

Pylon 8 (2025)
ISSN: 2751-4722

A Coptic Order for the Village Headmen of Tin (Girga)

Lincoln H. Blumell, Jonathan Vassar

Heidelberg: Propylaeum, 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48631/pylon.2025.8.114589>

Citation

L.H. Blumell, "A Coptic Order for the Village Headmen of Tin (Girga)," Pylon 8 (2025) Article 11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48631/pylon.20225.8.114589>.

We want to thank the L. Tom Perry Special Collections staff at the Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, particularly Magie Kopp and Cindy Brightenburg, for facilitating our work on this ostrakon. We also want to thank John Gee and Frederic Krueger for providing valuable feedback on an earlier edition of this ostrakon.

- §1 In 1981, Brigham Young University (BYU) acquired a small collection of papyri and ostraca through Aziz Atiya, Professor of Languages and History at the University of Utah.¹ Atiya approached BYU to sell some of the Greek and Coptic materials he had amassed in his personal collection since he was refining it to reflect his primary interest in Arabic documents. Since the late 1940s, Atiya had been acquiring Greek, Coptic, and Arabic texts from his native Egypt, and when he joined the University of Utah in 1959, he brought many of these with him. In the 1981 purchase agreement with Atiya, the Harold B. Lee Library acquisition records report the purchase of 20 ostraca (inv. nos. 67–87).²
- §2 Ostrakon inv. no. 67 preserves a document written in Coptic (Sahidic) consisting of 12 lines of text, inscribed on the convex side. The ostrakon is reddish-brown or terracotta in color. It has ribbing on the upper portion that transitions to a smoother side, suggesting that the sherd was once part of a truncated, cone-shaped transport amphora.³ The ink has a dark brown, almost black, hue. The top, right, and bottom margins of the text are preserved. For the first six lines, the opening text of each is lost, with at most 4 or 5 characters missing. But with each successive line, based on the breakage of the ostrakon, the missing text progressively diminishes. The lost text can be confidently restored.
- §3 Letters are written clearly and consistently with well-spaced lines, and many letters are written with a slight right-leaning tilt. While letters generally lack any ornate features, the left end of the crossbar of the tau often contains a small but distinct serif. The writer consistently uses a macron to mark the e-vowel and inserts a trema over the iota.
- §4 The document, which preserves an order, is terse and to the point and contains considerable implicit information. It is sent from a person identified as “John, the chief attendant” (ἀρχυπερετης) and is addressed “to the village headmen of Tin” (νῆλαωνηῆς ντῖν). John opens the document by reporting that an unnamed man had come to him and reported mistreatment at the hands of the group: specifically, that they had dismissed him from a “field-share” (οὔμερος ντοῖ) and had given it to someone else. John informs the village officials that their actions were unjust and reminds them that he had previously instructed them to leave the man there. Given the reference to “Tin,” a village located in Upper Egypt on the west side of the Nile, almost 20 km south of Ptolemais Hermeiou, it can reasonably be assumed that the land was not located too far away.
- §5 There are many scenarios that could involve the removal or reassignment of individuals to land. [P.Duk.inv. 839 R](#) and [P.Duk.inv. 839 V](#) illustrate an example of the assignment of individuals to a piece of land, revealing a situation where instructions are given to appoint men to a place on an island (μοῦ) and give them wages. Another situation that may entail the reassignment of land is a dispute, as in [P.KRU 50](#), which illustrates an argument where divisions of what may be an estate are negotiated. Along this line, the present document could fit into a larger conversation about a dispute over a “field-share” being negotiated by the village headmen. However, there are other possibilities that may result in the removal and assignment of individuals to land, and the evidence in this document is insufficient to determine the specific situation it addresses.
- §6 A date for the document falling somewhere in the sixth to eighth centuries is likely. Paleographically, the hand shares graphic features that can be found in dated Coptic texts from this period: e.g.,

¹ On the BYU collection acquired from Atiya, see discussions in [Blumell 2013](#): 182 and [Blumell and Wayment 2014](#): 59–60.

² Most of the ostraca preserve Coptic text, but three preserve Greek text (inv. nos. 68, 72, 79). Unfortunately, neither the acquisition records, the library’s catalog, nor any of Atiya’s extant correspondence mentions the ostraca’s provenance.

³ The ostrakon may have come from amphora Type AE 3T-3.1; see [Dixneuf 2011](#): 138–40, fig. 127.

☞ **P.Prag. 1.46** (A.D. 522; Antinoopolis)⁴ and ☞ **P.KRU 10** (8 Dec. A.D. 722; Thebes ?). Furthermore, the title **ⲗⲁⲟⲗⲁⲛⲉ** (“village head man”) appears in texts typically thought to date between the sixth and eighth centuries.⁵

⁴ While this text is written in Greek, the last line on the verso is written in Coptic.

⁵ ☞ **Berkes 2017**: 82.

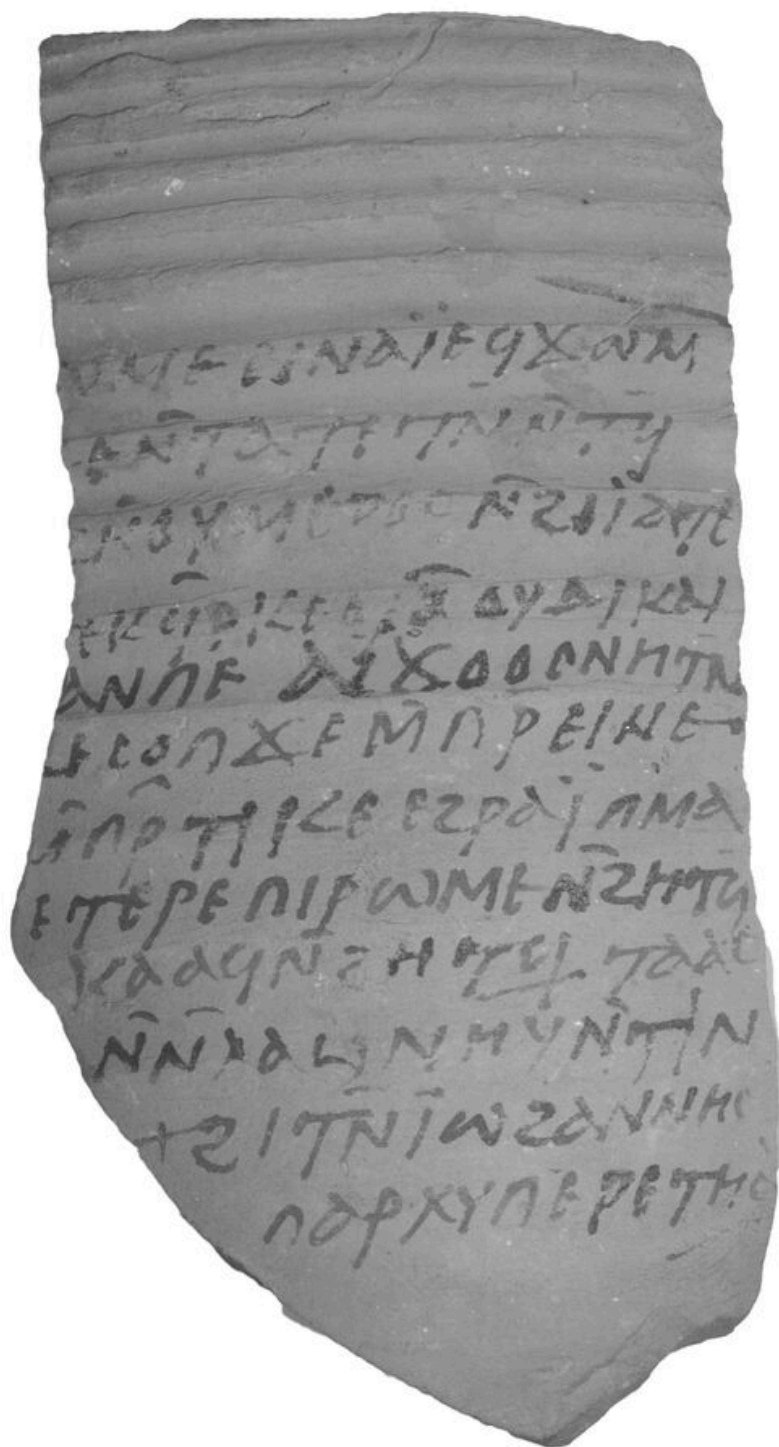


Fig. 1: BYU Inv. no. 67



Fig. 2: BYU Inv. no. 67

Inv. no. 67

18.5 (h) × 9.0 (w)

A.D. VI–VIII
Tin (Girga)

[† ΛΟΥΡ]ΩΜΕ ΕΙ ΝΑΪ ΕΦΧΩ Μ-
 [ΜΟC] ΧΕ ΝΤΑΤΕΤΝΝΤ⁴
 [ΕΒΟΛ] ΖΝ ΟΥΜΕΡΟC ΝΖΟΪ ΔΤΕ-
 [ΤΝ]ΤΕΚ⁴ ΕΚΕΟΥΔ. ΟΥΔΙΚΑΙ-
 5 [ΟΝ] ΔΝ ΠΕ. ΔΪΧΟΟC ΝΗΤΝ
 [Ν]ΚΕCΟΠ ΧΕ ΜΠΡΕΙΝΕ
 ΜΠΡΤΙΚΕ ΕΖΡΑΪ. ΠΜΑ
 ΕΤΕΡΕΠΙΡΩΜΕ ΝΖΗΤ⁴
 ΚΑΔ⁴ ΝΖΗΤ⁴. † ΤΑΔC
 10 ΝΝΛΑΩΝΗΥ ΝΤΙΝ.
 † ΖΙΤΝΪΩΖΑΝΝΗC
 ΠΑΡΧΥΠΕΡΕΤΗC. †

3 *l. μέρος* 4-5 *l. δίκαιος* 8 *l. πρώμε* 12 *l. ἀρχυπηρέτης*

+ Someone came to me and said that you (pl.) have dismissed him from a field-share and assigned it to someone else. This is an injustice! I have told you (pl.) on another occasion: “Do not remove and do not reassign.” The place (i.e., the disputed field-share) where the man was, leave him there. + Give it (i.e., the document) to the village headmen of Tin. + From John, the chief attendant. +

- §7 2–3 ΝΤΑΤΕΤΝΝΤ⁴ | [ΕΒΟΛ]. For the meaning “dismiss,” see [Crum 1939](#): 79b. It could also be read as a temporal perfect (“when you dismissed him”) with ΔΤΕΤΝΤΕΚ⁴ in ll. 3–4 as the apodosis.
- §8 3 ΟΥΜΕΡΟC ΝΖΟΪ. On the meaning of ΖΟΪ, see [Crum 1939](#): 650b, where the meanings include “field” or “pasture,” or alternatively “canal, ditch,” or “water wheel, sāḫiyah.” Given the use of ΜΕΡΟC, it seems that the first meaning is most likely: i.e., “field” or “pasture.” E.g., [CPR 4 28.9](#) (A.D. VIII; Nubia): ... ΜΠΑΜΕΡΟC ΚΚΤΗΜΑ (“... my portion of the ktema ...”). Cf. [P.Bas. 2 66.3](#) (=SB Kopt. 4 1805.3; A.D. VI/VII; Hermopolis Magna): ΟΥΝΟC ΝΖΟΪ (“large cog-wheel”); [P.Bawit Clackson 52.2–3](#) (A.D. VIII; Hermopolite): ΟΥΚΚΟΜ ΝΖΟΪ (“field klom” [agricultural implement]).
- §9 4–5 ΟΥΔΙΚΑΙ|ΟΝ ΔΝ ΠΕ. For parallel readings, see [P.KRU 104.46](#) (A.D. 771–72; Thebes) and [P.Mon.Epiph. 174.7](#) (1st half A.D. VII; Thebes). Cf. [P.KRU 74.43](#) (A.D. 733 or 748; Thebes) and [P.KRU 122.19](#) (A.D. 500–799; Thebes): ΟΥΔΙΚΑΙΟΝ ΠΕ.
- §10 5–6 ΝΗΤΝ | [Ν]Κ ΕCΟΠ. For parallel readings, see [O.Frange 365.6](#) (A.D. 700–750; Thebes) and [P.Lond. 4 1634.16](#) (early A.D. VIII; Aphrodite Kome)
- §11 8 ΠΙΡΩΜΕ. As noted by [Crum 1939](#): 258b, the masculine definite article π is periodically rendered πι in Sahidic. This rendering is not uncommon in non-literary texts. See additional discussion in [P.Bal. 1 pp. 122–23](#).

- §12 9 ⲛⲁⲛⲧⲧⲓⲛⲧⲓⲛ. + ⲧⲁⲗⲥ. The vertical stroke of the ⲧ is used as the vertical element of a cross, as there is a horizontal line intersecting its lower half. The cross marks the beginning of the address that starts with ⲧⲁⲗⲥ. On Coptic address formulae employing ⲧⲁⲗⲥ, see [Richter 2008](#): 764.
- §13 10 ⲛⲛⲗⲁⲱⲛⲛⲧⲓⲛ ⲛⲧⲓⲛ. The rendering ⲗⲁⲱⲛⲧⲓⲛ is the plural of ⲗⲁⲱⲁⲛⲉ. The term is descended from the Demotic *mr-šn*. [Crum 1939](#): 148a gives the translation as “village magistrate” or “village official,” and notes that it is equivalent to the Greek *μειζότερος* or *πρωτοκωμήτης*. For a detailed discussion of the office of ⲗⲁⲱⲁⲛⲉ, see [Berkes 2017](#): 82–84.
- §14 The village of ⲧⲓⲛ (Grk. *Θις*; modern name Girga) was located in Upper Egypt on the west side of the Nile, almost 20 km south of Ptolemais Hermeiou. It was located in the Thinite Nome and was one of the principal villages. On the toponym, see [TM Geo 2400](#) and [Timm 1992](#): 2682–685.
- §15 11–12 + ⲁⲓⲧⲛⲓ ⲓⲱⲗⲁⲛⲛⲛⲥ ⲛⲁⲣⲭⲩⲛⲉⲣⲉⲧⲛⲥ. The Coptic title ⲛⲁⲣⲭⲩⲛⲉⲣⲉⲧⲛⲥ is a direct rendering from the Greek *ἀρχυπηρέτης*, properly rendered *ἀρχιυπηρέτης*, that generically means “chief attendant” or “chief servant.” Outside of this example, it is only attested on two other occasions in Coptic, where it appears on gravestones and is spelled ⲛⲁⲣⲭⲓⲛⲉⲣⲉⲧⲛⲥ: [Quibell 1912](#): nos. 184 and 345.3; cf. [Förster 2002](#): 111. In Greek, the title is attested in papyri from the Ptolemaic period through to the seventh or eighth century A.D., with the latest example appearing in [P.Louvre 3 245.5](#) (A.D. VII/VIII; Arsinoite Nome). Another “John the chief attendant” is attested in [CPR 19 50.7, 10](#) (A.D. 650–699; Arsinoite): *Ἰωάννης ἀρχυπηρέτης*. On the use of the name John, see [TM Nam 3464](#).
- §16 The document appears to present a scenario in which the “chief attendant” is exercising authority over the “village headmen.” Is such authority inherent to this position at this time, or is the “chief attendant” acting under the authority of another? Similarly, could he be issuing this order from a nearby city, such as Achmim (Panopolis)/Sohag?

Bibliography

- [Berkes, L. \(2017\)](#) Dorfverwaltung und Dorfgemeinschaft in Ägypten von Diokletian zu den Abbasiden. Wiesbaden.
- [Blumell, L.H. \(2013\)](#) “Two Coptic Ostraca in the Brigham Young University Collection,” *CdÉ* 88: 182–187.
- [Blumell, L.H. and T.A. Wayment \(2014\)](#) “Coptic New Testament Fragments in the Brigham Young University Collection,” *JSCS* 6: 59–88.
- [Crum, W.E. \(1939\)](#) *A Coptic Dictionary*. Oxford.
- [Dixneuf, D. \(2011\)](#) *Amphores égyptiennes. Production, typologie, contenu et diffusion (IIIe siècle avant J.-C. - IXe siècle après J.-C.). Études alexandrines. 22.* Alexandria.
- [Förster, H. \(2002\)](#) *Wörterbuch die griechischen Wörter in den koptischen dokumentarischen Texten.* Berlin.
- [Richter, T.S. \(2008\)](#) “Coptic Letters” in E.M. Grob and A. Kaplony (eds.), *Documentary Letters From the Middle East. The Evidence in Greek, Coptic, South Arabian, Pehlevi, and Arabic (1st–15th c. CE)* = *Asiatische Studien* 62: 739–770.
- [Quibell, J.E. \(1912\)](#) *Excavations at Saqqara (1908–9, 1909–10). The Monastery of Apa Jeremias. The Coptic inscriptions edited by Sir Herbert Thompson.* Cairo.
- [Timm, S. \(1992\)](#) *Das christlich-koptische Ägypten in arabischer Zeit: Eine Sammlung christlicher Stätten in Ägypten in arabischer Zeit unter Ausschluss von Alexandria, Kairo, des Apa-Mena-Klosters (Der Abu Mina), der Sketis (Wadi n-Natrun) und der Sinai-Region. Teil 6 (T–Z).* Wiesbaden.

Blumell, Lincoln H.

GND:  <https://d-nb.info/gnd/1075476607>

ORCID:  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2922-5337>

Brigham Young University

lincoln_blumell@byu.edu

Vassar, Jonathan

ORCID:  <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7395-6826>

Brigham Young University

jonathan.vassar25@gmail.com