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'Hi Ahutab' Ostraca from Elephantine with Letters in Aramaic (5th c. BCE and beyond)

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Hi Aḥuṭab: Aramaic Letter Ostraca from Elephantine

1 Introduction

This contribution is devoted to the Aramaic letter ostraca from Elephantine.¹ These letters form part of a larger body of Aramaic ostraca from the Achaemenid period (ca. 550–330 BCE) which derive primarily from Elephantine and southern Palestine.² Elephantine, an island on the Nile located on ancient Egypt's southern border and opposite modern-day Assuan, is well-known for its colony of Judean mercenaries.³ These mercenaries left behind an impressive body of written documents, datable for the most part to the fifth century BCE. The most famous of these are the Aramaic papyri which refer to a temple on the island dedicated to their God YHW.⁴ In other legal documents on papyrus, contract partners with Yahwistic names are usually specified with the ethnicon “Judean” (Aram. *yhwdy*), though “Aramean” (Aram. *'rmy*) also occurs. It seems, at least in some cases, that the term “Aramean” in these papyri refers to the language used by the person mentioned, especially where individuals

1 Aramaic was the lingua franca of the Achaemenid period and an important administrative language. It was used for all kinds of written communications, while potsherds were used for both brief messages and administrative purposes (mostly name-lists and accounts). Its rise as an important language of communication and administration began in the 8th century BCE under the Neo-Assyrian administration. After the fall of the Assyrian empire and the accession of Nebuchadnezzar it continued to be used by the Neo-Babylonian administration. The Achaemenids in turn continued to use the administrative languages used in the Neo-Babylonian empire, i. e. Aramaic, Akkadian, and Elamite. On this, see Folmer 2011.

2 A large number of illegally retrieved ostraca from southern Palestine (Idumea) have flooded the market in recent decennia. They are currently being published by Bezalel Porten and the late Ada Yardeni (Porten/Yardeni 2014; 2016; 2018; a fourth volume is in preparation; Yardeni 2016; these volumes should be consulted for references to previous scholarship on these texts). Most of the ostraca from Idumea are administrative in content.

3 In the Aramaic texts, Elephantine is referred to as *yḥ* and Assuan as *swn*. The name Elephantine reflects the Greek translation of the name *yḥ* (which in turn reflects the ancient Egyptian name of the island). The name Assuan reflects the ancient Egyptian, Aramaic, and Greek forms of the name. In this contribution, I will use the conventional names Elephantine and Syene, which both arose in the Hellenistic period.

4 The divine name is generally spelled YHH in the ostraca (cf. YHWH in the Hebrew Bible). The spelling YHH is otherwise found only twice in legal documents from Elephantine (*TAD* B2.7:14 and 3.3:2).

Abbreviations used in this article: Aram. = Aramaic; Cl.-G. = Clermont-Ganneau; f. = feminine; Hebr. = Hebrew; m. = masculine; pl. = plural; PN = personal name; sg. = singular; *TAD* A = Porten/Yardeni 1986; *TAD* B = Porten/Yardeni 1989; *TAD* D = Porten/Yardeni 1999.

are identified on one occasion as “Judean” and on another as “Aramean”.⁵ Nevertheless, ethnic and religious affiliations at Elephantine/Syene are notoriously difficult to determine on the basis of the evidence in the Aramaic papyri.

The ostraca from Elephantine that were found at the beginning of the twentieth century are not as well-known as the papyri. A century after their discovery, their publication was finally completed with the appearance of H  l  ne Lozachmeur’s edition of the Collection Clermont-Ganneau.⁶ The reading of these ostraca is very difficult, as most are broken and the ink with which they were written has often faded away. Furthermore, the precise archaeological context of the ostraca is not known, as their findspots were not properly documented by the excavators.

Most of the ostraca from Elephantine are letter ostraca. They are examples of short-distance, intercommunal communications between the population on the island and the population on the mainland. Like the Aramaic papyri, they make it clear that the Judeans living on the island had family members and acquaintances on the mainland. They also shed important light on the daily life of the Judean community on the island, as well as their interactions with their neighbors on the mainland. (Ferry boats made travel between the island and the mainland possible, as well as the quick exchange of goods and messages.) However, they have not attracted the attention they deserve; only a few scholars have dealt specifically with the ostraca, while their focus has largely comprised the letter formulae and the religious aspects of these ostraca. Substantial contributions to the discussion (subsequent to Lozachmeur’s publication) are the contributions by Andr   Lemaire and Dirk Schwiderski.⁷

5 E. g. Maḥseyah son of Yedaniah, who has a typical Yahwistic name (with the ending *-yh*). In *TAD* B2.6:2 and 2.7:2, a document concerning his property at Elephantine, he is referred to as “an Aramean of Syene” (Aram. *’rmy zyswn*). In *TAD* B2.2:3 and *TAD* B2.4:2, he is referred to as “a Judean” and associated with Elephantine (*TAD* B2.4:2 “a Judean of Elephantine” [Aram. *yhwdy zy yb*]; *TAD* B2.2:3 “a Judean who is in the fortress of Elephantine” [Aram. *yhwdy zy bbyrt yb*]; *TAD* B2.3:2 “a Judean, holding hereditary property at Elephantine” [Aram. *yhwdy mhḥsn byb byrt*]). For other examples, see Porten 2011, 155, n. 4. In addition, an Aramean community existed in Syene on the mainland. This community appears most clearly in the Hermopolis papyri (named after their findspot at Hermopolis Magna). These private letters are addressed in part to persons living in Syene (*TAD* A2.1–2.4). The names of the persons addressed in these letters are clearly Aramean/Babylonian, while the temples mentioned in the letters are dedicated to Aramean/Babylonian deities: Nabu, the Queen of Heaven (Aram. *mlkt ṣmyn*), Bethel and Banit.

6 Lozachmeur 2006.

7 Lemaire 2011; Schwiderski 2000, 2013.

2 Elephantine Papyri and Ostraca: Short History of their Discovery

Incidental Aramaic finds from Egypt have been known to us since the early eighteenth century, while Elephantine emerged as a findspot for Aramaic papyri at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The earliest of the Aramaic finds known to us is the so-called “Carpentras stele”, a funerary inscription of unknown provenance. Giovan Battista Belzoni was the first to acquire Aramaic papyri during his travels in Egypt between 1815–1819. These letters were published by Edda Bresciani in 1960.⁸ In 1893, Charles Edwin Wilbour acquired the Ananyah archive, which was published by Emil Kraeling six decades later.⁹ The acquisition of this archive was followed by the acquisition of the Mibṭaḥyah archive in 1904 by Lady William Cecil and Sir Robert Mond. This archive was promptly published by Archibald Sayce and Arthur Cowley, in addition to several ostraca.¹⁰

The content of these documents, which mention a temple at Elephantine devoted to YHW among other things, provided a strong incentive for German and French excavations at Elephantine at the beginning of the twentieth century. The excavations by the French excavators in particular were motivated by their ambition to find the remains of the Judean temple as well as new Aramaic papyri.

The different sectors allotted to the German and French excavators yielded different textual materials.¹¹ The first German excavation was led by Otto Rubensohn in 1906–1907; this was followed by an excavation led by Friedrich Zucker and Walter Honroth in 1907–1908.¹² During these excavations, several major papyrus finds were made, including the Yedanyah archive, the Aramaic version of the Bisitun inscription by Darius the Great, and the Aḥiqar text. Numerous legal documents, lists, and accounts on papyrus were also found, as well as a handful of ostraca, all rapidly published by Eduard Sachau.¹³

The French excavations were led by Charles Clermont-Ganneau (1906–1911).¹⁴ Instead of papyri, the French excavators found hundreds of ostraca. Most of the Aramaic ostraca known to us were found or acquired during these four campaigns. The

8 Bresciani 1960.

9 Kraeling 1953.

10 Sayce/Cowley 1906.

11 The German excavators received a concession for the south-west area and the French for the south-east area of the antique town located in the southern part of the island.

12 See Honroth/Rubensohn/Zucker 1909–1910; see also Müller 1980.

13 Sachau 1911. In the following, personal names from Elephantine are transliterated according to Porten/Lund 2002.

14 First season in 1906–1907; second season in 1907–1908. Successive French excavations were led from a distance by Clermont-Ganneau; the task of daily supervision was undertaken by Joseph-Étienne Gautier (third season in 1908–1909) and Jean Clédât (fourth season in 1910–1911).

ostraca were brought to the Musée du Louvre in Paris and are known as the Collection Clermont-Ganneau. This collection consists of administrative texts and short messages, mostly incomplete and/or written on broken ostraca, a factor which may have contributed to the slow publication of these texts.

As no published reports of the French excavations exist, scholars are entirely dependent on the succinct descriptions and sketches/plans that accompany these finds in five of Clermont-Ganneau's notebooks. It is clear from the notes and sketches that the ostraca were found in the Judean quarter located in the north-east of the excavated antique town. References to their findspots are usually vague ("quartier [araméen]", "extrême nord", "nord", "nord E", "région E", "contre limite allemande" [the area where the dividing line between the French and German excavations ran], "au fond de la longue ruelle SN", "au sud de la grande rue", "la grande rue OE", "place"). Only in rare cases is a slightly more specific findspot given, such as "petit silo, a moitié détruit, au centre de l'éperon", "dans l'éperon" (Cl. G. nos. 28–44).¹⁵ However, we do know which ostraca were found in the same environment, as the ostraca are numbered in the order in which they were found.

Initially, only a few of the better preserved and more interesting letter ostraca discovered by the French were published, at first by André Dupont-Sommer (Cl.-G. nos. 16, 44, 70, 152, 169, 186, 277), and later on by his pupil, Lozachmeur (Cl.-G. nos. 125, 228).¹⁶ Most of the ostraca remained unpublished until Lozachmeur's publication of the entire collection in 2006. A relatively small number of ostraca were also found or acquired by persons without a connection to the French excavations. These ended up in several museum collections in Europe (Berlin, Munich, Cambridge, London, Oxford, Vienna) and in Egypt (Cairo). These ostraca were published over the years in several periodicals.¹⁷ In the late 1990s, these ostraca were brought together and reread by Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni in their fourth and final volume of *The Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt (TAD D7.1–54¹⁸)*. Porten and Yardeni also included seven previously unpublished letter ostraca,¹⁹ while the section *TAD D7* also includes nine letter ostraca from the Collection Clermont-Ganneau that had already been published by Dupont-Sommer and Lozachmeur.²⁰ In recent years, additional ostraca have been discovered during excavations under the auspices of the joint mission of the *Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Kairo* and the *Schweizerisches*

¹⁵ See Lozachmeur 2006, vol. 1, 76, and vol. 2 (plate 28–76).

¹⁶ For bibliographic references, see *TAD D*, XXIX–XXX.

¹⁷ For the *editio princeps* of these ostraca, see the bibliographic references in *TAD D*, XXIX–XXX.

¹⁸ *TAD D7.55–57* are from the Hellenistic period (probably from Edfu).

¹⁹ *TAD D7.27, 7.28, 7.34, 7.47, 7.48, 7.50* (Berlin) and *TAD D7.42* (Oxford Bodleian no. 6).

²⁰ Dupont-Sommer: Cl.-G. no. 16 (= *TAD D7.7*), Cl.-G. no. 44 (= *TAD D7.10*), Cl.-G. no. 70 (= *TAD D7.21*), Cl.-G. no. 152 (= *TAD D7.16*), Cl.-G. no. 169 (= *TAD D7.2*), Cl.-G. no. 186 (= *TAD D7.35*), Cl.-G. no. 277 (= *TAD D7.30*); Lozachmeur: Cl.-G. no. 125 (= *TAD D7.44*), Cl.-G. no. 228 (= *TAD D7.5*). For bibliographic details, see *TAD D*, XXIX–XXX.

Institut für Ägyptische Bauforschung und Altertumskunde in Kairo. These ostraca will be published in the near future by Porten and Lemaire.

The publication by Lozachmeur contains 259 letter ostraca from fifth century Elephantine.²¹ To this number should be added the 45 letter ostraca in *TAD D* that do not belong to the Clermont-Ganneau collection.²² This adds up to a total of 304 letter ostraca from Elephantine; as has been mentioned already, however, most of these are incomplete. There are only ten letter ostraca that are incontrovertibly complete (Cl.-G. nos. 16, 70, 169, 239, *TAD D*7.6, 7.8, 7.9, 7.17, 7.20, 7.29). To these ten ostraca, three additional items should probably be added (Cl.-G. nos. 42, 152, 223).²³ Most of these complete pieces were published prior to the edition of the Collection Clermont-Ganneau in 2006.²⁴

3 The Letter Ostraca: General Information

Many individual names in the letter ostraca also appear in the papyri, but it is generally not possible to link these names across the two corpora.²⁵ This is mostly because the patronymic—which occurs frequently in the papyri—is rarely mentioned in the ostraca. The ostraca are also not dated, whereas our main source of personal names—legal documents from Elephantine—are dated. As a result, names that occur in the ostraca may in theory refer to several individuals in the papyri. Sometimes a name that appears frequently in the letter ostraca is not mentioned in the papyri at all. One such case is that of Aḥuṭab, a woman who emerges in the letter ostraca as an active individual within the Elephantine community; the fact that she does not appear in the papyri may be entirely incidental.

The letter ostraca were sent from Elephantine to Syene on the eastern bank of the Nile, and from Syene to Elephantine. Both Elephantine (*yb*) and Syene (*swn*) are mentioned frequently in the ostraca (ex. nos. 1–4). The ostraca were sent by ferry boats. These ferry boats, which transported both persons and goods, are also mentioned regularly in the ostraca (Aram. *ʾlp* “ferry”) (ex. nos. 4–5). Below are some examples:

²¹ From a total number of 280 ostraca in the main collection.

²² From 54 letter ostraca in *TAD D*7.1–54.

²³ Cl.-G. no. 277—neatly inscribed on a rectangular fragment of the rim of a cooking-pot—is a complete ostrakon, but it differs from the other pieces in that it probably represents a scribal exercise or draft. It includes an address and the beginning of a wish for well-being: “To my brother Ḥaggai, your brother Jarḥu. The welfare of my brother Bel and Nabu, Shamash and Ner_{gal}” (Aram. *ʾl ʾhy ḥgy ʾḥwk yrḥw šlm ʾhy bl wnbw šmš wnr_{gal}*). Here the text breaks off, even though there is space left for more writing. Both the type of address and the wish are unusual for letter ostraca from Elephantine.

²⁴ With the exception of Cl.-G. nos. 42, 223, 239. It is unfortunate that there is no edition at present of the ostraca from Elephantine which includes all the ostraca that are known today.

²⁵ See Lozachmeur 2006, vol. 1, 463–493.



Fig. 1: Drawing of letter ostracon Cl.-G. no. 239 by H el ene Lozachmeur (taken from Lozachmeur 2006, vol. 2, plate 254).

- 1) TAD D7.4:2f. “Let not Nathan go to Syene” (Aram. *’l yšg’ ntn lswn*)
- 2) TAD D7.24:2f. “I will go to (lit. “enter”) Syene today” (Aram. *’l swn ym’ znh*)
- 3) TAD D7.1:5f. “Go, stand with him in Syene this day” (Aram. *’zly qwmy ’mh bswn ywm’ znh*)
- 4) TAD D 7.2:4f. “Buy from the boats of grain which are in Yeb” (Aram. *zbnw mn ’lpy ’bwr’ zy byb*)
- 5) TAD D7.16:2 “Meet the boat tomorrow on Sabbat” (Aram. *’rqy ’lp’ mħr bšbh*)

The messages were borne by messengers. Several letter ostraca refer to the fact that the documents were sent “by the hand (=through) of” (followed by a PN).²⁶ In one case, the sender specifically refers to his daughters as the message-bearers (ex. no. 6):

- 6) TAD D7.20 conv. l. 10f.²⁷ “Send me (a message) by the hand of my daughters” (Aram. *byd bnty šlh l[y]*)

Most of the letter ostraca consist of short messages that detail only essential information. At the beginning of the twentieth century they were compared to telegrams; at the start of our millennium, to SMS messages.²⁸ Today, they might best be compared

²⁶ In the expression “to send a message by the hand of PN” (Aram. *šlh byd PN*). The verb *šlh* “to send” is specifically used for the sending of messages. For the sending of goods another verb is normally used. See Folmer 1995, 657.

²⁷ Alternatively, the following reconstruction and interpretation is possible: “I have sent you (a message) by the hand of my daughters” / “Herewith, I send you (a message) by the hand of my daughters” (10. *byd bnty šlh[t] 11. l[k]*).

²⁸ See Lozachmeur 2006 vol. 1, 86.



Fig. 2: Drawing of letter ostraca TAD D7.8 by Ada Yardeni (taken from TAD D, 160).

to WhatsApp messages. Several of the ostraca are quite sizeable and include longer messages or even two different messages, such as the one cited below (TAD D7.8, ex. no. 7). This ostraca, like many other ostraca, bears writing on both concave and convex sides; usually, the scribe began on the concave and continued on the convex. The first of the two messages in TAD D7.8 is addressed to Uriyah, the second one to Aḥuṭab.²⁹ The second message starts on the convex in the middle of line 12 (ex. no. 7):

7) TAD D7.8 (Fig. 2):

	concave	
Hi Uriyah! Now:	1	<i>šlm 'wryh k'n</i>
look, your big ewe	2	<i>hlw t't' zy lk</i>
is ready ³⁰ for shearing.	3	<i>rbt' mṭ't lmgz</i>
Its first wool	4	<i>'mr' zylh qdm'</i>
is being torn away by the thorns. Now:	5	<i>mtmrṭ bkb' k'n</i>
come and shear it. On the day	6	<i>'th wgzh bywm</i>
you will wash it	7	<i>zy trḥ'nh</i>
you will shear it.	8	<i>tgznh</i>

²⁹ Aḥuṭab is one of the individuals most frequently addressed in the ostraca. She is addressed in at least nine letters (Cl.-G. nos. 78, 135, 157, 169 [see ex. no. 20], 202, 228; TAD D7.3, 7.4, 7.8 [second message; see ex. no. 7]) and is mentioned in at least thirteen other ostraca. She is also connected to all the other individuals frequently addressed in the ostraca (Yedanyah, Uriyah, Natan, Mikayah). Unfortunately, her name is found only in the ostraca; it does not figure in the Elephantine papyri. Another example of an ostraca with a double message is TAD D7.20. In this instance, the two sides of the ostraca are used for two distinct messages. The two messages have the same addressee, but the sender—mentioned in both cases by name—is different.

³⁰ Literally “has reached”.

		convex	
And if you do not go out	9		<i>whn l' tnpq</i>
today, send (a message)	10		<i>ywm' znh šlh</i>
to me, so that I can wash it before	11		<i>ly w'rḥ'h 'd</i>
you go out. Hi Aḥuṭab!	12		<i>tnpq šlm 'ḥṭb</i>
Now: on (i. e., from) this bread	13		<i>k'n 'l lḥm' znh</i>
we can eat until tomorrow	14		<i>n'kl 'd mḥr</i>
evening. One ardab of flour	15		<i>'rwbh ' qmḥ</i>
is left here.	16		<i>š'r tnh</i>

The smallest complete ostracon known to us is a small triangular fragment whose message consists of eight Aramaic words (ex. no. 8). The patronymic in the address here is exceptional (see the beginning of this section):

8) Cl.-G. no. 239 (see Fig. 1)

	concave	
Hi Mešu-	1	<i>šlm mš</i>
llam son of	2	<i>lm br</i>
Hošea'!	3	<i>hwš'</i>
Now:	4	<i>k'n</i>
	convex	
send	1	<i>hwšr</i>
me a ???-	2	<i>ly kry</i>
?	3	<i>š</i>

Usually the messages contain requests for (immediate) food supplies (often bread, flour, salt, or vegetables) or they deal with various practicalities (and include directives to take care of someone, to mistrust someone, to look (out) for someone, or to help someone). Notably absent are inquiries about people's welfare, as well as expression of emotions.

Adverbs of time such as “yesterday”, “today”, and “tomorrow” are frequent in the letter ostraca.³¹ They typically refer to a point in time close to the time of writing: the near future, the non-remote past, or the day of the message's delivery. Occasional references to the upcoming Sabbath—as in ex. no. 19 below—or Passover (*TAD D7.24:5*) also occur. These adverbs of time give the letters some sense of urgency and are an indicator of the message's ephemeral character. Some examples follow:

'tml, “yesterday” (ex. nos. 9–11):

9) *TAD D7.33:1f*. “Now: The child came to you yesterday because of a jar” *k'nt wld' 'l lk 'tml 'dbr sp' 1*

10) Cl.-G. no. 125:7–9 “Look, the bread that you sent to me yesterday is im[pure]” *h' lḥm' zy hwš[rt]m ly 'tml ṭ[m]*

11) *TAD D 7.47* “Now: I have eaten yesterday” *[k]'n 'klt 'tml*

³¹ Cf. also Lemaire 2011, 365, who uses these adverbs of time to adduce the letter ostraca as evidence of “everyday life”.

ywm' znh, “today” (ex. nos. 12–16):

- 12) TAD D7.48:2f. “Send me a little bread today” *hwšry ly z'yr lḥm' ywm' znh*
- 13) TAD D7.1:5–7 “Go, stand by him in Syene today” *'zly qwmy 'mh bswm ywm' znh*
- 14) Cl.-G. no. 169:1f. “Now: send me a little salt today” *k'n hwšry ly z'yr mlḥ ywm' znh*
- 15) TAD D7.3:4 “Go today” [*'z*]ly ywm' znh
- 16) TAD D7.8:9–12 “And if you do not go out today, send me a message” *whn l' tnpq ywm' znh šlḥ ly*

mḥr, “tomorrow” (ex. nos. 17–19):

- 17) TAD D7.8:13–15 “Now: on this bread we will eat until tomorrow evening” *k'n 'l lḥm' znh n'kl 'd mḥr 'rwbh*
- 18) Cl.-G. no. 152:1f. “Now: look, I will send vegetables tomorrow” *k'nt h' bql' 'wšr mḥr*
- 19) TAD D7.16:2 “Meet the boat tomorrow on Sabbat” *'rqy 'lp' mḥr bšbh*

4 Epistolary Characteristics of the Letter Ostraca

Exemplary of the brief nature of the letter ostraca is their compact epistolary style. The characteristics of most of the ostraca may be summed up as follows:

- “Greetings PN” / “Hi PN” (Aram. *šlm* + PN) form the predominant type of address;
- The wish of well-being is included in the address;
- The patronymic of the addressee is usually not mentioned;
- The sender is usually not mentioned;
- A closing formula is exceptional;
- Sometimes the messages lack an address and begin immediately with an imperative or with the transition marker “now then” (Aram. *k'n* / *k'nt*).³²

An example of a complete letter ostrakon that features many of the epistolary elements indicated above is Cl.-G. no. 169 (ex. no. 20):

20) Cl.-G. no. 169

	concave	
[Gr]reetings Aḥuṭab! Now, send	1	[š]lm 'ḥwṭb k'n hwšry
me a little salt today.	2	ly z'yr mlḥ ywm' znh
And if there isn't salt in the house	3	whn mlḥ l'yt bbyt'
buy it from the grain-boats	4	zbnw mn 'lpy 'bwr'
which are in Elephantine. Look,	5	zy byb ḥlw
I don't have	6	l'yty ly
	convex	
any salt to put in the flour.	7	mlḥ lmšm bqmḥ /

³² The transition marker immediately follows the address.

This ostrakon adheres to most of the yardsticks mentioned above: it includes the address *šlm* PN; it does not identify the addressee (Aḥuṭab) by her father's name; the sender's name is absent; and there is no closing formula. There are exceptions to these generalizations amongst the ostraca, the most noteworthy of which are listed in table 1, but they are relatively few in number. Many of these exceptions seem to have been introduced in the ostraca from the epistolary conventions in private letters on papyrus.³³

In several isolated cases, the message begins right off with the transition marker, but these examples are few (*TAD* D7.9 and *TAD* D7.24). The reason for this may be the loss of the original address. In other cases, it is clear that the letter simply begins with the transition marker. Thus, *TAD* D7.9 seems to be a complete ostrakon: all its available space was used up by the scribe, while supra-linear additions were made at the end of the line because the scribe ran out of space. The address was plainly omitted from this letter ostrakon, as pl. 2m. and sg. 2f. verb forms and pronouns are used to refer to the addressee(s). The person who delivered the messages probably indicated for whom the message was intended orally. The text on the concave side of *TAD* D7.9 reads as follows (ex. no. 21):³⁴

21) *TAD* D7.9

	concave	
Now: look (pl. 2m.), the gift (?) which Uriyah gave me for the libation,	1	<i>k'nt ḥzw ḥnt' zy yhb ly 'wryh lnsk'</i>
give (sg. 2f.) it to Gemaryah the son of Aḥio,	2	<i>hbyh lgmryh br 'ḥyw wy'rkh mn</i>
in order that he will prepare it from the beer.	3	<i>škr' wblwh l'wry' 'p pḥzy tṭwsry</i>
And carry (pl. 2m.) it to Uriyah. Moreover,		
look (sg. 2f.), our Tetosiri,	4	<i>zyln yktbwh 'l dr'h 'l mn ktbt'</i>
they should inscribe her on her arm, above the inscription		
which is on her arm. Look, thus he has/it was sent:	5	<i>zy 'l dr'h hlw kn šlh l'mr zy</i>
“they do not find the slave	6	<i>l' yškḥn 'lymth</i>
inscribed in	7	<i>mktbh 'l</i>
his name”	8	<i>šmh</i>

33 A clear case is Cl.-G. no. 70. This is a very rare example of a letter ostrakon with a closing formula: “for your well-being I send the letter” (Aram. *lšlmk šlḥt spr'*). Traces of the same formula are found in another fragmentary ostrakon as well: *TAD* D7.48 “for your welfare I send [...]” (Aram. *lšlmkm šlḥt [...]*). Closing formulae like this are common in private letters on papyrus, though the extant examples conclude with “this letter” (Aram. *spr' znh*) (see below, section 5). The same is true for the address in Cl.-G. 70 (l. 1f. “to my lord Mikayah, your servant Gaddul” [Aram. *'l mry mykyh 'bdk gdl*]), which contains the names of the addressee and the sender, both preceded by a noun which indicates the relative social relation between the two correspondents. The wish of well-being that is found in this letter ostrakon is also unique for the letter ostraca but common in private letters on papyrus. (l. 2f. “Welfare and life I send you. I bless you by YHH and Khnum” [Aram. *šlm wḥyn šlḥt lk brktk lyhh wḥmwmm*]). The ostrakon appears to be complete.

34 Another example is *TAD* D7.24.

The text on the convex of this ostracon also begins with the transition marker. It probably marks the transition to a new topic within the same message (ex. no. 22):

22) “Now: ... and moreover, be careful” (sg. 2f.) *k’n ... w’p hzdhr̄y*

The following ostracon (ex. no. 23) begins with an order (imperative pl. 2m.). This ostracon is probably complete, as evidenced by the fact that all the available space has been used for writing.³⁵ Its first four lines read:³⁶

23) *TAD D7.7*

	concave	
Send me	1	<i>hwšrw ly</i>
two qabs of salt	2	<i>mlḥ qbn 2</i>
fine and coarse	3	<i>dqq wḥšp</i>
the basket on it	4	<i>qpt’ lwh̄y</i>

5 Comparison with the Epistolary Style in Private Letters on Papyrus

For comparative purposes, the letter ostraca can be contrasted with the letters on papyrus.³⁷ The Hermopolis papyri and the Padua papyri are particularly suited to this purpose as they represent private letters: they were written by family members and deal with private matters.

Private letters on papyrus were sent over longer distances and were probably delivered by “private messengers”, that is, persons who carried these letters along with other stuff. It was thus important to include information about the sender within the letter itself. By contrast, letter ostraca did not travel far and were delivered by family members or acquaintances. Generally speaking, it is safe to say that ostraca primarily served for short distance communications, while papyri were reserved for long distance communications. For the unusual use of an ostracon for a long distance communication, see below, section 7. Letters on papyri also tend to go into more detail

³⁵ The size of the letters on the convex is smaller in the last two lines of the message due to a lack of space.

³⁶ These are followed by a second topic that is introduced with *’p ḥzy* “moreover”, “look” (frozen imperative sg. 2m. form) in l. 5 on the concave. This in turn is followed by an order in the sg. 2m. form. As in *TAD D7.9*, singular and plural verb forms are used to refer to the addressees.

³⁷ Official correspondences (such as the Aršama and Akhvamazda correspondences) have been left out of consideration here. For Aršama, see *TAD A6.1–16*; for Akhvamazda, see Naveh and Shaked 2012, nos. A1–8. These originated in satrapal bureaus and their content, outlook, and epistolary conventions differ greatly from private letters on papyrus, and even more so from the ostraca. On these conventions, see Folmer 2017.

about specific issues, and include more room for personal concern, as in the following letter found in Hermopolis Magna (ex. no. 24):

- 24) *TAD A 2.5:8f.* “And as for me, I was bitten by a snake and I was dying and you did not send (a message to ask) whether I was alive or dead.” (Aram. *w’nh nktny ḥwyh whwt myt wlh šlḥtn hn ḥy ’nh whn mt ’nh*)

Apart from differences in content, there are important epistolary differences between letter ostraca and letters on papyrus. One of the most conspicuous differences is that the sender generally remains unmentioned in letter ostraca; in letters on papyrus, however, the sender is always mentioned. Wishes of well-being can also run to some length in letters on papyrus; in the ostraca they are usually included in the address (*šlm* PN). The differences between letters on papyrus and letters on ostraca can be explained by the limited possibilities for writing on potsherds. The main differences in the epistolary style between letter ostraca and letters on papyrus are shown in table 1 (without pretention to completeness). The following are some examples of wishes of well-being in private letters on papyrus (ex. nos. 25–26):

- 25) *TAD A2.2* “I bless you by Ptaḥ, may he show me your face in peace” (Aram. *brtky lḥt zy yḥzny ’pyky bšlm*) (= Hermopolis papyrus no. 2)
 26) *TAD A3.3* “[I send you] well-being and strength” (Aram. *šlm wšrrt [hwšrt lk]*) (= Padua papyrus no. 1)

Many private letters on papyrus also conclude with a formula: “I send this letter for your well-being” (Aram. *lšlmk/ky/km/kn šlḥt spr’/h znh*; for references see table 1). This is extremely rare in letter ostraca (on Cl.-G. no. 70, which shows other characteristics of private letters on papyrus, see n. 33).

Tab. 1: Comparative data: epistolary style in letter ostraca and letters on papyrus (Hermopolis, Padua).

	Ostraca	Papyri
Internal address: addressee	– “greetings PN”/”hi PN” (Aram. <i>šlm</i> PN) (usual) – “to PN” (Aram. ’l PN ³⁸ and ’l PN ³⁹) (rare) – no patronymic ⁴⁰	– “to PN” (Aram. ’l or ’l [rare]) – no patronymic
Internal address: sender	– usually not indicated ⁴¹ – no patronymic ⁴²	– always indicated (sometimes preceded by <i>mn</i> ; no patronymic)

³⁸ Relatively rare: *TAD D7.1*, 7.6, 7.21, 7.30; Cl.-G. nos. 70, 87, 277.

³⁹ Rare: *TAD D7.13*, 7.29; Cl.-G. nos. 144, 277.

⁴⁰ Notable exceptions: Cl.-G. no. 239 “Hi Mešullam son of Hošea” (Aram. ’l *mšlm mšlm br hwš*’); *TAD D7.13* “to PN son of ...” (Aram. ’l PN *br*[...]).

Tab. 1: continued.

	Ostraca	Papyri
Nouns giving expression to the social relation between addressee and sender	– usually not indicated ⁴³	– often indicated: “my/your brother”, “my sister”, “my mother”, “your servant”, “my master” etc.
Wish of well-being	– <i>šlm</i> PN (incl. in the address) – <i>šlm</i> + pron. sf. 2 (“may you be well”) (Cl.-G. no. 222; <i>TAD</i> D7.5, 7.6) – longer formulae in Cl.-G. nos. 70, 277; <i>TAD</i> D7.1 ⁴⁴	– always present, but never included in the address (i. e. never <i>šlm</i> PN at the beginning of a letter) – always present (long or short) ⁴⁵ – often people make inquiries after s. o. welfare (<i>š’l šlm</i> + pron. sf./PN)
Transition marker “now”	<i>k’n</i> / <i>k’nt</i> ⁴⁶	<i>wk’t</i> (<i>TAD</i> A2.7 <i>wk’n</i>)
Closing formula	– absent ⁴⁷	– present: “for your well-being I send this letter” <i>lšlmk/ky/km/kn šlḥt spr’/h znh</i> (<i>TAD</i> A2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 3.4; absent in 3.3)
External address	not applicable	– present (in finalized letters)
Addressee in external address	not applicable	– present – more often without a patronymic (<i>TAD</i> A2.1, 2.2, 2.4, 2.5, 2.7) than with a patronymic (<i>TAD</i> A2.3, 3.3 and probably in A3.4)
Sender in external address	not applicable	– present – more often with a patronymic (<i>TAD</i> A2.1, 2.2, 2.4, 2.5) than without a patronymic (<i>TAD</i> A2.3, 2.7)

⁴¹ Notable exceptions: *TAD* D7.20 (1st and 2nd message); *TAD* D7.22.

⁴² Notable exception, with the preposition *mn* “from”: *TAD* D7.20 “from PN son of PN” (Aram. *mn ntn br gmryh*).

⁴³ Notable exceptions: *TAD* D7.30 “to my brother PN” (Aram. *’l ’hy ḥgy*); *TAD* D7.1 “to my mother PN” (Aram. *’l ’my qwylyh*); *TAD* D7.21 “to my Lord PN” (Aram. *’l mry mykyh*); Cl.-G. no. 277 “to my brother PN, your brother PN” (Aram. *’l ’hy ḥgy ḥwk yrḥw*); *TAD* D7.22 “your brother PN” (Aram. *’ḥwk myk[yh]*).

⁴⁴ See n. 23 and n. 33.

⁴⁵ Even when the tone of the letter is angry or indignant (*TAD* A2.5). Sometimes *šlm* PN follows a wish of well-being (*TAD* A2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 2.7) or appears later in the letter (*TAD* A2.2, 2.6, 3.4).

⁴⁶ The form *k’t* of the transition marker “now” is found only sporadically in ostraca (Cl.-G. no. 240; *TAD* D7.31). The form *wk’t*, which is standard in letters on papyrus and leather, is nowhere attested in the corpus of letter ostraca.

⁴⁷ Notable exceptions: Cl.-G. no. 70 “for your well-being I send the letter” (Aram. *lšlmk šlḥt spr*); *TAD* D7.48 “for your well-being I send[...]” (Aram. *lšlmkm šlḥt[...]*).

6 Pottery, Scribal Utensils, and Usage of the Sherds

6.1 Scribes

On the basis of the handwriting on 32 letter ostraca known to him at the time, Joseph Naveh concluded that the letter ostraca from Elephantine were written by the same scribe.⁴⁸ Naveh assumed that this scribe worked on the wharf of Syene around 475 BCE (this assumption was adopted in *TAD D*). Lozachmeur has shown that the large majority of ostraca probably come from the first half of the fifth century BCE, but she is reluctant to attribute these ostraca to one hand.⁴⁹

Many people at the time could scribble their own names (as the lists of witnesses at the end of legal documents show) but this does not imply that there was a high rate of literacy at Elephantine. In any case, the presence of one or more (official) scribes who offered their skills and services to the members of the community is more than likely.

6.2 Pottery

Examination of the sherds has led to the conclusion that approximately 80 % of the ostraca derive from large ribbed storage jars with two handles.⁵⁰ Most of the ostraca were taken from the belly of these jars; some were taken from other parts, such as the neck, rim, and bottom. The date of this type of pottery is congruent with the date of the script of the majority of ostraca (fifth century BCE).⁵¹

6.3 Scribal Utensils

As in the Levant, the reed pen was the principal writing instrument of scribes writing in Aramaic in pre-Hellenistic Egypt. These pens were cut from the stems of *juncus maritimus* (and from the local variant *juncus maritimus arabicus* in Egypt).⁵² For writing Aramaic on papyrus, a well-cut reed pen from the stem of a sea reed was used.

⁴⁸ See Naveh 1970, 37f. Naveh was not sure about Cl.-G. no. 70, as its writing is more formal (see Naveh 1970, 39, n. 89). Several ostraca were later added to Naveh's list of ostraca (for an overview, see Folmer 1995, 22, n. 124).

⁴⁹ Lozachmeur 2006, 146, 154.

⁵⁰ On this type of ribbed jar, see David Aston's study of the pottery from Elephantine (Aston 1999). This specific type of pottery was produced in the region of Thebes in the late Saitic and Persian period and is known as Aston type I.

⁵¹ Lozachmeur 2006, 133. The pottery that was used for writing has been studied by Pascale Ballet (in Lozachmeur 2006, 106–143 [Étude céramologique]).

⁵² See Gerrit van der Kooij 1976, 31–35.

The reed pen could also be used as a “brush” (as was customary in Egypt).⁵³ Among the objects found at Elephantine was a palette which contained several brushes and ink receptacles with traces of black ink; this palette bears an unintelligible Aramaic inscription on one of its sides.⁵⁴ Reed pens were probably also used for the writing of the letter ostraca from Elephantine; they were deployed as both a pen and as a brush, but confirmation requires a thorough examination of the ostraca.

6.4 Concave/Convex

Most of the letter ostraca were written on the concave of the ostrakon, with the obvious goal of avoiding the ribbed convex as a writing surface. If the scribe needed more space, he continued on the convex. The writing often runs parallel or perpendicular to the ribs, but oblique writing is found as well,⁵⁵ even on the convex. In principle, every available space on the sherd could be used, including the fracture surface, rims, and bottom.

6.5 Selection and Reuse of Sherds

It appears that ostraca were not selected at random. Several ostraca have an almost rectangular form (e. g. *TAD* D7.8; see Fig. 2). It may well be that these ostraca were reused due to their form. In fact, many ostraca show traces of earlier writing. At least at Elephantine, it appears to have been common practice to reuse ostraca. Before reuse, the ink would have been washed or rubbed away (at least to some extent). For that reason, the term “palimpsest” is used in literature. The fact that most of the ostraca are incomplete and were further fragmentized after their use as ostrakon may be a sign that, at some point, ostraca were cast away, perhaps in garbage pits.

6.6 Flipping the Ostrakon

In the majority of cases, if the scribe wanted to continue writing on the convex, he would flip the ostrakon over its vertical axis (like a book). Less frequently, the scribe might flip the ostrakon over its horizontal axis, which was the normal practice in the papyri (both letters and legal documents).⁵⁶ Once the scribe had reached the bottom

⁵³ Lucas/Harris 1989, 365.

⁵⁴ Acquired by Charles Edwin Wilbour in 1893. For a photo of this palette, see Bleiberg 2002, 25, fig. 12. For the inscription, see *TAD* D13.1.

⁵⁵ Lozachmeur 2006, 162.

⁵⁶ See Porten 1979, 80–81, 88–89.

of the papyrus, he would flip it over its horizontal axis to continue writing on top of the verso (coinciding with the bottom of the recto).

6.7 Corrections

Quite often the scribe made corrections on the ostrakon. These corrections were usually added by the same hand above the line, as in the papyri. Corrections might appear anywhere in a given line, while additions above the line also appear at the end of lines, but these are of a different nature: they reveal a certain reluctance to start a word at the end of the line and continue the word on a new line. This may well reflect the practice of writing on papyrus, where a word break at the end of the line was avoided. A good example of this is the first draft of the famous petition from the authorities in Palestine for permission to reconstruct the local Temple of YHW (*TAD* A4.7). Only in rare cases in the ostraca were words started at the end of a line and continued at the beginning of the next; this occurs mostly on very small ostraca, such as Cl.-G. no. 239 (see Fig. 1).

7 Other Letter Ostraca

Aramaic was widely used in the Neo-Assyrian empire as an administrative language, though only one letter ostrakon in Aramaic is known to have survived from this period, and most of our evidence for the use of Aramaic in this period derives from bilingual Akkadian and Aramaic and monolingual Aramaic inscriptions on clay-tablets. This ostrakon is dated to the middle of the seventh century BCE and is known as the Assur ostrakon.

The Assur ostrakon was written in ink on a very large potsherd preserved in fragments. At its tallest, it is approximately 42 cm high; at its broadest, it is approximately 60 cm wide—all in all, a very unusual size for an ostrakon. (The Uriyah ostrakon from Elephantine, by contrast, is at its tallest approximately 9 cm high and 7 cm wide at its broadest.) Its correspondents are two high officials with Assyrian names: Bel-eṭir and Pir'-Amur(ru).⁵⁷ As such, the ostrakon may *possibly* be said to demonstrate that it was not unusual for Assyrian officials to conduct their correspondence in Aramaic (rather than in Assyrian), at least where state affairs (both political and military) were concerned.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ See Fales 2010, 198.

⁵⁸ Radner 2014, 85. By contrast, Fales interprets the ostrakon as an example of a private communication. In Fales' reading, private problems were resolved in the spoken language (Aramaic) rather than

The place from where this letter was sent—Assur or Babylon—is disputed.⁵⁹ As it was found in Assur, many scholars are of the opinion that the text was written in Babylon. Mario Fales, however, has raised the possibility that the Aramaic ostrakon is a draft and that the final text was copied onto perishable material and sent from Assur to the addressee in Babylon.⁶⁰ This is an attractive theory, as it is difficult to imagine why such a large and heavy potsherd was selected for the purpose of long distance communication.

The survival of only one letter ostrakon from Babylon may be down to the disposal of drafts once they had been copied from ostraca onto papyrus or leather. This remains a best guess, however.⁶¹ It is of course possible to imagine that, in the case of the Assur ostrakon, the sender preserved the ostrakon (i. e. the draft) for his own archive, but this still does not explain why no other similar ostraca have been found.

The Aramaic Assur ostrakon is important in its own right, but there exist much closer parallels to the letter ostraca from Elephantine. Ancient letter ostraca written by Judeans were inscribed in other places as well, and the Arad letter ostraca, written in Hebrew, should be mentioned here.⁶² These letter ostraca, addressed to a certain Elyāšib, were found in a military fortress at Tell Arad, located in the Negev desert of southern Palestine (Arad nos. 1–16, 18). These ostraca are datable to the final days of the Judean monarchy (sixth century BCE).⁶³ Elyāšib was probably an officer in charge of the food supplies for this Judean desert fortress, as the ostraca deal with the distribution of rations. The ostraca commence with the address, which contains the preposition “to” (Hebr. *ʾl*), followed by the personal name of the person addressed without a patronymic: “to Elyāšib” (Hebr. *ʾl ʾlyšb*).⁶⁴ The address is immediately followed by the transition marker “now then” (Hebr. *wʾt*), which is followed by an imperative or equivalent verb form. As in the majority of Elephantine letter ostraca, the name of the sender is omitted in these ostraca. This implies that the sender was known to the addressee or that the sender was made known by the person who delivered the message (ex. no. 27):⁶⁵

the official language of the empire (Assyrian) (Fales 2010, 200). The underlying assumption is that private letters were written in the spoken language.

⁵⁹ That the letter was indeed sent is apparent from l. 19 which mentions a messenger.

⁶⁰ Fales 2010, 198.

⁶¹ Another explanation is found in Radner (2014, 85–86). Radner explains the absence of textual material on potsherds in Assyria by the failure of earlier archaeologists to recognize ostraca inscribed with ink; due to the solubility of ink in water, these texts were subsequently lost.

⁶² For a convenient edition of these letter ostraca, see Lindenberger 2003. This edition also includes the letter ostraca from Lachish from roughly the same period.

⁶³ Ostraca nos. 1–18 are all from the same locus and belong to stratum VI.

⁶⁴ Arad no. 17 is addressed to another person, “to Naḥum” (Hebr. *ʾl nḥm*); this is followed by “and now” (Hebr. *wʾt*) + imperative form.

⁶⁵ A similar picture emerges from the so-called Akhvamazda letters on leather, which were addressed to a subordinate named Bagavanta. Only the addressee is mentioned in the external address of these

27) Arad no. 1 “To Elyašib: And now, give to the Kittim ...” (Hebr. *’l ’lyšb w’t ntn lktym ...*)

As in the Elephantine ostraca, the wish of well-being is usually absent from the ostraca addressed to Elyašib, except in one case. In this particular instance, a subordinate uses the title “my lord” [Hebr. *’dny*]) to address himself to Elyašib (ex. no. 28):⁶⁶

28) Arad no. 18 “To my lord Elyašib. May the Lord ask for your welfare” (Hebr. *’l ’dny ’lyšb yhw h yš’l lšlmk*)

These letter ostraca, which deal with rations, can be contrasted with several other letter ostraca from Tell Arad. The ostraca—all from different loci belonging to stratum VI—deal with military matters, and only one is addressed to Elyašib (Arad no. 16). This letter also contains the name of the sender, who identifies himself as “Ḥananyahu, your brother” (Hebr. *ḥnnyhw ’hk*). The remaining letter ostraca dealing with military matters are more formally framed and may have been sent over a longer distance.⁶⁷ In Arad no. 16, the sender is included in the following formula (ex. no. 29):

29) Arad no. 16 “Your brother Ḥananyahu sends greetings to Elyašib and your house. I bless you by YHWH.” (Hebr. *’hk ḥnnyhw šlh lšlm ’lyšb wšlm bytk brtk lyhw*)

8 Conclusions

The letter ostraca from Elephantine represent short distance communications between people who appear to have known each other well. Upon delivery, the messenger communicated to the addressee the name of the sender. The frequent use of adverbs of time in the ostraca, such as “yesterday”, “today”, and “tomorrow”, clearly indicate that these messages were intended for the short-run. Their short length, succinct phrasing, and ephemeral content suggest a parallel with contemporary society’s WhatsApp messages. They open up an important window onto the daily life of the fifth century Aramaic-writing population of Elephantine.

letters, which would have been the only part of the letter visible after folding and sealing; the sender thus does not appear in the external address. See Folmer 2017. For the *editio princeps* of these letters, see Naveh and Shaked 2012.

⁶⁶ See also Arad no. 16. On this ostrakon, which deals with military matters, see below, ex. no. 29.

⁶⁷ A similar formula is also found in Arad nos. 21 and 40. Ostrakon no. 24, which is also addressed to Elyašib, is from a different locus; it belongs to stratum VI.

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