Seven Ancient Egyptian Figured Ostraca and a Decorated Sherd

Introduction

Egyptian ostraca are irregular pieces of limestone or pottery (potsherds) that served as surfaces for writing or drawing.¹ Although they were used throughout Egyptian history, the highest concentration of known ostraca is derived from the west bank of the Nile River at Luxor. Most come from either the environs of Deir el-Medina, the modern name for the ancient village of the workmen responsible for the construction and decoration of the royal tombs of the New Kingdom, or from the Valley of Kings,² although other sources are also known.³

Figured, also referred to as decorated, ostraca are typically informal renderings, sketches or outline drawings in red and/or black, although finely executed polychrome images are also known. Egyptian drawing and calligraphy were strongly related, and both the artist and the scribe worked with a brush, using primarily red and black pigments. We know from unfinished examples of tomb paintings that preliminary layouts and drawings were executed in red and corrections were overlaid in black. As sketches, the images on ostraca do not always exhibit this two-stage process,⁴ and images were often quickly executed in black, red, or bichrome.

The quality of most ostraca drawings indicates that the figures were usually executed relatively quickly for transitory purposes, making them basically ephemera—although very durable ephemera. Studies of the images preserved on ostraca indicate that they probably served a variety of functions, including as scratch paper, ex-votos, preliminary designs for decoration of walls or objects, architectural plans, sketch pads for training young artists, creative outlet, skill retention and enhancement, pattern books, remedy for boredom, and illustrations of cultural narratives and folk tales.⁵

The Museum of Art and Archaeology possesses eight small drawings on flakes of limestone and pottery that date to the period of the Egyptian New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1070
Seven are identified as figured ostraca, since they lack inscriptions, while the eighth is a painted potsherd. They depict a variety of human and animal figures (Figs. 1–10). Acquired by the museum in 1963 as a gift from Mr. and Mrs. Donald Wilber, these were “the best” of the ostraca collected by Mr. Wilber in Egypt between 1930 and 1934. In 1930, Wilber (1907–1997), a graduate student in architecture at Princeton University, was hired by James Henry Breasted, the eminent American Egyptologist, to work as an artist for the University of Chicago Oriental Institute’s Egyptian Expedition in Luxor. Wilber’s memoirs indicated that he collected ostraca because they interested him as an artist and because they were inexpensive. In the summer of 1931, during the break between field seasons in Egypt, he traveled to Greece and worked at Salonika/Olynthus, Greece, where he met a young scholar, Gladys Davidson (later Weinberg). Their lifelong friendship led to his giving the ostraca to the Museum of Art and Archaeology.

The Wilber collection consists of six limestone and one ceramic figured ostraca and one sherd from a painted pot (catalogue nos. 1–8). The figures and scenes depicted all fall within the corpus of known images and themes. The design repertoire includes representations of humans, animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Colors most frequently used are black or black and red. Polychrome (black, red, white) is found on one example (cat. no. 7), and perhaps on one other (black, red, and possibly yellow, cat. no. 8). Scenes with more than one figure or object occur on half of the ostraca (cat. nos. 1, 3, 5a, 7 and 8), and two have drawings on both back and front surfaces (cat. nos. 4a and 4b, 5a and 5b). A total of five human figures are found on four pieces (cat. nos. 1, 4a, 5a/5b, and 6). Non-human elements are more numerous and can be subdivided into figures of animals (cat. nos. 1–3, 7 and 8), plants (cat. nos. 4b and perhaps 5a), and inanimate objects (cat. nos. 3, 4b, 5a and 7). There is one obscure image which apparently consists of overlapping drawings, perhaps containing both human and inanimate elements (no. 5a).

Catalogue

1. Rider on a Horse (Fig. 1)
Material: Ceramic, black painted design; L. 7 cm; W. 5 cm
Acc. no: 63.6.1
Publication: None

Although more than half of the original drawing is missing, the relative positions of the fragmentary figures clearly indicate that the individual was riding, rather than walking or standing beside the horse. The line work of this sketch is somewhat rough, with extra or irregular lines on the horse’s neck and chin, and on the rider’s head and arm. Execution of the human figure is awkward, with almost no neck, an oversized eye under an eyebrow indicated by a simple arc, and a very small nose. The dome of the skull is uneven, defined with a heavy wavering line that may indicate either a shaved head or an unusual
The preserved hand holds a rein with the loop above the hand, a common feature in this type of scene; the short whip known from some scenes is omitted here. The bridle is simply rendered by a nose strap. A starburst shape on the horse’s head may represent the eye or perhaps a tassel connected to the bridle. Faint traces of a horizontal line, possibly representing a second rein, cross the lower neck of the horse. The mane is rendered as a series of flowing arcs, seeming to suggest motion. The small ear is pointed forward, indicating where the horse’s attention is focused.

The horse and rider motif is documented on ancient Egyptian ostraca and in other media (tomb relief and painting, stelae, models, and other objects). The rider usually sits bareback and holds one or two reins. Occasionally, riders appear to grasp the horse’s mane. Male and female as well as human and divine riders have been noted in the corpus. Male riders are often associated with military scenes. Schulman is of the opinion that these male riders functioned as military scouts. Images of the goddess Astarte on horseback, identified by her divine attributes, appear in the New Kingdom. A few images of female riders, shown nude and with short, sometimes tufted hair have been noted. These female riders have been identified with Astarte, even though no specific iconography is present. Identification of riders on ostraca may be difficult, since the larger context of a scene is often not depicted. The gender of the rider on the museum’s ostracon is uncertain. The relative robustness of the shoulder in relation to the arm may indicate masculine musculature, while the possible unusual hairstyle may indicate a female rider. The slight forward projection of the chest and the nipple cannot be assumed to indicate a female breast, since the male pectoral region may be similarly portrayed.
2. Head of a Horse (Fig. 2)

Material: Ceramic, black painted design; L. 7 cm
Acc. no: 63.6.2
Publication: None

At the top of the sherd are traces of three black lines of varying thickness, bands that once surrounded the entire vessel. Also in black is the left-facing head and neck of a horse. The ears are rather large for a horse, but the mane, forelock, and shape of the head render the image more horse-like. The eye is small, as is the single nostril. No bridle or other horse gear are depicted. Based on the curvature of the sherd, it probably came from a narrow-necked jar or amphora. Vessels with this type of decoration are usually of fine Nile silt wares with light-colored slip and designs in black or polychrome.

Storage jars with scenes of animals, including running horses and leaping calves in a natural setting, are known from the New Kingdom. Ceramics decorated with horses and other frolicking animals are most frequently dated to earlier in the New Kingdom, with the majority of examples attributed to Dynasty 18. The archaeological context for such vessels includes royal and non-royal elite domestic and funerary sites in Upper Egypt, especially (but not exclusively) at Thebes and Amarna. Sherds with this type of decoration have been found at palace sites of Malkata and Amarna.

3. Animal Musicians and Dancers (Fig. 3)

Material: Limestone, black, red, and reddish-orange drawing; H. 8 cm; W. 8 cm
Acc. no: 63.6.3
This type of scene, an animal parody of musicians and dancers, is well known in ancient Egyptian papyri and ostraca. The figures on this piece are executed in black and red; the black strokes are fine, sure, and precise. The red lines are dull and hard to see, perhaps indicating the preliminary layout under the finished black drawing. A slightly different shade of red, almost orange, colors the face of the piper. In the upper portion of the ostracon, a table with splayed legs supports two objects. On the left is a long, narrow ovoid, horizontally oriented, and to the right is a rough square with slightly incurved sides. The narrow ovoid may represent either a food item, such as a long-necked chate melon or cucumber, or a slender, narrow-necked vessel lying on its side. The smaller object probably represents a pot stand.

The main scene consists of four animal figures. On the left are the herbivorous musicians. The smaller figure has inward-curved horns, large ears, narrow snout, short tail, and black spotted or piebald coat. It plays a barrel drum. The larger figure plays the divergent double pipes (double oboe). An interesting feature is the object that hangs from its foreleg; this may represent the case used by professional musicians to transport the pipes. Due to a large chip, an important diagnostic feature—the horns—is missing from this figure. The face of this animal is sloped with a blunt muzzle, unlike the more pointed snout of the drummer. This figure lacks the spots but has a short curved tail; vertical lines on the torso and thigh may indicate shadings on the underbelly and rump of the pelt. To the right are the carnivorous dancers. The activity of the smaller animal is unclear. Only enough of the figure remains to identify that the creature stands, perhaps with arms outstretched, and has a somewhat pointed muzzle and erect ears. The larger animal has a pointed muzzle,
large upstanding ears, protruding tongue, spotted coat, and hairy underbelly. It stands with forelimbs spread wide in energetic movement. It is unclear whether it holds something in the forward paw.

While the activities of the animal actors are straightforward, difficulties arise when attempting to identify the specific types of animals portrayed. The musicians have been previously identified as goats. A survey of various New Kingdom, specifically Theban, portrayals of goats shows a variety of horn forms and coat colors, as in the tomb of Ipuy, but a similar horn form is also known from at least one portrayal of a gazelle. Since a piebald coat is not consistent with the gazelle, the smaller figure is certainly a goat. The larger animal may also be a goat, but with its shaded coat an identification of gazelle cannot be ruled out.

The identification of the large carnivore is also problematic. It has previously been identified as a wolf or fox. The pointed muzzle and upright ears have more in common with canine features, but the series of spots might indicate a hyena or other animal. Based on modern forms, the African wolf and jackal both have a bushy tail and shaded, but not spotted, coat. Foxes in Egypt lack spots (although some have horizontal color bands) and have a bushy tail with white tip. The hyena in Egypt is usually assumed to be the striped variety (Hyaena hyaena) rather than the spotted (Crocuta crocuta). The latter have rounded ears and distinct spots. The stripes in some varieties of Hyaena hyaena are discontinuous, looking more like spots; all have a mane, which is smaller on some individuals. Hyenas depicted with stripes, rather than spots, are not unknown in ancient Egyptian ostraca, and I believe that the animal represented on the museum’s ostraca may be a hyena.

Scenes of human musicians and dancers entertaining at celebrations are well known from New Kingdom tombs. The musicians are usually female, and the dancers almost exclusively so. The double pipes and barrel drum occur in the tomb scenes, along with several other instruments including the lute, harp, lyre, and single pipe. The jar on its side may indicate that the entertainers have consumed the alcoholic beverage it contained, adding to the enthusiasm of their activities. The Missouri piece is noteworthy for the presence of goat, or possibly gazelle, musicians and the pipe case. In a brief survey of ostraca showing animal musicians (either performing singly or in groups) from the most common ostraca publications, I found that the overwhelming majority (70 percent) of animals depicted playing the divergent double pipe were monkeys. In the remaining 30 percent of the sample, carnivores playing the double pipes were slightly more common than ungulates.

4a. Kneeling Nude Male (Fig. 4)
Material: Limestone, black and red drawing; H. 7.6 cm; W. 6.3 cm
Acc. no: 63.6.4 obverse
The color and line work on this squatting nude figure are strong and well defined, although the multi-stroke line work classes this as a sketch. The dark red-brown flesh is outlined in black. The well-executed figure has rolls of flesh below a rounded breast/pectoral area; the abdomen is slightly rounded, with a distinct oval bellybutton. The edge of the iliac crest is delineated by a single line, and a small penis is evident. The lower legs are rather thin compared to the robust thighs, and the back foot is long and narrow. The outline along the back, buttock, and breast of the figure seems to have been created with a double stroke, while the legs and foot were accomplished with thinner strokes. The position of one upper arm is indicated by a black line visible just above the breast.

The gender of this figure is clear based on the presence of the penis. This feature is missing from the drawing published in 1960, and so Wilber misidentified the image as a female. There is a soft quality to the flesh of the figure, although the rolls of the upper body could also be the result of the forward-leaning posture of the body. Figures of overweight men are occasionally depicted on ostraca and in tomb paintings with rolls of flesh below a distinct breast. Nude figures of men or boys are not rare on ostraca, and they are usually associated with scenes of work or energetic play. Due to the missing portion of the ostracon, it is uncertain which activity the man was engaged in. The position of the lower limbs is commonly seen when an individual is involved in activities as varied as kneeling in supplication or prayer before superiors or divinities, sailing a boat, tending a cooking fire, or feeding recumbent farm animals. The fact that only the extreme lower

Fig. 4. Kneeling nude male (ostracon) cat. no. 4a. Egyptian, Luxor (west bank), New Kingdom, Dynasty 19–20, ca. 1292–1070 B.C.E., limestone. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald Wilber (63.6.4 obverse). Photo: Kenyon Reed. Drawing: John Huffstot.
edge of the forward arm is visible would seem to indicate that whatever activity is represented, the arms were held either before and behind the body, or above chest height (a pose occasionally seen when worshipping). The figure's nudity, however, would seem to preclude the latter interpretation, and some work activity may be represented here. Based on body proportions, especially upper to lower leg, the long foot, presence of iliac crest, and wide oval navel, a post-Dynasty 18, Ramesside, date seems likely.

4b. Basket with Fruit (Fig. 5)
Material: Limestone, black and red-brown drawing; H. 7.6 x W. 6.3 cm
Acc. no: 63.6.4 reverse
Publication: None

Only part of the image is preserved due to a loss of the lower right corner of the ostracon and an area of dark discoloration possibly due to fire. A portion of what appears to be a wide-mouthed container, possibly a bowl, is outlined in black with horizontal black lines. Piled above the bowl are bag-shaped objects, with more or less narrow necks, which appear to be fruits. These are depicted lying on their sides and appear to be longer than wide, rounded at one end, and narrowing slightly toward the opposite, flat end. The rounded bottom is usually smooth, although one seems to show a central projection. It is unclear whether one or more of the fruits in the upper right section of the pile have very narrow necks, or whether this is the result of how the fruits overlap each other. The area
of the fruit was first colored by a wash of reddish brown pigment, over which the black outlines of the fruit were drawn. In the upper left corner of the ostracon are two marks in dense black. The form of the right-hand mark is unclear,39 and I cannot determine whether this is a brief hieratic or cursive hieroglyphic inscription, or a more modern mark.

The shape of the bowl, which appears to have a flared rim, is a common ceramic form. The horizontal lines may, however, represent coils, perhaps indicating this is a basketry bowl. The fruits overlap each other in a naturalistic fashion, and the slight variation in shapes may indicate that more than one type of fruit is portrayed. The rounded, bag-like shapes perhaps represent dôm-palm fruit,40 while the narrower-necked fruit, if present, might represent either the sycamore fig or the common fig.41

5a. Head and Upper Body of a Man and Obscure Image (Fig. 6)
Material: Limestone, black and red drawing; L. 7; W. 5 cm
Acc. no: 63.6.5 obverse
Publication: None

The drawings on the obverse of this ostracon are difficult to interpret, with overlapping red and black lines that may or may not belong to the same image. The figure on the left appears to be the head and upper body of a person, presumably a man. Preliminary red lines with black overlays are clearly visible in the head and face. The facial profile is quite flat, bisected by the projecting nose. The eye, which is set close to the front of the face, has heavy upper and lower cosmetic lines. The current state of the paint makes it unclear whether there was a separately rendered brow above the upper eyelid, or whether the upper eye line is simply abnormally thick. The mouth is small, with the preliminary red line larger than the black overlay. Where preserved, the hair is dense black. A heavy red line

Fig. 6. Head and upper body of a man and obscure image (ostracon) cat. no. 5a. Egyptian, Luxor (west bank), New Kingdom, Dynasty 19–20, ca. 1292–1070 B.C.E., limestone. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald Wilber (63.6.5 obverse). Photo: Kenyon Reed. Drawing: John Huffstot; updated, P. V. Podzorski.
that projects beyond the hairline at the forehead could represent a lotus blossom worn on
the head, as is seen in banqueting scenes, or be related to the large red smear in front of
the face.

The definition of the lower body is very obscure, with faint traces of red and black lines
and smears making identification of the posture difficult, and at times the traces seem to
indicate multiple images. Red lines with occasional traces of black overlay lines appear
to define the forward shoulder, back upper arm, and chest. Heavy red and black lines and
shapes just below the neck and crossing the rear shoulder may indicate something held in
front of the body, or elements of dress, or a separate image overlying the first. It is not un-
known for “cross” sketching to occur, where a later figure is drawn over an earlier figure,
often with a different orientation.42 Faint traces of red lines at the front of the torso could
represent a rounded pectoral area and forward arm or might relate to another image.
Diagonal black lines below the chest seem to connect with the red line of the back torso,
perhaps indicating legs in a striding position. The proportions do not match, however,
with the head being at a larger scale than the indications of the possible lower body. Red
shapes at the lower edge of the ostracon seem unrelated to the primary figure,43 as do fine
black lines to the right of these shapes. It is unclear whether the man and the image to the
right are part of a larger composition or whether the images are unrelated.

The figure on the right side of the ostracon is a confusing complex of apparently
overlapping images. Some elements may include a hand with long fingers in red oriented
downward and vertical black lines that may indicate the pleating of a garment over the
lower portion of a woman’s body44 or the lines in a complex papyrus/vegetal bundle col-
umn with floral capital.45 The projecting forms at the upper left of the figure seem to share
some elements with a reworked sketch of a divine barque now in Germany or a complex
religious installation from an ostracon in Cairo.46 The highest projecting object has two
elements at right angles with a cross-hatched pattern in red; the latter pattern possibly
indicates leather binding. Perhaps if more of the ostracon were preserved, the significance
of this complex form might become clear.

5b. Head of a Man (Fig. 7)
Material: Limestone, black and red drawing; L. 7 cm; W. 5 cm
Acc. no: 63.6.5 reverse
Publication: Wilber, “Off-Beat,” p. 261, fig. 8, p. 263

The reverse of this ostracon displays a clear right-facing profile and upper curve of
the forward shoulder of a man. There are complex layers of paint on this piece, perhaps
indicating a finished drawing with areas of applied color. Strong red lines define the top
of the head, nose, chin, and shoulder. Fainter red traces are seen elsewhere. Black lines,
appearing less solid than the red, follow the red at head, nose, and shoulder. Black lines
also define the hairline above the wide cheek area, what may be the edge of a broad collar
on the shoulder, and possible vertical striations in the hair. The hair, which covers the head
in a hemispherical cap, projects beyond the forehead. The nose is dished (concave), and
the lips are well defined above a small chin. There is no visible eye. A vertical black stroke in front of the face appears to have been intentional. It is unclear whether this was part of another image or whether it is related to the primary figure. A newer-looking scratch runs parallel to this mark. Other scratches are visible under the paint of the head. In the lower left of the ostracon, on a break and therefore unrelated to the ancient surface, a black mark, perhaps a modern number, appears to have been scratched off.

Figures with this hairstyle and profile are known from tomb paintings, reliefs, and ostraca and are usually identified as laborers or other ordinary individuals. Men with these features are sometimes shown wearing one or more feathers in the hair and are usually thought to be soldiers. It has also been suggested that this profile and hairstyle, especially when combined with other elements, may indicate that the individual portrayed is a Nubian. The famous presentation of a Nubian tribute scene from the tomb of Huy (time of Tutankhamon) has figures that display similar features.

6. Man Wearing Filet (Fig. 8)
Material: Limestone, black and red drawing; H. 6.5 cm; W. 5 cm
Acc. no: 63.6.6
Publication: None

This fragment preserves the upper portion of a man with his head turned backward. The figure is outlined in black with significant elements highlighted in red; there are no clear indications of preliminary red lines. The small face is dominated by a relatively large eye with a distinct pupil and narrow eyebrow. The downturned mouth is a single line, and
the nose is small and straight. The profile outline was created with one or more uneven strokes. The man wears a short wig with pendant curls and a plain fillet tied at the back of the head. Both are outlined in black and heavily accented in red paint. The red paint has been rather carelessly applied and obscures the earlier black line work. A thin drizzle of red paint shows where the artist rather carelessly passed his brush between the top of the head and the lower margin of the fillet. The torso appears to be covered with a thin layer of red pigment that does not touch the neck or face. The deep broad collar is painted red. The artist seems to have repositioned the surviving arm, as there appear to be two strokes for the underside of the upper arm, a darker one positioning the arm at a higher level, and a lighter one rendering the arm closer to the torso. A spot of black pigment appears to indicate the navel in the rounded, post-Amarna-style lower abdomen, and a curved stroke marks the upper edge of his kilt.

The fillet—also referred to as a circlet, hair- or headband—was worn by both men and women in ancient Egypt from prehistoric times. There was some variation in the forms of fillets; for example, a type known as the “boatman’s circlet,” with flowers woven through the band, is most commonly depicted in the Old and Middle Kingdoms. In the New Kingdom, headbands of plain cloth and also ones ornamented with vegetal elements such as leaves and petals were worn by men and women of all classes. Headbands appear to have been primarily functional, serving to keep the hair, whether natural or a wig, in place and out of the face. Men with shaven heads, acting as either laborers or priests, are also shown wearing fillets, which presumably functioned like sweat bands today. A survey
of non-royal Theban tomb scenes shows that men participating in a funeral sometimes wear plain white fillets, while images of the deceased in offering and banquet scenes often, although not exclusively, show a preference for the decorated fillet. This may indicate that the form of band could be related to a ritual context as well. Women wore decorated fillets in tomb reliefs much more frequently than men.

It is not possible to identify the specific activity depicted on this ostracon due to its fragmentary condition. An investigation was conducted to determine whether comparable images could be located. A survey of wall scenes from more than fifty decorated non-royal Theban tombs and numerous ostraca from published and internet sources indicated that male figures looking backward over their shoulder and wearing a fillet are extremely rare. In fact, only one example, from the tomb of Nakhtamun (Theban tomb TT 341), was located. In this instance, the figure of a *sem*-priest walking in front of the bier and mummy turns backward to offer incense and libation to the deceased. Backward-looking male figures without fillets were found engaged in a wide variety of activities including: (1) rituals associated with the funeral, especially priests preceding the bier or coffin or canopic chest, and funeral-goers carrying objects to the tomb; (2) rituals associated with the cult, specifically preceding cult statues of deified kings; (3) sailors at the bow of a boat; (4) laborers and soldiers, including men shutting bird traps, or leading animals; and (5) scenes with banquets, revelers, and entertainers. Solitary standing figures on ostraca are also known. Scenes with forward-facing men wearing a fillet also covered a variety of activities, including funerary (such as receiving offerings, honoring gods, and participating in the funeral procession and funeral feast) and daily life (such as herding animals, trapping birds, laboring, and boating).

The attempt to find stylistic matches for single uninscribed ostraca is a task fraught with difficulty and yet not without purpose as we attempt to place these wonderful little works of art within contexts of time, space, society, and artist’s output. Since these drawings are clearly the product of a single hand, rather than the result of the multi-stage, multi-worker process of tomb decoration, this goal is perhaps achievable. Elements of the face in this depiction—the eye with large pupil and simple eyebrow, the single-line downturned mouth, the small pointed nose and the heavy awkward outline of the profile—appear to share affinities with a few other published ostraca. The closest parallel I was able to identify is the face of a woman nursing a child on a Ramesside ostracon possibly from Deir el-Medina. A few other ostraca were also identified, most notably from the corpus of work attributed to the chief draftsman Amenhotep son of Amennakht, an artist active in Dynasty 20. These have similar features in the “wobbly” line of the profile, small nose, single-line mouth, and simple eyebrow. A distinctive feature unlike that on the museum’s ostracon is that the lenticular eye usually has a small pupil attached to the upper eyelid. In addition to ostraca, the hand of the chief draftsman, Amenhotep, or of those working under his guidance has been identified in tombs in the Valley of Kings (KV 2, KV 6 and KV 9), but also in the wider Theban necropolis (Theban tombs TT 65 and TT 113). Two additional ostraca share some of the features of the museum’s ostracon. The first is inscribed for Ken-her-khepeshef and his son Amennakht and has an
eye with large pupil, simple eyebrow, small nose, and single-line mouth, but the profile is done in a fine, sure stroke. Not too dissimilar is a figure by the draftsman Pentaweret, which exhibits an eye with small pupil, simple eyebrow, small nose, downturned mouth, and profile executed in a single line. Both date to Dynasty 20. If the association of the museum's ostracon with Amenhotep or someone working in similar style is correct, then the piece may date to Dynasty 20 and perhaps even originated outside Deir el-Medina.

7. Satirical Judgment Scene (Fig. 9)

**Material:** Limestone, black, red, and white drawing; H. 13 cm; W. 12 cm

**Acc. no:** 63.6.7


This ostracon has been discussed in detail by Patrick Houlihan in his article in *Muse* (1992). The structure of the scene is set by the post and crossbar of the scale at the center, which is painted reddish brown and outlined in black. An interesting feature is the ground line at the bottom of the scene. The best-preserved figures are to the left, where a hippo-

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Fig. 9. Satirical judgment scene (ostracon) cat. no. 7. Egyptian, Luxor (west bank), New Kingdom, Dynasty 19–20, ca. 1292–1070 B.C.E., limestone. Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald Wilber (63.6.7). Photo: Kenyon Reed. Drawing: John Huffstot; updated, P. V. Podzorski.
The hippo stands on its hind feet with four toes clearly visible. One forepaw is raised to its muzzle, while the other appears to reach forward toward a black bird, probably a crow, which faces him. The owl is well rendered, with a speckled grey band pattern on a white or very light grey ground; the area of the leg feathers, which lacks a background color, has some interior detail. The owl faces forward, as owls usually do in Egyptian art and writing, and has round eyes and long fluffy feathers at the chin. It has no indication of “ears” typical of certain owl species in Egypt, so this may represent a barn owl (Tyto alba alba), or other “earless” owl native to North Africa, although the light wing color is unnatural for these species.

The fourth creature is seated on its haunches, with one forepaw raised. Unlike the other animals represented, this one seems to be defined only by the black outline. No interior color is apparent, although it is possible that small spots of black, indicative of a pattern in the fur, were originally present. The upper portion of the figure has been lost, but traces of what may be a broad feline-like muzzle can be discerned. A faint trace of a dark horizontal line behind the back may indicate the tail.

This scene may represent a parody of one of the most significant scenes in ancient Egyptian religious iconography—the weighing of the heart. Before being allowed to pass into the realm of Osiris, the life and character of the deceased, symbolically represented by a heart, were weighed on a balance scale against a feather symbolizing Maat, a goddess who represents truth and righteousness. The deceased stands near the scales, along with the gods Anubis (guide of the dead), Ammut (the Devourer), and sometimes Thoth (who records the outcome of the event). To one side sits Osiris, to receive the deceased should he or she pass the test. The symbolism associated with the specific animal species depicted is uncertain. Houlihan has also suggested that this scene may represent an unknown folktale or a parody of a court trial, where the litigants are the hippopotamus and the crow, and the owl and cat are judge and jury.

8. Baboon, Monkey, and Insect (Fig. 10)
Material: Limestone, black, red and perhaps yellow drawing; H. 21 cm; W. 15.5 cm
Acc. no: 63.6.8

This is the largest ostracon in the collection. The primary figure, located in the center of the stone and outlined in black with interior details in black, red, and perhaps yellow, represents an adult male hamadryas baboon, seated on the ground on its rump, showing its bilobed red callosity. Its tail is curved forward. A thick mane depicted as locks of hair covers the shoulders and upper body, and its arm is visible below the mane. The head is almost entirely covered by a rounded element representing the cheek whiskers, and the
face is painted a deep red. The eye is rectangular and the iris, surrounding a distinct pupil, is attached to the upper margin. The muzzle is long and deep. The bridge of the nose is gently arched, and the tip appears to project only slightly beyond the upper lip. Faint traces of preliminary red lines are visible along the head, back, thighs, rump, and arm. Yellow coloration, which may not be part of the original design, is seen on the upper back, shoulder, and lower head. The contour line that creates the crown and back of the head and upper back is thicker than the lines elsewhere in the figure. This is a finely drafted image.

Behind the main figure is an incomplete image of another primate, either a young baboon or monkey, drawn in red only and lacking most interior details. This red is brighter than the red of the primary figure. The lower part of the body appears unfinished, and the work is less skilled in execution. There is no clear indication of a mane, and the upper body narrows down toward the now-vanished hips, perhaps indicating that this figure was originally depicted standing, although it seems unlikely that a full standing figure could have been accommodated in the available space. The artist has made two attempts at the contour line for the top and back of the head, and the pigment here is thick, indicating multiple brush strokes. Slightly more than half of the head is covered with a rounded representation of cheek whiskers. The brow ridge is rendered as a distinct “bump” in the profile, separated
from the hairline by a short, thick line. This feature is seen most commonly in Dynasty 20. A small red mark may represent the medial margin of the eye. The muzzle is rectangular. The bridge of the nose is straight, and the tip is pointed, projecting beyond the upper lip. The chin looks almost as though a small beard is attached, although this seems to have been the result of one or more awkward, heavy brush strokes. This red figure was most likely added after the detailed baboon was completed.

The third discernible representation on this ostracon is a winged insect outlined in black. The upper end of the narrow, tubular body has two long, forward-projecting antennae ending in round dots. The posterior of the body is not preserved. Faint traces of at least three legs can be discerned. Tall, arched features attached to the dorsal aspect of the body apparently represent wings and are poorly preserved. The identification of this creature is tentative due to the uncertain wing shape, but perhaps a butterfly was intended.

Monkeys and baboons are common figures on ostraca, tomb reliefs, and papyri, and sub-adult male and female baboons may look similar to monkeys. Based on evidence such as eye and brow shape, as well as other features, it has been proposed that the hamadryas baboon may date to Dynasty 19, specifically the reign of Ramses II, while the red figure was added later, possibly in Dynasty 20. Images of seated baboons created by the artists of Deir el-Medina appear in both royal and non-royal contexts in a variety of scenes: adoring the solar disk or other form of Ra; as baboon deities, such as Thoth; in vignettes illustrating spells, such as the first chapter of the Amduat or Book of the Dead chapter 125; and elsewhere.

Conclusion

The seven figured ostraca and one painted potsherd in the Wilber collection comprise a diverse group of images including humans, animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Identified by the donor as having been collected on the west bank of the Nile at Luxor, the majority, if not all, probably date to the period of the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1070 B.C.E.). The earliest piece may be the potsherd, which probably dates to Dynasty 18. Both tomb construction and the Deir el-Medina workforce increased dramatically after the 18th Dynasty, and it is likely that the bulk of the museum’s figured ostraca are of Ramesside date (Dynasty 19–20). Due to the lack of precise archaeological context and inscriptions, more specific dates are proposed for only two of the ostraca: cat. no. 8 (Fig. 10) with seated baboon to Dynasty 19 (reign of Ramses II), with possible later reuse; and cat. no. 6 (Fig. 8) with man wearing a fillet to Dynasty 20.

The five unequivocal human figures in the museum’s corpus all appear to represent males. Of special interest are the images of the horse and rider and the head that may depict a Nubian. Due to the fragmentary nature of the ostraca, with the exception of the rider, the activities in which the men were engaged are not known. Noteworthy by their absence are images of women and royalty.

Animals are the most numerous images among the corpus, which contains two horses, two primates, two goats, a hippopotamus, a cat, a hyena, and an unspecified small
carnivore. Winged creatures are represented by an owl, a crow, and one insect, possibly a butterfly. The hamadryas baboon is the most artistically accomplished rendering and may have been intended to represent a religious image. The majority of the animals are participants in two satirical scenes or parodies. The liveliest scene is the parody of dancers and musicians (cat. no. 3 [Fig. 3]). The other scene (cat. no. 7 [Fig. 9]) appears to represent a parody of an extremely important funerary motif, the weighing of the heart, or perhaps a court trial. It has been suggested that such animal scenes were a way that the lower social orders poked fun at their betters, or that they illustrate cultural narratives or folk tales.

Several inanimate objects are also depicted on the museum’s ostraca. The bowl containing dôm palm fruit is the most carefully rendered of the images of objects. The other items—a balance scale, a table with two pots, and musical instruments (drum, double divergent pipes, and pipe case)—are elements in the two satirical scenes just mentioned. The objects in the musicians and dancers ostracon (cat. no. 3 [Fig. 3]) are summarily rendered compared to the animal figures. This is most clearly shown by the double pipes, which are represented only as single lines.

Previous studies of ostraca from known archaeological contexts have demonstrated that certain subjects appear more frequently among ostraca found at the village of Deir el-Medina, while others are more commonly encountered among the tombs in the Valley of the Kings. Scenes with domesticated animals, ordinary folk engaged in daily activities, and parodies are less commonly encountered in the royal necropolis. Based on this generalization, it is possible that the majority of the Wilber collection may have come from the village rather than from the Valley of the Kings.

NOTES

*I would like to thank the director of the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri, for permission to publish this collection and Dr. Jane Biers, curator emerita of ancient art, as well as Dr. Benton Kidd, curator of ancient art. Special thanks go to Jeffrey Wilcox, curator of collections/registrar, who provided images and answers to many questions.


4. The standing baboon figure on no. 8 in the catalogue below is one of these exceptions.


7. Ibid., pp. 11–24. One or more of the pieces may have been collected in the 1950s (see Patrick F. Houlihan, “A Figured Ostracon with a Humorous Scene of Judgment,” *Muse* 25 (1992) pp. 30–31).


9. Ibid., pp. 16–17, 23.

10. Ibid., p. 18.

11. The decoration was added to the vessel before firing (cat. no. 2).


13. A similar rein is held by the rider in Peterson, “Zeichnungen,” cat. 31, and in Brunner-Traut, *Artists' Sketches*, no. 5.


16. Ibid., p. 271.

17. Ibid., p. 269.


19. The ancient Egyptians also bred mules and hinnies.


22. There may be a third object between the putative jar and pot stand; this is difficult to determine due to surface damage. Traces may indicate the image of a small shallow bowl with flared rim, perhaps a drinking bowl. A survey of ostraca scenes with drinking bowls showed, however, that shallow hemispherical bowls were used. Also, if a bowl is present, the neck of the jar would be unusually short.


26. A similar scene from an ostracon in Turin (n. suppl. 6299) shows two horned animals with
coat colors like those on the museum’s example playing single and double pipes. Both have been identified as gazelles (Silvio Curto, *La satira nell’antico Egitto* [Turin, 1965] fig. 5).


30. Ibid., pp. 68–75.


38. This discoloration is not present on the obverse side of the ostracon.

39. The mark to the left is a simple vertical stroke.


43. The clearest of these, a round element above a trapezoid, perhaps represents a cornflower blossom.


45. Brunner-Traut, *Scherbenbilder*, pl. 6, no. 5.

46. Ibid., pl. 10, no. 25; Vandier d’Abbadie, *Catalogue des ostraca*, vol. 2, pl. 82, no. 2603.
47. Mekhitarian, *Egyptian Painting*, pp. 146–147 shows scenes of a goatherd and a man trapping birds in the marshes who have this same hairstyle.


59. Menna (Theban tomb TT 69), Mekhetarian, *Egyptian Painting*, pp. 76–77; Ipuy (Theban tomb TT 217), Mekhetarian, *Egyptian Painting*, p. 146; Cairo ostraca 25.139 and 25.141, Daressy, *Ostraca*, pls. XXVII, XXVIII and Cairo ostracon 25.133, pl. XXVI.

60. Ipuy (Theban tomb TT 217), Mekhetarian, *Egyptian Painting*, p. 147.

61. Louvre ostracon E 25309 (figure leading monkey possibly female), Peck, *Egyptian Drawings*, pp. 143, cat. 72, and 204; Louvre ostracon E 14367, Vandier d'Abbadie, *Catalogue des ostraca*, vol. 1, cat. 2070, p. 16, pl. 11; Amenmose (Theban tomb TT 42), Nina de Garis Davies and Norman de Garis Davies, *The Tombs of Menkheperrasob, Amenmose, and Another* (Nos. 86, 112, 42 and 226) *Theban Tomb Series* 5 (London, 1933) pl. XXXV.

63. IFAO ostracon 3993, Gasse, *Catalogue des Ostraca* 5, cat. 3190, p. 18, pl. 19.


68. Bács, “... Like Heaven in Its Interior,” p. 37, fig. 6.


70. Brunner-Traut, *Scherbenbilder*, p. 79, pl. XXIX, cat. 78.


73. A possible alternate identification as a fox has also been proposed (Houlihan, “Figured Ostracon,” p. 31).


75. Houlihan, “Figured Ostracon,” p. 31, identified this animal as a cat.

76. Ibid., pp. 32–34.

77. Ibid., p. 32.

78. Ibid., pp. 32–34; Houlihan, *Wit and Humour*, p. 98.

79. Podzorski, “The Eyes Have It.”

80. Ibid.


82. Unless the obscure figures on cat. no. 5a include the lower body of a woman (see Fig. 6).

83. Or a goat and a gazelle.


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