

MVSE

VOLUME TWENTY-FIVE 1991



ANNUAL OF THE MUSEUM
OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-COLUMBIA

A FIGURED OSTRACON WITH A HUMOROUS SCENE OF JUDGMENT

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Potsherds and small, flat white flakes of limestone were very frequently used in ancient Egypt as a cheap alternative to costly papyrus for writing and drawing surfaces.¹ Today, these are commonly called ostraca (the singular is ostrakon) by Egyptologists. The Theban necropolis in Upper Egypt, in particular, has yielded a tremendous number of them. Here the limestone of the hills provided a wealth of handy flakes for a variety of purposes. The artisans of the “gang” of workmen who were employed in the construction and decoration of royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings were especially fond of sketching and writing on ostraca. Excavations at Deir el-Medina, the site of the workmen’s village in the necropolis, have turned up many hundreds of them.² These are datable from Dynasty XVIII through Dynasty XX (ca. 1550-1070 B.C.), the period when the artists’ community flourished and they were working on the royal tombs.³ The picture of Egyptian art that figured ostraca, so called because of the illustrations on them, presents to us is often considerably different from that presented by the traditional and formal art which decorate tomb and temple walls. On ostraca, the Egyptian draftsmen display a freedom of spirit and imagination that is rarely encountered otherwise. Their drawings were also significantly less hindered by the canons of Egyptian art which controlled their official work.⁴ Frequently, the subject matter represented on ostraca is almost unique to its appearance in this medium. The kinds of drawings on them, however, do vary. For example, they can range anywhere from mere doodlings to student trial pieces or master studies in anticipation of their execution elsewhere, etc. But a great many were clearly produced for the artists’ own amusement and pleasure, drawn to perhaps pass idle moments from their other work.⁵ It is in this last category that we possess a great number of figured ostraca the intent of which was to be humorous or satirical.⁶

The limestone figured ostrakon under consideration here (Figs. 1-2), is housed in the collection of the Museum of Art and Archaeology of the University of Missouri-Columbia.⁷ The scene depicted on the fragment is unique and of considerable interest. Although a facsimile drawing of the ostrakon has previously been published elsewhere, along with a brief description,⁸ and also mentioned by others,⁹ the fragment has yet to receive the full attention it deserves.

The precise provenance of the ostrakon is unknown. It was purchased in Luxor, Egypt



Fig. 1. Ostrakon with Weighing Scene, Egypt, New Kingdom, Dynasty XIX or XX, ca 1307-1070 B.C., painted stone (63.6.7), gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald Wilber.

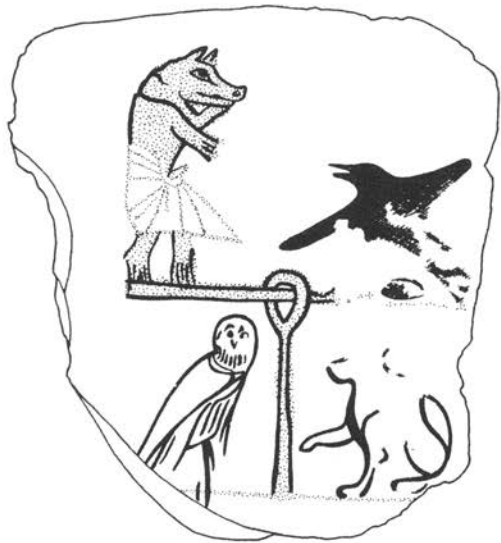


Fig. 2. Facsimile drawing by John Huffstot.

sometime during the 1950s and given to the Museum in 1963.¹⁰ It seems likely, therefore, that a Theban origin for it is probable, and it would not be too speculative to suggest that its find spot may have been in the village of Deir el-Medina. The fragment has a height of 13 cm and is 12 cm wide, about the size of a man's palm, placing it well within the usual size range for this kind of object.¹¹ From the style of the drawing, likely provenance, and parallels to it on other ostraca and papyri, we can be reasonably confident that the fragment dates from either Dynasty XIX or Dynasty XX (ca. 1307-1070 B.C.), commonly referred to as the Ramesside Period.


Only one side of the piece is decorated. The line drawing is in black and red ink, with red and white painted details. The surface and sketch are now rather worn, but enough is preserved to allow us to easily identify what is taking place. A judgment scene is pictured. It shows what has been called a hippopotamus,¹² but what might well be a fox,¹³ standing upright on its hind legs and facing towards the right, on the left side of the balance arm of a weighing scale. The beast is colored red and is wearing a short white pleated kilt. Facing it on the other side of the beam is a big black crow which has its wings outstretched and bill open. Below, serving as the judge and jury to this comical farce, are two more animals. On the right, there is the much faded outline of a cat which has its front leg upraised. While to the left, making a rare appearance in Egyptian art, is an owl with a painted white back and wing.¹⁴ The bird is shown en face and looks very much like the common owl hieroglyph  (m). The painted red weighing scale shown here is unusual,

Fig. 3. Scene from the funerary papyrus of Khonsumes. After A. Piankoff, *Mythological Papryi* (New York, 1957), pl. 17. Courtesy of the Bollingen Foundation.



and I have been unable to find any direct parallels for it.¹⁵ The large cavity at the top of the vertical post could not have properly secured the balance arm for actual use. Rather, it seems to me, its shape may have been modeled after the hieroglyph 𓂏 ('*nh*, "life"). This would have the animals being weighed on a balance scale representing life. The humorous nature of this episode is, of course, self-explanatory, but is there more to it than the obvious?

It is quite possible that what we have here is a parody of the traditional scene pictured in Chapter 125 of the Book of the Dead, showing the final judgment the deceased would face before achieving life and happiness in the beyond.¹⁶ This is nicely shown in a vignette from the Dynasty XXI funerary papyrus of Khonsumes, now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Fig. 3). A balance has been set up before Osiris, ruler of the dead, and is attended by Anubis. We view Khonsumes on the right holding two ostrich plumes, with two more stuck in his wig, watching as his heart is weighed against a seated statuette of Maat, goddess of truth and justice, whose symbol is an ostrich plume. The balance arm is shown in perfect equilibrium, as it also is on our ostrakon, which is favorable to the deceased, and this is reported to Osiris. As the presiding judge, Osiris would then grant Khonsumes a blissful afterlife.

The ostrakon in Missouri is one of a great number of figured ostraca and several illustrated papyri, all of Ramesside Period date, on which animals play the part of humans, with the natural order of their roles reversed as well. A topsy-turvy world is pictured. Here, a mouse dressed as a noblewoman is attended by a cat; cats wielding staffs herd flocks of ducks; a lion and antelope play the game of *senet* together; a crocodile plays a lute; and the theme of the war between cats and mice is frequently represented, etc. The precise meaning of these remains uncertain. It has been suggested that this brand of humor may have been parodies or social satires directed against upper-class Egyptians or scenes from

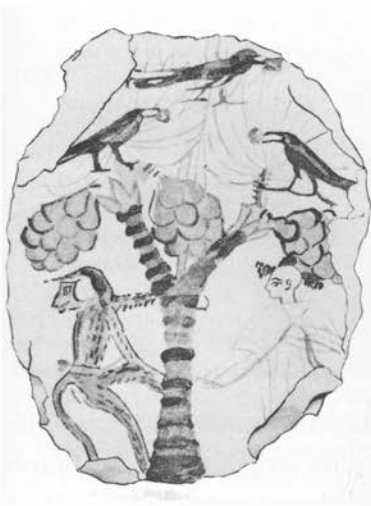


Fig. 4. Drawing of an ostrakon. After J. Vandier d'Abbadie, *Catalogue des ostraca figurés de Deir el Medineh* Fasc. I (Cairo, 1936), pl. II. Courtesy of the Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire.



Fig. 5. Figured ostrakon with chattering crows. Courtesy of the Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

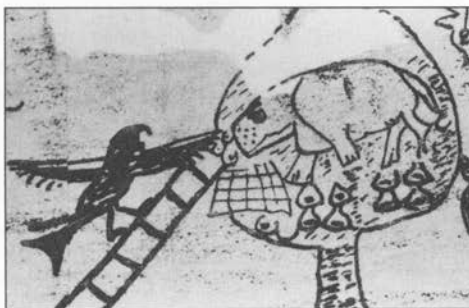


Fig. 6. An episode from the "Erotic and Satirical Papyrus." After E. Brunner-Traut, *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 80 (1955), p. III.

their tombs, and may reflect the turmoil that Egyptian society experienced late in Dynasty XX.¹⁷ Another possibility that has been extensively studied by Brunner-Traut, is that they may illustrate ancient Egyptian folktales or fables, now lost, which featured stories centered around the antics of these animals.¹⁸ However, the whole animal genre, whether folktales or fables, satire, or simply humoresque, is difficult to determine, since there are no written texts to accompany the pictures.

We cannot conclude our discussion of the ostrakon without further elaboration on one of the motifs depicted on it, namely the crow. The bird is not very often represented in Egyptian art, but is occasionally met with on figured ostraca and two papyri during the Ramesside era.¹⁹ Crows are shown in drawings on ostraca perched in the branches of dom palms eating the nuts before baboons could harvest them (Fig. 4). A limestone fragment now in the Ashmolean Museum, shows a pair of crows engaged in what seems to be a lively and animated discussion (Fig. 5). On the famous "Erotic and Satirical Papyrus" from Dynasty XX, now in the Museo Egizio, Turin, there is a small scene which may be related to the Missouri ostrakon.²⁰ It shows a large black crow attempting to pilfer fruit from a sycamore fig tree in a most laughable manner (Fig. 6). Instead of flying up to the

branches of the tree to reach the figs, the ingenious crow has opted to ascend the tree by means of a ladder, and we view the bird slowly making its way up the rungs. Already roosting up in the tree is a hippopotamus that is either guarding the fruit crop from the hungry bird or is himself gathering the ripe fruit into a basket. If the animal on our ostrakon is a hippopotamus and not a fox, the two scenes would be

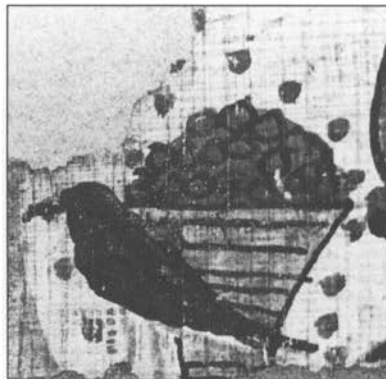


Fig. 7. Crow on a "Satirical Papyrus." Photograph by P.F. Houlihan.

related adventures of the hippo and the crow. If so, it would also have connections with another well-known "Satirical Papyrus" (Fig. 7) of similar date now in the British Museum,²¹ and another figured ostrakon excavated from Deir el-Medina.²²

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NOTES

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Jane C. Biers, Curator of Ancient Art, for her kind invitation to publish this ostrakon in *MVSE*.

² The principle works dealing with Egyptian figured ostraca are: G. Daressy, *Ostraca* (Cairo, 1901); M. Werbrouck, "Ostraca à figures," *Bulletin des Musées royaux d'art et d'histoire* (Brussels), 4 (1932), pp. 106-109; 6 (1934), pp. 138-140; 11 (1939), pp. 41-45; 25 (1953), pp. 93-111; J. Vandier d'Abbadie, *Catalogue des ostraca figurés de Deir el Medineh* (Documents de fouilles publiés par les membres de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, II) Fasc. 1-4 (Cairo, 1936-1959); L. Keimer, "Sur un certain nombre d'ostraca figurés, de plaquettes sculptées, etc., provenant de la nécropole Thébaine et encore inédits," *Etudes d'égyptologie* Fasc. 3 (Cairo, 1941), pp. 1-24; Fasc. 4 (Cairo, 1942), pp. 26-29; E. Brunner-Traut, *Die altägyptischen Scherbenbilder (Bildostraka) der Deutschen Museen und Sammlungen* (Wiesbaden, 1956); B.E.J. Peterson, "Zeichnungen aus einer Totenstadt," *Medelhavsmuseet Bulletin* 7-8 (1973), pp. 1-141; E. Brunner-Traut, *Egyptian Artists' Sketches* (Istanbul, 1979); A. Page, *Ancient Egyptian Figured Ostraca in the Petrie Collection* (Warminster, 1983); A. Gasse, *Catalogue des ostraca figurés de Deir el Medineh* Fasc. 5 (Cairo, 1986). For further references, see W. Helck, "Ostrakon," in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* IV, eds., W. Helck, E. Otto and W. Westendorf (Wiesbaden, 1972-1989), pp. 636-637.

³ For a good overview of the artisans' village at Deir el-Medina, see:

M. Bierbrier, *The Tomb-Builders of the Pharaohs* (London, 1982);

K.A. Kitchen, *Pharaoh Triumphant. The Life and Times of Ramesses II* (Warminster, 1982), pp. 185-205.

⁴ E. Brunner-Traut, "Bildostraka," *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* I, pp. 811-813;

Peterson, "Zeichnungen aus einer Totenstadt," p. 44;

Brunner-Traut, *Egyptian Artists' Sketches*, pp. 9-10;

T.G.H. James, *Egyptian Painting and Drawing in the British Museum* (London, 1985), p. 44.

- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ For a good survey of Egyptian drawing, see W.H. Peck and J.G. Ross, *Drawings from Ancient Egypt* (London, 1978).
- ⁷ Acc. no. 63.6.7. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald N. Wilber.
- ⁸ P.F. Houlihan (with S.M. Goodman), *The Birds of Ancient Egypt* (Warminster, 1986; Cairo, 1987), p. 134, fig. 191.
- ⁹ D.N. Wilber, "The Off-beat in Egyptian Art," *Archaeology* 13 (1960), p. 266;
B. Brentjes, "Zur Rolle der Eulen im Alten Orient," *Beiträge zur Vogelkunde* 13 (1967), p. 78.
- ¹⁰ In a personal communication from D.N. Wilber dated August 2, 1984.
- ¹¹ Brunner-Traut, *Egyptian Artists' Sketches*, p. 2.
- ¹² Wilber, "The Off-beat in Egyptian Art," p. 266; Houlihan, *The Birds of Ancient Egypt*, p. 133.
- ¹³ This is suggested by the erect ears and rather pointed snout. However, if it is a fox, its characteristic tail is not shown. For animals identified as foxes on ostraca and papyri, see for example, N. de Garis Davies, "Egyptian Drawings on Limestone Flakes," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 4 (1917), pl. L;
E. Brunner-Traut, *Altägyptische Tiergeschichte und Fabel*, 5th edition (Darmstadt, 1977), Abb. 5 and 30.
- ¹⁴ See Houlihan, *The Birds of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 109-110.
- ¹⁵ See S.K. Doll, in *Egypt's Golden Age: The Art of Living in the New Kingdom* (Boston, 1982), pp. 58-61.
- ¹⁶ J. Cerné, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (London, 1952), pp. 88-90;
J.G. Griffiths, "Osiris," *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* IV, pp. 629-630.
- ¹⁷ B. van de Walle, "Humor," *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* II, pp. 75-76;
E.L.B. Terrace and H.G. Fischer, *Treasures of the Cairo Museum* (London, 1970), p. 152;
R.A. Fazzini et al., *Ancient Egyptian Art in the Brooklyn Museum* (New York, 1989), no. 62.
- ¹⁸ Brunner-Traut, *Altägyptische Tiergeschichte und Fabel*; Brunner-Traut, *Egyptian Artists' Sketches*, pp. 11-18.
- ¹⁹ See Houlihan, *The Birds of Ancient Egypt*, pp. 132-134.
- ²⁰ For this extraordinary papyrus, see J.A. Omnin, *Der Papyrus 55001 und seine Satirisch-erotischen Zeichnungen und Inschriften* (Turin, 1973).
- ²¹ See W.S. Smith, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*, revised by W.K. Simpson (Harmondsworth, 1981), p. 383, fig., 381;
James, *Egyptian Painting and Drawing in the British Museum*, pp. 2-3.
- ²² See Vandier d'Abbadie, *Catalogue des ostraca figurés de Deir el Medineh*, fasc. 2, pl. XCII, no. 2717.