Unpublished Coptic Writing Exercises from Thebes

Rowida Abo Bakr*

Abstract

The monastic groups that settled in Thebes during the sixth and eighth centuries CE contributed to the prosperity of many aspects of life in Thebes, including education.

The Theban region provides us with many documents related to writing exercises, which reveal the development of education levels; there were many levels of writing and scripts, where the student would practice an entire course of literary education, with the goal of teaching the student to read and write properly. This course differed depending on the student's level: beginner, intermediate, or professional.

This study aims to track Coptic education levels by publishing three ostraca: the first ostracon is being published for the first time, bears alphabetical exercise, and is preserved in the Metropolitan Museum's excavation storehouse in Qurna; the photo of the second ostracon was previously published in a catalogue of the Graeco–Roman Museum, bearing biblical extracts, and is preserved in the Graeco–Roman Museum in Alexandria; and the third ostracon, which bears epistolary exercise and is preserved in the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (NMEC) in Cairo, is being published for the first time as well.

Introduction

A wealth of information about education in antiquity can be found in contemporary sources. Egypt preserved examples of many documents relating to pupils' exercises and teaching, provided the terms "school" and "education" are not narrowly defined in modern terms; in antiquity, there was no school building or set curriculum established and administered by a governmental authority. Preserved texts alone provide material for study and analysis of learning methods and goals.¹

It is plausible to conclude that the establishment of a Christian-based elementary education took place on the margins of traditional Greek culture. However, it should be noted that Coptic education was far more limited than Greek education and did not include the same variety of exercises. Initially, the instructions in both scripts appeared to be roughly equivalent. Once we reach the level of instruction covered by the Greek grammarian, there is no comparable material in Coptic education. According to the evidence so far, Coptic education did not include more advanced material on a regular basis as Greek rhetorical education did. Coptic education appears to have been more in touch with the practical needs of a person gaining literacy and wishing to learn to cope with the everyday demands of literacy, as well as strengthening their handwriting skills.²

The emphasis on education and literacy is directly related to the strong scriptural orientation of early monasticism on instruction, the early monastic rules demanding literacy of all monks, and the evidence for regular correspondence between monks and persons in society, as well as between the monks themselves.³ This explains the presence of evidence for elementary education in monasteries in Upper Egypt, particularly in the Theban region, where the monastic communities largely accepted monks with little or no elementary education.⁴ Despite the fact that schools were not organized on the grand scale of Western monastic centers in the small monasteries surrounding Thebes, education left distinct traces. Thus, excavations at the Monasteries of Epiphanius and St. Phoebammon yielded some Greek and Coptic school exercises, indicating the existence of a so-called school.⁵ This material evidence from the original excavations at these two sites was used to argue for a 'multifunctional' interpretation of ostraca that allows for their usage not just in scribal training, but also in private study or as recitation material for monks.⁶

Texts discovered in Thebes include: Coptic and Greek wall inscriptions, some of which were quite long, as well as graffiti; Coptic and Greek letters and documents on papyri, pottery sherds, and limestone flakes; and Coptic and Greek literary, patristic, and liturgical texts, indicating that this was clearly a bilingual literacy world in multiple registers.⁷

Most of the time, evidence of school exercises in Egypt that resurfaced from previous excavations aids in determining literacy. As a result, this paper presents three Coptic ostraca in an attempt to trace and clarify the scientific method and educational stages that arose in the Coptic community of Thebes.

1) O. Met Inv. 2/1: (plate 1)

White limestone	$7.6 \times 5 \text{ cm}$
Seventh–Eighth centuries (?)	Theban region

Description

The ostracon is a complete piece with a generally clear script with separate letters, but the surface is flaked at the last letter ' \mathbf{x} '. The text is written on one side in two hands with black ink and has a slight tilt to the right. The first hand wrote letters from **B** to ψ with thicker strokes than the staurogram (\mathbf{f}) at the beginning of the text; the rest of the letters may have been written by another hand. The distribution of the letters on the ostracon surface isn't similar; the first line contains twelve letters, the second contains eight, the third contains six letters every two letters have a space between them and the following two, and the last line contains four letters. The letters, **B**, Θ , and **P** are open from the top, and the letters from **q** to \mathbf{x} are larger than the rest. In addition, the scribe used the trema (\mathbf{i}), which distinguishes the Sahadic dialect alphabet.

A first stage of schooling⁸ is depicted on the ostracon by a Sahidic alphabetical exercise. The alphabet in the text was written in an abnormal order (see P. Rain. UnterrichtKopt. 53, 55, and 61),⁹ where the writer switched the position of every letter with the letter that comes after it. In light of what has been published thus far, this method is one of the rare methods of writing Coptic alphabet exercises; therefore, we can assume that this text was a type of dictation and did not follow the standard alphabetical order. Although the order of the four last letters defies contemporary convention, it is frequent in alphabetical exercise texts in which the letter $\boldsymbol{\sigma}$ precedes the letter \boldsymbol{x} .¹⁰

Text

- 1. *Ң***ВАДГ**ΖЄӨНКЇМА
- 2. ΣΝΠΟΟΡΥΤ
- 3. $x \phi \omega \psi q \omega$
- 4. 62 t x



2) O. Alex Inv. 28408 (plates 2-3)

Beige-brown pottery	10.3×9.3 cm
Seventh–Eighth centuries (?)	Theban region (?)

Description

The ostracon is irregularly shaped and broken on all sides. The text is written on two sides in a single hand with black ink, with irregular semi-uncial letters written in a careless hand. The recto has text in six fragments of lines, and the verso contains only four lines of text. No margins are preserved. There are black lines drawn on both sides of the ostracon between the lines of the text to divide it into groups. In the lower-left corner of the verso, a clear pen annotation reading '28408' can be observed. This number may represent the ostracon's register number.

This ostracon is part of a collection of 66 Coptic and Greek ostraca within a catalogue prepared by M. Kuhn.¹¹ Its precise provenance is unknown, but it probably is from the Theban region, as mentioned in the catalogue.¹²

The ostracon bears various biblical extracts (Psalms and Romans) written in Sahidic by a novice writer, with the recto allocated to Psalms.¹³

Recto		Verso	
L.2	Psalms 54: 11	L. 4–5	Romans 15:15
L.3–4	Psalms 30: 16		
L. 5	Psalms 103: 8		

Text

Recto:

х+1.]моү

- x+2. $[ayw \pi xi]$ NGONC TET[2N
- х+3. $[0\gamma \varepsilon]$ \overline{N} г пекго євол єх
- x+4. $[\overline{M}]\Pi \in K2M2a\lambda$
- x+5. [ent]akc \overline{mn} c \overline{n} [te] \overline{m} mooy nay a
- x+6.] Ņ



Verso:

x+1. x+2.]μογτε ετ[x+3.]τννει[... x+4. έν ογτολμ[Δ] x+5. διc2<δ>ις νητ[ν]

Apparatus

4 τόλμα

Translation

Recto:



.....] and injustice (Ps 54:11) make your face shine upon your servant (Ps 30:16) (x+5) which you have founded for them (Ps 103:8).....

Verso:

 \dots (x+5) I have written more boldly to you (Ro 15:15).

Commentary

Recto:

- NGONG ΠΕΤ this phrase appears in two psalms: the first one is Ps 145:7 (ΕΤΕΙΡΕ ΜΠ2ΔΠ ΝΝΕΤΧΗΥ NGONG ΠΕΤ TREPE NNET2KAEIT ΠΧΟΕΙΟ NABWA GBOA NNETMHP), and the second is Ps 54:11 (AYW ΠΧΙΝΘΟΝΟ ΠΕΤ2Ν ΤΕΟΜΗΤΕ AYW ΜΠϤWAN 2N NECΠAATIA NGI ΠΧΙΜΗΟΕ MN ΠΕΚΡΟ4); because of the extent of the lacuna at the beginning of the line, the last option is the most likely.
- 3-4. This passage, according to Kuhn, is from one of two psalms: the first one is Ps 26:9 (ΜΠΡΚϢΤϾΜΠϾΚ2Ο CΔΒΟΛ ΜΜΟΙ ΜΠΡΡΑΤΚ ΘΒΟΛ ΜΠϾΚ2Μ2ΔΛ), and the second is Ps 68:18 (ΜΠΡΚΤΕΠϾΚ2Ο NCΔBOΛ ΜΠϾΚ2Μ2ΔΛ).¹⁴ Nonetheless, the letter traces do not fit these suggestions very well, but they are more consistent with the Ps 30:17 (ΟΥΕΝ2ΠΕΚ2Ο ΕΒΟΛ ΕΣΜ ΠΕΚ2Μ2ΔΛ).
- 5. [ENT]ΔKCMNÇN[TE] MMOOY NAY this quotation represents the end of Ps 103:8 (NTOYEIH XOCE NCOUGE 20BE 2N NEYMA ENTAKCMNCNTE MMOOY NAY). Due to a lack of space at the end of this line, the writer chose to write the letters of 'MMOOY NAY' vertically, one above the other.

Verso:

4-5. 2N ΟΥΤΟΛΜΑ ΔΙC2ΔΙ NHTN this quotation represents the beginning of Ro 15:15 (2N ΟΥΤΟΛΜΑ ΔIC2ΔΙ NHTN ΔΠΟ ΜΕΡΟΥC NACNHY ΕΙΤΡΕΤΝΕΙΡΕ ΜΠΜΕΕΥΕ ΕΤΒΕ ΤΕΧΔΡΙC ΕΝΤΑΥΤΔΑC NAI EBOA 21TM ΠΝΟΥΤΕ). The scribe appears to have made an error by writing the verb 'C2Δi' as 'C2i', omitting the 'Δ' between the letters 2 and ï. In addition, he introduced a pronoun object 'C' to the verb 'C2ΔiC', this form differs from the form in the version of Ro 15:15, however, it only occurs once in the same form in Luke 2:1 (ΔCIJUΠΕΔΕ 2NNE2OOY ETMMAY ΔYΔOΓMA EI EBOA 2ITMΠΡΡΟ ΔΓΟΥCTOC ETPETOIKOYMENH THPC C2ΔIC NCANECTME).

3) O. NMEC Inv. 4520: (plates 4–5)

White limestone	11.1 x 5.8 cm
Seventh–Eighth centuries (?)	Theban region (?)

Description

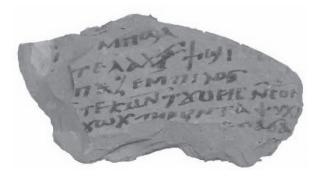
An incomplete ostracon is broken on the left and bottom sides. This limestone flake bears two texts on both sides, written in a single hand with black thick ink: 6 lines on recto and 3 on verso. The hand is regular and clear with no ligatures, and the letters are of an even size except for the t and z. The scribe used diacritics such as the connective stroke (line 4), the double abbreviation stroke (line 2), and dot (line 2 in the verso). In the middle-lower corner of the verso, a clear pen annotation reading '8307 and 4520' can be observed. The first number in red ink is the ostracon's registration number at the Egyptian Museum, where it was first obtained; while the second number, written in Arabic, could be the ostracon's registration number at the Coptic Museum before being transferred to the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (NMEC).

The ostracon bears an epistolary exercise on recto; the letter formulae are unquestionably an essential school activity model for both students and teachers, particularly in the Theban region. Some students appear to have been taught solely as letter scribes. As a result, they had to practice writing a variety of letter formulae.¹⁵ The verso text has almost been entirely lost, with only a few obscure letters remaining.

Text

Recto:

- 1. [+ мфорп меn] мпфа-
- 2. $xe \overline{N} Ta\overline{M} N$] $Te \lambda a x c T u J-$
- 3. NE ayw $\dagger ac$]naze $\overline{mn} < 2 > \lambda 06$ (vac.)
- 4. N]TEKMNTXOEIC NCON
- 5. $2M \Pi \mathbf{x} \mathbf{w} \mathbf{x}$ they ntay yxh
- 6.] стаба



Verso:

- 1.]_λγω on +[
- 2.]ммо.
- 3. (Traces)

Apparatus



2 έλάχιστος | 3 ἀσπάζομαι | 5 ψυχή

Translation

Recto:

[At the beginning of] my humble message I gr[eet and emb]race the sweetness of your fraternal lordship (5) [with] all the fullness of my soul [.....

Verso:

Traces

Commentary

Recto:

- 1. $\overline{\mathsf{Mnya}}[\mathbf{x}\mathbf{\varepsilon}]$ at the beginning of the text is probably part of the introductory formula of a letter ($\frac{1}{\mathsf{Ny}}$ $\overline{\mathsf{Ny}}$ $\overline{\mathsf$
- 2. EXAXC ¹⁷ Perhaps the scribe attempted to write the full form EXAXICTOC, but then he abbreviated it to EXAX by two strokes; the first one is used to write off the letter 'c', and the second to abbreviate the entire word.
- 3. $\pi \lambda \sigma \sigma$ The scribe made an error in the writing of the word $\pi \epsilon \epsilon \lambda \sigma \sigma$ here: the omission of 2 before λ , and he also used the form ' πi ' instead of the common form of the definite article ' $\pi \epsilon$ '.¹⁸
- 4-5. After comparing the beginning of this letter to similar ones,¹⁹ it turns out that the proposed supplement to this part is ($\uparrow \omega \mu \kappa \epsilon \lambda \gamma \omega \uparrow \lambda c \pi a z \epsilon \bar{\mu} \pi \epsilon \epsilon \lambda \sigma \epsilon$).
- 6. There are traces of the letters, τασα, which may have been a part of the formula 'Δρε τασαπμ',²⁰ this is an unusual form of 'Δρι ταγαπμ, τακαπμ'.

Discussion

It is self-evident that there is a connection between Coptic and Greek schooling systems, as well as an unmistakable ancient Egyptian influence. The Greek educational system appears to have served as a source of inspiration for Coptic education. In general, Coptic school exercises are modelled after Greek ones that have been thoroughly researched, and they can be divided into different types based on the students' levels and categories, such as beginner, intermediate, and professional. The curricula can also be divided into different types, such as letters and alphabets, syllabaries, lists of words, epistolary formulae, biblical and arithmetic texts, etc.

Numerous letter and alphabet exercises have been preserved; the training of letters was an initial stage of education, and students in the Coptic era learned their alphabet in different ways. The most common ones were: the usual order, which began with the first letter λ and ended with the last letter \dagger (see O. Frange 479, 480, and P.Rain.UnterrichtKopt. 53, 55, and 61), and the reverse order, which began with the last letter \dagger and ended with the first letter λ (see P. Rain.UnterrichtKopt. 68, 74). Based on the aforementioned, the first ostracon's writer used a unique alphabetical order.

The student advances to the stage of writing competency after finishing the primary stage of practicing letters, the alphabet, and lists of words. The learner had to copy exercises from other literature to practice and master writing, such as the Psalms and portions of the New Testament, or transcribe the standard letter opening formulae.

The training texts on the biblical extracts were common. This deployment was due to the rules of monasticism, where reciting the Psalter was, of course, an important part of any monk's daily life. Furthermore, the Pachomian Praecepta require that each newly entering monk, if unformed, be given 'twenty psalms, or two of the Apostle's epistles, or some other part of the Scripture'.

To hone his writing ability, the learner had to master the writing of some relatively large texts, particularly those with fixed opening formulae, such as letters. Many good epistolary exercise texts devoid of any mistakes are provided by the Theban region; these may have been models produced by teachers for students, or training models created by experienced scribes such as Frange, Moses, and Mark who practiced writing opening formulae letters. The absence of address and proper names, on the other hand, distinguishes real letters from school greeting formula exercises.

As Thebes had a stronger tradition of using ostraca, specifically limestone flakes, which are restricted to specific geological regions and are particularly common around Thebes, all of the pieces were most likely created in Thebes. Most probably all of the pieces are from Thebes, they most likely date from the seventh to the eighth centuries. A comparison of the formulae contained in the epistolary exercise ostracon with those found in the Theban region supports this viewpoint.

In conclusion, Egyptians were once again able to write in their own language thanks to the Coptic script. Coptic, which arose in bilingual milieus, was most likely taught alongside Greek in its early stages. As a result, the learning models, both at the basic level of reading and writing and at the higher levels of composition, rhetoric, and philosophy, had to be drawn from contemporary Greek society and its school tradition. Also, documentary evidence found in Epiphanius and Phoebammon Monasteries suggests that these Monasteries were employed as schools for formal educational activities, primarily for the instruction of adult monks rather than children.

Endnotes

- * Assistant Lecturer, Faculty of Archaeology, Luxor University; rowida.fawzy@arch.svu.edu.eg.
- 1 K. Brune, 'Schooldays in the Fayoum in the First Millennium', in G. Gabra (ed.), *Christianity and* Monasticism in the Fayoum Oasis: Essays from the 2004 International Symposium of the Saint Mark Foundation and the Saint Shenouda the Archimandrite Coptic Society in Honor of Martin Krause (Cairo, 2005), 33.
- R. Cribiore, 'The Coptic School Exercises in the Collection of Columbia University', in B. Palme (ed.), *Akten des 23. Internationalen Papyrologen-Kongresses*, Wien, 22-28 Juli 2001 (Vienna, 2007), 130.
- 3 S. Rubenson, 'Monasticism and the Philosophical Heritage', in S. Johnson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2012), 503.
- 4 A. Maravela, 'Homer and Menandri Sententiae in Upper Egyptian Monastic Settings', in L. Larsen and S. Rubenson (eds.), *Monastic Education in Late Antiquity. The Transformation of Classical Paideia* (Cambridge, 2018), 134.
- 5 R. Cribiore, Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt (Oxford, 2001), 24.
- 6 J. Timbie, 'The Education of Shenoute and Other Cenobitic Leaders: Inside and Outside of the Monastery', in P. Gemeinhardt, L.V. Hoof and P. V. Nuffelen (eds.), *Education and Religion in Late Antique Christianity Reflections, Social Contexts and Genres* (London, 2016), 38.
- 7 L. MacCoull, Prophethood, Texts, and Artifacts: The Monastery of Epiphanius, Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies, Vol. 39 (Cambridge, 1998), 309.
- 8 At this initial stage of learning, there were two complementary levels: practicing individual letters in no apparent order, and writing partial or whole alphabets with some awareness of the alphabetical sequence. R. Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Columbia, 1996), 131.
- 9 M. Hasitzka, Neue Texte und Documentation zum Koptisch-Unterricht, Mitteiungen aus der Papyrussammlung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek (Wien, 1990), 47, 48, 50.
- 10 The order $(\sigma \mathbf{x})$ is actually more common than the order $(\mathbf{x} \sigma)$, implying that there was no fixed order

in Late Antiquity. A. Delattre, 'Ostraca bibliques et scolaires de la région thébaine, Chronique d'Égypte', *CdÉ* 86 (2011), 388.

- M. Kuhn and A. Abd El-Fattah, 'Catalogue of a Collection of Coptic Ostraka in the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria', *Alexandrina* 3, (2009). The catalog contains 66 Coptic and Greek ostraca kept in the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria. This catalog, prepared by Magdalena Kuhn with the assistance of Ahmed Abd El-Fattah, is forthcoming in the series *Alexandrina*, published by the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale in Cairo. This catalog does not provide editions of the mostly very badly damaged texts, but draws scholarly attention to the collection as a whole.
- 12 Kuhn and Abd El-Fattah, *Alexandrina* 3, 274.
- 13 The missing parts on the recto can be reconstructed based on the Coptic Psalter edited by E.A. Wallis Budge. The translations of the whole text and the reconstruction of the quotations on the verso are based on the *New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS)* and *Coptic Scriptorium* websites.
- 14 Kuhn and Abd El-Fattah, Alexandrina 3, 294.
- 15 M. Eissa and S. Ahmed, 'Epistolary School Exercises from NMEC', *BSAC* 56 (2017), 33.
- See O. Frangé 10, 22, 155, 177, 382; O. Mon. Epiph. 188, 210, 241, 285, 304.
- 17 The most common epithet which the sender used in reference to himself was the Greek superlative form, **EXAXICTOC** 'most humble'; it could appear either before or after the name of the sender. Usually, it was written in an abbreviated form. More than likely, it was priests or monks, not laymen, who used it. S. Turner, *Epistolary Formulae in Theban Coptic Documents* (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1976), 183.
- 18 The alternation between the formulae of the definite articles Π€, T€, N€ and ΠΙ, TΙ, NI occurs frequently in the epistolary formulae. A. Boud'hors and Ch. Heurtel, *Les ostraca coptes de la TT 29 : autour du moine Frangé*, vol. 1, Textes (Bruxelles, 2010), 28.
- 19 See O. Frangé 34, 53, 73; O. Mon. Epiph. 210, 247.
- 20 H. Förster, Wörterbuch der griechischen Wörter in den koptischen dokumentarischen Texten, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur, Vol. 148 (De Gruyter, 2002), 3.