



Judith Jurjens

Dates on Literary Ostraca: A Case Study

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Summary: This paper presents an analysis of the dates found on ostraca containing the literary composition *The Teaching of Khety*, also known as *The Satire of the Trades*. Various aspects of these dates are discussed, for example the palaeography and the placement of the dates on the ostracon, for the purpose of outlining some scribal practices in ancient Egypt. From the dates themselves can be deduced that scribes conducted their literary activities all year round, both during the working week and at the weekend. Finally, the presumed educational context of the ostraca is discussed. The high percentage of dates on ostraca with *Khety*, in comparison to other literary compositions, suggests *Khety* was the most popular text used in the training of scribes.

Keywords: dates – education – Instruction of Khety – ostracon – scribal practices

1 Introduction

Little or no work has been done on the dates which are found on literary ostraca since Andrea McDowell's article¹. In most text editions no attention is paid to these dates, if they are mentioned at all, because editors are usually only concerned with the text itself. This is the case, for example, in the editions of *The Teaching of Khety*. Brunner (1944) omits the dates from his synoptic text edition. Helck (1970) does include them, but otherwise pays no attention to them. Jäger (2004) omits all but a few. Another reason why little attention is paid to these dates may be that they are unusable for exact dating because they only mention the day and month, rarely a year, and never a king's name. This paper tries to show that these dates are important, since they can offer information about scribal practices in ancient Egypt. The analysis of the dates in this paper is intended to help researchers recognize and interpret dates they may come across on literary ostraca.

¹ McDowell 1996.

Judith Jurjens: email: j.jurjens@hum.leidenuniv.nl

2 The corpus

In this paper *The Teaching of Khety*, also known as *The Satire of the Trades*, is used as a case study. It was one of the most popular wisdom instructions of the time, as can be seen from the multitude of ostraca bearing extracts from this literary composition. In fact, *Khety* is the most attested wisdom instruction on ostraca from Deir el-Medina². For my PhD project³ I have gathered together all known examples, both published and unpublished, which amount to a total of no fewer than 323 ostraca. Of these, 48 bear dates, so 15%⁴. This percentage would be even higher if we count ostraca where dates are no longer preserved but where there is a good possibility they were once there. For example, on some of the ostraca traces of red ink are still visible. Because dates were mostly written in red ink, these traces are very probably the remnants of a date, especially because they occur in the right place for a date (see below)

² Hagen 2012, 84.

³ Being and becoming a scribe: *The Teaching of Khety* and its use as an educational tool in Ancient Egypt (Universiteit Leiden), funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) [project number 023.008.011].

⁴ oBM EA 65597, oBM EA 65943, oBM EA 29550+oDeM 1546 (Demarée 2002); oBM EA 41650/47896 (Parkinson 1999); oCairo 25217 (Daressy 1901; Helck 1970); oColin-Campbell 12 (= oGlasgow D.1295.77 in McDowell 1993); oDeM 1013, oDeM 1015, oDeM 1037, oDeM 1039, oDeM 1043, oDeM 1087 (Posener 1938); oDeM 1179+oTurin 6622 (Posener 1951–1972); oDeM 1497, oDeM 1520, oDeM 1523, oDeM 1536, oDeM 1539, oDeM 1557, oDeM 1571, oDeM 1575, oDeM 1579, oDeM 1581 (Posener 1977–1980); oGardiner 47 (Helck 1970); oGardiner 311 (= HO 94,1 in Černý, Gardiner 1957); oGardiner 344 (= HO 102,3 in Černý, Gardiner 1957); oGardiner 491, oGardiner 576, oGardiner 632 (unpublished; current location: Ashmolean Museum); oGeneva 012551 (= oGenf 12551 in Helck 1970); oMerenptah (= Kat. Nr. 6 to be published by Matthias Müller, cf. Müller 2014); oToronto A3 (Gardiner, Thompson, Milne 1913); oThutmosis 15685, oThutmosis 20840 (unpublished; temporary numbers); oTurin 57244; oTurin 57298 (López 1980); oUC 31951 (unpublished; current location: Petrie Museum); oUC 32000 (= oPetrie 70 in Helck 1970); oUC 32266 (= HO 10,1 in Černý, Gardiner 1957); oUC 32986 (= oRamesseum 66 in Spiegelberg 1898); oUC 32995 (= oRamesseum 76 in Spiegelberg 1898); oUC 32998 (= oRamesseum 79 in Spiegelberg 1898); oUC 33008 (= oRamesseum 88 in Spiegelberg 1898); oUC 33013 (= oRamesseum 94 in Spiegelberg 1898); oUC 39639 (= HO 13,1 in Černý, Gardiner 1957); oUC 39675 (= HO 12,3 in Černý, Gardiner 1957); oVarille (Vente Archéologie, Arts d'Orient, Extrême-Orient, Auction Catalogue, 27 Apr–28 Apr, Pierre Bergé & Associés, Paris, 2007, no. 420); oWilson 106 (Helck 1970).

and no rubrics are otherwise present on these ostraca⁵. If we include these, a total of 16 % of the *Khety* ostraca bear dates. Again, this percentage could be higher still, since there are also some ostraca in my corpus which break off before the completion of a chapter, and some of these may also have once contained a date at the end.

In her article A. McDowell presents a large sample of approximately 100 ostraca with dates⁶. Of these, 25 contain extracts from *Khety*. Others bear passages from other literary compositions like *The Teaching of Amenemhet*, *The Hymn to the Nile* and *Die Satirische Streitschrift des Papyrus Anastasi I*. There are also hymns and even a magical text amongst her examples. McDowell gathered her corpus from a number of sources and did not focus on a single text⁷. For example, not all ostraca with dates inscribed with *The Teaching of Amenemhet* were included. This is also the case for *Khety*. This paper presents a further 23 ostraca, over and above the 25 already collected by McDowell. From her corpus she concluded that “fewer than 1/10” of the ostraca bear dates and that the practice of adding dates was therefore “idiosyncratic to a few instructors or students”⁸. As we have seen above, around 15 % of the ostraca with *Khety* bear dates, which is higher than the percentage deduced by McDowell. Apparently, the practice of adding dates was more common when writing *Khety* and less so for other texts. To be certain of this, this study would have to be repeated for every text separately, gathering all the material relating to a single text and then looking at the number of ostraca with dates, as has been done here for *Khety*. For the time being, because dates are often seen as proof of an educational context (see below), it seems that *Khety* was more often used in an educational context than other literary texts.

3 The position of the date on an ostracon

The majority of the dates (74 %) in the corpus conclude a chapter. When an ostracon ends not at the end of a chapter but with the first line of the next chapter, the date is often written not at the end of the chapter but after this first line (16 %). In rare cases (8 %) the date stands alone and seems to date the text on the ostracon itself rather than a chapter (see below). In one instance a date is added in the middle of a chapter, at the end of the ostracon⁹.

Most dates (42 %) are written directly between two chapters, with little or no spacing in between (Fig. 1). The punctuation sign (*gr/h*) is sometimes added in front of the date. In some cases, the date is also written directly following a chapter, but then the text does not immediately continue, as in the examples above. Instead, the space behind the date is left blank and the next chapter starts on the next line (21 %) (Fig. 2), or the date marks the end of the ostracon (12 %) (Fig. 3). In other cases, the date is written on the next line and stands by itself at the bottom of the ostracon (21 %) (Fig. 4). If this is the case, the date is often written parallel to the rest of the text, sometimes at an angle. In rare cases (3 %) the date is placed somewhere different than the above-mentioned positions¹⁰.

It seems the observation by McDowell that the dates are “often written out of line with the copied passage, across the bottom of the ostracon or at an angle”¹¹, does not apply to my corpus.

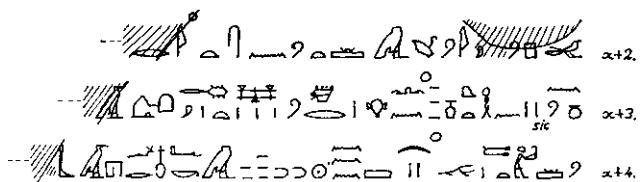


Figure 1: oDeM 1581: end chapter 28, date, start chapter 29 (l. x+4).
Posener 1977–1980, pl. 44.

⁵ oDeM 1532 (Posener 1977–1980); oDeM 1548 (Posener 1977–1980); oGardiner 1031 (unpublished; current location: Ashmolean Museum); oDeM 1104 (rubrics uncertain) (Posener 1938).

⁶ McDowell 1996, 603.

⁷ McDowell 1996, 601, n. 1.

⁸ McDowell 1996, 605. McDowell regards the ostraca from Deir el-Medina as student’s exercises, thus all stemming from an educational context.

⁹ oGardiner 344. Compare also oBM EA 29550+oDeM 1546 which also ends in the middle of a chapter but has no date there.

¹⁰ oUC 31951: by itself on the verso, while the text is on the recto; oGeneva 012551, v° l. 1: by itself above the text.

¹¹ McDowell 1996, 604.

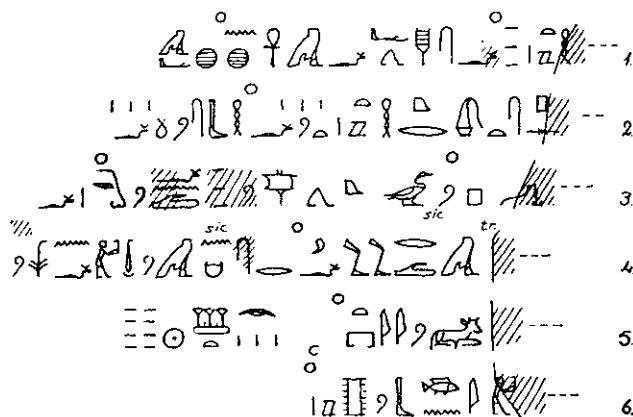


Figure 2: oDeM 1520: end chapter 9, date (l. 5); start chapter 10 (l. 6). Posener 1977–1980, pl. 36.

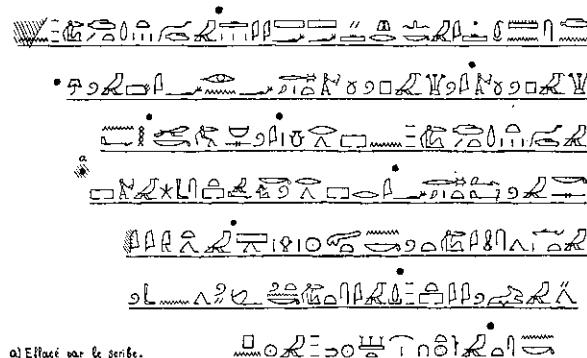


Figure 3: oDeM 1039: end chapter 26, date (l. 7). Posener 1938, pl. 22.

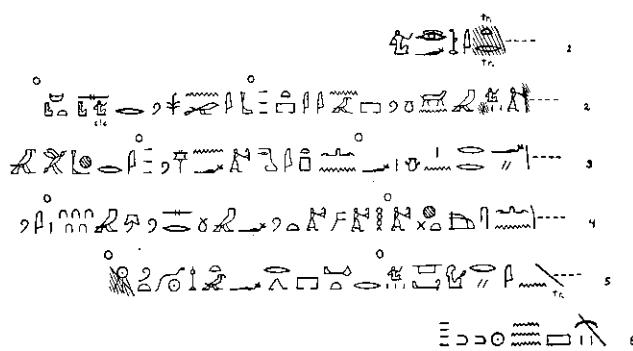


Figure 4: oDeM 1037: end chapter 14 (l. 5); date (l. 6). Posener 1938, pl. 20.

4 When was the scribe at work?

So, when were the scribes at work, writing down extracts from *The Teaching of Khety*? To answer this question, we must take a look at the dates themselves, which are the following:

- 1. I *ȝht* 5 (oBM EA 41650/47896)
- 2. II *ȝht* 8 (oUC 32995)
- 3. Year 10, I *ȝht* 13 *m hrw pn* (oDeM 1039)
- 4. II *ȝht* 12 (oGardiner 311)
- 5. II *ȝht* 24 (oDeM 1523)
- 6. III? *ȝht* 7 (oDeM 1557)
- III *ȝht* 8 (oDeM 1520)
- III *ȝht* 14? (oBM EA 29550+oDeM 1546)
- III *ȝht* 15 (oMerenptah)
- III? *ȝht* 16 (oDeM 1539)
- III *ȝht* 21 (oDeM 1536)
- III *ȝht* 21? (oBM EA 29550+oDeM 1546)
- IV *ȝht* 24 (oBM EA 29550+oDeM 1546)
- IV *ȝht* 11 (oToronto A3)
- IV *ȝht* 21 (oBM EA 29550+oDeM 1546)
- IV *ȝht* 22 (oDeM 1497)
- IV *ȝht* 25 (oUC 39639)
- IV *ȝht* 29 (oDeM 1497)
- 6. [...] *ȝht* 4 (oBM EA 29550+oDeM 1546)
- 7. *ȝht* 8 (oBM EA 29550+oDeM 1546)

- II *prt* 5 (oGeneva 012551)
- II *prt* 12 (oDeM 1179+oTurin 57316)
- II *prt* 16 (oDeM 1179+oTurin 57316)
- II *prt* [...] (oGeneva 012551)
- II *prt* [...] (oGardiner 344)
- III? *prt* 1 (oColin-Campbell 12)
- III *prt* 4 (oGeneva 012551)
- III *prt* 25 (oUC 32266)
- III *prt* [27] (oUC 32266)
- III? *prt*? 29 (oDeM 1575)
- IV *prt* 2 (oBM EA 65943)
- Year 16, IV *prt* 20 (oUC 39675)
- Year 16, IV *prt* [...] (oGardiner 47)
- IV *prt* 21 (oUC 32000)
- IV *prt* [...] (oUC 31951)
- IV *prt* [...] (oGardiner 491)
- [...] *prt* 10 (oVarille)
- [...] *prt* 13 (oDeM 1579)
- [...] *prt* 14? (oDeM 1571)

- I *šmw* 2 (oDeM 1087)
- I *šmw* 13 (oDeM 1013)
- I *šmw* 19 (oDeM 1013)

I *šmw* [...] (oUC 32998)
 II *šmw* 5 (oTurin 57244)
 II *šmw* 20 (oThutmosis 15685)
 II *šmw* 24 (oCairo 25217)
 II? *šmw* 24 (oDeM 1037)
 II *šmw* 25 (oDeM 1581)
 III *šmw* 3 (oTurin 57298)
 IV *šmw* 13(?) (oDeM 1043)
 IV *šmw* [...] (oGardiner 576)
 IV? *šmw* [...] (oGardiner 576)
 [...] *šmw* 9 (oUC 32986)
 [...] *šmw* 11? (oDeM 1015)
 [...] *šmw* 22 (oWilson 106)
 [...] *šmw* [...] (oGardiner 632)

I [...] (oUC 33013)

[...] 19? (oDeM 1013)
 [...] 26 (oThutmosis 20840)
 [...] 24 (oUC 33008)

[...] *hrw? mswt-Wsjr* (oBM EA 41650/47896)

[...] (oBM EA 65597)
 [...] (oUC 32266)
 [...] (oDeM 1497)
 [...] (oDeM 1497)
 [...] (oGardiner 576)

First of all, there doesn't seem to be much difference between the seasons, since they are fairly evenly distributed throughout the material. So, scribes conducted their literary activities all year round. What about the days? If scribes wrote during the week (days 1–8, 11–18, 21–28), as well as at the weekend (days 9–10, 19–20, 29–30), then 80 % of the dates would be mid-week dates and 20 % weekend dates. If we take a look at the dates above, 42 dates fall in the working week and 8 dates fall in the weekend, so 84 % mid-week and 16 % weekend dates. These figures deviate a bit from those of McDowell, who counted 89 % mid-week and 11 % dates at the weekend¹². She based the following conclusion on her figures: because the dates fall more often during the working week, lessons would have taken place during the working week, on days when the crew were not at work. However, looking at my figures, the division is not so clear; the 16 % of weekend dates does not deviate much from the expected 20 %, so I do not see a real "aversion to practicing writing on the weekends"¹³. In

fact, one scribe was even at work on the Birthday of Osiris, the first epagomenal day of the year¹⁴. Apparently scribes wrote down literary texts or (in the case of an educational context) children were being educated both during the working week and at the weekend. This conclusion is supported by ostraca with multiple dates. Some of these contain dates which fall both during the week and at the weekend¹⁵, so clearly the scribe did not stop his literary activities because of the weekend.

5 Multiple dates

Especially interesting are ostraca which bear multiple dates because they can give us information about how scribes progressed. This was already noted by Charles Maystre in his article about oGeneva 012551¹⁶. Unfortunately, oGeneva 012551 was the only ostraca known to him containing more than one date, so he was unable to make comparisons¹⁷. Nowadays more are known: 19 % of the ostraca with dates in my corpus bear multiple dates¹⁸. Again, this percentage could well be slightly higher because some ostraca (at least 5) have a single date but then break off in the middle of the following chapter. It is possible that a second date may have been present after this chapter but is now no longer preserved.

As seen above, most dates conclude a chapter, and this is also the case with ostraca containing multiple dates: after each chapter a date was added. Apparently, the scribe wrote chapter by chapter, putting the ostraca aside for a while before taking up his assignment again¹⁹. The number of days between writing sessions differs widely, from 2 to 10 days in between chapters. This kind of variation is possible even on a single ostraca. For example, on oBM EA 29550+oDeM 1546 the chapters are respectively 7(?), 3(?), 10, 4 and 13 days (for 2 chapters) apart. This is a broader range than the 3 or 4 days apart which was observed earlier²⁰. Why there were so many days in between writing chapters is not known²¹. The difference

¹⁴ oBM EA 41650/47896 (see Parkinson 1999, 50, n. e).

¹⁵ oDeM 1013: I *šmw* 13 and I *šmw* 19; oDeM 1497: IV *ȝht* 2 and IV *ȝht* 29.

¹⁶ Maystre 1938.

¹⁷ Maystre 1938, 68.

¹⁸ oDeM 1013; oDeM 1179+oTurin 6622; oDeM 1497; oUC 32266; oGardiner 576; oBM EA 41650/47896; oBM EA 29550+oDeM 1546; oGeneva 012551; oCairo 25217.

¹⁹ The practice of inscribing sherds over a period of time is also known for non-literary ostraca (Lougovaya 2018, 56).

²⁰ McDowell 1996, 606.

²¹ Brunner 1957, 76.

in number of days cannot be accounted for by the length of the various chapters. They do not differ so much in length that a scribe would have taken a day longer (or even more) to write down one chapter than another. Instead, the scribe interrupted his work for a couple of days before taking up his assignment again. Perhaps, he needed time to study and memorize the next chapter before writing it down²². A. McDowell saw in the difference in number of days between chapters proof that students received tuition at irregularly spaced intervals, on days when the gang from Deir el-Medina was not at work²³.

6 Scribal practices

6.1 Two chapters in one go

As noted above, a scribe usually wrote one chapter at a time, but from the evidence it can be deduced that sometimes he wrote not one, but two chapters. On oBM EA 29550+oDeM 1546 dates follow chapters 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 and 20, but not chapter 19, although the end of this chapter is marked by the punctuation sign (*grh*). Apparently, the scribe wrote chapters 19 and 20 in one go. The same applies to oDeM 1013. Here the scribe added dates after chapters 23 and 25 but not after chapter 24.

This phenomenon occurs not only on ostraca with multiple dates but also on ostraca with single dates. oGardiner 47 and oDeM 1039 (Fig. 3) contain two chapters each, but in both instances only the last chapter is dated, which indicates the scribes wrote the two chapters at the same time. On both ostraca the date also coincides with the end of the ostraca. Apparently, the scribe wrote his chapters until there was no space left, and then added the date as a sort of concluding remark. That the date in these cases marks the end of the text itself rather than the end of a chapter is apparent from oGardiner 344. The scribe of this ostraca wrote chapter 1 of *Khety*, followed by chapter 2, without putting a date in between. He did not have enough space left to complete the chapter, so at the end of the ostraca he stopped, right in the middle of chapter 2, and then scribbled down a date in the small space left at the bottom.

The same applies to some of the stand-alone dates found on ostraca: they date the text on the ostraca itself, i.e. the finished assignment on it, rather than the end of a

chapter²⁴. Interesting in this respect are two ostraca which have a separate date immediately following another date. oDeM 1013, mentioned above, has a date written directly after the end of chapter 25, as can be expected. Then, on the following line, there immediately follows another date, perhaps written in a different hand, as if to mark the end of the ostraca or indeed the completion of the entire task (the ostraca contains three chapters in total).²⁵ A parallel is oGardiner 576, which contains only one chapter but no fewer than three dates. The scribe wrote the chapter on two sides of the ostraca. At the bottom of the recto there are the remnants of a stand-alone date, written at a bit of an angle to the rest of the text. Clearly this date does not mark the end of a chapter, because the scribe had not finished writing it yet, but rather the end of the text on the recto. When the scribe completed the chapter on the verso, another date, now lost, was added²⁶. Then, after this date, there immediately follows another one, written by itself on the next line, marking the end of the completed task, as is the case with oDeM 1013. Since both ostraca also contain corrections it is possible that the final date was added after the entire text had been revised.

6.2 When were the dates added?

It is not known when exactly the dates were added. Were they added during the process of writing, immediately after a scribe had copied down the text? Or were they added later than the text itself, for example after revising the entire text? My corpus contains some interesting features which seem to suggest that, at least in some instances, the latter was the case²⁷. To be precise, on some ostraca the date overlaps with the first words of the next chapter²⁸. It seems that, during copying, the scribe left a blank space for a date to be added later, but that in these instances the available space was too small to put the entire date in, hence the overlap. This practice is also apparent on another ostraca (oVarille), on which the blank space is

24 E. g. oGeneva 012551, v° 1. 1; oWilson 106.

25 Cf. also oTurin 57539 (López 1978–1984), pl. 174, 174a.

26 There are traces of red ink visible at the end of the chapter. Since the text on the ostraca is written in black ink and contains no rubrics, these traces are very probably the remnants of a date.

27 The observations made below can also be seen as regards to rubrics on papyri, which were sometimes later added by the scribe. Posener suggested as a possible reason that the scribe did not want the distraction of having to change brushes to interrupt his attention while writing his text, cf. Posener 1951, 75–76. For an example of red *grh* signs being added later, see Clère 1939, 20, n. 4.

28 oDeM 1557; oUC 32266, r° 2; oGeneva 012551, r° 3.

22 Brunner 1957, 76; van de Walle 1948, 24.

23 McDowell 1996, 605–606.

still visible because for some reason it was never filled in. It occurs just before the start of a new chapter, so it looks like the scribe left this space intentionally empty for the later insertion of a date. This is supported by the presence of another date on the same ostraca, which is found a couple of lines earlier in a similar position, just before the start of a new chapter.²⁹ The opposite can be seen on oBM EA 29550+oDeM 1564, an ostraca which contains multiple dates. Apparently, after copying his first chapter, the scribe forgot to leave room for a date because the date can be seen scribbled above the line. He did not make the same mistake again though: the other dates are written neatly in between the chapters, just where they are supposed to be.

From her evidence A. McDowell also concluded that the dates were added later, presumably after revision of the text³⁰. Her argument, however, that the dates are a later addition because they are written out of line with the copied passage, across the bottom of the ostraca or at an angle, is not valid for my corpus, where this is seldom the case (see above). The question, therefore, is if this conclusion can be applied to all ostraca with dates, since in most cases the dates are a perfect fit: they are written between chapters without any overlap or spacing. This would seem to suggest the date was added during the process of writing rather than afterwards. On the other hand, it could also mean that most scribes were skilled enough to make the dates fit. On one of the ostraca with an overlapping date (oUC 32266, r° 2), it is apparent the scribe did his best to make the date match the available space because the date is written in a smaller hand than the rest of the text. In this case, it was a failed attempt, but one can imagine that using smaller handwriting would have been a perfect solution to make the date match the available space, and there are indeed some other examples where this is the case³¹. The opposite also occurs, however. If a scribe had plenty of room (which is often the case on ostraca where the next chapter starts on the next line), he sometimes made good use of it by writing the date not directly following the chapter, without any spacing, as normal, but leaving some room before adding the date³².

All in all, it seems likely that in some instances the date was added not during copying but at some moment later in time. Whether or not this was always the case is difficult to say for certain as the evidence remains inconclusive regarding most ostraca.

6.3 Who added the dates?

Opinions differ as to whether the date was added by the same scribe who wrote the text or by someone else, for example a teacher. Some scholars think the dates were written by the copyist himself³³, others that they were added by someone else³⁴. To answer this question a thorough palaeographical analysis of the handwriting of the date and the text itself would be needed to establish whether or not they were written in the same hand. However, one immediately runs into difficulties when one tries to compare the two. First of all, signs occurring in dates (for example N5, N37, O1) are more often than not lacking in the rest of the text, or only occur sporadically which makes a comparison between the two virtually impossible. Secondly, signs in dates are sometimes written in an abbreviated form, as is the case with *sw* and *ȝht*³⁵, so they can for that reason differ from the same signs in the text itself. Thirdly, a scribe will not write a single sign exactly the same every time; there is usually some variance in the handwriting of the same scribe³⁶. Therefore, it is often difficult to say whether signs differ due to being written by a different scribe or due to this variance in the handwriting of a single scribe (Fig. 5), especially when there are so few signs, if any, to compare. Lastly, because the dates are often written in red ink, they are sometimes faded beyond the point of palaeographical analysis. Because of these difficulties, there are only one or two ostraca in my corpus where I was able to establish with relative certainty that the date was written by the copyist himself, not by another scribe (Fig. 6). Whether this is also the case for the other ostraca remains impossible to say for certain³⁷.

²⁹ Similar blank spaces can be found on oDeM 1047 (Posener 1938), oDeM 1493 (Posener 1977–1980) and oBM EA 65943 (Demarée 2002). In the case of the latter, a date has been added below the blank space, probably because the scribe foresaw there was not enough room in the blank space to insert the date there.

³⁰ McDowell 1996, 604.

³¹ E.g. oDeM 1179+oTurin 6622, l. 4; oUC 32000; oBM EA 41650/47896, l. 3; oVarille, l. 5.

³² oDeM 1520 (Fig. 2); oDeM 1087; oCairo 25217. On oBM EA 41650/47896, l. 6 the scribe did add the date immediately after the chapter, but then left some spacing before the start of the next chap-

ter. This, however, could also be due to a ridge on the surface of the ostraca (Parkinson 1999, 51, n. k.).

³³ Maspero 1914, ix; Brunner 1957, 76.

³⁴ Erman 1925, 8–9; McDowell 1996, 604.

³⁵ *sw*: Möller 1927, n° 303 and n° 303B; *ȝht*: Möller 1927, n° 274 and n° LX.

³⁶ van den Berg, Donker van Heel 2000.

³⁷ Cf. Hagen 2012, 94.

	hieroglyph	date	text
oDeM 1013		 r° 8	 r° 7
		 v° 9	 v° 4

Figure 5: The palaeography of the sign N37, appearing both in the date and the text itself of oDeM 1013, to serve as an illustration of the different forms a single sign can take on a single ostraca.

	hieroglyph	date	text
oCairo 25217		 r° 5	 r° 1
		 r° 5	 r° 5
oDeM 1037		 l. 6	 l. 5

Figure 6: The palaeography of the signs N5 and N37 on oCairo 25217, and the sign N5 on oDeM 1037. In both cases these signs seem to have been written by the same hand.

7 A school context?

Since Adolf Erman's influential article on ancient Egyptian school texts, ostraca with literary texts have often been regarded as school exercises³⁸. One of the criteria to mark them as stemming from an educational context has been the occurrence of a date on the ostraca. According to Erman, these dates were tutor's check marks, added by a teacher after revising the lesson of his student³⁹. Although this particular conclusion was not necessarily accepted by everyone, many scholars since have interpreted the purpose of the dates in the light of an educational context. It is thought the dates were added by a student after finishing his daily pensem⁴⁰, or before continuing with his next assignment⁴¹.

Fredrik Hagen, however, was the first to caution that the occurrence of a date on an ostraca does not necessarily have to imply an educational context: "it seems dogmatic to classify a literary ostraca as an exercise solely

on the basis of the presence of dates in a text when their purpose is not properly understood"⁴². For example, one could imagine a scenario where a professional scribe, during a break from his official duties, wrote down a literary text for his own pleasure, adding a date to mark the occasion⁴³. Even so, Hagen also states that "the high number of sources for *Khety* [...] is perhaps an indication that, from a statistical point of view, these ostraca are the most likely to represent copies produced during the education and training of scribes"⁴⁴.

So, until further research proves otherwise, most ostraca with *Khety* are assumed to stem from an educational context, although it remains difficult to demonstrate for every individual ostraca that it was used in this way, and this can certainly not be established solely on the basis of a date alone. Whether a particular ostraca stems from a school context or not, apparently it was sometimes important to remember the exact day and month a text was written, hence the addition of a date. The date served as an aide-mémoire⁴⁵, be it for a teacher as a reminder of when his student handed in his homework, or for a professional scribe to keep track of copied passages, for example when a longer text occupied several ostraca. In this way the dates functioned as a sort of organizing principle⁴⁶.

8 Conclusions

The present research has shown that some earlier conclusions regarding dates on literary ostraca must be revised somewhat. In sum, dates are most often found at the end of a chapter except when an ostraca ends with the first line of the next chapter, in which case the date is sometimes put after this first line. If an ostraca contains multiple chapters, then dates, if present, are written in between the chapters, without any spacing. Most of the dates in my corpus are written in line with the copied passage and not out of line with the rest of the text or at an angle, as A. McDowell asserted. There is some evidence that dates were added later, seemingly by the same scribe, but the evidence is sparse, and it is difficult to say whether this applies to all ostraca. Ostraca with multiple dates reveal that scribes usually wrote one chapter at a time, some-

³⁸ Erman 1925, 9, 23.

³⁹ Erman 1925, 8–9; followed by McDowell 1996, 604.

⁴⁰ Maspero 1914, ix; van de Walle 1948, 21, 24, 27; Gasse 2005, 68.

⁴¹ Gasse 2005, 68.

⁴² Hagen 2012, 94. Cf. also Hagen 2006, 86; Hagen 2007, 39; followed by Widmaier 2013, 497, n. 57, 510.

⁴³ Hagen 2006, 92–93; Parkinson 2009, 111.

⁴⁴ Hagen 2012, 85.

⁴⁵ Gardiner, Thompson, Milne 1913, 4.

⁴⁶ Posener 1975, 108.

times two. The days in between writing vary from 2 to 10 days (instead of the 3 or 4 days previously assumed), and scribes sometimes interrupted their work for a period of time. They conducted their literary activities both during the working week and at the weekend, without a real preference for one or the other; there is no evidence for an aversion to writing at the weekend, as McDowell suggested.

The purpose of the date was to serve as a memorandum to keep track of when a certain passage was written. Why this was considered important is unclear. The question of why dates were added has often been answered as being due to the supposed educational context of the ostraca and often fall within a teacher-student scenario. In fact, the occurrence of a date on an ostracon has become one of the criteria to mark an ostracon as a student's exercise. However, we should be careful when making this assumption solely on the basis of the presence of a date. Assuming that most ostraca with *Khety* stem from a school context and that dates are associated with scribal training, the evidence from this study suggests that *Khety* was the most popular text in the education of ancient Egyptian scribes, since the practice of adding dates was more common when writing *Khety* than in other texts; some 15% of the ostraca with *Khety* contain dates compared to the less than 10% found by McDowell. To confirm this, more research is needed, and it would be interesting to repeat this study for other literary texts.

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