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Self-Donation or Retirement to the Monastery (?): O.NMEC 117

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# Self-Donation or Retirement to the Monastery (?): O.NMEC 117

MAHER A. EISSA\*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The ostraca published below is part of a seizure collection of 40 Coptic and Greek ostraca, some of them are fake. They are of unknown provenance (most probably Thebes for the majority of them) and are now kept in the NMEC (National Museum of Egyptian Civilization)<sup>2</sup> in Cairo. O.NMEC 117 is one of the most complete Coptic ostraca of this collection. It has a remarkable peculiarity since each of its text lines had been crossed. This is, as far as I know, the only example of such a practice for an ostraca. It seems that for some reason somebody wanted to make the text no longer valid. However the text is still readable and its content, while raising difficulties of interpretation, provides interesting insights on social uses connected with the monastic environment of the Theban region.

The text is actually complete and undamaged, apart from minor surface wear affecting the legibility of the beginning and the ending lines. It consists of 21 lines written in Sahidic Coptic with a few traces of Theban dialect (see the comments on Οὗτος l. 15 and οὐκεν l. 16). The script on the recto is regular and practiced, slightly sloping uncial, typical for documentary hands of the 7th and 8th centuries. The script has a few ligatures reminiscent of the 7th-c. hands.<sup>3</sup> The

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1 This article was written during my post-doctoral research at the Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes of the CNRS in Paris (2014), funded by the Institut français d'Égypte au Caire. I would like to express my special thanks to A. Boud'hors for hosting me and for her continuous support and valuable remarks. I am also grateful

to J. van der Vliet (Leiden University), for his comments, and also to the anonymous reviewers of *BIFAO* for their useful suggestions.

2 For more information and details about this museum and its collection, see M.A. Eissa, "A letter or an Exercise? O.NMEC 107", *CdE* 89, Fasc. 177, 2014, p. 197-201.

3 See for instance, Petrie Museum UC 62848 = O.Crum VC 76 (fig. 2). The texts are abbreviated according to J.F. OATES et al., *Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic, and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets of Duke University*, 5th ed., BASP-Suppl., Leiden, 2001. See also: <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/texts/clist.html>.

use of the superlinear strokes, as preserved, seems regular except in the abbreviation of Jesus Christ (see l. 12). The presence of a long superlinear stroke is also noted on πεφνά (l. 12). Trema (diaresis) is found throughout the entire text on all types of i: simple as in (πωϊ l. 2), diphthongal as in (μμοϊ l. 6, πενχοεῑc l. 12) or consonantal as in (ϊακωβ l. 3); it is also employed in Greek words as in (πλιαβολο̄c l. 10), and it resembles two separate dots on the two letters in ič πεχ (l. 12). There seems to be no logical punctuation, except for a raised point after ΝΟΜΟC (l. 5). The verso is scarcely legible and written by a different hand. It could be a school exercise, thus an example of reusing or recycling the writing surface.<sup>4</sup>

The date of the text could be at the beginning of the 7th century, before the Persian invasion,<sup>5</sup> during this period, most of the monasteries and churches in that area were destroyed (see below the commentary on the monastery of Apa Samuel mentioned in this ostracon).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the script could fit this period.

The ostracon contains a brief story by a man called Strategios. It explains how he came to sin by having an extramarital affair with a woman who lived with him for one year. Afterwards, he realized that his behaviour was inspired by the devil, so he decided to go to the monastery of Apa Samuel and dwell there in order to obtain God's forgiveness. As a whole, the document can then be considered as a kind of "narratio", that is to say a story about what happened in the past and how it encouraged the issuer to make a decision.<sup>7</sup> In other words, what one uses to call nowadays a "motivation letter".

## Text and Translation

O.NMEC Inv. 117

(FIG. 1-2)

22,4 × 8,5 × 0,8 cm

Thebes?

7th century?

### Recto

- [1] ΔΝΟΚ ΣΤΡΑΤΕΓΙΟC
- [2] Πωϊ ΝΠΜΑΚΑΡΙΟC
- [3] ΙΑΚΩΒ ΜΝ ΔΘΕΝΑΙ ΕΤΟΥΗΣ
- [4] ΣΝ ΠΑΦΕΝΣΩΡ ΕΡΕΚΗΒΤ Ο

<sup>4</sup> Due to its illegibility and since there is no connection between its content and the text of the recto, the verso of O.NMEC 117 and other pieces of school texts from the Coptic ostraca of NMEC will be the subject of another article.

<sup>5</sup> For more details about Egypt under the Persian invasion and the situation of Copts, see: L.S.B. MACCOULL, "Coptic

Egypt During the Persian Occupation: The Papyrological Evidence", *SCO* 36, 1986, p. 307-313; R. ALTHEIM-STIEHL, "The Sasanians in Egypt: Some Evidence of Historical Interest", *BSAC* 31, 1992, p. 87-96.

<sup>6</sup> When Persian occupied Egypt, they pillaged the monasteries and churches, violated and killed many people. Cf. S. JALALIPOUR, "Persian

Occupation of Egypt: Politics and Administration of Sasanians", *E-Sasanika Graduate Paper* 10, 2014, p. 1-16, esp. p. 13. Moreover, there are some Coptic documentary indications for this violence. For instance P.Mon.Epiph 300, 324 and 433.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. T.S. RICHTER, "What's in a Story", *JJP* 35, 2005, p. 237-264, esp. p. 242

- [5] ΝΑΥ ΝΝΟΜΟΣ ΔΑΦΩΠΕ Μ-  
 [6] ΜΟΪ ΝΤΕΡΕΙΡ ΝΟΣ ΣΝ ΘΥΛΥΚΙΑ  
 [7] ΝΤΕΣΕΝΜΕΥΕ ΕΥΣΟΟΥ ΕΙ ΕΣΟΥΝ  
 [8] ΕΠΑΓΗΤ ΕΤΒΕ ΟΥΣΛΛΩ ΝΤΑΒΩ[Κ]  
 [9] ΝΤΑΜΟΥΡ ΕΣΟΥΝ ΝΜΜΑΣ ΝΤΕ-  
 [10] ΡΕ ΠΔΙΑΒΟΛΟΣ ΣΩΡΜ ΜΠΑΣΗΤ  
 [11] ΝΤΑΡ ΟΥΡΟΜΠΕ ΕΙΦΟΟΠ ΝΜΜΑΣ  
 [12] ΑΠΕΝΧΟΕΙΣ Ι(ΗΣΟΥ)Ϲ ΠΕΧ(ΡΙСΤΟ)Ϲ Ρ ΠΕΦΝΑ ΝΜΜΑΪ  
 [13] ΔΑΟΥΩΝ ΝΝΑΒΔΑΛ ΔΙΝΔΥ ΕΒΟΛ ΝΘΕ Ν-  
 [14] ΡΩΜΕ ΝΙΜ ΔΙΜΟΩΤ ΣΕ ΚΑΝ ΠΟΟΥ ΚΑΝ ΡΑ[ΣΤΕ]  
 [15] ΤΝΑΜΟΥΡ ΕΙ ΣΙΒΟΛ ΝΤΟΠϹ ΝΝΧΡΕΣΤΪ[ΝΟϹ]  
 [16] ΔΠΗΔΑΗΤ ΝΝΟΥΤΕ ΟΥΗΝ ΕΠΑΓΗΤ ΔΙΜΟΩΤ ΣΝ ΠΑ-  
 [17] ΛΟΓΙΣΜΟΣ ΣΕ ΒΩΚ ΕΠΤΟΟΥ ΕΤΟΥΓΑΔΒ ΝΝΑΠΑΣΑ-  
 [18] ΜΟΥΗΛ ΝΓΟΥΓΩΣ ΣΜ ΠΜΑ ΕΤΜΜΑΥ ΠΝΟΥΤ[Ε]  
 [19] ΝΑΚΩ ΝΑΚ ΕΒΟΛ ΜΠΣΩΡΜ ΝΤΑ-  
 [20] ΚΒΩΚ Ν  
 [21] ΣΗΤΨ

*Verso*

- [1] ΔΝΟΚ ΠΟΥΣΕΙ ΜΝ ΔΝΟΚ  
 [2] ΔΙΚΔΙΟΣ ΤΙΡ ΟΥΦ ΝΙϹ  
 [3] ΔΝΟΚ ΔΙΚΔΙΟΣ ΦΩΜΟϹ  
 [4] ΔΝΟΚ ΝΙΜ ΤΨΙΝΕ ΙϹΑΚ  
 [5] ΜΑΚΑΡΙΟϹ  
 [6] ΠΕΤΡΟϹ ΠΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟϹ

[1] ¶ [2] μακάριος [5] νομός [6] read ἡλικία [10] διάβολος [12] read ιϲ πεχϲ ostr [14] κἄν ... κάν [15] read απϲ, χριστιανός [17] λογισμός

*I Strategios, the son of the late Jacob and Athenai who are living in Pshenhōr, Kēbt being [5] their Nome, it happened to me when I became old in age that some bad thoughts entered my mind because of an old woman, and I went and joined myself together with her and after [10] the devil led my heart astray, I spent one year with her. My lord Jesus Christ had mercy on me He opened my eyes. I saw as every man did I would examine that either today or tomorrow [15] I would die while being outside the number of the Christians. Having The merciful God opened my heart, I decided in my mind to go to the holy monastery of apa Samuel and settle there. God will forgive you the madness you [20] went through.*

## Commentary

1. 1-3. The names **στρατηγος** and **ιακων** were quite common in Thebes. They are attested many times in the Coptic documentary texts. **στρατηγος** (Στράτηγος) is well attested from the 3rd century BC to the 8th century AD, especially in Fayoum and Thebes.<sup>8</sup> **στρατηγος** is typical for late antique Egyptian anthroponomy.<sup>9</sup> As for **λαεναι**, it could be a female variant for the Greek name (Αθηναιος), well attested in the Greek texts from the 4th century BC to the 6th century AD, especially in middle Egypt.<sup>10</sup>

1. 2. ¶ the cross should be in the beginning of the first line. It looks as if, for some reasons, the first line had been added later.

1. 4. **πωενωρ** and **κηβτ**: Pshenhôr (Arabic Šanhûr, شهور) is well attested in Coptic sources as a village in the Nome of Coptos (κηβτ). It is mentioned several times in the archive of Bishop Pisenthius of Coptos, as well as in documents from Jeme and the Monastery of Epiphanius. As a main city or a district on the east bank, Qift (Coptos/Kēbt) gained its significance from the fact that it was the exit point of the desert routes to the Red sea and to the quarries in the desert area.<sup>11</sup>

1. 6-8. **νοε ση θυλγκια** and **ογσλω**: perhaps these expressions emphasise that **στρατηγος** had no excuse to sin because he was old enough to be able to avoid this kind of deeds. Moreover, he had a relation with an old woman, not even a young girl. What is the meaning of “getting old” in this context? Actually there is no clear evidence from Coptic texts that can inform us about this issue. However from the ancient Egyptian sources we know that, although the ideal age was 110 years, the average age of the Egyptian was between 50 and 60 years.<sup>12</sup> It could have been the same in Late Antique Egypt. Therefore, hypothetical old age could be around 40 years. Also unclear is the age for marriage. There is no direct evidence for average marrying ages in Coptic literary or documentary sources. In Late Roman Egypt it is generally assumed that women were around late teens, while men were in their early twenties.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.trismegistos.org/nam/detail.php?record=5879> (visited on 12/12/2014).

<sup>9</sup> A. FARID, *Fünf demotische Stelen aus Berlin, Chicago, Durham, London und Oxford mit zwei demotischen Türinschriften aus Paris und einer Bibliographie der demotischen Inschriften*, Berlin, 1995, p. 3, 36–37, no. IV; S.P. VLEEMING, *Some Coins of Artaxerxes and Other Short Texts in the Demotic Script Found on Various*

*Objects Gathered from Many Publications*, Leuven, 2001, p. 1, 158.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.trismegistos.org/nam/detail.php?record=2176> (visited on 12/12/2014).

<sup>11</sup> S. TIMM, *Das Christlich-Koptische Agypten in arabischer Zeit*, Teil 5, TAVO 41, Wiesbaden, 1991, p. 2292 ff.

<sup>12</sup> For more details about the name, location and its attestation see: S. TIMM, op. cit., 2140 ff; P. GROSSMANN, *The*

*Coptic Encyclopedia* 7, s.v. “Qift”, New York, 1991, p. 2038–2040.

<sup>13</sup> For more details about this issue, see: M. ROSALAN, J.J. JANSSEN, *Growing up in Ancient Egypt*, London, 1990.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. R.S. BAGNALL, B.W. FRIER, *The Demography of Roman Egypt. Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past Time* 23, Cambridge, 1994, p. III–II8.

1. 8-9. **NTABW<sup>K</sup> NTAMOY<sup>P</sup> ESOYN NMMAC**: like other Late Antique societies, the Coptic society had some experience of extramarital affairs, especially extramarital sex (adultery, lesbian, homosexual, rape, and prostitution activities), even among monks, shepherd and nuns.<sup>15</sup> On the one hand, literary sources provide some instances of extramarital sex in order to obligate the Christian population to avoid these forbidden relations and to exhort women and men to chastity and faithfulness to their partners. Sometimes the local ecclesiastical authority even wrote to parents, disapproving the private asylum of their daughter running away from her husband and asking them to send her back to him and to fulfil her matrimonial duties.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, documentary evidence of the practice of extramarital sex in late Antique Egypt is rare. I am aware of the following examples: biblical story of a woman taken in adultery;<sup>17</sup> abduction and sexual violence against a woman by a shepherd;<sup>18</sup> and a letter describing how a man found his wife in the courtyard with another man (her lover).<sup>19</sup> We can also figure out this practice from the threat of Apa Abraham to excommunicate any man or woman who divorce for any reason other than adultery;<sup>20</sup> a possible evidence of a prostitute woman from Thebes;<sup>21</sup> a story inserted in a will concerning the son of the testator, who married against the wish of his father and then got fights and disturbances in his married life because the virginity of his wife had not been intact.<sup>22</sup>

As a consequence, women saw possibilities of their marriage ruined or they had to run away from their own towns/villages;<sup>23</sup> sometimes illegitimate children are mentioned.<sup>24</sup> From the Greek evidence text, killing the adulterer could also be an option.<sup>25</sup>

1. 10. Intervention of the devil is frequent in this kind of story: for instance in P. KRU 97, “The one who hates every good thing” dissuaded the parents from accomplishing their vow of donating their child to the monastery (**ΔΠΜΑСТ ΠΕΤΝΔНОΥЧ НИМ НОХС ЕПНГНТ ΕΤРНКТОН ЕПАСОY 2Н ПНЕРНТ**). The devil is also mentioned in the deeds of divorce as the one who “separated”.

1. 16. **ΔПНДНТ ННОУТЕ ОУНН ЕПАСНТ** (*vs. ΔЧОУWН ННДВАХ l. 13*): two things are remarkable here: 1. the form **ОУНН**; 2. the construction with the preposition **ε**; for the latter see a similar construction in P.KRU 106.51: **ΔПНОУТЕ ПАГАДОС ННДНТ ОУWН ЕПАСНТ ЕТРДНОУХ ПАКОYI НЛУПТОН ПАI ЕТБОХВ.**<sup>26</sup> Both features are actually connected with the “southern dialects” and we must recognize here an attestation of the active infinitive with an object introduced by **ε**, a rare combination in non-literary Sahidic.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Women had been punished for having sex with each other (lesbian practice): cf. T.G. WILFONG, “Friendship and Physical Desire: The Discourse of Female Homoeroticism in Fifth Century CE Egypt”, in N. Sorkin Rabinowitz, L. Auanger (eds.), *Among Women: From the Homosocial to the Homoerotic in the Ancient World*, Austin, 2002, p. 304–329

<sup>16</sup> O.Crum Ad. 13.

<sup>17</sup> O.Brit.Mus.Copt.20:2.

<sup>18</sup> P. Pisentius 54 and P. Pisentius 55.

<sup>19</sup> P. Pisentius 38.

<sup>20</sup> O. Crum 72.

<sup>21</sup> P.Mon.Epiph. 269.

<sup>22</sup> P.KRU 67, 19–23.

<sup>23</sup> P. Mon. Epiph. 269.

<sup>24</sup> O. Frange 161.

<sup>25</sup> R.S. BAGNALL, *Everyday Writing in the Graeco-Roman East*, SCL 69, Berkeley, 2011, p. 16

<sup>26</sup> See a commentary to this sentence in A. BOUD’HORS, A. SHISHA-HALEVY, “Two Remarkable Features of Coptic Syntax”, *ZÄS* 139, 2012, p. 105–112, esp. p. 108. However, this comment should be adjusted in the light of Funk’s article quoted in the following footnote.

<sup>27</sup> See W.-P. FUNK, „Zur Syntax des koptischen Qualitativs“, *ZÄS* 104, 1977, p. 25–39, esp. p. 30–35.

I. 17. **λογισμός** is more precise than **ἢντ** or **μεεγέ**, to be used in the text. It is an interesting word to be found here, because it is generally used in the legal documents, especially the wills,<sup>28</sup> where the testator wants to emphasize that his reasoning ability is sound. This tightens the links of this text with a legal context (see the general discussion below).

I. 17-18. **πτοογε ετογααβ >NNΑΝΑ σαμογηλ**: the monastery of the holy Apa Samuel is known nowadays as “Deir El-Gizāz”, about 12 km to the south-west of Qûs (Kôs).<sup>29</sup> Among the non-literary sources, it is only attested in one Coptic<sup>30</sup> and one Greek text as the monastery of Apa Samuel of Phel.<sup>31</sup> This ostraca is thus the third attestation. It sounds consistent with the living place of Strategios’s family (Pshanhôr) that he chose to enter this monastery.

## General Discussion

This text is neither a letter nor a legal document since it contains no epistolary formula, no name of contracting people, no date and no witnesses. It is a story narrated by the first person. To this respect it shows similarities with the stories contained in the donations of children to the Monastery of St. Phoibammon in Thebes.<sup>32</sup> Thus O.NMEC 117 might have been written as a draft of the story of Strategios, namely what happened in the past and what he intended to do in the future. Perhaps this story was meant to be inserted in a more official document written on papyrus and addressed to the clergy of the Monastery of Apa Samuel, either a request to enter the monastery (which would be nowadays a “motivation letter”), or possibly a self-donation. Once the document was ready, the draft was no more useful or no more valid,<sup>33</sup> which could explain why all its lines are crossed and why it has been reused (see verso).

However this interpretation raises another question, what did this man want? To donate himself to the monastery as a servant or simply to retire there? Since our document does not

<sup>28</sup> H. FÖRSTER, *Wörterbuch der griechischen Wörter in den koptischen dokumentarischen Texten*, Berlin, 2002, p. 476.

<sup>29</sup> J. DORESSE, “Deir el Gizaz, ou couvent de Samuel : un monastère thébain oublié...et même disparu”, *Aegyptus* 69, 1980, p. 153–163. This article provides an extensive study about the place, its location and its history through literary, archaeological and historical sources.

<sup>30</sup> O.Crum ST 340, 2-4 (**πιμονοχος ΝΝΑΝΑ σαμογηλ μφελ**).

<sup>31</sup> It was actually unknown in Greek literature until J.-L. Fournet identified without doubt the Monastery of Phel and the one of Apa Samuel (Deir El-Gizāz): J.-L. FOURNET, “Révision du P.Rein. II 107 : un papyrus de Syène de moins, un étalon monétaire de plus”, *ZPE* 117, 1997, p. 167–170.

<sup>32</sup> There is an abundant bibliography on these texts. See above all E. WIPSYCKA, *The Coptic Encyclopaedia* 3, s.v. “Donation of Children”, New York 1991, p. 918–919; A. PAPACONSTANTINOU, “Notes sur les actes de donation d’enfant au monastère thébain de Saint-Phoibammon”, *JJP* 32, 2002, p. 83–105; T.S. RICHTER, op. cit., p. 237–264. The only self-donation of an adult is PKRU 104, where a man donates himself as a servant to the monastery, in gratitude for having been miraculously healed from illness. In PKRU 79, a boy had already attained adulthood and agreed to the donation his parents made of him.

<sup>33</sup> The ostraca could also bear a draft of the first half of a document, whereas the second half, with other expected parts, is not preserved. There is indeed another example of a document in two parts: see M. KRAUSE, *Apa Abraham: von Hermonthis: Ein oberägyptischer Bischof um 600*, PhD thesis, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 1956, vol. 2, p. 273, no. 76 (Berlin, P.12491): „Ein Beamter, mindestens ein Laschane“, wird angeschrieben; vielleicht der von Toimamen oder sein Vorgesetzter“.

give any indication of serving intention, one may suggest that the man simply wanted to retire and stay in the monastery without any kind of commitment, as a place to spend the rest of his life in repentance. The stories of miracles in the Coptic literature often provide similar events: after having done serious sins against a saint or a holy place and having been severely punished, the man or woman decided to enter the place as a servant or to donate his/her properties to it.<sup>34</sup> Whether Strategios was intending to become a monk, as George and Claudius in the *Panegyric of St. Claude*<sup>35</sup> or/and to donate his possessions to the monastery is impossible to say at this point.

<sup>34</sup> See for instance S. BACOT, “Quatre miracles de Saint Ménas dans un manuscrit copte de l’Ifao (Inv. 315-320)”, *BIFAO* III, 2011, p. 1-35.

<sup>35</sup> W. TILL, *Koptische Heiligen und Martyrerlegenden*, vol. 2. Rome, 1936, p. 105; G. GODRON (ed.), *Second panégyrique de St. Claude par Constantin*,

évêque d’Assiout, Turnhout, Brepols, 1970, PO 35, p. 655-663.

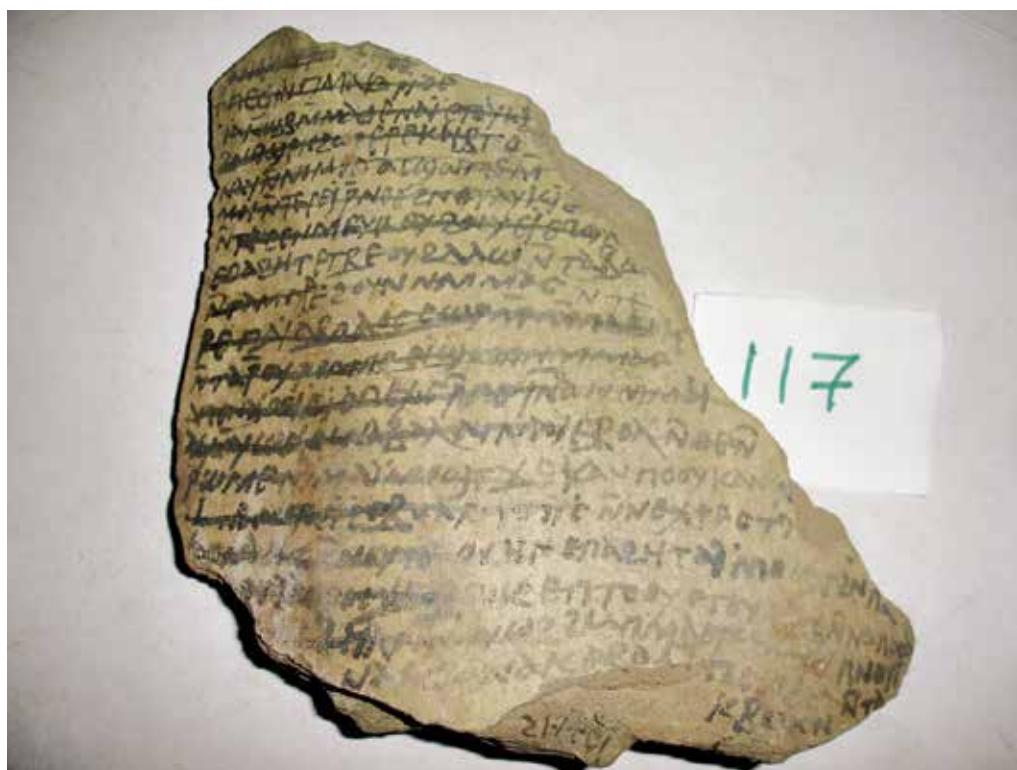


FIG. 1. O.NMEC 117. Recto.

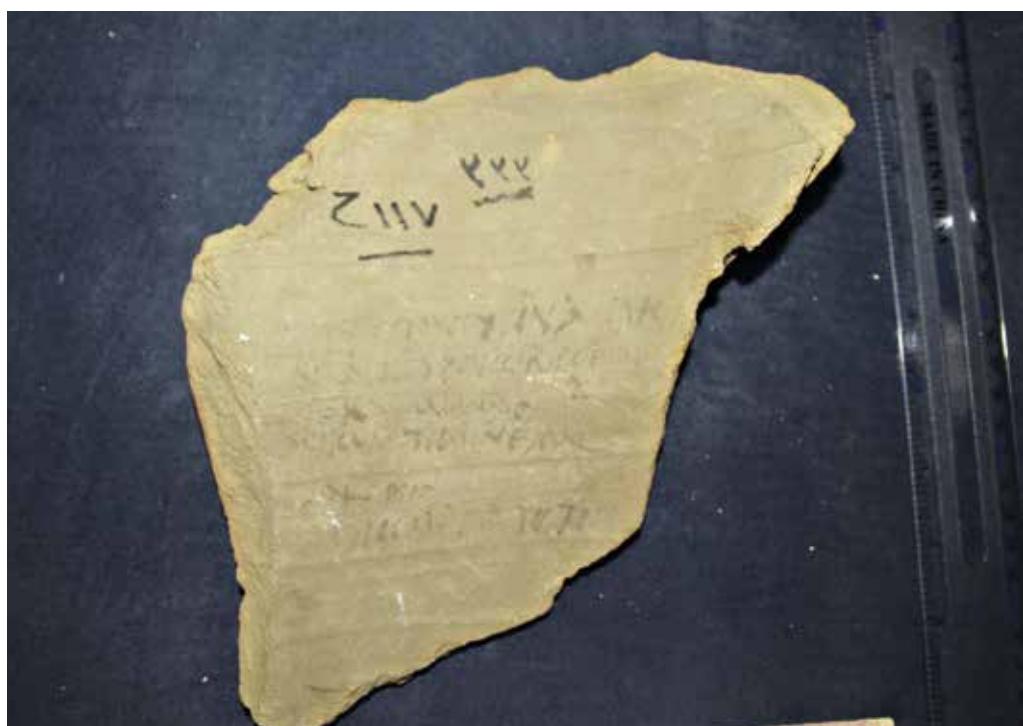


FIG. 2. O.NMEC 117. Verso.