

The Ostracon

The canonical definition. Verbatim. The spine of the artefact, and its front page.

An ostracon is a shard — a limestone flake or a piece of discarded pottery — the stone notebook of Deir el-Medina, the village where the artists and craftsmen who built the pharaohs' tombs lived. On these shards they wrote, drew and sketched their lists and building plans, their accounts and letters, their work rotas — even the record of a strike. On one, an artist sketched a Senet board: the game they played, again and again. Not the tomb: the making of it, and the playing through it, in the makers' own hand.

The Ostracon is that, for the age of AI. The book is the sealed tomb — *Mind the Gap*, 60,000 words, finished and permanent, the monument that carries the author's name. The Ostracon is everything the sealed tomb does not show: the making of it, kept open. It treats prompts, conversations, revisions and decisions as the behavioural traces of our time. The building plans are the manuscript's versions; the accounts are the numbers; the letters are the handovers; the rota is the journey; and where Deir el-Medina kept the record of a strike, this keeps the moments the AI was corrected and pushed back.

The game is here too. Senet was the passage through the underworld; SHaDS is the game now — the five moves an AI plays, again and again, not against another machine but with the person across the table, where only one player carries the consequence. Every conversation in this record is a round of it.

One shard, one making: the honest record of how the sealed tomb was built — by a human and its AI workers — and the million words of working it left behind. The tomb carries the author's name. The Ostracon carries the makers' — BookMan, the Joses, the Splicer, and the rest — kept, as the villagers of Deir el-Medina are kept, only because their shards outlived them.

It is Paul Roebuck's Deir el-Medina.

THE THREE WINDOWS ONTO A MAKING

- **Ostraca** — what the makers *wrote*. Here: the documents, the side-files, the Rubies the workers filed.
- **Senet** → **SHaDS** — the game they *played*, again and again. Here: the five moves (Smoothing · Hallucination · Affectation · Drift · Sycophancy) an AI plays *with the human*, across the gap, where only the human carries the consequence.
- **Ethnography** — behaviour *observed*. Here: the record itself — the conversations kept whole.

PROVENANCE

The name is Paul Roebuck's, from the **Ramses the Great exhibition, London, June 2024**. The exhibition's own words carried the parallel almost intact:

“Deir el-Medina artists wrote, drew, doodled, and sketched in ink on ostraca... these stone ‘notebooks’ with their lists, building plans, accounts, letters, work rotas — even a record of a workers’ strike — provide a glimpse into their everyday lives.”

“The finest artists and craftsmen, ‘Servants in the Place of Truth’, lived nearby in their own village, Deir el-Medina.”

“a sketched board for the game senet. This popular game symbolised the deceased’s passage through the Underworld.”

Three thousand years apart, the same instinct: keep the making, in the makers’ own hand — not the monument, the small human traffic of building it. And, as at Deir el-Medina, it is the shards that keep the makers’ names.