

HESHBON OSTRACON X

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Ostrakon X was found at Tell Heshbân on July 23, 1974, in Area C, Square 5, Locus 70, along with other potsherds assigned to Pail 233. It was first given the pottery registration no. 24067X, then the object registration no. 1890, and finally the Andrews University Archaeological Museum acquisition no. 74.224.

The ostrakon's excavator described its context (Locus C.5:70) as a 10 cm. deep "hard ashy dark brown soil layer with pebbles and tesserae" in the southwest corner of the square's northern portion (the only portion excavated in 1974). Along with the other sherds which were predominantly Byzantine but included some Late Roman and a few Early Roman, the locus contained bones from sheep, goats, a pig, a cow, and a donkey, and was interpreted to be the bottom soil layer in a Byzantine dump just to the west of an Early Roman tower in Squares C.1 and 5.

The ostrakon itself was probably already broken in antiquity on all four sides leaving a trapezoid-shaped sherd whose dimensions are roughly 4 x 5 cm. (and nearly 4 mm. thick). The light red (Munsell 2.5YR 6/8)¹ slipped sherd may have come originally from an Early Byzantine open bowl of fine ware² whose interior concave surface may have carried the full painted inscription. In any case, when the bowl (or large sherd containing the inscription) was broken, only the final two letters, with part of a third, remained on the ostrakon discovered in Square C.5.

The remaining letters, all in the upper left corner of the sherd, each nearly 2 cm. high by 1 cm. wide in weak red paint (5R 4/4), read: . . . [N]HΣ, perhaps the genitive ending of a name like *Ιωαννης*, John (see Fig. 20 where these letters are traced in black).

¹The color readings in this report were taken from *Munsell Soil Color Charts* (Baltimore: Munsell Color Co., 1971) in normal daylight on an overcast day when the ostrakon was dry.

²Since it is only a body sherd, the author cannot rule out the possibility of a Roman date for the sherd.

An unusual feature of this ostracon is that these fine formal letters are themselves painted over the identical letters executed in a more cursive hand in pinkish white paint (7.5YR 8/2) (in Fig. 20 these letters are indicated by stippling where heavier concentrations of dots represent thicker paint; cf. Pl. XV: C).

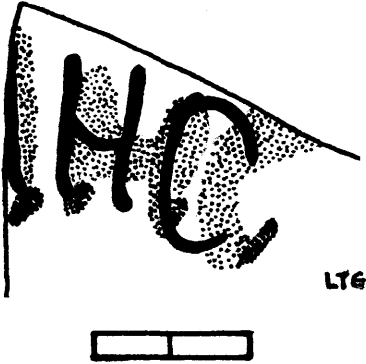


Fig. 20. A tracing of upper left corner of Heshbon Ostracon X.

Palaeographically, the weak red letters were painted carefully; they are large in terms of size and definable by a rectangle. The *eta* was executed with three successive brush strokes, each ending in a blob of paint. The *sigma* was completed in two curved strokes, the first starting at the upper right and arching to the upper left, and the second crossing it at the upper left in a downstroke that then curved up to finish at the lower right. The underlying pinkish white letters were painted more cursively; they are squatter in terms of size, the *eta* definable by a square but the *sigma* by a rectangle. The *eta* was executed with two strokes, the first being the left downstroke, and the second the curved crossbar which moved up to the right and then down again (without lifting the brush from the surface) into the right downstroke—each ending in a paint blob. The *sigma* was completed in only one stroke which began at the upper right (where the ostracon is broken) but angled into a thick downstroke at the upper left shoulder and then finished off at the bottom with an upward flourish to the right.

The best parallels for these letter forms are found in documents broadly dated between the 3d and 5th centuries A.D.;³ it would be hazardous to assign an absolute date on the basis of only two letter forms but an Early Byzantine date in or near the 4th century A.D. for Heshbon Ostracon X would not be far wrong.

³ Though parallels could be cited in numerous palaeographical handbooks, examples of the outside limits in terms of dating can be conveniently compared in Richard Seider, *Paläographie der griechischen Papyri*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart, 1967). P. Berl. 11532 from Theadelphia (plate 26 opposite p. 83) illustrates comparable formal and cursive hands of the 3d century A.D. P. Oxy. 1130 from Oxyrhynchus (plate 34 opposite p. 99) illustrates comparable hands from the 5th century A.D. A formal hand which is very close to that of Heshbon Ostracon X is the one found in P. Chester Beatty IV [961] from Aphroditopolis in Middle Egypt (vol. 2 [Stuttgart, 1970], plate 29 opposite p. 148) dated to the 4th century A.D.