



## On some fake hieratic ostraca

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# ON SOME FAKE HIERATIC OSTRACA

By FREDRIK HAGEN

Three modern forgeries imitating a single genuine Eighteenth Dynasty ostrakon are discussed: one is currently in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, another is in the IFAO archives in Cairo, together with the original, and a third is in private hands. The forger is not known but was probably someone working in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century: all copies seem to predate the Second World War.

MOST museums with significant collections of Egyptian antiquities have involuntarily acquired, at some point in their past, modern forgeries. These may have been bought in good faith, they may have entered museum holdings as part of private bequests, or they may have arrived through official channels as part of otherwise genuine assemblages of materials from excavations. For many years a public discussion about the status of such objects was seen as problematic. For example, when Ludwig Borchardt published a seminal article in 1930 identifying 56 specific cases of forgery, reactions from collectors, dealers and academics were immediate and aggressive.<sup>1</sup> The subject has since become less sensitive,<sup>2</sup> but the identification of objects as forgeries can still be controversial because of the frequent absence of objective criteria. Although the history of Egyptology is littered with high-profile cases of forgery—exemplified by such cases as the ‘Amarna princess’ recently acquired by Bolton Museum, the British Museum statue of Tetisheri, the harp’s head from the Louvre, or the Brussels scarabs of Necho<sup>3</sup>—there are also several cases where authentic artefacts have been wrongly condemned as fakes.<sup>4</sup> The vast majority of forgeries are objects of art which were produced to be sold to tourists, collectors and museums, and they encompass many classes of objects, including statues, reliefs, pottery, objects of wood and metal, stelae, shabtis and scarabs. Inscribed objects are not uncommon: shabtis and scarabs with more or less legible hieroglyphs are well attested, and some are found in duplicate.

To philologists, the most familiar examples are probably the forgeries of the commemorative scarabs of Amenhotep III, of which a number have been produced over the years. These occasionally allow for a detailed reconstruction of their transmission

\* I am grateful to R. J. Demarée, H.-W. Fischer-Elfert, and P. Grandet for discussing the material with me and for making a number of helpful suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> L. Borchardt, ‘Ägyptische “Altertümer”, die ich für neuzeitlich halte’, published as an appendix to *ZÄS* 65 (1930). For a discussion of the reactions, see J.-J. Fiechter, *Faux et faussaires en art égyptien* (MonAeg 11; Brussels, 2005), 45–52.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the recent interest by museums in hosting exhibitions looking at the history of forgery in the context of Egyptian artefacts: *GeaECHTet: Fälschungen und Originale aus dem Kestner-Museum Hannover* (Museum Kestnerianum 4; Hannover, 2001); S. Schoske (ed.), *Falsche Faraonen: Zeitung zur Sonderausstellung 400 Jahre Fälschungsgeschichte* (Munich, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Fiechter, *Faux et faussaires*, 61–99.

<sup>4</sup> Fiechter, *Faux et faussaires*, 107–10. Note that Fiechter himself has been criticised for classifying authentic objects as fakes: see M. J. Raven, review of Fiechter, *Faux et faussaires*, in *BiOr* 64 (2007), 635.

history because of idiosyncrasies in their inscriptions. So, for example, Barbara Lüscher was able to show that a fake commemorative scarab, bought by her from a trader outside the temple of Seti I at Abydos, was in fact based on another forgery which had been published as an original in a catalogue that had appeared over eighty years earlier.<sup>5</sup> The actual original on which this earlier fake was based is in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York,<sup>6</sup> but due to a fault in the reproduction of the old fake in the 1907 catalogue—which was not present on the original object—the modern forger had unwittingly betrayed his source (which he is unlikely to have realised was, in turn, a fake). In addition, the modern forger had inserted some arbitrary royal names instead of the expected titulary of Amenhotep III, apparently copied from the walls of the temple of Seti I near his own area of operation.<sup>7</sup> Such details regarding the provenance of forgeries are comparably rare, and even in the case of well-attested figures like the ‘Berlin Meister’, Oxan Aslanian,<sup>8</sup> it is often difficult to ascribe specific objects to that particular individual, rather than to other contemporary forgers. The material under discussion here can similarly not be ascribed to any specific individual, and although it represents not much more than a footnote in the history of forgery of Egyptian objects, it does introduce, as far as I am aware, a relatively little known category of fakes.<sup>9</sup>

During work on the unpublished hieratic ostraca in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge,<sup>10</sup> I came across what looked like a badly written but largely legible ostrakon of a rather unusual physical appearance. This was O. EGA 6122.1943 (presented as figure 2 at the end of this article after the authentic original), a piece of Theban limestone of a rough circular shape.<sup>11</sup> It carries two columns of hieratic on one side only, written in black ink, and measures about 6.1 cm in diameter. The text can be transcribed as follows:<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup> B. Lüscher, ‘Zwei interessante Fälschungen’, *ZÄS* 116 (1989), 58–9. The fake after which it was copied was published by P. E. Newberry, *The Timins Collection of Ancient Egyptian Scarabs and Cylinder Seals* (London, 1907), pl. xxi.16.

<sup>6</sup> The MMA piece was first identified as the *Vorlage* for the fake published by Newberry by C. Blankenberg-van Delden, ‘More Large Commemorative Scarabs of Amenophis III’, *JEA* 62 (1976), 75.

<sup>7</sup> Lüscher, *ZÄS* 116 (1989), 59.

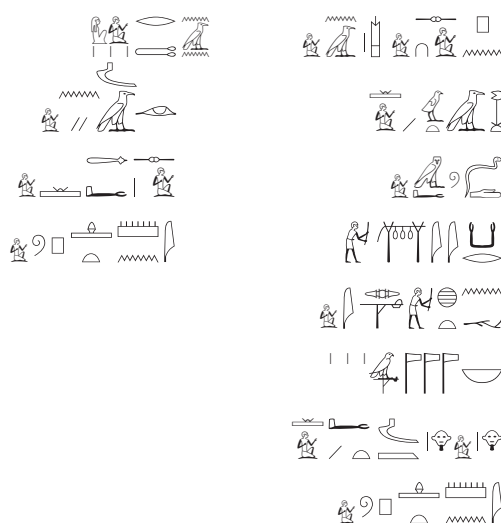
<sup>8</sup> For a recent overview of his life and career, see Fiechter, *Faux et faussaires*, 27–34.

<sup>9</sup> The curious case of O. Berlin P 12636, found during George Möller’s excavations at Deir el-Medina in 1911 (conveniently accessible, with photographs, on Deir el-Medina Online <<http://www.uni-muenchen.de/dem-online/>> accessed 20.03.2009), may be, in part, a modern forgery. The ‘verso’ carries a genuine Nineteenth Dynasty administrative text concerning the division of various objects between a man and a woman, but the other side has a completely illegible inscription of pseudo-hieratic signs that are presumably a modern addition. I am grateful to R. J. Demarée for drawing my attention to this ostrakon.

<sup>10</sup> The catalogue is forthcoming: F. Hagen, *New Kingdom Ostraca from the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge* (CHANE 46; Leiden, 2011). I am grateful to the Fitzwilliam Museum for permission to publish the collection, and to Sally-Ann Ashton and Helen Strudwick for their support and help in facilitating access to it.

<sup>11</sup> Compare the shape of O. Gardiner 163 (J. Černý and A. H. Gardiner, *Hieratic Ostraca* (Oxford, 1957), I, pl. 58.3) and O. DeM 10018 (P. Grandet, *Catalogue des ostraca hiératiques non littéraires de Deir el-Médineh*, X: Nos. 10001–10123 (DFIFAO 46, Cairo, 2006), 206). Grandet, *Catalogue des ostraca hiératiques* X, 25, noted the rarity of such circular shapes, but R. J. Demarée (pers. comm.) reports that A. Dorn has identified these as jar-lids, based on a group of about 40 such lids recently found near KV 18 by the Swiss mission currently working there; several of these also carried hieratic and hieroglyphic texts. The modern forger of O. EGA.6122.1943 was in other words working with a genuinely ancient artefact.

<sup>12</sup> The text is essentially identical to O. DeM 10002 (see further below), so only a transcription and translation is given here: for a philological commentary on the text, see Grandet, *Catalogue des ostraca hiératiques* X, 8. Photographic images and facsimiles of O. DeM 10002 (fig. 1), O. EGA 6122.1943 (fig. 2), and the other comparable ostraca referred to, O. DeM inv. 10016b (fig. 3) and the privately owned Amsterdam ostrakon (fig. 4), are gathered at the end of this article, along with O. Ashmolean reg. no. 1942.67b, a forgery of O. Ashmolean HO 1189 (fig. 5).



He of ten men, Iuna.  
 Khaut  
 Djeduma  
 Kary  
 Nakhtmin  
 Nebnetjeru  
 Herihermaat  
 Amenhotepu

The men:  
 Many  
 Seaa  
 Amenhotepu

At first glance the text itself seemed to be of the Eighteenth Dynasty, similar to the ones found near Deir el-Bahri and now being studied by Malte Roemer in Berlin.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the ostracon in the Fitzwilliam is a modern copy of O. DeM 10002 (= O. Černý 10) in the collection of the IFAO in Cairo (fig. 1). This was recently published as part of their long-running catalogue under the current editorship of Pierre Grandet,<sup>14</sup> who noted that it stemmed from the private collection of Jaroslav Černý. Prior to the tenth volume of that catalogue, published in 2006, photographs of the object had not been publicly available. Grandet added in a footnote that the IFAO possessed a fake of this ostracon, first identified as such by Yvan Koenig.<sup>15</sup> This object, which carries the designation inv. no. 10016b (to distinguish it from O. DeM 10002 = inv. no. 10016a, the original), has never been published; a photograph and facsimile is reproduced on fig. 3.<sup>16</sup> It is of limestone, and measures *c.* 15 × 15 cm, and the ink is well preserved. The third fake copy (fig. 4) is in a private collection, and I have no information about its current whereabouts or history of ownership.<sup>17</sup> It is made of limestone, measures *c.* 17.5 × 13.5 cm, and is written in faint black ink. Because of the faintness of the ink, details of the forms of the different signs are frequently difficult to establish, and

<sup>13</sup> Cf. M. Römer, 'Die Ostraka DAI/Asasif 55 und 56: Dokumente der Bauarbeiten in Deir el-Bahri und im Asasif unter Tuthmosis III', in E. M. Engel, V. Müller, and U. Hartung (eds), *Zeichen aus dem Sand: Streiflichter aus Ägyptens Geschichte zu Ehren von Günter Dreyer* (Menes 5; Wiesbaden, 2008), 613–25.

<sup>14</sup> Grandet, *Catalogue des ostraca hiératiques* X, 7–8, 184.

<sup>15</sup> Grandet, *Catalogue des ostraca hiératiques* X, 7 n. 3.







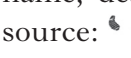


<sup>16</sup> My thanks are due to Nadine Cherpion and the IFAO for providing photographs and for allowing them to be published here.

<sup>17</sup> I am grateful to R. J. Demarée for alerting me to the existence of this copy, and for providing photographs of it; he received these photographs in January 1998 (pers. comm.).



























the facsimile may contain inaccuracies. Consequently, this copy is only occasionally incorporated into the discussion below.




The classification of the fake ostraca as modern forgeries will be uncontroversial to hieratic scholars. The handwriting looks subtly ‘wrong’, perhaps partly because the outlines of strokes are too rounded—this may be a result of the type of pen or brush used by the forger. The text is clearly imitating a real hieratic text, which means that the fake text itself can, for the most part, be read, even though the copyist could not read hieratic himself. His inability to read hieratic is obvious from both the shapes of various signs and the distribution of the signs on the page: the following discussion includes the most characteristic examples, but the list is not meant to be exhaustive.

### Displacement of signs






Examples are frequent and revealing. On the original (O. DeM 10002), the personal name Many is written  (column II, line 2). In all three fake copies the sign  (U2) has been detached from that name and placed under the determinatives for the word *rmt*, ‘people’, in the line above, indicating that the copyist was unaware of the relationship between the hieratic groups. Similarly, the forger reproduced the groups used to write the name Amenhotep very differently in the two cases where they appear (col. I, line 8; col. II, line 4). Most tellingly, in the first instance the constituent strokes of the group  are separated so that the ‘body-stroke’ is attached to the preceding group , while the two ticks which normally mark the loaf on the offering table are left hanging on their own:  (O. EGA.6122.1943)  (O. DeM inv. 10016b). The copyist seems to have been unaware that lines I.4 and II.8 contained the same name, despite the insignificant differences between the two writings in the original source: , . Another but more minor example is the distribution of the three ticks in the plural determinative of the word *ntrw*, ‘gods’, on O. DeM inv. 10016b (col. I, line 6): “  ”.

### Curious forms

The writing of the sign  (A1) in the word *s*, ‘man’ (col. I, line 1; col. II, line 3), is written with a simple vertical tick in the fakes ,  (O. DeM inv. 10016b), ,  (O. EGA.6122,1943), unlike the original (O. DeM 10012) where the fuller form is used: , . The rather cramped writing of  (G1) in the group  (col. I, line 1) has been given an uncharacteristic shape with a prolonged horizontal line on top in the fake copies: compare  (O. DeM inv. 10016b) and  (O. EGA.6122.1943) with  (O. DeM 10002). The sign  (A24) is written with the usual three or four strokes in the original (col. I, lines 4 and 5), whereas in the fakes this reduced to two, with a correspondingly simplistic form: compare ,  (O. DeM 10002) with ,  (O. DeM inv. 10016b) and ,  (O. EGA.6122.1943). Not all shapes are simplified, and the sign  (V30; col. I, line 6), which in the original consists of two strokes of the pen ; O. DeM 10002), has been elaborated to three strokes in the fakes, as seen most clearly on O. DeM inv. 10016b: . The letter  (Q3) is written in several different ways on the fakes, occasionally with fewer strokes than in regular hieratic (four): see in particular O. DeM inv. 10016b:  (col. I, line 8) and  (col. II, line 4). More complex signs like  (M43 variant) were reproduced in forms of varying similarity to the hieratic

original: compare  (O. EGA.6122.1943) and  (O. DeM inv. 10016b) with the *Vorlage* of O. DeM 10002: .

### Omissions of signs

On EGA.6122.1943, in the name Kary (col. I, line 4), as well as that of Nebnetjeru (col. I, line 6), the dot that serves as the determinative  (A1) was left out. The former is also missing on O. DeM inv. 10016b, but not the latter: this is probably best explained by the weakness of the ink used to write the missing sign in the original. O. DeM inv. 10016b is also missing the  in the group  (col. I, line 5), and the final diagonal stroke under  in  (col. I, line 7). On the Amsterdam ostrakon (pl. 4), several signs appear to be missing in col. II, lines 2 and 4, but they may simply be too faint to see in the photograph; certainly there is enough space available.

### History and manufacture

Little can be said about the provenance of the objects, or the identity of the forger. In terms of chronology, the first recorded appearance is the arrival of the Fitzwilliam piece in 1943 as part of the Gayer-Anderson collection of inscribed ostraca.<sup>18</sup> I have no information about when the original in Cairo was donated to the IFAO by Černý, or how the fake copy made its way into their collection. P. Grandet notes that both objects carry SA numbers (SA 12889 and 10200, respectively),<sup>19</sup> which are inventory numbers that were assigned by the Antiquities Service when the IFAO and its objects were impounded during the Tripartite Invasion of the 1956 war, when Britain, France, and Israel invaded Egypt in order to seize control of the Suez canal. Consequently, both the original and the fake ostrakon must have been in the IFAO archives by 1956. All three fakes are thus old forgeries, presumably made before Černý purchased the original; as an expert on hieratic ostraca he would not have been fooled by the copies had he been presented with them, but would also have easily recognised that they were based on an authentic text.

When encountering forgeries one generally assumes that the motive behind their production was financial gain, and this remains the most plausible hypothesis in the case of fake ostraca. Although hieratic ostraca were not expensive to buy in the early Twentieth Century—Gardiner famously bought several hundred himself,<sup>20</sup> and many other contemporaries had smaller collections<sup>21</sup>—their value to an Egyptian would not have been insignificant. R. J. Demarée (pers. comm.) remembers being told by the

<sup>18</sup> This was bequeathed following the departure of R. G. Gayer-Anderson from Cairo in 1942, but before his death in England in 1945; W. R. Dawson, E. P. Uphill and M. L. Bierbrier, *Who Was Who in Egyptology*, 3rd rev. edn (London, 1995), 165. For the figured ostraca from the Gayer-Anderson collection, divided between Medelhavsmuseet in Stockholm and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, see B. J. Peterson, *Zeichnungen aus einer Totenstadt* (Medelhavsmuseet Bulletin 7/8; Stockholm, 1973) and E. Brunner-Traut, *Egyptian Artists' Sketches* (Istanbul, 1979).

<sup>19</sup> P. Grandet, pers. comm.

<sup>20</sup> Of this large collection only a small proportion have been published: in Černý and Gardiner, *Hieratic Ostraca*. Černý's provisional transcriptions of a number of others can be found in his Notebooks now kept in the Griffith Institute, Oxford (see <<http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/gri/4hicerros.html>> for listing), some of these have also been used for standard reference works such as *KRI*. See also the Deir el-Medina database <<http://www.leidenuniv.nl/nino/dmd/dmd.html>> under O. Ashmoleum Museum.

<sup>21</sup> J. Černý (1898–1970) had a significant collection, as did W. M. F. Petrie (1853–1942), A. Varille (1909–1951), P. Lacau (1873–1963), B. Grdseloff (1915–1950), W. Helck (1914–1993), J. H. Breasted (1865–1935),



famous Luxor dealer Sayed Molattam<sup>22</sup> that he used to sell ostraca to Gardiner for an average of 5–10 piasters per object, and this is the only information I have about prices. The exchange rate for the Egyptian pound in the period 1885–1939 was fixed at £E 0.975 = £1, so the price for ostraca was in the range 5–10 pence; when compared to the Retail Price Index for, say, 1937,<sup>23</sup> this corresponds to approximately £1–2 in current (2007) money.<sup>24</sup> Even if such calculations should be wrong by an order of magnitude (i.e. ‘real’ costs equivalent to £10–20 in 2007 prices), hieratic ostraca were not expensive objects to Westerners, and they would have been correspondingly lucrative to produce for local Egyptians. Limestone flakes can be picked up for free anywhere in the Theban hills on the west bank, identical in geological terms to those used by Ancient Egyptian scribes, and ink would have been reasonably cheap and accessible. It would not have been difficult for an individual with a keen eye and a steady hand to replicate New Kingdom hieratic, especially with an authentic *Vorlage*, to such a standard that it would have fooled a member of the general public (or antiquities dealers, for that matter). The scale of production of fake ostraca is difficult to estimate because by their nature they are not generally included in the scholarly literature,<sup>25</sup> but it will probably not have been as extensive as that attested for more popular categories of objects like shabtis or scarabs. The three copies presented here are very similar in appearance and may have been produced by a single individual, probably working in Egypt at some point before World War II. They are not identical,<sup>26</sup> however, which might suggest that they were not produced simultaneously. Further copies may well appear in due course; a significant number of hieratic ostraca remain unpublished, and the original copy of the text was published in 2006, making comparisons with it possible only recently.

### Postscript

After this article was finished, Helen Whitehouse very kindly brought to my attention another case of a forged hieratic ostrakon (fig. 5), this time from the collections of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. This ostrakon, reg. no. 1942.67b, is a fake copy of O. Ashm. HO 1189 (reg. no. 1942.67a), a short administrative text noting the ‘receipt [of the] measure<sup>27</sup> brought by one of [...] (*ššp* [...] *ip in.t w<sup>c</sup> n* [...])’. Line 2 mentions ‘milk [...] the people ([...] *irtt t3 rmt*)’. There are traces of three lines on the ostrakon, but

W. Spiegelberg (1870–1930), as well as many private collectors: see e.g. D. N. E. Magee and J. Malek, *A Checklist of Transcribed Hieratic Documents in the Archive of the Griffith Institute* (Oxford, 1991), 27–33; 48–50.

<sup>22</sup> On this dealer, see e.g. B. Bothmer, *Egypt 1950: My First Visit* (Oxford, 2003), 38, 42.

<sup>23</sup> This was the year when N. de G. Davies purchased the fake hieratic ostrakon in the Ashmolean Museum (see Postscript, below). The fake copies of O. DeM 10002 may have been purchased around the same time.


<sup>24</sup> The Retail Price Index (RPI) measures ‘the cost in a given period of the goods and services purchased by a typical consumer in a base period...’ (<<http://www.measuringworth.com/glossary/priceindexRet.html>> accessed 21 June 2009). This is a method of calculating relative worth frequently used by economic historians, and although not entirely accurate for years prior to 1948, it does provide a rough indication of relative monetary values. 2007 is the latest year for which the relevant data is available. I am grateful to R. Allen, of Nuffield College, Oxford, for discussing some of the issues involved in such calculations, as well as for providing information about the online resources employed here.

<sup>25</sup> Unless included in museum collections, they tend to remain unknown by hieraticists. R. J. Demarée reports having seen fake ostraca being offered for sale in Luxor in the 1960s, but these were ‘easily recognisable as such by even beginning students of hieratic’ (pers. comm.).

<sup>26</sup> Compare e.g. the two signs omitted in O. DeM inv. 10016b (col. I, lines 5 and 7), which are present in O. EGA.6122.1943 (cf. discussion above).

<sup>27</sup> Or perhaps ‘quota’; cf. R. A. Caminos, *Late-Egyptian Miscellanies* (Brown Egyptological Studies 1, London, 1954), 307.

the forger has only reproduced the two most visible lines (lines 2 and 3 of the original). The fake ostrakon does not look like the three others discussed above, and may be the work of another individual, but like the others this ostrakon was produced by someone unable to read hieratic.<sup>28</sup> Both of the Ashmolean ostraca were given to the museum by Norman de Garis Davies, and a slip of paper kept with them, a copy of a note written by Davies himself, records their provenance: ‘Ostrakon bought at Thebes, Dec 1937. Forged copy of the same bought from the same native dealer a week later. (signed) N. de G. Davies’. The interest of this example is considerable in that it associates the production of fake ostraca with an unnamed ‘native dealer’ at Thebes, and because it provides an example of an Egyptologist knowingly purchasing a forged ostrakon (Černý is perhaps another example, if the Cairo forgery was part of the same gift as O. DeM 10002). The date of Davies’ purchase—1937—is also suggestive: this is within six years of the first record of a fake copy of O. DeM 10002 (the Fitzwilliam ostrakon arrived in Cambridge in 1943). However, there is no evidence to link all these forgeries to a single forger, and the number of people involved, and the scale of production, remains unknown. Davies’ (and perhaps Černý’s) motive for buying what he knew was a forgery was probably personal amusement—the object no doubt made for an entertaining anecdote.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g. the misrepresentation of the determinative of *šsp* in line 2 (line 1 of the forged copy), which is clearly the expected , despite the faintness of the ink.

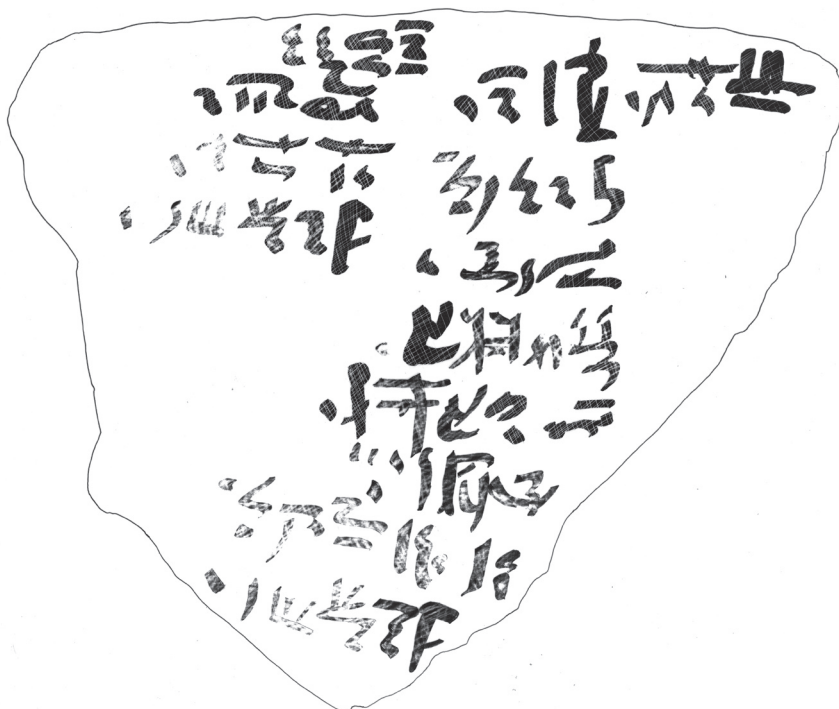
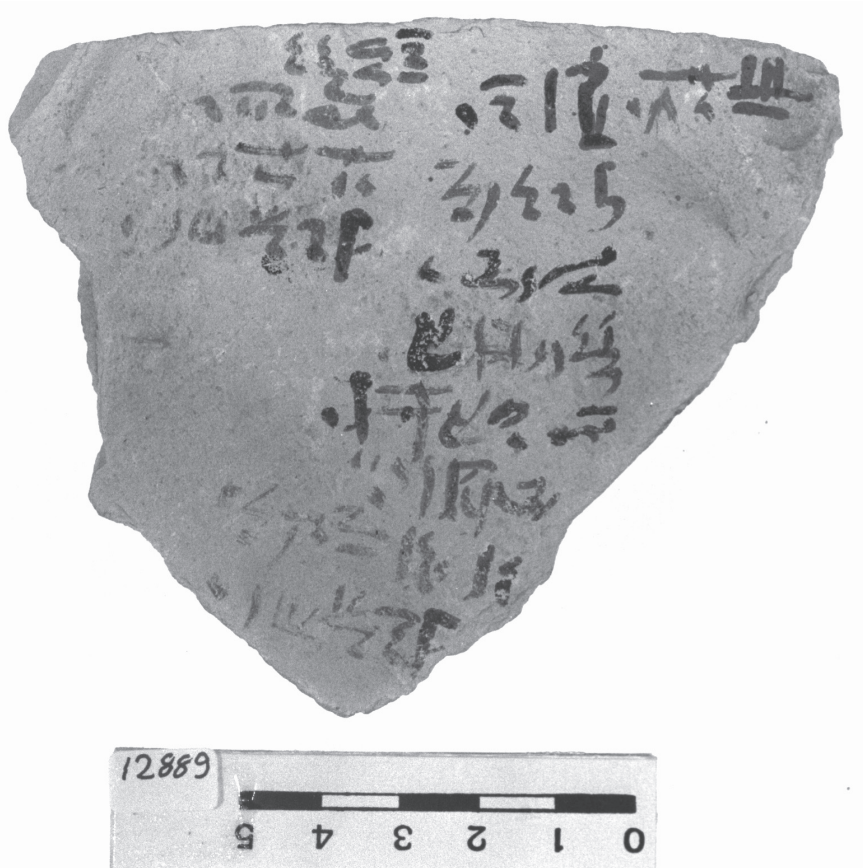


FIG. 1. Ostrakon DeM 10002 = inv. no. 10016a  
(photograph: courtesy of Institut français d'archéologie orientale, Cairo; facsimile: F. Hagen).

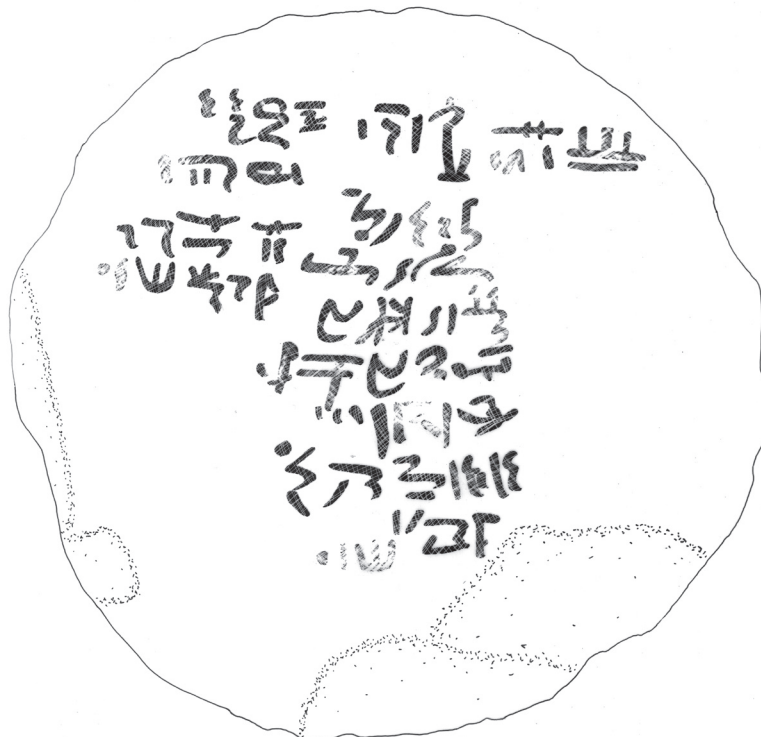
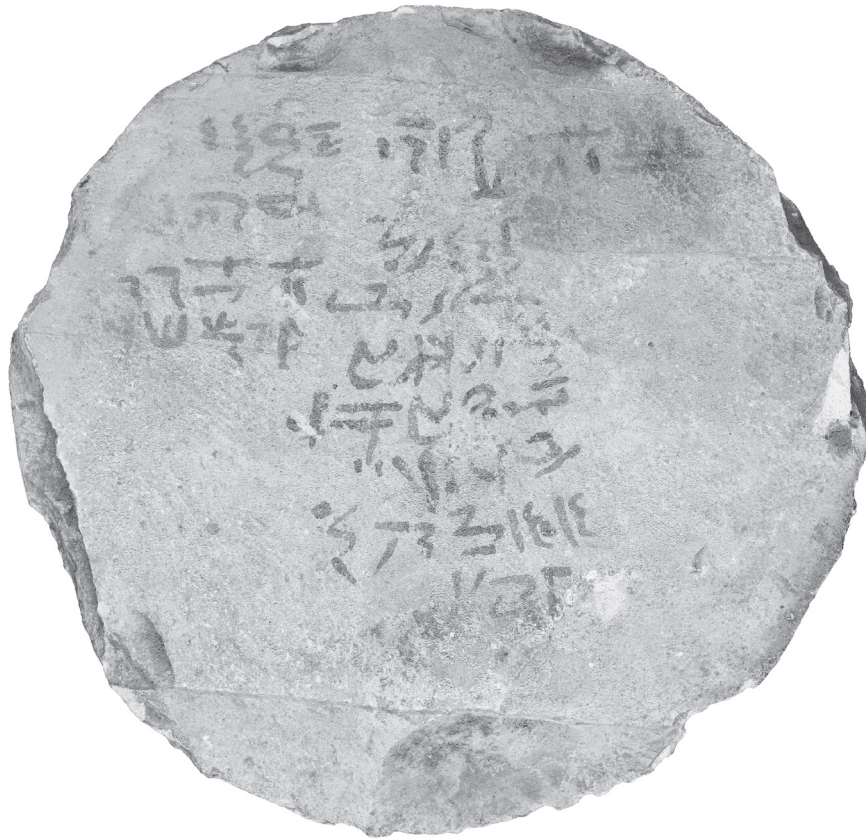


FIG. 2. Ostrakon EGA.6122.1943; a modern forgery  
(photograph: courtesy of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; facsimile: F. Hagen).

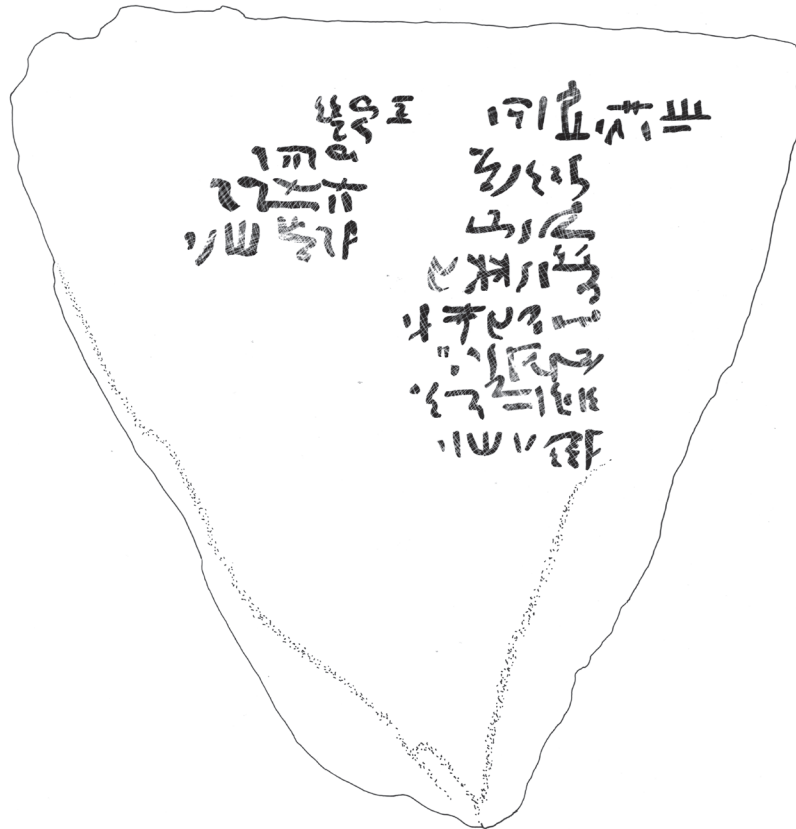


FIG. 3. Ostrakon DeM inv. 10016b; a modern forgery (photograph: courtesy of Institut français d'archéologie orientale, Cairo; facsimile: F. Hagen).

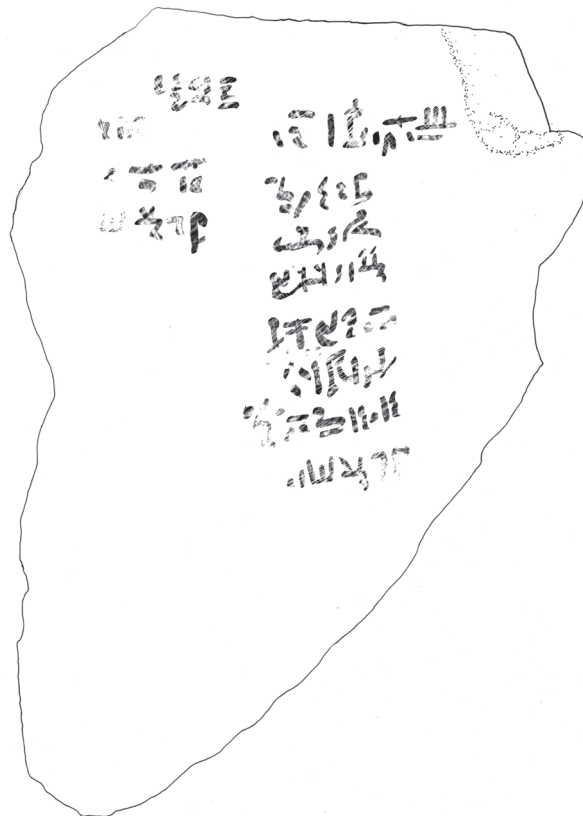
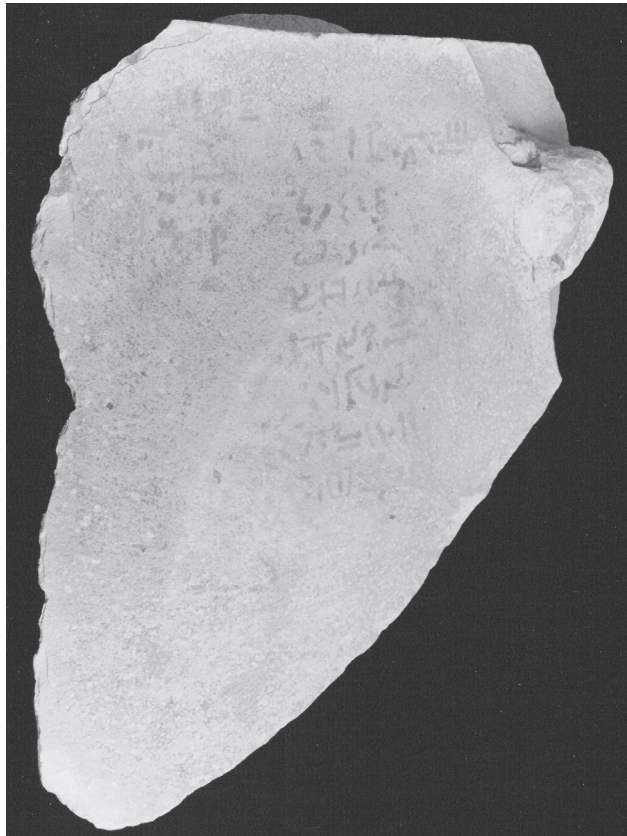


FIG. 4. An ostrakon previously in a private collection in Amsterdam; a modern forgery (photograph: R. J. Demarée; facsimile: F. Hagen).

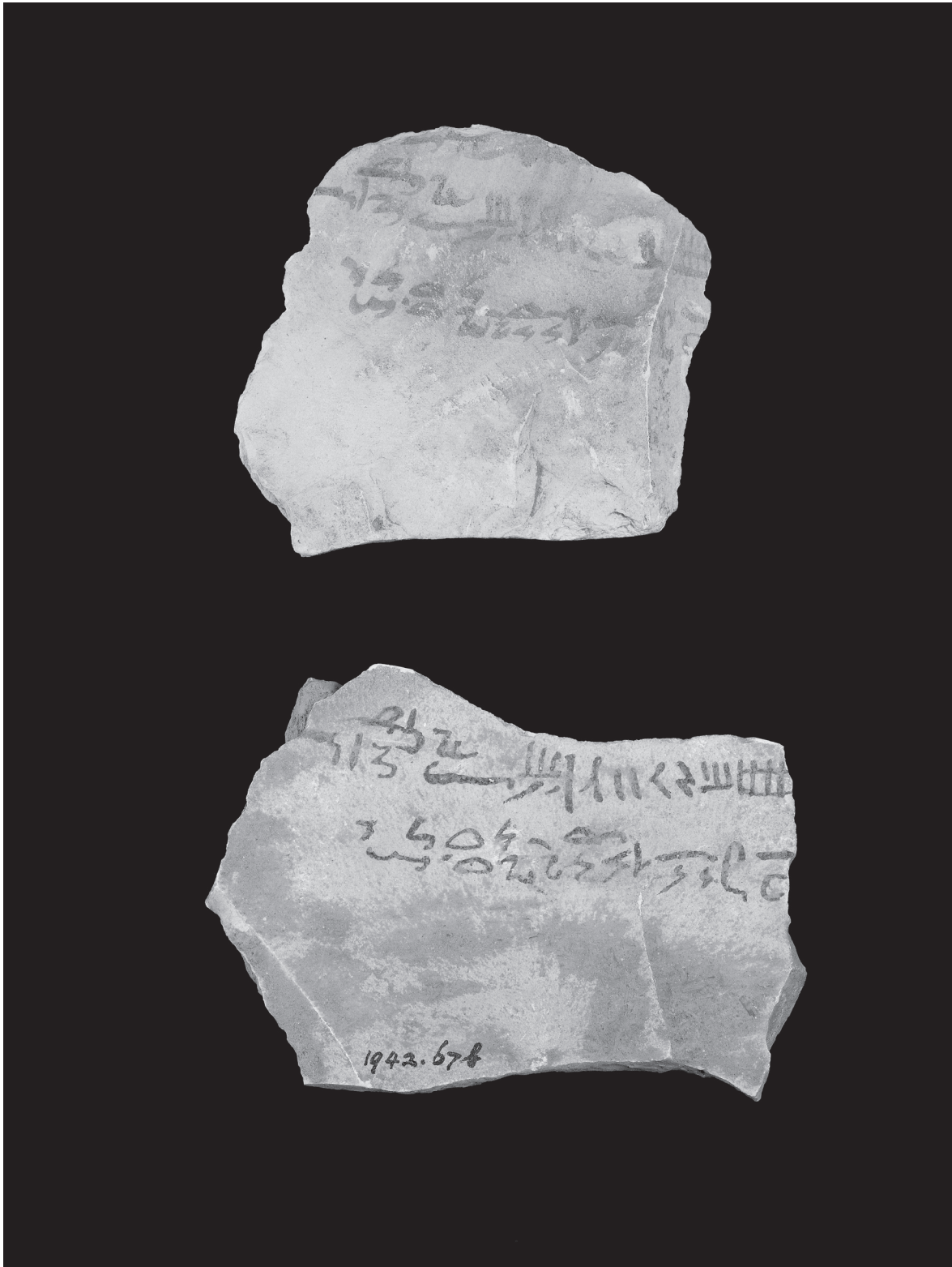


FIG. 5. Top: The Ramesside ostracon Ashmolean HO 1189 (= reg. no. 1942.67a).  
Bottom: Ostracon Ashmolean reg. no. 1942.67b; a modern forgery  
(photographs: courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).