

## Non-Elite Writing on Athenian Ostraka

Since the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, excavations in Athens have uncovered more than 11,000 ostraka—inscribed potsherds bearing the names of Athenian citizens—that were used as ballots in votes of ostracism conducted during the fifth-century BC. Scholars have focused much of their attention on the persons at whom these ballots were directed, most of whom were members of the Athenian political elite, and what the numbers of ostraka naming specific persons can tell us about their political careers and the political climate at Athens at the time that votes of ostracism took place. As for voters themselves, it is impossible to identify the authors of individual ballots, but the sheer number of surviving ostraka all but proves that a majority of them were composed by ordinary, non-elite citizens. This paper will explore what ostraka can tell us about these non-elite individuals, not only in terms of the reasons why individual Athenians may have cast ballots against specific politicians, but also with respect to their familiarity with the written word and what features such as spelling, grammar, and textual layout may indicate about the literate skills of non-elites.

This study draws heavily on the published ostraka from both the Athenian Agora (Lang 1990) and the Kerameikos (Brenne 2018), but it also incorporates data culled from more recent finds, including more than 300 ostraka discovered over the past two decades. Three features stand out. First, a majority of ostraka appear to have been written by individual voters. Although the North Slope of the Acropolis and the Kerameikos excavations have produced groups of multiple ostraka written by single individuals, mass production of ostraka is relatively rare. Second, ostraka rarely include additional text that might reveal the motives of individual voters. A few ostraka, to be sure, include tags or brief comments about the candidates named on them,

and those remarks may reflect why a voter aimed his ballot against a specific person. But the number of inscribed sherds preserving additional text beyond a candidate's name is exceedingly small, and it is unsound to assume that such remarks are representative of the citizen body as a whole. Third, although spelling and style of writing can vary widely from one sherd to the next, a large number of ostraka share basic features with respect to letters shapes, word division, and the location of texts on surfaces of sherds. These characteristics point to a general familiarity with writing and the written word among non-elite Athenians, perhaps from their exposure to texts recorded on papyri and stone inscriptions.

#### Bibliography

Brenne, Stefan. 2018. *Die Ostraka vom Kerameikos*. Vol. 20. *Kerameikos: Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen*. Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag.

Lang, Mabel L. 1990. *Ostraka*. Vol. 25. *The Athenian Agora*. Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens.