



Press Release

Record-breaking trove of information: Upper Egypt site has now yielded over 43,000 inscribed pot sherds

Ostraca give insights into a thousand years of daily life in old Egypt

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A joint archaeological mission by the University of Tübingen and the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MoTA) has documented the world's most extensive find of inscribed pottery sherds at the Upper Egypt site of Athribis. The archaeologists have recovered more than 43,000 ostraca between 2005 and 2026, more than 42,000 of them in the past eight years alone. Ostraca are pot sherds that were used as writing material in ancient times, mostly for short, everyday notes, accounts, lists, or practice texts. Athribis is now the most productive site for ostraca to date, surpassing Deir el-Medina, a former workers' village in the Valley of the Kings.

The archaeological complex of Athribis is located ten kilometers west of the Nile, opposite the ancient metropolis of Akhmim. It was the cult center of the lion goddess (Ta-)Repit, consisting of the temple district, the settlement, the necropolis, and limestone quarries. The excavations in Athribis are being conducted under the direction of Professor Christian Leitz from the University of Tübingen Institute for the Cultures of the Ancient Near East (IANES), Egyptology in cooperation with Mohamed Abdelbadia and his team from MoTA.

A rich source of social history over a millennium

The earliest texts are tax receipts from the 3rd century BCE written in Demotic script, the common administrative script of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. The most recent texts are Arabic inscriptions on vessels from the 9th to 11th centuries AD. "The ostraca show us an astonishing variety of everyday situations," says Leitz. "We find tax lists and deliveries, along with short notes about everyday activities, exercises by schoolchildren, religious texts, and priestly certificates attesting the quality of sacrificial animals. This mixture is what makes the find so valuable," Leitz adds. "This everyday content gives us a direct insight into the lives of the people of Athribis and makes the ostraca an important source for a comprehensive social history of the region."

The majority of the ostraca are written in Demotic script, followed by a considerable number of Greek inscriptions. A smaller but significant proportion of the sherds shows figurative and geometric designs. In addition, there are rare texts in Hieratic, hieroglyphic, Coptic or Arabic script. Athribis is also considered the world's most important site for demotic-hieratic horoscopes, featuring more than 130 such texts. These birth predictions are important sources for the history of ancient astronomy and astrology.

Growing excavation areas, increasing number of finds

The extraordinary extent of the finds became apparent in 2018, when a 20 by 40 meter area was opened up west of the Temple of Ptolemy XII and extended to the southwest. The work led to a large-scale deposit of ceramics, transitioning into an excavation of a settlement. Along with the ostraca, more and more mud brick buildings, living quarters, and storage structures are coming to light.

About three years ago, the excavation was further expanded to the west. Around 40,000 ostraca were found on the resulting 40 by 40-meter area, with between 50 and 100 sherds found each day. For every ostrakon hundreds of sherds had to be examined front and back. Yet more ostraca have come from the clearance of an older temple, of which only the 52-meter-wide gate structure was visible until 2022.

"We expect to find many more ostraca. The high and ever-growing number of objects is encouraging, but it also presents us with challenges," says Leitz. For example, the complete three-dimensional digitization of the more than 40,000 sherds in the local depot is labor-intensive and requires specialized equipment, high computing capacity, and specially trained staff. "In principle, it would be possible to accelerate the digitization and cataloging of the ostraca by using AI systems," says Leitz, "but the effort required to train and maintain such a system, though appealing, would be high."

"This impressive project demonstrates the power of joint, long-term research. Through expertise, patience, and passion, inconspicuous pot sherds are transformed into a vivid picture of past worlds," says Professor Karla Pollmann, President of the University of Tübingen. "The project is also a successful part of the long-standing collaboration between the University of Tübingen and its Egyptian partner institutions. Together, we bear responsibility for preserving and researching a cultural heritage that has significance far beyond national borders."



View of the site where both ostraca and a settlement are being excavated.
Photo: Marcus Müller / Tübingen Athribis Project



On the right in the foreground are the remains of a pylon. To the left of it is the current excavation site in front of a rock face to the west.
Photo: Marcus Müller / Tübingen Athribis Project



In front of the western rock face: Remains of a temple where numerous astrological ostraca were found. This may have been where the temple astronomer worked.

Photo: Marcus Müller / Tübingen Athribis Project



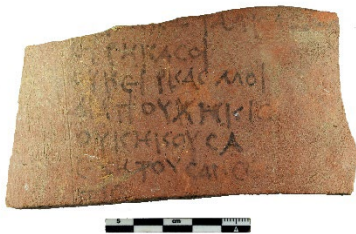
Drawing of a shrew, the sacred animal of the god Haroeris.

Photo: Tübingen Athribis Project



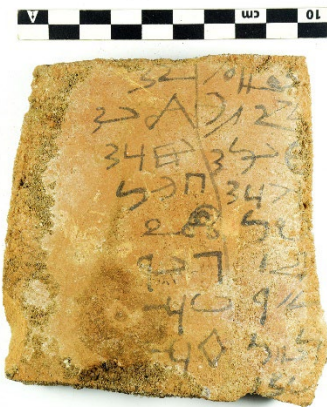
Hieratic school text, a version of the “bird alphabet”

Photo: Tübingen Athribis Project



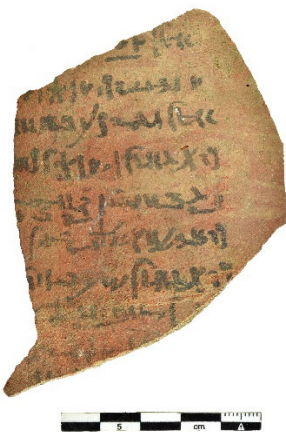
Greek school text of an everyday conversation; it translates roughly as follows: "I wrote to you. You didn't write to me. I told you. You didn't tell me. Why didn't you come? I have heard nothing. They waxed you. Who?" "Waxed" probably refers to the wax tables which pupils used, which could be wiped clean and re-used.

Photo: Tübingen Athribis Project



List of workers in Demotic script, using unusual symbols as abbreviations for individual workers

Photo: Tübingen Athribis Project



List in Demotic script including several personal names referring to local gods

Photo: Tübingen Athribis Project



Pupils copy of a hieroglyphic temple inscription
 Photo: Tübingen Athribis Project



Demotic inscription on an amphora: "the first (delivery from) the southern vineyard"
 Photo: Tübingen Athribis Project

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