Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 62 (2008)

Heft: 3: Documentary letters from the Middle East : the evidence in Greek, Coptic, South Arabian, Pehlevi, and Arabic (1st - 15th c CE)

Artikel: Correspondence by letter and epistolary formulae in Ancient South Arabia

Autor: Stein, Peter

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147790

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Mehr erfahren

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. En savoir plus

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. Find out more

Download PDF: 07.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, https://www.e-periodica.ch

CORRESPONDENCE BY LETTER AND EPISTOLARY FORMULAE IN ANCIENT SOUTH ARABIA[1]

Peter Stein, Jena

Abstract

Correspondence by letter in Ancient South Arabia is a rather new subject in Semitic philology. The first relevant texts were published only in the 1990s. Consequently, the available material is not very extensive. The present study is based on about 100 mainly Sabaic letters, covering the historic span from the mid-first millennium BC up to the fifth or even sixth centuries CE. A characteristic of this correspondence is the material it is written upon – segments of palm-leaf stalks and other pieces of wooden sticks. This can be considered one of the most easily accessible and cheapest of all writing materials, but nevertheless, in the Ancient Near East, it remains exclusive to Southern Arabia. In the present approach, the most relevant aspects of this writing material will be dealt with, as far as there has been research on them. For the texts proper, the focus will be on the development of epistolary formulae. Unlike in previous studies on the topic, the formulaic structures will be presented within their full textual context – quoting the formulae not in isolation, but in the framework of complete, representative texts.

1 Introduction. State of research

Only a few decades ago, the existence of correspondence in the Ancient South Arabian languages and script was completely unknown. Epigraphic documentation from pre-Islamic Yemen was restricted to so-called 'monumental inscriptions' – texts carved on rock surfaces and stone blocks, or cast in bronze plates, numbering up to now almost 10,000 published texts, graffiti, and fragments.[2]

1 Sigla of inscriptions are quoted according to STEIN, 2003: 274–290, for the letters see also the list at the end of the paper. The siglum X.BSB designates minuscule inscriptions from the Bavarian State Library in Munich, published in STEIN, 2008. In the transliteration of Ancient South Arabian inscriptions, the word divider / (cf. below, with n. 33) is indicated only in longer quotations of particular texts; in all other instances this sign is replaced by a simple space. – I am very much indebted to Michael C.A. Macdonald (Oxford) for reading a draft of this paper.

2 Among these, more than a half can be attributed to the realm of the Sabaic language, followed by c. 2,000 Qatabanic texts. The Minaic and Ḥaḍramitic languages have each slightly more than 1,000 inscriptions (for the last-mentioned language, the number is currently in-

Inscriptions of this kind can, of course, not be written quickly and spontaneously, carried and delivered, or even stored in an archive.[3] Writing for everyday-life purposes, for commercial and communicative activities, was consequently not to be expected among these inscriptions (and had indeed never been found there).[4] On the other hand, no alternative writing material had been discovered: The common materials like papyrus, leather, or perhaps clay tablets, well-known from the neighbouring cultures, were neither archaeologically established nor even mentioned in the written sources of Ancient South Arabia.[5] Of the materials commonly used for correspondence in the Ancient Near East only one has so far been attested in South Arabia – ostraca, pieces of smashed ceramic vessels. However, these were not used to write letters or legal matters upon. No single Ancient South Arabian text of communicative or economic content written on an ostracon has been discovered. As far as we can see, these ostraca serve only one specific purpose – the identification of corpses in the large tomb buildings of cemeteries.[6]

In the early 1970s, two pieces of wood came to light in Yemen, incised all around with texts in a hitherto unknown script. These sticks in the shape of large cigars, said to originate from the region of al-Ǧawf in North Yemen, were put at

---

creasing by the Russian editing project of the Raybūn archaeological campaigns). For more details, cf. the comments in the introductory chapter in STEIN, 2008.

3 The two last-mentioned arguments are valid, of course, for rock and stone inscriptions only. Indeed the flat, handy bronze tablets may well be considered portable and easily storable objects; their extraordinarily expensive production, however, a priori excludes any use for daily communication purposes.

4 One obvious exception is the occurrence of legal deeds, contracts, or settlements in form of monumental inscriptions, mostly on stone blocks. These are, however, not the original documents of the deed but rather copies of it, while the original, bearing the signatures of protagonists and/or witnesses, is laid down in a handy wooden stick that has been kept in an archive. The monumental version was simply intended to announce an important legal act to the public (cf. STEIN, 2008: 33f.).

5 Some literary indication for writing materials in pre-Islamic Arabia is given, however, in later, Islamic sources. According to Arabic-Islamic authors, the contemporaries of the Prophet Muḥammad, in central Ḥiǧāz in the late sixth and early seventh centuries, wrote on quite different materials, such as the papyrus, leather, and parchment mentioned above, but also objects more easily at hand like animal bones, stone splinters, and obviously our palm-leaf stalks (*ᶜuṣub*, see further below). These sources are compiled by MARAQTEN, 1998, cf. also the evaluation in STEIN, 2005b: 121–133.

6 Particularly in the ᵒAwām cemetery in the Sabaean capital Mārib, more than 200 of such identity tags, bearing the name of the deceased, have been unearthed (cf. GERLACH, 2002: 57).

the disposal of the Jordanian scholar Mahmud al-Ghul (Maḥmūd ᶜAlī al-Ġūl) who spent the remaining years of his life in deciphering their script.[7] Due to the alledged provenance of these inscriptions, their language was supposed to be some Ancient South Arabian language or dialect; the cursive character of their script, however, allowed a basic deciphering only in the late 1970s. After al-Ghul's death in 1983, his work was continued by Yusuf Abdallah (Yūsuf Muḥammad ᶜAbdallāh, Ṣanᶜāᵓ), Walter W. Müller (Marburg), and the late Jacques Ryckmans (Louvain-la-Neuve). The text of the two first sticks, identified as two letters of quite similar background, but still hardly comprehensible in detail,[8] was made public by Alfred F.L. Beeston (Oxford) in 1989. Three years earlier, another inscription, a receipt of a commercial transaction, had been published by Abdallah. In the meantime, other pieces of similar character had come to light – not only letters but also numerous legal and business documents.[9] A first mile-stone in research was set by the team of Ryckmans, Müller, and Abdallah in 1994. Their comprehensive volume not only contains studies on several structural aspects of this new type of epigraphy, but also a complete publication of sixteen pieces from the National Museum and the university collection in Ṣanᶜāᵓ, among them seven letters. Until today, the number of published inscriptions of this sort exceeds forty,[10] among them sixteen letters, seventeen legal and economic documents, and four writing exercises (alphabets). However, there are several thousands of texts in public collections in Ṣanᶜāᵓ (there is talk of six thousand pieces[11]), Munich (four hundred texts[12]), and Leiden (more than three

7 On the history of the decipherment and early research on the Ancient South Arabian inscriptions on wood, see, e.g., BEESTON, 1989: 15f., RYCKMANS/MÜLLER/ABDALLAH, 1994: 25ff., MÜLLER, 1997–1998, and ROBIN, 2001: 528–537.

8 In the following years, no other approach to an interpretation of the contents of these 14-lines texts was undertaken. The first attempt to give a preliminary but complete translation of both texts has been made only recently in STEIN, 2005a.

9 As far as can be seen at the moment, the majority of the wooden documents is made up of documents from daily business activities like accounts and settlements, promissory and obligation notes and so on. By the way, also the bulk of the letters is concerned with economic and commercial affairs. For an introduction to the several kinds of text genres written on wooden sticks, see the introduction in STEIN, 2008.

10 Apart from the above-mentioned monograph, the texts are published in various places. For an up-to-date bibliography, see the entries in STEIN, 2008: 743f.; a complete list of all published letters is given below.

11 In the Yemeni National Museum (4,000 sticks), the Military Museum (2,000), and the museum of the university (a dozen; thus MARAQTEN, 2000–2001: 81). It is questionable, how-

hundred[13]). The publication of the collection of the Bavarian State Library in Munich is currently in progress.[14]

Besides the work on the texts themselves, also systematic and material approaches to this new kind of epigraphy have been made. First of all, the script of these texts has been analyzed, defining its special character as cursive or 'minuscule' script in comparison with the contemporary inscriptions on stone or metal (called 'monumental' script). The fundamental work in this field was done by Ryckmans who finally produced a fairly detailed sequence of palaeographic development which allows not only the reconstruction of a straight development of the minuscule script over almost fifteen centuries, but also the establishment of a relative chronology of the minuscule inscriptions (see especially RYCKMANS, 2001; a rough overview for the palaeographic development of both minuscule and monumental script is given here in *fig. 3.1*). Thanks to this work, we are able to pursue the historical attestation of minuscule inscriptions from the earliest time of the Ancient South Arabian culture in the eighth (or even tenth) century BC up to the latest phase in the sixth century CE.[15]

Concerning the formulae of the inscriptions, Mohammed Maraqten (Marburg) has presented a first attempt at systematically analyzing the structure of Sabaic letters (MARAQTEN, 2003).[16] A short introduction to Sabaic letter structure is also given in STEIN, 2006: 385–389. An exhaustive analysis of the Ancient South Arabian epistolary formulae, in comparison with the letter corpora of other contemporary cultures, by the present writer is in preparation.

---

ever, how many of these sticks indeed bear authentic Ancient South Arabian inscriptions since we have to allow for a comparatively high percentage of fakes (cf. the following note).

12 In the Bavarian State Library. Another 400 items of that collection were originally uninscribed pieces (i.e., sticks prepared for writing, but then never used) to which some 'inscription' has been added by a recent forger.

13 At the Oosters Instituut (cf. RYCKMANS, 2001: 223f.).

14 Of this project, financially supported by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, the first volume is already in press (STEIN, 2008).

15 In the meantime, this data could basically be proved by means of modern radiocarbon datings of selected inscribed sticks (see recently DREWES et al., 2006). For some examples, these tests gave reason for a dating as early as the tenth century BC – more than 200 years before the first monumental inscriptions were written in South Arabia! As for the fourth-sixth centuries CE, the relative chronology is more accurately fixed by the help of absolute dates according to the Ḥimyarite era.

16 This approach, mainly based on the published material and several unpublished texts from the Yemeni National Museum in Ṣanʿāʾ, will be augmented and, wherever necessary, revised in the following pages.

The following presentation is based on the data of the sixteen published letters (as mentioned above) and some eighty letters from the collection of the Bavarian State Library in Munich. Out of the latter, seventy-four texts belong to the later phase of the minuscule script (palaeographic periods Ry IIIa–IVb, after RYCKMANS, 2001), which can be dated between the fifth/fourth centuries BC and the sixth century CE.[17] These seventy-four letters are the complete material preserved in the Munich collection from those periods and may thus be considered in some way representative for the corpus of Middle and Late Sabaic letters as a whole. These texts are exhaustively discussed in the edition in STEIN, 2008. In contrast to this, the previous periods, going back at least to the eighth century BC,[18] have not yet been covered in similar detail. While more than thirty items from these periods have already been identified as letters, the analysis of most of them still remains to be carried out. Consequently, the structure of these Early Sabaic letters (presented in § 4.1) should be considered as somewhat preliminary for the time being.

2 Material aspects of the letters

2.1 Provenance and material constitution of the wooden sticks

As far as can be seen, almost all of the minuscule inscriptions known so far come from one single place, the ancient city of Naššān (today as-Sawdāʾ)[19] in the Yemeni Ǧawf, where they were unearthed during clandestine excavations.[20]

17 Cf. above, with n. 15, and for more details STEIN, 2008: 45ff.. This span corresponds roughly with what is called the 'Middle Sabaic' and 'Late Sabaic' periods in Ancient South Arabian culture and language history.

18 Cf. again above, with n. 15. These texts are contemporary with the so-called 'Early Sabaic' period.

19 For a discussion of the provenance of the sticks see J.-F. Breton in RYCKMANS/MÜLLER/ABDALLAH, 1994: 4. One of the probable locations of the alledged archive of this city lies in the immediate vicinity of a sanctuary (cf. the photograph *op.cit.*: 72). The provenance from Naššān has meanwhile been confirmed also by particular hints (as toponyms and the like) in the texts themselves.

20 Only two dozens of such texts have been found by scientific excavations, namely at the site of Raybūn in Ḥaḍramawt (cf. FRANTSOUZOFF, 1999). Among them, however, no letters have so far been identified. It is, of course, to be expected that similar archives (or what has remained of them) may be preserved beneath the surface of other historic places in Yemen as well.

Especially in respect to the correspondence, however, this does not mean that they were all written in that very place. As common sense suggests, we must expect that Naššān was the destination rather than the starting point of the letters which were found there – an assumption that is supported also by some evidence from the inscriptions themselves.[21]

Given the precondition that the material used for everyday writing should be of the cheapest, most easily accessible sort, the letters should be written on wood of trees or shrubs which were sufficiently spread in the particular region. For the majority of the inscriptions this question is easily solved: They are written on palm-leaf stalks, cut off the leaves of the date-palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) which was cultivated in huge plantations throughout the oases on the north-eastern fringe of the Yemeni highlands, i.e., for example, in the Sabaean capital Mārib as well as in the Ǧawf (and thus in Naššān, the location of our archive). Besides this, a considerable number of the letters[22] is written on pieces of some sort of juniper, a tree which grows from a height of 2,000 meters onwards, but not at all in the Ǧawf, a region with an elevation average of 1,100 meters (and, moreover, with negligible rainfall). It is obvious that these letters must have been written somewhere in the Yemeni highlands and then delivered to their destination in the city of Naššān. The third important material is wood of the Sodom's apple (*Calotropis procera*).[23] This characteristic desert plant was used in the above-mentioned cultural zones after date palm produce suffered a considerable decline. From the fourth century CE onwards, *Calotropis* completely displaced the formerly used palm-leaf stalks.[24]

The branches of either wood were cut into handy segments of c. 10–20 cm, sometimes even more than 30 cm length. The thickness of these pieces ranges between 1.5 and 3.5 cm, with an average of about 2 cm.

21 One of these criteria is the different toponyms mentioned in the texts, which sometimes give a hint of the present location of the sender, another is the different material (see the following paragraph and, for both points, in detail STEIN, 2008: 21ff.).

22 Of the above-mentioned seventy-four texts from Middle Sabaic-Late Sabaic times, about 25 % belong to this group.

23 From a botanical point of view, all these plants are well established in Yemen (for the date palm, see e.g. SIMA, 2000: 217–246, for the other JAGIELLA/KÜRSCHNER, 1987: 64f., 110f.).

24 Of the Munich collection, practically all minuscule inscriptions (not only letters) from the last palaeographic period Ry IVb (4th–6th c) are written on *Calotropis* or juniper, while palm-leaf stalks are completely lacking for that time. The decline of date palm cultivation in Yemen in the last centuries before Islam is reflected in several written sources (cf., e.g., SIMA, 2000: 235, 238f.

2.2 *The mode of writing. Sealing and envelopping*

Being stripped of their bark, branches of *Calotropis* as well as juniper were inscribed round the surface, starting beneath a horizontal line. In contrast to this, the palm-leaf stalks needed no further preparation. The writing surface was clearly determined by their differentiated shape: Inscribing started, as a rule, on the top of the convex upper surface which provides much more (and smoother) space than the underside of the stalk. Except for the horizontal line, the following features are shared by both types of wood: The text may be delimited by vertical lines to the right as well as to the left. On the right margin, besides the first lines of the text, a symbol can be engraved.[25] If the field of writing prepared like that is found not sufficient enough for the whole text, the remaining passages are written on the left and right margins, often after turning the stick by 180° (for an example, see X.BSB 141/8–11 quoted below).

The script is incised with a pointed stylus; some such styluses, made of ivory and metal and having a length of between 8 and 15 cm, have survived among the inscribed wooden sticks.[26] Writing with ink or the like is not attested in this context at all.

Although there is mention of seals in some texts,[27] material traces of this have not survived. The same must be stated in respect to envelopes or the like. Even though the address formulae are rather defective (lacking, e.g., the location of the addressee), no evidence for an external address has been found. At the present stage of research we have to proceed from the hypothesis that the letters were delivered in the cover-less shape they were found in.

25 The function of these symbols has not yet been determined. The very limited repertoire of different shapes (which can probably be traced back to two or three basic forms) suggests a connection with a centrally organized writing process (cf. the discussion below in § 5).

26 Cf. the photograph in RYCKMANS/MÜLLER/ABDALLAH, 1994: 82.

27 One letter, X.BSB 92/2, speaks of "the seal of the written document" (*ḫtm ṣṭrn*), another, Document A/9f., mentiones "wax and the seal" (*lkm w-ḫytmn*, see RYCKMANS/MÜLLER/ABDALLAH, 1994: 65). Both passages, however, do not refer to the letter they are mentioned in.

3 The language(s) of the texts

In the preceding paragraphs, there was (at least implicitely) talk of letters in the Sabaic language only. In all probability, however, correspondence by letter in the Ancient South Arabian minuscule script should be expected throughout the entire cultural region, hence not only in Sabaic, but also in the other Ancient South Arabian languages (and even dialects).[28] And indeed, besides the few Ḥaḍramitic inscriptions from Raybūn (n. 20), many Minaic texts have been found among the minuscule texts from the Ǧawf, among them several letters. Since only one of them has been published (X.JRy b-2, see RYCKMANS/LOUNDINE, 1997), and few of the Munich collection have been studied so far, they play only a marginal role in our analysis. Despite some grammatical specifics, however, these texts exhibit no fundamental differences from the formula of the contemporary Sabaic letters. One remarkable exception, which is shared by some letters in the Amirite dialect of Sabaic as well, will be discussed in § 5.1, with n. 66.

As for the letters written in Sabaic, their language resembles the idiom known from the contemporary monumental inscriptions. The slight differences are stylistic rather than grammatical.[29] At present there is indication of neither a special vernacular nor some sort of supra-regional 'high-level' register within the idiom of the letters. In single letters of the Minaic period, however, we find some mixture between the two languages: letters written mainly in Sabaic but containing one or another Minaism, and vice versa.[30] This peculiarity, already known from monumental inscriptions, can shed some light on the practice of writing in the multilingual situation in the Ǧawf region during the first millennium BC.[31]

28 As for the latter, one may refer to the three letters X.BSB 95, 96, and 97 which are written in the dialect of the northern-Yemeni tribe of ʾAmīr (the prominent characteristics in the grammar of this dialect are discussed in STEIN, 2007).

29 For examples, see the overview in STEIN, 2008: 39ff.

30 E.g., the preposition *k-* (instead of *l-*) "for" in the closing formula of the Sabaic letter X.BSB 86/12, and the enclitic pronoun *-hw* in the Minaic text Mon.script.sab. 133/4f.

31 It may be argued that such a 'mixed' text was written by a scribe who's mother tongue was, say, Minaic, while his client wanted him to write a letter in Sabaic. The coexistence of all three languages respective dialects (i.e., Sabaic, Minaic, and the Amirite dialect) in several cities of the Ǧawf is epigraphically well established.

4 Structural aspects of the texts. Epistolary formulae

As a rule, Ancient South Arabian letters (like all Ancient South Arabian inscriptions) exhibit no graphical means of structuring, neither punctuation[32] nor paragraphs or the like (the only structural element regularly found in all texts is the word divider, a vertical stroke to separate single word units from each other[33]). In particular, the address of a letter is in no way graphically distinct from the main text of the message, as can easily be seen in the facsimiles on *figs. 3.2–3.6*. The only way of organizing a text is by special syntactic constructions. The most striking feature in this respect is placing a part of a sentence – mainly the subject – in front of it, followed, in most cases, by the progress-marking particle *f-*, like *w-ʾt f-fᶜl(n)* "As for you, make ... !" (as in YM 11742/2, below) and *w-hʾ f-fᶜl* "As for him [the sender], he has ... done" (cf. X.BSB 98/6, below, and the formula *w-hmw f-ngyw* discussed in § 5.1). Besides this, the letter's structure is mainly determined by opening and closing formulae, as will be demonstrated in the following lines. These expressions of politeness are of stereotypical character and have a rather fixed position in the text; the use of them, however, is optional.

During almost one and a half millennia of epigraphic documentation, the Ancient South Arabian epistolary formulae underwent certain changes. The most striking change took place around the fifth/fourth century BC, at the end of the Early Sabaic period: Before this date, the address formula was formed by a verbal sentence ("X has written to Y")[34], while afterwards it is embedded in a nominal phrase ("(Message) to Y from X")[35]. Apart from these syntactical differences, the principal elements of letter structure, like greetings and blessing formulae, remain basically unchanged. Differences are restricted to certain keywords and, of course, the deities invoked.

In the following sections, the main steps in this development will be demonstrated by some representative examples. In order to give an authentic impression of the structures, the single elements of the formulae are not presented sepa-

32 For the only seeming exception, the 'final mark' transcribed with | and \/ respectively, see below, nn. 38 and 51. In some business accounts, this sign is used to separate several entries from each other, but it never occurs between elements of formulae, e.g., to separate introductory matters like address and greetings from the actual message of a letter.

33 Such a unit is formed by a single noun or verb which can be augmented by uni-consonantal particles like the prepositions *b-*, *l-*, etc., and by pronominal suffixes and enclitics. Cf. also n. 1.

34 Type 3 of the *praescriptio* formulae in MARAQTEN, 2003: 277f.

35 Corresponding to type 1 and 2 of the *praescriptio* formulae in MARAQTEN, 2003: 277f.

rately, but rather in the context of a whole sample letter. In order to distinguish the often stereotypical formulae from the message proper, they are marked in bold face. If not otherwise indicated, the examples are taken from inscriptions written in the Sabaic language (§ 3).

4.1 The earliest period

The earliest phase covers the palaeographic styles Ry I–Ry IId. The letter structure of this period is characterized by a verbal expression of the address formula: "S(ender) has written to A(ddressee)" (*S ḫṭ A*)[36]. The letters are written in Sabaic (Early Sabaic) and Minaic.

Oost.Inst. 14[37] (cf. *figs. 3.2a–b*)

1. ***ᶜmwṯn / ḏt / byt / šbmhmw / ḫṭt / ʾ***
2. ***bwṯn*** */ w-ʾḫt-k / ysrt / ʾrbᶜ / mšymm | ////*
3. *w-qnmn / nᶜmm | // | w-qnt / ṯḥnm / ḏ-w*
4. *lśm | / | w-mfẓr / blśnm | f | w-mhn*
5. *tᶜkrn / w-sṭrn / l-ʾḫt-k /*
6. *tysrn / l-k / w-mlʾ / ʾḥt / mšym*
7. *tm / mmtm*

ᶜMWṮN, the related (by marriage) of the family of ŠBMHMW, has written (the following) 2 **to ʾBWṮN:**
Your sister has sent four *mšym* (4)[38] 3 and two *qnm* [units of measure] of aromata (2), and (also) one *qnt* [unit of measure] of flour of *wlś* [some sort of grain] 4 (1) and one *mfẓr* [unit of measure] of lentils (F)[39].
What (else) 5 you want and write to your sister, 6 she will send it to you and refund one *mšymt* [unit of measure] 7 of linseed.

36 This verb is derived from the geminated root *ḪṬṬ* "to draw a line, inscribe".

37 A palm-leaf stalk of 15.9 x 2.1 cm, written in the palaeographic style Ry IIb (perhaps 7th–6th c BC). For publication and further bibliographical reference of this and the following texts see the list at the end of the paper.

38 The numbers of the counted objects, regularly expressed in numeral nouns, are repeated in ciphers, placed between two double bars (which are transcribed here with |), at the end of each passage. These double bars are well-known from Early Sabaic (and Minaic) monumental inscriptions, serving exactly the same function there.

39 This abbreviation is not, as previously suggested, the cipher for *fqḥ* "half" (e.g. DREWES/RYCKMANS, 1997: 227) but rather a symbol for the measure unit *mfẓr* (see the discussion in STEIN, 2008: 73f.).

The fact that this letter lacks any greeting formula may be simply by accident. Also in later periods, business letters, especially when addressed to a servant of a lower social position, omit these expressions of politeness. From other, still unpublished letters, however, the structure of greetings in this early phase can be reconstructed. A common expression of greeting, occurring in at least three texts[40], is *w-hᶜsmn ḥyw*, which may be translated as "Be many times greeted!".[41] In one Minaic letter from the palaeographic period Ry IId, these greetings are followed by a passage which can clearly be compared with the later blessing invocations: *w-wd l-ys²mᶜ-k* "May (the god) Wadd hear you" (Mon.script.sab. 248/1f.). As these few examples show, the basic structure of epistolary formula established in the later periods, consisting of address, greetings and blessing invocations, can be assumed for the earliest phase as well.

4.2 The middle period

This period is defined by the palaeographic styles Ry IIIa–Ry IVa, the former starting in about the fifth century BC, the latter ending in the late third century CE. Linguistically, it is characterized mainly by Middle Sabaic dialects.[42] At the beginning of this phase,[43] Minaic inscriptions also occur; they show, however, no marked differences in the structure of their formula.[44]

As already mentioned, the structure of the address has completely changed. From now on, the addressee is mentioned first (often preceded by *ṭbyt* "message"[45] designating the document), the sender only in the second place. The

40 Mon.script.sab. 128/1, 248/1, and 643/1f.

41 The form *hᶜsmn* is best interpreted as an imperative "to do something many times, repeatedly", as in the common formula *hᶜsm ḥmd* "to thank many times" in Middle Sabaic letters (e.g., in YM 11729/3f. below). The root *ḤYW* "to live, be alive" is also attested in the greetings of the more recent letters, embedded in a precative sentence *w-l-hw l-thḥywn* "From him (i.e., the sender) you shall be greeted (lit. kept alive)" (ibid. ll. 1f.).

42 For a structural definition of the several phases of Sabaic language history, see STEIN, 2003: 5ff. For the minuscule inscriptions, the exact turning point from the Early to the Middle Sabaic stage has not yet been defined.

43 With the decline of the Minaean culture in the second century BC, Minaic disappeared also in the minuscule inscriptions.

44 Of course, word formation follows the grammatical rules of Minaic in these texts. For instance, the address is introduced by the preposition *k-* instead of *l-*: *k-A ᶜm-n S* "To A from S".

45 *Ṭbyt* is probably derived from the root *ṬBB* "teach, proclaim / judge" (cf. BEESTON et al., 1982: 152). The alternative derivation from an otherwise unattested root **ṬBY*, peferred by MARAQTEN, 2003: 277, seems less probable from an etymological point of view.

whole is formed by a nominal phrase: *(ṭbytm) l-A ᶜm-n S* "(message) to A from S". All other formulae are, again, optional. Especially in business letters, expressions of politeness like greetings are lacking; the following text gives an example:

YM 11742 = TYA 6[46] (cf. *figs. 3.3a–b*)

1. ***l-whr / ḏ-ḥbrn / ᶜm-n / yᶜll / ᶜbd / ḏ-gr***
2. ***fm*** */ w-ᵓnt / f-śḫln / ᶜbd / ḏ-dwrm / ḏ-*
3. *hysr / b-ᶜm / sbᶜm / w-ᵓl / tᶜyrn / ᵓys*
4. *n / **yᶜll*** signature

To WHR of (the clan) ḤBRN from YᶜLL, the servant of (the clan) D̲-GRFM.
2 As for you, take care of the servant of (the clan) D̲-DWRM who
3 was sent (to you) together with SBᶜM, and do not disgrace him!
4 **YᶜLL (has signed this).**

At the end of this letter, another specific can be observed: a colophone of the sender. This colophone consists of the sender's name, followed by his individual signature.[47] Since letters were normally written by professional scribes (§ 5), it can be assumed that the sender has scratched only the signature, while the name (here: YᶜLL), as far as written in the same ductus as the preceding text (like in the present example), was carved by the scribe as well.

Unlike the example above, the majority of the letters make use of one or another polite form. These phrases consist of elements which can be considered stereotypical, not intended to fit a particular situation. The different types of these formulae are illustrated by the marked passages of the following examples. Each of the formulae pointed out in these samples occurs in the same structure in several other letters as well. There are two main types of blessings, one using a form of the root *KRB* "to bless" (as in the following example), another combining the verb *hṣbḥ* "to make shine, enlighten" and the noun *nᶜmt* "good luck" (as in the examples further below). The last-mentioned noun forms also part of the common blessing phrase *w-l-k nᶜmtm* "Good luck to you!" at the very end of many letters.

46 A palm-leaf stalk of 11.1 x 1.7 cm, written in ductus Ry IVa.

47 Only occasionally, the person mentioned in the colophone is not identical with the sender (as in the example from X.BSB 158/7, quoted in § 5.1 below). In these cases, we have to assume that the letter was dictated by a servant or another representative in the name of the sender.

Another stereotype is the reference to a previous letter which had reached the sender of the present one before. In some cases, also the bearer of this previous correspondence is mentioned (as in line 2 of the following example).

X.BSB 98 = Mon.script.sab. 38[48] (cf. *figs. 3.4a–b*)

Obverse:

1. ***ṯbytm / l-ʾlwhb / ʿm-n / klbm / w-ʾlmqhw / l-yk***
2. ***rbn-k / w-sṭr / sṭrk / mḏʾ / b-ʿm / mhbm /*** *w-sqy / ʾl*
3. *ʾs / ymṯn / k-hḏf-hw / sqy / sr / sbʾ / w-ḫms-m / ʾ*
4. *gmsm / ymṯn / sqy / sr / sbʾ / f-sṭrn / l-hw / k-hm*
5. *yrʾy / kn / yhzʾn / l-k / ʾtmrm / ʿly / ḫmsn / ʾ*
6. *gmsn / w-hʾ / ṯny-m / qrfn / hmṯ / ʿd / ʾ.f*

Reverse:

7. *y / w-b / ʾ<r>ḫ / ʾṭlq / qwrfn / ʾly / b-ʿm / hwtr*
8. *<ʿ>ṯt / b-ʾrḫ / ʾṭlq / qwrfn / ʾly / b-ʿm-hw /*
9. <...>

Message to ʾLWHB from KLBM.
May (the god) ʾLMQHW 2 bless you.
The writing you have written has arrived with MHBM.
The irrigation (device) of 3 ʾLʾS floods (the land), after the irrigation (device) of the oasis of Sabaʾ has supplied it with water. Exactly five 4 (plots of) fallow the irrigation (device) of the oasis of Sabaʾ floods (at the moment). Now, write to him, for if 5 he sees (your relevant instruction) he can continue like this (to lay out) date plantations on the(se) five 6 fallows. He has only two fields flooded (so far) until they were sufficiently supplied [?]. 7 As for the matter of the portions [?] of the fields which are with HWTRʿṮT, 8 <<as for the matter of the portions [?] of the fields which are with him [sc. HWTRʿṮT?]>> [?][49] <...>

48 A palm-leaf stalk of 13.4 x 1.8 cm, from the palaeographic period Ry IIIa. The text is published in STEIN, 2008.

49 The motivation of the repeated phrase is not clear, perhaps we have to assume a scribal mistake. In any case, this prepositional phrase should have been followed by a main clause. Finally, at the very end of the letter, we would expect the stereotypical blessing formula *w-l-k nʿmtm* "Good luck to you!" (as in the following examples). Obviously the letter was not finished and, thus, never delivered to its addressee.

X.BSB 107 = Mon.script.sab. 80[50] (cf. *figs. 3.5a–b*)

Obverse:

1. ***ṯbytm / l-mṯwbm / ḏ-grfm / ʿm-n / ḏmrkrb / mlk / hrmm / w-šhrm / bn / m***
2. ***bhlm / w-l-k / l-yhṣbḥn / ʿṯtr / w-ḏ-smwy / nʿmtm / w-hʾrk / ywm-k*** / *w-*
3. *ʾnt / f-hm / trḍwn / f-ngwn / šrḥʾl / ḏ-frztm / w-šrḥʾl / ḏ-fḍlm / w-ḏ-*
4. *yʿd / l-ḏt / ysfrnn / ʿdy / hrmm / l-ḏt / yrk? sw / byn-hmw / w-byn / lbʾ*
5. *m / ḏ-ḥḏymrm / w-b-hm / l-yḥmdnn-k / w-ʾl-ʾs / ylyʿn / tʾbytm / b-ś*
6. *n-k* / ***w-l-k / l-yhḥd***

Reverse:

7. ***ṯn / ʿṯtr / w-ḏ-smwy / nʿmtm*** \// [51]

Message to MṮWBM of (the clan) GRFM from ḎMRKRB, king of (the city of) Haramum[52], and ŠHRM, son of [2] **MBHLM.**
May (the gods) ʿṮTR and Ḏ-SMWY let shine good luck upon you and prolong your day.
[3] As for you – if you like, ask ŠRḤʾL of (the clan) FRZTM and ŠRḤʾL of (the clan) FḌLM and [4] Ḏ-YʿD that they should travel to Haramum in order that they distribute (the possessions) [?] between themselves and LBʾM [5] of (the clan) ḤḎYMRM. Eagerly [?] they [the senders] will thank you (for this). And nobody will (therefore) provoke trouble with you.
[6] **To you may** [7] **(the gods) ʿṮTR and Ḏ-SMWY renew good luck.**

In the following text, two other features can be observed. The first is a greeting formula, formed of the verb *hḥyw* (lit. "to keep alive"), apparently in the passive voice with the addressee as its subject[53] (lines 1f. of YM 11729). Since the root

50 A palm-leaf stalk of 21.2 x 1.9 cm, from the palaeographic period Ry IVa. The text is published in STEIN, 2008.

51 This sign, formed by two large and one shorter stroke, is often used to mark the end of a text and can thus be considered some kind of punctuation mark (cf. above, n. 32). Morphologically, it can be identified with the double bar that is used to separate ciphers from the running text in Early Sabaic inscriptions (like Oost.Inst. 14, see above, with n. 38).

52 The city of Haram (today Ḫaribat Hamdān) is one of the ancient centres of the Yemeni Ǧawf region, located about 15 km east of Naššān/as-Sawdāʾ (see ROBIN, 1992: 10–60). The king mentioned in our text has, however, not yet been identified.

53 In contrast to this, the sender is introduced by the preceding preposition *l-* (thus already BEESTON, 1989: 18, in respect to Document B/1). Previous interpretations of this verb as active (e.g., MARAQTEN, 2003: 279: "and may you wish for him (i.e., the sender) to continue in life") do not really make sense. Introduction of the agent of a passive action by the preposition *l-* is a feature known, for example, in classical Arabic as well.

ḤYW "to live, be alive" is clearly used in a context of greeting in other texts,[54] this phrase should be considered more a greeting than a blessing formula. Structurally, it has to be distinguished from the blessings that regularly invoke deities.

The other feature is an inquiry about the well-being of the correspondent,[55] followed by a statement on the sender's own condition. These inquiries, however, must equally be considered stereotypical formulae since they are always used in the same unspecified manner that shows no individual feature at all.

YM 11729 = TYA 7[56]

1. ***l-wᶜdkrb / w-qssm / ᶜm-n / rṯdᵓl / ḏ-qšbn / w-***
2. ***l-hw / l-thḫywn / w-ᶜṯtr / w-ᵓlmqhw / l-hṣbḥn***
3. ***n / l-kmw / nᶜmtm / w-b-ḏt / wfym / ᶜbr-n-kmw / f-hᶜ***
4. ***smw / ḥmd / w-ᶜbr-n-hmw / f-ḥdṯ / wfym*** */ w-hmy*
5. *ᶜwdk / ᶜm-n / yhnᵓ / rkbn / mᶜšrn / glglnm / w-*
6. *ᶜwdn / ᶜm-n / rbᵓwm / mkrbn / ḍbytm / mlᵓtm / ṭ*
7. *ḥnm / w-b-hw / ᵓrbᶜt / mᶜšrtm / w-[s]bᶜtm / b-hw*
8. *mlḥ / w-blšnm / w-msḫym* ***/ w-l-kmw / nᶜmtm*** *V/*

To WᶜDKRB and QSSM from RṮDᵓL of (the clan) QŠBN.
2 **From him you shall be greeted.**
May (the gods) ᶜṮTR and ᵓLMQHW 3 **let shine good luck upon you.**
For (the fact) that well-being (was reported) from you they 4 **have thanked many times.**
From them (also) well-being was reported.
If 5 you have brought from YHNᵓ, the *rkb* [a functionary], two *mᶜšr* [unit of measure] of sesame, 6 bring (also) from RBᵓWM, the *mkrb* [a functionary], a full 'sack' of 7 flour and moreover four *mᶜšr* and one *sbᶜt* [units of measure] of 8 salt, lentils, and *msḫy*.
Good luck to you.

54 E.g., *w-hnᵓm f-ḥywn l-hw w-ᶜlhn f-ḥywn* 8 *l-hw* "And as for HNᵓM – greet him from him [the sender], and as for ᶜLHN – greet him from him!" at the end of the letter Mon.script.sab. 68/7f. (cf. already WENINGER, 2002: 218ff.). Here, the verb (in imperative) must be considered a derived stem 0_2 (cf. Arabic *ḥayyā* with the same meaning) which shows in general some semantic similiarities to the H stem.

55 This phrase was syntactically misunderstood in the past. The translation of *w-b-ḏt wfym ᶜbr-n-k(mw) f-hᶜsm(w) ḥmd* by MARAQTEN, 2003: 279f.: "and herewith well-being for you and may you always be thankful" completely ignores the syntactical function of the particle *f-* as convincingly established by NEBES, 1995 (cf. the treatment of some passages from epistolary formulae *op.cit.* 272).

56 A palm-leaf stalk of 13.2 x 2.5 cm, written in a late ductus of the palaeographic period Ry IVa (c. 2nd half of the 3rd c CE).

4.3 The late period

The last period of Sabaic epistolography is contemporary with the last three centuries of the Ancient South Arabian culture. From the fourth century CE onwards, the Sabaic[57] minuscule inscriptions make use of a characteristic palaeographic shape which forms the last step in the development of the Ancient South Arabian minuscule script (called Ry IVb). Concerning the letter's structure, the Middle Sabaic formulae basically remain in use, suffering changes only in their vocabulary: Instead of *l-*, the preposition *ᶜbr* is used to indicate the addressee, and the latter may be introduced by the polite epithet *tḥrg* "authority, honour". The designation *ṯbyt* of the message no longer occurs, but can be replaced by a more elaborate phrase *ḏ-ʾʾrḫm w-slmnm* "news and greetings" (lit. "(something) of affairs and salutations").

From a cultural point of view, the monotheistic nature of the blessing formula has to be noticed. From the late fourth century onwards, it replaces the polytheist invocation in letters of earlier periods.[58]

The third part of the introductory formula, concerning the circumstances of writing the letter (*w-hmw f-ngyw l-sṭr ᶜbr-kmw k-*... "As for them [the senders], they have asked to write to you that ...", lines 4f. of the following text), is discussed in § 5.1 below. Also this phrase, occurring in four letters of the monotheistic period,[59] seems to be a fixed formula of a stereotypical character.

57 The other Ancient South Arabian languages have died out in the meantime (like Minaic and probably Qatabanic) or have been reduced to a merely spoken idiom with any appreciable output of writing (like Ḥaḍramitic).

58 Admittedly there is no certain chronological indication for this change in the blessing invocations. Indeed the official conversion of rulers of the Ḥimyarite dynasty can be fixed in the 380s (see e.g. ROBIN, 2003: 102–105), but there is some evidence that among the ordinary population, the older faith survived much longer. While an explicitly monotheistic letter may therefore be dated posterior to the mentioned date, this provides no *terminus ante quem* for the polytheistic invocations.

59 X.BSB 141/4f., X.BSB 142/5, X.BSB 149/2f., and X.BSB 144/4f. While the three first-mentioned texts contain an explicit invocation of the monotheist god, the last letter omits any blessing formulae. For reasons of palaeography, however, it should belong to the same period as the other three texts.

X.BSB 141 = Mon.script.sab. 6[60] (cf. *figs. 3.6a–b*)

1. ***ḏ-ʾʾrḫm / w-s<l>mnm / ʿbr / tḥrg / ʾlm...***
2. ***ḏ-ḫbzn / ʿm-n / ʾḥmd / ḏ-rsb / w-ʾbšmr***
3. ***ḏ-ḫbzn / w-rḥmnn / ḏ-b-smyn / l-ykrbn***
4. ***tḥrg-kmw / b-nʿmtm / w-wfym / w-hmw / f-ngy***
5. ***w / l-s[ṯ]r / ʿbr-kmw / k-dʾ / mḍʾ-hmw / ʾšrʿ?***
6. *w.[.]....* /? [ ] [?] *f-mḍʾ-hmw / w-mr / w-ḍmnkmw*
7. *b-ʾšrʿ?* ***/ w-l-tḥrg-kmw***
8. ***nʿm***
9. ***tm /***
10. ***w-dyn***
11. ***m \//***

News and greetings to the honour of ʾLM[...] 2 of (the clan) ḪBZN from ʾḤMD of (the clan) RSB and ʾBŠMR 3 of (the clan) ḪBZN.
May RḤMNN[61] who is in heaven bless 4 your honour with good luck and well-being.
As for them [the senders], they have asked 5 to write to you that ʾŠRʿ has not yet reached them. 6 (Instead?) [...] has reached them and came (to them). You have (however) assured (to send) 7 ʾŠRʿ.
To your honour 8–11 good luck and justice![62]

5 Organization of writing and delivering a message

5.1 Identification of the letter's scribe

This section deals with one main question: Who actually wrote these letters? Of course, this question is not easily answered, since it involves highly speculative matters as literacy, education and the like, matters which are widely disputed even for ancient cultures with much better documentation, and can therefore not be discussed exhaustively within the framework of this paper.[63] What can be done, however, is to collect the main arguments that can be drawn from the texts themselves, arguments in favour of the assumption that the letters were generally

60 Segment of a branch of juniper of 19.7 x 2.1 cm, written in the palaeographic style Ry IVb (c. 5th c CE). The text is published in STEIN, 2008, a German translation is already given in STEIN, 2006: 396f.

61 One of the names of the monotheist god (cf. the Arabic epithet *ar-Raḥmān*) which can be of either Jewish or Christian background. Other designations of this deity are "God" (*ʾln or ʾlhn*) or simply "lord of heaven and earth" (*mrʾ/bʿl smyn w-ʾrḍn*), comparable to the epithet following the name in the text above.

62 The last four lines of the text are written upside down on the left margin after the prepared field of writing was completely filled up (see the facsimile on *fig. 3.6b*).

63 For a recent approach to the question of literacy in pre-Islamic Arabia, see STEIN, 2005b.

written by their sender's own hand, and arguments for the contrary – that they were written by professional scribes.[64]

One particular feature in this connection is the grammatical person the sender of a letter is mentioned in. Generally, the reference to the sender in the first person allows two interpretations: Either the sender dictated the text word by word to a professional scribe,[65] or he himself wrote it with his own hand. If the sender is referred to in the third person, however, a composition in his own hand can reasonably be excluded. Consequently, since the Sabaic letters basically refer to the sender in the third person,[66] they should have been written by another person, presumably by an educated professional scribe. This assumption is supported by the fact that all the letters known so far originate from one and the same place (see above, with n. 19) where they were found mixed up with other writings like legal and business documents, notes from ritual context and also many exercises – remnants of exactly that training with which the scribes were prepared for their profession.[67] The concentration of all these different texts in one single place strongly suggests the existence of a central archive, an office which was occupied with the composition, notarizing, and storage of all kinds of

64 The latter assumption is favoured also by MARAQTEN 2003, based on the argument of the "contractual formulas, whose characteristic and stereotypical features are sometimes recognizable to the trained eye" (*op.cit.* 275).

65 Thus, for example, in Ancient Mesopotamia. Although the opinions on the stage of literacy in the cuneiform cultures differ widely, it is obvious that not all of the Akkadian letters were written by their sender's own hand. Moreover – the job of the "scribe" (Akkadian *ṭupšarru*, from Sumerian *dub-sar* "tablet writer") was a well-known, important profession. In a quite positivistic approach, for example, WILCKE, 2000: 48 reaches the following conclusion for the urban societies from the Ur III period onwards: "Die Lesefähigkeit war dabei sicher immer wesentlich stärker entwickelt als die aktive Beherrschung der Schrift." That means that although many officials and merchants may have been able to read their correspondence themselves, they would nevertheless have had letters (and other documents) written by a professional scribe – in a literal dictation, as the use of the first person shows.

66 This is in some contrast to an earlier practice. A considerable percentage of the Minaic letters are written in the first person. Since they exhibit no other differences, neither in their formal appearance nor in their textual structure, from the letters in the third person, it has to be questioned whether or not this evidence must be taken as indication for a scribal practice different from that of the later periods. The early texts still need further investigation.

67 Among these school texts, some examples with epistolary formulae have also been found, namely X.BSB 160, 164, 167, and others. These exercises comprise different letters (or even parts of their formulae) on one stick. By the way, there are also exercises containing formulae of legal and business documents as well.

written documents as well as with the education of the trainee scribes.[68] This office was probably located at a temple (n. 19). However, at present we cannot say whether there were one or more offices in a city. We can only assume that every reasonably large city in Ancient South Arabia would have had at least one such office where all written correspondence was centrally regulated.[69]

While the above-mentioned arguments support the assumption of a centralized organization of written correspondence, the letters themselves also exhibit some evidence that they were written, of course, in the name of the senders – but by professional scribes. One phrase occurs in the Late Sabaic letter X.BSB 141/4f. quoted above, but is nevertheless found in several other letters of the same period:[70]

w-hmw f-ngyw l-sṭr ᶜbr-kmw k-...
"As for them [the senders], they have asked to write to you that ..."

This phrase is best understood as a commission of the scribe by the senders to write the message in their name. In an other letter of the Late Sabaic period, X.BSB 158/7, the colophone is augmented by the following passage:

w-zḫr ᶜbdm k-hᵓḏn signature
"ᶜBDM has signed (this) as he was informed".

This means that the person mentioned (obviously not the scribe but a representative of the senders)[71] has confirmed by signature that the written text corresponds to the instructions he was given by the senders. This orally, as the verb *hᵓḏn* (from the root *ᵓḎN* "to hear") suggests, transmitted message was then written down by the scribe – not necessarily in its final form already but only in a first draft, containing the basic information from the senders. A specimen of

68 Another argument for the existence of a centralized writing process is provided by the symbols which occur on many sticks (cf. above, with n. 25). Their uniformity seems to contradict the assumption of an independent production of these writings in different private households.

69 Besides this public office, the existence of private archives should not be excluded, at least in the royal palaces. But even governors may have received their instructions through the normal public way as the existence of a royal letter to the governors of the neighbouring city of Našqum among the texts from the Naššān archive shows (X.BSB 139 from the 4th c CE).

70 X.BSB 142/5, 144/4f., and 149/2f.

71 For this identification, see the exhaustive discussion in STEIN, 2008: 33 and 553.

such a draft letter is probably preserved in the following text from the Munich collection:

X.BSB 129 = Mon.script.sab. 412[72] (cf. *figs. 3.7.a–b*)

1. *ḥywn / l-whbᶜṯt / <w->ʔšᶜb-hw / w-mrᵊ-hw / w-mrᵊt-hw /*
2. *mngw / ᶜlm / b-hw / tᶜlm / yᶜlgd / b-ᶜbr / rʔbbm*
3. *mngw / hysrn / ṯny / ᶜlmn / ᵊḥd / ḏ-ḫmsy / w-ᵊḥd / ḏ-ᶜšr*

ḤYWN to WHBᶜṮT, his tribe, his lord and his lady:
2 Request (to send) the document which YᶜLGD has signed, to RBBM
3 Request to send two documents, one of fifty (units) and one of ten (units).

This note in the form of a list contains the characteristic feature of an epistolary formula in line 1: the name of sender (ḤYWN) and addressee (WHBᶜṮT and his relatives). The two following entries can be considered two matters to be dealt with in the body of the letter (it has to be noticed that these two requests are introduced by a noun which is derived from the same root as the verb *ngy* "to ask" in the formula quoted above). All other specifics of epistolary formula, like greetings and blessings and inquiries about the correspondent's well-being, are stereotypical phrases (as seen above). They are not adapted to an individual situation and are therefore not included in the draft. Only afterwards, when the scribe was going to formulate the actual letter, would he have filled up these outlines with the necessary formulae of politeness.

5.2 The role of the messenger

Finally, a last point has to be dealt with, the question of how the letters were delivered to their destination. If our picture of a centralized writing (and also reading) process of correspondence, located in certain offices, is correct, we might expect some equally centralized postal system, mainly connecting these offices in different cities. At present, however, we have no indication of an organization of this kind. Most of the letters give no hint of the mode of delivery of the message. Only occasionally are certain persons mentioned who can be identified as a messenger, as in the following passage from X.BSB 98/2:[73]

72 A palm-leaf stalk of 24.7 x 1.7 cm, written in the ductus of stage Ry IVa.

73 The only further example of this formula in the examined corpus is Mon.script.sab. 68/2; another from unpublished material is quoted by MARAQTEN, 2003: 276.

w-sṭr sṭr-k mḍʾ b-ʿm mhbm

"The letter [lit. writing] you wrote has arrived with MHBM".

This expression has a rather familiar character; the messenger seems to be an individual well-known to both sender and addressee. In contrast to this, however, a formula without mention of such a person (*w-sṭr sṭrk f-mḍʾ* "The letter you wrote has arrived", e.g., X.BSB 109/3) seems to be more common.[74] Whatever this means, the evidence is not sufficient to allow any convincing conclusion. Of all aspects of correspondence by letter, the question of how the messages were delivered remains one of the least documented.

6 Ancient South Arabian letters published up to now[75]

Ghul Document A: BEESTON, 1989: 17f.; RYCKMANS, 1993; STEIN, 2005a: 461–469.

Ghul Document B: BEESTON, 1989: 17f.; RYCKMANS, 1993; STEIN, 2005a: 469–483.

A 40-4 = TYA 5: RYCKMANS/MÜLLER/ABDALLAH, 1994: no. 5; SIMA, 2000: 125 ex. 1.

YM 11742 = TYA 6: RYCKMANS/MÜLLER/ABDALLAH, 1994: no. 6; STEIN, 2006: 391f. no. 3.

YM 11729 = TYA 7: RYCKMANS/MÜLLER/ABDALLAH, 1994: no. 7; STEIN, 2006: 395f. no. 7.

YM 11732 = TYA 8: RYCKMANS/MÜLLER/ABDALLAH, 1994: no. 8.

YM 11733 = TYA 9: RYCKMANS/MÜLLER/ABDALLAH, 1994: no. 9.

YM 11749 = TYA 14: RYCKMANS/MÜLLER/ABDALLAH, 1994: no. 14; STEIN, 2006: 392f. no. 4

YM 11738 = TYA 15: RYCKMANS/MÜLLER/ABDALLAH, 1994: no. 15.

74 While only two letters mention the messenger (cf. above, with the preceding note), the formula without it occurs in at least four texts (besides the above-mentioned, X.BSB 103/3f., 113/3f., and 133/2). Most letters, however, completely lack any information of this kind.

75 Excluding the corpus in STEIN, 2008 (cf. above, n. 14). – If not otherwise indicated, the language of the texts is Sabaic.

without siglum: ᶜABDALLĀH, 1996; STEIN, 2005c: 185; STEIN, 2006: 390f. no. 2.

Oost.Inst. 14 = L 14: DREWES/RYCKMANS, 1997; SIMA, 2000: 216 ex. 1; STEIN, 2006: 389f. no. 1.

X.JRy b-2 (Minaic): RYCKMANS/LOUNDINE, 1997.

Mon.script.sab. 68: WENINGER, 2002: 217–220; STEIN, 2006: 393f. no. 5.

Mon.script.sab. 129 (= X.BSB 100): STEIN, 2004.

Mon.script.sab. 557 (= X.BSB 121): STEIN, 2006: 394f. no. 6.

Mon.script.sab. 6 (=X.BSB 141): STEIN, 2006: 396f. no. 8.

Bibliography

ᶜABDALLĀH, Yūsuf M.

1996 "Risāla min imraᵓa bi-ḫaṭṭ az-zabūr al-yamānī". In: *New Arabian Studies* 3: 18–28 (Arabic).

BEESTON, Alfred F.L.

1989 "Mahmoud ᶜAli Ghul and the Sabaean Cursive Script". In: *Arabian Studies in Honour of Mahmoud Ghul. Symposium at Yarmouk University, December 8–11, 1984*. Ed. Moawiya M. Ibrahim. Wiesbaden: 15–19.

BEESTON, Alfred F.L. / Mahmud A. GHUL / Walter W. MÜLLER / Jacques RYCKMANS

1982 *Sabaic Dictionary (English–French–Arabic)*. (Publication of the University of Sanaa, YAR). Louvain-la-Neuve/Beyrouth.

DREWES, Abraham J. / Thomas F.G. HIGHAM / Michael C.A. MACDONALD / Christopher BRONK RAMSEY

2006 "Some Absolute Dates for the Development of the South Arabian Minuscule Script". Unpublished paper presented (by M.C.A. Macdonald) at the Rencontres Sabéennes 10, St. Petersburg, May 31st–June 3rd.

DREWES, Abraham J. / Jacques RYCKMANS

1997 "Un pétiole de palme inscrit en sabéen, no. 14 de la collection de l'Oosters Instituut à Leyde". In: *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 27: 225–230.

FRANTSOUZOFF, Serguei A.

1999 "Hadramitic Documents Written on Palm-leaf Stalks". In: *Proceedings*

of the Seminar for Arabian Studies 29: 55–65.

GERLACH, Iris

2002 "Der Friedhof des Awām-Tempels in Marib. Bericht der Ausgrabungen von 1997 bis 2000". In: *Archäologische Berichte aus dem Yemen* 9: 41–91.

JAGIELLA, Christian / Harald KÜRSCHNER

1987 *Atlas der Hölzer Saudi Arabiens. Die Holzanatomie der wichtigsten Bäume und Sträucher Arabiens mit einem holzanatomischen Bestimmungsschlüssel.* (Beihefte zum Tübinger Atlas des Vorderen Orients, vol. A.20). Wiesbaden.

MARAQTEN, Mohammed

1998 "Writing Materials in Pre-Islamic Arabia". In: *Journal of Semitic Studies* 43: 287–310.

2000–2001 "Altsüdarabische Inschriften auf Holzstäbchen: Eine wichtige Quelle zur Erforschung der Sprache und Kultur des antiken Jemen". In: *Beiruter Blätter* 8–9: 80–84.

2003 "Some Notes on Sabaic Epistolography". In: *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 33: 273–286.

MÜLLER, Walter W.

1997–1998 "Entdeckungen aus dem antiken Jemen. Die Entzifferung einer bislang unbekannten Schrift und der damit geschriebenen Dokumente". In: *Alma Mater Philippina*: Wintersemester 1997–1998: 1–5.

NEBES, Norbert

1995 *Die Konstruktionen mit /fa-/ im Altsüdarabischen. Syntaktische und epigraphische Untersuchungen.* (Veröffentlichungen der Orientalischen Kommission der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur Mainz, vol. 40). Wiesbaden.

ROBIN, Christian J.

1992 *Inabbaʾ, Haram, al-Kāfir, Kamna et al-Ḥarāshif.* (Inventaire des inscriptions sudarabiques, vol. 1). Paris/Rome.

2001 "Les inscriptions de l'Arabie antique et les études arabes". In: *Arabica* 48: 509–577.

2003 "Le judaïsme de Ḥimyar". In: *Arabia* 1: 97–172.

RYCKMANS, Jacques

1993 "Les deux bâtonnets sud-arabes déchiffrés par Mahmoud Ghul". In: *Studies in Oriental Culture and History. Festschrift for Walter Dostal.* Ed. André Gingrich / Sylvia Haas / Gabriele Paleczek / Thomas Fillitz. Frankfurt/M.: 41–48.

2001 "Origin and Evolution of South Arabian Minuscule Writing on Wood (1)". In: *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 12: 223–235.

RYCKMANS, Jacques / Avram G. LOUNDINE

1997 "Un pétiole de palme inscrit en minéen". In: *Aktualisierte Beiträge zum 1. Internationalen Symposion Südarabien interdisziplinär an der Universität Graz mit kurzen Einführungen zu Sprach- und Kulturgeschichte*. Ed. Roswitha G. Stiegner. Graz: 171–180.

RYCKMANS, Jacques / Walter W. MÜLLER / Yusuf M. ABDALLAH

1994 *Textes du Yémen antique inscrits sur bois (with an English Summary)*. (Publications de l'Institut Orientaliste de Louvain, vol. 43). Louvain-la-Neuve.

SIMA, Alexander

2000 *Tiere, Pflanzen, Steine und Metalle in den altsüdarabischen Inschriften. Eine lexikalische und realienkundliche Untersuchung*. (Veröffentlichungen der Orientalischen Kommission der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur Mainz, vol. 46). Wiesbaden.

STEIN, Peter

2003 *Untersuchungen zur Phonologie und Morphologie des Sabäischen*. (Epigraphische Forschungen auf der Arabischen Halbinsel, vol. 3). Rahden/Westfalen.

2004 "A Sabaic Proverb. The Sabaic Minuscule Inscription *Mon.script.sab.* 129". In: *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 34: 331–341.

2005a "Die sabäischen Briefe Ghul Document A und B. Ein erster zusammenhängender Interpretationsversuch". In: *Sabaean Studies. Archaeological, Epigraphical and Historical Studies in honour of Yūsuf M. ᶜAbdallāh, Alessandro de Maigret and Christian J. Robin on the Occasion of Their 60th Birthdays*. Ed. Amida M. Sholan / Sabina Antonini / Mounir Arbach. Naples/Ṣanᶜāᵓ: 459–487.

2005b "Stein vs. Holz, *musnad* vs. *zabūr* – Schrift und Schriftlichkeit im vorislamischen Arabien". In: *Die Welt des Orients* 35: 118–157.

2005c "The Ancient South Arabian Minuscule Inscriptions on Wood. A New Genre of Pre-Islamic Epigraphy". In: *Jaarbericht van het Voor-aziatisch-Egyptisch Genootschap Ex Oriente Lux* 39: 181–199.

2006 "Sabäische Briefe". In: *Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments. Neue Folge. Band 3: Briefe*. Ed. Bernd Janowski / Gernot Wilhelm. Gütersloh: 385–398.

2007 "Materialien zur sabäischen Dialektologie: Das Problem des amiritischen ('haramischen') Dialektes". In: *Zeitschrift der Deutschen*

Morgenländischen Gesellschaft 157: 13–47.

2008 *Die altsüdarabischen Minuskelinschriften auf Holzstäbchen aus der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek in München. Band 1: Die Inschriften der mittel- und spätsabäischen Periode.* (Epigraphische Forschungen auf der Arabischen Halbinsel 5) (in preparation).

WENINGER, Stefan

2002 "More Sabaic Minuscule Texts From Munich". In: *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 32: 217–223.

WILCKE, Claus

2000 *Wer las und schrieb in Babylonien und Assyrien. Überlegungen zur Literalität im Alten Zweistromland.* (Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-historische Klasse, Jahrgang 2000, Heft 6). München.

Figures

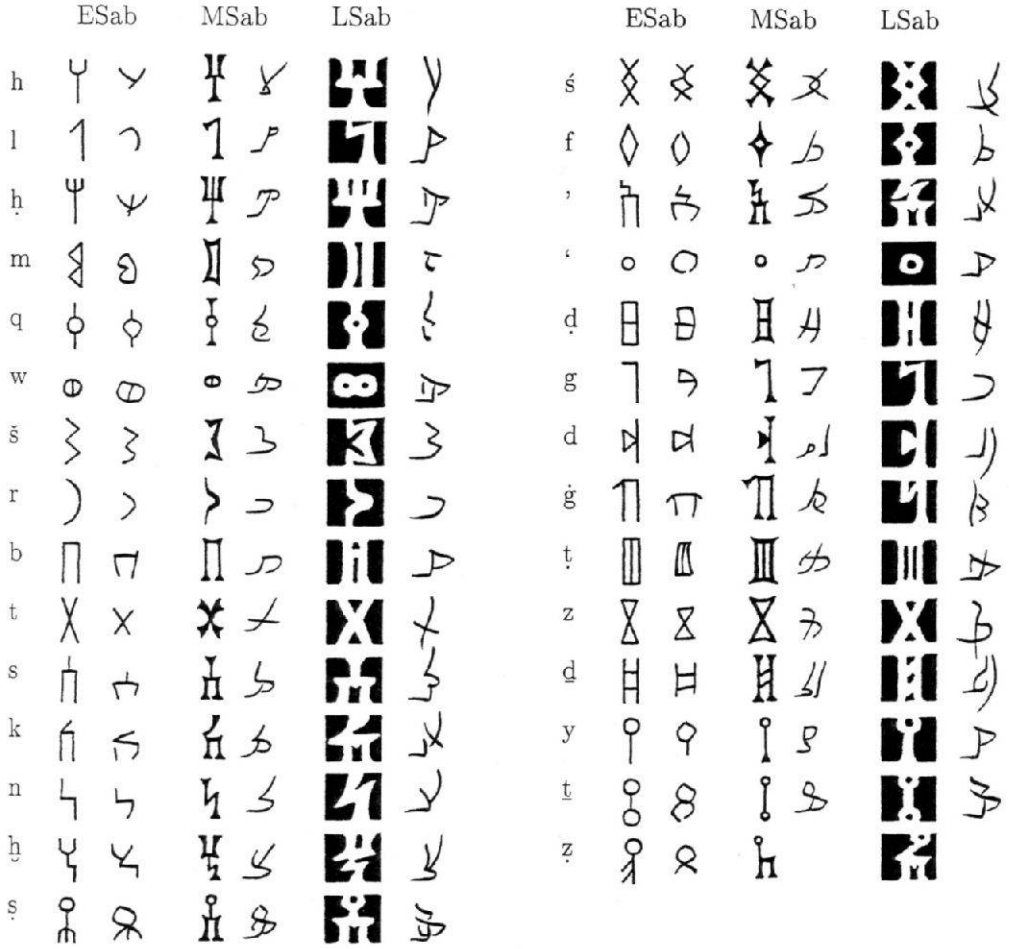

Fig. 3.1. The palaeographic development of the Ancient South Arabian monumental (left column) and minuscule (right column) scripts from Early until Late Sabaic times (i.e., eighth century BC until sixth century CE).

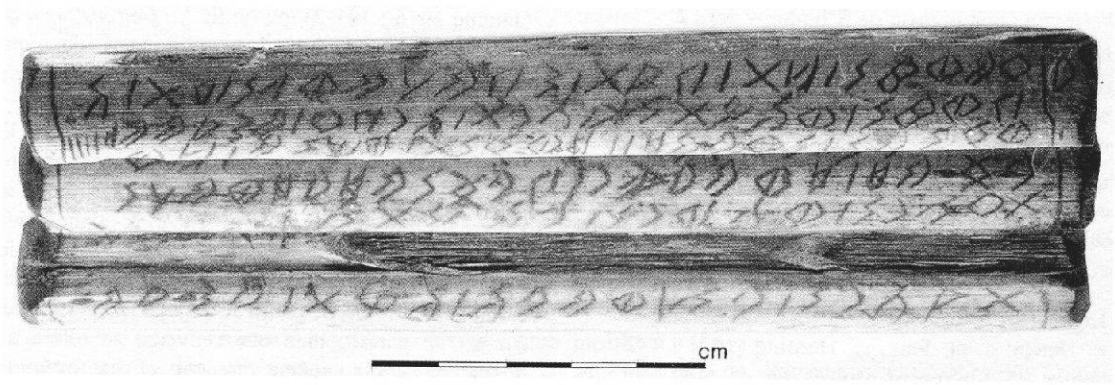

Fig. 3.2a. Oost.Inst. 14 (palaeogr. Ry IIb, from DREWES/RYCKMANS, 1997: 225 fig. 1).

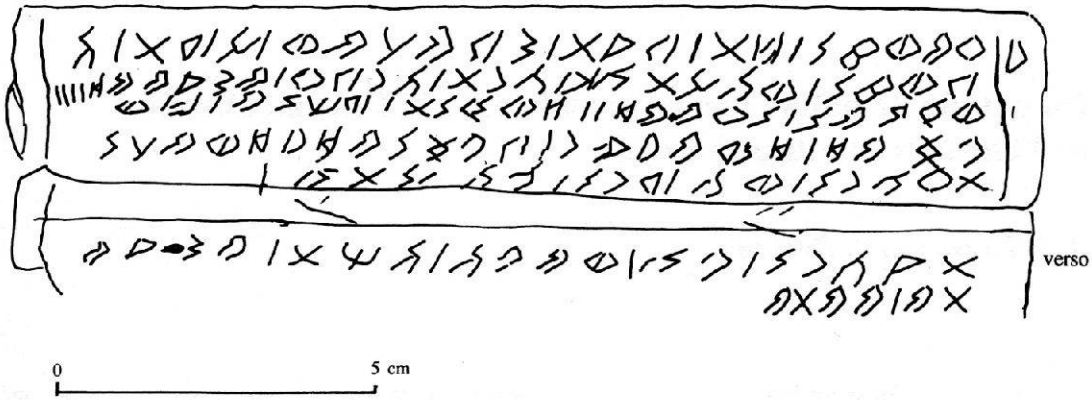

Fig. 3.2b. Oost.Inst. 14, facsimile (from DREWES/RYCKMANS, 1997: 226 fig. 2).

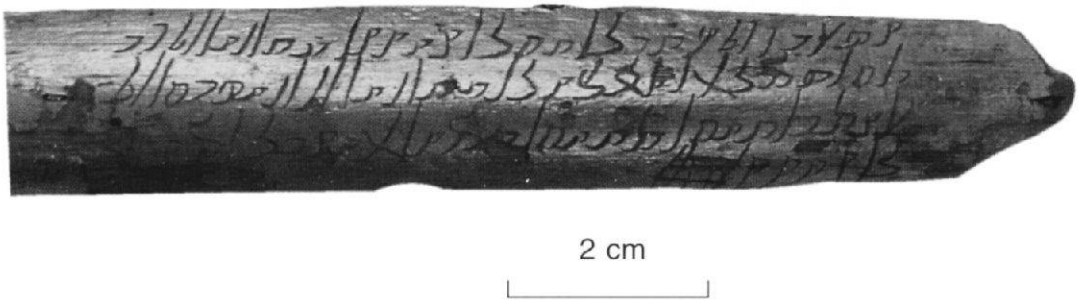

Fig. 3.3a. YM 11742 = TYA 6 (palaeogr. Ry IVa, from RYCKMANS/MÜLLER/ABDALLAH, 1994: 84 pl. 6a).

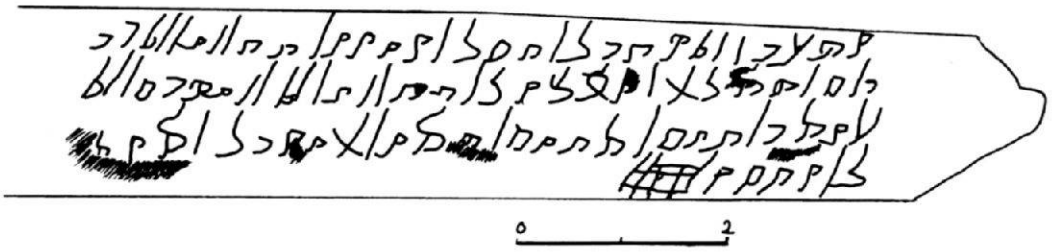

Fig. 3.3b. YM 11742 = TYA 6, facsimile (from RYCKMANS/MÜLLER/ABDALLAH, 1994: 84 pl. 6a).

Fig. 3.4a. X.BSB 98 = Mon.script.sab. 38 (palaeogr. Ry IIIa, photo: BSB München).

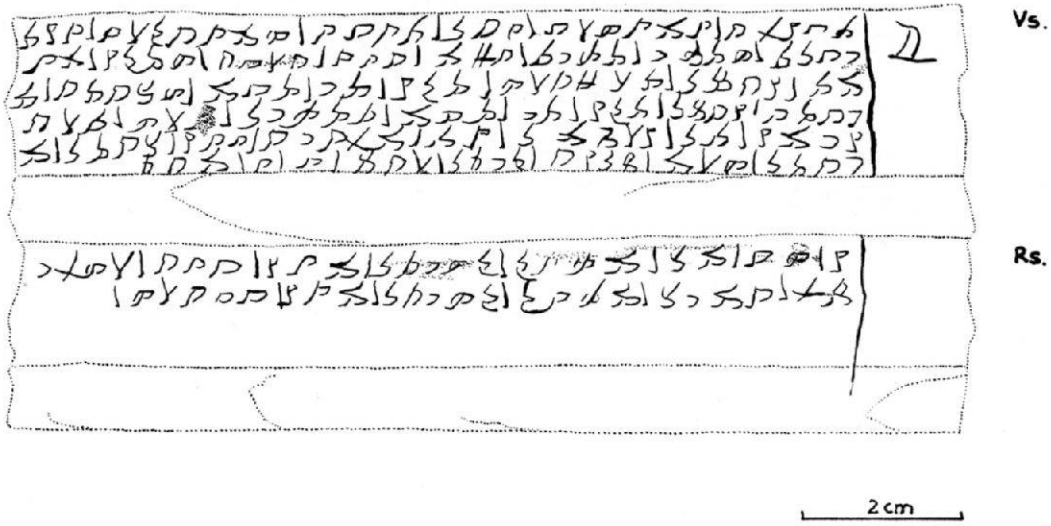

Fig. 3.4b. X.BSB 98 = Mon.script.sab. 38, facsimile.

Fig. 3.5a. X.BSB 107 = Mon.script.sab. 80, obverse (palaeogr. Ry IVa, photo: BSB München).

Fig. 3.5b. X.BSB 107 = Mon.script.sab. 80, reverse (photo: BSB München).

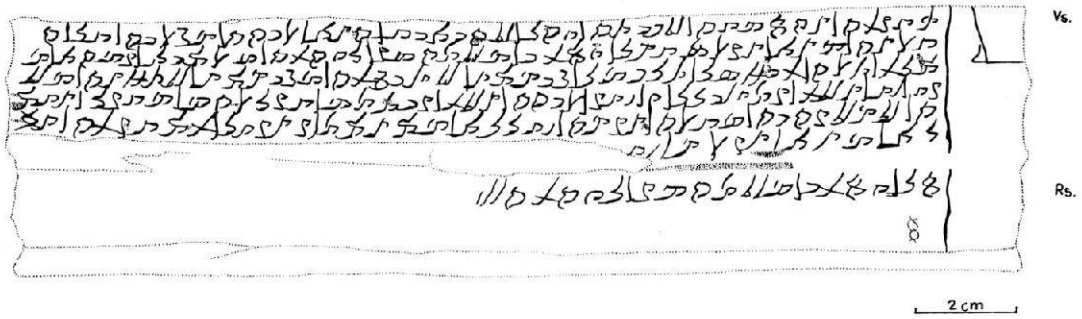

Fig. 3.5c. X.BSB 107 = Mon.script.sab. 80, facsimile.

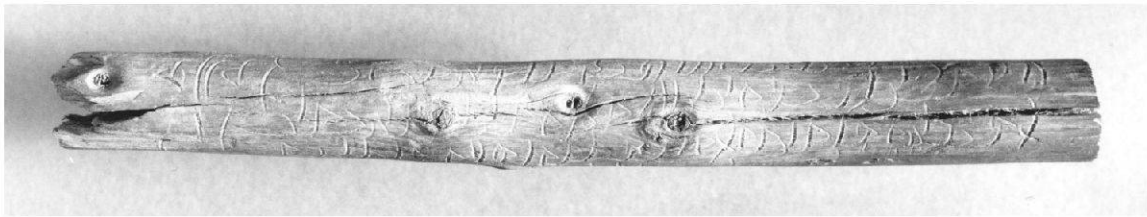

Fig. 3.6a. X.BSB 141 = Mon.script.sab. 6 (palaeogr. Ry IVb, photo: BSB München).

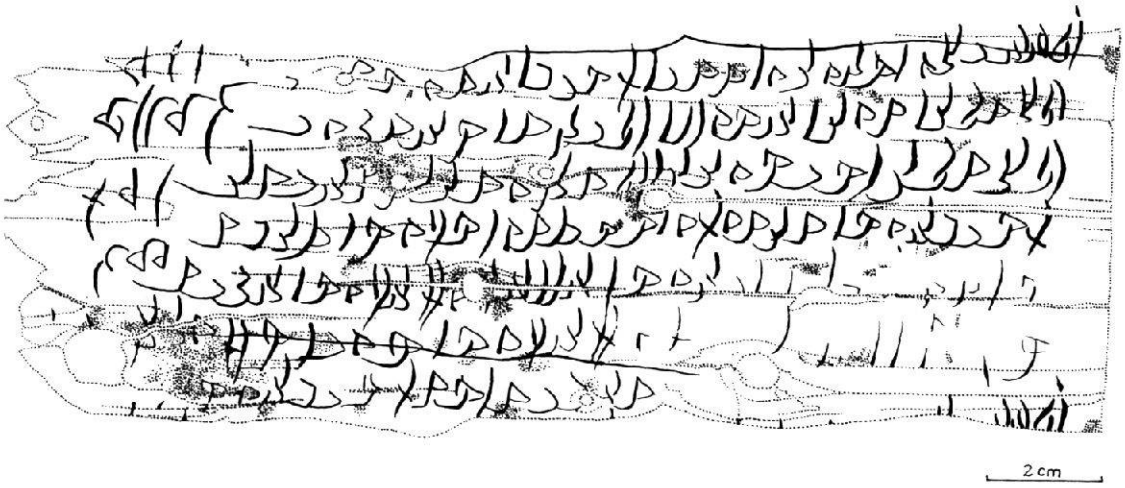

Fig. 3.6b. X.BSB 141 = Mon.script.sab. 6, facsimile.

Fig. 3.7a. X.BSB 129 = Mon.script.sab. 412 (palaeogr. Ry IVa, photo: BSB München).

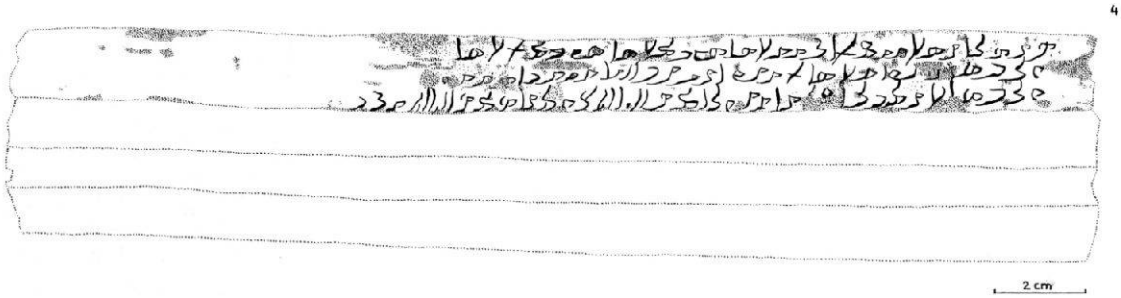

Fig. 3.7b. X.BSB 129 = Mon.script.sab. 412, facsimile.