

Three Unedited Coptic Ostraca at the NMEC

Ahmed Nakshara^{1*}, Jošt Martinčič², Pia Kos², Lara Unuk²,
Jana Unuk², Maher Eissa³

*ahmed.nakshara@arch.asu.edu.eg

¹ Lecturer of Coptology and Site Management, Ain Shams University. Egypt.

² MA, PhD Candidates, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

³ Professor of Egyptology/ Coptology, Fayoum University, Egypt

Abstract

This article presents the edition of three unpublished Coptic ostraca and is the first in a series celebrating the academic collaboration established in 2024 between the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia) and Egyptian institutions (Ain Shams and Fayoum Universities), supported by the Erasmus+ KA171 programme and the SloveNile platform. Designed to foster Coptic studies in Slovenia, the initiative encompasses introductory courses, advanced paleography workshops, and papyrological training hosted in Ljubljana and Cairo. The editions of the three letters in this article were prepared by Slovenian students, trained and supervised by the two Egyptian co-authors through this initiative.

Keywords

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Author 1. **A Nakshara**: Supervision, introduction, commentary, and drafting.

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1. Introduction

This article is the first in a series celebrating the fruitful collaboration between the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia) and the Universities of Ain Shams and Fayoum (Egypt). Launched in 2024 under the auspices of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (Section for Egyptology and Coptology) at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, and continuing to the present day, this initiative aims to establish and foster Coptic studies in Slovenia, in association with the SloveNile platform (Slovenian-Egyptian Heritage Science Platform, For further details, see: <https://www.e-rihs.si/slovenile/>).

Within the framework of the Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility Programme (KA171), following preliminary visits by the two Egyptian co-authors in October 2024 to strengthen institutional ties and plan future training, Dr. Ahmed Nakshara (Ain Shams University / *Institut français d'archéologie orientale* [IFAO]) and his host Dr. Jan Ciglencečki (University of Ljubljana) delivered the first two-week introductory «Coptic language and literature» course at the University of Ljubljana in April 2025, training over ten Slovenian students. This was followed in October 2025 by a joint papyrology workshop, «Papyrology in Dialogue,» held at the IFAO in Cairo. Coordinated by Prof. Khaled Younes (Sadat City University/IFAO), Dr. Laura Aguer (IFAO), Dr. Nakshara, and Dr. Ciglencečki, in collaboration with the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Ljubljana, the event brought together 37 Egyptian and eight Slovenian scholars and students who engaged directly with the IFAO archives and worked on original Coptic ostraca and papyri. Its comprehensive program featured practical sessions on papyrus sheet production (Ms. Iman Ali, IFAO) and ancient ink manufacturing (Dr. Hassan Ebeid, Ain Shams University, and Dr. Dalia Nabawy, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities [MoTA]), a keynote lecture by Dr. Ciglencečki entitled «Before They are Gone: Challenges and (Lost) Opportunities in Documenting Coptic Graffiti,» and a three-day intensive workshop in Coptic documentary papyrology led by Dr. Nakshara in collaboration with Dr. Nesreen Monir (MoTA), Dr. Rowida AboBakr (Luxor University), Dr. Wafaa Abd Elwahab (Assiut University), and Prof. Ahmed Khalil (Minia University). By hosting this workshop and sustaining the ongoing Papyrology Seminar, co-organized by Prof. Younes, Dr. Nakshara, and Dr. Aguer, the IFAO aims to reinforce its long-standing commitment to interdisciplinary, multilingual papyrological research and to provide a sustained platform for advanced training and scholarly exchange between Egyptian and international researchers.

Following the establishment of a parallel Erasmus+ (KA171) agreement with Fayoum University, Prof. Maher Eissa provided advanced papyrological training, «Glimpses of Coptic Daily Life: Through Documentary and Literary Texts,» to the same group of Slovenian students in Ljubljana in November 2025, joined this time by students from the *Institut für Ägyptologie* at Ludwig Maximilian University (Germany), in collaboration with Dr. Florian Rösch and Dr. Ciglencečki. In April 2026, Prof. Eissa and Dr. Nakshara conducted a further advanced course, «How to Edit Coptic Texts?», in Ljubljana on Coptic palaeography and critical text-editing according to international conventions, such as the Leiden System.

A joint online SloveNile papyrology seminar is planned for the summer of 2026, taking place on a weekly basis and co-hosted by Prof. Eissa alongside Egyptian instructors (Dr. Nakshara, Dr. Monir, and Dr. AboBakr). The initiative will bring together Egyptian and Slovenian students, who will work in pairs to edit unpublished Coptic ostraca. These texts will form the subject of the forthcoming second article in this series. An additional advanced training course led by Prof. Eissa is scheduled to take place in Ljubljana in September 2026, and three Slovenian students will participate in the 8th International Summer School in Coptic Papyrology at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo from 26 September to 2 October 2026, visiting

the Coptic collections of several museums, including the Coptic Museum and the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (NMEC).

The NMEC in Cairo, situated near the archaeological site of al-Fustāt and the Coptic quarter of Old Cairo, houses a significant and linguistically diverse epigraphic collection that includes hundreds of Coptic ostraca alongside texts written in hieroglyphic, hieratic, demotic, Greek, and Arabic scripts (Eissa, 2014, p. 197). This substantial collection of Coptic sherds was assembled through several channels, including archaeological excavation missions, institutional transfers from other prominent museums like the Egyptian Museum in Cairo and the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM), and police confiscations of smuggled antiquities (Eissa, 2014, p. 197; Eissa & Ahmed, 2017, p. 21). A highly notable component of this corpus is a confiscated group of forty Coptic and Greek ostraca of unknown precise provenance, though dialectal and paleographical indicators strongly suggest they originate from the Theban region and date primarily to the seventh and eighth centuries (Eissa, 2014, p. 197; Eissa, 2015, p. 412; Eissa, 2016, p. 145; Eissa & Ahmed, 2017, p. 21).

The textual genres represented within the NMEC's Coptic holdings are exceptionally broad; they encompass everyday personal correspondence and scribal exercises (Eissa, 2014, p. 198; Eissa & Ahmed, 2017, p. 22), biblical and liturgical passages such as Sahidic Coptic Psalm extracts utilized for personal piety, protective amulets, or school writing practices (Eissa, 2015, p. 411–412), and unique administrative or monastic "donations" like O.NMEC Inv. 117 (Eissa, 2016, p. 146). O.NMEC Inv. 117, which notably features crossed-out lines to render the draft invalid, records a deeply personal narrative of repentance and a resolution to retire to the holy monastery of Apa Samuel, historically known as Deir El-Gizāz (Eissa, 2016, pp. 145–146, 150). Linguistically, these ostraca serve as an important resource for Coptic dialectology, with many texts composed in Sahidic Coptic while displaying strong regional Upper Egyptian variations or rare lexical and morphological influences from the Lycopolitan L4 dialect (Eissa, 2014, pp. 199–200).

Ultimately, the collection provides modern scholars with a vivid window into the socio-religious fabric of late antique Egypt, documenting the educational methods used to train copyists and the active integration of monastic networks into the daily lives and spiritual discipline of the local population (Eissa, 2016, p. 150; Eissa & Ahmed, 2017, pp. 32–33). The three ostraca published below stem from the NMEC's confiscations collection; all three represent fragments of letters. Both the circumstances of acquisition and their internal features point to a Theban origin.

2-The Three Ostraca

2.1 A monastic letter? (O. NMEC 235)

Jošt Martinčič, Pia Kos

The text is a letter, though the names of the correspondents have unfortunately been lost. The subject of the message remains unclear, but it may concern an exchange of goods (l. 10 ⲉⲧⲛⲟⲩⲥ, possibly l. 19 ⲁⲣⲁⲕⲟⲥ) or an administrative matter (l. 7 ⲗⲁⲩⲁⲛⲉ), and in some way involves an individual named ⲉⲁⲃⲓⲛⲉ. Although its contents remain obscure, the ostrakon was evidently produced in a monastic context, as indicated by the titles (ⲡⲣⲉⲥϣⲧⲉⲣⲟⲥ, ⲛⲙⲁⲗ) and the epithet ⲉⲗⲁⲭⲓⲥⲧⲟⲥ, as well as the mention of a *topos*.

The text is written on both sides of a reddish-brown pottery sherd, which is broken along its left edge. Consequently, although line 1 is clearly the first line of the preserved text, it remains uncertain whether the beginning of the message has been lost. On the recto, the end of line 7 is chipped away, as is the area following lines 8–9, though no text appears to be affected.

Similarly, on the verso, the beginning of line 19 and the space preceding lines 17–18 are chipped away. A left margin approximately one character wide is preserved on the verso.

The script is bilinear and slightly right-sloping with no ascending and few descending strokes. The letters are written very close together, often touching one another and giving the impression of being ligated. Nevertheless, genuine ligatures occur in several places: in lines 8, 12, and 17, the arm of *epsilon* connects to the headstroke of *tau* and *pi* or the upper arm of *kappa*, in lines 11 and 18, the stem of *alpha* extends and forms the (upper) lobe of *beta* and *rho*. In line 7 (and perhaps 6) *pi* exhibits a special form when it is ligated to the following letter. A diaeresis is placed over *iota* following *alpha*, though not consistently. Superlinear strokes are placed slightly to the right of the letters they accompany (*mu*: l. 3; *nu*: ll. 4, 5, 9). In addition to their standard functions, superlinear strokes are occasionally placed over the final letter of a word (l. 5 ζΜΖΑΛ̄, l. 17 ΕΙΩΤ̄, l. 18 ΡΑΝ̄, l. 20 ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟΣ̄).

O. NMEC 235

9.5 x 13.7cm

Theban region

Fig. 1, 2

7th – 8th century?

Recto

[- - -] +̄ CΥΓΧΩΡΕΙ
 [- - -]Ϛ̄Ν ΧΑΡΤΗΣ
 [- - -]ΤΟΝΟΣ̄ ΜΜΑΙ
 4 [- - -]Ϛ̄ ΔΙΜΟΥΖ̄ ΝΡΑΩΕ
 [- - -]ζΜΖΑΛ̄ ΝΝΕΛΑΧ(ΙCΤΟΣ)
 [- - -]η̄ ΔΙΧΙ ΝΕΚCΖΑΪ̄ ΕΤ
 [- - -]η̄ΛΑΩΑΝΕ ΔΙΩΔΧΕ̄ [.]
 8 [- - -] . Ε̄ ΕΤΟΥΔΑΒ̄ ΜΝΤΕΚ
 [- - -]ΙCΤΑ ΕΜΑΤΕ̄ ΕΧ̄Ν
 [- - -]ΝCΤ̄ΝΟΥCΕ̄ ΖΙ ΠΑΖ̄ .
 [- - -] . Ῡ CΑΒΙΝΕ̄ Ε
 12 [- - -]η̄ΕΚΤΟΠΟΣ̄
 [- - -]ΜΑΤΑ

Verso

ΕϚΩΑΝ̄ Ρ̄ . [- - -]
 ΤΚ ΠΕΖΟΥΟ̄ . [- - -]
 16 ΜΝΤΧΟΕΙC̄ Ν̄ . [- - -]
 ΝΕΙΩΤ̄ ΠΕΠΙCΚΟ[ΠΟΣ̄ ---]
 ΜΠΑΡΑΝ̄ ΜΜΟΝ̄ [- - -]
 [Ε]ΤΒΕ ΝΑΡΑΚΟ[C- - -]
 20 ΠΕΠΙCΚΟΠΟΣ̄ . [---]
 ΖΙΧ̄Ν ΤΕΚΖᾹ . [- - -]
 ΟΥΧΑῙ ΖΜ̄ ΠΧ̄[ΟΕΙC̄]
 η̄ΑΧΟΕΙC̄ . [---]
 24 η̄ΡΕCΒΥ[ΤΕΡΟΣ̄]

1 συγχωρέω || 2 χάρις || 5 ελαχ̄ς ost. ἐλάχιστος || 12 τόπος || 17, 20 ἐπίσκοπος || 19 ἄρακος || 24 πρεσβύτερος

Recto

... Forgive me ... find papyri ... loving (?) (4) ... I was filled with joy ... servant of the least [ones] ... I received your letters ... the *lašane*. I spoke ... (8)... holy with your ... greatly for ... the perfumes ... Sabine (12) ... your *topos* ...

Verso

If he does the majority ... (16) lordship ... of father the bishop ...in my name (to) us concerning the aracos (?)... (20) the bishop ... upon/for your ... Farewell in the [Lord] my lord ... (24) the priest.

Commentary

ll. 1–2 The ink is extremely faded at the beginning of line 1. Despite the unusual form of the *gamma*, the word CΥΓΧΩΡΕΙ is secure. Given the combination Ϛ̄Ν ΧΑΡΤΗΣ in the following line, this phrasing likely represents the well-attested Theban formula of excuse for using an ostrakon instead of papyrus. While this formula typically employs the Coptic phrase ΚΩ ΝΑΪ ΕΒΟΛ ΧΕ ΜΠΙΘΕΝ ΧΑΡΤΗΣ (“Forgive me that I did not find papyrus”), our scribe appears to have preferred the Greek loanword CΥΓΧΩΡΕΙ (συγχωρέω) over ΚΩ ΕΒΟΛ.

Because this epistolary formula frequently opens a letter, the traces at the very beginning of line 1 may be read as an initial cross (+), suggesting that line 1 is intact at the start. Restoring the formula as $\text{CΥΓΧΩΡΕΙ ΝΑΪ ΧΕ ΜΠΙΘΝ ΧΑΡΤΗΣ}$ yields an approximate lacuna of eight letters in line 2. Although this exact variant of the formula is otherwise unattested, the use of CΥΓΧΩΡΕΙ in introductory excuses is well documented; see, for example, P.Mon.Epiph. 277.1 (+ $\text{CΥΓΧΩΡΕΙ ΝΑΙ Χ[Ε]ΕΡΕΤΑΟΥΕΡΗΤΕ ΩΦΗΕ ΜΠΙΘΝ ΘΕ ΝΤΑΕΙ}$, “Excuse me, for my foot aileth and I have not found means to come”).

l. 3 Probably restore ΜΜΑΙ[ΝΟΥΤΕ] (“god-loving”).

l. 4 ΔΙΜΟΥΖ ΝΡΑΩΕ : This phrase (“I was filled with joy”) also occurs near the opening of a letter in O.Frange 779.3 and P.Mon.Epiph. 127.3. In both parallels, it appears in combination with, though following, the formula ΔΙΧΙ ΝΕΚΕΖΑΙ (“I received your letter”), which occurs later in the present text (l. 6).

l. 9 The traces may represent the ending of the Greek verb [ΕΥΧΑΡ]ΙΣΤΑ (“to thank”), reinforced by the adverb ΕΜΑΤΕ (“very much”), with ΕΧΝ introducing the object of thanks. The resulting phrase would mean “to thank [someone] very much for...”.

l. 10 At the end of the line, the letters become illegible, written on top of one another, perhaps in a cursive hand, probably due to the lack of remaining space. Following the sequence ΖΙ ΠΑΖ- , three possibilities present themselves: ΝΣ , ΚΟ and ΚΩ . The first yields ΖΙ ΠΑΖΝΣ , which could be a defective spelling of ΠΑΖΟΝΣ , an alternative name for the 9th month ΠΑΩΟΝΣ , attested in O.Crum 478 as ΠΑΖΟΝ[Σ] . However, the construction with the preposition ΖΙ seems to rule out this possibility, since we would expect a different phrase to indicate a month. The second option produces ΖΙ ΠΑΖΚΟ , potentially meaning ‘in my hunger’, and the third ΖΙ ΠΑΖΚΩ , containing the word ΑΖΚΩ of unknown meaning (Crum, Dict. 24b). The most textually elegant solution, ΖΙΠΑΖΟΥ , does not match the appearance of the traces on the ostrakon.

l. 11 CABINE : A personal name of Latin origin (Sabinus / Sabina) that most commonly occurs in Theban documents dating to the sixth to eighth centuries (TM NamVar 55077, <https://www.trismegistos.org/namvar/55077>)

l. 17 Unusual use of the superlinear stroke on the ending consonant *tau* in the noun ΕΙΩΤ̄ . Similarly in l. 18 (ΡΑΝ̄) and l. 20 (ΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΟC̄).

l. 19 ΝΑΡΑΚΟ[Σ] : The word ΑΡΑΚΟ[Σ] most probably represents the Greek loanword ἄρακος. The spelling ΑΡΑΚΕ is attested in the bilingual Greek-Coptic document SB Kopt. I 234 (8th century). The Greek term refers to the wild chickling vetch (*Lathyrus annuus*), a leguminous plant with edible seeds similar to peas. In Coptic, the word is attested in many variations, such as ΑΡΑ , ΑΡΑΓΕ , ΑΡΑΚ , ΑΡΑΚΑ , and ΟΡΑΖ (Förster, 2002, p. 94).

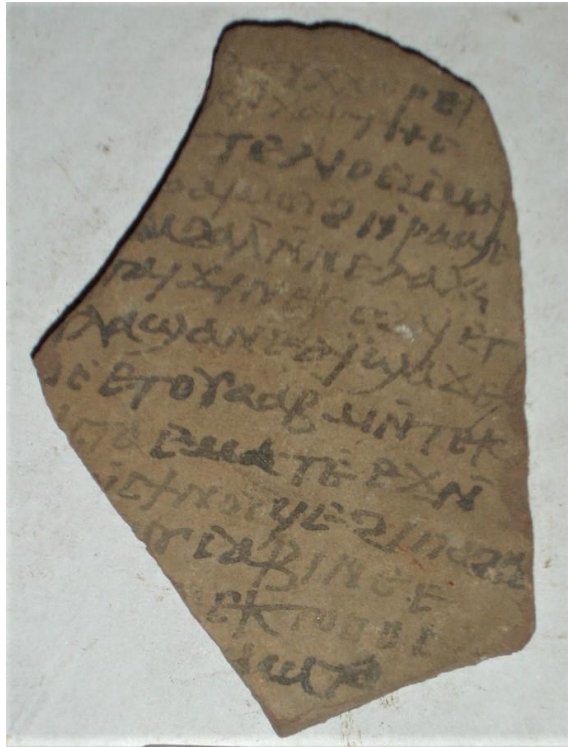


Figure 1: O. NMEC 235 R., © Eissa

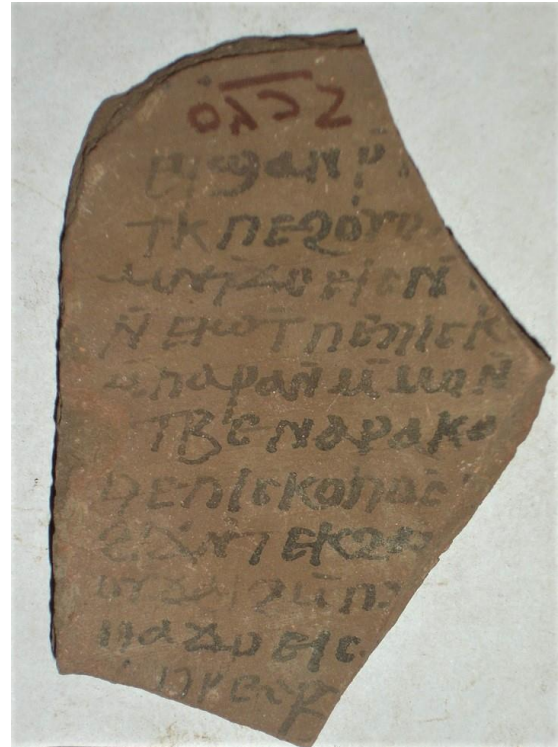


Figure 2: O. NMEC 235 V., © Eissa

2.2 A letter with a request (O. NMEC 217)

Lara Unuk

The contents of the ostracod are rather obscure due to the broken parts at the top and the bottom. Although it preserves no recognizable introductory formulae or closing greetings, the identification of the text as a letter rests on the use of the second-person singular and the presence of a direct addressee. A connection to a monastic milieu is indicated by the mention of *apa* Isaiah. The message of the letter remains abstruse, as is often the case with letters, since the modern reader lacks the background knowledge shared by the sender and the recipient.

The top of the ostracod is lost. Along the left margin, at least a few letters are missing in every line except the last, while the right margin lacks text in lines one and two. Given that the text ends abruptly without closing greetings, it is highly probable that the lower portion is missing as well.

The script is bilinear (majuscule), on the right side of the ostracod slightly right-sloping, in other parts more upright. Slightly curved lines of writing seem to follow the form of the ostracod. The letters are regular and readable, but have the appearance of having been written a bit carelessly or in a hurry.

Shading is visible: some letters are considerably thicker, others quite thin. This can be observed almost in every line, especially in the 1st, 2nd, and 4th lines. The lobes on some letters are thus filled in (l. 2 α; l. 4 ρ).

Diaeresis is used on the letter (ι), which is prolonged below the line. The final letter α in the third line has a noticeably long descender. The (ι) in the name Isaiah is written higher, between the two *alphas*, as if added later. Between the two *omicrons* in the first line, another *omicron* can be discerned; it might be a correction. A descender can be discerned at the end of the 2nd line, perhaps a ω. A high dot can be discerned in line 4.

Three Unedited Coptic Ostraca at the NMEC

O. NMEC 217

6.1 × 5.4 cm

Theban region

Fig. 3

7th – 8th century?

-----?
[---]ΜΠΟΟΥ[---]
[---]ΝΧΑΡΤΗΣ ΝΓΟ[---]
[---]Γ ΠΝΟΥΤΕ ΝΑ
4 [---]Ν ΠΡΟΣΘΕ ΟΝ
[Ν]ΤΑΪΧΟΟΝ ΝΑΚ Ε-
ΤΒΕ ΔΠΑ ΗΣΔ\Ι/ΔΣ
-----?
2 χάτης || 4 πρόσ

... Today ... papyrus and you ... God will (4) ... in the same way also I have already told you considering apa Isaiah.”

Commentary

1. 2 The word ΧΑΡΤΗΣ could be part of the formula ΚΩ ΝΑΙ ΕΒΟΛ ΧΕ ΜΠΙΟΝ ΧΑΡΤΗΣ, which is sometimes used as an excuse for sending ostrakon instead of papyrus. However, we can also find ostraca asking for ΧΑΡΤΗΣ to be sent to the author, in which case it can also mean «scroll» or «document».

11. 2-3 ΝΓΟ[γωω] can tentatively be restored in the lacuna.

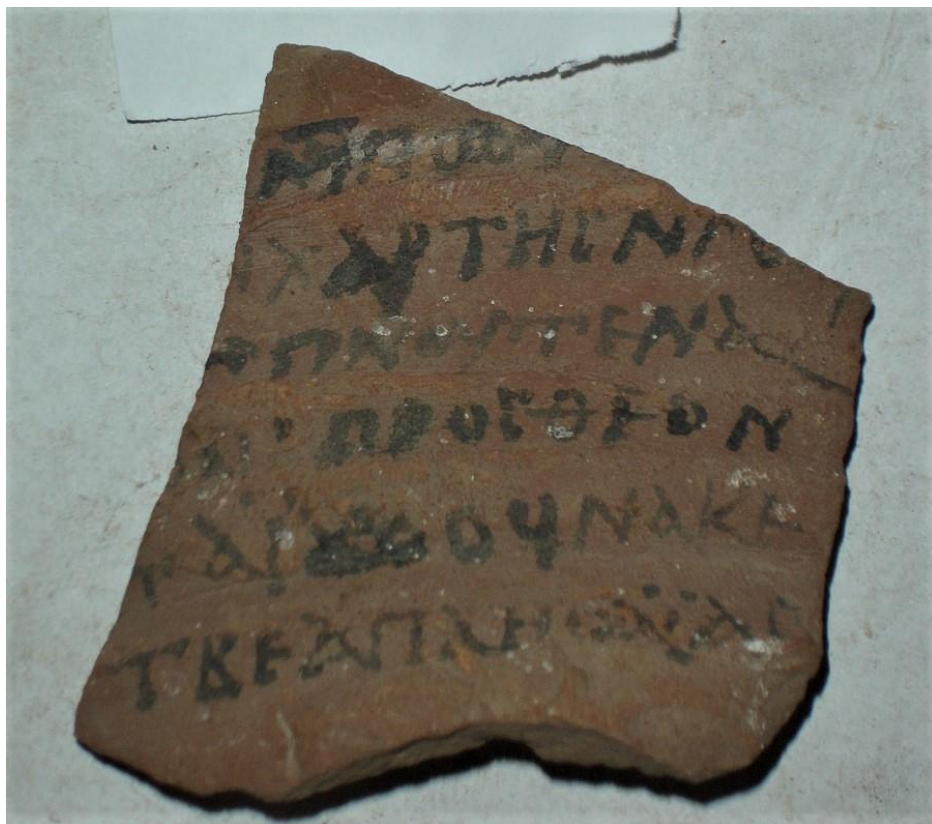


Figure 3: O. NMEC 217, © Eissa.

2.3 A letter mentioning a monk (O. NMEC 219)

Jana Unuk

The text is a letter, despite the loss of its introductory formulae, as indicated by the surviving final greetings. Neither the sender nor the recipient is named, and the overall content remains unclear. The sender reminds the addressee of previously transmitted "words", a phrasing that likely refers to a prior letter, presumably between the two parties, though third parties may also have been involved.

The beginning of the sherd is damaged, with lacunae likely on both sides, except in the final two lines. The hand is bilinear (majuscule), regular, and slightly slanting to the right. A vertical ink stain appears between lines 3 and 4; however, the λ of $\omega\lambda\chi\epsilon$ remains legible beneath it.

O. NMEC 219
Fig. 4

7.8 x 6.1

Theban region
7th – 8th century?

-----?
[---] NEN . [---]
[---] $\text{Γ} \text{Δ} \text{P} \text{KCOOY} \text{N}$ [---]
[---] $\text{XΕ} \text{ΔΙ} \text{XOOY}$ [---]
4 [---] $\text{Ω} \text{Δ} \text{XΕ} \text{XOΛΚΤ}$ [---]
[---] $\text{MΠ} \text{P} \text{KΩ} \text{OY} \text{N}$ [---]
[---] $\text{NΕΙΩΤ} \text{XΕ} \text{ΠΩΔ}$ [---]
 $\text{ΟΥΧΔΙ} \text{ΖΜ} \text{ΠΧ-}$
8 $\text{ΘΕΙΣ} +$
2 $\gamma\acute{\alpha}\rho \parallel 5 \text{ οὖν}$

... our ... for you know ... that I sent ... (4) ... word ... Therefore, don't abandon
father... Farewell in the (8) Lord +

Commentary

1. 5 The imperative phrase $\text{MΠ} \text{P} \text{KΩ} \text{OY} \text{N}$ [---] ("Therefore, do not leave..." / "do not delay...") represents a classic Sahidic Coptic epistolary injunction whose lacuna can be restored based on line length and pragmatic context. Depending on whether the verb κω is used intransitively to mean "to delay" (yielding short completions like νει / νωογει , "to come"), transitively regarding property or diligence (νλααγ , "anything", or ντεκσπογδη , "your diligence"), or conditionally with a negative complex preposition ($\text{νωγεω} \text{τααγ}$, "without giving it"), the clause functions across documentary papyri and ostraca as an urgent command demanding immediate presence, complete administrative execution, or the strict conditional hand-off of goods.

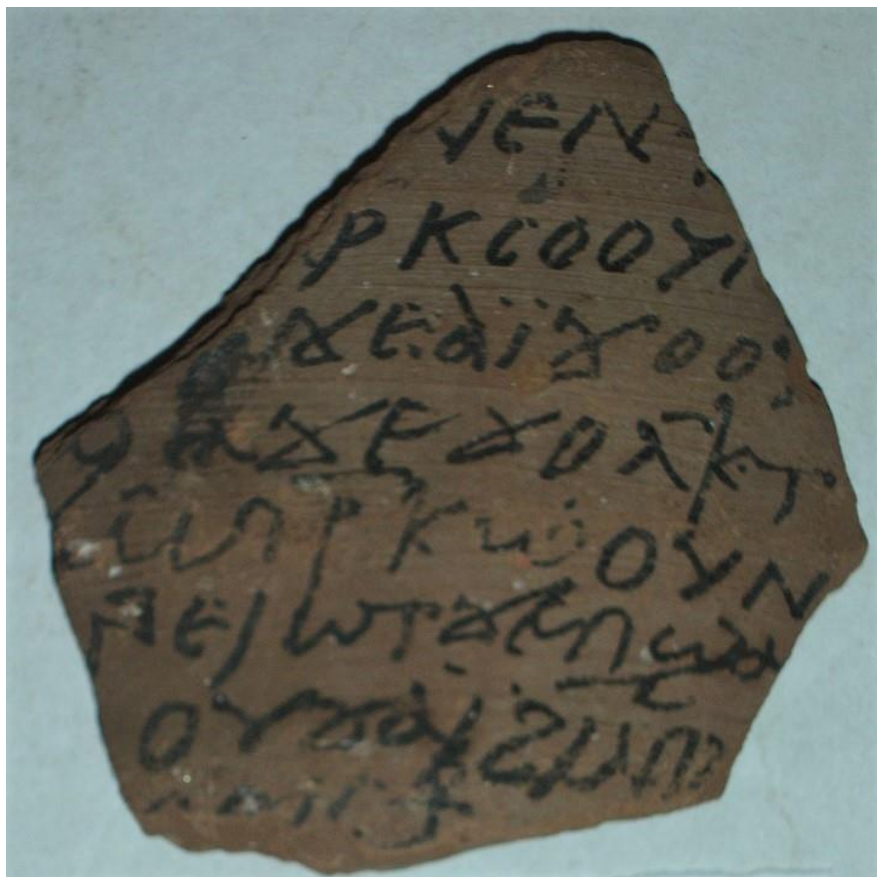


Figure 4: O. NMEC 219, © Eissa.

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