with all other OC scripts in so far as can be determined, lacked any sign for **-ⲧ-**. That sign may be taken to be a characteristic innovation of Coptic proper, and indeed the last letter created for the alphabet. This supposition leads one to read the first letter of the person’s name as **-ⲱ-** (and not as **-ⲧ-**, the two letters can appear very similar in form²³). It may also be noted that male Coptic names beginning Pse- (e.g. Pseke) are much more likely than with Tie-. As regards the name: It is possible that there were further letters at the finish of line 1, and similarly the traces of a supposed two letters at the start of line 2 are very poor; thus, the name may have been of more than four letters length.

2–3 **ⲙⲛ̄ ⲛⲓ̄ⲱⲣⲱⲧ**: The usage of the term **ⲱⲣⲱⲧ** (‘child’ pl.) was most unexpected, and without parallel in texts from Ismant where there is generally found **ϣⲏⲣⲉ** (also **ⲗⲓⲗⲁⲛⲉ** and **ⲕⲟⲛⲓ̄**). This lexical element can be counted as evidence of the early date and OC character of the text²⁴.

4 **ϩⲟⲟⲧ**: The resolution of the first grapheme as **ϩ-** is open to some question, though I regard it as most likely. This must be a man’s name, and I derive it from the word for ‘male’ or ‘husband’²⁵.

7–8 **ⲙⲛ̄ ⲛⲓ̄ⲱⲄⲃⲁⲛⲉ**: This is clearly the same construction as found twice already, with **Ⲅⲃⲁⲛⲉ** in place of **ⲱⲣⲱⲧ**. The word must (logically) be some term of relation (e.g. ‘brothers’), or at the very least companionship, with reference to Moni who is being greeted. If the first grapheme is taken as **Ⲅ-** (and see the comments *supra*), then the sense can be resolved as **Ⲅⲁⲟⲟⲟⲛⲉ** (pl. of **Ⲅⲁ(ⲟ)ⲟⲟⲛ** ‘servant’ or ‘slave’)²⁶. The **Ⲅ/ⲟⲟ** substitution is well attested, and an **-ⲁ-** vocalisation corresponds to the other dialectical features of the text. CD 835b lists instances of a servant (m and f) greeting a master²⁷, and this seems to be the only sensible resolution of the text; at least, that I can suggest. Nevertheless, it may be best to mark it ‘unproven’ at this stage.

8–9 **ⲁ-ⲓⲙⲟⲟⲑⲙⲥ**: The initial **ⲁ-** is read as the preposition ‘to’, with a repetition of **ⲧⲓⲱⲓⲛⲁ** simply implied (or possibly dropped in error). Alternatives (e.g. to read it as a verbal prefix) merely compound the problem.

10 **ⲧⲥⲟⲁⲉⲓ**: This is difficult to understand; i.e. the verbal prefix as merely **ⲧ-**, and also there is the problem of the superlineal. Syntax will hardly allow it to be nominal (perhaps with superlineal upon the article), but I can not determine any tense which would explain the initial **ⲧ-** as it stands. I suggest that it should be read as **ⲧ<ⲛ̄>-**, agreeing in person with l. 12 (which thus justifies the suggested though unexpected switch to pl.).

11 **ⲛⲉⲧⲛ̄: ⲛⲏⲧⲛ̄.**

²¹ Ed. F. Li. Griffith, The Old Coptic Horoscope of the Stobart Collection, ZÄS 38, 1900, 71–85 (p. 80 n. on **ⲱⲣⲱⲧ**).

²² The spelling with a final **-ⲁ** is not otherwise recorded; but there are numerous analogous instances in the Ismant el-Kharab texts, e.g. **ⲕⲙⲁⲙⲁ** (T. Kell. II Copt. 2, 133).

²³ Indeed, this shape for the **-ⲱ-** is itself an argument for a very early date; when the **-ⲧ-** became established it became a matter of necessity to distinguish the letters in Coptic orthography. See also Kasser, op. cit. p. 44 (also 34–35).

²⁴ See the references in W. E. Crum, *A Coptic Dictionary*, Oxford 1939: 631ab.

²⁵ Ibid. 738–739.

²⁶ My great thanks to Wolf-Peter Funk who led me to this solution.

²⁷ My thanks to Anthony Alcock for bringing this reference to my attention.

Ⲭⲁ: The resolution of the first sign as equivalent to -Ⲭ- is made on the basis that here should be read the common construction ⲧⲚⲟⲗⲓ ⲛ/ Ⲭⲉ ‘I write to you that ..’. In this case the form Ⲭⲁ can be understood as another example of the remarkable -ⲁ- vocalisation already remarked upon, and found elsewhere in texts from Ismant el-Kharab.

12 Ⲭⲛⲧⲛⲓⲓ . . .: Consequent to the above this must be Ⲭⲛ- (‘since’) + verbal prefix + verb²⁸. Unfortunately the end of the line is most difficult to read, and the number of final letters is not absolutely certain. This seems to be the completion of the text, so it is a shame not to know what was the actual purpose.

In sum: I have argued that the script of this ostrakon should be labelled Old Coptic²⁹ on the basis of the written form (and indeed number) of the letters derived from Demotic, for Coptic proper is characterised by a standardised script (and a standard alphabet³⁰). It should also be emphasised that despite some archaic lexical features, the language is most definitely Coptic; it is not (earlier) Egyptian ‘written in Greek letters’ or suchlike. Matters of orthography and lexicon are also reinforced by the indications of date for the piece, as prior to any other identified Coptic pieces from Ismant el-Kharab. If these arguments are accepted, then a series of most important hypotheses are suggested; viz.:

OC was not simply a rather restricted attempt to write out a number of pagan religious (magical and astrological) texts; but rather refers to a number of competing systems for writing the emerging Coptic language. These could be used for purely secular purposes, and (as indeed the substantial finds of fourth-century Coptic documentary texts from Ismant el-Kharab also evidence) the dominant role generally assumed for temple and church in the collapse of Demotic and rise of Coptic may need to be reassessed. Whether the triumph of a standardised Coptic orthography, and the demise of its rivals, was exactly linked to the process of Christianisation (and what exactly Christianisation might mean in view of the evident promotion of Coptic by Manichaean missions) remains to be confirmed. If that were so, then the piece published here would be a most rare remnant of pagan Coptic from prior to the (complete) evangelisation of the oasis.

Hypotheses such as these could lead to a radical reassessment of the processes that led to the development of Coptic, and are thus fundamental to the discipline. I am aware of the dangers of presuming too much from a single and brief piece of evidence, but look forward to scholarly support for the continuing work at Ismant el-Kharab. If my suppositions are correct, the piece published here can not be unique.

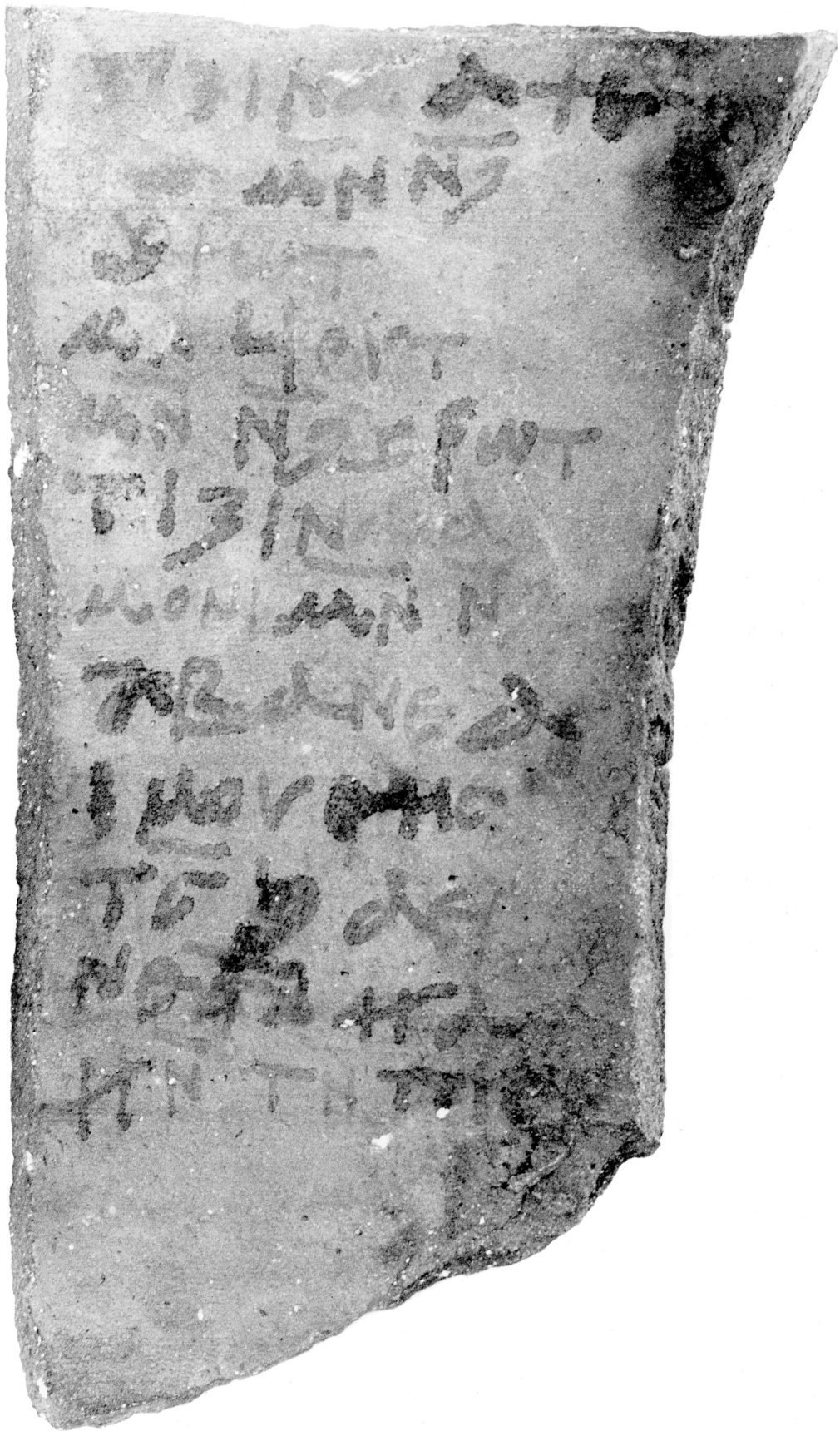
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²⁸ Cf. Crum, *ibid.* 772a.

²⁹ Note that OC is not properly a particular language (and certainly not a dialect). It is merely a script; or, more exactly, it is the term given to a number of rival scripts that were rendered obsolete by the triumph of Coptic itself.

³⁰ This included the letter ⲧ, not found in any known version of OC. The dialects did retain certain consistent variations in the number and form of the letters derived from Demotic (contrast especially A to S to B); but generally there is a tendency to drop some of the letters ‘trilled’ in various OC scripts.



Old Coptic Ostrakon from Ismant-el-Kharab (Inv. No. D/1/234); I. Gardner, pp. 195–200