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BIFAO 112 (2013), p. 139-146

Mohamed Gaber Elmaghrabi

Two Letters Exchanged between the Roman Forts of Dios and Xeron (Eastern Desert of Egypt) concerning a mulokopion.

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Two Letters Exchanged between the Roman Forts of Dios and Xeron (Eastern Desert of Egypt) concerning a *mulokopion*

MOHAMED GABER ELMAGHRABI

The two ostraca published here were found during the excavations conducted at the two Roman *praesidia* of Dios and of Xeron Pelagos in the Eastern Desert (fig. 1).[1] The first was found in 2007, the second in January 2012.[2] Both come from the rubbish deposits in front of the gates of the forts.[3]

These two ostraca are of particular interest as it is the first time to have a letter and the answer to it, each of them found in its intended destination. There is however another example from Didymoi, but the letter and the answer were both found in the same place and the answer was perhaps a draft or an original that was never sent.[4]

The first letter, found at Dios, was written on the 24th of Mesore and sent by Longinus at Xeron to Niger at Dios asking him to send him a *mulokopion* (for a discussion about the definition of *mulokopion*, see *infra*). The answer was written by Niger only after three days. It is possible that Longinus wrote his letter on the 24th at night, the horseman left with it on the morning of the 25th, arrived the same day at Dios, gave a day of rest to his horse[5] on the 26th, and left on the 27th, on which day Niger wrote his answer.

1 The excavations are funded by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ifao in Cairo, and are directed by Hélène Cuvigny to whom I am very grateful for allowing me to publish these two ostraca. I am grateful to Hélène Cuvigny for looking through an earlier version of this paper and to Adam Bülow-Jacobsen for correcting the English.

2 See map (fig. 1). Dios and Xeron are successive praesidia on the Berenike Road (Bi'r Bayza should not be taken into account, because Dios was built in 114/115 to replace it). The distance between Dios and Xeron is about 60 kms.

3 The stratigraphical analyses of the two deposits are not completed yet. Therefore, no date more precise than 2nd cent. AD can be offered.

4 A. Bülow-Jacobsen, "Drinking and Cheating in the Desert," in Tr. Gagos, R.S. Bagnall (eds.), *Essays and Texts in Honor of J.D. Thomas*, *ASP* 42 , 2001, p. 119-123 (now = *O.Did.* 342-343).

5 Couyat, who travelled on the Koptos-Berenike road, counted 37 kms between Dios ("Abou-Graia") and Xeron ("Ports gréco-romains de la mer Rouge et grandes routes du désert Arabique", *CRAI,* 1910, p. 537). According to my own calculations on Google Earth, there are about 47 kms by going through the wadis. Perhaps it was better for the small horses of antiquity to get some rest between two journeys that long (explanation proposed by A. Bülow-Jacobsen).

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The identity of the correspondents and their position in the two *praesidia* cannot be established with certainty. We can only be sure that they are soldiers, since Longinus at least had a horse. It is not impossible that they are both *curatores* of their respective *praesidia*: in *O.Krok*. 14, the person responsible for such matters was the *curator praesidii*. No curator called Longinus or Niger is known in the documents found in Dios or Xeron, apart from a curator called Niger, who wrote a graffito in the chapel of Dios.[6]

1. Letter from Longinus to Niger [FIG. 2]

O. Dios inv. 636 14 × 12,5 cm II AD

The sherd is a fragment of AE3 amphora. Written in an inexperienced hand with many errors of spelling and grammar. The *formula valedicendi* has been forgotten.

Λογγῖνος Νίγερ
τῶ τιμιοτάτη χαίρειν.
ἐρωτηθὶς πέμψε μοι
μηλοκόπιν διὰ τοῦ ἱππέος
τοῦ φέροντός ⟨σ⟩ου τὸ ὄστρακον
καὶ εὐθέος ⟨σ⟩[ο]ι πέμψο αὐτὸ
μετὰ τ̣[ῆς ἐ]ρχο̣μ̣έ̣ν̣ες *vac.*
πρότ̣η̣ς.
ἀσπάζομε ἡμᾶς πάντες.
Μεσορὴ κδ.

1 l. Νίγερι ‖ **2** l. τῷ τιμιωτάτῳ ‖ **3** l. ἐρωτηθεὶς, l. πέμψον ‖ **4** l. μυλοκόπιον, l. ἱππέως ‖ **5** l. σοι ‖ **6** l. εὐθέως, l. πέμψω ‖ **7** l. ἐρχομένης ‖ **8** l. πρώτης ‖ **9** l. ἀσπάζομαι ὑμᾶς πάντας

Longinus to Niger, his most honoured, greetings. Could you please send me a mulokopion *through the horseman who is bringing this ostracon to you, and I will send it (back) to you at once with the (coming) first <shuttle?>. I greet you all. Mesore 24.*

3. For the use of ἐρωτηθείς see M. Leiwo, "Imperatives and Other Directives in the Greek Letters from the Mons Claudianus," in T.V. Evans, D. Obbink, *The Language of the Papyri*, Oxford, 2010, p. 97-119. Although the expected form of the verb after the participle ἐρωτηθείς is the imperative πέμψον, Longinus erroneously used the aorist infinitive (πέμψε, l. πέμψαι) as if he used ἐρωτῶ σε. Another example of grammatical error after

6 H. Cuvigny, "The Shrine in the *praesidium* of Dios (Eastern Desert of Egypt): Graffiti and Oracles in Context", *Chiron* 40, 2010, p. 255, no. 11.

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ἐρωτηθείς is found in *O.Krok.* I 72 where the writer used the future indicative πέμψεις which is also frequently used after ἐρωτῶ σε.

6. There appears a vertical stroke just after the break. The only possibility that I can think of and fit the meaning is to read [σο]ι, but it is difficult to accommodate two letters in the lacuna. Therefore there must be a haplography as in line 5.

8. The expected noun after ἐρχομένης has not been written. According to similar context the expected feminine noun is πορείας "caravan of supplies" or προβολῆς, the meaning of which is not clear: it could be the local shuttle between two neighbouring forts. The phrases μετὰ τῆς πορείας or μετὰ τῆς προβολῆς are well attested in the Eastern Desert. Reading προβολῆς is tempting because of πρ, but does not seem possible because it would be too long. Therefore I would rather read πρ̣ό̣τ̣ης l. πρώτης, which has been added under ἐρχομένης as if to correct or to precise it, and then the scribe forgot to write the noun for which he had left the space after ἐρχομένης. There is one instance where πρώτης πορείας is used in a mutilated context (O.Dios inv. 883); πρῶτος and ἐρχόμενος are found together in the same type of context in O.Xer. inv. 754: καλῶς οὖν ποιή{ι}σις δοὺ⟨ς⟩ αὐτὸ τῷ πρώτῳ ἐρχομένῳ μετὰ ἐπιστολῆς. For a full discussion about the transportation on the Berenike road see H. Cuvigny (ed.), *Didymoi*, II, *FIFAO* 67, 2012, p. 6 ff. and especially p. 10-15 for the *poreia* and the *probole*.

2. Answer from Niger to Longinus [FIG. 3]

O. Xer. inv. 858 15,5 × 16 cm II AD

Written on the neck of brownish Egyptian amphora AE3. Niger was a better writer than his colleague Longinus, with a practiced hand. Noteworthy is the formatting of the text especially the last three lines which contain the *formula valedicendi* and the date, and are justified to the center.

Νίγερ Λονγίνῳ τῳ τιμιωτάτῳ
χαίρειν.
ἐκομισάμην σου ἐπιστόλειον
δι' οὗ μοι γράφεις πέμψαι σοι μυλοκό̣π(ιον).
ε̣ἶδεν Ἡφαιστᾶς ὅτει ἄχρηστον ἦν
καὶ δι{α}επέμψαμε̣ν αὐτὸ ἰς Κόπτον
ὥστε γενέσθαι διὰ Ἡρκλειανοῦ · ἐὰν ἐ̣γεκ-
χθῇ, εὐθέως σοι ἀποπέμψω.
ἄσπασαι τοὺς φιλοῦντές σε πάντες.
ἐρρῶσθαί σε εὔχομ(αι)
σὺν τῷ̣ ἀβασκάντῳ
ἵππῳ σου. Μεσορ(ὴ) κζ.

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3 l. ἐπιστόλιον ‖ 4 μυλοκο$^{\pi}$ ostr., l. μυλοκόπ(ιον) ‖ 5 l. ὅτι ‖ 6 l. διεπέμψαμεν, l. εἰς ‖ 7 l. Ἡρακλιανοῦ ‖ 7-8 l. ἐνεχθῇ ‖ 9 l. φιλοῦντας ‖ 10 ευχο$^{\mu}$ ostr.

Niger to Longinus, his most honoured, greetings. I received your letter in which you wrote to me to send you a mulokopion. *Hephaistas saw that it was out of order and we have sent it off with Heraklianos to Coptos in order to be repaired. When it is brought back I will immediately send it to you. I greet all those who love you. I pray for your health and that of your horse, may it be safe from the evil eye. Mesore 27.*

4. The reading μυλο- is paleographically ambiguous and could be read μελο- as well. See *infra*.
5. ε̣ἶδεν. Spontaneously one reads οἶδεν, which is not satisfactory for the meaning, unless we suppose that the writer did not know the pluperfect (with the meaning of an imperfect) of οἶδα, when he should have written ᾔδει(ν): "Hephaistas knew that it was out of order and we have sent it…". But, if we examine the ductus of the letter closely, we observe that it could suit a *epsilon*, which is closed on itself. The hypothesis of an *epsilon* is strengthened by the presence of another ambiguous *epsilon* with the same shape at the following line (the last ε of διεπέμψαμεν). When Niger asked Hephaistas to take the *mulokopion* in order to send it to Longinus, Hephaistas noticed that it was not useable and they decided to send it to Koptos to have it repaired.
7. For γίγνομαι = 'repair' see *O.Krok*. 14, 8n. Although the word-order suggests that Heraklianos is the smith who will repair the *mulokopion*, I rather prefer to take διά as a repeated preposition of the compound verb διεπέμψαμεν in the preceding line, to mean, as an afterthought, that Heraklianos is the courier who took it to Koptos. This usage of διά after διαπέμπω is attested for example in *BGU* I 93, 19-21: διαπέμψεις αὐτὴν διὰ | τῆς μητρός μου ἢ το[ῦ ἀδελ]φοῦ αὐ|τῆς ἢ τῆς μητρὸς ἢ ὡς θέλεις. It happens quite often in private letters that ἐάν means "when", not "if". About this phenomenon see H. Cuvigny, "*Quand Hèroïs aura accouché…* ἐάν = ὅταν dans l'expression de l'éventuel", *BIFAO* 112, 2012, p. 97-99.
9-10. Horses are often mentioned in the *formula valetudinis* (see J.-L. Fournet, in H. Cuvigny (ed.), *La Route de Myos Hormos*, vol. II, *FIFAO* 48, 2006, p. 482 and n. 7). It is less frequent in the *formula valedicendi* (*O.Claud.* I 165; M150; M1318). In *O.Florida* 15 the horse is mentioned in both formulas. One cannot avoid thinking that Niger wanted to make a show of his epistolary skill, when the clumsy Longinus had forgotten the *formula valedicendi*.

What is a *mulokopion*?

In O.Dios inv. 636 the scribe wrote μηλοκόπιν, and in O.Xer. inv. 858 the word could also be read μελοκοπ- which would suggest the reading of a word of the family μελ-. There exist a word μελοκόπος, which is only attested in the *glossatores* (*CGL* II 23, 39.), translated into Latin *articulator*: a tool which is used to dismember (one could imagine that Longinus had a dead camel to cut up and needed a special tool for that).

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If we give up the idea of an *articulator*, we come back to a word of the family of μύλος. μυλ- is confused with μηλ- in the λίθων μηλοκοπικῶν, l. μυλοκοπικῶν, in *PSI* III 237, hence the tentative translation in LSJ: "for pulping fruit (unless μυλοκοπικός is meant)". The word μυλοκόπιον is attested only once, in a scholia to Oppian's *Halieutica*, as the name of a fish, being a diminutive of μυλοκόπος = μύλλος. In the present case it is the diminutive of τὸ μυλοκόπον which is attested in the *glossatores* where it is translated *acisculus* = adze[7], and *marculus* (small hammer); *CGL* III 23, 23 has the equivalence μυλωκοπον *acisclum*. While μυλοκόπον is rare, the related trade-name μυλοκόπος is well attested in the papyri and it means a stone-cutter specialized in making and repairing millstones (contrary to what is sometimes written, for instance in the *WB* or in *P.Kellis* IV 96, ad 776, it does not mean a miller).

The equivalent *acisculus* reminds at once of *O.Krok.* 14, where the curator Capito writes to the prefect of the desert (who resides in Koptos) that he sends him a horseman with a broken iron object, the name of which was read by the editor: ὁ ἀκίσκ[λ]ο[ς] τ̣ο̣ῦ̣ μ̣ύ̣λ̣ο̣υ τὸ σιδήρειν, but John Rea (*per litt.*) proposed to read rather: ὁ ἀκίσκ[λ]ο[ς ἥ]τ̣ο̣ι μ̣ύ̣λ̣ο̣υ τὸ σιδήρειν, a reading which is possible and which fits the syntax better ("the *acisculus,* that is the iron part of the mill"). The only iron part of a rotative mill is the axis, but David Peacock suggests that the mill mentioned by Capito could be of the Olynthian type, which was in use as well in the *praesidia* of the Eastern Desert.[8] Whatever the type of mill, it is strange that the iron piece is called *acisculus* in *O.Krok.* 14, which normally means a stone-mason's tool. However, it is certain that this broken iron object is a part of the mill since Capito also asks for lead to solder it into the mill.

But this meaning is not applicable in the present case: the *mulokopion* cannot be a part of a mill since Longinus promises to send it back at once. In that case, the meaning "iron tool to repair a mill", which in any case fits better the etymology, is suitable. It is possible that Longinus wanted a tool to redo the beams of the millstone, as is the case in *O.Claud.* II 287 and 288 where not only the tool but also the stone-mason (σκληρουργός) is wanted. Adam Bülow-Jacobsen, whom I have consulted, remarks: "The stone-mason's point that was used for dressing mill-stones must have been fitted with a steel-core or tip called *stomoma* like all tools that were used on hard stone.[9] The tool was sharpened in an ordinary small forge or even, when no forge was available, on a whetstone, but when the *stomoma* was worn away the tool had to undergo *stomosis*, fitting of a new tip. For this operation one needed a forge capable of welding-temperatures (white-hot steel) as in the *stomoterion* at Mons Claudianus, which was surely not available in the small desert forts. The stone-mason's point which probably served no other purpose in the fort than occasionally dressing the mill-stones would thus have to be sent away for *stomosis* from time to time, and this was apparently done in Koptos". According to A. Bülow-Jacobsen, a μυλοκόπιον is thus a tool, probably a stone-mason's point, but possibly an *acisculus*, used for dressing mill-stones.

7 For the meaning of *acisculus*, ἀκίσκλος see A. Bülow-Jacobsen, *Mons Claudianus Ostraca Graeca et Latina IV. The Quarry Texts, DFIFAO* 47, 2009, p. 251.

8 "If operated in oscillatory mode it would have rod, a pivot and a fitting to attach it to the stone – iron set in lead" (*per litt.*, 7/05/2012).

9 For a more detailed description of *stomoma,* see A. Bülow-Jacobsen, *op. cit.*, p. 257-259.

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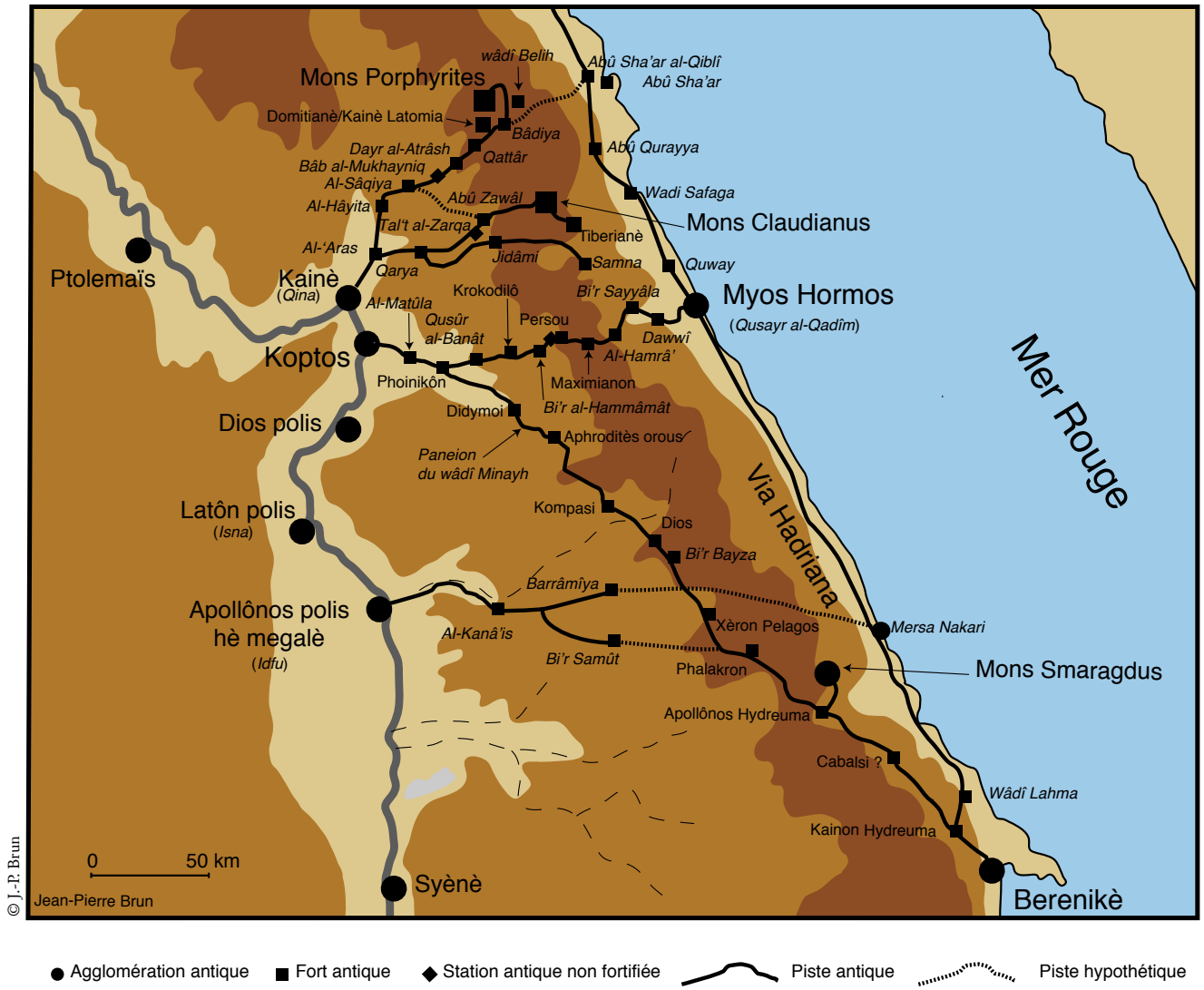
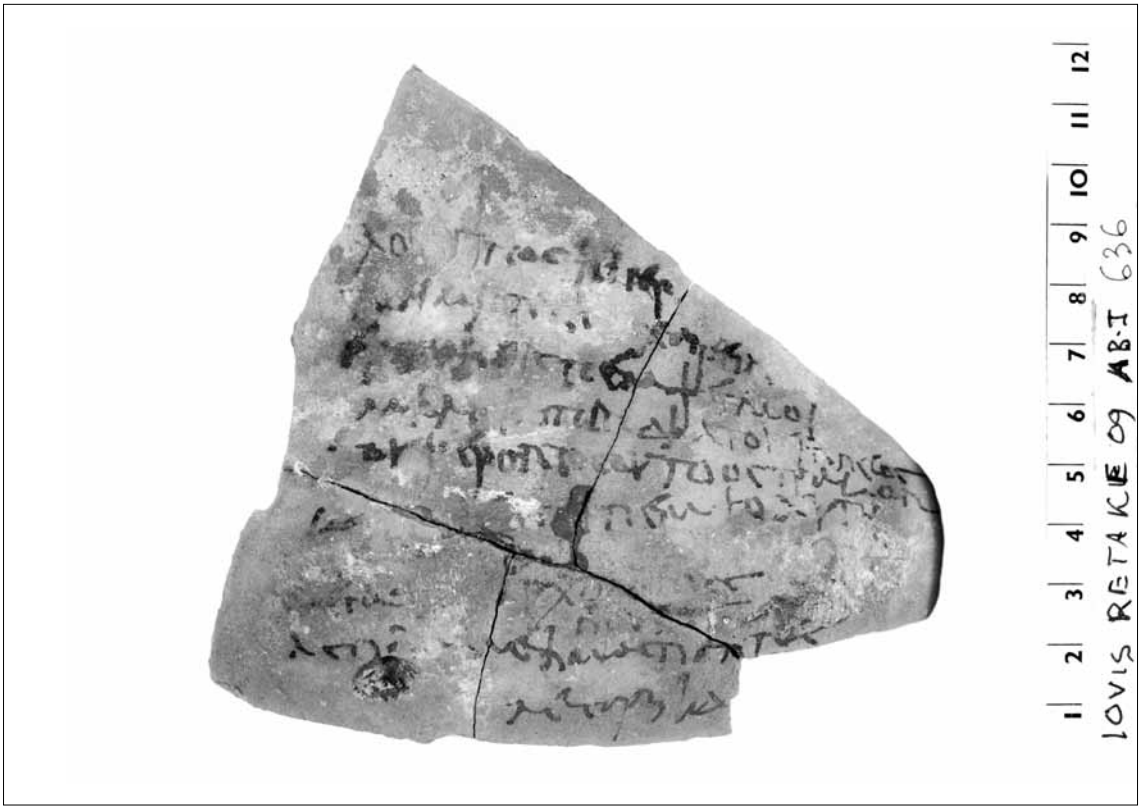


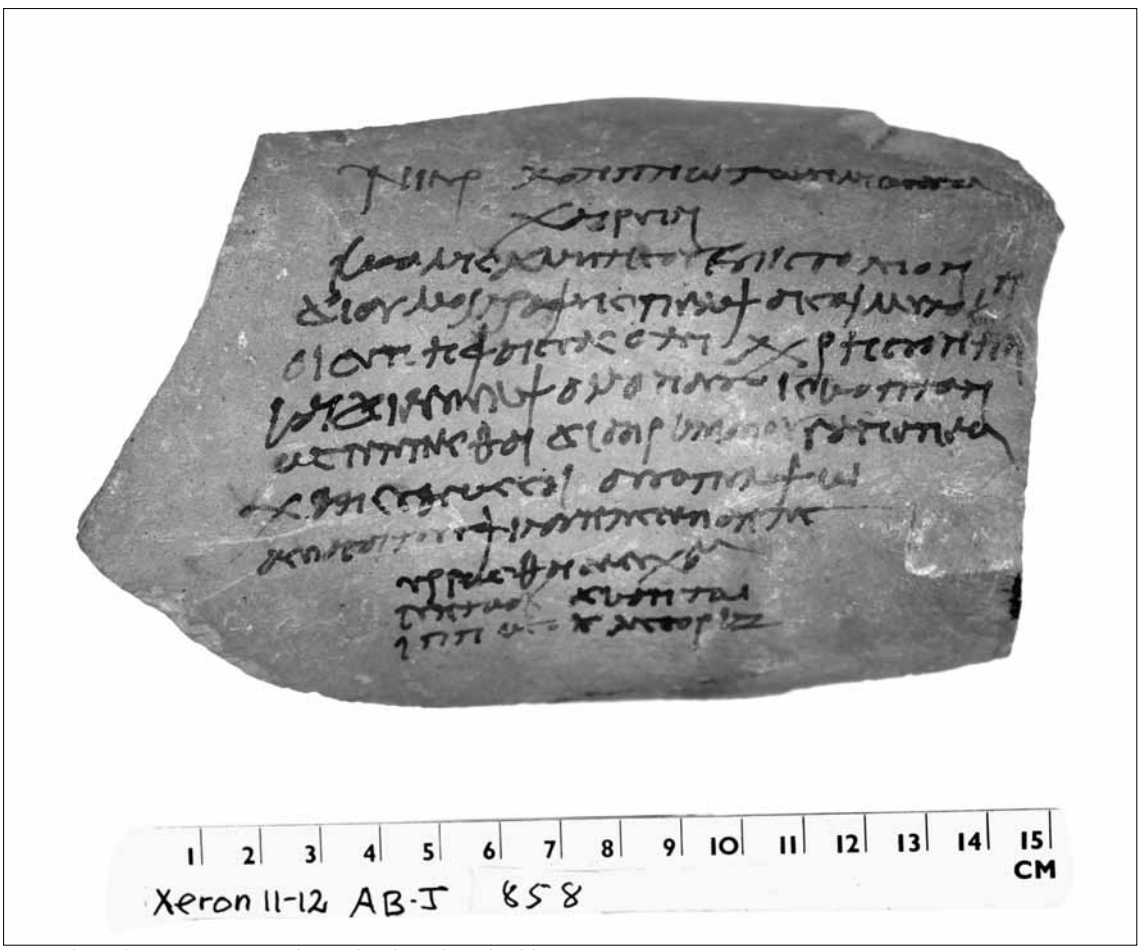
FIG. 1. Roman roads and praesidia of the Eastern Desert.

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FIG. 2. Ostracon 1: Letter from Longinus to Niger.



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FIG. 3. Ostracon 2: Answer from Niger to Longinus.

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