

Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

Eva Mira Grob and Andreas Kaplony, Zurich

The following volume has grown out of our work at the University of Zurich. Our focus is on the palaeography and style of pre-modern Arabic documents written on papyrus, parchment and paper, preserved in four archives: the documents issued by the clerks of Qurra ibn Šarīk, governor of Egypt (709–710); the family archive of the Bactrian landlord Mīr ibn Bēk (755–777); the half-private, half-business letters of a ninth-century textile merchant family in al-Fuṣṭāṭ (now a neighborhood in modern Cairo); and the thirteenth-century letters of a grain-trading family that lived in the Red Sea port of al-Quṣayr.

Being part of the Swiss National Research network on *Mediality: Historical Perspectives* made us more and more aware of issues of mediality, i.e. the characteristics of a particular medium. What rules did a scribe have to follow in order to create a document that was recognized as such? On one hand he had to operate within a rather restricted set of rules that left little freedom to individual initiative. He could, for example, use or leave out certain polite formulae, and thereby define his position vis-à-vis the addressee. The use, intentional misuse, or absence of these formulae might also reflect the tone of the document. At the same time, the scribe's skill in employing the formulae might reveal something about his own education and status because not knowing the rules would be worse than ignoring them deliberately. On the other hand it is not easy for us to grasp these unwritten rules, as they were definitely different from ours: a ninth-century business letter we would consider chaotic, perfectly followed the rules of its time, whereas careful handwriting and a high degree of legibility was only of minor concern.

Our research network is especially interested in how, in the course of time, people replaced one medium with another (*Medienwandel*), how they switched between media (*Medienwechsel*) and what implicit and explicit attitudes they had towards the media they used (*Medienwissen*). Applying these issues on Arabic documents immediately opened up three major fields of research, as the following examples show:

In tenth century Egypt, papyrus was replaced by paper within a short time. How was this *Medienwandel* possible and how did this affect letter writing in general and the layout of documents in particular? But we had better use the

term *Medien* “media”, to cover *all* means of transferring information: In the Mamluk period (1250–1517), e.g., the formulae expressing blessings developed into a complex system.

The parallel use of different media (*Medienwechsel*) can be observed in many contexts. The clerks of Qurra ibn Šarik addressed their tax payers in two different ways: they sent the village communities short tax bills and the city’s bishop long threatening letters in which they held him personally responsible for the payment of outstanding taxes. Within the documents from Quṣayr, we see thirteenth century merchants using a whole system of shipping notes, receipts, personal letters and lists to ensure that ship loads arrived in full – every single one of these different media had its own functional “load”.

Senders of letters usually referred to the business of letter-writing (*Medienwissen*). They used to mention both the letter they were about to write and the one they had sent previously, and asked the addressee to answer. However, the concept of letter-writing changed drastically over time. Eighth-century letters exhibit an internal address and a prominent epistolary perfect (“I have written to you” in the sense of “I am writing to you”). They overtly display the physical distance between sender and addressee. Yet thirteenth century letters, with their wide range of polite formulae and an introductory verb in the imperfect (“I am reporting to you”), make the sender a humble applicant received in audience by the addressee.

The more we studied Arabic letters, the more we understood that in order to comprehend the full implications of *Medienwandel*, *Medienwechsel*, and *Medienwissen*, we would have to take earlier traditions into account. There were the Mediterranean traditions of Greek, Coptic, Aramaic, and Syriac papyrus letters. There were also the Pehlevi, Bactrian, and Sogdian traditions of Iran where cloth, leather, and parchment served as the key writing surfaces. Finally, there were the South Arabian letters written on palm sticks, a scribal tradition which could provide important clues for understanding the development of Islamic Arabic scribal practice but which is all too often ignored. This was the reason why we thought of inviting scholars working on the Arabic and the older traditions to attend a two days’ workshop on “Private and Business Letters in the Middle East”. The response to our call was enthusiastic and the *Swiss Research Network on Mediality* generously supported our initiative. So we heard, at our workshop in April 2007, concise introductions into Greek, Coptic, South Arabian, Pehlevi, Bactrian and Arabic letter-writing, each presentation being followed by a lively discussion. Most important – despite all differences between our source corpora – we found a common language. This encouraged us

to publish this volume.¹ We are very grateful to our authors for contributing to this volume, for focussing on the topics (following below) we asked them to deal with, and for their patience when we, again and again, had minor questions. Our thanks are also due to the *Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft / Société Suisse-Asie* which kindly accepted this volume into the *Asiatische Studien / Etudes Asiatiques*, and to the editor of the journal, Dr Felix Konrad, as well as to Dr Anne-marie Pestalozzi who greatly improved the clarity of our manuscript. The illustrations of these volumes were made possible by the kind permission of many collections. Our thanks go to all of them.

Through our discussions, a number of topics emerged as being especially important, and we asked our contributors to focus on them, to make them explicit, wherever possible, while keeping in mind the issues of *Medienwandel*, *Medienwechsel* and *Medienwissen*.

(1) Each of the fields mentioned has its own, long or short, history of when, in which numbers and under what circumstances documentary letters were found, transferred to and kept in collections, and the way they have been, or in the future are going to be, published. Greek, Coptic, Pehlevi and Arabic letters have also been conserved in literary tradition, and Greek and Arabic epistolography even tell us what letters should look like. But although epistolography and literary letters are based on documentary letters, they are no simple mirrors of the realities of letter-writing. The basic assumptions of research, the central questions asked, and the main answers given depend on the academic home of the scholars involved and on the importance documentary letters have, or have been attributed, in relation to the respective wider field of research. What is especially precious are all those hints as to which tracks could and should be followed in future research.

(2) Letters were written, drawn or incised, with the help of pens, styluses and brushes, on papyrus, parchment, leather, cloth, paper, and wooden sticks, etc., and this already defined many of their respective characteristics – just consider how much shorter the South Arabian letters on wooden sticks are, com-

1 At the time of our workshop, Nicholas Sims-Williams already had an article and a book on Bactrian letters in the process of being published. To have the full picture, we suggest to consult his “Bactrian Letters from the Sasanian and Hephthalite Periods”. In: *Proceedings of the 5th Conference of the Societas Iranologica Europaea held in Ravenna, 6–11 October 2003*. Vol. I: *Ancient and Middle Iranian Studies*. Ed. Antonio PANAINO / Andrea PIRAS. Milano, 2006:701–713; *Bactrian Documents from Northern Afghanistan*. II: *Letters and Buddhist Texts*. Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum. Part II: Inscriptions of the Seleucid and Parthian Periods and of Eastern Iran and Central Asia, vol. 3. London, 2007.

pared to all the other letters. Some scripts were cursive – others were not. Some had ligatures and abbreviations, and some well-defined ways of marking word and paragraph ends – while others had not. How did one deal with the margins, how with recto and verso, and how were letters re-used? What about seals, and letters made up of more than one sheet, not to mention letters put into letters? What about a scribe who used one style in his official letters and another in his business letters, and transferred some of the formulae from one kind into the other? These questions of structuring, information packaging, and its display can of course only be approached after a thorough description of the texture of letters and their obligatory and optional parts.

(3) What if a scribe was able to write his letters in two, or even three, languages? Which language did he choose for which purpose? Which of the peculiarities of letter-writing mentioned did he keep or transfer from one language and tradition to the other? There are letters accompanied by translation, but the translations are slightly different from the respective master text. There are also phenomena like parts of speech written in another script and/or another language, and there are ideograms written in one language supposed to be read in another one.

(4) The question of style is especially intriguing. To help us with style, comments conserved in the literary tradition and in epistolography need to be taken into account – but even where no such comments have been found, style most probably played a major role. Style needs to be measured by the standards of its own time: formulae we consider baroque were maybe rather simple in their meaning, while others we think of as laconic could have expressed overwhelming enthusiasm. The whole issue of using an unexpected style to express nuances of humour, irony, or insult, is challenging and not easy to grasp, not to mention the valuation of individual preferences and what good or bad manners implied.

(5) Finally there remains the question of the *Sitz im Leben*, i.e. the pragmatics of letter-writing. What did writing a letter mean, what sending a letter, receiving a letter, answering a letter? Letters were written and read by the literate, but how many of the senders and addressees were literate? And what was the role of the messenger? What kind of information did he add to the letter? Was the letter merely a confirmation of what he said? Or was it rather the other way around, i.e. that the messenger mainly confirmed that the letter really came from the person it claimed to come from?

We would have liked to round off this volume with some tentative conclusions on the peculiarities of *the* documentary letter in the Middle East. But this

would have been premature for two reasons. First, research is just too diverse and has only recently started for South Arabian, Bactrian, and Sogdian letters, as well as for the Pehlevi letters at Berkeley that have recently received scholarly attention. And secondly, the previous traditions furnish only half of the background of pre-modern Arabic letter-writing. The other half would be established by reading them against the frame of contemporary letter-cultures like, e.g., Persian, Turkish, Armenian and Byzantine-Greek. So we hope to be able to add another volume – but these are dreams of the future.

Zurich, August 21st, 2008

