

Miscellanea

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Beyond the papyrus. The writing materials of Christian Egypt before the tenth century: ostraca, wooden tablets and parchment¹

The exceptional climatic conditions of the Egyptian desert and the Nile valley have resulted in the preservation and possible recovery of a huge quantity of documents and literary texts. Even if we limit ourselves to dealing with the Coptic manuscript materials – with the exclusion of those in Greek, which, as is well known, was never completely replaced by the Coptic language – the sheer quantity of this material is still overwhelming.

Aside from nobler book materials, Egypt is well known for the use of several other writing supports. These include: pottery sherds, limestone flakes and slices, bones, wooden tablets, cloth, and, in short, anything with a smooth surface. Naturally, wall paintings and graffiti are excluded from this list because they belong to the sphere of epigraphy rather than to that of manuscripts.

Ostraca, or pottery sherds, were widely used in Egypt, and this fact is easy to explain. Being discarded material, they were cheap and could be readily found almost anywhere. Although *ostraca* were more often used for receipts, calculations, student exercises and notes, literary texts are also well represented. This state of affairs – it is worth remembering – obtained not only in Christian times.

¹ This paper was inspired by the discussion within the COMSt Team Codicology.

The well-known Middle Kingdom Tale of Sinuhe has been transmitted primarily by *ostraca*. *Ostraca* also preserve legal texts, magic spells, private and official letters – those belonging to the archive of Pisenhius, the bishop of Coptos, are justly famous – and lists of books. In the last instance – it is worth observing – mention is often made of the material of which the books are composed. This is the case, for example, with the Monastery of St. Elias of the Rock, the list of which is preserved at the Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale in Cairo.² In short, *ostraca* were the most common means of written communication in Egypt from Dynastic times onwards. An example of this state of affairs is afforded by the *Life of Anastasia*. Believed to be a eunuch monk, Anastasia lived in complete isolation and received messages only from her brother “by means of a written ostrakon, placed at the entrance of her cell”.³

The Copts use two terms to designate *ostraca*: the Greek πλάξ and the Coptic Ⲅⲉⲗⲁⲕⲉ. With but a few exceptions, the first is normally used to indicate pottery, whereas the second indicates limestone.⁴ From a preliminary estimate based upon examination of the main catalogues of Coptic *ostraca*, it would appear that two-thirds are ceramic, whereas only one-third is made of limestone. Two reasons are likely to explain this situation. First, the surface of stone flakes is far less regular than that offered by ceramic. Second, since Egypt constituted an important commercial crossroads for the Mediterranean, there was always a large quantity of discarded ceramic containers available, and this pottery was recycled in part as building material (for example, in *opus caementicium*) and in part as writing material. Fragments of amphorae and dishes appear to have been favoured for use as *ostraca*. However, there is no discernible preference between the concave and the convex side of the pottery sherds. Both are equally used. In addition, it is worth noting that as in the case of parchment and papyrus, albeit less often, pottery *ostraca* might be subject to re-writ-

² IFAO 13315; Otranto 2000:125.

³ Crum 1902:xi.

⁴ Crum 1902:xi



Fig. 1. The mortuary temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu (Western Thebes), site of the village of Djeme.

ing once the first text had been erased with a wet sponge.⁵

As a rule, official text-receipts make use of unribbed pottery that is glazed and generally light yellow in colour, with the preferred shape being triangular.⁶

However, as far as the business transactions of Medinet Habu (the Coptic village of Djeme) are concerned, the texts, except for a small number of white limestone flakes, “are written on pottery sherds of various kinds”, whereas “the dominant type among them is a dark-brown, strongly ribbed ware which came primarily from wine jars; this pottery is thick and durable”.⁷ The ratio between pottery and limestone seems, however, quite the opposite in Western Thebes, where the predominance of the latter, especially in official texts – ecclesiastical and legal – suggests that the stone was considered there more honourable than pottery, maybe because of the geological characteristics of the region and, consequently, of the better quality of limestone (it is not by chance that the so called “Theban Mountain” puts up the most famous Egyptian

hypogean *necropoleis*, excavated in the strong and trustable rock of the west bank of the Nile).⁸

In Greek and Roman times, limestone *ostraca* become extremely rare, even in Thebes.

Wooden tablets, by contrast, are less commonly found.⁹ This may be due to the obvious reasons for which fewer of them survive. Not all writing materials last equally well, and their preservation depends in part upon where they were used and discarded. In the humid conditions

of the Nile Delta, for example, almost no writing materials have survived. Besides, wood was probably less freely accessible: it was only occasionally found locally, but most often it was imported, which contributed to escalating costs.

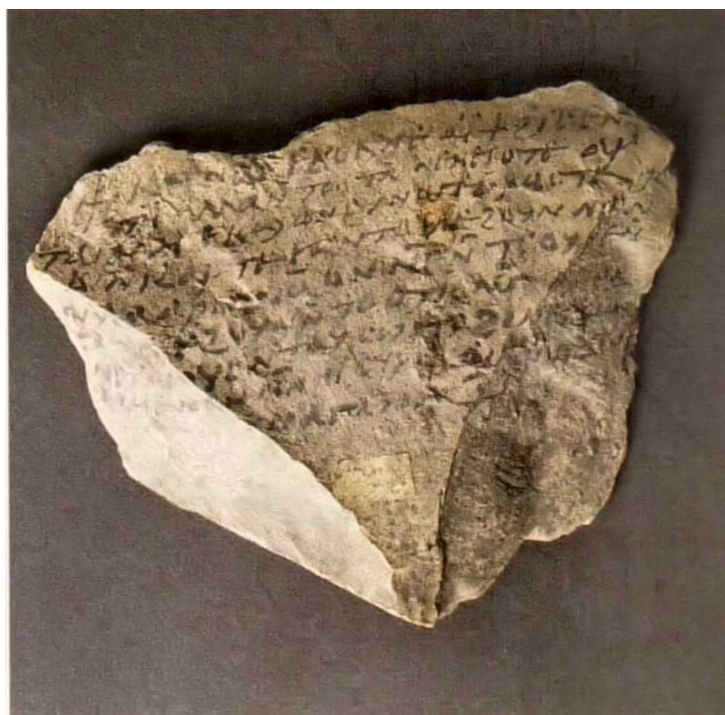


Fig. 2: Letter concerning the book restoration. Thebes, VI-VIII cent. Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités égyptiennes, N 686, from Boud’hors 1998:60.

⁵ Crisci 2003:57.

⁶ Crum 1902:x.

⁷ Stefanski – Lichtheim 1952:6.

⁸ Crum 1902:x.

⁹ Brashear – Hoogendijk 1990:21-54.

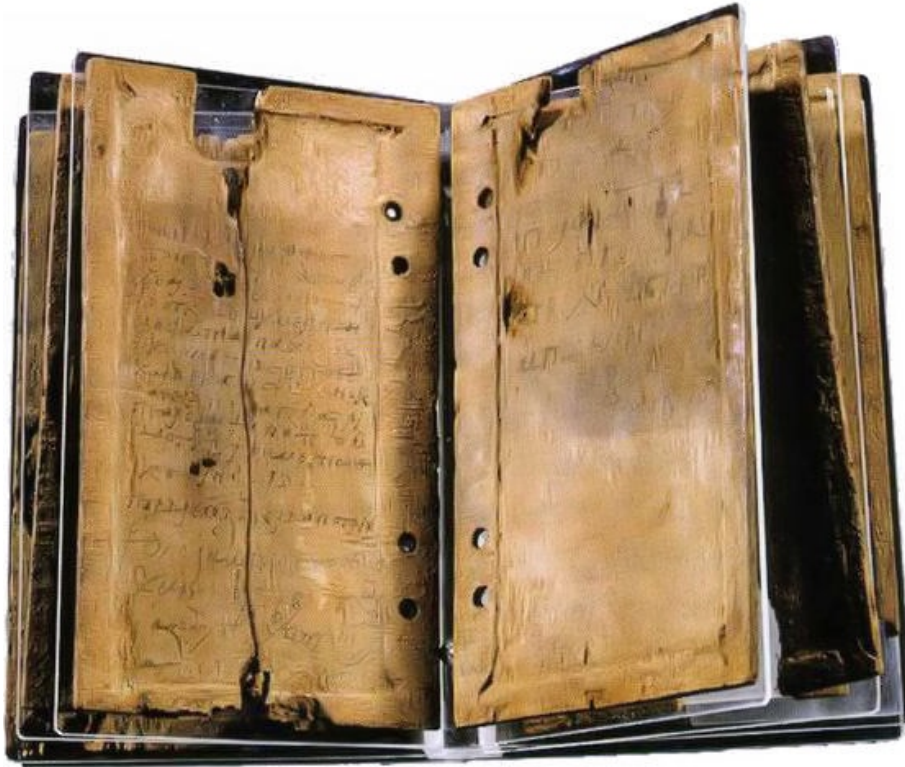


Fig. 3: Fiscal text. Akhmin (?), VI-VII cent. Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités égyptiennes, E 24454, from Boud'hors 2004:66.

Most of the examples of wooden tablets that we have contain documentary texts. This is the case of the single wooden tablet recently acquired by the National Museum of Antiquities of Leiden from a Dutch private collector. The tablet contains an exercise in multiplication, which is in the process of being published by Karl Worp and Jacques van der Vliet. The text is inscribed on one side, in a depressed field surrounded by slightly raised borders that are 1.6-1.8 cm wide. The reverse of this tablet is slightly convex and is not inscribed. Four holes (0.5 cm diameter) were pierced in the upper margin at intervals of 3, 6, 10, and 13.5 cm from the left. Notches were carved above these holes so as to keep in place the threads that held the codex together. Clearly the other tablets making up this codex have been lost. The inscribed surface shows traces of a stucco layer.

Very similar to the Dutch tablet, as far as the physical aspect is concerned, is the polyptych from Akhmim now kept in the Musée du Louvre. It consists of eight wooden leaves (very likely re-used) containing a fiscal text.¹⁰ We know that wooden tablets could be bound together in a codex containing

up to ten tablets.

A different case is represented by P.Vat.copt. 5A (originally P.Vat.copt. 112) which contains a deed for the sale of wine and dates to the seventh-eighth century. The tablet measuring 47,5 x 22 cm has two sets of holes: four in the upper border and two in the lower one. Grooves can be made out between the latter two, which is where once threads¹¹ were probably located.

The case of P.Vat.copt. 6 (originally P.Vat.copt. 113) is also of interest. The tablet measures 46,5 x 19 cm and is 1 cm high. Its little irregularities were plas-

tered before a light preparatory paint was spread so as to serve as a base for the text. Three big holes were created in recent times, without any regard for the text's legibility, and probably served to join it to other tablets. It is probably for this same reason that the left side was cut. Apparently original, on the other hand, are the two holes situated in the upper margin at a distance of 3.7 cm from one another. If one assumes that they were once located centrally, it would mean that about 11.5 cm of the left side was cut in order to adapt the dimensions of our object to the other tablets. Finally, there are eight holes in the side of the tablet. Some of them are still filled with the remains of wooden nails, which fact suggests that the tablet was originally completed by another wooden strip. Side A contains Psalm 49, whereas Side B, where a large humid spot is visible and some sesame seeds have been stuck, preserves Psalm 69.¹²

P.Vat.copt. 7 (originally P.Vat.copt. 114), which contains a magic text edited by Sergio Pernigotti, served a different purpose. The tablet measuring approximately 48.5 x 20.7 cm has suffered visible damage. As in the case of P.Vat.copt. 6, a prepara-

¹⁰ Boud'hors 1998; Aufrère – Bosson 1999, no. 47.

¹¹ Pintaudi 1989:52-54, plate xiii

¹² Pintaudi 1989:54-50, plate xiv-xv.



Fig. 4: Literary text (IB.13). White Monastery (Akhmim), 10th-11th cent. Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale "Vittorio Emanuele III".

tory light paint can be made out under the text. The tablet has a single hole, which was obviously created after the text had been written, for it has resulted in the loss of a letter. The hole was in all likelihood made in order to hang up the tablet for use as a *phylacterion*.¹³

Similarly, Ryl.copt.suppl. no. 50, which was one of a number of Coptic, Demotic, and Arabic documents purchased by J. Rendel Harry for the John Rylands Library¹⁴ in 1917, and which contains the well-known apocryphal correspondence between Christ and king Abgar of Edessa, was possibly once located at the entrance to a house in order to protect its inhabitants. Partial confirmation for this hypothesis comes from the fact that the same text was found painted at the entrance to a house in Edessa itself.

In short, not all of the wooden tablets found in Egypt once constituted part of a codex. Some of them were simply hung somewhere so as to be used as an amulet. However, none of them is a wax tablet. Of course, this does not exclude the possibility that the first two of my examples were originally

waxed and later re-used to receive a text written with ink. On the other hand, however, the shape of the tablets, with their concave side, may simply be explained as an example of continuity of use.

Wooden tablets were often used for school exercises. In this case, "though most of the tablets appear to be written by a single student, sometimes several pupils seem to be at work in the same notebook. Three students, for instance, wrote exercises in a codex of seven wooden tablets: fractions, the conjugation of a verb, a rhetorical paraphrase, and the text of a psalm in Coptic".¹⁵ As Raffaella Cribiore stresses, "this evidence is particularly suggestive: not only does it evoke a picture of a classroom where the teaching of Coptic stood side by side with the teaching of Greek, but it presents students at different levels of ability sharing the same material".¹⁶

Turning now to ancient parchment, one should note at the outset that although there exists an immense bibliography dedicated to this subject,¹⁷ the study and analysis of Coptic parchment has to date been

¹³ Pernigotti 1983:75-90. Pintaudi 1989:59-69, plate xvi-xvii

¹⁴ Giversen 1959:72-82; Crum 1921; Giversen 1958:19-23.

¹⁵ Cribiore 1996a, no. 388.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ S. esp. Janzen – Manetzki 1991.

almost completely neglected. Consequently, the considerations that follow are based primarily upon personal experience.

While the documents written on skins are first mentioned in Egypt at the time of the Fourth Dynasty, and the oldest extant documents on leather include an Egyptian scroll dating to the Twelfth Dynasty and now preserved in the Papyrussammlung of Berlin, in Late Antiquity the use of parchment seems to be taken for granted and is therefore only rarely explicitly mentioned by the Copts.

We do not have recipes, and, if we exclude lists of books that occasionally specify the material of which the book is made, only a handful of references to parchment are found in the documentary and literary texts. The *Regulae* of Pachomius specifically forbid monks from leaving codices untied when they put them away in a niche or cavity in the wall of their cell in the evening. This prohibition clearly derives from the concern that an open codex may become warped, especially if made of parchment. In one of the titles attributed to the *Life of Maximus and Domitius*, the deacon Eustathios is said to have found the text “in a large storage box of old parchment books written in quires (ΠΥΡΡΟΜΕ ΜΕΜΒΡΑΝΟΝ) when he was looking among books that might have deteriorated over time”, for the original work had been composed centuries earlier by Pshoi, who “wrote the life of the saints on a papyrus scroll (ΕΥΧΛΟΜΟΣ ΠΥΡΡΗΣ)”.¹⁸ Lastly, Pambo of Scetis suggests to one of his disciples that it is better to copy the *bioi* and *logoi* of ancient authors on papyrus rather than parchment, for the latter material is more susceptible to being re-used as writing material.

This raises the question of economic considerations in the choice of book materials. According to the calculations of Roger Bagnall, the cost for the writing material and labour involved in the creation of a complete copy of the Bible would have come to more or less 16 *solidi* for a parchment copy and 14 *solidi* for a papyrus one. In this period, a *solidus* was the equivalent of 72 Roman grams of gold.¹⁹ This estimate for the production of a Bible reveals the economic motivation that probably lies behind the fact that as late as in the eighth century the

papyrus codex was far from being abandoned. According to another evaluation, made by Anne Boud'hors on the basis of *ostraca* found in western Thebes, the cost of an unbound book was half of that of a bound one.²⁰

Although Worrell, in describing the Psalter ms. no. 1 of the Freer Collection, specifies, without uncertainties, that “it is mostly or entirely of goatskin”,²¹ to date no chemical analysis has been undertaken so as to determine what kind of animal skin was predominantly used to make parchment in Egypt. Coptic parchment is often of poor quality, even when used for official codices created for important monastic libraries. In late Coptic manuscripts (between the eighth and tenth centuries) it is normally quite easy to distinguish the flesh and hair sides from one another, with the latter showing traces of hair follicles and a darker colour. Dimensions differ considerably, ranging from about 41.5 x 32 cm to about 28 x 23 cm. It is less easy to distinguish the flesh and hair sides in earlier codices (fourth to sixth century). As a rule, the parchment is clearer on both sides and the dimensions are rather small, ranging from roughly 14 x 12 cm to 17 x 13 cm. However, it is hard to say whether this difference is to be attributed to the use of different animals or rather to a difference in taste.

Quite frequently there is more than one hole in a codex, and these can be very large on occasion. Often holes are to be found in association with more or less showy darns. The latter involve not only the margins of the pages, but also the core of the leaf. Both holes and darns exert a strong influence on the layout of the page. Often the thickness of the leaves is not homogeneous: different areas of the same leaf may vary considerably.

Another common feature of Coptic parchment is the presence of visible striations. These were most likely caused by the process of stretching the leather, which involved scraping the two sides of the skin (especially the flesh side) with a sharp knife in order to smooth the surface and produce a sheet of more or less uniform thickness. It is also not unusual to find transparent areas (“eyes”, “occhi vetrosi” in Italian) that were also produced during the stretching operation.

¹⁸ Buzi 2001:523.

¹⁹ Bagnall 2009:57.

²⁰ Boud'hors 2008:149-62; Bagnall 2009:51.

²¹ Worrell 1923.

The use of parchment is not destined to a specific kind of text, unlike in Greek tradition where, according to Crisci's analysis, between the sixth and the eighth centuries about the 75% of the Biblical codices are made of parchment²².

It is highly desirable that the same scientific approach that has been applied to the analysis of papyri, with surprising results, also be applied to parchment. When this happens, we shall know much more about the tastes, habits, and economic life of the Coptic monasteries.

Answers to other questions, however, are to be found elsewhere. In one of his letters, Besa, Shenute's successor as archimandrite of the White monastery, mentions the professions practiced in the community. There are carpenters, blacksmiths, potters, weavers, bakers, copyists and the makers of book-covers²³. This allows us to perceive that the book materials employed in writing were created elsewhere. Precisely where and by whom is, however, amongst the various aspects of Coptic codicology that we have yet to clarify.

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²² Crisci 2003:105.

²³ Kuhn 1958:33