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Abstract: This paper has two main parts. It begins with the first detailed account of how a collection of 87 Greek ostraca (i.e. inscribed pottery fragments), once belonging to the German theologian Gustav Adolf Deissmann, a leading Greek philologist, came to Sydney. The collection was destined to go elsewhere – were it not for the serendipitous convergence of Deissmann's forced retirement under the Nazis, a much travelled German Egyptologist, an ailing Scottish theology professor, and the staunchly Presbyterian director of the Bank of New South Wales. The second part introduces the collection as a whole, before focusing more specifically on four selected exemplars. Two, whose writings have faded away almost completely since coming to Sydney, and two (representing the majority) which remain in good condition. Remarkably, most of the Deissmann ostraca have not yet been analysed comprehensively from a socio-historical perspective. Despite Paul Meyer's philological publication of the collection in 1916, many questions remain either unasked or unanswered, leaving the potential for further research and study.

1. Introduction

Seventy-five years ago, this October (2011), Professor William John Woodhouse (1866-1937), then curator of Sydney University's Nicholson Museum, opened three wooden boxes, containing a valuable collection of 87 Greek ostraca, destined for their new home at 'his' museum. Later that day, he wrote with obvious enthusiasm to the University Registrar, W.A. Selle:

The collection is of great intrinsic value as being one of choice specimens, and also of considerable historical and sentimental value. ... American Universities would have given much to secure it. (Lawler 1997: 160)

In the summer of 2005, when I was first given an opportunity to see the full extent of this collection in Sydney, I couldn't help being moved by the experience. Some may view these fragments as fairly dull, antique objects, with esoteric writings and oddly mysterious symbols; whereas others, like Gustav Adolf Deissmann (1866-1937), could hold them in their hands and allow their often very personal communications to touch – even enthrall – them through an almost sentimental time-travelling experience into a bygone reality. For these once discarded sherds do have the latent power, by means of their written inscriptions, to connect us sympathetically with common individuals who lived some 2000 years ago – and by extension, may perhaps even cause us to think a little more about our own brief existence.

The intent of this article, therefore, is mainly twofold: in the first place, I want to address the question of how and why Deissmann's private collection in Germany came to Sydney. It is, indeed, a serendipitous story, and one that has thus far not been fully told anywhere.

In the second part, I aim to raise awareness of, and rekindle scholarly interest in the Deissmann ostraca, by lifting their 'potentiality-profile'. There are, of course, thousands of such ostraca in museums scattered around the globe, but very few people in Australia – and who

are interested in the ancient world – seem even aware that this particular collection exists within our own country. Consequently, it is nowadays either largely being overlooked, or, if known at all, erroneously thought of as having been academically 'mined out' long ago. Nonetheless, I hope to demonstrate to the reader that the latter is far from being the case, by centring on just one or two particular points of interest in each of the four representative exemplars I have chosen, and by raising some pertinent questions for consideration.

It is, of course, well beyond the scope and intent of this article to focus more explicitly on each item in this collection. Yet many of its archaic messages are full of real-life drama that have either not at all been explored yet, or are still only partly understood. In fact, it might come as somewhat of a surprise to learn how little is actually known about them with any certainty, be it as individual objects or as a collection overall. This is true despite the fact that Deissmann's colleague in classical philology at Berlin, Prof. Paul Martin Meyer (1866-1935), has published most of them in April 1916.¹ His work appeared only in German; but the introduction may give a clue as to why it makes for such 'dry' (and often bewildering) reading today, for he made it a point at the outset to explain that he saw the publication of this book as his contribution to Germany's war effort.

Though the war that will lead us to victory rages on, our duty is to continue the work of peace; each one within the particular sphere of his post or profession. My book came about during the war; may it be seen as a modest product of this peace activity (Meyer 1916: iii).

Renewed serious studies, ideally with the use of modern imaging technology, are therefore bound to make some contributions to our socio-historical and philological understanding of these particular texts. For ostraca in general are not just lifeless voices from the past, virtually

drowned out by the din of today's noisy and hectic pace of life, but rather they are poignant mirrors in which we can, in many ways, see reflected ourselves – if we but care to look.

2. Background to Deissmann's ostraca collection

Adolf Deissmann was born on 7 November 1866, in the small Hessian village of Langenscheid. He was the third of five children of a Lutheran pastor, himself the son of a Lutheran pastor.

While still at high school in Wiesbaden (1879-85), Deissmann became so deeply impressed by one of his teachers' lively way of reading Horace and Sophocles that he made up his mind to study Greek philology – against his father's express wishes. This was not an acceptable option to the elder Deissmann since his firstborn son, Wilhelm, had already failed to follow in his footsteps by choosing a civil service career, eventually becoming a prison inspector. Despite Adolf's personal ambition, the paternal authority prevailed, and in spring of 1885 he was enrolled as a student of theology at the Tübingen University. After further studies in Berlin and Herborn – where he later also took on a brief dual role as *Pfarrer* (pastor) and seminary lecturer (1895-7) – he was appointed Professor of New Testament exegesis at the University of Heidelberg (1897-1908). It was here that his groundbreaking work on postclassical Greek launched him onto the international stage, particularly through his research on the language used in the New Testament texts. His first two books were misleadingly entitled *Bibelstudien* (1895) and *Neue Bibelstudien* (1897), but tended to be rather foreign territory for New Testament specialists, since they presented unexplored philological material from ancient texts which were unrelated to the biblical narrative.

At this point, it needs to be made clear that Deissmann, throughout his life, remained far more interested in the language and cultural history of the New Testament and early Christianity than in biblical exegesis – despite his professional tenure – or religious idealism *per se*.²

In Deissmann's time, Greek philology was a highly prestigious field, globally competitive, and certainly not easy to break into as an 'untrained' outsider. This applied particularly to theologians; and that despite their exhaustive linguistic training in at least the three Western-culture's cardinal languages: Greek, Latin and Hebrew. Needless to say, Deissmann didn't particularly endear himself to some of Germany's philological *echelon* (Gerber 2010: 31, 86-7, 120-2), especially after he had publicly stated in a guest lecture at Cambridge, England:

Greek philologists, enslaved to the prejudice that only the so-called classical Greek is beautiful, have long treated the texts of the later period with the greatest contempt. A good deal of their false judgments about late Greek is the simple



Figure 1: Gustav Adolf Deissmann (1926).
Photo: from Gerber (2010: 125)

consequence of their complete ignorance of it (Deissmann 1908: 56).

Although a theologian by profession, in 1908 Deissmann had long enjoyed the necessary *gravitas* to make such provocative charges, as he was one of the world's foremost authorities in postclassical Greek since the mid-1890s. He had achieved this status by pioneering the innovative approach of analysing non-literary Greek writings – such as are found on inscriptions, ostraca and papyri – and comparing them critically with post-classical texts, particularly those of the Septuagint and New Testament. For prior to that, the Greek of the New Testament was commonly believed to be linguistically isolated from other languages – a kind of special 'biblical', 'corrupt' or even 'Holy Ghost' language (Gerber 2010: 7, 66, 363, 544).

By far the best known, most influential and enduring book Deissmann has produced is *Licht vom Osten* (1908), particularly its much-revised and expanded 4th edition of 1923. The English version, *Light from the Ancient East*, is a translation of the 2nd edition, and was reprinted as recently as 2004. To further consolidate the international philological pre-eminence he had gained from his earlier two *Bibelstudien*, he purchased between 1904 and 1912 a number of unpublished ostraca (Meyer 1916: iv), and – according to his private diary – some papyri and at least three codices.³

However, for his first edition of 1908, Deissmann made use of only five of his ostraca (*O. Deiss.* 31, 36, 56, 57, 64). But in the 1923 edition, where he included a total of 48 such pottery fragments, 22 are from his own collection

(*O. Deiss.* 17, 18, 22, 23, 24, 25, 31, 32, 33, 36, 36a, 37, 39, 40, 44, 47, 56, 57, 59, 64, 76, 77). All but four of this group (i.e. 17, 18, 31, 36a)⁴ are now held at the Sydney University's Nicholson Museum – the southern hemisphere's largest repository of ancient artefacts. It owns a total of 122 Greek ostraca, 87 of which belong to the Deissmann collection.⁵

How did Deissmann obtain all this archaeological material? Genuinely ancient and unpublished textual *realia* was not readily available for private sale within Germany. However, it was possible to make such acquisitions through experienced 'field agents' – private brokers, so to speak. In other words, much-travelled individuals who were conversant with the relevant languages and idiosyncratic machinations of antiquities markets in countries such as Egypt or the Middle East. One such agent was Deissmann's good colleague, the Egyptologist Carl Schmidt (1868-1938), whom he had known since at least 1899, although likely some time before that.

Early during Deissmann's tenure at Heidelberg University, he was commissioned by the State of Baden to publish the University's newly acquired Septuagint Papyri – this was the first philological publication of the Heidelberg collection.⁶ Schmidt had already earned the good-natured nickname 'Koptenschmidt', not only because he was a rare expert in Coptic, but also because he had travelled widely and understood the Egyptian antiquities markets (Rohde 1985: 541). Schmidt and Deissmann worked closely together on several of these texts, and in 1909 Deissmann invited Schmidt to accompany him on his two-and-a-half months academic study tour to Anatolia, Greece, Crete and Egypt (Gerber 2005: 32-5).

In 1904, when Schmidt had obtained a set of 43 ostraca, originating from Thebes and Hermonthis (Meyer 1916: iv), Deissmann bought them *en bloc* (i.e. *O. Deiss.* 1-4, 7, 11, 15-19, 21-27, 30a-32, 35-40, 44, 47, 49-50, 56-58, 64-65, 67, 70, 76-79, 83). It is this impressive 'lot' which formed the first part of his private collection. This transaction was made while Deissmann and Schmidt were actively collaborating on the publication of the Heidelberg Papyri.

During the next eight years Deissmann added various other ostraca to his collection, as opportunities arose, mostly from Egypt – Edfu, Elephantine and the Faiyum. But although Meyer writes that these purchases had all been made through Carl Schmidt, no records remain to indicate precisely where the latter had sourced them, nor how much they cost. We know from Meyer (iii) that Deissmann's complete collection eventually totalled 117 pieces, of which he gifted six to various colleagues, although Meyer is somewhat ambiguous about this (Meyer 1916: iv). Thus, *O. Deiss.* 15 and 35 went to Professor Allan Menzies (St. Andrews), *O. Deiss.* 17 to Professor Hans Windisch (Leiden), *O. Deiss.* 18 to *Pfarrer* Heinrich Schlosser (Wiesbaden), *O. Deiss.* 36a to *Pfarrer* Georg Lasson (Berlin), and *O. Deiss.* 60

to Professor Martin Dibelius (Heidelberg). Since the Nicholson Museum received only 87 pieces, this leaves 24 of Deissmann's original collection unaccounted for – their whereabouts remains undetermined. However, a peculiar entry exists in Deissmann's diary, dated 15 July 1927, where he reminds himself to telephone his colleague, Ulrich Wilcken, a papyrologist, to see whether he 'wished to have ostraca'; but with the absence of a definite article it is far from certain as to what he actually meant by this, and nothing further should perhaps be made of it.

3. But why Sydney?

To answer the question as to why Deissmann's collection ended up in Sydney, it is necessary to digress briefly and focus on the already mentioned Samuel Angus. Born 1881 in Ulster, he graduated at the age of 21 with an MA from the Royal University of Ireland, Dublin, after which he enrolled for a PhD program at Princeton University, New Jersey. There he gained his doctorate in 1906 with an investigation of St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*, but shortly thereafter suffered a 'nervous breakdown from overwork' (Emilsen 1991: 54-61). Two years later, an opportunity arose for him and his American wife Katharine (married in 1907), to travel from the USA to Germany to study advanced Greek for a semester at the Marburg University, under the eminent philologist Albert Thumb (1865-1915). Thumb's lectures introduced Angus to Deissmann's philological work on the language of the New Testament, particularly since *Licht vom Osten* had just been published in May of that year.



Figure 2: Samuel Angus (oil).
Photo: courtesy of St Andrews College, Sydney

This Marburg semester redefined Angus' life, as it gave him unexpected access to a completely new approach to his theology: the philology of the New Testament's Greek language. Four years later, while visiting Louisville in Kentucky to present a guest lecture at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, he wrote to Deissmann: 'Your works first commenced me in this line [i.e. NT philology]' (letter, 15/5/1912).

In 1910 Angus took up a new position in Edinburgh that allowed him to further his philological studies in Berlin. That same year he enrolled in eight courses at the Berlin University's Theological Faculty – two of them under Deissmann who regarded him as an outstandingly gifted New Testament philologist and later introduced him to the 'world's greatest Continental scholars and scientists' (Angus 1943: 157).

During the next couple of years Angus and his wife travelled extensively, until early 1914. That year, his friend, the Scottish theologian Harry Angus Alexander Kennedy (1866-1934), stopped him in his tracks, as it were, by revealing that he had quietly recommended him for the professorial chair of New Testament Exegesis and Historical Theology at the Presbyterian Theological Hall, St. Andrews College – in Sydney! Angus was completely shocked by this abrupt development. Recalling that watershed moment three decades later, he wrote tellingly:

I would accept a chair in the United States or Canada, but I could not think of going to Australia, away from libraries and museums and friends.

His attitude towards Australia as an intellectual exile was typical of many European academics of that time, who tended to know very little about the Antipodes, except, perhaps, that it was a kind of 'dumping ground' for British convicts! Nonetheless, in May that same year the Presbyterian Assembly of NSW cabled to Edinburgh that they had elected him to the vacant chair at St. Andrews – and after that, according to his own words, 'the die was cast'... (Angus 1943: 175-78).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on Angus' long and distinguished career in Australia – suffice to say that it was not without considerable controversy. For throughout the 1930s his liberal and (importantly) philology-informed theology was provoking the ire of the Presbyterian conservatives, who, for twelve years and through a host of different legal channels, kept (unsuccessfully) pursuing him for heresy. But this constant pressure left him physically ill and exhausted; and when Katharine, his wife of 27 years, died in late November 1934, he suffered a stroke that resulted in facial paralysis and temporary speech impairment.⁷ In his memoirs – poignantly completed, with the help of an amanuensis, just five months before his own death of cancer – he wrote of that period: 'In 1935 a severe illness confined me to bed for months during which I was on at least three occasions given up as beyond recovery.' (Angus 1943: 187; see also Emilsen 1991: 251).

To help him overcome this trying time, Angus embarked on a convalescence tour of Europe. It was there that he took the opportunity to make what turned out to be a serendipitous three-day visit to his former teacher, Adolf Deissmann, 'the professor whom I adored' (Angus 1943: 157) – and this is where and when the first tangible link between the Sydney University and German post-classical Greek philology has been forged.

According to Deissmann's diary entry of Saturday 26 October 1935, Angus had dinner with the family at their home in the rural village of Wünsdorf, near Berlin. Here he expressed his frustration at the lack of archaeological *realia* in Australia to do any serious academic studies, and complained that the country 'had appeared too late on the scene to acquire a share of such archaeological materials as enrich the museums of Europe and America'. In answer, Deissmann led Angus to his study, where he showed him his ostraca collection, and intimated that he was actually thinking of selling it – American buyers had already tried to entice him to do so with lucrative offers. He went on to explain, however, that he did not care to sell merely to the highest bidder, but preferred the collection rather to go to an institution where 'one of his old students was settled'. This would then give him an opportunity to pass on the *bâton* to someone who could continue his lifework with further philological research into the postclassical Greek language and its role in the New Testament.

Angus seized the moment. And, according to his own words, 'persuaded Deissmann to part with his precious collection ... so that I might secure [it] for the Nicholson Museum in the University of Sydney.' (Angus 1943:158).

4. A curious business transaction

It is regrettable that no written records seem to have survived which might shed light on the transactional arrangements concerning Deissmann's ostraca; nor could I determine the financial value he had originally placed on them.⁸ What is clear, however, is that he *did* sell the collection for money – and apparently a substantial sum at that – likely to help ease his forced retirement four months earlier (Gerber 2010: 351-56). For later, when his collection was presented to the Nicholson Museum, the curator, Professor William John Woodhouse (1866-1937), declared it a 'most notable donation' (Senate Minute Book). In this regard, Angus, too, kept his cards close to the chest when he wrote, rather enigmatically, that he had arranged the financial transaction, 'not on the ordinary commercial system of "on credit," but by the superior non-commercial method of faith – faith in the generosity of certain Australian friends' (Angus 1936a). Undoubtedly, he must have had some prospective Christian sponsors in mind from the outset, or he couldn't have persuaded Deissmann to sell his collection – wealthy and reliable contacts, surely, whose anticipated munificence he could potentially count upon.



Figure 3: Sir Robert Gillespie. Photo: courtesy of Historical Services, The Westpac Group

One such possibility was the Irish born merchant and philanthropist, Sir Martin McIlwrath (1874-1952), with whom he had toured Europe in 1935. But the man he pinned most of his hopes on was the Australian industrialist (flour-mills) and director of the Bank of New South Wales, Robert Winton Gillespie (1865-1945 – knighted 1941).

Gillespie was not only a well-known philanthropist, but also a stalwart Presbyterian with a serious interest in education and, as Angus reveals, the principal man ‘on whose generosity I did not rely in vain’ (Angus 1936a). But what was the reason that underpinned his trust? Susan Emilsen explains it this way:

Most significantly, he enjoyed the confidence and patronage of Robert Gillespie ... To Angus, Gillespie represented the ideal of the ‘noble Scot’. Successful, hard-headed and honest in his business dealings, discreet and straightforward in his social relations, practical in his piety, and generous to causes which he believed merited generosity. In the 1930s Angus was well-aware of the advantages of his relationship with Gillespie ... (Emilsen 1991: 180).

Not the least of these advantages was the potential for financial backing should he so require. Indeed, on 30

October 1936, almost exactly one year after Angus’ visit to Wünsdorf – and just five months before Deissmann’s death – Angus delivered Deissmann’s ostraca, packed in three separate boxes, to Professor Woodhouse at the Nicholson Museum, ‘in accordance with Deissmann’s wish that [the collection] should find a resting place in a centre where one of his students was settled’.⁹

Thus far, the collection had been known simply as ‘The Deissmann Ostraca’. But on 9 February 1938, the University Senate Registrar, W.A. Selle, wrote to Angus that the Senate had decided,

to adopt the suggestion from Mr. Robert Gillespie that his gift of ostraca to the Nicholson Museum of Antiquities should in the future be known as the ‘Deissmann-Angus Collection’ (letter, 9/2/1938).

Angus felt, in his own words, ‘greatly honoured’ by this; but it should be noted that he had earlier tried to talk Gillespie out of the idea, suggesting instead that it should be named the ‘Deissmann-Gillespie Collection’ – ‘but’, he writes wryly, ‘he would have none of it’ (letter, 10/2/1938).

5. The Deissmann-Angus collection

Deissmann’s ostraca collection forms one of the most remarkable, broadly thematic collections of Graeco-Roman non-literary writings in Australia, in that its various texts revolve mainly (although not exclusively) on tax or commerce related matters. These include an intriguing range of tax receipts (e.g. *O. Deiss.* 1-50.), private agreements, transportation documents and bills, as well as one or two private letters, guild bylaws and even a child’s alphabet exercise (see page 24). They also constitute a tangible link with Adolf Deissmann, who had purchased these particular pieces of fragmentary pottery mainly for two reasons. Firstly, because he recognised that their unpublished texts might provide worthwhile material for his philological work and, therefore, help reinforce his international authority in this field, as already mentioned. However, they also offered him an affordable possibility of owning some ancient *realia* that was directly related to his research on the postclassical Greek language. It is his possession of these ostraca that conferred on them the name by which they are commonly known today amongst scholars. Nevertheless, although Deissmann made general philological use of them, in the first edition of *Licht vom Osten* he published only five of his collection (i.e. *O. Deiss.* 31 (pages 74ff), *O. Deiss.* 36 (pages 261ff), *O. Deiss.* 56 (pages 83ff), *O. Deiss.* 57 (pages 131ff), *O. Deiss.* 64 (pages 135ff)).

Although three-quarters of a century has passed since Deissmann’s ostraca arrived in Australia, this collection clearly continues to offer many research or study opportunities to students and academics alike. For despite the commendable philological groundwork that Meyer has done with them almost a century ago, little or no further progress has been made since.¹⁰ This is regrettable, since his various commentaries tend to get rather bogged

down with technical and/or extraneous superfluity, whilst not paying sufficient attention to the expositions of the texts' real messages themselves. Besides, some of their inscriptions, signs and symbols are by no means properly understood yet, and thus have not been fully integrated into mainstream Greek lexicography. Because of this, numerous linguistic, historical, social and palaeographic questions remain tantalisingly unanswered to this day, awaiting a solution. Yet Meyer himself repeatedly pointed out in his introductory comments to the various ostraca that his readings, interpretations, or translations are far from definitive – in fact, in certain cases they are no more than educated guesswork, and sometimes even pure speculation, as we shall see.

The existing collection provides us with individually unique, original and wholly unpretentious private-life information, mostly in postclassical *koine* Greek; although there are three which are bilingual, with a few demotic lines or phrases added (i.e. *O. Deiss.* 7; *O. Deiss.* 23; *O. Deiss.* 46). All of these texts have been more or less hastily written down, between the third century BC and the third century AD, only to be discarded later as useless rubbish, by either their owners or recipients. Yet now, two millennia later, these same broken bits of pottery offer a variety of exciting research possibilities – and that in our own backyard, as it were. Not only can they aid us with socio-historical insight into the day-to-day affairs of some common individuals about whom otherwise nothing else would be known, but they are also useful for philological, palaeographical and lexicographical studies. They certainly deserve to be regarded as more than merely quaint museum exhibits or occasional student exercise opportunities.

In fact, their writings can be amazingly private; yet somehow the Deissmann ostraca seem to fail to capture the imagination of modern-day classical scholars. One reason for this might be because their apparent mundanity is not deemed to warrant further studies beyond what has already been done; but another is the perceived notion that they are not 'sensational' or 'useful' enough to warrant serious study. At any rate, we know that the Deissmann collection is now seldom made use of by external researchers, and even more rarely referred to in academic or student works. As a matter of fact, according to the Nicholson Museum's curatorial assistant, these ostraca were physically accessed since 2005 by only one single student, in the presence of a supervisor.

In 1983, G.H.R. Horsley featured a photo and brief description of the two ostraca, *O. Deiss.* 33 (NM 36.28) and the 14-letter *O. Deiss.* 83 (NM 36.78) – the latter being a fragmentary child's alphabet exercise – on the book cover of his lexicographical spadework towards a postclassical Greek lexicon, *New documents illustrating early Christianity* vol. 3, (1983). This elicited a letter from Poland, from someone who was pleased to discover where Deissmann's ostraca were now being held. Twenty years later, the same *O. Deiss.* 83 received again a brief mention in the book, *Coming of age in ancient Greece:*

Images of childhood from the classical past (251). That same year (2003), the fragment was sent to the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, as part of an exhibition of the same name as the book; the ostraca was returned to the Nicholson Museum in October 2005 (NM Email, 4/1/2012). In 1985, the Museum has also lent eight of Deissmann's ostraca to the Macquarie University;¹¹ all were returned in 2008. But other than that, only a very small number of this collection might, on rare occasions, be called upon for internal teaching purposes by the Sydney University's Department of Archaeology (NM Email, 21/10/2010).

6. Vanishing voices from the past

Three months before the Nicholson Museum received the Deissmann collection, Angus wrote two colourful articles on these ostraca, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, in which he announced:

This collection of fragments of pottery, reaching back twenty-two centuries, with their compact cursive script, puzzling contractions and signs, preserved for us by the dry air and the dry sands of Egypt, has now to encounter the more humid atmosphere of Sydney. Every precaution will be taken to prevent the danger of the script fading (Angus 1936b).

Despite Angus' assurance that everything possible would be done to prevent the texts from deterioration, the ink on a few of these ostraca has in the meantime become quite indistinct, in some cases even faded away completely, leaving behind little more than the original pottery fragment they once were (Figures 4 and 5). This deterioration occurred mainly within the past 75 years, and is virtually impossible to reverse without the application of modern imaging technology.¹² The cause of this is partly due to what Angus has described as 'the more humid atmosphere of Sydney', and – perhaps more directly – the physical wear and tear that resulted from casual handling and over-exposure to ultraviolet light by well-intentioned individuals. To some extent, Deissmann himself has also contributed to this, since (as his son, Gerhard, told me in 2004) he was not above carrying various 'demonstration pieces' inside his coat-pockets, to show them to his students during lectures.

Nevertheless, it is significant that when Meyer published the ostraca in 1916, they were all still readable with the naked eye – including the two faded specimens pictured below! It is certainly advantageous for us that Meyer transcribed these texts to the best of his ability; but unfortunately, transcription does not equal textual preservation. For even though the loss of legibility on a few old sherds may not be overly worrisome in the grander scheme of things, further philological studies of their texts, without the aid of advanced technology, now rests somewhat uneasily on Meyer's not always definitive transcripts. Happily, however, the great majority of Deissmann's ostraca remains fairly well preserved and readable.



Figure 4: *O. Deiss. 58* (#NM 36.53) h. 100, w. 125.

Three-quarters of a century has passed since the collection arrived on Australian soil – and nearly a hundred years since Meyer first published its legible texts. Isn't it about time to re-examine all these ostraca thoroughly, and once and for all close those various wide-open gaps Meyer, Deissmann et al. have left behind? Such a project is quite achievable nowadays, in part because of the intervening philological advancements that have occurred since their days, but also because of the technical leaps (i.e. digital and spectroscopic) which have been made since the early 1990s – including digital infrared, X-ray fluorescence, and spectral imaging.

* * *

The first two rather inconspicuous ostraca are reproduced here to show the extent to which the original visual appeal has now been lost to the naked eye on a few fragments of this collection. In effect, they have almost reverted to their original state – i.e. unremarkable bits of broken pottery – and as such, are now of little value as museum exhibits. Yet for more than 2000 years these same two potsherds have preserved the untold story of two real-life men: Pasemis, the illiterate owner of an irrigated patch of farming land in Egyptian Thebes (Figure 4), and Horos, the slave who needed a written order to rent a pack animal from his local 'rent-a-donkey' guild, to transport a sizable consignment of vegetable seed to the temple of Isis (Figure 5).

These are not earth shattering or literary tales of epic deeds – yet this is precisely the point! Because these ostraca can

tell us so many things about the lower to middle social classes in antiquity that no amount of classical literature could or would be able to reveal to us.

***O. Deiss. 58* (#NM 36.53: Figure 4)**

[Π]ασῆ[μ]ις Πετεχῶντος [.] . [.] -
 ενει Ἀμῶτος χαίρειν. ἔχω παρὰ
 σοῦ τὸ ἐκφόριον καὶ τὸ ἐπιγένημα
 τῆς ἐπηντλήτου μου γῆς. ἂν δέ τι[ς]
 5 ἐπέλθῃ περὶ βασιλικῶν ἢ ιδιω-
 τικῶν, ἐκστήσω αὐτόν.
 ἔγραψεν ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ Ἀρχιτάρχις (?)
 ἀξιωθείς ὑπ' αὐτοῦ διὰ τὸ
 φάσκειν αὐτὸν μὴ εἰδέναι
 10 γράμματα.
 Ἦ ΚΣ μεσορῆ Κ.

Pasemis, son of Petechon, to ... son of Amoto, greetings. I have (received) from you the rent and the surplus of my artificially irrigated land. But should anyone raise an objection against you regarding state or private (obligations entailed by this land), I shall confound him. Architarchis (?) wrote this on his (Pasemis') behalf; it was requested by him because of his statement that he does not know how to write. Year 26, 20th Mesore (i.e. 15 Sept. 155, or 12 Sept. 144 BC)



Figure 5: O. Deiss. 81 (#NM 36.76), h.65, w. 80.

Nothing is known of either Pasemis or the son of Amoto, except what is written here in this private leasehold receipt. But from it we can see that Pasemis owned a fertile piece of irrigated farming land somewhere along the Nile, similar to modern Egypt's Sharaki fields in the comparatively higher lying regions of the river valley. For some reason, he doesn't want to (or can't) work the plot himself, but has leased it to the son of Amoto, an apparently quite enterprising tenant farmer, for an undisclosed rent (likely in kind) and any 'surplus produce' (ἐπιγένημα) that the latter isn't able to sell or use himself. Significantly, the ostracum is dated mid-September, which is towards the end of the first of Egypt's three-season flood cycle, and referred to as the Inundation – or *Akhet* – (Strudwick 2005: 87), that is to say, right at the time when the arable land is about to become ready for sowing the next season's crops.

Lines four and five, as well as the date, seem to imply that this was not only a receipt for payment received, but also a contract (or permit) that allows Amoto's son ongoing farming rights for the coming year. Last season he has successfully managed to raise enough crops to pay his rent, feed his family, and produce a pleasing enough surplus for the landowner to act as his potential guarantor. Plainly, this farmer is a robust optimist who is not intimidated by the hard physical labour this plot necessitates if it is to be productive. Yet despite his physical confidence he is not imprudent, for he wants to protect himself against potential trouble from resentful neighbours – perhaps in connection with his water supply? For instead of a simple receipt, or even his culture's equivalent to our time-honoured handshake, he and Pasemis engage a scribe to put their agreement in writing – even though the owner himself is illiterate. Moreover, the latter dictated a strongly worded caveat against any would-be adversaries of his tenant – surely something he would only do for a man he appreciated and trusted.

O. Deiss. 81 (#NM 36.76: Figure 5)

Εἰσίωμι γρα(μματεῖ). μέρισον
 Ὅρωι Ἑρακλ(είδου) ὑπ(ὸ) λαχανό(σπερμον)
 ὄνον ἕνα ἀρτά(βης) μιᾶς
 ἡμίσουσ βετερ (?) [εἰς] ἴ
 5 θη(σαυρόν) Φίλας Εἰσήου.
 ι ι Τιβερίου Καίσαρος
 Σεβαστοῦ μεσορῆ
 χζ.

To the [donkey guild] secretary, Ision. Allocate to Horos, son of Herakleides, a donkey to transport 1 ½ artabas (c. 30 kg) vegetable seeds ... to the warehouse of the temple of Isis at Phylae. Year 10 of Tiberius Caesar Augustus, 27th Mesore (i.e. 20 Aug. 23 AD)

As with the previous ostracum, very little is known about either of the two main characters listed in this transportation directive, nor has the writer signed his name. Nevertheless, we do know that Horos, the deliveryman to whom this load of seed is entrusted, must transport it to the temple of Isis in Phylae, located on two small islands in the Nile. In an earlier era, both these islands had once been deemed to be sacrosanct (ἄβητος) and thus only occupied by priests; but by the time this ostracum was written, the same temple complex had morphed into a lucrative trading centre between Egyptian Memphis and Nubian Meroë.

The name Horos was very common throughout Egypt (Bagnall 2009: 192), yet this deliveryman is not of Egyptian but of Greek immigrant stock, as his father's name, Herakleides, attests. Horos appears to be a civic slave, since he owns no pack animal and needs a written order from his (unnamed) superior to lease one

from the municipally regulated ‘rent-a-donkey’ guild,¹³ administrated by Ision.

Similar to *O. Deiss.* 58 (above), the date of this directive also falls within the Nile’s flooding season. Horos, therefore, appears to bring the seed to the temple not for storage but for trading purposes. In other words, someone (likely the writer) is hoping to make a profit from selling it to farmers because the sowing season was about to begin. The exact nature of the seed itself is not certain, except to say that it was for some kind of garden vegetables and not cereal crops.

* * *

None of these men could possibly have foreseen that their names and activities would one day be immortalised through the most fortuitous route, via Deissmann, Meyer, Angus and, finally, the Sydney University’s Nicholson Museum. But against all odds, the above two ostraca have survived into modernity and now present us with brief snapshots from these people’s daily way of living.

7. The challenge

In contrast to the above faded exemplars, most of the Deissmann ostraca are still in a fine state of preservation, with their writing clearly legible and intact, as the two following images show. And these texts make further studies not only practical – but distinctly called for. For neither Meyer nor Deissmann had intended their philological work to be understood as ‘the final word’ for any one piece in this collection.

Take, for instance, the example of *O. Deiss.* 65 (Figure 6). Meyer admitted in his commentary – quite rightly – ‘whether I have correctly interpreted πρ(εσβύτερος)ς in line 1 and 8 as [an abbreviation for] “Presbyter” is doubtful’ (Meyer 1916: 188). And in regard to his reading

of *O. Deiss.* 66 (Figure 7), he went so far as to confess: ‘[My] explanation is completely uncertain and should be viewed as merely conjectural’ (Meyer 1916: 190).

Admittedly, the low hanging fruits have indeed been picked from this collection, by the likes of Meyer, or Deissmann himself; but very much is still hanging there, temptingly inviting. These timeworn pieces of inscribed pottery are now fully ripe for the picking to anyone seriously interested – and excited enough – by the opportunity to engage more deeply with the thoughts and lives of these ancient people and their world.

O. Deiss. 65 (#NM 36.60: Figure 6)

Σῦρος πρ τῷ Παῆρι...Ψειθιαη...[χα(ίρειν)]
 ἀναγ’ καίως σπούδαζων μετὰ
 Εὐδαίμωνι, ἕως ἂν ταριχεύει
 τὰ δύο κολοφόνεια, καὶ ποίησον
 5 τὸ σὼν ἐν τάχει, ἀλλὰ μὴ ἀμε-
 λήσεις χαὶ ἐτήμασον τέσσαρας
 ἀρτάβην σῖτον.
 Σῦρος πρ ἐσημιωσάμην

Syros, Commanding Officer(?), to Paëris ... Psenithiaë ... [Greetings]. You and Eudaimon must do your best that he will fill the two Kolophonian wine jars with salted herrings. And do your part quickly, but don't neglect to make ready as well four artabas of flour. I, Syros, Commanding Officer(?), have signed this myself.

This letter was written in the third century AD by a man named Syros. And, judging by his name, he appears to have been a Greek, while the ostracon itself originates

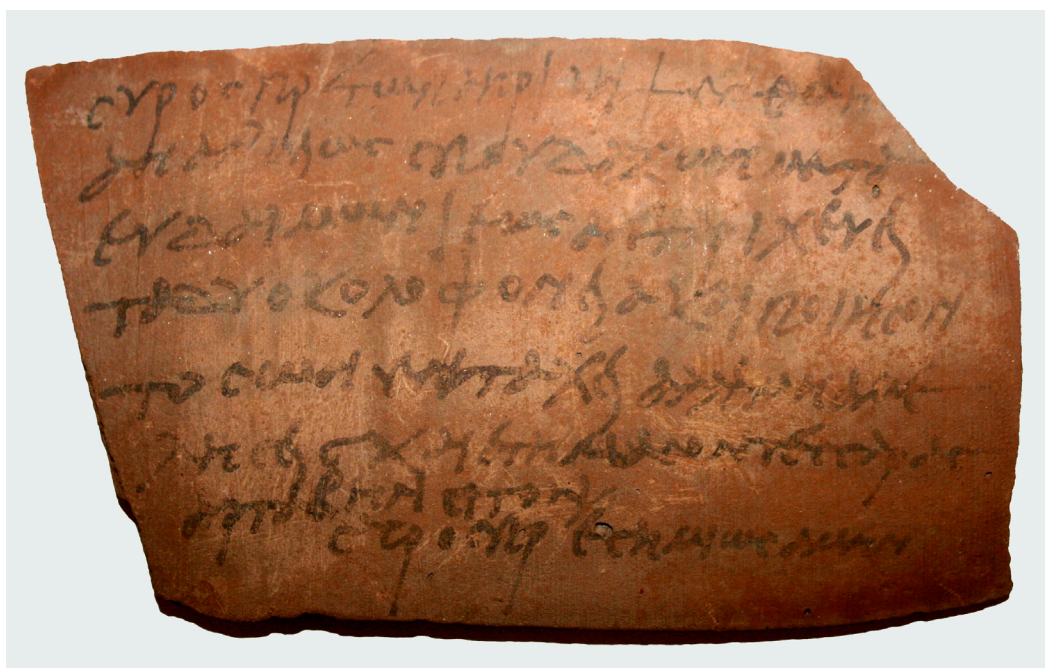


Figure 6: *O. Deiss.* 65 (#NM 36.60), h. 80, w. 130

from Egyptian Thebes (so Meyer). However, one of the most fundamental yet still unresolved questions this text poses must surely concern the two mysterious consonants ΠΡ (PR), which are appended to Syros' name in the first and last line. That they are some kind of titular abbreviation is reasonably certain, but do they really have to stand for *πρεσβύτερος* (*Presbyteros* – e.g. elder), as Meyer rather unsurely speculated? After all, some 46 different kinds of abbreviations are known to exist for this particular word (Avi-Yonah 1974: 11). If Meyer is correct, then we might think of Syros in two ways: either as an elder or overseer of something like a small business or farming cooperation, or – and in that case perhaps then more naturally – as a presbyter of an early Egyptian Christian (i.e. Coptic) community.

In the first instance, the ostrakon would indeed be a private letter, as Meyer suggests; yet this would also raise the obvious question why the writer should conclude his letter with such an oddly formulaic greeting: *ἐσημιώσαμην* (I have signed for myself)? On the other hand, if the second proposition were true, it would turn the text into an early church-related letter. Yet this too lacks fibre; for if Syros were indeed a Coptic presbyter, one would surely expect his letter to show some internal corroboration to this – at the very least in the register of his language? And again, we have to contend with this formulaic greeting, which points into quite a different direction, since it is without any hint of religious or ecclesiastical authority, purpose, spiritual blessing or formula. All in all then, to read the

abbreviation *πρ* as *πρεσβύτερος* (elder) does not give us the right key with which to unlock the 'meaning' of this ostrakon's text, nor to contemplate the true social stratum of Syros' life.

Perhaps, then, these two vexed consonants should be viewed from quite a different angle. Could they, for instance, not just as reasonably (or even more so) stand for some other at that time commonly recognised abbreviation? A few well-attested possibilities are: *πατήρ* (father), *πρόβουλος* (commissioner), *πρόεδρος* (president), *πρώτιστος* (the very first), or even *παροδίτης* (a passer-by, or wayfarer) (Avi-Yonah 1974: 2, 96). Yet, once again, none of these fit the context satisfactorily.

However, I suggest a further alternative exists that deserves serious consideration – even though it may necessitate a little speculation to draw it out. For it seems to me much more consistent with the overall thrust of the ostrakon's text, if *πρ* be read as the shortened form for a military rank (cf. Avi-Yonah 1974: 11). To be specific, the rank of *πραίτωρ* (*praetor*) – in this case, not in reference to a Roman magistrate (civilian *praetor*), but to a commanding officer in a Roman garrison stationed in Greek-speaking Egypt. Looked at in this way, the abbreviation becomes a recognisable hallmark of political/military authority, and the entire ostrakon takes on a more official tone. This would also go a long way to explain the awkwardly formulaic greeting. At any rate, Syros is clearly in an authoritative position, and seems to

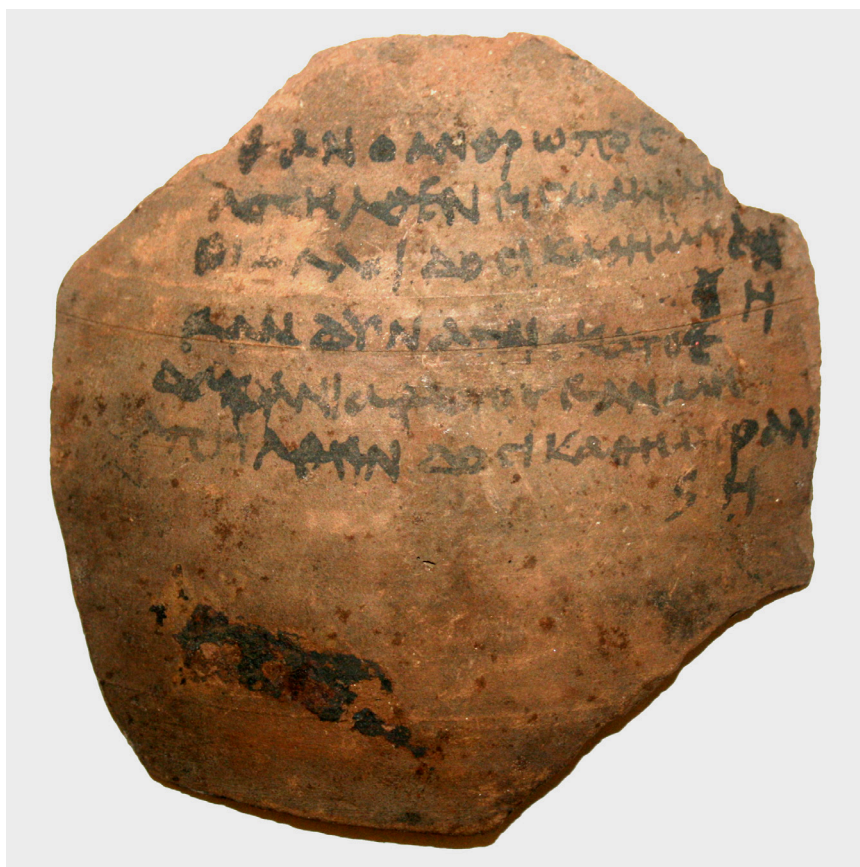


Figure 7: O. Deiss. 66 (#NM 36.61), h. 115, w. 120.

know Paëris' stock and general layout rather intimately, including that the two Kolophonian wine jars are standing empty. This suggests that he has been there not so long before, inspected these earthenware containers, and made plans to return – apparently with a detachment of hungry men, for whom he expects Paëris and Eudaimon to cater. That he wants to re-use the two empty three-gallon crocks for salted fish, instead of new wine, becomes also less surprising when πρ is read as *praetor*, since Kolophonian wine was putatively of inferior quality, and significantly, produced mainly for military troops (Kruit and Worp 2000: 65-146).

As an afterthought (so Meyer), Syros has also ordered four artabas of flour to be made ready. At about 30 kg per artaba, this amounts to some 120 kg (Bagnall 2009: 187), enough for a medium sized company of men, especially when used in conjunction with the salted fish. There appears to be an organised urgency about Syros' instructions, and it looks as if he sent it ahead in preparation for the imminent arrival of his men. Although the message is addressed to Paëris, he seems to have at least one assistant in Eudaimon, and quite possibly a third – could these men perhaps be something akin to 'provisions officers' in the military base where Syros' garrison was normally stationed?

O. Deiss. 66 (#NM 36.61: Figure 7)

ἐὰν ὁ ἄνθρωπος
ἀπῆλθεν εἰς μακράν
οἱ ἄλλοι δόσι καθ' ἡμέραν

Σ η

5 ἐὰν δύναται ἑκατος
δεκανία αὐτοῦ, ἐάν μῆ
ἀπῆλθεν, δόσι καθ' ἡμέραν

Σ η

If the man should move away to a far (land), the others will each give (him) 8 drachmas daily, provided each member of his dekania has the capacity; should he not go away, they will give (him) 8 drachmas daily.

This is a particularly intriguing ostrakon; because its interpretation, as Meyer recognised, is somewhat of a mystery. And while its text is reasonably legible, it was scrawled rather sloppily, with smears, runny ink and careless inconsistencies – even an inkblot at the bottom. But, as with the earlier discussed fragments, should not all this signal a challenge for a fresh approach to this puzzling piece of writing?

For instance, Meyer may well have misjudged the operative word, *dekania* (1. 6) – the Greek form of the Roman *decuria* – by rendering it 'Verein' (i.e. association, or club). He posits various conceivable interpretations for

it, but opts unconvincingly to go with Ulrich Wilcken's suggestion of 'Verein' (Meyer 1916: 190, n. 4). However, since the use of *dekania* is well attested militarily by the time this text was written, the term could just as reasonably denote a troop of ten soldiers, perhaps not unlike Syros' above suggested military unit. And in that case this ostrakon, too, should be classified as a military, or perhaps law enforcement missive.

Its text is clearly not a schoolboy's writing exercise (as, for instance, the earlier mentioned *O. Deiss.* 83), but was meant to be read by a literate recipient *in absentia* – why else write it? Could this, therefore, not simply be a hastily dashed off explanatory note to some distant enquirer, perhaps in answer to a question relating to the 'running' of this *dekania*?

Let's also look briefly at the puzzling eight-drachmas-pledge (if that is what it is) of the ten members. Meyer places it generally into the third century AD, although he fails to substantiate this in any way, while Deissmann himself never mentions this particular ostrakon at all. So, could Meyer's claim be said to be internally consistent? The drachma reference places the writer firmly into pre-Diocletianic Roman-governed Egypt, since the Egyptian drachma 'could not be taken to the rest of the [Roman] Empire' (van Minnen 2008: 238), and 'Egypt thus stood in a sort of monetary isolation' (Bagnall 1985: 9). A daily contribution of eight drachmas per individual would have been totally unaffordable for any commoner or soldier before the latter parts of the third century. But 'then came sustained inflation from 275 onwards, which more or less ruined the economy' (van Minnen 2008: 227), yet it certainly made a personal contribution of eight drachmas per day much easier affordable. During the mid-second century one could buy a measure of wheat for around seven to eight Egyptian drachmas, but in contrast, by the late third the cost for this same measure had risen to approximately 20,000 times as much (Levy 1967: 89; also van Minnen 2008: 227-9). This leads to the reasonable conclusion that a more refined date for the origin of this military ostrakon should be posited at sometime between 275 and the first decade of the fourth century.

* * *

Deissmann's academic focus was primarily on the philology of the postclassical *koine* of the New Testament, which is why he collected these ostraca. But it is clearly not coincidental that 31 of them bear the names of Roman emperors – and each with the appellation (κύριος) *kyrios*: Augustus (27BC-14AD); Nero (54-68); Vespasian (69-79); Domitian (81-96); Trajan (98-117); Hadrian (117-138); Antoninus Pius (138-161); Marcus Aurelius (161-180), and Gallienus (253-268).

Kyrios, usually translated as 'Lord' in the Bible, is one term of significance that frequently occurs in early Christian texts, but has continued to attract scholarly debate and interest. In 1907 Deissmann wrote what one reviewer of

his recently published book described as ‘the best account of this word known to the present reviewer’ (Souter 1907: 412 [referring to pages 79ff of this book]). And in his next and most popular book, *Licht vom Osten* (1908: 231-77), Deissmann devoted an entire chapter to the cultic (mis)use of this Greek appellation in the New Testament (4th edn., of 1923: 287-324). For after the death of Jesus Christ, this same title was appropriated by the New Testament writers and applied as a monotheistic epithet to Christ’s name (e.g. Acts 2:36; I Cor. 8:6; Phil. 2:11). This, of course, only added to the already strained relations early Christians faced within the various religio-politically governed Roman provinces. To give just one example: when Polycarp, the 86-year old bishop of Smyrna, was arrested in February 155, the police captain urged him privately regarding this term, by reasoning (unsuccessfully): Τί γάρ κακόν ἐστὶν εἰπεῖν· Κύριος καῖσαρ, καὶ ἐπιθῦσαι καὶ τὰ τούτοις ἀκόλουθα καὶ διασώζεσθαι (for what harm is there in saying, “Lord” Caesar [instead of Lord Jesus], and to offer up a sacrifice and so forth, and to save yourself?)

As we have seen, Deissmann’s ostraca collection comprises a considerable scope of topics; but the 31 ‘*kyrios* ostraca’ form part of a somewhat more defined collection within a collection, as it were (Deissmann 1907: 80). For not only do they support the evidence that Domitian was not the first emperor to be referred to by this appellation – as used to be believed earlier – but they also helped in Deissmann’s research on the essentially Eastern tradition of the Christian’s curiously ubiquitous use of the honorific ‘Lord’ (i.e. *kyrios*), for Christ (see *Licht vom Osten* 1923: 298-310).

8. Conclusion

The Deissmann collection of ostraca, although broadly thematic in content, is neither uniform nor internally wholly consistent; its individual texts display a frequent use of entirely individualistic grammatical contractions, even occasional demotic lines or words, and various mysterious signs which are not fully understood yet.

Ostraca, in general, are certainly no easy puzzles to unscramble or to place within their correct socio-historical context. Especially since physical damage through centuries of ‘wear and tear’ is not uncommon; their texts (or crucial parts thereof) may be faded completely, worn away or broken off; moreover, the lettering may be smudged or written in completely idiosyncratic or illegible scripts. Yet for all that, the Deissmann collection provides us with very good and relatively easily accessible opportunities to catch a glimpse of a few poignant moments in the lives of some ordinary people whose ‘today’ has long ago slipped away into the forgotten past. Indeed, their ostraca have now become their memorial stones – and symbols of the brevity of our own existence.

Meyer, Deissmann and a few others have undoubtedly achieved commendable work with these ostraca. But after 75 years in Sydney this collection has neither produced the wider intellectual enthusiasm nor the academic engagement that Deissmann, Angus and Gillespie had once hoped for. Yet, as Angus has highlighted, the timeworn texts on these broken pieces of ancient pottery

have come a long and devious way from their historic Oriental home, through the medium of a German professor and an Australian merchant, to remain in our new land and solemnly to remind us that history is ever in the making, whether in the more spectacular hours of crisis or in the reposeful periods (Angus 1936b).

We should count ourselves fortunate to have Deissmann’s intriguing ostraca collection within this country. For, as I have tried to illustrate by those few observations I singled out and took the liberty to expand somewhat upon, these ostraca have clearly not yet been ‘mined out’ academically. And whether or not modern imaging technology will be employed on any or all of them – a project well worth considering – this collection still offers a wealth of rewarding challenges which deserve more serious scholarly attention than it presently attracts.

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Endnotes

- 1 Meyer (1916: iv) described a few mainly physically for the record (e.g. *O. Deiss.* 83-92); and *O. Deiss.* 17 was published by H. Windisch in *Neue Jahrbücher*, 25, 1, 1910, 204.
- 2 For Deissmann's religious and political persuasions, see Gerber (2011: 174-187); for a comprehensive bibliography of Deissmann's published works, see Gerber, (2010: 591-8).
- 3 One of these papyri is also in Australia (held privately) and was published by G.H.R. Horsley (1994: 10-20). The fate of Deissmann's other papyri and the codices are not known.
- 4 The museum's ostraca index shows NM 36.31 wrongly as *O. Deiss.* 35 instead of 36. Meyer reports (iv) that Deissmann had gifted *O. Deiss.* 35 to Prof. Allan Menzies, which explains why *O. Deiss.* 36 is missing in the present NM index.
- 5 NM Email, 21/10/2010. Although, strictly speaking, *O. Deiss.* 68 and 69 are mummy tablets, and 70 is a small wooden panel (a name list) 5.5 cm x 26.5cm.
- 6 *Veröffentlichungen aus der Heidelberger Papyrus-Sammlung. I, Die Septuaginta-Papyri und andere*

altchristliche Texte, Heidelberg, 1905.

- 7 Angus' wife had been an invalid for many years, and he cared for her at their home in Turrumurra in northern Sydney. She died on 24 Nov. after prolonged illness.
- 8 My research included the Historical Services Archive of the Westpac Group; the University of Sydney Archives and Records Management Services, St Andrew's College Archive, and the Rare Book & Special Collections Library; the Presbyterian Church's Ferguson Memorial Library Archive; the Deissmann main 'Nachlass' in the Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin; the Bundesarchiv Berlin, and the Deissmann family's private sources.
- 9 Woodhouse, letter to W.A. Selle, in Lawler (1997: 160).
- 10 And that despite the 33 minor changes Meyer subsequently recorded in vol. 2 of the *Berichtigungsliste* (1922, 14-16), and the further 8 equally minor changes in vol. 3 (published posthumously in 1958, 260).
- 11 i.e. *O. Deiss.* 33 (NM 36.28), *O. Deiss.* 48 (NM 36.43), *O. Deiss.* 49 (NM 36.44), *O. Deiss.* 61 (NM 36.56), *O. Deiss.* 62 (NM 36.57), *O. Deiss.* 64 (NM 36.59), *O. Deiss.* 65 (NM 36.60) and *O. Deiss.* 83 (NM 36.78).
- 12 Further to this, see G. Bearman, M.S. Anderson and K. Aitchison (2011) and G. Bearman and W.A. Christens-Barry (2009)
- 13 Further to such donkey-renting services, see Judge (1981).