

Daily Life in Ancient Egyptian Personal Correspondence

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ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD

Summertown Pavilion

18-24 Middle Way

Summertown

Oxford OX2 7LG

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-78969-507-6

ISBN 978-1-78969-508-3 (e-Pdf)

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Introduction

Prompted by a person's need to communicate in writing to a recipient at a distance, over the years private letters have been an important additional source of social and historical information. The personal correspondence from ancient Egypt exemplifies the extra knowledge such letters are able to provide. Their importance lies in the extra dimension they give to ancient Egyptian society in comparison with other types of evidence. While the visual and textual representations on tomb and temple walls and private stelae are valuable sources for ancient Egyptian daily life, religious affairs and military achievements, they are unable to provide the insight into actual events and the personalities involved – such as a general's involvement in an assassination plot, an overseer of cattle's problem regarding the return of a donkey, a scribe's threat to strike a woman if she comes near him – the personal touch.¹

There has been considerable interest in this *genre*. However, the methodology of the research reflects certain focuses of attention. For example – letters discovered amongst a collection, those looking at a collection within a certain timeframe, those related to a specific grouping, a specific topic, or a single letter, those analysing structure and wording – such as the following representative examples.

A focus on personal correspondence within collections is shown by the studies of five letters found amongst the *Hekanakhte Papyri*² and of letters which form part of the *Lahun Papyri*.³ Examples of collections studied within a certain timeframe are the *Amarna Letters*,⁴ the *Late Ramesside Letters*,⁵ *Late Egyptian Miscellanies*.⁶ The work *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt* provides extensive insight into areas such as 'Social Selves,' 'Founding a House,' 'Love and Eroticism.'⁷ The *Letters to the Dead* are an example of a specific group or topic.⁸ With regard to structure and wording are an analysis of correspondence from the Eighteenth to Twentieth Dynasty⁹ and a study of the dialogue within letters from the Late Ramesside period.¹⁰ An article on letters

¹ These letters are discussed in Chapters One, Two and Four.

² Allen, J. P. 2002. *Heqanakht Papyri*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art: 243-55.

³ Collier, M. and S. Quirke. 2002. *The UCL Lahun Papyri: Letters*. Oxford: Archaeopress.

⁴ For example Moran, W.L. 1992. *The Amarna Letters*. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press.

⁵ Wente, E. 1967. *Late Ramesside Letters*. Chicago & Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1967; Černý, J. *Late Ramesside Letters*. Brussels: Édition de la Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth.

⁶ Gardiner, A.H. *Late-Egyptian Miscellanies*. (Brussels: Édition de la Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1937).

⁷ Meskell, L. 2002. *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

⁸ Such as Gardiner, A.H and K. Sethe. 1928. *Egyptian Letters to the Dead, Mainly from the Old and Middle Kingdoms*. London: Egypt Exploration Society.

⁹ Bakir, A-el-M. 1970. *Egyptian Epistolography from the 18th to the 21st Dynasty*. Cairo: BdÉ 48, Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale.

¹⁰ Sweeney D. 2001. *Correspondence and Dialogue: Pragmatic factors in Late Ramesside Letter-Writing*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

from the New Kingdom¹¹ discusses the varying ways deities are addressed. Further background and information on these works and other relevant studies falling within these categories are given in the Appendix. This also includes comments on letters to and from royalty and the vizier.

While information is provided on the social aspects (as defined below¹²), it is not the primary focus. In some cases limitations have been acknowledged. Regarding the letters from the *Lahun Papyri*, Collier and Quirke note that due to their number ‘it has not proven practicable to attempt publication with detailed commentary for each item.’¹³ When discussing the *Late Ramesside Letters* Wente states that his ‘primary interest in translating these letters has been philological rather than historical.’¹⁴ Černý comments that his notes ‘aim at concision and avoid any discussion concerning the content of the letters and the meaning of particular passages.’¹⁵ Gardiner regarding his *Late Egyptian Miscellanies* includes only ‘such annotations as bear directly on the readings.’¹⁶ Sweeney states her aim is ‘to investigate how the sender asks questions, makes requests, offers information and complains, and what the other party’s options for replying are in each case.’¹⁷ Other studies evidence ancient Egyptian private and social life, religious belief and the events of daily life primarily from iconographic and archaeological sources. For example in Meskell’s study letters are referenced in some instances, but not studied individually *per se* to augment the information from the artefacts and visual representations. The parameters set by the various approaches as exemplified above indicate the value of a work focused specifically at a range of individual personal letters from differing periods of ancient Egyptian history.¹⁸

‘Personal’ in this context denotes a private letter involving people in the general population regarding their affairs and issues, rather than those involving royalty. The research has of necessity covered an extensive range of letters falling within this definition. Those selected for this work, from a time frame from the Old Kingdom up to, and including, the Twenty-first Dynasty,¹⁹ are examples evidencing social aspects relevant to the specific topics of problems and issues, daily life, religious matters, military and police matters.

¹¹ Baines, J. 2001. Egyptian Letters of the New Kingdom as evidence for religious practice. *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 1.11-31.

¹² See later in the Introduction for the criteria.

¹³ Collier and Quirke (2002): iii.

¹⁴ Wente, (1967): 1.

¹⁵ Černý (1939): VI.

¹⁶ Gardiner (1937): xii.

¹⁷ Sweeney (2001): 190.

¹⁸ For a relevant comment on this previous lack of attention to the information in individual private letters see Demarée, R.J. 2008 Letters and Archives from the New Kingdom necropolis at Thebes, in L. Pantalacci (ed.) *Le Lettre d’Archive*: 48-49. Cairo : Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale.

¹⁹ Edward Wente’s *Letters from ancient Egypt* does provide a broad selection of letters across this timeframe but in translation only with just a brief introduction to each section. His work is noted among the sources for letters in this study.

Spoken communications carrying a directive or request for action represent a ‘speech act,’ in the presence of the person being addressed, with the intention of achieving an immediate response or action.²⁰ In contrast personal letters, such as those discussed in this study,²¹ are not able to employ vocal tones and body language to influence their recipient. It is the manner in which they address the recipient, together with the structure of the wording conveying the message, which are the means of provoking a response or action to resolve the issue. From this perspective the analyses of the individual letters, together with the summaries at the end of each chapter, will provide an overview to compare and contrast the differing ways in which the letters are formulated, expressed and structured – how this relates to the reason for writing, sender/recipient status, the time of writing. They are the most complete letters except in some cases where, despite the *lacunae*, the content is extremely informative and relevant.

The approach will be to focus on the content from the perspective of the following criteria:

- Senders and recipients, their occupations and relationships.
- Background of other people mentioned in the letter and their relationship to the sender and/or recipient.
- Societal structure and religious belief indicated by the forms of address.
- Interpretation of the differing styles of greeting to show the way they can be related to status, relationships, and in some cases the subject of the letter.
- Aspects of belief and custom found in the reasons for writing.
- Discussion of the events occurring and the means of resolving any issues.
- Historical context.

Translations are given for each letter.²² Transliteration and translation of specific words and phrases are included in the following analysis of the letter as a confirmation and explanation of the content, together with comment on the differing modes of address, historical context and emotional implication. They also enable discussion on any possible differences that have occurred in the interpretation of transcription/translation that, for example, may affect the letter’s message, the information regarding writer and recipient or the meaning of specific words in the context of the letter’s topic. In these instances transliteration from the primary source, in conjunction with the comparative translation, are included to draw a conclusion as to the most appropriate meaning.

The final chapter is firstly an overview across the timeframe to discuss, compare and contrast the specific social aspects reflected across all the pieces of correspondence. The categories considered are under the sub-headings of agricultural organisation and natural resources, religious aspects, aspects of feeling and emotion, the role

²⁰ See Crystal, D. 2008. *Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* 6th ed. Malden M.A: Blackwell Publishing..

²¹ For a discussion of letters involving royalty see Horbury, M. 2009. *Personal Identity and Social Power in New Kingdom and Coptic Egypt*. BAR International series 203: 23-26.

²² The sources for the translations are fully referenced for each letter.

of women, the question of delivery, writers and recipients. Secondly, it discusses the distinctiveness of the data which the letters have provided in comparison with other sources, such as the visual and textual representations on personal stelae and tomb and temple walls, written textual documents and material evidence.

The objective of this work, by focusing on the information found in the content of a number of individual pieces of personal correspondence from across a wide timeframe, is to augment the knowledge from other studies, providing additional evidence regarding society and custom in ancient Egyptian daily life – the extra dimension.