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New Kingdom Hieratic Documents in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the collection of New Kingdom hieratic documents in the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), Boston. An opening section discusses the history of the museum's Egyptian collection, with special focus on the New Kingdom hieratic documents, including several limestone ostraca and a large group of ceramic ostraca from Deir el-Ballas. The second half of the paper presents a case study of O. Boston MFA 47.1632, which bears an excerpt of *The Teaching of Amenemhat*, investigating the ostrakon's likely provenance, providing textual commentary, and contextualizing the ostrakon within the broader corpus of manuscripts of Amenemhat.

1. INTRODUCTION [L. M. B]

Some forty-five hundred antiquities acquired in 1872 form the nucleus of the Egyptian collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Collected in Egypt by Scottish traveler Robert Hay in 1824–1828 and 1829–1834, these objects were purchased from Hay's heirs in 1871 by Samuel Alds Way, a Boston businessman, whose son Charles Granville Way presented them to the Museum the following year (Berman 2001: 11–24). Since then the collection has grown exponentially, partly through gifts and purchases, but mostly from excavations. The collection now includes over sixty thousand objects, the major portion of which derives from the excavations conducted by the Harvard University-Boston Museum of Fine Arts

expedition led by George Andrew Reisner from 1905 to 1947 and awarded to the Museum by the governments of Egypt and Sudan.

New Kingdom hieratic documents comprise a very small portion of the MFA's Egyptian collection. They may be summarized as follows:

Two limestone ostraca with oracle petitions from the Hay-Way collection were published in 1997 by K. Ryholt.¹

A large limestone ostrakon with inscriptions in hieroglyphics and hieratic was published in 1958 by J. Černý and again in 1993 by D. Berg.² The ostrakon was purchased in Egypt around 1909 and acquired by the Museum in 1911 through funds provided by a donor. From the same source comes a small round-topped limestone stele with

1 MFA 72.659 and 72.666: Ryholt (1997). All accessioned MFA objects are accessible online with images (when available) on the Museum's collections database at www.mfa.org.

2 MFA 11.1498: Černý (1958); Berg (1993).

a hieratic inscription painted on the edges and on the back.³

The largest group of New Kingdom hieratic inscriptions in the MFA are ninety-two pottery ostraca and one nearly complete beaker. They derive from the palace and settlement site of Deir el-Ballas, excavated by Reisner in 1900 for the Hearst Expedition of the University of California, Berkeley. After the Hearst Expedition was taken over by Harvard and the MFA in 1905, these potshards remained with Reisner at Giza. They were part of the share allotted to Boston in the last division of finds with the Egyptian government when the Harvard-MFA Expedition was closed down in 1947. These ostraca have been consulted by scholars but remain unpublished and unaccessioned.

As a case study we have chosen a literary ostrakon of uncertain provenance that may come from the last mentioned group.

2. CASE STUDY: A LITERARY EXCERPT IN BOSTON (O. BOSTON MFA 47.1632) [M. G.]

Just one of the hieratic ostraca in the MFA contains a literary excerpt: O. Boston MFA 47.1632, which bears one verse of *The Teaching of Amenemhat*. The ostrakon is a pentagonal body sherd from a large Upper Egyptian marl vessel, measuring 13.2 × 7.5 × 0.8 cm and bearing one line of hieratic written in black ink (fig. 1).

The ostrakon has no recorded provenance. The accession paperwork states that it came ‘from Harvard Camp’, referring to the headquarters of the Harvard University-MFA Expedition at Giza, but this does not necessarily suggest that the ostrakon was excavated from Giza, as Harvard Camp served as a storage facility for objects from various sites. The fabric, surface treatment, and

manufacture of the ostrakon suggest that it may be from Deir el-Ballas.⁴ In these qualities, the ostrakon resembles several others in the MFA’s collection—Eg. Inv. 6802, Eg. Inv. 6866, and Eg. Inv. 6936—that were certainly (or, in the case of Eg. Inv. 6936, probably) excavated from Deir el-Ballas by the Hearst Expedition. However, O. Boston MFA 47.1632 differs from many of the MFA’s other ostraca from this site, in that the vessel it comes from was larger and had thinner walls.⁵ As a result, the ostrakon’s connection to this site remains uncertain. As mentioned above, none of the MFA’s ninety-two hieratic ostraca from the Hearst Expedition’s excavations at Deir el-Ballas have been accessioned, whereas O. Boston MFA 47.1632 was accessioned on December 31, 1947. This suggests that, if O. Boston MFA 47.1632 was in fact part of the group of Deir el-Ballas ostraca, somehow it became separated from the others at some point before late 1947, when Harvard Camp closed and the objects stored there were divided between Egypt and the MFA.

The text is written in neat hieratic with no ligatures. Due to the short length of the inscription, the few distinct sign forms, and the difficulties inherent in dating literary hands, the ostrakon’s paleography is of limited use in establishing its dating. Several of the ostrakon’s signs appear most similar to examples from the late 18th or early 19th Dynasty, namely the *s*’ sign (Aa18), which lacks a horizontal crossbar on the bottom, and the sun sign (N5), which has a round shape and a separated dot in the center. The text also includes one unusually formed sign: the night sky (N2), which has two separate dots on either side of the bottom of the scepter, rather than the typical crossbar. Based on my examination of the individual signs, as well as the hand’s overall appearance, I propose a date of inscription in the late 18th or early 19th

³ MFA 11.1500: Leprohon (1991: 3, 100–105).

⁴ P. Lacovara, pers. comm. 23 Jan. 2022.

⁵ S.J. Allen, pers. comm. 16 Feb. 2022.



Fig. 1. Ostrakon Boston MFA 47.1632. Harvard University
—Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition.
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Dynasty.⁶ This date accords with the ostrakon's possible origin of Deir el-Ballas: although the main phases of occupation of the settlement appear to have ended in the mid-18th Dynasty, limited material and a few tombs from the late 18th and early 19th Dynasties suggest that a small community occupied the site in this period.⁷ However, O. Boston MFA 47.1632's later date contrasts with the MFA's other Ballas ostraca, which date to the late 17th and early 18th Dynasty.

The ostrakon bears an excerpt of §6a of *The Teaching of Amenemhat*.⁸ This verse begins the central section of the poem, in which Amenemhat I describes the attack on him by his bodyguards. Here the poem shifts in tone, from the didactic and lamenting opening stanzas to a dark and dramatic first-person narrative. §6a is among the most frequently copied excerpts of the poem—second only to the opening lines, which are generally the most copied portion of any literary text⁹—appearing in at least forty-one other

manuscripts.¹⁰ I present here a hieroglyphic transcription (fig. 2), transliteration, and translation of O. Boston MFA 47.1632's copy of §6a, along with a brief textual commentary.



Fig. 2. Hieroglyphic transcription of O. Boston MFA 47.1632

r-sʹ msyt pw h[ʹwj...]

It was after dinner, and e[vening...]

O. Boston MFA 47.1632 displays very little variation with respect to the other copies of §6a, other than an unusually large number of determinatives in *msyt*—no other copy of this verse includes the sun (N5) or its accompanying stroke (Z1)—and traces of an additional sign after *pw*. Due to the break on the left side of the ostrakon, it is difficult to identify this sign with certainty. J. Černý read these traces and the sign I have read as *hʹ* (M12) as a single sign, *mn* (Y5). Although the visible traces do resemble *mn*, this sign is unattested in any of the other twenty-two copies that preserve this portion of §6a, all of which have *hʹwj* 'evening' (Adrom 2006: 35–36). A more plausible reading is of two separate signs: a *p*, which was written erroneously and then partially converted into the next sign, *hʹ*.

The ostrakon adds to a corpus of over two hundred and fifty copies of *Amenemhat*, the vast majority of which are Ramesside ostraca. Within this corpus, it is uncommon, though not unheard of, to find an excerpt consisting of a single verse, as in O. Boston MFA 47.1632. Due to a variety of factors—including handwriting quality, archaeological context, medium of the manuscript, and

6 This opinion is shared by R.J. Demarée (pers. comm., 15 Nov. 2018), and the proposed dating overlaps with the catalog record's date of Dynasty 19–20. J. Černý transcribed the ostrakon in Notebook 65, p. 32, but his brief remarks do not discuss palaeography or dating.

7 Lacovara (2020: 151); Jensen (2019: 1, 460–461).

8 I employ the verse divisions put forth in Helck (1969), which are widely accepted in studies of *Amenemhat*.

9 See, e.g., Parkinson (2009: 193); Hagen (2021: 5).

10 Thirty-nine others are listed in Adrom (2006: 35–36). Two others have been recently published: Asyut dipinto TN2, in Verhoeven (2020: 28–31, pl. 43, 182–183); and T3.L10, in Hagen (2021: 42, pl. 62).

excerpting practices—nearly all of the ostraca bearing excerpts of *Amenemhat* have been identified as scribal exercises. In the case of O. Boston 47.1632, such an identification is plausible, since it is an ostrakon with a literary excerpt, but not definitive.¹¹ An earlier ostrakon bearing an excerpt of *Sinuhe* (Berlin P 12341), which was most likely copied by a scribal apprentice in 17th-Dynasty Deir el-Ballas, attests to the usage of literary

excerpts in scribal training during the main phase of occupation at the site (Parkinson 2009: 174–175). At the very least, O. Boston MFA 47.1632 suggests that the 18th–19th Dynasty community of Deir el-Ballas continued to participate in literary activity; it may also suggest that this later community included scribal apprentices being trained at the settlement.

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11 On the question of the identification of scribal exercises, see, e.g., Hagen (2012: 91–101); Geoga (2020: 30–33).