O.Florida inv. 21: An Amorous Triangle

1. Background (R.S.B.) ([1])

When Florida State University, where I held my first teaching position, bought the ostraca that I published in *O.Florida* (1976), they arrived with an inventory prepared by P.J. Sijpesteijn, from whom the university had acquired the collection of ostraca and papyri. ([2]) A slip with this inventory was the source of the statement in the publication (p. 1) that their provenance was Edfu, thus presumably originally Contrapollonopolis Magna, across the Nile, where a Roman garrison was stationed. We will return to this question at the end of this article.

Amidst the correspondence concerning the Roman military in the deserts of Upper Egypt contained in the Florida ostraca was one item labeled by Sijpesteijn as "fake?" I could see at the time no reason to dispute this judgment; the hand was certainly less developed and less professional than those responsible for most of the Florida ostraca, and I could make little if any sense of it, even though there were some strings of letters that clearly formed plausible Greek words. It in any case did not seem to belong to the military-centered dossier published in *O.Florida*, and I left it in a file folder.

In 2003, as I was sorting through my older files in order to prepare them for archiving, I came across my transcription of the long-forgotten ostracon. Knowing a bit more about the possible range of handwritings now than then, and having seen much more of the variety in content possible in ostraca from the eastern desert, thanks to Mons Claudianus and its

(1) This ostracon was first presented by Roger Bagnall at the Twenty-Fourth International Congress of Papyrology (Helsinki, 2004). We publish it here in memory of Georges Nachtergael, who knew the world of the Eastern Desert ostraca well and would, we are sure, have both enjoyed the text and been able to improve on our interpretation of it. We are indebted to Jean-Luc Fournet, David Sider, and Gareth Williams for discussing various aspects of it with us.

(2) The papyri were published in collaboration with R. Bogaert, "Orders for Payment from a Banker's Archive: Papyri in the Collection of Florida State University," *Ancient Society* 6 (1975) 79-108 and pll. II-VII, reprinted in Bogaert's *Trapezitica Aegyptiaca* (Florence, 1994) 219-244. The texts were printed as *SB* XIV 11309-11328.

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successor excavations, I felt immediately that the judgment that I had accepted thirty years earlier must be wrong. To be sure, the hand is not highly developed; it would probably deserve to be classified in Cribiore's "evolving" category. (3) The unattractive overall appearance, however, owes its ungainliness as much to closely packed lines and lack of margins as it does to the letter forms. The letters are separated, the writer kept on dipping the pen, and there is a messy erasure. This is not, however, a "school hand", as the textual content shows, but it belongs with those hands that Schubart calls "personal." (4) A good comparison might be the hand of *P.Oxy*. LXVII 4546. This text, which looks like a clumsy school copy, is the copy of an actor and contains only Admetus' lines in Euripides *Alcestis*, omitting the lines of Alcestis and the chorus. In any case, the ostracon's hand is later than that and should be dated to the second/third century.

2. Text, Translation, Notes (Fig. 1) (R.S.B. - R.C.)

O.Florida inv. 21 — 9 × 8.9 cm

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	τοὺς στεπάνους [...].. [.]	the crowns…
	ση. εἶνα τί σοὶ σιγῶσαν ἀνή-	Why are you crazily rocking a silent
	δωνα σαλεύειν μοράνῃ	barbarian woman without pleasure?
4	βάρβαρον; εἶν' εἴπῃς καὶ πρὸ	So that you can talk and laugh
	ἐμοῦ καταγελάσῃς; ὡς θ-	in front of me? Since I'm willing,
	έλω, ἄνθροπε, λαβ' ὅ τί ποτε	pal, take whatever you
	χρῄζεις· δώσω πατικῶς, ὡ-	need. I'll give (myself) pathically,
8	ς οὐκ οἶδες, νὴ τὴν σὴν κε-	in a way you don't know, by your
	παλὴν, καὶ ξένως, ἂν πθάσω	head, and in a strange way, if I
	ὕπνῳ τὰ μέλη μου παρα-	hand over my limbs to sleep first.
	δῶναι. τί ποεῖς; οὐκ οἶδα τί	What are you doing? I don't know why
12	⟦ .... ⟧ ἐμ' ἐραυνᾷς. (*vac.*)	you're searching for me.
	ὡc αἰσθάνωμαι, βίνι με.	Fuck me so that I can feel it.

1 στεφάνους ‖ **2** ἵνα, σύ ‖ **2-3** ἀνήδονα ‖ **3** μωράνῃ, μωράνει? ‖ **4** ἵν' ‖ **6** ἄνθρωπε ‖ **7** παθικῶς ‖ **8-9** κεφαλήν ‖ **9** φθάσω ‖ **10-11** παραδοῦναι ‖ **13** βίνει

(3) R. Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt* = *Am.Stud. Pap*., 36 (Atlanta, 1996) 112.

(4) W. Schubart, *Griechische Palaeographie* (Munich, 1925) 146-55.

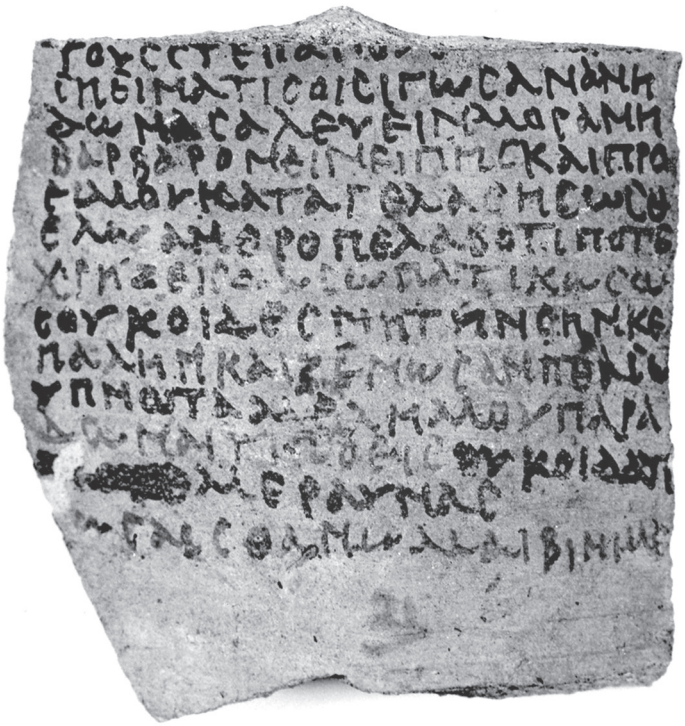

FIG. 1. — O.Florida inv. 21.

1 The "crowns" are probably wreaths and may indicate something about the setting of the scene, perhaps a banquet; cf. however below.

2 For ἵνα τί, "to what end?", i.e., "why?", see *LSJ*, s.v. ἵνα II.3.c. We have assumed in the text that σοί is a phonetic spelling for σύ, but it could be argued instead to be a dative as written (and best accented as enclitic): "silent for you"?

3 The verb σαλεύειν indicates the shaking of intercourse. Plu. *Quaest.Conv.* 651 B10 refers to young women who σαλεύονται πρὸς τὸ γεννᾶν "are shaken so that they procreate;" the scholia to Aratus also report a phrase used by Archilochus about a "crow shaken in pleasure" ὑφ' ἡδονῆς σαλευομένη. For a similar use of κινεῖν, see Herod. 5.2 τἀμά σοι σκέλεα κινεῖν. On nautical metaphors in comedy, J. HENDERSON, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy* (New York, 1991[2]) 49 and 161-66. David Sider has suggested to us the possibility that this is an error for σκαλεύειν, "to poke" (i.e., to fuck), citing Aristophanes, *Pax* 440. On βινεῖν, see the article of Bain cited below in the note to line 13.

2-3 We take ἀνήδονα to be a plausible but, as far as we know, unattested adverbial form of the adjective ἀνήδονος (the adverb that is attested is ἀνηδόνως). The adjective can mean either "disagreeable" or "without pleasure." It is not clear whose lack of pleasure is referred to. If the woman's, it is likely that "without pleasure" refers to her reaction to the sexual act; it is entirely possible that she is a slave or prostitute. The adjective is related to the pleasures of Aphrodite in Arist. Frag. 1.p.1.21. The barbarian woman may in this context be "silent" either because of the absence of pleasure or because of her lack of knowledge of Greek. If the adverb refers to the man, it could mean that he is not enjoying the act; but it could equally well mean "unpleasingly" to his partner.

3 We do not know other instances of μωραίνειν governing an infinitive.

6 ἄνθρωπε is quite common both in Old and New Comedy, e.g., Ar. *Pax* 164, Menander, *Mis*. 217; and *Comica Adespota* 359.1. See also in prose Lu. *Salt*. 63.31.

7 Neither παθικός nor its adverb παθικῶς is attested elsewhere in classical Greek; the adjective appears in *LSJ* on the basis of the borrowing of the word as the Latin *pathicus*, referring to catamites or prostitutes (see further below). (There is one occurrence in Joannes Camaterus [patriarch of Constantinople, 1198-1204], *Eisagoge astronomias*, l. 2900 Teubner, not in an erotic context.) This would, therefore, be the first known attestation of the word in an ancient Greek text. The Greek word παθήματα can have this sexual significance, as in Ar. *Th*. 199 and especially 201.

8 "By your head" occurs in oaths; cf. Synesius often in his letters, e.g., 95.21 and 105.132.

11-13 These lines appear to introduce some kind of change of scenery, with the first man making a sexual advance toward the jealous speaker.

11 Whether this is a slip for the normal koine ποιεῖς or a deliberate Attic form, we do not know.

12 ἐραυνάω is a later form of ἐρευνάω, "seek for or after, explore, search." The erasure may have held up to five or six letters if squeezed; perhaps the writer originally wrote οὐκ οἶδα τί | [δρῶ εἴν'] ἐμ' ἐραυνᾷς, "I don't know what to do to make you go after me." If so, however, the deletion would have changed the meaning substantially.

13 The verb βινεῖν, which describes sexual intercourse in a vulgar way, often appears in comic contexts, e.g. Ar. *Ec*. 706 and *Ra*. 740. In prose it is generally not common except in genres close to comedy; there is a notable occurrence in Lucian, *Par*. 10.25, who jokingly refers to the lazy Odysseus and Calypso who indulged in it. It is usually employed in the active for men and in the passive for women. The same thing would be true in this ostracon if the speaker is a woman. (5) On βινεῖν, see generally D. Bain, "Six Verbs of

(5) M. Andreassi, *Mimi greci in Egitto* (Naples, 2001) 105-106.

Sexual Congress (βινῶ, κινῶ, πυγίζω, ληκῶ, οἴφω, λαικάζω)," *CQ* 41 (1991) 51-77 at 54-62. He remarks (p. 55) that *P.Oxy.* III 413 verso col. ii.107 provides the one instance in which a woman expresses a desire ἵνα με βεινήσῃ, "for him to fuck me".

3. Interpretation (R.S.B. - R.C.)

This text is a piece of a speech, all apparently from a single character, (6) which in vocabulary and tone, not to speak of contents, is unmistakably comic. It is not from a known work of Greek literature, as far as we can see. It is in prose, as no meter can be discerned.

We may then turn to wonder what this piece of pottery was and why it was found wherever it was. Who would write a piece like this in such a hand? Is it a writing exercise, as Walter Cockle labeled several minor literary texts in the first volume of Mons Claudianus ostraca? It is hard to imagine something of this character serving as an educational exercise, even in the largely adult setting of the Eastern Desert forts, with their combination of a homosocial military milieu and widespread prostitution. Not all of the subliterary ostraca found at Maximianon, for example, have a scholastic provenance. Particularly interesting are those written by a soldier, Sosianus, who proclaimed his burning love for a certain woman on six of them. Sosianus' Greek was far from perfect, but he used a complex vocabulary of literary origin as he wrote his erotic compositions in prose. (7) We shall return to Sosianus later.

As we understand the surviving text of our ostracon—the beginning is lost—it presents a scene involving a sexual triangle. The parties in question are a man (the "you" of the text), addressed in line 6 as ἄνθρωπε, (8) who is engaging in sex with a barbarian woman (this woman is neither addressed nor spoken of except at the start, and is a passive and, we are

(6) We have considered the possibility of a change of speaker in line 11, with τί ποιεῖς. But we have not found a plausible way of understanding what follows if that line of thought is pursued.

(7) J.-L. Fournet, in H. Cuvigny (*ed.*), *La route de Myos Hormos* (Cairo, 2003, 2006^2) 466-67.

(8) E. Dickey, *Greek Forms of Address* (Oxford, 1996) 150-54. Dickey notes that it is not necessarily derogatory, but that its "primary use... is as a general term for vague, imaginary, or unspecified addressees." When used between people who know one another, however, "the context... is usually negative, and often strongly negative" (p. 152). She goes on to note that "It also happens, although rarely, that ἄνθρωπε is used between people who know each other as an expression of amazement and surprise at the conduct of the addressee."

told, silent partner in the scene), and the speaker, who jealously offers himself or herself instead as a sexual partner. The direct appeal of the last line echoes with an urgent immediacy which reminds one of the raucous cries of Catullus (e.g. 16) or, more suitably, of the rough and threatening proposition of Apion and Epimas in *P.Oxy*. XLII 3070, titled "Indecent Proposal" by its editor. That letter has an elegant, literary structure that contrasts with its uncouth and explicit contents, demanding homosexual sex in exchange for avoidance of physical violence. ([9])

Is the speaker male or female? There is no clue in the morphology of the passage. That the speaker offers to engage in sex παθικῶς might seem to suggest that it is a male, as the term—at least in Latin—seems generally to refer to the passive partner during anal intercourse in male homosexual relations. ([10]) But this is far from certain. The *Carmina Priapea* contain a number of references to *pathicae (puellae)*, which make it clear that women also can be described with the term. ([11]) None of these passages gives specific evidence of the meaning of the term, but there is no reason to think that the reference is to anything other than what it denotes with a man.

Holt Parker has argued that in Roman sexuality the opposite of the *vir* is the *femina* or even better the *puella*, that is, the woman as sexual object. He has identified three categories of women engaged in intercourse, which correspond to analogous categories of men: the *puella fututa* (vaginal intercourse), the *fellatrix* (oral) and the *pathica* / *pedicata* (anal penetration) and did not see anything degrading in the last term that would make it necessary to think that such love always involved prostitutes. ([12]) The most recent discussion of the term, by Craig Williams, argues that *pathica* alludes only to a passive role, not necessarily to anal penetration. ([13]) Williams in fact argues that the women so described in the *Priapea* were lustful women who took a special delight in the act, but this distinction seems arbitrary. Williams cites only the expression *pati natae,* that is,

(9) See C. Gallavotti, "P.Oxy. 3070 e un graffito di Stabia," *MCr* 13-14 (1978-79) 363-69.

(10) *TLL* 10.1 704.39-60. We thank Gareth Williams for discussing this matter with us.

(11) *Priapea* 25, 40, 48, and 73. Of these only 40 gives clear indications that the woman in question was a prostitute.

(12) "The Teratogenic Grid," in J. Hallett and M. Skinner, *Roman Sexualities* (Princeton, 1997) 47-65, esp. 48-49.

(13) C. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity* (Oxford, 2010[2]) 196-97.

"women born to submit" in Seneca, *Ep*. 95.21. We think that the passage in which this phrase occurs, which reads in full *pati natae, adeo perversum commentae genus impudicitiae viros ineunt,* should be translated: "In fact, not even in matters of lust do these women come second to men, even though they are born to submit. They have devised the most twisted forms of impurity, and now mount the males." ([14]) The general meaning is therefore that women who are born to submit (in whatever way) here take the initiative. We do not see this as supporting Williams' interpretation of *pathica*. The speaker in the ostracon might, therefore, be a woman, yet there is no certainty, and either a woman or a man engaged as the passive partner in anal sex could be the speaker.

It is also not easy to fit our ostracon into any particular literary tradition; the mime may be a possibility, so also, but perhaps less convincingly, erotic epistolary fiction. The missing beginning may have made this clear. In the genre of mime, the model for the scenario of the ostracon could be considered Herodas 5, in which a jealous woman protests the fact that a beloved slave does not make love to her any more but betrays her with a female slave. A number of mimes from Greek and Roman Egypt are extant. ([15]) They are often in verse, but are sometimes in prose, ([16]) and some of them play on the triangle of jealousy. On the verso of *P.Oxy*. III 413, dated to the second century, a jealous mistress who has been rejected by a slave tries to put him to death together with the female slave he loves. The threat, however, is not carried out. ([17]) This text reminds us of our ostracon in some respects. A long monologue of the resentful woman occupies most of this mime, which has a simple structure, that is, like ours, a παίγνιον, a mime that could be recited by a single actor who could cover several roles on need. ([18]) Only the words in

(14) We thank Gareth Williams for helping us interpreting the passage, which would mean that women would penetrate men anally using some kind of device, cf. *NQ* 1.16.2, where Seneca writes of Hostius Quadra that he was the passive partner: *cum uirum ipse pateretur…* Then, at 1.16.7, Hostius declares in his reported voice '*simul...et uirum et feminam patior*'.

(15) See Andreassi (above, n. 5), 10-12 and especially T. Gammacurta, *Papyrologica scaenica* (Alessandria, 2006).

(16) Cf. the verso of *P.Oxy*. III 413; *P.Oxy*. LIII 3700 in prose and verse; for a prose mime, see also J. Elliott, "A New Mime-Fragment," *ZPE* 145 (2003) 60-66.

(17) Republished by Gammacurta (above, n. 15) 7-32. On a comparison between this and other mimes in Egypt and Herodas 5, W.G. Arnott, "Herodas and the Kitchen Sink," *Greece & Rome* 18.2 (1971) 121-32 is still valuable.

(18) Gammacurta (above, n. 15) 31; she calls the mime on the recto of the papyrus a ὑπόθεσις, that is, a complex mime that required several actors and a chorus.

the monologue let one see a change of scenery. The mime on the papyrus is, like our text, in prose; it also, again like ours, does not contain any marginal signs. It is possible that both texts only outlined the role of an actor who kept the ostracon as a memorandum and might even have improvised following that. In this way we could explain the absence of any lectional signs.

But another hypothesis that cannot be absolutely discarded is that this text is part of an erotic letter. No doubt, the surviving examples of erotic epistolary fiction are not as coarse and explicit as this text. Its general frame has some vague similarity to that of the *Heroides*, where women like Dido, Hypsipyle, or Ariadne (but not only women) addressed their lovers with laments that they were absent or unresponsive. In the present text it is unclear whether the dejected and perhaps rejected lover is actually witnessing the scene he or she describes.

The first, incomplete, line refers to crowns, or wreaths. It is possible that these define the scene as a banquet, or that these are wreaths of parties frequented by the two main protagonists in the past, which have now dried up. But wreaths, particularly made of roses, are often mentioned in epistolary fiction as gifts from lovers to the beloved, whether a boy or a woman. In O.Max. inv. 361.6-7 ([19]) the writer speaks, in the context of a composition about burning love, of crowning with roses. Philostratus 55 says that "roses truly are Love's flowers," and invites the woman addressed to crown herself. His letters are in any case mostly addressed to boys. Repeatedly he says that wreaths of roses are becoming on a boy, that lovers send wreaths as erotic gifts, and that the roses may wither at contact with fragrant, tender skin (e.g., *Epp*. 1, 3, and 9).

The scene depicted on this ostracon, however, is far more forceful and crude than these. Line 5 shows that the distressed lover is also concerned with ridicule. The object of his/her affection may be laughing, whether with the barbarian woman or, more likely, with friends who become aware of his/her new passion. Concerns with ridicule often appear in Greek literature. In the epistolary genre, the best example is Alciphron, *Letters to the Courtesans* (8), which shows an unrequited lover who weeps and wails and thus provokes the laughter of others.

In line 9, the speaker offers a new amatory technique, καὶ ξένως, probably to be taken as "in a strange, unusual way," perhaps an allusion to

(19) *La route de Myos Hormos*, 467.

anal penetration (see above), and thus referring more properly to a woman than to a timid male. On this hypothesis, in offering her services, this woman, who was perhaps inexperienced in that kind of sexual act, asks her partner to let her go to sleep first.

As a conclusion to this section, and not quite seriously, we point to a very famous erotic scene, that in Sappho fr. 31. Our text seems curiously the reversal of that. In both texts, there is a threesome involving both heterosexual and homosexual love. In the poem, Sappho suffers intensely as she watches the girl she loves sitting with a man. That man is silent but listens to the voice of the young woman. He is somewhat in the background, while the girl occupies the scene with her talking and sweet laughing. The "I" of the text on this ostracon, by contrast, expresses his/her frustration at seeing his lover (or would-be lover) make love to a silent woman.

4. Provenance (R.S.B. - R.C.)

As we indicated at the start, the information provided by the seller gave Edfu as a provenance. This statement was challenged by Willy Clarysse in his paper to the 1983 congress of papyrology. ([20]) By this point, the dossier of these ostraca had expanded to include the Amsterdam collection, along with ostraca in the Barnes, Moen, Pezin, and Hombert collections published in the 1970s or known to Clarysse. The varieties of provenances offered in these cases had become very doubtful, given the high degree of similarity among these collections, and the recurrence of a set of personal and geographical names among texts in them. Clarysse argued that the personal names in the ostraca were not consistent with Edfu as a provenance, and he noted that some were distinctively Theban. On this basis, he concluded that "our garrison was probably stationed along the eastern desert rather than on the West Bank, somewhere in the vicinity of Thebes, although the dealer's story about Esna cannot be disproved for the time being." A few years later, Clarysse reversed himself and put the West Bank forward as a preferable option. ([21])

By the Copenhagen congress of 1992, the picture had changed once more. The excavations at Mons Claudianus had started to give a sense

(20) "A Roman Army Unit near Thebes," *Atti del XVII Congresso internazionale di Papirologia* III (Naples, 1984) 1021-1026.

(21) *Ancient Society* 19 (1988) 90.

of the wealth of ostraca to be found in the Eastern Desert, and Hélène Cuvigny was able to present an ostracon found at el-Zerqa, now known to be the ancient Maximianon, in which a clear identification of individuals with some known in *O.Amst*. 9 could be established. ([22]) She therefore proposed this site as the origin of the entire dossier of ostraca. By the time the Proceedings of the congress were published, however, excavations at this site had begun, and Cuvigny realized that no connections with any ostracon in the group except for this one had come to light. She concluded, therefore, that "c'est un intrus dans la série des ostraca militaires d'Amsterdam."

With the benefit of another decade's worth of material, Cuvigny has more recently continued to accept Clarysse's assignment of the dossier (apart from this one text) to the Theban region. ([23]) Nonetheless, the evidence for it seems to us insufficient. Georges Nachtergael argued, in the context of publishing several additional ostraca from the collection of Marcel Hombert, that Edfu was in fact the most likely provenance. ([24]) As he noted, Theban names had a wide currency in Upper Egypt, and in dealing with a mobile population like the army, it is hard to be confident that they could not be found in other locations. In the light of the enormous discoveries of the past two decades and more in the Eastern Desert, it is harder than it was to avoid the observation that on the whole these ostraca belong to the world of the Roman control of the desert rather than to the world of the valley.

In this context, we observe that the discussion above showed that the greatest similarity of any parallel to the Florida ostracon was with the dossier of the poems of Sosianus, found at Maximianon along with some of his correspondence. One example of the latter is illustrated in *La route de Myos Hormos* (p. 500, fig. 233). But the volume does not include any illustrations of the "literary" compositions, and we are indebted to Hélène

(22) "Un ostracon inédit du désert oriental et la provenance de O. Amst. 9," in A. Bülow-Jacobsen (*ed.*), *Proceedings of the 20th International Congress of Papyrologists* (Copenhagen, 1994) 229-30.

(23) *La route de Myos Hormos* 286.

(24) G. Nachtergael, *La collection Marcel Hombert*. Tome II. *Nouveaux documents grecs d'Égypte et addenda au tome I = Pap.Brux*., 32 (Brussels, 2003) 9-13. It should be noted that the indication on p. 9 that the Florida ostraca had been acquired at the beginning of the nineteenth century is a slip for the twentieth. Even this date, however, is simply an example of what Cuvigny meant when she described the first editors of the dossier as being "abusés par les déclarations contradictoires de l'antiquaire de Louxor qui les écoulait dans les années 70" (*Proceedings*, 229).

Cuvigny for providing us with a photograph of O.Max. inv. 785, one of Sosianus' compositions. It is not only similar in hand to the Florida ostracon, but laid out on the sherd in a similar fashion, with letters distinct but lines tightly packed—a style altogether distinct from the letter illustrated in the volume. Despite these similarities, however, the writers are not likely to be the same. Sosianus is the more skilled, and some of his letter shapes are significantly different. Jean-Luc Fournet, who has seen the entirety of Sosianus' production, has kindly informed us that he is convinced they are not in the same hand as our ostracon. Nevertheless, the similarities not only in handwriting and presentation, but more importantly in vocabulary and content, suggest that they come from the same or highly similar contexts. ([25])

If this is right, two results emerge: first, the likelihood that the Florida ostracon comes from Maximianon is significantly enhanced, and we must then ask whether it is also a cuckoo in the nest, or if the entire dossier (or at least a much larger part of it) is to be assigned to Maximianon, as Cuvigny first thought; and second, we see the distinctive traits of a cultural milieu in which erotic literature was cultivated. Whether these are in fact original compositions by the men who wrote them down on ostraca, we cannot say on the available evidence. Sosianus likely had enough education to have composed works of this type; whether our anonymous writer did, we are less certain. It is possible that such works circulated in the Eastern Desert and were copied by residents of the forts who found them appealing. As we have suggested above, it is even possible that our ostracon derives from a personal copy of a passage in a mime to be used by a performer.

Roger S. Bagnall - Raffaella Cribiore

(25) Fournet cites a reference to παθεικὴ γυνή in O.Max. inv. 359.