

EPISTOLOGRAPHY

Anglicized Greek word denoting the writing (*graphe*) of a letter (*epistole*). The study of letter writing has as its goal distinguishing and classifying the various kinds of letters, analyzing the form and function of the component elements (introduction, body, conclusion) of these letters, learning of and describing the mechanisms or postal systems through which these communications moved to their destinations, and examining the theories of the ancients on the art of letter writing.

Awareness of the letter as a unique and specialized form of communication, sometimes even an art form, is evidenced in the works of ancient literati and rhetoricians. Demetrius, for example, in discussing letter writing in his work *On Style*, attributes to Artemon, the editor of Aristotle's letters, the statement that the subject of a letter should be conversational (223). An Egyptian letter from the New Kingdom with the heading "Beginning of the Lesson in Letter [writing]" attests that instruction in the art of writing letters was available to the would-be epistolographer. "Practice" letters of this sort in Greek and several Greek letter-writing handbooks are still extant. These exercises and handbooks not only show that epistolography was a matter for study and practice but also help to explain the promulgation of the formulaic phrases so evident in ancient letters.

Greek Correspondence

Inasmuch as the study of Greek epistolography is far more advanced than the study of Coptic and Arabic letters, and has given rise to an approach and a terminology that are used in the investigation of both Coptic and Arabic epistolography, an overview of letter writing in Coptic Egypt should begin with Greek correspondence. Greek letters are generally divided into four categories.

Familiar Letters.

These communications are usually between relatives or friends, but other letters that employ expressions of familiarity are also included in this group. Such letters almost always have a greeting from the sender (A) to the recipient (B), with the sender's name first, such as "A-B greetings," in addition to a wish of health; these salutations often include some mention of the relationship of the two correspondents. In this function, the words "brother" and "sister" occur regularly as terms of friendship and equality, even when the correspondents have no blood relationship. "Lord" and "lady" appear as deferential terms for parents with increasing frequency during the [Roman](#) rule of Egypt. The phrase "before all things," followed by an expression such as "I pray you are well" or "I greet you," is often found in the opening of these letters. The same phrase is used in Coptic letters (see below). As a closing these letters have simply "farewell" or, more elaborately, "I pray for your health." In the [first century](#) A.D., secondary greetings to friends or relatives in the recipient's vicinity, such as those found at the end of the New Testament Pauline epistles, became common in the closing of familiar letters. In the second century and afterward, such secondary greetings became part of the opening.

[Petitions](#)/Applications.

Under this heading are not only [petitions](#) and applications (usually for rental or purchase) but also other legal documents addressed to officials, such as birth and death notices, census registrations, and complaints. In documents of this class, the address formula regularly gives the name of the recipient before that of the sender. By placing the recipient's name first, the writer acknowledges his inferiority to the official he is addressing. Greetings may or may not be included with this address. Among the variations are "To B from A," "To B, A," "To B from A, greetings," and "To B, greetings, A." The designations that accompany the greetings in such letters are usually of a more formal and definitive nature than those in familiar letters, giving such information as

patronymic, age, occupation, place of residence, and distinguishing [physical](#) characteristics. [Petitions](#) normally close with “farewell.”

Business Letters. Many of the texts in this category are not letters at all but commercial documents drawn up in epistolary form. Their opening formulas, usually in the form “A to B, greetings,” generally include much identifying detail about both the writer and the recipient, including occupation, age, [physical](#) characteristics, and names of parents, spouses, and guardians. The opening formulas sometimes contain a health wish. Many of the letters in this class have no special closing formula, but “farewell” is used frequently.

Official Letters.

Administrative and business correspondence written or received by official persons comes under this rubric. The opening formula in letters of this category is usually “A to B, greetings.” This opening sometimes includes some mention of the relationship between the writer and the recipient. Most of these letters end with “farewell.”

In those varieties of letters that used “farewell” as a closing, the expanded formula “I pray for your health” began to supplant [the simple](#) form after the first century. In all but familiar letters, an illiteracy formula was appended to the end of the letter if the sender was unable to write and had the document drawn up by someone else. In the standard formula the scribe, after writing his own name, declared, “I wrote [this] on behalf of X since he does not know letters.” In the body of letters from all four of these classes, standard phrases or clichés were common (see Steen, 1938, pp. 125-72, and White, 1981, pp. 98-102).

In the study of Greek epistolography, as well as of Latin, Coptic, and Arabic epistolography, letters from the four categories above are usually labeled “real” or “nonliterary,” while letters that were intended for the public at large (though perhaps addressed to an individual), as well as

treatises and essays written in epistolary form with an opening and closing, are called “nonreal,” “fictitious,” or “literary.” Use of the letter form as a vehicle for philosophic or didactic thought has a long and rich tradition. The classical authors Plato, Aristotle, Isocrates, Demosthenes, Epicurus, Horace, Seneca, Sallust, Pliny, and Quintilian all wrote treatises in the form of epistles. The tradition was continued by Saint Paul, Saint Basil, Saint Gregory Nazianzus, Saint John Chrysostom, and Saint Shenute.

Despite the fact that most studies of ancient letters deal only with real letters or only with fictitious epistles, many of the same formulas evident in the four classes of real letters are found in literary letters. Accordingly, a number of scholars have found it suitable to apply the same kind of analytical approach to both varieties of communication (see, for instance, Betz, 1975, p. 353).

Coptic Correspondence

Only recently have Coptic letters begun to enjoy the kind of extensive and detailed analysis that has been lavished on their Greek counterparts, but Biendenkopf-Ziehner's *Untersuchungen zum koptischen Briefformular* is a significant and valuable first step.

The broad categories for Coptic correspondence are (1) private letters; (2) official letters (documents, business letters, administrative correspondence, and such); and (3) epistles (literary or nonreal letters). The Coptic letters that have survived date from the period between the third or fourth century to the tenth or eleventh century. The various parts of these letters with their component formulas are the following: polite preface (apology, introduction formula, greeting, health formula, letter reception formula, opportunity formula); body (introductory phrase); and closing (prayer formula, remembrance formula, confirmation, closing formula, date, address).

This paradigm represents diachronically the range of formulas that were available to Coptic letter writers. However, few of the formulas were in use for the entire period from which we have Coptic letters, and it is not to be expected that a writer from any given period will employ all of the formulas at his disposal. Nonetheless, with the exception of the prayer and remembrance formulas, which evince changes attributable to the advent of Islam and the decline of Greek as the administrative language, each formula remained surprisingly stable throughout the period in which it was used.

Writers used the apology when they were unable to find a piece of [papyrus](#) and were forced to pen a letter on an OSTRACON. This formula made its appearance in the sixth century and was quite common in the seventh and eighth centuries. The evidence indicates that it was used only in letters to superiors. In its simplest form it reads, "Forgive me; I found no piece of papyrus."

In its fullest form the introductory formula gives the names, occupations, and titles of sender and recipient, and the relationship of the sender to the recipient; abbreviated forms, such as "it is X, who writes to Y," leave out much of this information. Variations can include a self-abasing reference to the sender as a servant; greetings; additional verbs (e.g., "it is X, who writes [and] greets Y," "it is X, who dares it [and] writes to Y"), and preposed elements such as "before all things" and "farewell in the Lord."

The greeting usually stands in the preface of the letter, but it is sometimes found in the conclusion. Its standard form is "X greets Y." Frequently two or more verbs are combined in a single greeting. In many letters the name of the sender and/or recipient is replaced by pronouns or epithets such as "servant" (used of the sender), "son," and "holy father." To [the simple](#) greeting many writers add modifiers such as "very much" and "with my whole heart." Often greetings are sent to others in the home or vicinity of the recipient.

With the health formula the sender inquires after the wellbeing of the recipient. [The simple](#) formulation of this inquiry is “I ask about your health.” Often the query is followed by an assurance that the sender himself is in good health. In many letters, the introductory and health formulas are combined; for instance, “I am X [and] I write and inquire after the welfare of Y.”

The letter reception formula indicates that an earlier letter has been received; for example, “I [we] have received the letter of Y.” This simple form was used mostly in official correspondence, which dealt with mundane matters and was sent between persons of equal rank. In other letters, the formula is usually expanded to include some expression of joy at the news contained in the previous letter, especially the news that its sender is well, such as “I [we] have received the letter of Y; I [we] was [were] very pleased because I [we] learned thereby that Y is well.” The letter reception formula occurs in letters written between the fourth and ninth centuries.

With the opportunity formula the writer explicitly states the obvious: that he writes because he has the opportunity and/or the need to write (“I found an opportunity [and] it is a duty and a constraint for me to write”). Greetings are usually attached to this formula; for instance, “I found the opportunity, [so] I wrote, in order to greet Y.” Sometimes a writer expresses this notion in negative fashion, such as “without any inducement I greet Y.” The opportunity formula was used in the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries. It occurs primarily in [papyrus](#) letters. Often the content of the letters in which it appears is a combination of business and private matters; these letters were usually sent to equals or superiors.

In some letters the body follows the preface immediately without any introduction, but in many others the actual communicate is introduced by a formula or a formulaic expression. The various kinds of introductions fall into six classes: (1) actual introductions; (2) those which contain a

request; (3) those which contain a command or a summons; (4) those which contain a protest; (5) those which contain a confirmation; and (6) those which introduce a report.

In the prayer formula, which can come at either the beginning or the end of the letter, the sender asks the recipient to pray for him. Simply formulated, it reads “pray for me,” but addenda are common: “in love,” “in your holiness,” and “in your holy prayers.” More complicated forms are also attested, such as “be so dear,” “have the goodness [to] pray for me,” and Saint Shenute’s “we ask your spotlessness to pray for us that we may be capable of completing our way in peace as our holy brother. . . .” Most of the letters in which the prayer formula occurs are dated to the sixth, seventh, or eighth century.

The remembrance formula asks the recipient to keep the sender in his thoughts, such as “think of me.” It is often prefaced by the phrase “be so dear [as to]” or followed by such phrases as “in your holy prayers” and “in the uplifting of your hands.” The formula is attested between the fourth and ninth centuries from the Fayyum to Thebes. While it appears in letters on both ostraca and papyri, and in both private and business communications, it was used primarily in correspondence with persons of ecclesiastical standing.

The confirmation formula occurs almost exclusively in [papyrus](#) letters of the seventh and eighth centuries. It is normally bipartite in form, with the first part always being “by writing these things.” The second part admits of some variation. Sometimes it is a greeting, such as “I greet Y.” Sometimes it is a health wish, such as “remain well in the Lord,” or an expression of hope that the sender will fare well through the concern of the recipient, such as “I hope that I will be well through your prayers.” Combinations of both a greeting and a health wish (either for the recipient or for the sender) are also common in the second part.

The closing formula, like the health wish, addresses the welfare of the

recipient. In effect it is a parting salutation. Sometimes it is as simple as the command “be well.” More often it is modified by phrases such as “until we come,” “always,” and “in the Lord.” In the letters of Saint [Athanasius](#) and [Saint Shenute](#) the closing formula sometimes takes the form “I pray that you are well in the Lord.”

In Coptic letters, the date is often given in Greek. The writer normally specifies the month, day, and the indiction year, for example, “it was written on 21 Babah, 8th indiction year.” Only rarely does one find number words instead of numerals and complete words. Instead, alphabetic symbols as numerals and abbreviations are the norm in dates.

The address is normally written on the back of the letter. If the letter itself is continued on the back, the address is usually placed above the continuation. Occasionally the address is written on the front, at the beginning of the letter. In letters on ostraca the address is often attached to the body of the letter or sometimes omitted altogether, its purpose being fulfilled by the introductory formula. The standard form of the address is “it [the writing/letter] is to be given to X from Y.”

Arabic Correspondence

The study of Arabic epistolography has not advanced as far as that of Greek and Coptic letters, but several observations on the nature of Arabic correspondence are worthy of mention (see Jahn, 1937, pp. 157-73).

The preface of Arabic letters consists of either the *basmla* (“in the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful”) and the address, to which various health wishes can be attached, or the *basmla* alone. In the address, the name of either the sender or the recipient can appear first. Writers using the former style followed the precedent established in Muhammad’s correspondence, while those who placed the recipient’s name first did so in accordance with the urging of [Caliph](#) al-Walid, who espoused the principle that the inferior ought to be subordinated to the

superior. Often the name of the sender is omitted altogether.

Among the formulaic wishes that appear in the preface of Arabic letters are the following: “may God protect you,” “may God prolong your life,” “may God make me for all evil your ransom,” “may God cause your might, honor, and strength to continue.” Often two or more such wishes are combined in the same preface. An especially elaborate preface from a letter of the mid tenth century reads, “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. I am writing, O Ahmad b. Hudayy— may God prolong your life and may He cause your might and strength to continue—from Qus in safety and good health—praise and thanks be to their giver—on Thursday when eight [nights] had passed of Ragab—may God make it honoured for his favourite— and blessings on all the years to come; and praise be to God, the Lord of all created beings” (see Grohmann, 1955, text 306, pp. 66-75).

Arabic letters are often undated. In those that do bear dates, the formulas normally state the month, day, and year of the Hegira; for example, “[and] he [name missing] wrote it in the month Gumada 1, 127” (see Jahn, 1938, no. 3, pp. 177-78).

The phrase “and afterward” is often used to introduce the body of the letter.

Most of the formulas that occur in the preface of Arabic letters can appear in the conclusion. Many letters close with the phrase “hail to you” or with “my [our] sufficiency is God alone.”

Like their Greek and Coptic counterparts, Arabic letters written on [papyrus](#) were folded so that the back of the papyrus sheet served as an envelope and bore the address. Occasionally the address was written on the front above the letter, and the sheet was then folded in such a way that the address was on the outside. What was said above about the form of the internal address in the preface of Arabic letters applies also to the

external address. Either the sender's or the recipient's name can be given first.

In all periods, private letters in Egypt traveled mainly by messenger. Wealthy individuals were able to use slaves, servants, or employees as couriers, but the average person had to rely on caravans, friends, or strangers who happened to be going in the direction of the letter's intended destination.

Egyptian and Greek documents suggest that an organized postal system through which official letters moved between districts was in existence at least as early as the New Kingdom. This system used horses for urgent communications and camels for ordinary post. A separate system handled letters within each district. Witnesses for the [Roman](#) period are scanty, but the evidence suggests that the Romans incorporated both systems into their post, the *cursus publicus*.

In the Byzantine era, there was a *cursus velox* (swift course) and a *cursus clabularis* (transport-wagon course). The *cursus velox*, attested as early as A.D. 322, at first made use of donkeys, horses, and mules to move the mail, but after a funding cutback in the reign of [Justinian](#) it was limited to donkeys. Beginning as early as 470, large landholders, the wealthy, and the church established their own independent postal systems. Occasionally several landholders joined together to form a mail delivery service.

In Islamic states the official postal service was known as the *barid* (from Latin *veredus*/Greek *beredos*, post horse). In Egypt, the stages (*markaz al-barid*) were approximately 4 *farsakhs* (15 miles) apart. Horses and camels carried the mail between these stages.

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