



Press Release

More than 18,000 pot sherds document life in ancient Egypt

Finds from ancient Athribis detail trade, teaching materials and even school punishments

Dr. Karl Guido Rijkhoek
Director

Antje Karbe
Press Officer

Phone +49 7071 29-76788
+49 7071 29-76789

Fax +49 7071 29-5566
karl.rijkhoek[at]uni-tuebingen.de
antje.karbe[at]uni-tuebingen.de

www.uni-tuebingen.de/aktuell

Tübingen, 31.01.2022

Egyptologists have recovered more than 18,000 inscribed sherds in ancient Athribis - the remains of vessels and jars that served as writing material some 2,000 years ago. The sherds, known as ostraca, document lists of names, purchases of food and everyday objects, and even writing from a school, including lines written by pupils as a punishment. It is very rare to find such a large volume of ostraca. They were recovered during excavations led by Professor Christian Leitz of the Institute for Ancient Near Eastern Studies (IANES) at the University of Tübingen in cooperation with Mohamed Abdelbadia and his team from the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

In ancient times, ostraca were used in large quantities as writing material, inscribed with ink and a reed or hollow stick (calamus). Such a large quantity of finds has only been made once before in Egypt, in the workers' settlement of Deir el-Medineh, near the Valley of the Kings in Luxor. The ostraca now recovered provide a variety of insights into the everyday life of the ancient settlement of Athribis, nearly 200 kilometers north of Luxor.

Around 80 percent of the pot sherds are inscribed in Demotic, the common administrative script in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, which developed from Hieratic after 600 BC. Among the second most common finds are ostraca with Greek script, but the team also came across inscriptions in Hieratic, hieroglyphic and - more rarely - Coptic and Arabic script.

They also discovered pictorial ostraca - a special category, says Christian Leitz. "These sherds show various figurative representations, including animals such as scorpions and swallows, humans, gods from the nearby temple, even geometric figures."

The contents of the ostraca vary from lists of various names to accounts of different foods and items of daily use. A surprisingly large number of

sherds could be assigned to an ancient school, the research team said. "There are lists of months, numbers, arithmetic problems, grammar exercises and a 'bird alphabet' - each letter was assigned a bird whose name began with that letter." A three-digit number of ostraca also contain writing exercises that the team classifies as punishment: The sherds are inscribed with the same one or two characters each time, both on the front and back.

Tübingen Egyptologists have been working in Athribis since 2003, and since 2005 as part of a 15-year research project funded by the German Research Foundation. The aim was to uncover and publish a large temple built by Ptolemy XII, the father of the famous Cleopatra VII. This project has now been completed and the temple is open to visitors. The sanctuary was built about 2000 years ago for the lion goddess Repit and her consort Min, and was converted into a nunnery after pagan cults were banned in 380 AD. Since spring 2018, excavations have been under way west of the temple at another sanctuary, and the team have come across the numerous ostraca in the rubble. The excavations are ongoing.

Excavation director Marcus Müller faces increasingly challenging tasks on site as the depth increases. In the west of the excavation area, multi-story buildings with staircases and vaults are now coming to light; the rest of the area has filled in with rubble over the centuries. The analysis of the ostraca by an international team, mostly from France and Germany, is coordinated by Sandra Lippert, head of research at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) in Paris. The pictographic ostraca are being investigated by Carolina Teotino at the University of Tübingen. The excavations are financially supported by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, the Brunner Foundation and the Humanism Foundation.

Information and video on the temple project: <https://uni-tuebingen.de/de/80785>

Contact:

Professor Dr. Christian Leitz
University of Tübingen
Institute for Ancient Near Eastern Studies (IANES)
Phone +49 7071 29- 78529
Christian.leitz[at]uni-tuebingen.de

➤ **Videos (in German):**

-Video 1 (1:1; with subtitles) about the findings: <https://youtu.be/sVCbgGYG-hI>

-Video 2 (16:9) - Prof. Dr. Christian Leitz about Ostraka: <https://youtu.be/nojb3a4ooxA>

-Video 3 (16:9) – Dr. Carolina Teotino about the pictographic ostraca:
<https://youtu.be/Z97IExsLI6U>

➤ **Information about the Project Athribis und virtual reconstruction:**

<https://uni-tuebingen.de/de/80785>

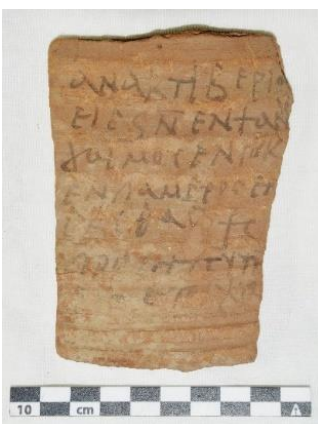
➤ **Project Website:** <http://www.athribis.uni-tuebingen.de/>

➤ **Images for Download:** <https://www.pressefotos.uni-tuebingen.de/20220131%20Ostraka.zip> – Please not the copyright.



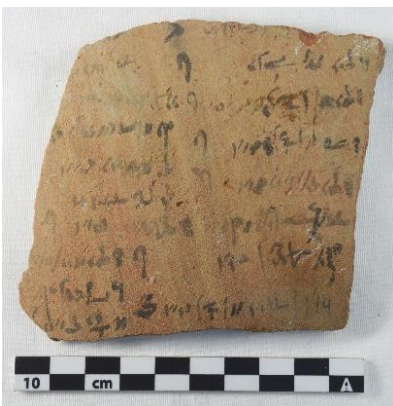
1)
The temple of Athribis

Photo: Marcus Müller



2)
Coptic receipt, issued by a man called
Tiberius (likely 6th century)

Photo: Athribis-Projekt Tübingen



3)
Receipt for bread in Demotic. The loaves
are distributed in multiples of 5 (often 5,
sometimes 10 or 20). Many of the buyers
are women. (Late Ptolemaic or early Roman
period)

Photo: Athribis-Projekt Tübingen



4)
Naughty pupils had to write lines - hundreds
of these tablets were found, with the same
symbol usually written on both front and
back.

Photo: Athribis-Projekt Tübingen



5)
Fragment of a school text with a bird alphabet in Hieratic. On the right, the name of the bird, and on the left, the numbers from 5 to 8, which reflect the position of the letters in the list. (Late Ptolemaic or early Roman period).

Photo: Athribis-Projekt Tübingen



6)
Fragment of a hieroglyphic inscription with information on local mythology, probably copied by a student from the neighboring temple. (Late Ptolemaic or early Roman period).

Photo: Athribis-Projekt Tübingen



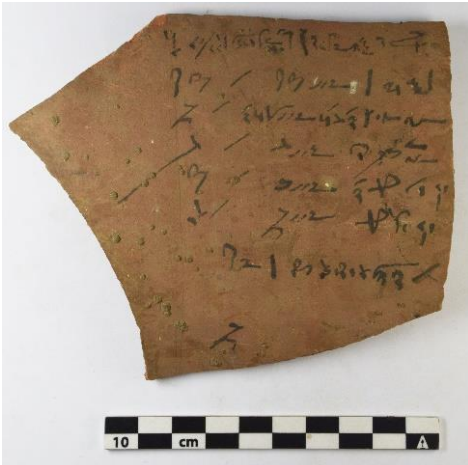
7)
Pictorial ostracon with a baboon and an ibis, the two sacred animals of Thoth, the god of wisdom.

Photo: Athribis-Projekt Tübingen



8)
Child's drawing

Photo: Athribis-Projekt Tübingen



9)
Accounting for offerings - money, wine, castor oil, wheat and barley - to the temple goddess Repit. (Late Ptolemaic period)

Photo: Athribis-Projekt Tübingen



10)
Building complex with stairs and vaults after removal of several layers.

Photo: Athribis-Projekt Tübingen



11)
A group of workers in the area where the ostraca are found. In the background, the hill of Athribis.

Photo: Athribis-Projekt Tübingen