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## The Meinarti phylactery factory: Medieval Nubian ostraka from the Island of Michael

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Giovanni R. Ruffini

**THE MEINARTI PHYLACTERY FACTORY:  
MEDIÉVAL NUBIAN OSTRACA  
FROM THE ISLAND OF MICHAEL\***

THE ISLAND OF MEINARTI, just north of the Nile's Second Cataract in Sudan, was continuously inhabited from the late Kushite through the late medieval periods. Its excavation by William Y. Adams in the early 1960s, prior to its destruction by the waters of the High Dam, represented the most thorough study of any site in medieval Nubia.<sup>1</sup> The discoveries of that excavation were crucial for defining a chronology for late Kushite and Nubian pottery, thanks to the site's considerable degree of stratification. The site is believed to have been the occasional residence in the medieval period of the eparch of Nobadia, governor of Lower

\* I would like to thank William Y. ADAMS for providing Gerald M. BROWNE's transcriptions and allowing my own examination of the ostraka presented herein. I would also like to thank the Columbia University papyrology seminar for their feedback on text numbers 3 and 5, and Anne-Marie LUIJENDIJK for assistance with bibliography and references. I am particularly grateful to Adam ŁAJTAR and GRZEGORZ OCHAŁA for their comments on an earlier draft of this article. My remarks on the palaeography of these texts are based on their observations.

<sup>1</sup> See generally the monographs on Meinarti by William Y. ADAMS published by the Sudan Archaeological Research Society, London. See also D. A. WELSBY, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia. Pagans, Christians and Muslims along the Middle Nile*, London 2002, pp. 124–127.

Nubia, and to have played an important role in the control of trade to points further up the Nile.

In addition to the ostraka presented here, Meinarti was the findspot of eight inscriptions from the eleventh and twelfth centuries AD, four in Greek and four in Coptic.<sup>2</sup> Of the four Greek inscriptions, the only ones complete enough to warrant comment are both funerary inscriptions for males, both styled *choiakeikshil*, one of whom was the eparch of Nobadia, the highest ranking political position in Lower Nubia.<sup>3</sup> Of the four Coptic inscriptions, one is too fragmentary to identify; the other three are funerary inscriptions for females, two of whom are described as church-owners. In short, the epigraphic evidence well attests the importance of Meinarti and the elite status of some of its population.

William Y. Adams has kindly made available to me for autopsy eight of the ostraka excavated at Meinarti.<sup>4</sup> A description of the contents of four ostraka and one graffito appeared in Adams' publication of the Meinarti excavations.<sup>5</sup> Although isolated references to the ostraka have appeared in print, they have never been fully published. I present full editions with commentary here. Gerald M. Browne transcribed five of these

<sup>2</sup> Coptic: *I. Khartoum Copt.* 18–21; Greek: *I. Khartoum Greek* 8–11. See also, A. ŁAJTAR & J. VAN DER VLIET, 'Rich ladies of Meinarti and their churches. With an appended list of sources from Christian Nubia containing the expression «having the church of so-and-so»', *JfurP* 28 (1998), pp. 35–55.

<sup>3</sup> *I. Khartoum Greek* 8 and 9: for the eparch, see no. 8; for the title *choiakeikshil*, see the commentary to no. 9, l. 26 and G. R. RUFFINI, *Medieval Nubia: A Social and Economic History*, Oxford 2012, pp. 46–56.

<sup>4</sup> W. Y. ADAMS, *Meinarti III: The Late and Terminal Christian Phases* [= *Sudan Archaeological Research Society Publication* 9], London 2002. The appendix records seven of these ostraka as UKMA, that is 'Objects loaned for study to the British Museum; subsequently returned to the University of Kentucky Museum of Anthropology.' To these seven should be added Meinarti inventory number 707, ostrakon number 11 below, described in ADAMS, *op. cit.*, p. 122, as housed in the Sudan National Museum, but in fact found with the seven loaned to the University of Kentucky and made available to me by ADAMS. All eight have been delivered to the British Museum for permanent storage. Photographs of all eight ostraka can be found online at <[http://www.medievalnubia.info/dev/index.php/Meinarti\\_Ostraka](http://www.medievalnubia.info/dev/index.php/Meinarti_Ostraka)>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 91.

eight. For ostraka 3, 5, and 9–11, these editions use Browne's transcriptions, with alterations as noted based on my own autopsy of the ostraka. The transcriptions of ostraka 1, 2, and 5 are my own. Ostrakon 3 has already received partial publication, with references given below.

One text (4), a hieroglyphic stela, clearly belongs to an earlier period in Meinarti's history, but the remaining texts, Greek and Old Nubian, are from Christian Nubia. Palaeographically, the Christian texts are in standard Nubian majuscules with a slight rightward slope.<sup>6</sup> The hands are uniformly clear and professional, with the obvious exception of ostrakon number 2, where a poor surface and a nonstandard writing implement disrupt the hand. The author of the alphabet in ostrakon number 3 seems particularly experienced, producing majuscules with long slashing strokes.

The exact findspots of all of the texts are unknown, but nonetheless, a general picture starts to emerge from a composite analysis of their contents. Of these ten texts, the nature of two remains obscure. The remaining eight include three excerpts from the Psalms, a magical text, and an alphabet with religious cryptograms attached. All of the texts found at Meinarti with generally known proveniences (seven of the eleven) were found in layers from the Late Christian periods or later. Of those seven, five were found in levels dating to Meinarti's Phase 5, the period between the invasion of Nubia by Shams el-Dawla in 1172–1174 and the occupation of Meinarti by the Beni Ikrima *ca.* 1367.

Thus, the bulk of the texts about which archaeology provides us any dating information comes from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This is an important period in Meinarti history, in which William Adams has proposed that the eparch of Nobadia – the regent of Lower Nubia – was in residence in Meinarti. On current evidence, this is not yet certain. But given the remains on site, including the epitaph of an eparch, it seems likely that Meinarti was an important political center in this period. These texts – concentrated as they are on religion, magic, and education – can thus provide valuable light on Meinarti's cultural life during one of its crucial moments.

<sup>6</sup> For brief notes on Old Nubian palaeography, an understudied subject, see G. M. BROWNE, *Old Nubian Grammar* [= *Languages of the World/Materials* 330], Munich 2002, p. 1.

### 1. Unknown text in Old Nubian

Inv. no. 6.К.3-II. In a plate in the publication, Adams described this object as ‘small ostrakon of Late Christian orange ware, with inscription of two words in an unidentified language. The height of the piece is about 5 cm’.<sup>7</sup> I base my transcription on this plate, as the original object is not available to me. Provenience: Phase 7.<sup>8</sup> What Adams called ‘an unidentified language’ is almost certainly Old Nubian.

† сΔεΙΟ  
 ΟΥΡΘΑΜΗ

1. Saeio is presumably the subject of the verb in l. 2; it is attested in unpublished Banganarti inscription no. 488. (I am grateful to Adam Łajtar for sharing with me his name index for these forthcoming texts.) In that text, it is most likely a personal name, but might also be part of a title.

2. The word ΟΥΡΘΑΜΗ appears to be the singular vetitive form of a verb ΟΥΡΘ- (see Browne, *Grammar* [cit. n. 6], p. 64). But what is this verb? None of the words so far attested in Old Nubian seem to fit. Arcangelo Carradori’s seventeenth-century Nubian dictionary attests to various related terms based on the stem *org-*, with, e.g., *orgossom* meaning ‘to be hungry’ (Inge Hofmann, *Das nubische Wörterverzeichnis des Arcangelo Carradori [O.F.M.]*, Vienna 1983, p. 188). This seems an unlikely match, unless we have a plea to the effect, ‘May Saeio be hungry’.

### 2. Greek invocation of the Trinity

Inv. no. 6.К.3-16. According to Adams, this is ‘a body sherd of utility Ware U5, having the beginning portion of an undeciphered inscription in large, black letters’, of unknown provenience.<sup>9</sup> A fragment of an ostrakon with the beginning of an inscription. Browne made no transcription of this text. Given the state of the original ostrakon, it is easy to see why.

<sup>7</sup> ADAMS, *Meinarti* III (cit. n. 4), pl. 35d.

<sup>8</sup> See *ibidem*, p. III, discussing the presence of late medieval objects such as this ostrakon in the fill of the Anglo-Egyptian occupation level.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. II8.

The writing is hazy and badly faded. It seems likely that some nonstandard ink or writing instrument was used, as the product bears little resemblance to any of the other ostraka published here. The surface is uneven and damaged prior to writing, driving the scribe to distortions in letter form and poor letter placement.

The text appears to be a Greek invocation of the Holy Trinity. It is possible, given the spelling error in l. 1 and the poor letter quality, and also given the nature of some of the other texts presented below, that this is a scribal or school exercise. For more on Nubian school exercises, see the introduction to text 3 below. Note that Greek invocations of the Trinity are known from a number of late medieval Nubian sites. Indeed, our text is almost identical to the opening invocation of the Trinity in *I. Khartoum Greek 8*, an epitaph of Joassê, eparch of Nobadia, buried at Meinarti in AD 1161. We may imagine the hesitant forms on this ostrakon as the first step in a Meinarti scribal education, culminating in such more complex texts as Joassê's epitaph.

† ἐν ὄν(ὄ)μα-  
 τι τοῦ π(ατ)ρ(ὸ)ς (καὶ)  
 τοῦ υἱ(ὸ)ῦ (καὶ) τοῦ  
 4 ἁγίου πν(εύματος)  
 ἀμήν

2. π̄ρ̄ς ς || 3. ῡϋ ς

2, 3. The abbreviation used for *καὶ* resembles a lunate *sigma*, but rather more angular.

3. υἱ(ὸ)ῦ: The *upsilons* here do not resemble the scribe's other *upsilons*, and look more like *iotas*.

3. τοῦ: The second article is not easily read; the scribe ran out of room, and the *upsilon* is just visible on the fabric exposed by the break in the ostrakon.

### 3. Old Nubian alphabet with numerical cryptograms

Inv. no. 6.K.3-136. Adams writes that this is 'a fragment of utility Ware U5, probably from the body of a *qadus*. The specimen, measuring approx-



Fig. 1. Greek invocation of the Trinity (no. 2)  
(© Trustees of the British Museum)

imately 18 x 18 cm, is apparently complete, except for a very small piece missing at the left side'.<sup>10</sup> Provenience: Phase 6. Browne in his original transcription judged this to be a 'fragment of coarse red pottery containing Coptic alphabet?' He changed his mind in print and described the text as 'the Old Nubian alphabet minus the enchoric letters'.<sup>11</sup> It is with this description that Browne gave a partial publication, including the alphabet but omitting the subsequent numerical cryptograms, in 2002.<sup>12</sup> Browne presumably called it an Old Nubian alphabet despite the lack of unique Old Nubian characters on palaeographic grounds: Old Nubian letter forms, apparent here, are quite different from standard Coptic letter forms. The alphabet is still, however, Coptic in essence.

Ostraka with Coptic alphabets or portions of the alphabet are com-

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, pl. 34a and p. 106.

<sup>11</sup> G. M. BROWNE, *Introduction to Old Nubian* [= *Meroitica* II] Berlin 1989, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> BROWNE, *Grammar* (cit. n. 6), p. 8.

mon from Egypt.<sup>13</sup> Nor is this the first ostrakon with an alphabet known from Christian Nubia. Excavations from Debeira West uncovered an ostrakon with the partial remains of a Coptic alphabet, along with three further lines of text. The excavators noted that ‘What follows the alphabet is obscure’.<sup>14</sup> While the published plate is small and the surviving ink faint, it is possible that what followed the alphabet included various religious cryptograms, as we find with the Meinarti ostrakon here. Finally, Christian Nubia has given us Coptic alphabets in other contexts, specifically in the form of epigraphic school exercises on plaster found at Faras, the capital of Lower Nubia.<sup>15</sup> To these alphabets and school exercises we can add an unpublished Coptic alphabet on an ostrakon (Łajtar’s personal communication) and reports of school exercises among the epigraphic remains found at Old Dongola.<sup>16</sup>

As interesting as the alphabet itself is the trio of numerical cryptograms appearing after the alphabet.<sup>17</sup> Numeric cryptograms are numeric sequences

<sup>13</sup> An APIS search produced the following 30 known examples: *O. Mich.* 1 659; *P. Duke inv.* 232, *P. Mich. inv.* 2816, *O. Col. inv.* 6.1, 183, 187, 447, 478, 564, 575, 725, 740, 913, 1259, 1279, 1285, 1298, 1333, 2034, 2255, 2328, 2337, 2361, 2402, 2403, 2511, 3062, 3113, 3270, 3518.

<sup>14</sup> P. L. SHINNIE & Margaret SHINNIE, *Debeira West: A Medieval Nubian Town*, Warminster 1978, p. 98 (no. 195), with pl. 52.

<sup>15</sup> S. JAKOBIELSKI, [in:] K. MICHAŁOWSKI *et alii*, *Faras. Fouilles Polonaises 1961* [= *Faras I*], Warsaw 1962, pp. 80, 176–178, figs. 48, 94, and 95; cf. K. MICHAŁOWSKI, ‘Polish excavations at Faras, second season 1961–62’, *Kush* 11 (1963), pl. LIX b.

<sup>16</sup> A. ŁAJTAR, ‘New finds of Greek epitaphs at Dongola’, [in:] A. ŁAJTAR & J. VAN DER VLIET (eds.), *Nubian Voices: Studies in Christian Nubian Culture* [= *JJP Supplement Series 15*], Warsaw 2011, pp. 37–94.

<sup>17</sup> For a survey of numeric cryptograms, often called isopsephisms, see G. POLARA, ‘Gli isopsefi’, *Vichiana* 11 (1982), pp. 242–453. A. STRUS, ‘L’isopsephie des abréviations byzantines: une solution pour une inscription de Kh. ’Ain Fattir’, *Revue Biblique* 102 (1995), pp. 242–254, at p. 244, provides a list of examples of these cryptograms. For their use in a Christian papyrological context, see M. CHOAT, *Belief and Cult in Fourth-Century Papyri* [= *Studia Antiqua Australiensia* 1], Turnhout 2006, pp. 114–116. See S. R. LLEWELYN, ‘SD, a Christian isopsephism?’ *ZPE* 109 (1995), pp. 125–127, for discussion of an (unsuccessful) attempt to use computer analysis of the Greek text of the Bible to identify the resolution of a potential cryptogram, *sd*. For numeric cryptograms in a more literary Christian milieu, see Leslie S. B. MACCOULL, ‘An isopsephistic encomium on Saint Senas by Dioscorus of Aphrodito’, *ZPE* 62 (1986), pp. 51–53, for a poem of Dioskoros of Aphrodito in honor of Saint

in which a number indicates the sum of the individual numeric values of the letters in an original but now hidden source word. Such cryptograms are widely known in Nubia and in the Christian Mediterranean more generally.<sup>18</sup> According to Adams, the extra letters after the alphabet on l. 4 'presumably stand for the numbers 10 (ι), 600 (χ), 800 (ω), 10 (ξ), 40 (μ), 100 (ρ), 50 (ν), and 2 (β)'.<sup>19</sup> Thus he provides a reading of the initial letters, ιχω, different in the second and third letters than that provided below, where we read ιϣω. Two of the three numeric cryptograms we encounter here, χμ and ρνβ, are widely known: see the commentary to l. 4 below. But ιϣω is part of a larger complex of similar characters which remains poorly understood: if the scribe intends a numeric cryptogram, then he has surely made a mistake, as no numerical value can be made from these characters.

The size and weight of this ostrakon are extraordinary. It is not a piece that would have been convenient to work with. Moreover, the characters themselves are quite large, and easily visible from a distance. We can imagine a stationary ostrakon, resting at the front of a room, copied by a group of students working in unison, all able to see the text from afar. Certainly, an alphabet ostrakon would suggest a school milieu. However, as one scholar has pointed out, the 'Greco-Roman world supplies widespread evidence for the use of the alphabet in magic'.<sup>20</sup> The presence of numeric cryptograms in this text, as well as the presence of other magical texts in the Meinarti finds, may suggest a dual use for this ostrakon.

Menas, the value of every line of which adds up to 5680. (Menas, not Senas: J.-L. FOURNET, *Hellénisme dans l'Égypte du VI<sup>e</sup> siècle. La bibliothèque et l'oeuvre de Dioscore d'Aphrodité*, Cairo 1999, p. 452.) For a striking example of a cryptogram apparently passing from Coptic into the Latin of pagan author Martianus Capella, see Leslie S. B. MACCOULL, 'Coptica in Martianus Capella *de Nuptiis* 2.193', *CP* 90 (1995), pp. 361–366.

<sup>18</sup> Numeric cryptograms are part of the epigraphic domain as well: see the remarks on the number 99 for 'Amen' in Syrian epigraphy at L. ROBERT, 'Épigrammes de Syrie', *Hellenica* 11 (1960): 296–327, at pp. 306–311. In a Nubian context see most notably I. *Qasr Ibrim* 91 G, with commentary and references.

<sup>19</sup> ADAMS, *Meinarti* III (cit. n. 4), p. 106.

<sup>20</sup> A. R. MILLARD, 'BGD ... – magic spell or educational exercise?', *Eretz-Israel* 18 (1985), pp. 39–42, at p. 39.



Fig. 2. Old Nubian alphabet with numerical cryptograms (no. 3)  
(photo by the Author)

† a b ḡ ḏ e z ḥ ḥ̄ ḥ̄̄ k  
 λ ḿ n ξ o p̄ r c̄ τ  
 γ φ x ψ ω q z  
 4 δ x † iḡw xḿ pḥb

4. iḡw: Browne: iḡw. Adams: ixw

2. c̄: A stroke from the lower left to the top right slashes across the bottom of the *sigma*.

4. δ x: Here we appear to have the Old Nubian character for /j/ where Coptic would give σ, followed by the Coptic character for /č/ or /t/ + /š/ which Old Nubian omits. The Coptic *shima* σ for /k/ is absent. Alternatively, if δ indicates the Coptic *shima*, it is an unusual letter-form, more proper to someone familiar with Old Nubian but misforming the Coptic.

iḡw: Browne read iḡw, which the downstroke at the end of the last character would seem to eliminate. Better than Browne's reading would be iḡw, as the putative *shei* here would compare closely to that in l. 3. Supporting an alternate reading of a *sigma fai* over a *shei* is the clear separation between the two supralinear strokes, suggesting two characters instead of one. This sequence iḡw is

another variation of the sequence discussed in G. R. Ruffini, 'Psalms 149–150: A bilingual Greek and Old Nubian version from Qasr Ibrim', *ZPE* 168 (2009), pp. 112–122, at pp. 117–118. There, it was proposed that the several different variations of this sequence are misunderstood cryptograms. This challenges the consensus, which has tended to see the sequence  $\omega\gamma$  merely as an abbreviation for the name Ioannes. This text provides further evidence against the Ioannes thesis: personal names do not appear in alphabetical ostraka.

$\chi\bar{\mu}$ : Here we have a cryptogram for the archangel Raphael, as demonstrated by Plumley in 1982.<sup>21</sup> We should note in passing that this cryptogram may have gone unrecognized in other contexts. Consider the numerous graffiti found on pottery from medieval Soba which were taken as 'unfinished monograms of Michael' but are in fact nothing but  $\chi\mu$ .<sup>22</sup> These Soba graffiti may not have been Michael monograms, but Raphael cryptograms. Given the long-standing identification of Meinarti as the 'Island of Michael' known from literary sources, it is ironic that  $\chi\bar{\mu}$  for Raphael appears here, instead of the cryptogram  $\chi\mu\theta$  for Michael.<sup>23</sup>

$\mu\bar{\eta}\bar{\beta}$ : Here we have a cryptogram for Maria; cf. Plumley, 'Qasr Ibrim, 1974' (cit. n. 23), p. 7.

#### 4. Hieroglyphic stela

Inv. no. 6.K.3-292. Small fragment of a stela with hieroglyphic inscription. Provenience: Level 4 (5c).<sup>24</sup> Gerald Browne made no transcription of this text. Arthur F. Shore's analysis of the text cited by Adams describes it as part of a New Kingdom (19th–20th Dynasty) funerary stela.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> J. M. PLUMLEY, 'Nubian Christian numerical cryptograms: some elucidations', [in:] P. VAN MOORSEL (ed.), *New Discoveries in Nubia*, Leiden 1982, pp. 91–97.

<sup>22</sup> D. A. WELSBY & C. M. DANIELS, *Soba: Archaeological Research at a Medieval Capital on the Blue Nile*, London 1991, p. 281, for the list accompanying fig. 159 (p. 282). Note particularly graffiti 23 to 30. See also fig. 165 (p. 288), for graffito 188, with the list on p. 293.

<sup>23</sup> On Meinarti as the Island of Michael, see ADAMS, *Meinarti III* (cit. n. 4), pp. 7–8, with n. 9. On Michael cryptograms, see J. M. PLUMLEY, 'Qasr Ibrim, 1974', *JEA* 61 (1975), pp. 5–27, at p. 7, and IDEM, 'Numerical cryptograms' (cit. n. 21), pp. 91–92.

<sup>24</sup> ADAMS, *Meinarti III* (cit. n. 4), p. 73.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79, with fig. 28.

### 5. Magical text

Inv. no. 6.κ.3-294. Small ostrakon with complete inscription. Provenience: Unknown.<sup>26</sup> Browne made no transcription of this text.

This ostrakon has two features typical of magical papyri: 1) designs in the shape of Greek letters, with each line culminating in a ring at every end, the so-called 'ring letters' or *charaktêres* discussed below; and 2) nonsense syllables and characters repeated in varying patterns, also discussed below. The comparanda adduced in the commentary to this text are chiefly Egyptian. This text thus gives the impression that Nubian magical practices in the medieval period were heavily influenced by Egyptian exemplars.

This impression is supported by Nubian texts from other sites. Adam Łajtar (personal communication) reports ring letters on magical ostraka from Gebel Adda (Royal Ontario Museum inventory numbers 973.24.813\_1 and 973.24.986\_1) and on an ostrakon found at Soba (now in the Sudan National Museum). Qasr Ibrim inv. 64/40 (I) (published in Plumley, 'Numerical cryptograms' [cit. n. 21]) produces 24 cryptograms in a sequence based on the Greek alphabet and presumably inherited via Christian Egypt. Qasr Ibrim inv. 78.3.4/31 (NI 64) integrates a number of ring letters and nonsense syllables in the Egyptian fashion. Note also the report of foundational ostraka found at Serra East which include magical symbols known from Coptic magical texts.<sup>27</sup> Given the possibility that some of our Meinarti ostraka were foundational deposits (see numbers 6 and 9–11 below), something similar may be at stake here.

Characters transcribed in italics indicate the use of ring letters, discussed in the commentary below.

† χΙCΙΝΑ ΧΑĊ ΧΩC  
 ΔΩ̄ ΧΑΛ̄ ΛΩ̄ CΩ̄Π  
 ΧΩ̄ ΧΩ̄Ν ΝΑΜ̄ΑΛ  
 4 ΝΗ̄ ΜΑΝΟΥΛΑΧ ΥΩ̄

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 118, where a typographical error lists it as ostrakon 249 instead of 294.

<sup>27</sup> See WELSBY, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia* (cit. n. 1), p. 67.

γ(ιο)Ϸ γ(ιο)Ϸ Ϸαρζιι  
 θεοϷ Ϸ Ϸ Ϸ Ϸ  
 8 

γ	γ	τ̄ον Δ(ογλον) Δολλο
Ϸ	Ϸ	Ϸο<γ> αραπιτι

1-4. χιϷινα ϷαϷ ϷωϷ etc.: Two magical charms held at Yale, published in 1974, and dated to *ca.* seventh century AD, consist of a series of repeated Greek letters without any apparent sense.<sup>28</sup> In the case of the first text, ω and ι predominate, and in the second text, η, ο, Ϸ, Ϸ, and ω ‘appear repeatedly’.<sup>29</sup> These characters are for the most part those which recur without any apparent pattern in this text as well. One study of magical texts notes that ‘Foreign languages or downright gibberish and hocus-pocus words were intercalated into the texts of the spells’,<sup>30</sup> and points out that ‘Common to all of these is the repetition of similar sounds, *homoiarcton* and *homoioteleuton* – standard devices of the later Greek and Coptic *voces magicae* and *glossolalia* everywhere’.<sup>31</sup>

2. τ̄ωπ: It is possible that this is a mistaken attempt at the *nomen sacrum* for Ϸωτηρ. This *nomen sacrum* is one of the least common and least consistently abbreviated in the corpus; see L. W. Hurtado, ‘The origin of the *nomina sacra*: A proposal’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 (1998), pp. 655-673, at pp. 655-656. The *πι* might be a misread *eta*.

4-6, 8. γ(ιο)Ϸ etc.: These lines feature characters with a peculiar style, in which each stroke ends in a circle. These characters are: (1) the second to last character on l. 4; (2) the third, fourth, and fifth characters on l. 5; (3) the first six characters on l. 6; and (4) the first two characters on l. 8. To describe these characters, I adopt the term ‘ring letters’ appearing in the APIS record to P. Mich. inv. 3569. Modern scholars also call them *charaktères*, as they were known in antiquity.<sup>32</sup> These ring letters or *charaktères* are common in magical texts. P. Mich. inv. 600, part of the Coptic Wizard’s Hoard (on which see W. H. Worrell, ‘A Coptic Wizard’s Hoard’, *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature* 46 (1930), pp. 239-262, and P. Mirecki, ‘The Coptic Wizard’s Hoard’, *The Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994), pp. 435-460), has exactly the same kind of

<sup>28</sup> G. M. PARÁSSOGLOU, ‘Artificial scripts and magical papyri’, *StPap* 13 (1974), pp. 57-60.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

<sup>30</sup> W. M. BRASHEAR, *The Greek magical papyri* [= ANRW II 18.5], Berlin - New York 1995, pp. 3380-3683, at p. 3395.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3395, n. 30.

<sup>32</sup> D. FRANKFURTER, ‘The magic of writing and the writing of magic: The power of the word in the Egyptian and Greek traditions’, *Helios* 21 (1994), pp. 205-211.



Fig. 3. Magical text (no. 5)  
(photo by the Author)

stylized *upsilon* as in our ostrakon here, in which each stroke ends with circles. P. Mich. inv. 1559 also has similar designs at the end. These ring letters are part of a wider pattern in late antique and medieval magical texts. Compare the ring letters appearing in the medieval Cairo Geniza, with multilingual Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic texts (see J. Naveh & S. Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity*, Jerusalem – Leiden 1985, pls. 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8; and L. H. Schiffman & M. D. Swartz, *Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts from the Cairo Genizah*, Sheffield 1992, pls. 11, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20).

The question of how to interpret ring letters, or even if they can be interpreted at all, is important to understanding this text, and the scholarly community is divided. Ring-letters are ‘widely employed in Jewish amulets’, although one scholar of their appearance in Aramaic texts thought that they had no meaning and were merely ‘individual creations’ of each scribe.<sup>33</sup> A study of Coptic

<sup>33</sup> J. TRACHTENBERG, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion*, New York 1939, p. 141.

magic, in which these ring letters are common, notes that the ‘circles on the edges of the letters seem to imitate cuneiform writing, but with circles instead of triangles’.<sup>34</sup> Another study of Coptic magic takes them to be ‘abstract or astrological diagrams or letters’.<sup>35</sup> David Frankfurter, whose study of Greek and Egyptian magical writing gives the most thorough treatment of *charaktêres*, notes that they have an iconographic element to them, and in some cases are based directly on antecedent hieroglyphs. However, some ring letters also had a cryptographic element to them, and some ‘characters might function as a pronounceable alphabet ... [for] sounds in this case that could not be represented by the letters of the alphabet’.<sup>36</sup>

These ring letters appear elsewhere in medieval Nubia. We see them on the ‘crudely formed fired brick’ on plate 35 of *Meinarti* III (cit. n. 4); they are also attested in Qasr Ibrim on a paper with Old Nubian text, NI 58. They are thus part of a larger trend in Nubian magical texts, adopted from previous Egyptian and Mediterranean comparanda. Where Frankfurter’s study of the practice in an earlier period found *charaktêres* representing sounds outside of the Greek alphabet, here I propose that the ring letters represent specific Greek letters. The repeating sequence of ring letters in l. 5 seems likely to signify the Greek letters *upsilon* and *sigma*. I would read this as  $\Upsilon(\iota)\sigma$ , and take the sequence as a repeating invocation of a sacred name for Jesus as the  $\Upsilon\iota\sigma$  (son) of God.

6.  $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ : Two possible interpretations of the initial characters present themselves. The first is that given as the primary reading: assuming that the first few characters are ring letters intended to represent Greek characters, we might suppose them to be distortions of another sacred name, as proposed in l. 4 above. We might tentatively see these ring letters as  $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ , ‘God’. The distortions in the letters – through which the putative *theta* and *omicron* lose their left semicircles – may have been deliberately crafted to give the letters the illusion of forming a visual palindrome.

Alternatively, no letters may be intended at all. It has been argued that where these ringed symbols appear in magical texts but do not take letter form, the number of the rings themselves sometimes has significance. In deciphering P. Vindob. G 42406, a Judeo-Christian amulet, its editors argued that three eight-pronged asterisks with rings on the tips of the prongs played a role in that text’s overall alphanumeric value. An eight-ringed symbol would have the numeric

<sup>34</sup> W. VYČIHL, ‘Magic’, [in:] A. S. ATIYA (ed.), *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, New York 1991, vol. 5, pp. 1499–1509, at p. 1508, with accompanying example.

<sup>35</sup> M. MEYER & R. Smith (eds.), *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power*, New York 1994, p. 390.

<sup>36</sup> FRANKFURTER, ‘The magic of writing’ (cit. n. 32), p. 210.

value of 8; three of them together would have the numeric value of 24.<sup>37</sup> Thus the symbols here in l. 7 with six circles and four circles respectively could have those values in a putative numeric cryptogram. Whether the scribe of this current text was aware of this potential meaning, or simply inherited the symbols in fossilized form, is not clear.

A Coptic funerary inscription from Wadi el-Ghazali ends with ‘a conspicuous but crudely carved seven-pointed star, perhaps a blundered ‘Solomon’s seal’, a common apotropaic device’.<sup>38</sup> The inscription’s most recent editor cites U. Monneret de Villard, *Storia della Nubia cristiana* [= *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 118], Rome 1938, p. 184; Jadwiga Kubińska, *Inscriptions grecques chrétiennes* [= *Faras* IV], Warsaw 1974, pp. 180–181; and T. Mina, *Inscriptions coptes et grecques de Nubie*, Cairo 1942, no. 313 (Sakinya), for comparanda.

6. x x x x: The first two of these four characters are ring letters, with circles at each end of both strokes. The last two characters are written normally. Thus the line appears to form a progression, of an extravagant and large ring letter at the far left, with moderate size ring letters in the middle and normal characters at right. Repetition of characters is common in Coptic magic, but more often found with repetition of vowels, seven times, perhaps in ‘some relation to the seven planets’.<sup>39</sup> Adam Łajtar (personal communication) suggests that a seven-fold repetition of vowels may relate to the fact that the Greek alphabet has seven vowels and reports similar repetition on the Gebel Adda and Soba ostraka (cited above) as well as in magico-religious inscriptions on the walls of the burial vault under Room 5 of the Northwestern Annex to the monastery at Dongola’s Kom H.

7–8.  $\Upsilon$ C: Here the sacred name of  $\Upsilon$ (I0)C for Jesus is presented in vertical columns rather than horizontal rows, and surrounded by strokes placing the letters in boxes on all sides. If this interpretation is correct, the *sigma* has in both cases fallen over, taking the shape of a horizontal half-circle. In the second case, the ring letters seem poorly executed, the rings themselves slightly off-target.

$\overline{\text{TON}} \Delta(\text{OY}\lambda\text{ON}) \Delta\text{O}\lambda\lambda\text{O} | \text{CO}<\Upsilon> \Delta\Gamma\text{A}\Pi\text{TI}$ : Here we appear to have a misspelled confession that the scribe is a servant of God. In Nubian magical texts this phrase usually appears as  $\text{TON} \Delta(\text{OY}\lambda\text{ON}) \text{COY}$ , with the *delta* abbreviating  $\Delta\text{OY}\lambda\text{ON}$  appearing above the  $\text{TON}$ . Here, the scribe has instead given the abbreviation and then mistakenly spelled the word  $\Delta\text{OY}\lambda\text{ON}$  out, after a fashion. Note that the scribe omits both the *nu* at the end of  $\Delta\text{O}\lambda\lambda\text{ON}$  (for  $\Delta\text{OY}\lambda\text{ON}$ ) and the *upsilon* at the end of  $\text{COY}$ . Following as it does after the scribe’s self-confession as ‘your servant’,

<sup>37</sup> Christine H. HARRAUER & H. HARRAUER, ‘Ein jüdischchristliches Amulett, P. Vin-dob. G 42406’, *Wiener Studien* 100 (1987), pp. 185–199, at pp. 196–198.

<sup>38</sup> I. *Khartoum Copt.* 73, p. 136.

<sup>39</sup> VYICHL, ‘Magic’ (cit. n. 34), p. 1501.





Fig. 4. Psalm 100:6–8, recto & verso (no. 6)  
(photo by the Author)

#### Verso

[λαλῶν ἄδικα οὐ κατεύθυν]εν  
 [ἐναντίον τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν μου. εἰς τὰς πρωίας ἀπέκτενον πάντα  
 τοὺς] ἁμαρτο-  
 [λοὺς τῆς γῆς τοῦ ἐξολεθρεῦσαι ἐκ πόλεως κυρίου πάντας] τοὺς ἔρ-  
 4 [γαζομένους τὴν ἀνομία]ν.

Recto: 1–2. συγ]κατ[ῆσθαι 1. συγκαθησθαι || 5. κατα οἰ]κει Ralphs κατώκει ||

6. τῆς[οἰκίας μου ποιῶν Ralphs τῆς οἰκίας μου ποιῶν

Verso: 2. ἁμαρτο- 1. ἁμαρτω-.

### 7. Personal name

Inv. no. 6.κ.3-385. Late Christian Red Ware RII. 9.4 cm long. Provenience: Unknown.<sup>41</sup> Previous publication: Adams, *Meinarti* III (cit. n. 4), p. 118, pl. 38b.

ΤΑΔΔΑΙΟC

To my knowledge, the name Taddaios and its variants are attested nowhere else in the published material from medieval Nubia. Adam Łajtar (personal communication) suggests that as a potential reference to the apostle Judas Thaddaeus, the ostrakon may have been a foundational deposit. Thaddasia is the name of one of the Magi on the Nativity painting from Faras (see K. Michałowski, *Faras. Die Kathedrale aus dem Wüstenstand*, Zurich – Cologne 1967, pp. 143–147, pl. 64–66).

### 8. Owner's graffito

Inv. no. 6.κ.3-405. Adams describes this object as a 'small sherd bearing what appears to be the start of an inscription in very large letters. The shape of the letters is more suggestive of an owner's graffito than of an *ostrakon*, but the text is painted in black, not incised'. Provenience: Phase 5.<sup>42</sup>

The published figure of the text is no more than a sketch of letter traces which appear to read:

† α α  
Υ

### 9. Psalm 100:7 (?)

Inv. no. 6.κ.3-424. Two ostraka with five lines forming the right-hand

<sup>41</sup> ADAMS, *Meinarti* III (cit. n. 4), p. 118.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 91 and fig. 63.

portion of an inscription. Dimensions: 7 x 8.5 cm. Provenience: Phase 5.<sup>43</sup> According to Adams, ‘The hand looks very like that in no. 296’ (ostrakon 6 above).<sup>44</sup> The two ostraka are not, however, part of the same piece, as 296 is considerably thicker than 424. The break between the two pieces of 424 runs under l. 3, to clip the tops of the final characters of l. 4. The text presented here must be considered hypothetical only. It admittedly relies on an uncertain reading in l. 1, uncertain lacuna sizes to the left of the break, and an orthographic variation in l. 3.

Nonetheless, taking this ostrakon to be a fragment of Psalm 100:7 recommends itself. This verse is a perfect fit for the certain text in l. 4. More importantly, it elaborates on Adams’s note about the similarity between the hands in this text and number 6 above. The hands are close enough to be a match, the only significant difference appearing in this text, where the scribe presents some irregularities in the  $\delta\varphi$  in l. 4, perhaps due to trouble with ink flow.

We may then have the same scribe working on the same text twice. I argue above that ostrakon 6 may have been as large as 30 cm in its original size, perhaps large enough for all of Psalm 100. It does not seem likely that the same was true here. If my reconstruction is correct, the original ostrakon was only twice as wide as the surviving fragment. Without any text on the back, the original would have been impractically long in relation to its width in order to hold the whole psalm. Our scribe may then have practiced individual verses of Psalm 100 on smaller sherds, perfecting his ink-flow before attempting the whole psalm on one ostrakon.

] λ̣α̣λ̣-

[  $\hat{\omega}\nu$  ἄδικα] οὐ̣ κα-

[  $\tau\epsilon\acute{\upsilon}\theta\upsilon\nu$ ]  $\epsilon\nu$   $\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omega\nu$ -

4 [  $\tau\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$   $\tau\hat{\omega}$ ]  $\nu$   $\delta\varphi$ θαλ-

[  $\mu\hat{\omega}\nu$   $\mu$ ]ου

3-4.  $\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omega\nu\tau\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$  l.  $\acute{\epsilon}\nu\alpha\nu\tau\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 91.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, *loc. cit.*



Fig. 5. Psalm 100:7 (no. 9)  
(photo by the Author)

### 10. Psalm 90:7-11

Inv. no. 6.K.3-641. Ostrakon with portions of inscriptions on both sides. Provenience: Unknown.<sup>45</sup> According to Browne, the ostrakon is a 'fragment of Coptic red pottery ware inscribed on both sides with fragmentary remains', which he determined to be part of the text of Psalm 90:7-11. Thus this ostrakon would appear to have some relation to the next, 6.K.3-707, which provides a portion of Psalm 90:1-6.<sup>46</sup> The two ostraka appear to come from the same original pottery: they have the same width, the same color fabric, and the same interior ridge lines. And yet this ostrakon is written on both sides, while the next one is not, and

<sup>45</sup> ADAMS, *Meinarti* III (cit. n. 4), p. 118.

<sup>46</sup> Here, I use the numbering of the Greek Psalms in preference to that of the Hebrew or Masoretic Psalms; Greek Psalm 90 is the Masoretic Psalm 91.

the two texts appear to be in different hands. The scribe of this ostrakon was generous with space, making no attempt – at least on the verso – to fill all available space. The scribe of 707, however, is more efficient with space, packing his lines tighter and filling up most of the ostrakon.

The state of the extant text allows us to reconstruct the shape of the missing fragments, and the scribe's writing process. A large triangular fragment is missing at the top left, and a smaller triangular fragment is missing at the bottom left. When the scribe reached the end of line 6, no more space was available on that second fragment, resulting in a much shorter line 7. The scribe then rotated the ostrakon and continued on the verso with lines running in the same horizontal direction. But with such a relaxed use of space on the verso, it is clear that the scribe had no intention of going past Psalm 90:11. Otherwise, he could have fit much more content on the verso with more efficient spacing.

Psalm 90 is the most common psalm in Christian protective charms.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> For modern discussion, see, e.g., A. BIONDI, 'Le citazioni bibliche nei papiri magici cristiani greci', *StudPap* 20 (1981), pp. 93–127, at pp. 100–102; R. W. DANIEL, 'A Christian amulet on papyrus', *Vigiliae Christianae* 37 (1983), pp. 400–404, at p. 401; D. FEISSEL, 'Notes d'épigraphie chrétienne, XXIII: Une inscription de Salamine de Chypre et les citations du psaume 90', *BCH* 108 (1984), pp. 571–579, cited by D. R. JORDAN, 'Choliambos for Mary in a papyrus phylactery', *The Harvard Theological Review* 84 (1991), pp. 343–346, as the definitive list of attestations of the Psalm; more recently T. J. KRAUS, 'Septuaginta-Psalm 90 in apotropäischer Verwendung: Vorüberlegungen für eine kritische Edition und (bisheriges) Datenmaterial', *Biblische Notizen* 125 (2005), pp. 39–72, with discussion of the Psalm's apotropaic function and a list of its papyrological and epigraphic attestations; Cornelia E. RÖMER, 'Ostraka mit christlichen Texten aus der Sammlung Flinders Petrie', *ZPE* 145 (2003), pp. 183–201, at p. 335, with two recent examples of Psalm 90 amulets from the papyri; and T. S. DE BRUYN & J. H. F. DIJKSTRA, 'Greek amulets and formularies from Egypt containing Christian elements', *BASP* 48 (2011), pp. 163–216, whose checklist of Greek amulets and formularies from Egypt features excerpts from Psalm 90 in over 10% of the texts, 19 of the 186. See now also *P. Oxy.* LXXIII 4931. In a separate discussion, M. J. KRUGER, '*P. Oxy.* 840: Amulet or miniature codex?', *JTS* NS 53 (2002), pp. 81–94, at p. 87, notes that 'at least thirty-one of the amulets (about one third) quote from the Psalms, most of them from Psalm 90 or Psalm 1', and *ibidem*, n. 26, lists amulets citing the Psalms found in J. VAN HAELST, *Catalogue des papyrus juifs et chrétiens* [= *Publ.Sorb.Pap.* 1], Paris 1976; for specific cases, see n. 34. For a list of appearances of the Psalms in the papyri, see J. O'CALLAGHAN, 'Los LXX en los papiros', *StudPap* 14 (1975), pp. 11–50, at pp. 26–37, with Psalm 90 at p. 35.

It appears in Jewish protective charms as well,<sup>48</sup> where, for example, its first verse is quoted on an Aramaic Mesopotamian bowl; its tenth verse paraphrased on an amulet from the Cairo Geniza;<sup>49</sup> and its initial letters invoked in an incantation text from the same Geniza.<sup>50</sup>

Psalm 90 appears in amulets and magical papyri from the fourth to the seventh centuries. The editors of one example from Oxyrhynchos noted that 'All these are careless ill-spelled productions'.<sup>51</sup> It also appears on Byzantine residential inscriptions, lintels, and metal bracelets.<sup>52</sup>

It is not immediately obvious that Psalms on ostraka serve the same purpose as these examples.<sup>53</sup> Allen Wikgren, who long ago published two large ostraka from Upper Egypt with portions of Psalm 20 and Psalm 30, rather too easily asserted that the ostraka 'doubtless served as amulets'.<sup>54</sup> This, despite the fact that the pieces were both over 9 inches wide, and one over 11 inches high. These were certainly not amulets meant for personal, portable use. They could have been intended as house amulets. Amulets in ostraka form have been found buried under door-sills from Christian Egypt and Nubia.<sup>55</sup> This may have been part of a wider Medi-

<sup>48</sup> See TRACHTENBERG, *Jewish Magic* (cit. n. 33), pp. 112–113, for the conjunction of Psalms 90 and 91 (Masoretic), with the final verse of the former and the whole of the latter as the *Shir shel Pega'im* or 'anti-demonic psalm', the 'most popular selection from the Bible' used in Jewish magic.

<sup>49</sup> Psalm 91, Masoretic: NAVEH & SHAKED, *Amulets and Magic Bowls* (cit. no. 5, commentary), Bowl 11 (pp. 184–185) and Geniza 7 (p. 238). See also EIDEM, *Magic Spells and Formulae: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity*, Jerusalem 1993, p. 25.

<sup>50</sup> SCHIFFMAN & SWARTZ, *Hebrew and Aramaic Incantation Texts* (cit. no. 5, commentary), p. 78.

<sup>51</sup> *P. Oxy.* XVI 1928, introd.

<sup>52</sup> FEISSEL, 'Notes d'epigraphie chretienne, XXIII' (cit. n. 47).

<sup>53</sup> O. Col. inv. 25 (acc. 2.6) has part of Psalm 118.

<sup>54</sup> A. WIKGREN, 'Two ostraca fragments of the Septuagint psalter', *JNES* 5 (1946), pp. 181–184, at p. 181.

<sup>55</sup> N. B. MILLETT, 'Gebel Adda preliminary report, 1965–66', *JARCE* 6 (1967), pp. 53–63, at p. 60. Nor can I exclude the possibility that these ostraka served a purpose similar to the Jewish incantation bowls of late antiquity, which 'may have served as traps for demons, being meant to keep the evil spirits imprisoned inside them' (NAVEH & SHAKED, *Amulets and Magic Bowls* [cit. no. 5, commentary], p. 15).

terranean phenomenon: we know of Samaritan ‘phylacteries in stone’ in which Biblical passages appear carved on lintels and doorposts.<sup>56</sup>

In a recent study of Christian texts on ostraka, Cornelia Römer drew attention to a number of other possible explanations for the use of ostraka in preference to papyrus or other media.<sup>57</sup> Economic considerations may have been at stake: ostraka were going to be cheaper than any other writing surface. For under-trained scribes, the mere act of practicing on a Biblical text could be seen as an act of prayer or piety. Alternatively, an ostrakon of this size could be a model for teaching religious scribes.<sup>58</sup> Those in medieval Nubia responsible for Biblical text production presumably needed something to practice on. Similarly, those responsible for the production of amulets, charms, and phylactery texts needed exemplars. Ostraka of this size would be durable and easily legible source-texts for phylactery makers. The Psalms are the most widely attested part of the Old Testament in medieval Nubia, and appear on parchment and wood as well.<sup>59</sup>

#### Recto

[       ?       ἐκ δεξιῶν σου,  
 [πρὸς σέ δὲ οὐκ ἐγγιεῖ· πλ]ῆν τοῖς ὄφ-  
 [θαλμοῖς σου κατανοήσει]ς καὶ ἀνταπό-  
 4 [δοσιν ἀμαρτωλῶν] ὄψη[.] ὅτι σύ εἰ  
 [κύριε, ἡ ἐλπίς μου· τὸ]ν ὑψιστον ἔθου `κα-'  
 [ταφυγὴν σου.] οὐ προσελεύσε-  
 ται πρὸς σέ

<sup>56</sup> M. RIST, ‘The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: A liturgical and magical formula’, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 57 (1938), pp. 289–303, at pp. 293–294.

<sup>57</sup> RÖMER, ‘Ostraka mit christlichen Texten’ (cit. n. 47), pp. 186–190.

<sup>58</sup> A suggestion I owe to Stanley BURSTEIN.

<sup>59</sup> See RUFFINI, ‘Psalms 149–150’ (cit. no. 3, commentary), for a bilingual Greek/Old Nubian version of Psalms 149 and 150, with references to other attestations of the psalms from Christian Nubia. See also G. M. BROWNE, ‘New texts in Old Nubian from Qasr Ibrim II (A leaf from a bilingual psalter [Ps. 83:13; 86:1–7; 46:2–6])’, *Sudan Texts Bulletin* 3 (1981), pp. 9–19; IDEM, *Bibliorum Sacrorum Versio Palaeonubiana* [= CSCO 547, *Subsidia* 87], Louvain 1994; and IDEM, ‘An Old Nubian translation of Psalm 129’, *Beiträge zur Sudanforschung* 9 (2006), pp. 25–27.

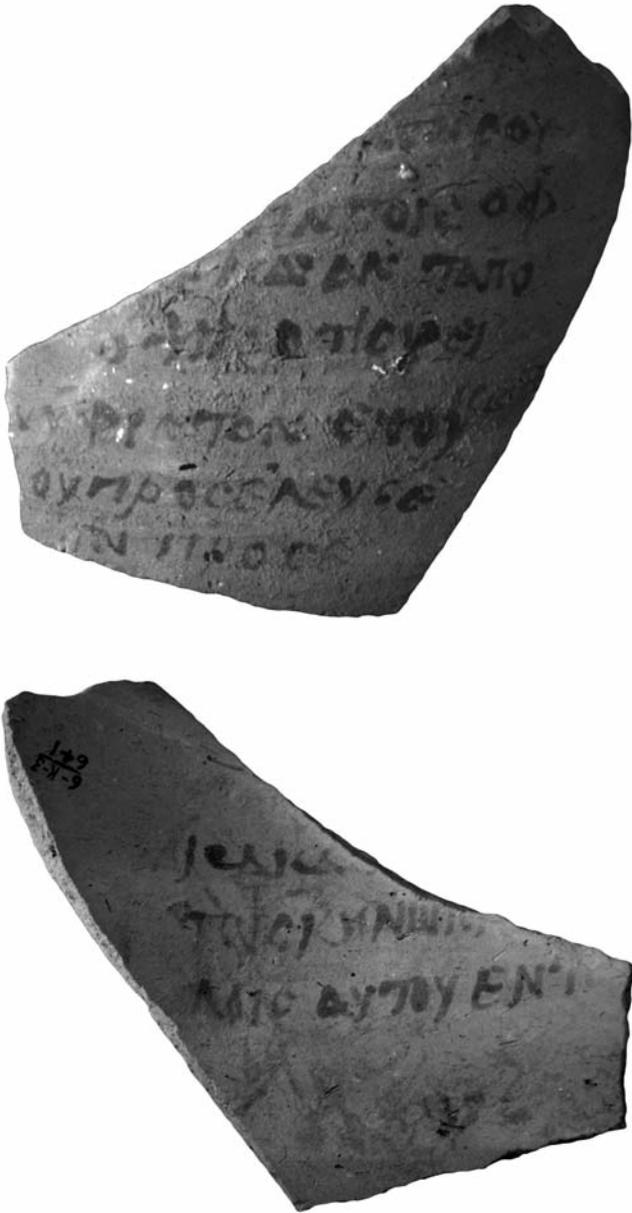


Fig. 6. Psalm 90:7-11, recto & verso (no. 10)  
(photo by the Author)

## Verso

κακά, [καὶ μάστιξ οὐκ ἐγγιεῖ]  
 τῷ σκηνώμ[ατί σου, ὅτι τοῖς ἀγγέ-]  
 λοῖς αὐτοῦ ἐντε[λείται περὶ σοῦ ? ]

Recto: 4-5. Rahlfs ὅτι σὺ, κύριε, ἡ ἐλπίς μου

## II. Psalm 90:1-6

Inv. no. 6.κ.3-707. Very large ostrakon with complete inscription of eleven lines. Browne's unpublished notes describe this text as a 'Curved fragment of coarse red pottery, re-assembled from several pieces, inscribed on the inside surface with eleven lines of Greek, containing Psalm xc (xc1) 1-6'. Provenience: Phase 5.<sup>60</sup> I use the vertical | bar to indicate where the original ostrakon has broken into smaller pieces.

One striking aspect of this ostrakon, apart from its size, is its insertion in l. 3 of the non-standard *βοηθός μου*, 'my helper', into the Old Testament text in reference to God. This insertion is, with text 2 above, another convergence between these ostraka and Meinarti's epigraphic evidence. God appears in *I. Khartoum Greek* 8, l. 26, as ὁ θ(εὸ)ς βοηθία μου, 'God (is) my help' and in *I. Khartoum Greek* 9, ll. 26-27, ὁ θ(εὸ)ς βοηθός, 'God (is) help'. Both inscriptions are from Meinarti, from AD 1161 and 1084 respectively. As the editor of the latter text noted, God is nowhere else designated as 'helper' in Nubian Greek (*I. Khartoum Greek* 9, commentary to ll. 26-27).

† Ὁ κατοικῶ|ν ἐν βοηθείᾳ τ|οῦ ὑψίστου ἐν σκέπη τοῦ θ(εο)ῦ  
 τοῦ οὐ(ρα)νοῦ ἀ|λισταῖται· ἐρε|ῖ τῷ κυ(ρι)ῷ Ἀντιλήμω|ρων μου  
 εἶ καὶ καταφυ|γῆ μου· ὁ θ(εὸ)ς μου β|οηθός μου, καὶ ἐλπῶ ἐπ'  
 αὐτόν,

4 ὅτι αὐτὸς ῥύσ|αιταί με ἐκ παγίδ|ο|ς θηρευτῶν καὶ ἀπὸ λόγου  
 παραχοόδου(ς). | ἐν τοῖς μεταφ|ρέν|οις αὐτοῦ ἐπισκιάσε σου,

<sup>60</sup> ADAMS, *Meinarti* III (cit. n. 4), p. 91.

καὶ ὑπὸ τ|[ᾶ]ς πτέρυγας |αὐτοῦ ἐλ|πειεῖς· ὄπλων κυκλώ-  
 8 σει σε ἢ ἀ|λήθεια αὐτ|οῦ. οὐ φο|βητήση ἀπὸ φόβου ν|υκ-  
 τεριωῦ,| καὶ ἀπὸ βέλ|ους πετ|ομένους ἡμέρας, ἀ|πὸ πράγ-  
 γαμ|ατος ἐν σ|κότει διαπο|ρευομένου, ἀπ|ὸ συμ-  
 πτώμ|ατος καὶ δαι|μονίου μεσ|υμβρι-  
 νοῦ·

1.  $\overline{\theta\gamma}$  || 2.  $\overline{\delta\gamma\eta\omicron\gamma}$  |  $\overline{\kappa\gamma\rho}$  || 3.  $\overline{\theta\epsilon\varsigma}$

2. ἀλυσθήσεται I. ἀλυσθήσεται | Ἀντιλήπτωρ I. Ἀντιλήπτωρ || 3. ὁ θεός μου β|ηθός μου, καὶ ἐλπῶ ἐπ' αὐτόν Rahlfs ὁ θεός μου, ἐλπῶ ἐπ' αὐτόν || 4. ῥύσαιταί I. ῥύσεται || 5. παραχόδου(s) I. παραχώδους | ἐπισκιάσε σου I. ἐπισκιάσει σοι || 6. ὄπλων I. ὄπλω || 7. φοβητήση I. φοβηθήση || 8. καὶ ἀπὸ βέλους I. ἀπὸ βέλους | πετομένους I. πετομένου || 8-9. πράγματος I. πράγματος || 9. ἐν σκότει διαπορευομένου Rahlfs διαπορευομένου ἐν σκότει || 10-11. μεσ|υμβρινοῦ I. μεσημβρινοῦ

1-3.  $\overline{\theta\gamma}$ ;  $\overline{\delta\gamma\eta\omicron\gamma}$ ;  $\overline{\kappa\gamma\rho}$ ;  $\overline{\theta\epsilon\varsigma}$ . Various forms of the *nomina sacra* appear in Psalm verses from Qasr Ibrim.  $\overline{\theta\epsilon\varsigma}$ , for instance, appears at P. QI II 13, ii, l. 23.<sup>61</sup> The abbreviations for θεός and for κύριος are very common, being among the earliest attested of the *nomina sacra*.<sup>62</sup> The abbreviation for οὐ(ρα)νοῦ employed here is, by contrast, one of the later additions to the *nomina sacra*, and among the least consistently abbreviated.<sup>63</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Consider the most revealing pieces of the textual puzzle at Meinarti: (1) a hesitant attempt at writing an invocation to the Holy Trinity; (2) an

<sup>61</sup> The citation form I recommend in 'A Guide to the Texts of Medieval Nubia', available online at <[http://www.medievalnubia.info/dev/index.php/Guide\\_to\\_the\\_Texts](http://www.medievalnubia.info/dev/index.php/Guide_to_the_Texts)>.

<sup>62</sup> HURTADO, 'The origin of the *nomina sacra*' (cit. no. 5, commentary), p. 655.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 655-656. For the origin of the *nomina sacra* in the 'early Christian reverence shown to the name of Jesus', with certain words 'presented in a special written form that was intended to mark them off from the surrounding text and express special reverence for them as visual signs', see *ibidem*, pp. 671-673. For a list of appearances of the *nomina sacra* in the papyri of the New Testament, see O'CALLAGHAN, 'Los LXX en los papiros' (cit. n. 47). For the practice in papyri more generally, see CHOAT, *Belief and Cult* (cit. n. 17), pp. 119-125.

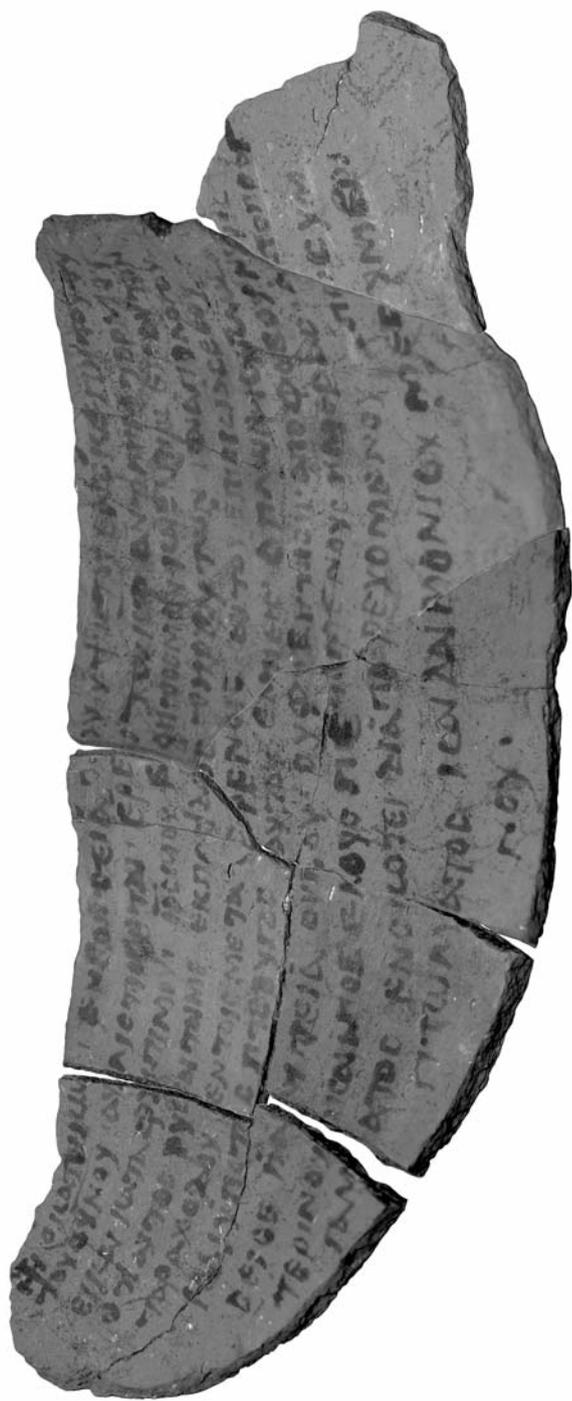


Fig. 7. Psalm 90:r-6 (no. II)  
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alphabet and religious symbols on an ostrakon better suited for viewing from a distance than for personal use; (3) a magical text with apotropaic symbols based on a tradition inherited from Egyptian Christianity; (4) an ostrakon with a portion of Psalm 100; (5) another ostrakon with the same Psalm by perhaps the same scribe; and (6) two ostraka with consecutive portions of Psalm 90, a common verse in protective charms, two ostraka which appear to have been written on fragments of the same pot by different scribes, and meant not for portability but for use as models or house charms.

Without more accurate information on the findspot of these texts, and thus without the ability to put them all in the same location, we cannot be certain about what we have found. But the composite picture is suggestive nonetheless. One obvious way to synthesise this material is to consider it evidence for Nubian education and religious training. Ostraka like these show how Nubian scribes like Agapiti learned the alphabet, learned the religious cryptograms they sprinkled through their texts, and learned the magical spells and Psalm verses through which they invoked divine protection. It is even possible that this educational process took place in a single centre, where scribal training and production of magical and religious texts took place, in essence, at the Meinarti phylactery factory.

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