

Coptic letters

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COPTIC LETTERS*

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Septagenario Peter Nagel, in constant gratitude and admiration!

Abstract

The following paper is an attempt to provide a concise overview on the corpus of letters composed in Coptic, the written norm of the Egyptian vernacular used in Byzantine and early Islamic Egypt. First, the study of letters is dealt with in a more general, textlinguistic perspective, and the functional state of written Coptic during its age is outlined socio-linguistically. Then the current state of arts of the study of Coptic letters is sketched briefly. Two chapters deal with external features of Coptic letters, such as their editions, their writing surfaces, and their distribution in terms of space and time, and with their internal features, such as formularies and phrases. Since Coptic letters have come down to us from two different kinds of sources, by papyrological discoveries and by literary transmission, a case study comparing letters from the two spheres is included. Two chapters are devoted to the earliest attested Coptic letters (fourth and fifth centuries) and to significant alterations in late Coptic letter-writing (tenth and eleventh centuries).

0 Prolegomena

0.1 *Letters in a textlinguistic perspective*

[...] letters are, by their very nature, obscure; for on the one hand, the writer of a letter does not bother to explain the subject fully, assuming that the addressee knows what it is all about; and, on the other hand, we have not got the whole correspondence; thus, most of our translations must be based on hypothetical reconstructions. Such reconstructions are almost unavoidable, when one deals with matters of everyday life, reflected and expressed by short unconnected sentences and quotations.

Sarah GROLL, Review of Edward WENTE, *Late Ramesside Letters*, *Revue d'égyptologie* 26 (1974): 168.

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The late Sarah Groll, in her review of Wente's masterful edition of Ancient Egyptian letters, pointed to the general difficulty underlying the study of letters and letter writing in ancient societies. Reading written documents is a business quite different from appreciating literary texts. Literary works, despite being conditioned by their cultural context, specific background information, *Sitz im Leben*, etc., may nevertheless form autonomous, self-contained units of meaning. At least on a primary level, comprehending such a text does not immediately require knowledge about who its author is or under what circumstances it was composed. Documentary texts, on the contrary, are far from autonomous and self-contained in terms of meaning. Each type, in its own way, comprises bits of memory, information, or communication that are deeply embedded in legal, economic, administrative, or social settings of various kinds, and form part of them together with complementary bits of speech, written as well as oral, and with large segments of practice. The inherent incompleteness of these texts implies a reader involved in or at least familiar with the concerned practice. Of course even a well-informed person may need some marks of orientation, and in fact the texts themselves regularly provide them, via their formulaic character, their language, and their style. The specific form of interdependence of verbalized and non-verbalized, or textualized and non-textualized aspects of life has been described and named by linguists in the sociolinguistic concept of *linguistic varieties according to use*,¹ and in the textlinguistic concept of *function(al) styles*.² The stereotyped diplomatic habits of a document, be it the address of a letter, the layout of a list, or the confession of indebtedness, serve to categorize standard situations; like a thematic proposition, they state a given constellation and imply a certain type of behaviour, while the variable corpus details – particular personal names, place names, dates, quantities, qualities, etc. – relate like bits of rhematic information, specifying general possibilities or options by individualized, actual items and events. Thus formulary, language and style of documents are the linguistic correlates of social practices. In the case of letters, the overall constellation is, evidently, that persons at different places, have the desire or the need to communicate with each other. This very constellation underlies many of the “universals” of letter-writing, such as the designation of sender and addressee, acknowledgement of having received an earlier message,

1 HALLIDAY/MCINTOSH/STREVEANS, 1972: 87.

2 Cf. AMMON, 1998; HOFFMANN, 2004 and the attempt to apply this concept to the language of Coptic Legal Documents by RICHTER, 2002a, esp. 5–8; cf. also the textlinguistic approach to Welsh letters in SHISHA-HALEVY, 2005.

summarizing a certain state of affairs, forwarding bits of information, placing queries and requests, while other most characteristic parts of letters, such as greetings and wishes, asking for health and well-being, apologies and defense, are motivated and shaped by general social relationships between the persons taking part in a given correspondence, and by their particular attitudes to each other. It is often not quite obvious to us, what social or emotional values might inhere in certain expressions, and what implicit messages they might convey; however, we should assume that there were only very few entirely neutral phrases.

0.2 *The rise and functional state of Coptic – a sociolinguistic remark*

Before turning to the Coptic letters themselves, it might be useful to consider what Coptic is and what it was used for. Coptic was a socially determined and functionally limited written code from its very beginnings shortly before 300 CE. The underlying written norm of Egyptian, or, to be precise, norms of several dialects corresponding with Lower, Middle and Upper Egyptian vernaculars, might have been developed, refined, and properly put into circulation by Egyptian believers of late antique *Offenbarungsreligionen*, such as Gnostics, Manichaeans, and, above all, Christians, who possibly already formed a demographic majority in Egypt at the time when Coptic came into being.³ The mere need for such a linguistic means bears evidence of a stage when preaching and reception of holy scriptures went beyond the boundaries of urban settlements, the boundaries of linguistic hellenization, towards the countryside, that is to say, the milieu of native speakers of Egyptian. Accordingly, our earliest pieces of evidence for the use of Coptic are pieces of *religious literature*, mostly translations of Greek compositions, such as parts of the New Testament and the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, as well as specimens of apocryphal, Gnostic, and Manichaean writing. Also the earliest known Coptic *documentary* texts, fourth-century private and business letters,⁴ can be attributed to Christian and Manichaean milieux.

The use of Coptic for letter-writing allowed monolingual Egyptians for the first time in centuries to communicate over distances without the assistance of translators, since Demotic, the former written norm of Egyptian, had disappeared from everyday contexts after the first century CE and had gradually become a linguistic register connected to Egyptian religion and magic. As Willy Clarysse

3 For this process and scholarly theorizing about it cf. RICHTER, 2008.

4 Cf. CHOAT, 2006: 30–42; CHOAT, 2007.

put it pointedly:⁵ “From about 100 A.D. until the introduction of Coptic, a period of more than two hundred years, an Egyptian wanting to write a letter to a fellow Egyptian had to do so in Greek, even though in many cases both writer and addressee needed a translator to understand what was written.” The virtual gap, not just in the transmission and preservation, but actually in the production of letters in any Egyptian vernacular during such a considerable period of time fully explains the differences between Coptic letters and their Demotic predecessors in terms of epistolary phraseology and means of expression.⁶ Even after the introduction of Coptic, Greek continued to serve as an epistolographic medium by individuals of either party, worshippers of pagan cults of hellenistic or Egyptian origin, as long as these still existed, Manichaeans, and Christians.⁷ Only after the Arab conquest of Egypt in 641 did Greek virtually stop being used in private letters,⁸ and Coptic virtually became the only idiom of letter-writing used by

- 5 CLARYSSE, 1993: 201. Cf. also DEPAUW, 2006: 299: “The evanescence of Demotic epistolography in the 1st century AD may well have been caused by the banishment of the language and its script from official documents effectuated under Roman rule. The scribes switched to Greek, not only for contracts, but apparently also for letters. As a result, in the 1st and 2nd century AD, Greek was the only language used for private communications between spatially separated individuals, even if their native tongue was Egyptian. This suggests that practically all members of literate society were able to write and read Greek, and had probably been bilingual for a long time already, for otherwise Demotic would have been continued as an everyday epistolary script. By their adoption of archaizing formulae, the exceptional 2nd and 3rd century AD letters in Hieratic clearly illustrate how using Egyptian script for letters had become limited to a pedantic sacerdotal milieu.”
- 6 This opinion is also held by DEPAUW, 2006: 299: “The Egyptian language, however, was still widely spoken, and in the course of the 3rd century reappeared in (Old-)Coptic letters. The introduction of this new script must have taken place in a bilingual environment with little or no knowledge of the Demotic epistolary tradition but with a renewed desire to write in the native language. The Christianization of Egypt may well have catalyzed this evolution and made Coptic a fully-fledged language and script.”
- 7 The complicated matter of interconnections between religious identity and epistolary behaviour has recently been dealt with intriguingly by CHOAT, 2006. Cf. also TIBILETTI, 1979 and MARKSCHIES, 2006.
- 8 While Greek maintained its importance in administrative contexts, such as the correspondence of the Arabic governor at Cairo with local officials during the eighth century, it seems difficult to find evidence for the use of Greek in private letters from Egypt after the early eighth century (the date of the latest Greek letters included in the *Heidelberger Gesamtverzeichnis*: <<http://www.rzuser.uni-heidelberg.de/~gv0/gvz.html>>). A particularly late specimen was brought to my knowledge by Myriam Krutzsch (Berlin, Papyrus collection): P.Berlin P. 8964, an unpublished tenth-century Greek letter written on paper.

Christian Egyptians until the eleventh/twelfth century, the time when educated Christians abandoned Coptic and adopted Arabic as their written language.⁹

1 Coptic letters as a matter of research

Coptic letters appeared on the scene in the later nineteenth century, when large quantities of papyri and ostraca were unearthed in Egypt,¹⁰ and have been treated sporadically since then. Sporadically, for despite the fact that letters constitute the majority of Coptic documentary texts that are available in editions since the early twentieth century (see below, *table 2.1*), and despite the fact that they have of necessity been used for lexicographical and prosopographical purposes, Coptic letters have always been avoided, or at least, neglected as objects of study in their own right – in terms of what they tell, and how they do this – for quite obvious reasons: the difficulty, often hopelessness, of understanding what they actually *wanted* to tell their addressees.¹¹ The voice of one of the most active editors and interpreters of non-literary Coptic texts, the Austrian Coptologist Walter Till, may be quoted as expressing a symptomatic opinion: “Apart from the literary Coptic texts there are many non-literary ones. The most important of them are the legal documents. [...] They are highly important not only for the history of law, but also for the point of view of folklore. *The same holds true for the numerous Coptic letters of all kinds which must be considered alongside with the legal documents.*”¹² After Krall’s early survey of the phraseology of

9 Cf. RICHTER, 2008. In the Melkite church, linguistically based on Greek, the language shift to Arabic seems to have happened even earlier; a ninth-century Christian Arabic letter edited by ANAWATI/JOMIER, 1954 might be related to that milieu.

10 The earliest editions of Coptic letters appeared in the 1870s, such as STERN, 1878, nos. 2–4.

11 As Eitan Grossman commented: “It is interesting that for certain languages, letters are the primary source for grammatical information, or at least, are taken as such. ČERNÝ/GROLL, 1993 is almost entirely from private letters, and there are studies of Old Babylonian syntax that take the huge *ABB* corpus as the exclusive source for data on ‘everyday speech’”. The philologists’ favor or disfavor of letters seems to depend on what kind of textual sources of a given language are available to linguistic study. In the case of Coptic studies, grammatical investigation a long time focused on biblical texts, and ignored sources providing linguistic norms closer to colloquial style and vernacular, cf. SHISHA-HALEVY, 1991: 199 and RICHTER, 2006.

12 TILL, 1957: 257–258. The present author commented elsewhere in a similar vein, cf. RICHTER, 2004: 145–147.

Coptic letters,¹³ it took almost a century before Biedenkopf-Ziehner's comprehensive study on the Coptic letter formulary appeared,¹⁴ considered a standard work until now.¹⁵ A classification and study of Coptic letters in terms of contents and pragmatics¹⁶ is still a *desideratum*.

2 External features of Coptic letters:

Editions, writing surface, dating, etc.

To speak about Coptic letters first and foremost means, to speak about a huge corpus of documentary texts, that is to say, about genuine articles, probably having been written, sent and received just once in antiquity, before being rediscovered by papyrus diggers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Evidence for letter writing in Coptic further includes a number of letters transmitted in a scriptorium tradition, which have come down to us in literary manuscripts. This is the case *e.g.*, with the letters of Shenoute, a monastic authority flourishing in the fourth and fifth centuries, who is particularly important for us as the most productive known Coptic writer.

To start with the documentary group: *table 2.1* shows the distribution of letters in the more important editions of Coptic documentary material. The total amount of letters contained in them comes up to more than 2,500 items according to my calculation. Alain DELATTRE's *Brussels Coptic Database*,¹⁷ providing a virtually complete checklist of Coptic documentary texts, gives an even higher estimation, with 3,300 items classified as "lettre". Still, these figures would be increased tremendously if hitherto unpublished material were to be added.¹⁸

13 KRALL, 1889.

14 BIEDENKOPF-ZIEHNER, 1983; cf. also BIEDENKOPF-ZIEHNER, 1996.

15 Cf. also the commenting remarks in TILL, 1941; TILL, 1942. The epistolary formulae of early (fourth-century) Coptic letters have recently been studied by CHOAT, 2007; a particular epistolary formula has been dealt with by DELATTRE, 2005. A good overview on letter-writing in late antique and early Islamic Egypt is provided by STEWART, 1991.

16 As is available, *e.g.*, for the study of Ramesside letters: SWEENEY, 2001, and for ancient Babylonian letter-writing: SALLABERGER, 1999; cf. also Depauw's recent study on Demotic letters quoted above (DEPAUW, 2006).

17 <<http://dev.ulb.ac.be/philo/bad/copte>>.

18 Just to give an example, the papyrus collection of the University of Leipzig keeps more than 700 unedited ostraca from the Theban area, most of them being letters.

The column next to numbers and amount shows the attested repertoire of writing surfaces, including five qualities. The vast majority of Coptic letters was written on papyrus leafs (*fig. 2.1*) or on ostraca, depending on their provenance. Letters coming from northern Upper Egypt, Middle Egypt and the Fayyum oasis are mostly written on papyrus (in Coptic named by the Greek loan-word *chartēs*) while letters from the southern part of Upper Egypt, particularly from the Theban area, are usually written on ostraca. In this context, “ostrakon” refers to two different materials: plates of the dense white limestone (*fig. 2.2*), which crops out in the rocks along the Upper Egyptian Nile valley (in Coptic named by the Greek loan-word *plax* “plate”), and pottery of different wares (in Coptic called *blčé* “potsherd”), most frequently pieces of wine amphorae, conspicuous by their grooved outer surface and their inner side coated with pitch. Paper (*fig. 2.3*) and, even less frequently, parchment only occur in the late period of Coptic letter writing, the tenth and eleventh centuries.

This brings me to the issue of chronology. As already mentioned, letters are among the earliest extant documents written in Coptic, dating from the fourth century, and they still occur among the latest ones from the eleventh century. However the great bulk of Coptic documentary texts falls in a roughly two-hundred-year period of time from the later sixth to the eighth century, and this holds true for Coptic letters too. In many cases, it is rather difficult to give more precise dates with certainty, since we still have only poor palaeographical criteria for estimating Coptic documents. Internally dated letters are far from common at that time, and even if there are dates, what we get are usually references to years of the *indiction*, a fifteen-year tax cycle,¹⁹ hardly absolute dates in any sense.

3 The earliest attested Coptic letters

Early Coptic letter writing is evidenced mainly by four fourth-century papyrus dossiers, all of them related to persons and sites in the rural space of Egypt.

Altogether five Coptic letters edited in *P.Lond. VI*²⁰ and *P.Nepheros*²¹ mirror a Melitian monastic community during a time of pressure and persecution by

19 For details cf. BAGNALL/WORP, 2004: 22–35.

20 Ed. BELL/CRUM, 1924.

21 KRAMER/SHELTON/BROWNE, 1987.

the partiarch of Alexandria, which might have happened before the mid-fourth century.

Ten Coptic letters (*P.NagHamm.Copt.*) written and received by monks come from the cartonnage processed into covers of some of the famous codices from Nag Hammadi, datable to the mid-fourth century by dated Greek documents of the same origin.²²

Up to eighteen Coptic items among the Rylands papyri (*P.Ryl.Copt.*) form a distinct group of letters sent to a holy hermit named Apa John by admirers and persons requiring his help. The precise date of this important dossier is still under discussion, but the late fourth century seems probable.²³

By far the largest collection of early Coptic letters (*P.Kell.Copt. I*), an assemblage of more than thirty papyri, has been discovered in three houses at the late antique settlement of Kellis, Dakhleh oasis.²⁴ The final abandonment of this settlement at the very edge of civilization falls in the late fourth century, providing us a *terminus ante quem* for the Coptic texts. The town of Kellis served as the residence of members of a flourishing Manichaean community, whose letters reflect intimate connections between commercial travellers acting far from home in the Nile valley and their relatives and friends staying at home.

Table 2.2 provides an overview of opening and closing formulae and phrases occurring in early Coptic letters.²⁵

4 Internal features of Coptic letters: Their formularies, phrases, etc.

Coming to formularies, phrases and the language of Coptic letters, I must restrict myself to basic information, and can justly do so as there is a standard work on the subject available, as mentioned above.²⁶

Letter-writing in Coptic had to be learned along with other skills connected to Coptic literacy. The existence of explicit concepts of epistolary politeness and etiquette, that is to say, of social behaviour in written communication, is attested

22 Ed. BARNES/BROWNE, 1981.

23 Ed. CRUM, 1909; cf. VAN MINNEN, 1994; ZUCKERMAN, 1995; CHOAT, 2006; CHOAT, 2007; CHOAT/GARDNER, 2006.

24 Ed. ALCOCK/FUNK/GARDNER, 1999.

25 For details and peculiarities of the fomulary of early Coptic letters cf. CHOAT, 2007.

26 BIEDENKOPF-ZIEHNER, 1983; cf. also KRALL, 1889; DELATTRE, 2005; CHOAT, 2007.

by a number of practice letter formularies.²⁷ Actually a good number of Coptic letters were apparently written by more or less skilled laypersons in their own handwriting, without the assistance of professional persons, such as professional scribes and notaries, as is indicated by calligraphic as well as by linguistic traits. Among all textual genres attested in Coptic, documentary texts generally represent a more “relaxed” linguistic norm at all levels of the language – orthography, phonology, morphology, syntax and lexicon – than any literary *Textsorte*. This is particularly true of letters,²⁸ which makes them even more interesting for the study of issues such as the dialectal geography and linguistic history of Coptic, but also even more difficult to understand.

Considering the spatial and diachronic diversity of the corpus, covering a roughly 700-year period of time and a North-South extension of some hundreds of miles, a fair degree of variation does not come as a surprise. Thus the collection of formulae and phrases given in *table 2.3* cannot claim to be more than a sample, not indicating any diachronic, dialectal, or diatopic peculiarities, and suppressing much of the wealth of synchronic and syntopic variants. The categories chosen there, such as (internal and external)²⁹ address formulae, greeting formulae, phrases acknowledging the receipt of a letter, apologies for and defence against something, questions, requests, commands, bits of information, good wishes, and closing formulae, are limited by, and properly depend on the overall setting of letter-writing (cf. above, § 0).

Most of the attested formulae and phrases have no direct connection with earlier Egyptian epistolary means of expression.³⁰ This is hardly surprising,³¹

27 Collected in HASITZKA, 1990: no. 109–183.

28 Cf., e.g., RICHTER, 2006; for the case of New Kingdom Egyptian letters cf. SWEENEY, 1994.

29 The internal address was meant for the addressee, the external for the messenger. In the case of papyrus, paper and parchment letters, the external address was written on the outer side of the sheet after having folded it (cf. *fig. 2.1* and *2.3b*). In the case of ostraca, the external address simply follows the closing formulae of the letter.

30 For pre-Coptic Egyptian letter writing see BAKIR, 1970; ČERNÝ, 1939; DEPAUW, 2006; JANSSEN, 1991; MÜLLER, 2006; SCHAD, 2006; SCHENTULEIT, 2006; SPIEGELBERG, 1917; SWEENEY, 1994; SWEENEY, 2001; WENTE, 1967; WENTE, 1990; WENTE, 2001.

31 This has also been pointed out by DEPAUW, 2006: 291–292, who concluded (292): “Although the chronological gap is somewhat smaller than with Late Egyptian, the differences between Demotic letters and their Coptic successors are more pronounced, particularly on the levels of formulae and vocabulary. Only some of the later Demotic letters, in which Greek influence is clearly visible, are clear predecessors of Coptic. The exclusively Christian character will have alienated Coptic further from the Egyptian tradition.” The use of *εραφη* in the closing formula is considered by DEPAUW, 2006: 292 as “most probably a con-

taking the virtual gap³² of letter-writing in any Egyptian idiom from about 100 to 300 CE into account.³³ To a certain degree, terminology, phraseology and rhetorical strategies applied in Coptic letters depend on scriptural³⁴ and on contemporary Greek patterns.³⁵

5 Coptic letters in literary tradition – the case of Shenoute’s letters

As Stephen Emmel in his seminal work on *Shenoute’s Literary Corpus* has shown,³⁶ Shenoute’s late antique “complete works” edition consisted of three parts. Two of them, called *κάνωνες* *Canons* and *λόγοι* *Discourses*, formed the main structure, while an additional third part contained the author’s *Letters*. The existence of a separate dossier of *Letters* within, or subsequent to, the original arrangement of Shenoute’s œuvre is indicated by the Vienna *incipit*-list, a “catalogue” or “table of contents” of that edition, when it reads after the incipits of the last, eighth book of the *Discourses*: “Moreover, these too are the letters that our holy father Apa Shenoute wrote to our holy fathers the archbishops, and

tinuation of the Demotic tradition”; however, although ubiquitous in Coptic legal documents, it occurs only exceptionally in Coptic letters.

- 32 There are some Demotic letters from the second and even the early third century and Hieratic letters from the third century, but all of them are closely connected to very limited priestly milieux.
- 33 The conclusion drawn by BIEDENKOPF-ZIEHNER, 1996: 24: “Anklänge an spätantike Topik sind – wenn überhaupt – nur in Briefen der Oberschicht gelegentlich nachweisbar. Der Normalbürger bewegte sich in der Sphäre altägyptischer Tradition, erweitert oder modifiziert durch christlichen Einfluß” seems a bit exaggerated and over-simplified. In my view, the case of Coptic letters is rather similar to that of Coptic legal documents in so far as continuity is basically restricted to a couple of lexical items (for the legal terminology cf. RICHTER, 2002a; RICHTER, 2002b). In the terminology of letter-writing, the words *šn* “to ask” and *wḏ3* “well-being”, e.g., do reappear in Coptic epistolography (ϣINE “to greet”, ϣΥ-ΧΛΙ “well-being”); they are, however, embedded in different phrases and formulae.
- 34 The greeting formula of St Paul’s letters, e.g., is echoed in the formula ΤΙΡΗΝΗ ΝΑΚ/ΝΗΤΝ (ΕΒΘΛ ΖΙΤΑΠΝΟΥΤΕ) “the peace be with you (from God)”; for instances cf. FÖRSTER, 2002: 231–233.
- 35 This is quite obvious in occurrences of Greek address formulas and of formulas operating with *χαίρε*, *χαίρετε* and *χαίρειν*, cf. Förster, 2002: 862–863. For early Byzantine Greek epistolographic phraseology cf. KOSKENNIEMI, 1956 and TIBILETTI, 1979.
- 36 EMMEL, 2004.

Remains of that collection of letters are actually transmitted in the manuscripts, namely at the end of certain books of the *Discourses*, such as the fifth book, the seventh book, and most regularly, at the end of the eighth book, the last volume of the “complete works”.

In his *Schenute von Atripe und die Entstehung des national ägyptischen Christentums*, Johannes Leipoldt provided a list of Shenoute's writings, subdividing them into seven groups according to formal and material textual features:³⁸ No less than four of them exclusively consist of what Leipoldt justly identified as *letters*, namely a) "Letters to monks" (25 items), b) "Letters to nuns" (10 items), c) "Letters to monks and nuns" (14 items), and d) "Other letters" (7 items), – altogether 56 texts. The vast majority of them, 49 items, belong to the first *three* groups, letters to monks, to nuns, and to both male and female inhabitants of the monasteries under Shenoute's supervision. None of them has its place within the separate dossier of explicitly so-called *Letters* of Shenoute, and most of them are filed under the nine volumes of *Canons*, especially in the ninth book (see *table 2.4*). These letters are thus not arranged *sub specie* "letter", but have been put together with texts like homilies, catecheseis and the like, which, although different in terms of formal textual traits, share the same circle of addressees – monastic folk. The obvious aim of such a compilation was, to get a corpus of texts particularly significant and binding for *monastic life*, and this is what *kanones* actually means. On the contrary, the *separate* dossier of Shenoute's letters as evidenced by the manuscripts consists of items of Leipolds "Andere Briefe" type, letters *not* directed to monks or nuns, but to clerics (from presbyters up to the archbishop of Alexandria) and to laymen such as landlords, village dignitaries, and administrative officials up to the highest ranks.

38 LEIPOLDT, 1903: 5–9.

Facing this constellation, two questions may be raised: how are Shenoute's letters, transmitted together with his literary corpus, related to roughly contemporary "real" letters from the documentary corpus? And are there any formal differences between the two types of Shenoute's letters, those addressed to his subjects living in the monasteries of his congregation, and those directed to non-monastic addressees?

The comparison of epistolary forms as attested by the letters of the third part of Shenoute's works (*table 2.5*) on the one hand, and authentic fourth-century Coptic letters³⁹ from the documentary corpus (see above, *table 2.2*) on the other, shows clearly that the repertoire of formulae and phrases used by contemporary Christian writers of Coptic letters (*P.NagHammadi*, the Melitian correspondence, the letters to Apa John) and those used by Shenoute in his correspondence with non-monastic persons was more or less the same. Different, to some degree, were the Manichaeans of Kellis (*table 2.2*), who obviously cultivated epistolary conventions of their own, verbosely emphasizing the intimacy between the members of the community. Although the small number of instances makes it difficult to draw conclusions, it would seem that in this domain of written communication, Shenoute's linguistic behaviour was like that of a very conventional letter-writer. He proves well-aware of the social distance between his addressees and himself, and is able to express such issues by common means of epistolary politeness. To be sure, this statement is meant to concern the formulaic parts of the letters only, and it cannot be applied to the epistolary bodies where Shenoute's rhetorical style and means of expression are full of gruff originality, to say the least.

Would this conclusion also hold true of Shenoute's letters to his own subjects, monks and nuns of his congregation? Let us compare Shenoute's letter to otherwise unknown clergymen of the town of Psoi/Ptolemaïs, transmitted in the *Letters* dossier, with an explicitly so-called "letter" (ⲉⲛⲟⲩⲧⲁⲓⲛⲉⲣⲓⲧⲉⲗⲁⲓ) to a nun named Tachom from the 9th book of *Canons*.⁴⁰ In his letter to the clergymen of Psoi (*table 2.5*), Shenoute blames his addressees for a misdeed that he calls robbery. He applies a couple of Old Testament threats against unworthy priests to them, while at the same time defending *himself* against accusation of his violent temper. The *internal address formula* of the letter runs like this: "It is Sinuthios who writes to the clerics of Psoi the second time, in the Lord!" A formally rather unmarked choice of a very conventional phrase, although the letter

39 Cf. CHOAT, 2007.

40 LEIPOLDT III: no. 7; on the figure of Tachom cf. most recently KRAWIEC, 2002.

body is full of complaint and harsh blame (*table 2.5*). It is quite clear that Shenoute was not in the mood to spare his addressees' feelings. Yet the formulaic introduction of his letter is absolutely correct and does not mirror the uneasy content of the epistolary body. The opposite is the case of the letter *Ad Tachom matrem* from the ninth book of *Canons*. This writing, explicitly called a letter, had been forwarded by Tachom's own brother to her, as we learn from the epistolary body.⁴¹ It also provides the common opening formula of any Coptic letter, insofar as sender and addressee are identified. However its wording is *quite far* from common, running like this: "It is Shenoute who writes to Tachōm like a barbarian (does) with a barbarian, and not like a father with a mother, nor like a brother in the face of a sister" (ⲙⲉⲛⲟⲩⲧⲉ ⲡⲉⲧⲥⲁⲓ ⲛⲧⲁⲗⲱⲙ ⲛⲟⲉ ⲛⲟⲩⲃⲁⲣⲃⲁⲣⲟⲥ ⲙⲛⲟⲩⲃⲁⲣⲃⲁⲣⲟⲥ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲛⲟⲉ ⲁⲛ ⲛⲟⲩⲉⲓⲱⲧ ⲙⲛⲟⲩⲙⲁⲁⲩ ⲟⲩⲧⲉ ⲛⲟⲉ ⲁⲛ ⲛⲟⲩⲥⲟⲛ ⲛⲛⲁⲗⲣⲛⲟⲩⲥⲱⲛⲉ). So harsh a manner of expression, lacking even slight traces of epistolary etiquette, is unattested in letters to addressees outside the monastery. If these went to persons beyond the monastic milieu, they passed the boundaries of Shenoute's direct sphere of influence. This fact might have had a pragmatic impact on Shenoute's epistolary behaviour: it might have forced him to do what he felt exempted from within the realm of his congregation, to adapt himself to external discourse rules. Shenoute's two letters to the clerics of Psoi and to the abbess Tachōm indicate the extent of the difference: here and there, Shenoute blamed his addressees brutally, but in the case of the clerics of Psoi, he still maintained some basic rules of letter-writing, which he willfully ignored, in fact *explicitly* revoked in the case of his female subject.

41 Eitan Grossman commented on this example: "Do you have any ideas regarding whether Shenoute's letters were really 'private' or whether they only nominally were addressed to a specific person but were actually meant for public consumption? I often wonder about this: did Shenoute (and Besa) read these letters aloud from the pulpit on Sunday? One can only imagine the terrifying scene, the poor nun being the focal point of a vocal tirade which is actually aimed at the entire sinful community... In Besa, you have some 'slips' into second person plural which make this likely, in my opinion!" Even if the letter itself in the present case tells us that it has been physically forwarded to its addressee, this does not contradict the possibility of its public reading elsewhere.

6 Significant alterations in late Coptic letters

At last I would like to briefly address some striking changes in the phraseology of Coptic letters from the tenth and eleventh centuries. Coptic documents of such a late date bear evidence of Coptic-speaking communities on the eve of the linguistic Arabization of Egypt. While biblical and liturgical manuscript traditions outlasted the language obsolescence and death of spoken Coptic, Coptic documentary text, that might mirror everyday communication, disappeared after the eleventh century.

As mentioned above (2., p. 745), many of the late Coptic documents can be recognized at first glance by their writing surface, usually being paper and sometimes parchment, instead of papyrus which rapidly fell into disuse in Egypt after the mid-tenth century. It is striking to find them now operating with a changed repertoire of opening and closing phraseology. Besides, or instead of, expressions like those quoted above (*tables* 2.2–2.3), one meets expressions like these (*table* 2.6):

- “The Lord preserve you!”
- “The Lord watch over your life!”
- “The Lord give you a long lifetime!”
- “The Lord let me know your face!”

Quite a novelty in the phraseological attitude of Coptic letters is the use of *third person* pronouns in wishes for health and prosperity, such as (*table* 2.6):

- “The Lord preserve *him*!”
- “The Lord watch over *his* life!”
- “The Lord bless *him*!”

Already more than a century ago, Walter Crum raised the hypothesis that these expressions might have been patterned on Arabic models, but nobody has proved his suggestion as yet.⁴² I am strongly inclined to think he was right. Generally, late Coptic non-literary texts bear witness of their author’s acquaintance with contemporary Arabic formularies, indicating an increasing social intercourse and intellectual exchange between Christians and Arabs in Egypt during Fatimide

42 Cf. CRUM, 1905: 267: n. 1 *ad* no. 545: “This [whose life God preserve] and the expression soon following (l. 5 [whom God maintain]) are foreign to earlier Coptic letters.”

times.⁴³ Even if extant Arabic letters from Egypt do not provide full equivalents of every phrase,⁴⁴ their style and modes of expression seem to be echoed in late Coptic phraseology.

An intriguing issue of its own which can only be touched upon here, is the occasional occurrence of senders, addressees, or either parties of Coptic letters bearing Arabic names (*table 2.6*). This phenomenon raises questions like these: Could Coptic have been used during a certain period by converts from Christianity to Islam who had changed their names but not yet their tongues?⁴⁵ Or even by Arabs by birth having learned Coptic as a second language, a scenario which would seem rather doubtful to me? Anyhow, answers would need some further investigation into the interrelations between religious conversion, anthroponymy, Coptic-Arabic bilingualism, and language attitudes in early Islamic Egypt, investigation which might decisively profit from the evidence of Coptic letters.

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43 Cf. RICHTER, 2000; RICHTER, 2001; RICHTER, 2004b.

44 This was emphasized by Werner Diem on the Workshop on Private and Business Letters in the Middle East, Universität Zürich, Orientalisches Seminar, 21–22 April 2007.

45 The clear avoidance of distinctively Christian formulae and expressions in later Coptic documents makes it even more difficult to get an clear idea of their writers' or addressees' religious feelings. E.g., the invocation formulae of that time are usually confined to a merely monotheistic statement such as "With God" or "In the name of God!" which would fit into a Christian as good as an Islamic setting, cf. RICHTER, 2003.

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*Table 2.1: Coptic Letters contained in the most important editions of Coptic documentary material, their main features and datas. Sigla of the editions according to the Checklist of Editions of Greek and Latin Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets: <<http://odyssey.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/texts/clist.html>>. Additional abbreviations: writing surfaces: Li limestone, Pmt parchment, Po pottery, Ppr paper, Pps papyrus; dialects: *B* Bohairic, *F* Fayyumic, *LE* Lower Egyptian, *L_o* Early Upper Egyptian koinē, *M* Mesokemic, *S* Sahidic, *UE* Upper Egyptian.*

<i>Edition</i>	<i>Numbers</i>	<i>Amount</i>	<i>Writing surface</i>	<i>Provenance</i>	<i>Dialect(s)</i>	<i>Dating</i>	<i>Context</i>
<i>BKU I</i>		74	Po, Li	Theban area	UE <i>S</i>	c. 6 th –8 th c	various
<i>BKU II</i>	256–318	63	Po, Li	Theban area	UE <i>S</i>	c. 6 th –8 th c	various
<i>BKU III</i>	330–338, 397–416	29	Pps, Ppr, Li	Theban area, Ashmunein, Fayyum	<i>S, F</i>	c. 6 th –10 th c	various
<i>CPR II</i>	225–241	17	Pps	Ashmunein, Fayyum	<i>S, F</i>	7 th –9 th c	various
<i>KSB I</i>	271–298	28	Po, Li, Pps	various	<i>S, F</i>	4 th –8 th c	various
<i>KSB II</i>	801–906	105	Pps, Pmt, Po, Li	various	<i>S, F, M</i>	5 th –10 th c	various
<i>KSB III</i>	1261– 1364	103	Pps, Ppr, Po, Li,	various	<i>S, F</i>	4 th –11 th c	various
<i>P.Bal.</i>	180–285	106	Pps	Dēr el- Balā'izah	<i>S</i>	7 th –8 th c	monastic
<i>P.Hermitage Copt.</i>	37–51	15	Pps, Ppr	various	<i>S, F</i>	7 th –11 th c	various
<i>P.Kell.Copt. I</i>	11–43, 50–52	36	Pps	Kellis (Dakh- leh oasis)	<i>L_o</i>	mid-4 th c	Manichae- an com- munity
<i>P.Laur. V</i>	198–204	7	Pps	Ashmunein, Fayyum	<i>S, F</i>	7 th –8 th c	various
<i>P.Lond. IV</i>	1633– 1646	14	Pps	Aphrodito/ Kōm Ishkāw	<i>S</i>	8 th c	administra- tive
<i>P.Lond. VI</i>	1920– 1922	3	Pps	Middle Egypt	<i>S, M, L_o</i>	330–340	Melitian monastery
<i>P.Lond.Copt. I, Sahidic Mss.</i>	465–488, 1101– 1214	137	Pps, Ppr	various	<i>S</i>	c. 6 th –11 th c	various
<i>P.Lond.Copt. I, Fayyumic Mss.</i>	529–669, 1237– 1243	148	Pps, Ppr, Pmt	Fayyum	<i>F</i>	c. 6 th –11 th c	various
<i>P.Mich.Copt. III</i>	1–18	18	Pps, Ppr	various	<i>S, F,</i> early <i>B</i>	4 th –11 th c	various
<i>P.Mich.Copt. IV</i>	2–11	10	Po, Li	Theban area	UE <i>S</i>	6 th –7 th c	various
<i>P.Mon.Apoll.</i>		4	Pps	Bāwīt	<i>S</i>	7 th –8 th c	monastic

<i>P.Mon.Epiph.</i>	103–518	416	Po, Li, Pps	Theban area	UE <i>S</i>	6 th –7 th c	monastic
<i>P.Moscow Copt.</i>	54–81	27	Po	Theban area	UE <i>S</i>		
<i>P.NagHamm. Copt.</i>	4–8, 15–19	10	Pps	Upper Egypt	<i>S, L_o</i>	4 th c	monastic
<i>P.Nepheros</i>	15–16	2	Pps	Middle Egypt	<i>S</i>	mid-4 th c	Melitian monastery
<i>P.Ryl. Copt.</i>	267–410, 413–415, 460–461	149	Pps, Ppr, Pmt	various	<i>B, S, F, L_o</i>	4 th –11 th c	various
<i>P.Sarga</i>	86–120	35	Po, Li	Wādī Sarga south of Asyūt	<i>S</i>	c. 6 th –8 th c	monastic
<i>P.Teshlot</i>		4	Ppr	Dahlūt, south of Ashmunnein	late <i>S</i>	11 th c	village community
<i>O.Ashm.Copt.</i>	17–19	3	Po, Li	Theban area	UE <i>S</i>	7 th –8 th c	various
<i>O.Brit.Mus. Copt.</i>	17–37	21	Po, Li	Theban area	UE <i>S</i>	6 th –8 th c	monastic
<i>O.Crum</i>		270	Po, Li	Theban area	UE <i>S</i>	c. 6 th –8 th c	various
<i>O.CrumST</i>	170–397, 446–450	233	Po, Li, Pps	Mainly Theban	varieties of nonlit. <i>S</i>	c. 6 th –8 th c	various
<i>O.CrumVC</i>	37–116	80	Po, Li, Pps, Pmt	Fayyum, Theban	<i>S, F</i>	4 th /5 th –9 th c	various
<i>O.Med.Habu. Copt.</i>	134–217	84	Po, Li	Theban area	UE <i>S</i>	c. 6 th –8 th c	various
<i>O.Theb.</i>	27–42	16	Po, Li	Theban area	UE <i>S</i>	c. 6 th –8 th c	various
<i>O.Vindob. Copt.</i>	152–418	267	Po, Li	Theban area	UE <i>S</i>	c. 6 th –8 th c	various
<i>Total</i>		2534					

Table 2.2: Opening and closing formulae of fourth-century Coptic letters

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Melitian Correspondence (ca. 330–340 CE)</i> ed. BELL/CRUM, 1924 (<i>P.Lond. VI</i>) and KRAMER/SHELTON/BROWNE, 1987 (<i>P.Nepheros</i>)</p>	
• <i>P.Nepheros</i> 15, Apa Papnoute to Nepheros und Paiēu, (A) opening and (B) closing formulae:	
A) ἀπα παπνουτε πετςδε[ι ννεφερως π]πρεσβυτερος εμν παϊην διακον μερατε “It’s Apa Papnoute who writes [to Nepheōs the] priest, and Paiēu the deacon, the beloved.”	
B) ⲥⲱⲛⲉ ⲉ[...] “I greet [you]!”	
• <i>P.Lond. VI</i> 1920, Hatre to Paiēu, (A) opening and (B) closing formulae:	
A) ϣατρε πρυντμου υπαζωμ πετςδει πεφειωτ παεινυ νπζατζωρ εφϣινε εροϣ τονου ϣⲁⲡⲭⲟⲓⲥ ϣαιρε “It’s Hatre, the inhabitant of Tmou-Mpahōm, who writes to his father Paiēu of (the monastery) Hatōr, greeting him warmly, in the Lord, hail!”	
B) ⲟⲩⲭⲁⲓ ϣⲁⲡⲭⲟⲓⲥ ⲛⲧⲉⲧⲛⲧⲛⲧⲣⲁⲙⲉⲉⲩ ϣωⲩⲧ “Farewell in the Lord, and remember me too!”	
• <i>P.Lond. VI</i> 1921, ? to Paiēu, (A) opening and (B) closing formulae:	
A) [...] πετς[ζει ...] πⲁⲓⲛⲧⲉⲩ ϣⲁⲡⲭⲁⲓⲥ [ϣⲁ]ⲓⲣⲉⲧⲉ “[It’s ...] who writes [to ...] Paiēu, in the Lord, hail!”	
B) ⲥⲱⲛⲉ ἀⲣⲁⲕ [ⲙⲛⲛⲉⲧⲛⲙⲉⲕ ⲧⲏⲣⲟⲩ ⲕⲁⲧⲁ ⲛⲉϣⲣⲉⲛ “I greet you and those with you according to their names!”	
• <i>P.Lond. VI</i> 1922, Bēs and Aphinge to ?, opening formula:	
ⲃⲏⲥ ⲙⲛⲁⲫⲓⲛⲉ πετςζει ⲛ[...] ⲙⲛⲛⲉⲕⲛⲏⲟⲩ ⲧⲏⲣⲟⲩ ⲉϣϣⲓⲛⲉ ϣⲁⲕ ⲛⲉⲛⲉⲓⲱⲧ “It’s Bēs and Aphinge who write to [...] and all the brethren, while they are greeting you, our father!”	
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>P.NagHamm.Copt. (mid-4th century)</i> (ed. BARNES/BROWNE/SHELTON 1981)</p>	
• <i>P.NagHamm. C4</i> , Daniēl to Aphrodisi, (A) opening and (B) closing formulae:	
A) ⲁⲗⲛⲓⲛⲁ πετςⲁⲓ ⲙⲛⲉϣⲙⲉⲣⲓⲧ ⲛⲛⲉⲓⲱⲧ ⲁⲫⲣⲟⲩⲥⲓ [ϣⲁ]ⲡⲭⲟⲓⲥ ϣαιρε. ϣⲁⲥⲏ ⲛⲭⲱⲃ ⲛⲓⲙ ⲥⲱⲛⲉ εροϣ “It’s Daniēl who writes to his beloved father Aphrodisi, in the Lord, hail! Before anything else I greet you!”	
B) ϣ[... ϣⲁ]ⲡⲭⲟⲓⲥ “... in the Lord!”	
• <i>P.NagHamm. C5</i> , Aphrodisi to Sansneus, opening form:	
ⲁⲡⲣⲟⲩⲥⲓ ⲛⲉⲣⲉⲓ ⲛⲭⲁⲛⲉⲛⲉⲟⲩ ⲛⲭⲁⲓⲥ {ϣⲉ}ϣⲉⲣⲉ ϣⲁⲥⲏ ⲛⲭⲱⲃ ⲛⲓⲙ ⲥⲱⲛⲉ ἀⲣⲁⲕ ⲙⲛⲛⲉⲧⲛⲙⲉⲕ “It’s Aphrodisi who writes to Sansneus, the Lord, hail! Before anything else, I greet you and those who are with you!”	
• <i>P.NagHamm. C6</i> , Papnoute to Pahōm, opening formula:	
ⲙⲡⲁⲙⲉⲛⲣⲓⲧ ⲛⲓⲱⲧ ⲛⲁⲭⲱⲙⲉ παπνουτε ϣⲛ ⲡⲭⲟⲓⲥ ϣⲉⲣⲉ ϣⲁⲥⲏ ⲛⲭⲱⲃ ⲛⲓⲙ ⲥⲱⲛⲉ εροϣ “To my beloved father Pachōm, Papnoute, in the Lord, hail! Before anything else, I greet you!”	
• <i>P.NagHamm. C8</i> , ? to ?, closing formula:	
[...] ⲟⲩⲭⲁⲓ ϣⲁⲡⲭⲟⲓⲥ “Farewell in the Lord!”	
• <i>P.NagHamm. C15</i> , Isaak, Psaj and Benjamin to Mesweris, opening form:	
A) ⲓⲕⲁⲕ ⲙⲛⲧⲉⲓ ⲡⲣⲁⲓ ⲙⲛⲧⲉⲛⲧⲉⲧⲥⲁⲓ ⲙⲙⲉⲕⲟⲩⲉⲣⲓⲥ ϣαιρε “It’s Isaak and Psate and Benjamin	

who write to Meswēr[is, hail!]”
<p><i>From the correspondence of Apa John (late 4th century?)</i> (ed. CRUM, 1909 [<i>P.Ryl.Copt.</i> 268 sq.], cf. CHOAT, 2006: 184–185)</p>
<p>• P.Ryl.Copt. 268, Apa Shoi to Apa John, (A) opening and (B) closing formulae: A) ἀπα ὡοι πεπρεβύτερος ππτοσυ ππνομτ πετζαι μπεφμεριτ νcon ἀπα ιωζαννης. ζα-θι δε νζω8 νιμ †ωινε ερoκ “It’s Apa Shoi, the priest at the rock of Pnomt, who writes to his be- loved brother Apa John. Before anything else, I greet you!” B) ογχαζ ζμπχοεις πcon μμεριτ “Farewell in the Lord, beloved brother!”</p>
<p>• P.Ryl.Copt. 269, Apa Shoi to Apa John, opening formula: ἀπα ὡοι πετζαι μπεφμεριτ νιωτ ἀπα ιωζαννης ζμπχοι[c χαιρετ]ε ζατεζη μεν νζω8 νιμ †ωινε ερ[oκ παμ]εριτ νιωτ “It’s Apa Shoi who writes to his beloved father Apa Joh[n, greet- ing]s! Before anything else, I greet you!”</p>
<p>• P.Ryl.Copt. 270, Porphyra to Apa John, opening formula: πορφυρα πετζαι ναπα ιωζαννης “It’s Porphyra who writes to Apa John.”</p>
<p>• P.Ryl.Copt. 272, ? to Apa John, opening formula: [... ετ]cζαι ναπα ιωζαννης [... μ]εριτ ζμπχοεις χαιρε “[It’s ... w]ho writes to Apa John, [... be]loved, in the Lord, hail!”</p>
<p>• P.Ryl.Copt. 272, ? to Apa John(?), opening form: μνν[εcνηγ ετ]νμμμμζ ζμπχοεις χ[αιρε] “[...and the brethren who] are with him, in the Lord, hail!”</p>
<p><i>From P.Kell.Copt. I (mid-4th century)</i> (ed. ALCOCK/FUNK/GARDNER, 1999)</p>
<p>• P.Kell.Copt. I 17: Horion to Hōr, opening formula: πacαν παχαic εταϊ νtot πpen ετζαλε8 ζνρωι νno νιμ εϊειρε μπρπμεoye νζατε νιμ ντεφμντζ[λ]cητ παcαν νωoyμεeie ζωp. ανακ ωριων †ωινε αρακ τονoy ζνπχαic χαιρειν “(To) my brother, my lord, honoured by me, the sweet name in my mouth at every time, of whose sweetness I bear memory at every moment, my amiable brother Hōr! I, Horion, I greet you warmly, in the Lord, hail!”</p>
<p>• P.Kell.Copt. I 37: Ammōn to Pshai, opening formula: πacαν πμμεριτ εταϊait νtot τονoy πετερεπεφpen ζαλε8 ζν ρωι νno νιμ πωoyμεeie νταψγχη μνπαπνεγμα παcαν παχαic πωαϊ. ανακ πεκcαν αμμων πετωινε αρακ ζνπχαic πnoyte χαιρειν ζι-θι νζω8 νιμ †ωινε αρακ τονoy “(To) my beloved brother, greatly honoured by me, whose name is sweet in my mouth at every time, the amiable one for my soul and my spirit, my brother, my master Pshai! It is I, your brother Ammōn, who greets you, in the Lord God, hail! Before anything else I greet you warmly!”</p>

Table 2.3: Formula and phrases of Coptic letters

<i>Invocation formula</i>	
+ Ⲅⲙⲡⲣⲁⲛ ⲙⲡⲛⲟⲩⲩⲉ (ⲛⲩⲟⲣⲡ) “In the name of God (at first)!”	
≠ Ⲅⲙⲡⲣⲁⲛ ⲙⲡⲛⲟⲩⲩⲉ (ⲛⲩⲟⲣⲡ) (strokes instead of cross as initial marker, cf. RICHTER 2003)	
+ ⲉⲩⲛⲁ “With God!”	
≠ ⲉⲩⲛⲁ (strokes instead of cross as initial marker, cf. RICHTER 2003)	
<i>Internal address formula</i> (cf. BIEDENKOPF-ZIEHNER, 1983: 225–220)	
+ (ⲁⲛⲟⲕ) ... (ⲡ)ⲉⲧⲥⲁⲓ / ⲉⲩⲥⲁⲓ / ⲉⲓⲥⲁⲓ ⲛ-... “(Its) (me), A, (who)/(I) write(s) to B.”	
+ (ⲁⲛⲟⲕ) ... ⲉⲓⲥⲁⲓ ⲉⲓⲩⲛⲉ ⲛ-... “(Its me), A, I am writing and greeting B.”	
+ ⲡⲉⲥⲁⲓ ⲛ-... ⲭⲁⲣⲉ “I am writing to B, hail!”	
<i>Greeting formulae used instead of, or in addition to, the former phrases</i> (cf. BIEDENKOPF-ZIEHNER 1983: 239–250)	
a) Using an operating term such as (a) ⲩⲛⲉ “to greet” (lit. “to ask after sb.”), (b) ⲁⲥⲡⲁⲥⲉ “to greet” (lit. “to kiss”) and (c) ⲡⲣⲟⲕⲩⲛⲉⲓ “to greet respectfully” (lit. “to prostrate oneself”):	
+ ⲁⲛⲟⲕ ... (ⲡ)ⲉⲧ-ⲩⲛⲉ/ⲡⲣⲟⲕⲩⲛⲉⲓ/ⲁⲥⲡⲁⲥⲉ / ⲉⲩ-ⲩⲛⲉ/ⲡⲣⲟⲕⲩⲛⲉⲓ/ⲁⲥⲡⲁⲥⲉ / ⲉⲓ-ⲩⲛⲉ/ⲡⲣⲟⲕⲩⲛⲉⲓ/ⲁⲥⲡⲁⲥⲉ ⲛ- “(Its) (me), A, (who)/(I) greet(s) B.”	
+ (ⲛⲩⲟⲣⲡ ⲙⲉⲛ ⲛⲥⲱⲃ ⲛⲓⲙ) ⲡⲉⲩⲛⲉ/ⲡⲣⲟⲕⲩⲛⲉⲓ/ⲁⲥⲡⲁⲥⲉ ⲛ-... “(Before anything else) I am asking for and I am (respectfully) greeting B!”	
b) Using a combination of (a), (b) or (c) in pairs:	
+ (ⲛⲩⲟⲣⲡ ⲙⲉⲛ ⲛⲥⲱⲃ ⲛⲓⲙ) ⲡⲉⲩⲛⲉ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲡⲣⲟⲕⲩⲛⲉⲓ ⲛ- “(Before anything else) I am asking for and I am (respectfully) greeting B.”	
+ (ⲛⲩⲟⲣⲡ ⲙⲉⲛ ⲛⲥⲱⲃ ⲛⲓⲙ) ⲡⲁⲥⲡⲁⲥⲉ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲡⲣⲟⲕⲩⲛⲉⲓ ⲛ-... “(Before anything else) I am am greet- ing and I am (respectfully) greeting B!”	
c) Using other terms:	
ⲡⲣⲛⲛⲛ ⲛⲁⲕ “Peace be with you!”	
<i>Receipt of B’s letter</i> (cf. BIEDENKOPF-ZIEHNER, 1983: 233–234)	
ⲁⲩⲭⲓ ⲛⲉⲕⲉⲥⲁⲓ ⲁⲣⲁⲩⲉ ⲉⲙⲁⲧⲉ “I received your letter, I was very glad.”	
<i>Reproach and admonition</i> (cf. BIEDENKOPF-ZIEHNER, 1983: 220–221)	
ⲡⲣⲱⲡⲛⲣⲉ ⲙⲙⲟⲕ ⲭⲉ “I am astonished at you, since ... !”	
<i>Apologies and Defence</i> (cf. BIEDENKOPF-ZIEHNER, 1983: 211, 221)	
ⲕⲱ ⲛⲁⲓ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲭⲉ (ⲙⲡⲓⲉⲛ-ⲭⲁⲣⲧⲛⲉ) “Forgive me as (e.g., I could not find papyrus)!”	
ⲡⲛⲟⲩⲩⲉ ⲉⲃⲟⲩⲛ ⲭⲉ “God knows that ...!”	

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Request</i> (CF. BIEDENKOPF-ZIEHNER, 1983: 216–220)</p>	
<p>ἀΡΙ ΤΑΓΑΠΗ / ΠΙΝΔ / ΠΕΠΕΤΝΑΝΟΥΥ / ΤΑΝΤΩΝ / ΤΑΝΤΕΙΩΤ ΝΑΙ “Do the favour / charity / kindness / brotherliness / fatherliness for me ...” †ΠΑΡΑΚΑΛΕΙ ΜΜΟΚ ... “I request you ...”</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Command</i> (CF. BIEDENKOPF-ZIEHNER, 1983: 220–221)</p>	
<p>(ΕΚΨΑΝΧΙ ΠΑΤΖΑΙ) ΟΥΨΩ “(When you receive my letter) be willing ...!” ΤΙΝΝΟΥ “Send ...!”</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Information</i> (CF. BIEDENKOPF-ZIEHNER, 1983: 223)</p>	
<p>a) Recalling earlier events ΕΠΕΙΔΗ ... ΤΕΝΟΥ ΘΕ “After ... now then ...”</p>	
<p>b) Quoting earlier letters or personal communications (reported speech, cf. SWEENEY, 2001: 23–28) ΑΥΤΑΜΟΙ ΧΕ “I was told, that ...”</p>	
<p>c) Communicating current messages and events †ΤΑΜΟ “I let (you) know” ΤΑΡΕΚΕΙΜΕ ΧΕ “That you know: ...”</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Good wishes and closing formula</i> (CF. BIEDENKOPF-ZIEHNER, 1983: 251–264)</p>	
<p>ΟΥΧΑΙ (ΖΗΠΧΘΕΙC) (<i>the most common formula</i>) “Farewell (in the lord)!” ΨΛΗΛ ΕΧΩΙ “Pray for me!” ΑΡΙ ΠΑΜΕΕΥΕ (ΖΗΝΕΚΨΛΗΛ ΕΤΟΥΔΑΒ) “Remind me (in your holy prayers)!”</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>External address formula</i> (CF. BIEDENKOPF-ZIEHNER, 1983: 204–209)</p>	
<p>a) Coptic (<i>usually</i>): ΤΑΔC Ν-... ΖΙΤΝ-... “Give it to B, by A”</p>	
<p>b) Greek: (<i>usually in Kellis, occasionally in Ashmunein, Fayyum and elsewhere</i>): (ἀπόδος) τῷ δεῖνι (ὁ δεῖναι) (ἀπὸ ...) (εἰς) “To B, (A), (from place name) (to place name)”</p>	
<p>c) Arabic (<i>exceptionally</i>): min ʿaḥū Sawīrus ibn Agānah(?) “from his brother Sāwīrus ibn Agānah(?)” (<i>P.Ryl.Copt.</i> 376)</p>	

Table 2.4: Place of LEIPOLDT's "Briefe", categories a–c, within the bibliographical structure of Shenoute's Literary Corpus (cf. EMMEL, 2004, vol. II: 909–911); C = Canones, D = Discourses.

C.1	C.2	C.3	C.4	C.5	C.6	C.7	C.8	C.9	C.?
1	2	6	3	3	7	3	7	10	2
D.1	D.2	D.3	D.4	D.5	D.6	D.7	D.8	Shenoute?	
2				1				4	

Table 2.5: Phraseology in Shenoute's letters to and from non-monastic persons

<i>Secular senders to Shenoute</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dorotheos, Hēgemōn (Praeses), to Shenoute, (A) opening and (B) closing formulae (HD 335 [AT-NB K 9617^r.i.18–21] and 336 [AT-NB K 9617^v.i.12–16]): A) ΔΩΡΩΘΕΟΣ ΠΕΤΕΖΑΙ ΜΠ[Ε]ΥΛΑΒΕΣΤΑΤΟΣ ΑΠΑ ΣΙΝΟΥΘΙΟΣ "It's Dōrōtheos who writes to the most pious Apa S." B) ΕΡΕΠΧΟΕΙC ΝΑΖΑΡΕΖ ΕΤΕΚΕΥΛΑΒΙΑ ΠΑΕΙΩΤ ΝΡΕΦΩΜΩΕΝΟΥΤΕ "God watch over your piety, my god-fearing father." • Akylas (on behalf of Kyra Mendēsia) to Shenoute, opening formula (ZD, frg. 1a [AT-NB K 9236.i.7–9]): ΑΚΥΛΑC ΠΕΤΕΖΑΙ ΜΠΘΕΙΟΦ[ΙΛΕCΤ]ΑΤ[ΟC ΑΠΑ] ΩΕΝΟΥΤΕ "It's Akylas who writes to the most god-favoured Apa S."
<i>Shenoute to secular addressees</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shenoute to Paul, the eparchos (praefectus), (A) opening and (B) closing formulae (XE frg. 2 [EG-C C.G. 9262 fol.2^r.i.8–14] and [EG-C C.G. 9262 fol.2^v.ii.54–55]): A) ΣΙΝΟΥΘΙΟC ΠΙΕΛΑΧΙCΤΟC ΠΕΤΕΖΑΙ ΜΠΕΦΜΕΡΙΤ ΝCΟΝ ΜΜΕΓΑΛΟΠΡΕΠΕCΤΑΤΟC ΠΑΥΛΟC ΠΕΠΑΡΧΟC ΖΜΠΧΟΕΙC ΧΑΙΡΕ "It's the most humble Sinouthios, who writes to his beloved brother, the megaloprepestatos Paulos, the eparch, in the Lord, hail!" B) ΟΥΧΑΙ ΖΜΠΧΟΕΙC ΠΑΜΕΡΙΤ ΑΥΩ ΝΩΘΟΥΝΑΥΩ "Farewell in the Lord, my dearly beloved." • Shenoute to Dorotheos, the hēgemōn (praeses), closing formulae (ZM 368 [FR-BN Copte 130⁵ fol. 45v]): †ΩΛΛ ΕΤΡΕΚΟΥΧΑΙ ΖΜΠΧΟΕΙC ΠΑΜΕΡΙΤ ΝCΟΝ Ε†ΟΥΑΥΩ "I pray that you may be sound in the Lord, my beloved brother, whom I like." • Shenoute to Theodosios, the <i>comes</i>, opening formula (GL 334 [FR-BN Copte 130³ f. 62^v.ii]): CΙΝΟΥΘΙΟC ΠΕΤΕΖΑΙ ΝΘΕΟΔΩCΙΟC ΠΚΟΜΕC "It's Sinouthios who writes to Theodōsios, the comes." • Shenoute to notables of a village and an <i>epoikion</i>, opening formula (XE frg. 3 [EG-C C.G. 9262 fol.3^r.i.2–6]): [... ΜΠ]ΡΩ[ΤΟΚΩΜ]ΗΤΗC ΜΝ ΝΚΕΦΑΛΑΙΩΤΗC ΜΠ†ΜΕ ΤΗΡΩ ΝΝΕΒΩΔ ΜΝΠΕΠΟΙCΕ ΖΜΠΧΟΕΙC ΧΑΙΡΕ "[It's Sinouthios who writes to the village] majors and the heads of the

whole village of Nebōd and the <i>epoikion</i> , hail!”
<i>Shenoute to ecclesiastical addressees</i>
<p>• Shenoute to Timotheus, the archbishop of Alexandria, (A) opening and (B) closing formulae (XE frg. 4 [EG-C C.G. 9262 fol.4^r.i.6–13] and [EG-C C.G. 9262 fol.4^v.i.24–25]); similar in HD 302 [IT-NB IB3 fol. 54]:</p> <p>A) $\text{CINOY-ΘIOC ΠΕΛΑΧΙCΤOC ΠΕΤΕΖΔΙ ΠΠΕΦΜΕΡΙΤ ΝΕΙΩΤ Ν-ΘΕΟΦΙΛΕCΤΑΤOC ΔΥΩ ΠΠΑΚΑΡΙΩΤΑΤOC ΑΠΑ ΤΙΜΟ-ΘΕΟC ΠΑΡΧΙΕΠΙCΚΟΠΟC CΥΠΧΘΕΙC ΧΑΙΡΕ}$ “It’s the most humble Sinouthios who writes to his beloved, most god-favoured and most blessed father Apa Timotheos, the archbishop, hail!”</p> <p>B) $\text{ΟΥΧΔΙ CΥΠΧΘΕΙC ΠΑΠΕΤΟΥΔΔΒ Ν[ΕΙ]ΩΤ ΕΤΤΑΕΙΗΥ}$ “Farewell in the Lord, my honoured holy father!”</p>
<p>• Shenoute to Dioscorus, archbishop of Alexandria, opening formula (HD 300 [US-MU MS 158,13 fol. f.ii.46–51]):</p> <p>$\text{CINOY-ΘIOC ΠΙΕΛΑΧΙCΤOC ΠΕΤΕΖΔΙ ΠΠΕΦΜΕΡΙΤ ΝΦΙΛΕCΤΑΤOC ΑΠΑ ΔΙΟCΚΟΡΟC ΠΑΡΧΙΕΠΙCΚΟΠΟC CΥΠΧΘΕΙC ΧΑΙΡΕ}$ “It’s the most humble Sinouthios, who writes to his beloved, most favoured Apa Dioscorus, the archbishop, in the Lord, hail!”</p>
<p>• Shenoute to the clerics of Psoi, (A) opening formula and (B) letter body (HD 312 [IT-NB IB3 fol. 55]):</p> <p>A) $\text{CINOY-ΘIOC ΠΕΤΕΖΔΙ ΝΝΚΛΥΡΙΚΟC ΠΠCΟΙ ΠΠΠΕΖCΟΠ CΝΔΥ CΥΠΧΘΕΙC}$ (<i>doublet</i>:) {$\text{CINOY-ΘIOC ΠΕΤΕΖΔΙ ΠΠΠΕΖCΕΠCΝΔΥ ΝΝΚΛΗΡΙΚΟC ΠΠCΟΙ}$} “It’s Sinouthios who writes to the clerics of Psoi the second time, in the Lord! [<i>doublet</i>:] {It is Sinouthios who writes the second time to the clerics of Psoi}.”</p> <p>B) (<i>Past history</i>): “After you have said: ‘that we are coming out is to let the Satan enter to us’ – for you have heard this in the first letter – !,” (<i>Present concern</i>): “how can you say (now), he is not among you, (namely) the Satan, while your acts of violence and your robberies bear witness against you (<i>sg.</i>) or against you (<i>pl.</i>), since you took away what is not yours? Am I not aware that my sins are plenty before God? And (yet) I am distressed for you, companions? Will you really decide to bring upon you what the prophet has said: [Ez 7,26] ‘the law went astray by the priest, and the council by the prophets’, and further: [Hos 6,9] ‘the priests concealed the way of the lord’, and further: [Hos 4,9] ‘the priest who will behave like the crowd, I will take revenge on him for his misdeeds and I will repay him for the thoughts of his heart’? (Is it) not for the plenty of their anger (that) the prophets said: [Nah 3,14] ‘go down to the clay which is mingled with straw, and beat’, that means: go down to the violence and the robbery that is mingled with it, and beat, until its dirt is broken(?) at(?) your necks? Do you want to do the deeds of the house of Ahab within the house of the Lord, God, the All[-soverei]gn?”</p>

Table 2.6: Peculiarities of late Coptic letters. Abbreviations: Pmt parchment; Ppr paper; Pps papyrus

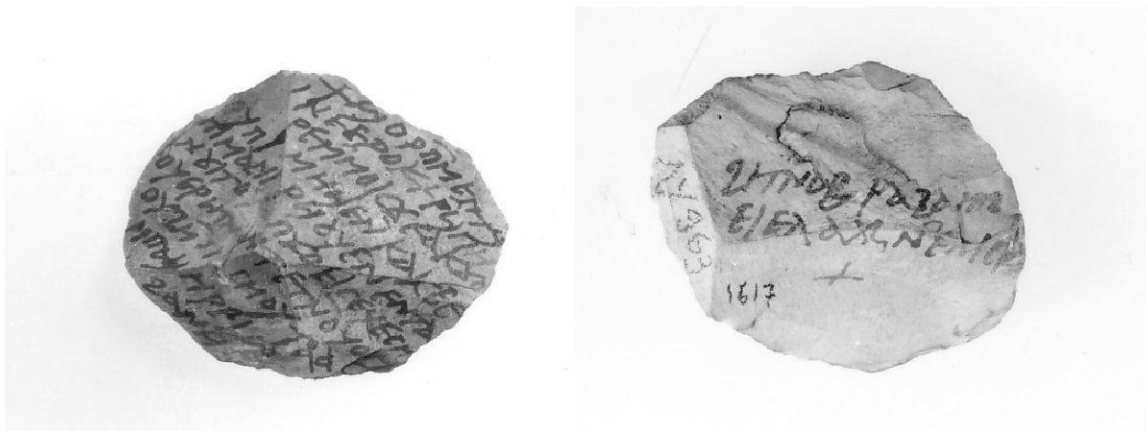
<i>“The Lord/God preserve you/him”</i>	
ερεπῶς κα(α)κ (bis) P.Ryl.Copt. 368 (Pmt)	“The Lord preserve you!”
ελεπνοῦτι κεκ P.Lond.Copt. I 582 (Pps)	“God preserve you!”
ερεπῶς κλακ P.Ryl.Copt. 392; P.HermitageCopt. 51 (Ppr)	“The Lord preserve you!”
πῶς κλακ ... πῶς ζαρηζ ερωτεν P.Teshlot 10 (Ppr)	“The Lord preserve you ... the Lord watch over you!”
ελεπνοῦτι [...] εβετι οὐναδ νεζι νηκ εβεκεκ ζαχωι νοϣμηνε ναμμι P.Lond.Copt. I 661 (Pps)	“God ... and he give you a long lifetime and he preserve you for me a many of years!”
ερεπῶς καθῡτην (ν)αι ψαπανιβε νζαι νηταμμοι επετ(ν)ζο νκεσοπ ετοϣοδ σωμ ψϣχ πνα παψατε ποκκλακ P.Lond.Copt. I 1132 (Ppr)	“The Lord preserve you (pl.) for me up to my last breath and He let me know your faces again, being in sound body, soul, and mind, Pashate, the Lord preserve you (sg.)!”
πῶς χαϣ (bis) P.Lond.Copt. I 545 (Ppr), 1st letter	“The Lord preserve him!”
ερεπῶς κoes P.Lond.Copt. I 599 (Ppr)	“The Lord preserve him!”
ερεπῶς κεβ εβϣχαρις νεβ P.Lond.Copt. I. 592 (Ppr)	“The Lord perserve him and give him mercy!”
ερεπῶς καϣ αϣω ϣμοϣ ερωϣ P.Lond.Copt. I 545 (Ppr), 2nd letter	“The Lord preserve him and bless him!”
ερεπῶς ζαρεζ εποϣωνεζ μεποϣωηρε μεπεϣιωτ ερεπῶς κλαϣ νη P.Ryl.Copt. 337 (Ppr)	“The Lord watch over your (Sg. f.) life and (as to) your son and his father; the Lord preserve them for you!”
ελεπχαic κεϣϣ ... ελεπνοϣ κεεβ CPR II 227 (Pps)	“(Greetings to all our fathers,) the Lord preserve them, ... (Address: Give it to Souros the deacon,) God preserve him!”
<i>“The Lord watch your/his life”</i>	
πῶς αρεζ επεϣωνεζ P.Lond.Copt. I 545 (Ppr), 1st letter	“The lord watch over his life!”
[...]πῶς ζαρεζ επεκωνεζ P.Ryl.Copt. 306 (Ppr)	“The Lord watch over your life!”
ερεπῶς ζαρεζ νπεκωνεζ P.Ryl.Copt. 309 (Ppr)	“The Lord watch over your life!”
ερεπχαic ζαρεζ επεκωνεζ P.Ryl.Copt. 317 (Ppr)	“The Lord watch over your life!”
ερεπῶς ζαρεζ εποϣωνεζ μεποϣωηρε μεπεϣιωτ ερεπῶς κλαϣ νη P.Ryl.Copt. 337 (Ppr)	“The Lord watch over your (sg. f.) life and (as to) your son and their (sic) father; the Lord preserve them for you!”
<i>“The Lord bless him”</i>	
ερεπῶς καϣ αϣω ϣμοϣ ερωϣ P.Lond.Copt. I 545 (Ppr), 2nd letter	“The lord preserve him and bless him!”
ερεπῶς ζαρεζ επεϣωοϣαζ εζοϣν ... ερεπῶς σμοϣ ερωϣ νεμοϣ νιμ P.Ryl.Copt. 373 (Ppr)	“The Lord watch over their congregation ... the Lord bless them in every blessing!”

<i>“The Lord/God give you a long lifetime”</i>
ΕΛΕΠΝΟΥΤΙ [...] ΕΒΕΤΙ ΟΥΝΑΘ ΝΕΖΙ ΝΗΚ ΕΒΚΕΕΚ ΖΑΧΩΙ ΝΟΥΜΗΗΘΕ ΝΑΔΙΠΙ P.Lond.Copt. I 661 (Pps) “God ... and he give you a long lifetime and he preserve you for me a many of years!”
<i>“The Lord/God let me know your face”</i>
ΕΡΕΠΘΕ ΙΕ ΠΕΧΘΕ ΤΑΜΟΙ ΕΠΕΚΖΟ ΖΝΟΥΡΑΘΕ P.Ryl.Copt. 290 (Ppr) “The Lord Jesus Christ let me know your face in joy!” ΕΡΕΠΘΕ ΚΑΤΗΥΤΝ (Ν)ΑΙ ΘΑΠΑΝΙΒΕ ΝΖΑΙ ΝΟΥΤΑΜΟΙ ΕΠΕΤ(Ν)ΖΟ ΝΚΕΣΟΠ ΕΤΟΥΘΣ ΣΩΜΑ ΨΥΧΗ ΠΝΑ ΠΑΨΩΑΤΕ ΠΘΕ ΚΑΔΚ P.Lond.Copt. I 1132 (Ppr) “The Lord preserve you (pl.) for me up to my last breath and He let me know your (pl.) faces again, being in sound body, soul, and mind, Paššate, the Lord preserve you (sg.)!”
<i>Addressee and sender bearing Arabic names</i>
CPR II 228: (Opening formula) ΑΝΟΚ ΠΕ ΙΕΖΙΔ ΕΙΣΖΑΙ ΕΙΘΙΝΕ ΕΠΑΜΕΡΙΤ ΝΩΝ ΑΒΟΥ ΑΛΙ; (bilingual address on verso) ΤΑΔ ΝΜΑΠΕΡΙΤ ΝΩΝ ΑΒΟΥ ΑΛΙ ΖΙΤΝ ΙΕΖΙΔ ΠΕΦΩΝ ʾilā Abū ʿAlī (address) “Give it to my beloved brother Abū ʿAlī, by Yazīd his brother; (Arabic:) to Abū ʿAlī!” P.Lond.Copt. I 584: ΤΕΙΣ ΠΑΜΕΛΙΤ ΝΕΑΝ ΑΠΟΥ ΙΑΖΙΕ ΖΙΤΕΝ ΜΟΥΖΑΜΗΔ Υ ΑΒΔΕΛΛΑΔ (address) “Give it to my beloved brother Yaḥyā, by Muḥammad son of ʿAbd Allāh!” (other persons bearing Arabic names mentioned in the letter) P.Lond.Copt. I 591: ΤΕΙΣ ΠΑΜΕ ΝΕΑΝ ΙΑΖΙΕ ΖΙΤ ΔΑΟΥΔ (address) “Give it to my beloved brother Yaḥyā, by Dāʿūd!” P.Lond.Copt. I 638: [ΤΕΙΣ] ΠΑΜΕΛΙΤ [ΝΩΗ]ΛΙ ΓΙΡ ΖΙ ΔΑΟΥΔ ΥΘ ΑΠΔΕΛΓΙΠΑΡ (address) “Give it to my beloved son Kīr (?), by Dāʿūd son of ʿAbd al-Ġabbār!”

Figures



Fig. 2.1: Coptic papyrus letter, preserved in genuine folding; provenance unknown. 7th/8th century. The external address: “Give it to Tiskou!” is visible outside, while the slightly unrolled part above gives a glance at the first line of the inner side, containing the greeting formula “+ We greet thee ...”. (Photograph by courtesy of the Museum Bibel+Orient of the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, inv. AeT2006.11).



Figs. 2.2a–b: Coptic letter written on a piece of limestone. Theban area, around 600 CE. The letter belongs to a dossier of around 400 ostraca and limestone letters (the preferred writing surfaces for letters in that region) related to Bishop Abraham of Hermonthis, a contemporary of the Alexandrian patriarch Damianos (officiated 578–607 CE). The letter, written on behalf of Abraham by one of his clerks, deals with the consecration of bread. On the verso (*fig. 2.2b*), the sender identifies himself, applying the modest understatement typical for ecclesiastical milieus in Byzantine Egypt: “From Abraham, that humble bishop”. (Photograph by courtesy of the Egyptian Museum of the University of Leipzig (Germany), inv. 1617).

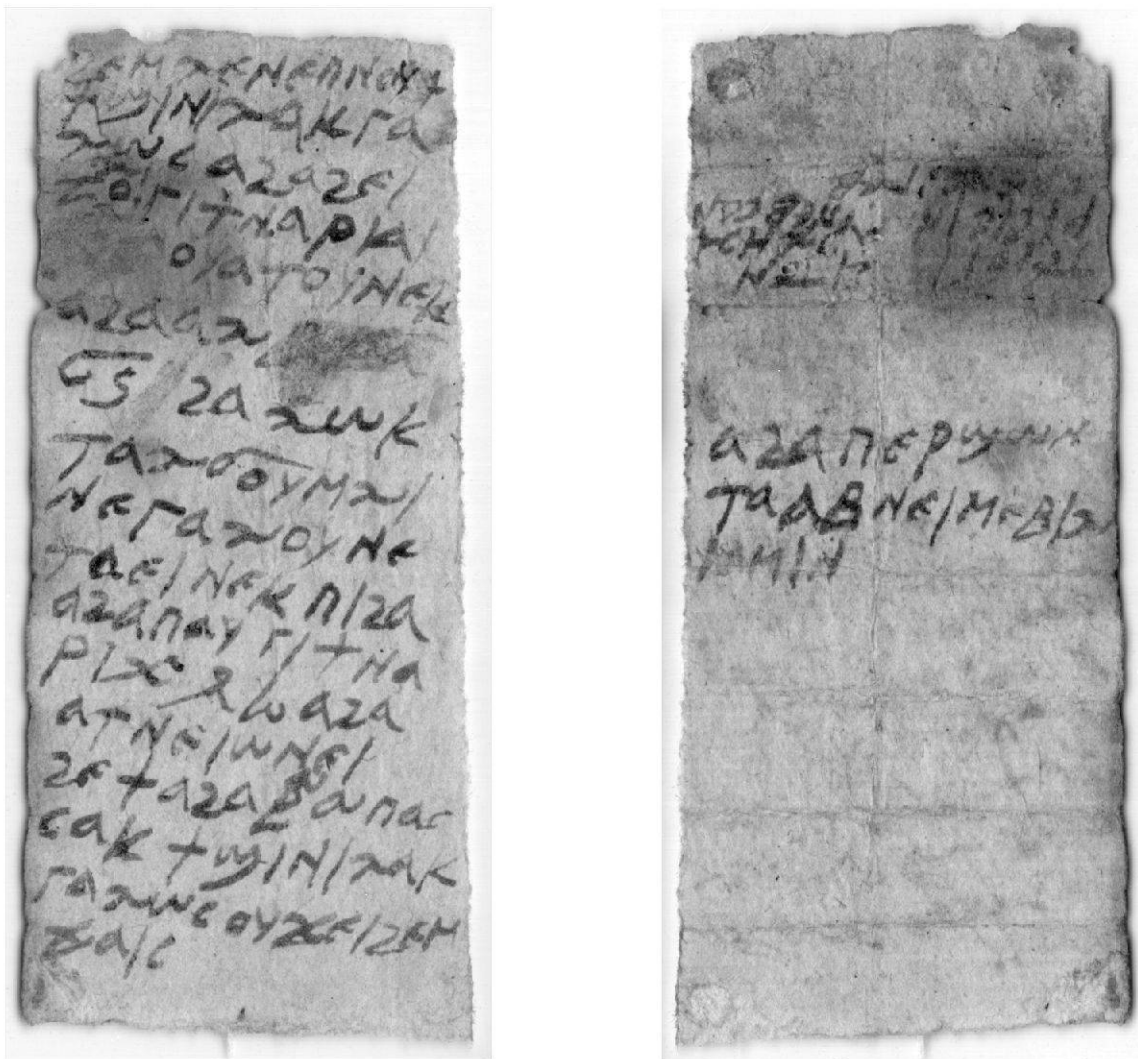


Fig. 2.3a–b: Late Coptic letter written on a strip of paper; Fayyum region, 10th/11th century. The genuine folding is still traceable by clearly visible folds. The verso (fig. 2.3b) contains an addition to the letter corpus: “And as to the cloak, send it to me together with Biliamin!” The external address is written in reverse direction: “Give it to Siri, (son of) Sisini! From Archela, his brother”. (Photograph by courtesy of the papyrus collection of the University Library of the University of Leipzig (Germany), inv. 260).