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A Kemyt Ostracon from Amheida, Dakhleh Oasis

OLAF E. KAPER

Archaeological Context

Amheida, located in the western end of Dakhleh Oasis, is a large settlement site that contains archaeological remains from all historical periods of antiquity. Since 2004, excavations have been conducted at this site, bringing to light important remains from the 4th century AD and earlier.\(^1\) The presence of a pharaonic temple at the site was known already previously from the presence on the surface of a block of temple relief and a scatter of stone fragments.\(^2\) The recent excavations have identified these remains as a temple dedicated to Thoth built in pharaonic and Roman times. The temple was demolished and survives only in the form of loose blocks and fragments carrying the names of the following kings: Pedubast I, Necho II, Psametik II, Amasis, and Darius I. In the Roman period a second major building phase commenced in the reigns of Titus and Domitian, and there are the empty cartouches of an anonymous later emperor.

The temple was built at the highest point of the site, on top of earlier settlement remains. The underlying remains of mud brick walls may be dated to the Old Kingdom on the basis of

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\(^1\) I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Robert J. Demarée, who discussed the ostracon with me and pointed out several unpublished parallels. Roger Bagnall and Paola Davoli read the manuscript and provided additional comments; the final version was improved thanks to the anonymous reviewer of the Ifao.

ceramics found with them. This early settlement at Amheida was thus contemporary with those at ‘Ayn Asil and ‘Ayn al-Gazzareen in Dakhleh. It is clear, however, that habitation continued in later times, as the ceramic assembly also contains material from most subsequent periods. The town may plausibly be identified with the “town of the Back of the Oasis” (dmỉ sȝ-wḥȝt) that is mentioned in the larger Dakhleh Stela from the time of Shoshenq I.3 Thus far, the excavations have not progressed sufficiently to indicate the size and nature of this settlement. Also, it is not yet clear whether the earlier remains also included a temple at this location. The earliest dated remains of the temple consist of a relief block from the reign of Pedubast I and a stela from the reign of Takeloth III, both of dynasty 23.4

The present article focuses on a single find from the site of the later temple to Thoth. It is a New Kingdom ostracon found among rubble in an otherwise heavily disturbed context.5

Description

Excavation season: 2006.
Find spot and designation: Amheida, area 4.1 (the site of the later temple); deposition stratigraphic unit 61; inventory code 11050; SCA no. 2879.
Dimensions: H. 18 × W. 15 cm; Th. 1.6 cm.
Fabric: P29 in the classification of C.A. Hope. This is a plain ware of a calcium-rich fabric from Dakhleh oasis regularly used for amphorae.

The sherd is inscribed on the convex side with 4 columns of hieratic script and a date written in black ink. The columns run perpendicular to the wheel marks; they are bordered by thin red lines that are irregularly marked by small crossing bars in the same colour.

The surface is damaged at the upper right corner and parts of the first two columns of text have disappeared. Apart from this damage, the ostracon is complete.

6 In the field records of the expedition, the context is summarized as A06/4.1/61/11050.
The photograph was taken with a UV camera by R. Ast in 2009. It has been digitally enhanced. The facsimile in figure 2 was drawn by the author from the original.
Remarks on the Writing and the Dating of the Text

There are no signs indicating the ends of sections, as would be expected in three locations in this ostracon, after $r\text{ sw, }\text{ wrwt}=i$ and $hr=i$. Only very few parallels show this omission. The red border lines of the inscription are marked at a few places by small red bars, but these appear to be random and not related to the contents of the inscription. These marks were possibly placed to assist in drawing the vertical lines correctly.

Another notable deviation of standard practice is the colour of the date, which is in black, whereas dates are usually added in red ink.¹⁰

What could be the date of the Amheida ostracon? The script is particularly difficult to date, because Kemyt is written in a deliberate archaizing fashion. The earliest attestation of Kemyt was found among papyrus fragments of the late Middle Kingdom from Lahun,¹¹ after which school texts are attested from the 17th dynasty onwards,¹² and becoming increasingly common. Most copies date from the Ramesside period, after which the use of the text seems to have ceased. The sherd used for the exercise at Amheida is from a large jar or amphora, which may well date to the New Kingdom, but there is no information as to its shape. At this moment, a more precise dating of the Amheida ostracon within the New Kingdom is not possible.

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Footnotes:

8 Faint traces of this section do not provide enough evidence to confirm the transliteration suggested here on the basis of the parallels.

9 In this line, the translation follows the transliteration $\omega-s\, sb\varepsilon$, which occurs again in a single parallel from Thebes: O. Brux. E 3208. The three other preserved copies of this phrase read $\omega-\delta\varepsilon$.


The Book of Kemyt

The text is part of the literary composition known by its ancient designation as Kemyt, of which it contains §XVI, and also a part of §XV in the numbering introduced by Posener in 1951. Only a single papyrus fragment has been preserved with a part of Kemyt and there are five writing boards and an inscribed scribal palette known with a section of the text. Recently, also a few graffiti have been noted with parts of the text, described further below. Astonishingly, an estimated total of over 410 Kemyt ostraca are known today, some 340 of which were found at Deir al-Medina alone. The Ifao in Cairo is said to possess more than 330 ostraca with the text, nearly all of which stem from Deir al-Medina and the remainder from other locations in the Theban West Bank.

Posener first assembled the texts of eight ostraca as basis for his reconstruction of section XV of Kemyt and nine ostraca for section XVI. In the most recent study of these sections, by Mathieu and Ritter published in 2008, the number of sources was increased to 23 ostraca. Many of these ostraca, however, are damaged or otherwise incomplete and the find of a new attestation of this part of the text is significant, therefore, also because the translation is still open to improvement. Apart from the Amheida ostracon, one further ostracon from the Ifao collection has been published by A. Gasse, and another unpublished ostracon is in Chicago, bringing the list of sources for the sections XV and XVI of Kemyt currently known to 26.

In the translation above, I have chosen to follow the interpretation of Mathieu and Ritter (2008), which is based on the largest number of sources. They defined the final part of the text, sections XV-XVII, as a microtext of a didactic nature. However, many other interpretations of the text have been made, as listed below. Their substantial differences demonstrate the great difficulties encountered in this part of the text.

13 G. Posener, Catalogue des ostraca hiératiques littéraires de Deir el Médîneh, II, (N° 1109 à 1167), 1, DFIFAO 18, 1951.
15 V. Ritter, “La littérature à Deir el-Médîneh: entre tradition et création”, Les Dossiers d’Archéologie 272, 2002, p. 33; B. Mathieu, V. Ritter (“Les sections finales du manuel scolaire Kémyt (§ XV-XVII)”, in Chr. Gallois, P. Grandet, L. Pantalacci (eds.), Mêlanges offerts à François Neveu, BiEtud 145, 2008, p. 193) indicate that over 410 sources are known today, which include four writing boards, one scribal palette and a papyrus. R.J. Demarée informs me that he knows of at least seven further unpublished Kemyt ostraca in various collections.
17 A. Gasse, op. cit., p. 86, n.17.
18 G. Posener, op. cit.
19 B. Mathieu, V. Ritter, op. cit., p. 196-197; their additions are the followings: O. DeM inv. 2573; O. DeM C 6139; O. DeM C 277; O. DeM C 1577; O. Michael. 78; O. Turin CG 57554. Posener had already listed the following ostraca with sections XV or XVI: O. Brux. E 3208; O. Brux. E 7627 rto; O. Cairo JE 54949; O. Cairo JE 56842; O. DeM 1145 vso; O. DeM 1153 rto; O. DeM 1157; O. DeM 1158; O. DeM 1159; O. DeM 1161 vso; O. DeM 1162; O. DeM 1163; O. DeM 1164; O. DeM 1165; O. DeM 1166; O. DeM 1167; O. MMA 56112 vso.
20 This is O. DeM 1873. B. Mathieu, V. Ritter, op. cit., did not know of this publication at the time of writing, as their most recent bibliographic source dates from 2004.
21 O. Chicago OIM 16992, containing sections XIV-XVI. I owe knowledge of this piece to R.J. Demarée, who provided me with a transcription from his notebooks.
Published Translations of Sections XV-XVI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Translation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Brunner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Barta</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Wente</td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Dakin</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Brunner</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Parkinson</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Quirke</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Peust</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

24 E.F. Wente, Letters from Ancient Egypt, Writings from the Ancient World 1, 1990, p. 16.
28 St. Quirke Egyptian Literature 1800 BC. Questions and Readings, GHP Egyptology 2, 2004, p. 54; the same is published on the website of UCL: www.digitegypt.ucl.ac.uk/literature/kmyt.html.
The genre to which *Kemyt* belongs is difficult to define because it shares characteristics with several genres. It is usually classified as a kind of literary letter, as does Wente, but Brunner and Assmann grouped it among the instructions. In fact, the work contains elements from letter writing, (auto)biography, instruction and narrative. The contents may be described as a compilation of different types of exercise sentences taken from various types of text that the Egyptian official might encounter. We may distinguish four independent parts in *Kemyt*: sections I-VIII contain greetings used in letter-writing; IX-XI contain a narrative concluding with a letter; XII-XIV have a selection of phrases drawn from the genre of ideal biography; and XV-XVII are drawn from the wisdom texts or instructions.

The text was divided into 17 sections in nearly all copies of the text by the insertion of horizontal bars and sometimes also the sign for “pause”, “end” (grḥ). These marks were the equivalents of verse points in horizontally written hieratic. It is noteworthy that the Amheida ostracon has no dividing marks, as in only few other examples of *Kemyt*.

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36 On this sign, see A. Erman, *Neuägyptische Grammatik*, 1, 2nd ed., Leipzig, 1933, §57.


38 The only parallel for the final part of the text without division marks is O. MMA 36112 vso of the 18th dynasty from Thebes, published in W.Chr. Hayes, “A Much-Copied Letter of the Early Middle Kingdom”, *JNES* 7, 1948, pl. III.
The Text as an Educational Tool

The word *kemyt* is the designation for the text or its title.\(^{39}\) The work was used in the education of officials, and the frequently irregular handwriting upon the ostraca shows that it was one of the first texts to be taught in this particular form of the script. It has been aptly called “the oldest school book in world literature”.\(^{40}\) Chappaz has shown how well the text had been conceived didactically, making up for the lack of internal cohesion in its contents.\(^{41}\)

The word *kemyt* has been translated as “summation” or “completion” by Wente,\(^{42}\) and similarly as “Abschluß, Vollendung” by Peust.\(^{43}\) These translations suggest that the text may have served as a kind of student examination. However, the vast majority of *Kemyt* ostraca preserve only the beginning of the text. Peust and also Gasse concluded from this that most students would focus on repeating the beginning and that only very few would write the text as a whole.\(^{44}\) It is significant to realize that the same phenomenon is observed more generally in Egyptian literary texts,\(^{45}\) and that this reflects common practices in teaching rather than examination. Parkinson has opted for the translation “compendium”, which draws attention to the diverse contents of the work, which was apparently principally employed in the early stages of literacy classes. Another translation was proposed by Brunner already in 1957, who took the grammatical form of *kemyt* into account. In his view, the term should be translated as the passive “completed” or “perfected”, and this refers to the state of the pupil after he had mastered the work of that name.\(^{46}\)

The script employed for *Kemyt* is always hieratic that leans towards the cursive hieroglyphic script. This resembles the hieratic of the early Middle Kingdom,\(^{47}\) and it is normally written in archaic fashion in columns. Often red lines separate the columns, as also here. The use of horizontal lines is only very rarely encountered in copies of *Kemyt*.\(^{48}\) These features are explained by the conservative nature of the Egyptian administration, which valued its traditions. Mathieu has recently taken position against the accepted view that the practicing of hieratic in

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\(^{39}\) H. Brunner (*LÄ* III, 1980, col. 183, s.n. “Kemit”) rejects the possibility that *Kemyt* could be the title of the work, but the latter option is now made more likely by the findings in Assiut; U. Verhoeven, (“Von der ‘Loyalistischen Lehre’ zur ‘Lehre des Kaïrsu’: eine neue Textquelle in Assiut und deren Auswirkungen”, *ZÄS* 136, 2009, p. 88) remarks that the literary texts written on the walls of tomb Assiut N13.1, all start with a title. Since there are two copies of *Kemyt* among these texts, as Ursula Verhoeven has kindly confirmed to me, it is possible that the title of the work was included also here.


\(^{41}\) B. Mathieu, V. Ritter, *op. cit.*, p. 194. The occurrence of the opening of a work far more than any other part may also be observed in Greek literary school texts, as R.S. Bagnall informs me.\(^{46}\)


\(^{45}\) B. Mathieu, V. Ritter, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

\(^{46}\) This is especially noticeable in the shape of the sign Gardiner A1 = Möller no. 33; cf. the remarks by Posener, in B. van de Walle, *La transmission des textes littéraires égyptiens avec une annexe de G. Posener*, Brussels, 1948, p. 41.

\(^{47}\) Two examples are cited in A.N. Dakin, in *Atti: Sexto Congresso, op. cit.*, 1992, p. 471: O. BM 5641 vso. and O. DeM 1129, both containing section V.
vertical columns would pose advantages for beginning students.\textsuperscript{49} Instead, he sees the practice of Kemyt as a study in calligraphy, in which more advanced pupils would be familiarized with earlier writing styles.

McDowell has studied the ostraca from Deir al-Medina containing dates.\textsuperscript{50} Over 100 ostraca are known with at least one date, which is less than one tenth of the total of student exercises. Usually they were written in red at the end of a chapter of the text. According to Brunner, the dates were normally written by the same hand as the main text, but this has been disputed by McDowell.\textsuperscript{51} The purpose of the dates is not exactly clear. Were they tutor’s check marks or were they intended to keep track of the copied passages and perhaps keep them in order?\textsuperscript{52} The later Greek school exercises also contained dates similar to these, but they seem to be exclusive to the models that the instructors prepared to be copied.\textsuperscript{53} There is no evidence that the same system was employed at Deir al-Medina.

As in the Amheida ostracoon, most exercises are dated to a weekday (days 1-8) rather than a weekend (days 9-10). Day 24 was a weekday in the third week of the month.\textsuperscript{54} In the case of the Deir al-Medina ostraca, the find spot for nearly all of them was close to the village, rather than at the work place in the Valley of the Kings. McDowell concluded from this that the education in Deir al-Medina took place on days off, when all the men were at home, mainly in the later part of a king’s reign.\textsuperscript{55}

In his study of the wisdom literature, Burkard has shown that the texts were usually copied individually by the pupil, not dictated.\textsuperscript{56} This means that copying was an individual activity and not carried out in a class situation, as is also suggested by the lack of shared dates on the ostraca. The Amheida ostracoon has a contribution to make to this discussion.

In the Amheida ostracoon, the scribe has mixed up the usual order of the sentences in his exercise. The internal parts of sections XV and XVI have been changed around and with that, the meaning of the sentence was lost completely. This confirms Burkard’s observation that the texts were never dictated by the teacher to the pupil. According to Burkard the reasons for deviating from the standard text were always the result of a mistaken understanding,\textsuperscript{57} and this seems to be the case also here. The mixed-up sentences are now without sense, but even the


\textsuperscript{51} H. Brunner, Altägyptische Erziehung, op. cit., 1957, p. 76; A.G. McDowell (op. cit., p. 604) disagreed because of the location of the dates, which is often out of line with the main text.

\textsuperscript{52} A.H. Gardiner, Late-Egyptian Stories, XIII-XV; G. Posener, “Les ostraca numérotés et le Conte du Revenant”, in Drevnij Vostok, 1975, p. 108.

\textsuperscript{53} R. Cribiore, Writing, teachers, and students in Graeco-Roman Egypt, Atlanta, 1996, p. 88, 90.

\textsuperscript{54} Although the weekdays were not always working days, cf. the evidence collected in H. Jauhiainen, “Do Not Celebrate Your Feast Without Your Neighbours”, a Study of References to Feasts and Festivals in Non-Literary Documents from Ramesside Period Deir el-Medina, Publications of the Institute for Asian and African Studies 10, 2009, p. 58-63. The same date of the Amheida ostracoon, III akhet 24, was once used for a gathering of the ḳnbt at Deir al-Medina, which did usually not coincide with a working day; cf. S.P. Vleeming, “The days on which the ḳnbt used to gather”, in R.J. Demarée, Jac.J. Janssen (eds.), Gleanings from Deir el-Medîna, EgUit 1, 1982, p. 185.


\textsuperscript{56} G. Burkard, Textkritische Unter- suchungen zu ägyptischen Weisheitslehren des Alten und Mittleren Reiches, Äg.Abb 34, 1977, p. 88-71, 142-143.

\textsuperscript{57} G. Burkard, op. cit., p. 19.
conventional version was already difficult to understand as appears from the widely divergent translations in modern times, cited above. A deliberate rearrangement of the text is certainly to be excluded, but then what is the explanation for this obvious mistake?

Burkard has concluded that the school texts were always copied after written examples, so that we may perhaps assume that the scribe got lost in his Vorlage and jumped back one or two columns before realizing his mistake. After commencing with the first line of section XVI, the scribe jumped back to the beginning of XV, of which he wrote only the first line, after which he continued with section XVI as if no mistake had been made. Instead of the expected hw n hr=t or hw hr=f, the scribe wrote hw sn šw tr=k sȝ-s sbȝ r šw. This mistake seems, however, not to be a mere visual error of the scribe. The mistake is being made while he is in the middle of a sentence in section XVI, and he switches back to a sentence from the beginning of section XV. Even though this Kemyt ostracon does not have the section separators found in other copies, it is remarkable that a copyist would switch from the middle of one sentence to the beginning of another that looks entirely different. It is significant that there are no similar looking words or signs at the end of section XIV that would explain the confusion as an error of vision.

The mistake may be more plausibly understood as a memory mistake, resulting from the homophonous first words of the confused passages: both transliterated as hw. This being the case, the ostracon speaks against the assumption that the texts were copied from a written Vorlage directly. The text seems to have been memorized by the pupil and at the beginning of a particularly obscure subsidiary clause in the text, he continued inadvertently with a previous passage that started with a similar sounding word. The scribe worked mechanically and seems not to have noticed that his text did not make sense anymore until he had completed nearly a full column. At that moment, he realized his mistake, dipped in his brush and continued with section XVI, leaving out a few words to cover up his slip. He then wrote correctly until the end and closed with the date of his exercise as if nothing had happened.

This was a typical failure of memory rather than a copy mistake. Already Barns, in his commentary on the highly corrupted Sinuhe ostracon in Oxford observed “In the case of phonetic errors one suspects that dictation has played a part …; this, however, is not necessary; for a text learned by heart, by ear and without comprehension, will produce just such errors when the learner writes it down.” Burkard cited Barns in agreement, concluding that the texts were either copied from a Vorlage directly or memorized and written down from memory. The Amheida ostracon is a specific case of the latter, and it provides an argument for reassessing the role of memory in scribal education.

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**Kemyt and the National Curriculum**

Thus far, the *Kemyt* ostraca have been found in large numbers in Thebes. Yet, this was not the only place where the text was used in education. The oldest attestation of the text, P UCL 32271B recto, was found at Lahun.\(^{61}\) Two ostraca have been found at Amarna, containing sections IV and VII respectively.\(^{62}\) Their editor, Fairman, felt compelled to make an exception of these two pieces when he suggested their date to be “possibly Ramesside”, because of the parallels known to him, even when all other textual material at Amarna was contemporary with the city’s habitation.\(^{63}\) Because more copies of *Kemyt* from the early New Kingdom have come to light, a dating of *Kemyt* copies to the Amarna period is no longer a problem today.\(^{64}\) One of the Amarna ostraca contains the addition of a date: “day 16”, which is a valuable indication that the text was part of the training of an apprentice scribe at Amarna.\(^{65}\)

A single *Kemyt* ostracon, containing section VIII, has been found at Saqqâra outside the tomb of Horemheb.\(^{66}\) It has been dated to the 19th dynasty. In the neighbouring tomb of Ptahemwia at Saqqâra, discovered by the Leiden mission in 2007, a graffito was written in red ink on the southern wall of the entrance to the northern chapel by an inexperienced scribe, which contains the first line of *Kemyt*.\(^{67}\) Even more recently, two similar graffiti of the first line of *Kemyt* have been found at Assiut, among a series of literary graffiti on the walls of tomb N13.1 of the nomarch Iti-ibi(-iqer) of the 11th dynasty. The graffiti in this tomb are all of New Kingdom date, from the 18th as well as 19th dynasty.\(^{68}\)

A single ostracon with *Kemyt* is known from outside Egypt, found in 1930 at Kuban in Lower Nubia.\(^{69}\) It contains parts of the sections III and IV. The fortress of Kuban had been reoccupied in Ramesside times, and Černý dated the ostracon to that period.

The Amheida find now adds a further locality where *Kemyt* was being used in the scribal training. The ostracon was found among the remains of the later temple of Thoth. Even though there is no evidence as yet for a New Kingdom temple at this same location, as mentioned above, it is conceivable that the *Kemyt* was practiced around a temple building. Some schools are known to have been located within a temple enclosure. The temple of Mut at Karnak is

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68. U. Verhoeven, *ZÄS* 136, 2009, p. 97. I thank Ursula Verhoeven for providing me with additional information about this important find.
69. W.B. Emery, L.P. Kirwan, *The Excavations and Survey between Wadi es-Sebua and Adiuban 1929-1931*, Cairo, 1935, p. 529, pl. 58.1. No photograph is given, but only a facsimile. The ostracon was found in “the rubbish in the later fort ditch.”
known from inscriptions to have had a scribal school,\textsuperscript{70} and the school at the Ramesseum has been attested archaeologically, even yielding copies of \textit{Kemyt}.\textsuperscript{71}

The addition of the date on the Amheida ostracon indicates that it had been written as part of the curriculum. It provides additional proof of uniformity in the training of officials in Egypt, which was already in evidence by the Memphite \textit{Late Egyptian Miscellanies} that were commonly used in the scribal training at Thebes.\textsuperscript{72} Apart from the \textit{Kemyt} found at Kuban in Nubia, two ostraca with \textit{The Teaching of Amenemhat} from the 19th dynasty have been found at Amara West (Lower Nubia), which confirms that the same country-wide syllabus was in use also there.\textsuperscript{73} We conclude that the teaching of \textit{Kemyt} was practiced throughout the country even as far as Nubia and the schools in the oases of the Western Desert.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{70} According to the biography of Bak-enkhons: KRIIII, p. 295-299; translated in E. Frood, \textit{Biographical Texts from Ramesseid Egypt, Writings from the Ancient World} 26, 2007, p. 43 sq.


\textsuperscript{72} A.G. McDowell, in \textit{Tribute to Janssen}, \textit{op. cit.}, 2000, p. 230.


\textsuperscript{74} A much later example of a Greek literary text used in teaching at Amheida may be cited from late antique times, see R. Cribiore, P. Davoli, D.M. Ratzan, “A teacher’s dipinto from Trimithis (Dakhleh Oasis)”, \textit{JRA} 21, 2008, p. 170-191.