The bearers of business letters in Roman Egypt

SCHUBERT, Paul

Abstract

In the absence of a postal service available to all, letters exchanged between the inhabitants of Roman Egypt were most often transmitted with the help of informal bearers whose task was not limited to carrying a letter: they brought or collected goods, helped the recipients, sometimes received assistance, facilitated money transfer, performed escort and police duties, and more generally they were an essential link within a wide social network. This short study not only covers formal aspects, such as terminology or the place of the bearer in the structure of a business letter, but also provides a description of the role of the bearers and of their interaction with both senders and recipients.

Reference

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IN ROMAN EGYPT

Paul Schubert
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THE BEARERS OF BUSINESS LETTERS
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Paul Schubert

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Foreword

Business letters from Roman Egypt offer us a fascinating glimpse into the active life of ordinary people. At a time when transportation was slow, expensive and unreliable, the circulation of messages – short notes, orders, requests, letters of recommendation – could somehow mitigate the inconvenience created by the distance that separated individuals. The main purpose of business letters was to get things done. Presumably, the outcome was often successful, in spite of the frustration expressed by many writers who might as well have visited their correspondents if this had been practical.

In the absence of a postal service available to all, letters were placed in the hands of whoever happened to be travelling in the right direction. The bearer of the letter did not merely carry a slip of papyrus closed with a string and a seal: in many instances, he had to accomplish other tasks, such as delivering or collecting some goods, gathering information, or escorting a person.

This study of the bearers of business letters began with an attempt to map a typical structure of such documents. It soon became clear that the bearer, who frequently appears with an explicit mention in the text, plays an important role in the exchange. I thus found it necessary to consider more than the structural dimension, and to take into account the various aspects of his informal function.

For the most part, this fascicle was written during a research leave, which I received from the University of Geneva. I was able to continue my work during another leave funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (grant # 174419). To both institutions, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude for having shielded me from the bearers of many business letters: time for research, free from most administrative tasks and teaching duties, is a rare and valuable commodity.
1 Introduction

1.1 The bearer of a letter

The countless ancient letters written on papyrus and found in the sands of Egypt have been the topic of many scholarly studies. For the most part, the authors of such works have focused on the relationship between a sender and a recipient, and on the way by which virtual contact endures in spite of geographic distance; they have carefully examined the personal aspects of family letters, as opposed to business letters.¹ Less attention has been devoted to the bearer of a business letter, i.e. the person who carries the letter and delivers it.² The main purpose of this study will be to examine, relying on specific cases and examples, the role of the bearer of a business letter.³

1.2 Definition: business letters vs. family letters

Greek letters serve many purposes, all related to the need to communicate with someone living at a distance; they work as a replacement for direct conversation.⁴ Business letters can be considered as a sub-group of a varied ensemble, which also includes messages with a literary dimension, official letters and correspondence between friends or family. The latter category displays some overlap with business letters because friends and family often conduct business together. In particular, the communication channels are similar; therefore, some details from family letters may be used to illustrate the way by which correspondence circulated in Roman Egypt.

In a family letter from a son to his mother, family matters are entangled with other elements that would rather suit a business letter.

¹ In particular Exler 1923; Koskenniemi 1956; White 1972.
² Some useful elements on the topic are to be found in Blumell 2014: 46-53. He covers both family and business letters. Head 2009 also offers a good survey; it is devoted to letter-carriers explicitly presented as such, but rests on a corpus limited to the Oxyrhynchus papyri, and it does not distinguish family from business letters.
³ All quotations from documentary papyri retain the original spelling, in most cases with a translation. I have corrected faulty spelling only when the quotation was incomprehensible. Unless stated otherwise, the translations of Greek passages are mine. In a few instances, a passage taken from papyri has been quoted twice, in different contexts, so as to spare the reader the effort of jumping back to a previous section.
⁴ Koskenniemi 1956: 38 – following ancient theory – underlines the role of the letter as a means to turn absence into presence; Ceccarelli 2013: 2-10.
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In another case, the sender also mixes family matters with some business: he sends his greetings to the recipient’s children and wife, and then deals with a money deposit.

In P.Ryl. 2.242 (III AD), some family members are well on all accounts. I am surprised that, although I write to you every day, you have sent me no reply. (…) Receive therefore (…) from the person who is delivering this writing of mine a jar of oil, and give it to Hierax – it has the inscription ‘Horion’ (Ὄ) – and do all you can to come to us quickly. If you see that he is staying at your place, send me Thonios; for I need him here.⁵

Family or personal matters can also be mixed with official duties. A strategos of the Sebennyt nome receives a letter from a person who seems to be his assistant. The bearer of the letter is carrying an ounce of purple dye, apparently as a present for the prefect’s daughter.

As you requested, master, I sent the ounce of purple through the guard who brought your letter. (The purple) is to be given to the young one for the entertainment; for I guessed that you were in attendance with his excellency the prefect.⁷

Between business and family letters, there is a difference in the way the channels of communication are described in the letters themselves. In family letters, the sender frequently complains about the lack of reply from the recipient, and in such a context often mentions the name of a bearer. The rhetorical emphasis put on such claims, which serve also the purpose of showing how much the sender values a steady flow of communication with a

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⁵ P.Oxy. 14.1770.6-11 and 14-23 (late III AD). In P.Ryl. 2.242 (III AD), some family members are engaged in trade.
⁶ P.Brem. 52.3-9 (II AD).
⁷ P.Oxy. 6.931.3-9 (II AD). Conversely, instructions about forwarding an official letter from a manger to a strategos are imbedded in a soldier’s letter; see P.Mich. 8.479.10-15 (early II AD).
friend or family member, somewhat undermines their credibility. Although not totally absent from business letters, those standard phrases seem to appear mostly in a family context; in a more matter-of-fact exchange, correspondents normally dispense with heavy displays of affection.

As a loose criterion, it could be said that business letters relate to professional, financial, logistical or commercial matters; also, in business letters, the main purpose is to get something done on the part of the recipient, whereas letters between family or friends often aim at sharing some reciprocal information about individuals. The typical clause where the bearer of a letter finds an explicit mention tends to appear most frequently in letters with a business content; in purely private matters, it is scarcer. Within a perspective where the bearer of the letter will hold the centre of the stage, we shall concentrate on exchanges where the sender expects the recipient to do something, frequently with the collaboration of the bearer.

Another reason for focusing on business letters is that they tend to display a more regular structure than in family letters. In such a structure, the bearer often appears explicitly, and we shall see that the relevant clause fits into a clear pattern. If one were to attempt a broad structural typology of private correspondence, business letters would offer a better potential for classification than family letters, where the attention of the writer often seems to drift at random.

1.3 Corpus

The corpus considered below will consist of Greek business letters, and also family letters that contain some elements of a business practice, from Egypt during the Principate. Although Greek business letters are to be found from the beginning of the Ptolemaic period till the Arab conquest, it will be convenient to focus mainly on documents from the first till the third century AD: at this time, letters are numerous and varied; in their structure and wording they display a consistency that allows for a clear definition of structure. A few examples from the early fourth century will occur when they seem relevant.

Identifying the relevant material within a mass of more than sixty thousand published documentary papyri is not an easy task. As we shall see below, the bearer of a letter is frequently mentioned with a standard wording, e.g. ὁ ἀναδίδοντος σοι τὴν ἐπιστολήν ‘the person who delivers this letter to you’. It is not enough, however, to search databases for a few standard expressions, especially since variation in spelling can be misleading. In his study of letter-carriers with an explicit mention among the Oxyrhynchos Papyri, Head already noted that point: ‘There was no standard terminology used for letter-carriers and

8 E.g. ἀνδιδόντος for ἀναδίδόντος in PSI 13.1332.7 (= SB 5.7992; II/III AD).
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therefore no way to collect examples of the role and function of (named) letter-carriers from straightforward computer searches (...)."9

Quite often, the bearer of a letter appears in an unconventional wording. Moreover, a faulty edition may conceal the words used for an automatic selection of sources.

Your uncle Eiomippos received from the bearer the letter I had sent and he did not deliver Sotiras’ writing (...).10

I have sent you through the person who is delivering this letter to you 30 dry cheeses (...).11

When the sender alludes to the dispatch of a letter, it does not necessarily imply that this is the one that was preserved to us.

I sent you a letter through the baker and perhaps you are aware of what I wrote to you.12

The sender is apparently alluding to a previous letter, to which the recipient did not give a satisfactory reply. We cannot be sure that the baker also carried this reminder.

It seems necessary, therefore, to follow a hybrid approach, where the material is sorted out in a broad fashion before a closer examination of the remainder can take place. Using the Heidelberger Gesamtverzeichnis, I selected all documentary papyri that carried the description ‘Brief’ (letter), within a time span from the first till the third century AD.13 This yielded a rough corpus of ca. 2'000 documents, which had to be sorted out by a close reading of the text. After discarding official letters and other irrelevant material, and bearing in mind the imprecise and porous boundary between family and business letters, I was able to extract many details pertaining to the bearers of business letters. This was complemented with various other searches, as well as with information provided by other scholars who had worked on related topics.

Among the roles ascribed to the bearer of a business letter, the conveyance of goods is most frequent, as we shall see below. Quite often, a letter will mention the sending of wares, and

9 Head 2009 : 282.
10 P.Vars. 23.1-5 (II/III AD).
11 P.Laur. 3.102 verso.10-12 (III AD).
12 P.Tebt. 2.424.2-3 (III AD).
13 <www.rzuser.uni-heidelberg.de/~gv0/gvz.html> 2059 hits on 27.07.2018.
we can suppose that they are being carried by the same person who is bringing the letter, although this is not clearly specified.

ἐπεμψα δὲ σοι διὰ Ὀννόφριος νε(ωτέρου) τὰ σύνεργα τῆς στολῆς τοῦ Ἡρακλείδου κρόκης μεν ἵπποι ἔξ ὀλκής στατήρεσι αἱ ἑσ[

I have sent to you by Onnophris the younger the yarn for weaving Herakleides’ outfit: 7 minai of woof, weighing (...) staters, that is 100 reels; and warp from Lykopolis weighing 90 staters, that is 75 balls.\textsuperscript{14}

The wording ἐπεμψα δὲ σοι διὰ Ὀννόφριος ‘I have sent to you by Onnophris’ does not necessarily imply that Onnophris is also carrying the letter, although this is quite plausible. The presence of the bearer of a letter can thus be felt, but not ascertained. Conversely, in family letters, there are cases where the sender states explicitly that some announced goods have been travelling in the hands of another carrier.

κόμισαι τὰ σικονομίδια ἀπηρτισμένα. ἐπεμνά σοι πρὸ τοῦτων διὰ Ὀσοράπιος ἱερέως τὴν οὐγκίαν τῆς πορφύρας καὶ πρὸ ἀυτοῦ διὰ Πολυδεύκους βιβλία. περὶ ὧν δήλωσον.

Herewith the documents, completed. Before these I sent you by the hand of Osarapis the priest, the ounce of purple, and before him books by the hand of Polydeuces. Let me know about them.\textsuperscript{15}

κόμισαι παρὰ τῷ ἀποδιδόντος σοι τὸ ἐπιστόλιον καλάθιον ἐν ὧν ὃ ἐὰν εὑρίσκεις αὐτὸ ἀντιγράψις μοι. καὶ διὰ Ὀδαλερίου τῷ ἱεροσοχ throwError ἄλλο σοι ἀπέσταλκα.

Receive, from the person who is delivering this letter to you, a basket; whatever you find in it, you will let me know in your reply. I have sent you another basket through Valerius the goldsmith.\textsuperscript{16}

This can presumably be extended to business letters. Given the abundance of ambivalent sources, it seemed preferable to focus on letters where an explicit relation was made between the bearer of the letter and the goods he was carrying, or at least on cases where the context made the implicit presence of the bearer unmistakable. Finally, texts too damaged to yield any clear sense were omitted.

\textsuperscript{14} P.Oxy. 31.2593.3-9 (II AD; transl. Rowlandson 1998 : 269).
\textsuperscript{15} P.Oxy. 33.2679.4-12 (II AD; transl. P.J. Parsons).
\textsuperscript{16} P.Mich. 8.481.5-10 (early II AD).
2 Parameters of letter delivery

2.1 Historical perspective on letter writing

Greek letters written in the Roman province of Egypt during the second and third centuries AD follow a practice that started several centuries earlier. It is possible to trace the form of letters to an earlier stage. Already in the Iliad, the hero Bellerophon becomes the first attested letter-bearer in Greek literature. Letters become a regular feature in Greek literature in the sixth and fifth centuries; and as a means of communication between distant partners – as opposed to a dialogue performed orally by heralds –, they find only limited acceptance before the fourth century.

On the material and structural side, early examples (sixth–fifth century) of letters written on lead and found in the Black Sea area do not display the division in three parts that will become the norm in the Hellenistic and Roman periods: a heading (where the sender and recipient are named), a central body (where the actual purpose of the letter is stated) and closing greetings. Ancient tradition that attributes the first letter with the greeting χαίρειν to the Athenian general Cleon after the battle of Sphakteria (425 BC) is open to suspicion.

In a letter written on lead and found in Athens (late fifth / early fourth century), Ceccarelli identifies ‘the exact transition between a narrative opening and a formal prescript’.

Μνησεργος ἐπέστειλε τοῖς οίκοι χαίρειν καὶ ἰγιαίνειν.
Mnesiergos sent to those at home greetings and good health.

The shift to a formalised way of preparing letters takes place in Athens in the mid-fourth century, and the format is taken up by Hellenistic kings, who sent letters to cities. It thus seems that Greek letters from Egypt preserved on papyrus are roughly structured in a way that was formalised elsewhere and earlier, but only by a few decades. The common use of the letter format in the documents from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt mirrors the wide acceptance of letters in the Hellenistic world at large, as witnessed e.g. by the historian Polybius in the second century BC.

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17 Iliad 6.168-180.
18 Ceccarelli 2013 : 35-47.
19 Ceccarelli 2013 : 35-36, 40-41 and 56-57.
20 Ceccarelli 2013 : 91-98.
21 Ceccarelli 2013 : 45 and 352; SIG 3 3.1259.
22 Ceccarelli 2013 : 266, 300 and 329.
2.2 Delivery of letters

The imperial postal service (cursus publicus) carried messages – and sometimes goods or persons – for state service, but not for private purposes. The Roman army also offered, in some specific contexts, a network of messengers that served the needs of both the army and of civilian officials to carry letters and parcels, notably in the Egyptian Eastern Desert. Messengers were either auxiliary horsemen or so-called μονομάχια (or μονομάχου). For the civilian administration, the ἐπιστολαφόρος (‘letter-carrier’, also spelled ἐπιστολοφόρος) performed a public service (liturgy) in Roman Egypt, prolonging an office of the Ptolemaic administration.

The delivery of official mail is illustrated by a letter to a strategos announcing the dispatch of letters and other documents.

"οὐ δὲ λέγεις μη κομίσασθαι ἀπόδεσμον ἐπιστολών προσεμφθέντα υπ’ ἐμόν ἔτι ἄπω [. . . ἐν ὧν τοῦ κρατίστου] ἤχεμόνος περὶ τοῦ ἐκκειμένου ἐν [. . .] τοῖς κληρονόμοις [. . .] νω ἐκτοτε διαπεμψάμενος διὰ Κλαυδίου [. . .] ἐκδοσ(α)ς τοῖς κληρονομο(οίς)

'Ηγουμένου γενομ(ένου) βασιλικο ὑγείας τα τά ἐπιστάλημα Δημητριανοῦ ὑπεύθυνο τῆς εἰς τὴν Β[α]ρβαρίαν στατιώνα ἑπιστημήν, παρ’ ὑμᾶς στοιχάζει αὐτὸν μεμενηκέναι μή ὄντος ἐκεί τινος ἐπιστολαφόρου ἐκ τοῦ ὑπὸ σοι νομοῦ τοῦ δίηκον[ου] ὑγείας σοι αὐτὸν κατὰ τὰ κελευσθέντα. οὐ νῦν μείρη νῦν μη ἐκομίσθης, φρόντισον εὐθέως πέμψαι τὸν λαμψάμονα αὐτόν.

The packet of letters, which you say you have not received and which was previously sent by me as long ago as (...) including one from his highness the prefect concerning the decree issued to sitologoi (...), was then forwarded by me through Claudius (...) and given to the heirs of Ischyrion, former royal secretary (...), while the dispatches of Demetrianus, cavalryman, were given to the overseer at the station of Basilios, where I conjecture that the packet has remained, no messenger being there from your nome to carry it to you according to the orders. If you have not yet received it, take care to send somebody at once to take it."

In this passage, the letters have been bundled together. The word ἀπόδεσμον was restored by the editors of the papyrus, but it finds parallels in the log-book of army messengers in the Eastern Desert, preserved on large ostraka. Those document also indicate that, at least in the context of delivery through military messengers, they could be sent either sealed (ἐσφραγισμέναι), or open (λελυμέναι). For the public post, boxes or bags could also be

24 Cuvigny 2005 : 5-7; Cuvigny 2019 : 70 thinks that this network of messengers maintained by the army in the desert does not correspond to a military postal system; rather, the army’s presence in the desert provided the infrastructure that allowed the public postal system to function effectively in remote areas such as the Eastern Desert.
25 Cuvigny 2019 : 78.
27 P.Ryl. 2.78.17-27 (AD 157; transl. adapted from the editors of the papyrus).
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closed with lead seals.29 Given the haphazard nature of the informal communication of private letters, however, those were usually sealed. The editors of another ostrakon tentatively read the presence of post-camels. They note, however, that the adjective ἀγγάριος ‘of the mounted post’ is not satisfactorily attested.

προσδέχομαι τοὺς καμήλους ἁγγαρίους ἐώς ἐξέλθωσιν.
I am waiting for the post-camels till they set off.30

In the absence of a public postal service available to all, letters were usually entrusted to a person who happened to be travelling along the desired route, or to a servant sent specifically to deliver the message.31 Such attempts, however, were not always successful.

καταπλέοντι μοι ε[ίς] Ἀλεξάνδριαν διὰ σπουδῆς ἐγκέςθαι εἰς τὸ καταγώγιον τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς γεουχίας σου τὸ ἐν Μέμφει ἵνα ἐκείθεν σοι γράψω, καὶ οὐδένα εὑρὸν ἐρχόμενον πρὸς σέ.
As I was sailing down towards Alexandria in haste, I happened to pass the lodgings located in Memphis (occupied by) the people from your estate, so that I might write to you, but I found no one who was going in your direction.32

2.3 Terminology

2.3.1 Words used for a letter

In the Greek world at large, the use of ἐπιστολή as a specific word for ‘letter’ appears in the fourth century BC;33 it is abundantly attested in papyri from the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. Explicit reference to letters within the text of a letter itself occurs frequently, with the word ἐπιστολή and its diminutives ἐπιστόλιον and ἐπιστολίδιον hardly distinguishable.34 A boundary between business and family letter is hard to perceive. The words γράμματα, χειρόγραφον and – for small slips of papyrus – πιττάκιον are also attested.

29 Cuvigny 2019 : 81.
30 O.Claud. 1.142.6-8 (ca. AD 109/100).
31 Adams 2007 : 135–6 and 144; on the informal use of army patrols for mail delivery, 210; Blumell 2014 : 46-47. In P.Mich. 8.487.10 (family letter, II AD), a letter was apparently carried from Rome by a man called Eros, a name that would befit a slave. This letter works as an introduction and a request for an escort.
32 P.Mich. 8.503.2-4 (late II AD).
33 Ceccarelli 2013 : 18.
34 Both ἐπιστολή and ἐπιστόλιον are ubiquitous; for ἐπιστολίδιον, e.g. P.Poethke 14.5-6 (II AD).
parameters of letter delivery

γράψον μοι ἐπιστολήν διὰ τοῦ ἁναδιδόντος σοι τὸ ἐπιστόλλον.
Write a letter to me through the person who is delivering this letter to you. 35

To the Theban who is delivering this letter to you, give 24 drachmai that are owed to him. 36

καλῶς ποίησῆς, κύριε μου, συνάρασθαι τῷ ἁναδιδοῦντί σοι τὰ γράμματα (...).
Please, master, help the person who is delivering this writing to you (...). 37

(...) λημψόμενος παρ’ αὐτοῦ τὸ χειρόγραφόν σου (...).
(...) when you receive from him the letter that is addressed to you (...). 38

καλῶς ποίησεις δοῦς τῷ ἁναδιδόντι σοι τὸ πιπτάκιον Πασίων (...).
Please give to Pasion, who is delivering this ticket to you (...). 39

The traditional distinction made between ἐπιστολή – where content takes precedence over the material dimension – and γράμματα – which emphasizes the visual aspect of the writing – does not seem relevant in the context of letters from Roman Egypt. 40

2.3.2 Words used to designate the bearer of a letter

In the Ptolemaic period, the standard term used to designate a letter carrier is βυβλιαφόρος (or βιβλιαφόρος). 41 The bearer of a business letter, however, appears most often through the mention of ὁ ἁναδιδός σοι τὴν ἐπιστολήν ‘the person who delivers this letter to you’, the grammatical case of the participle depending on the intended action. The participle ἁναδιδός is by far the most frequently used form, at least in the early Roman period; this is also reflected in private letters of recommendation. 42 As early as the second century AD, but with increasing frequency till the fourth century, scribes display a tendency to retain in

36 P.Oxy. 59.3990.3-5 (II AD).
38 P.Coll.Youtie 2.88.5-7 (IV AD).
40 This general distinction was made by Ceccarelli 2013 : 18.
41 Sarri 2018 : 18.
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the oblique cases the -ου- of the athematic nominative ἀναδιδός, producing a hybrid ἀναδιδούντα etc.\(^{43}\) The future participle is also used in a letter of introduction.\(^ {44}\)

Other verbs also appear occasionally, such as παραδίδωμι, κομίζω or καταφέρω (a late usage).

ό παραδούς σοι ταύτά μου τὰ γράμματα (...).

The person who delivers to you this writing of mine (...).\(^ {45}\)

δόσις δὲ τὸ κομίζοντί σοι τὴν ἐπιστολήν (...).

You will give (it) to the person who is bringing this letter to you (...).\(^ {46}\)

Ἰέραξ (I. Ἱέρακι) οὖν τῷ [κατα]φέροντί σοι ταύτα μου τὰ γράμματα (...).

To Hierax, who is carrying to you this writing of mine (...).\(^ {47}\)

In private letters of recommendation, the following verbs are attested: ἀποδίδωμι, ἀναδιδωμι, κομίζω, παρακομίζω, φέρω, προσφέρω and καταφέρω.\(^ {48}\)

The word ἐπιστολοφόρος, mentioned above in the context of a postal liturgy, also seems to apply to an ordinary letter-carrier in a family context. The sender being a soldier, however, it cannot be excluded that he resorted to some kind of informal help from a military messenger.


When the letter-carrier came up to me, he said: ‘When I was about to leave, I said to your wife and to her mother: “Give me a letter to carry to Paniskos.” And they did not give.’\(^ {49}\)

The vocabulary pertaining to letters is in no way restricted to business letters on papyri from the Roman period: it also appears in documents from the Ptolemaic period, as well as in Greek literary sources from various periods. The Zenon archive offers many instances of a standard phrasing where the bearer of a letter finds an explicit mention.

\(^ {43}\) Mandilaras 1973: 74, § 92.

\(^ {44}\) P.Herm. 1.4-5 (I AD): Διόσκορον τὸν ᾧ[ναδω]σοντί (I. -τα) σοι τὴν ἐπιστολήν.

\(^ {45}\) P.Mich. 3.213.8-10 (III AD).

\(^ {46}\) O.Claud. 1.171.8-10 (ca. AD 100-120); also P.Oxy. 6.936.13-14 (III AD).

\(^ {47}\) P.Amh. 2.145.19-20 (late IV AD).

\(^ {48}\) Kim 1972: 43.

\(^ {49}\) P.Mich. 3.217.20-25 (= SB 3.7249; AD 297).
Please give 150 drachmai to Nikadas, who has delivered this writing to you.

Alexandros, who is delivering this letter to you, is a close relative of one of my friends.

We have sent Dexilaos, who is carrying a letter about expenses.

(...) sending quickly, together with the person who is delivering this letter to you, the price thereof.

In literary sources, both the procedure and the wording seem to match what we can observe in papyri from Egypt.

As for the shiny gold which you gave for the journey, Baccheios, who is carrying this letter, is bringing it (back to you).

The ambassadors sent by Ptolemy, cheated of the alliance, handed to the magistrates a letter from the king that they were holding ready in advance, by which they asked (...).

First he ordered to communicate orally to Ezekias the contents of the written message, then to deliver the letter itself.

This being said, documentary papyri from the Ptolemaic period and literary texts fall outside of the scope of the present study and will not be further examined.
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2.3.3 The bearer: explicit and implicit presence in business letters

The actual process of transmitting a letter requires the existence of a bearer in all cases, although there are instances where we must surmise his presence from the context. The following ostrakon offers an example of a complex transaction where the bearer appears only implicitly.

Μάξιμος Ἰσιδώρῳ χαίρειν. ιδοὺ μήνες τρίς ἐξ ὁτὲ εἶληφας παρ' ἐμοῦ (δραχμάς) ἴδ, οὐδὲ τόκον οὐδὲ [κε]φάλειν μοι ἔδωκας. οὐκ ἔστιν εὐλογον ξέμε δανίζεσθαι, σοῦ μοι ὑφύλοντες (ι. -τος). χρεὶαν οὐκ ἔχω τό τόκον. δόσης οὖν Σερήνῳ τῷ φίλῳ μου στρατιώτῃ χορταρίῳ ὥ τι καὶ ἐγὼ ὑφύλο.

Maximus to Isidoros, greetings. See, three months have passed since you received from me 14 drachmai, and you have given me neither interest nor capital. It does not make sense that I should be in debt while you owe me money; and I have no use of the interest. You will therefore give to my friend Serenus, a soldier in charge of fodder, what I myself owe him.57

The sender, Maximus, is claiming money back from Isidoros, the recipient; he asks him to repay this money to Serenus because he himself has borrowed from that person. This is a virtual payment, where the sender finds a shortcut and avoids one of the two payments that would balance the accounts.

Serenus is not explicitly described as the bearer of this potsherd, but several clues indicate that he is the person delivering the message to Isidoros. First, Serenus is presented as Maximus’ friend (Σερήνῳ τῷ φίλῳ μου), which works as a kind of introduction for Isidoros; then Serenus’ activity is specified – a soldier in charge of fodder – and Isidoros can check it if in doubt. Finally, this exchange finds a good parallel in a business letter where the bearer appears explicitly.

Σύρος Ἀλεξάνδρῳ χαίρειν. καλῶς ποιήσεις δοὺς τῷ ἀναδιδόντι σοί τὸ πιττάκιον Πασίωνι ὑ(πέρ) μὲν τόκον (δραχμάς) δ (τετράβολον) καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ κεφαλαίου (δραχμάς) δ, ὡς γενέσθαι (δραχμαί) η (τετράβολον). ἀλλὰ μὴ ἀμελήσῃς, ἐπεὶ τὰς ἵσας ἔσχον παρ’ αὐτοῦ ἐνθάδε ἐπὶ τῆς πόλεως.

Syros to Alexandros, greetings. Please give to Pasion, who is delivering this ticket to you, 4 drachmai and 4 oboloi as interest, and 4 drachmai from the capital, which makes 8 drachmai and 4 oboloi. Do not neglect the matter, for I have received the same amount from him here in town.58

Alexandros seems to be Syros’ business partner. Pasion lent some money to Syros; Alexandros is to repay part of the debt to Pasion upon receiving this note. The document functions as a cheque and mentions explicitly the bearer’s role and name. The parallel

57 O.Claud. 2.266.1-7 (mid-II AD).
58 P.Gen. 1.2 (II/III AD).
between the two documents presented above shows that the sender does not necessarily state explicitly the role of the letter bearer in a business letter.

A similar phenomenon occurs in the archive of Apollonios (strategos of the Apollonopolites Heptakomias in the period AD 113-120), where there are seven letters of recommendation. Among those letters, two carry an explicit mention of the bearer as such. The other five do not, although it seems almost certain that in each instance the person introduced to Apollonios is carrying the letter.

Finally, circumstances can make the sender change his plans about the envisaged carrier.

καλῶς ποιήσις δοὺς τὸ παρτικλάριον μου [νῦ Ἄλεαμος προφήτου Πανούφι] ἕναδιδόντι σοι τὸ πιττάκιον.

Please give this list (?) of mine [to the son of Melas the prophet, (i.e.) Panouphis] correction above the line: to the person who delivers this ticket.

It seems that the sender had to adapt the dispatch of this letter after Melas’ son was no longer available. Naming the bearer offered added security to the recipient, but this could backfire if the bearer turned out to be another person.

In sum, in many cases only the wording of the letter allows us to recognize the presence of the bearer in the letter. A list of books sent to the recipient, for instance, may provide a secure identifier.

τὰ δὲ πευφθόντα ἐστίν δι’ Ἀχιλλᾶ τὰ ύποτεταγμένα.

The (books) being sent through Achillas are those listed below.

2.3.4 Single or multiple bearers

In most instances, the bearer is alone, but there are some exceptions.

(...) τοὺς ἀναδιδοὺσί σοι ταῦτά μου τὰ γράμματα Διδύμῳ καὶ τοὺς σὺν αὐτῶ.

(...) to those who are delivering to you this writing of mine, Didymos and the persons accompanying him.

59 P.Brem. 5-9; P.Giss. 1.71 (= P.Giss.Apoll. 37); P.Giss. 1.88 (= P.Giss.Apoll. 41).
60 P.Giss. 1.71 (= P.Giss.Apoll. 37) and P.Giss. 1.88.3-4 (= P.Giss.Apoll. 41).
61 On the direct link between the letter of recommendation and the bearer, see also Blumell 2014: 47, n. 70.
62 SPP 22.61.5-6 (II/III AD). The παρτικλάριον is probably a list.
63 P.Mil.Vogl. 1.11.8-9 (first half II AD).
64 P.Flor. 2.258.3-5 (III AD).
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The letter may be travelling along with a bulky delivery of goods, or even with a dead body, which easily justifies the presence of several bearers.

εὖ ποιήσεις τοῖς ἀναδιδοῦσι σοι ταῦτα τῇ γράμματα παραδῶν πᾶς τῆς Τεπτύνεως κριθῆς ἄρτῳς τριάκοσι[...] (…).

Please hand over to the persons who are delivering this writing to you three hundred artabai of barley using the measure of Tebtynis.65

ἀξιώσω οὖν, κυρε μου, εἶνα δῶς αὐτοῖς γράμματα εἶνα μηδίς ἐνοχλήσαι αὐτοῖς καθ’ ὁδόν, εἶνα δυνηθῷ κηδεῦσας τὸ σωμάτιν ἐλθὼν πρὸς σέ.

Therefore I ask you, my lord, to issue to them a written document so that no one will bother them along the way, so that I may bury the body and come to you.66

2.3.5 Gender

The conventional use of the masculine to designate a letter-bearer is made here by way of simplification. Judging from the grammatical usage followed by the senders, most bearers of letters seem to be male. Women nonetheless appear too, for example in a letter of recommendation sent to a strategos on behalf of a woman.

Ἀπολλωνοῦν τὴν ἀναδιδοῦσάν σοι τὸ ἐπιστόλιον (...).

Apollonous, who is delivering [feminine participle] this letter to you (...).67

In a chain of transmission of a letter, a woman can also receive a letter and forward it to the next person. The following case is particularly interesting, as it consists of instructions about the transmission of an official letter, embedded in the text of a private letter.

ἀναδώσεις Ταβαθεῦτι τὴν ἐπιστολὴν τὴν τοῦ διοικητοῦ πρὸς τὸν στρατηγὸν. πᾶν δὲ ποισάτω ἀναδώσει αὐτὴν ταχύτερον τῷ στρατηγῷ ἵνα πρὸς τὰ γραφέντα αὐτῷ καὶ αὐτὸς ταχέως ἄντιγραψῇ.

You will deliver to Tabatheus the dioiketes’ letter for the strategos. Let her do her best so that she may deliver it with sufficient speed to the strategos, in order that he too may reply to what was written to him.68

65 P.Mil.Vogl. 4.257.3-5 (AD 175).
66 P.Oxy. 7.1068.23-27 (III AD).
67 P.Giss. 1.88.3-4 (= P.Giss.Apoll. 41; AD 113-120).
It is tempting to explain the scarcity of females in the role of letter-bearers by their reduced liberty of movement, in a society where women are often assigned to house-bound activities. We should nonetheless avoid being too dogmatic on this point. Women are known to travel in Egypt for family or business matters; in the latter case, they can be landowners.69

Women seem to carry letters also when they are directly involved in the business that appears in the letter. In one such case, a woman should collect the price for two arourai of land, presumably for a loan on security.

In a family letter from a woman to another woman, the sender seizes the opportunity to write when a man is going downstream, but she also states her intention to go and visit a farmer herself; she seems quite able to travel on her own.

In another case, a man sends a letter to a woman through another woman, perhaps a slave, who is also carrying an order and some other items.

You will receive from Doxa, the bearer of this note, the order for Ptolemaïs which I received from Chairemon the embroiderer, to send as he gave it to me, sealed. (...) Doxa has also other things which she received (...).72

70 P.Mert. 1.23.3-7 (late II AD).
71 P.Oxy. 33.2680.3-5 and 10-13 (II/III AD); see Rowlandson 1998 : 235.
72 P.Oxy. 14.1677.4-7 and 15 (III AD).
2.4 Conclusion

Business letters from Roman Egypt follow a regular wording, which allows both sender and recipient to recognize the basic elements that will frame the object of the letter itself. The bearer often finds explicit mention, but his existence does not require any special justification because the pattern of communication is well established among the inhabitants of the country. There seems to be no specific restriction on the choice of the bearer: whereas he normally acts alone, multiple bearers also occur; and although men constitute a majority among the bearers, women also play a role in the transmission of letters. Only children are never explicitly mentioned as the bearers of business letters.

3 Structure of communication in business letters

Identifying the bearer of a letter with a typical clause is a first step towards describing business letters in terms of structure. This approach is not new: previous scholars have attempted to conceive letter-writing in that way; it will nonetheless be necessary to propose here a simpler model than what has been developed in the past, so as to focus more specifically on the role of the bearer.

In written correspondence, we can assume a minimal structure of communication where a sender passes a message on to a recipient. In many cases, however, the bearer of the letter plays an active role in the process: not only does he carry the document, but he also brings goods, money or information. It is thus possible to describe the structure of such letters in a dynamic way, where both the sender and the recipient have an interest at stake, and where the bearer usually becomes an instrument in the transaction.

I propose to define structural elements as blocks of text that display a standard wording and play a recognizable function. Business letters include structural elements that are essential (in most cases, they cannot be omitted from the letter) or optional (they appear in some letters, but not on a regular basis). The essential structural elements are: heading, required action, closing formula. An explicit mention of the bearer is not essential, but in the corpus under consideration, it occurs frequently.


Eponychos to his dearest brother Horos, greetings. Give to the bearer of this potsherd [figure lost] Colophonian vessels of good wine. Farewell.74

73 In particular White 1972: 1–41, whose description of letters found among non-literary papyri was in part biased by the second part of his study, on the Pauline letters in the New Testament.

74 O.Stras. 1.792 (I BC / I AD).
An optional element can complement an essential element; the reverse is not true. Most of the structural elements go in pairs. Either those structural elements appear in a fixed relative position in the letter, or their position is loosely determined. Although a mention of the letter’s bearer is optional, in the present context the focus of attention will be directed specifically towards this element.

The rules expressed here have a general validity, but they may suffer from exceptions. In some cases, the exceptions find a ready explanation, whereas sometimes we lack the precise contextual elements that might help us to understand them properly. Also, the labelling of some parts of a letter can be more problematic than it would appear at first glance because they can display an overlap of several functions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>structural element</th>
<th>essential / optional</th>
<th>fixed relative position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>heading (wishes of well-being)</td>
<td>essential</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>context reminder</td>
<td>optional</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>token of identification (σημεῖον)</td>
<td>optional</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>required action</td>
<td>essential</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bearer (τῷ ἀναδιδόντι σοι)</td>
<td>optional</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exhortation (μὴ ἀμελήσῃς)</td>
<td>optional</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>justification</td>
<td>optional</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other business</td>
<td>optional</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communication to others (incl. greetings)</td>
<td>optional</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>closing formula</td>
<td>essential</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1 Heading

The heading is one of the most stable elements in the structure of letters, at least from the fourth century BC till the fourth century AD. It requires no special clarification in the context of this study.

3.2 Wishes of well-being

In a letter where a bearer is explicitly mentioned, this clause appears only seldom, and mostly in the late third or in the fourth century.
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[προηγομένως εύχομαι σε ὅλοκληρον ἀπολαβεῖν καὶ τὸ διακόσμημά σου ποιώ καθ’ ἐκάστην ἡμέραν παρὰ θεός πάση.

First, I pray that I may find you in full health, and I prostrate myself on your behalf before all the gods every day.\(^{75}\)

3.3 Context reminder

The sender often reminds the recipient of the general nature of the business under consideration.


As I have deposited with you the purse of money, give it to the person who delivers to you this writing of mine.\(^{76}\)

καὶ καὶ δύνη σε παρεκάλ[ε]σα ἕνεκα τῶν δέκα σταθµίων τῶν ἔρη[ον], ὄποιος ἔν τάχει αὐτὰ ἀπαρτίσῃς.

Already when we met face to face, I asked you about the ten loads of wool, so that you should have them ready.\(^{77}\)

Besides recalling the context, this sentence also provides the recipient with a way of checking the sender’s identity; the correspondents share a common knowledge of the setting. In P.Herm. 13, the sentences that follow the quoted passage indicate that the sender’s concern lies elsewhere. He has already asked someone else to fetch the money, to no avail; he is now absent from home; and he is in need of his money.

This example shows that the boundary between the different sections of a letter is not always clear. The context reminder also plays to a certain extent the role of a token of identification, and one could argue that it carries a dimension of justification. In the following example, the context reminder is clear enough, so that we can grasp the outline of the story; but it also allows the recipient to ascertain the sender’s identity.

\(^{75}\) PSI 3.236.3-5 (III/IV AD); see also P.Oxy. 14.1770.4-6 (late III AD) and P.Oxy. 20.2275.2-3 (III/IV AD).

\(^{76}\) P.Herm. 13.3-7 (IV AD); transl. adapted from the editor.

\(^{77}\) SB 6.9160.3-7 (= P.Mil.Vogl. 3.201; II AD).
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You should have, without my writing to you through Saetas, sent me the 20 drachmai, for you know that I paid them here to my partners; but you waited all that time without paying me back. 78

This section can be used simply to establish a communication that has been so far unsatisfactory.

3.4 Token of identification (σημείον)

Since letters sometimes had to be entrusted to strangers, communication between the sender and his recipient was hardly safe. In the following passage, the sender tries to reassure the recipient that he can trust the bearer of the letter and pay him the requested amount of money.

(...) λημψόμενος παρ’ αὐτοῦ τὸ χειρόγραφόν σου μετὰ πάσης ἁσφαλείας (...).

(...) when you receive from him the letter that is addressed to you with all security (...). 79

The sender merely states with some emphasis that this procedure is safe and that the bearer of the letter may be trusted. Another sender requires the transmission of a letter of credit through a safe channel.

τὸ ἐπιστόλιον τὸ τῆς ἐπιθήκης τὸ διαπεμφθέν σοι ἀπ’ Ἀλεξανδρείας διὰ ἁσφαλοὺς μοι πέμψον.

Send me through a safe messenger the letter of credit that was sent to you from Alexandria. 80

Sending letters of credit seems to be a particularly delicate task that requires great care in the dispatch. In the following example, the bearer is explicitly presented as someone in the direct service of the sender; moreover, he should be allowed to leave as fast as possible.

78 P.Oxy. 3.532.2-9 (II AD).
79 P.Coll.Youtie 2.88.5-8 (IV AD).
80 P.Oxy. 41.2983.11-13 (II/III AD).
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In other cases, however, the sender resorts to a sign of recognition, the function of which is to bring the recipient to trust the message’s carrier. In the Classical period, this is called a σύμβολον and consists of two pieces from a single object — often a potsherd — that, by joining together, provide a proof of connection between two individuals. This device is also used in a metaphorical fashion, with the sender providing the recipient with a written token of identification.

Let the beginning of this letter be for you at the same time a token that it is from me: one day, when you were entertaining the Locrian young men, you were seated away from me, and you got up to tell me, in a well-meaning way, a pleasant word, namely that (...).

In papyri, this metaphor of a token is called a σημεῖον ‘sign’. The σημεῖον clause constitutes the prototype of a password: in a fashion similar to Plato’s σύμβολον, the sender is recognized by mentioning a piece of information that he and the recipient share in common (and that presumably the bearer cannot have made up).

σημεῖον (1. σημεῖον) ὅτι ἦκις καλῶν με καὶ τὸν γαμβρὸν καὶ λέγο σοι ὅτι ὅφθαλμά.  
The sign (of authentication) is that you came to call on me and (your?) son-in-law, and I told you that he was suffering from eye-disease.

(...) ἐπὶ σημέω (1. σημείω) ὅτι σοι ἁφίοκα χοῦν ἐλαιόν καὶ μάτιν πιπέρεος εἶνα παραδοῖς Καρίλῳ.  

(...) the sign (of authentication) being that I sent you a chous of oil and a mation of pepper to give to Karila.

---

81 P.Oxy. 51.3644.3-6 and 30-31 (III AD).  
82 Youtie 1970.  
83 [Plat.] Ep. 13.360a-b.  
84 O.Did. 361.6-8 (AD 76/77); transl. A. Bülow-Jocobsen.  
85 O.Did. 364.6-10 (discarded c. AD 88-96); transl. A. Bülow-Jocobsen.
As a sign (of authentification), (remember) that I loaded three hundred linen *semesta* when you embarked with Alexandros the linen-dealer.\(^8^6\)

A σημείον clause appears also in the revised version of P.Prag. 1.111 (Appendix 1, below): it is a piece of information, not directly related to the business that constitutes the object of the letter, and presumably known only to the sender and the recipient, but not to someone who may want to forge or falsify the message.

### 3.5 Required action

The core element of the letter consists of the action required of the recipient: most often, he should give something to the bearer.

\[
καλῶς ποιήσεις δοὺς (...) ἵππηρ μὲν τόκου (δραχμὰς) δ (τετρῶβολον) καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ κεφαλαίου (δραχμὰς) δ, ὡς γενέσθαι (δραχμαὶ) ἡ (τετρῶβολον).
\]

Please give 4 *drachmai* and 4 *oboloi* as interest, and from the capital 4 *drachmai*, which makes a total of 8 *drachmai* and 4 *oboloi*.\(^8^7\)

Apart from carrying the letter, the bearer can bring other items, collect some goods or money from the recipient, or he can perform an action for which he needs the help or protection of the recipient. This will be examined in greater detail below.

### 3.6 Bearer (τῷ ἀναδιδόντι σοι)

The bearer clause is normally associated with the description of the action required; it can be placed before, within or after the sentence describing the action.

\[
καλῶς ποιήσεις δοὺς τῷ ἀναδιδόντι σοι ταῦτα μου τὰ γράμματα (...).
\]

[required action] Please give [bearer] to the person who delivers to you this writing of mine (...).\(^8^8\)

In the phrasing of a single document, there can be a certain amount of variation, or even of repetition.

---

\(^8^6\) P.Oxy. 59.3979.13-14, with comm. and additional references. The nature of *semesta* (an *addendum lexicis*) remains unclear.

\(^8^7\) P.Gen. 1.2.2-4 (II/III AD).

\(^8^8\) P.Flor. 2.274.3-4 (AD 265).
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(...) ἀποδοῦναι τὰ ἐκατὸν τάλαντα Δίῳ λημψόμενος παρ’ αὐτοῦ τὸ χειρόγραφόν σου. (...) δοῦναι αὐτῷ Δίῳ τὸ ἀναδίδοντι σοι ταῦτα μου τὰ γράμματα.

(...) deliver the hundred talanta to Dios when you receive from him the letter sent to you. (...) give the (hundred talanta) to Dios, who is delivering this writing from me. 89

The sender does not systematically name the bearer of the letter; but when he does, this constitutes a kind of introduction for the bearer. The sender can add some emphasis to this clause by placing it in the initial context reminder, as in the following example, where the sender underlines the parallel between a past context and a present request.

Χαιρήμονα τὸν ἀναδίδοντα σοι τὸ ἐπιστόλιον τοῦτο οὖκ ἄγνοείς, ἀδελφε· καὶ γὰρ πέρυσι ἐπὶ τὴν παράλληλην τὸν ιματίων αὐτὸν παρὰ σοι κατέλειψα καὶ νῦν δὲ πρὸς παράλληλην κρείθης ἔπεμψα αὐτὸν (...).

Chairemon, who is delivering this letter to you, is not unknown to you, brother: for a year ago I left him with you for the collection of the coats; and now I have sent him for the collection of barley (...).

In the following case, the bearer is not identified by name, but the parallel between past context and present request is very similar.

καὶ κατ’ ἐσιν σε παρεκάλεσα (…) καὶ νῦν ἐρωτηθεὶς σπουδάσασιν τὸ ἀναδίδοντι σοι τὸ ἐπιστόλιον αὐτὰ δοῦναι (...).

Already when I saw you, I asked (…) and now, upon my request, take care to give them to the person who delivers this letter to you (...).

3.7 Exhortation (μὴ ἀμελήσῃς)

Once the sender has requested an action, he may want to make his instructions more effective by insisting on the importance of the envisaged business. This is done by exhortation, often using a wording like μὴ ἀμελήσης ‘do not neglect (the task)’, or μὴ ἄλλως πράξῃς ‘do not act otherwise’. 92 The clause replaces another, which was used in the Ptolemaic period, μὴ ἄλλως ποιήσῃς (I. -σης) ‘do not act otherwise’. 93

89 P.Coll.Youtie 2.88.3-7 and 15-17 (IV AD).
90 P.Giss. 1.69.3-7 (AD 118/119).
91 P.Mil.Vogl. 3.201.3 and 7-8 (II AD).
92 Steen 1938 : 162-166.
93 P.Heid. 7.393.5-7, with comm.
Do not neglect (the matter) for I have encouraged you often on this and you know how pressing it is.\(^{94}\)

See to it that you do not neglect to pay him the money for which you will receive the letter. (…) and you should therefore not neglect to give them. (…) Communicate also to Deme-
trios: ‘Take care to send the money to the man now that he has become the middleman so as to avoid being summoned by soldiers.’\(^{96}\)

Do not neglect to deliver the wine (…) and devote your care to this business.\(^{97}\)

In other parts of this letter, the sender’s eagerness to get his money back is emphasised by his choice of words: ἀναγκαῖος ‘by necessity’; εὐθέως ‘quickly’; ὅπως κἀκεῖ ἀσκυλτὸν ποιήσῃς ‘that you may save me too from trouble’. This presumably explains both the repetition found in P.Coll.Youtie 2.88 and the barely veiled threat that appears in P.Oxy. 3.532. It may also help to understand why, in the following instance, the sender embeds an exhortation within the required action.

\(^{94}\) BGU 2.417.10-11 (II/III AD).
\(^{95}\) P.Oxy. 3.532.15 (II AD).
\(^{96}\) P.Coll.Youtie 2.88.8-9, 14-15 and 18-22.
\(^{97}\) P.Tebt.Quen. 22.11-16 (II/III AD).
\(^{98}\) P.Oxy. 3.532.15-18 (II AD).
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ἵνα οὖν πέμψῃ μοι μίκκον χαρτάριον καὶ στημόνιν. μὴ ἀμελήσῃς. πέμψων μοι διὰ τοῦ ἀναδίδοντός σοι τὴν ἐπιστολήν.

(Ensure) that you send me the small slip of papyrus and the string. Do not neglect (the matter). Send it to me through the person who delivers this letter to you.\(^99\)

3.8 Justification

An exhortation, however, may not be enough; the recipient is sometimes offered some kind of justification that again underlines the importance of the business.

(...) καὶ γὰρ ἐν Παώμει τότε σε εὕρον καὶ βουλόμενον σε φιλανθρωπωσαι οὐκ ἀνέμεινας ὑπὸ κακοῦ συνειδότος κατεξήμενος.

(...) for the other day I found you in Paomis and wanted to treat you kindly; but you would not stay because you were oppressed by your bad conscience.\(^{100}\)

The sender uses justification in order to strengthen his argument: the recipient will more readily comply with the request if he understands its urgency. In some cases, the justification actually tells quite an intricate story.

(...) ἐπὶ δὴ ὁ ἐπιστήκων Ανουβίων κατέχει αὐτὸν ὡς αὐτοῦ ἀποδράσαντος τῶν χρόνων Καστορίωνος. (...) εἶπε μοι γὰρ ὅτι εἴ τι βούλεται διδῶ αὐτῷ, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ἔγραψά σοι. ἐὰν γὰρ σὺ θελήσῃς, γείνεται αὐτοῦ τὸ ἔργον.

(...) since the superintendent Anoubion is holding him because he ran away in the times of Kastorion. (...) For he told me: ‘If he wants something, I give it to him’. And for this reason I wrote to you. For if you wish so, his affair is concluded.\(^{101}\)

This document does not imply a truly bi-directional business; it works more like a letter of recommendation. According to the sender, the bearer has the means to satisfy whatever wish the recipient may have. It thus seems that the bearer is trying to escape from Anoubion’s grip and needs help from a person in a position of power, who will presumably act on the sender’s recommendation.

3.9 Other business

The focus of a letter is not necessarily placed on a single issue. In the following example, the main point of the letter is to request some money; but the sender carries on with some additional information.

\(^{99}\) O.Claud. 2.239.3-7 (mid-II AD).
\(^{100}\) P.Oxy. 3.532.18-24 (II AD).
\(^{101}\) P.Mich. 8.515.2-5 (late III AD).
As regards the brother of Melanos the president of the athletic association, he often wrote to me about the matter, and I sent him numerous replies. And concerning the receipt, he wrote that he gave it in part to Eudaimon, not himself, but those who brought there the introduction letter.102

3.10 Communication to others (incl. greetings)

A general mention of family relatives may appear, or of friends whose existence the sender wishes to acknowledge.

ἀσπάζομαι Σερήνον τὸν ἀδέλφον καὶ Πτολεμαῖον.

I send greetings to my brother Serenos and to Ptolemaios.103

3.11 Closing formula

The closing formula produces an echo to the initial heading. Here again, further elaboration does not seem necessary.

ἐρρώσθαι σε εὔχομαι πολλοῖς χρόνοις.

I pray for your health over many years.104

3.12 Conclusion

Examination of business letters carrying a mention of the bearer reveals a structural pattern that fits not all, but most cases. To a core consisting of essential elements (heading, required action, closing formula), the writer adds various devices that will increase the effectiveness of an action in which he is only indirectly involved: the bearer, who is often mentioned explicitly, carries out the task assigned to him.

In this structure, two elements stand out because they underline a fundamental difficulty in the process of communication. First, a token of identification (σημεῖον) becomes necessary when the bearer’s trustworthiness can be doubted by the recipient, as we shall see below in greater detail. In communication through letters, we witness only the written dimension of the exchange, but we have no idea of the oral communication that may have taken place, first between the sender and the bearer, then between the bearer and the recipient. Given

102 PSI 3.236.15-20 (III/IV AD).
103 P.Oxy. 59.3990.12-13 (II AD).
104 P.Mich. 8.515.6-7 (late III AD).
The risk of distortion or abuse on the part of the bearer, the token of identification is an essential element of the exchange.

Second, the exhortation clause (μὴ ἀμελήσῃς) betrays another limitation induced by acting through a third party: the sender cannot necessarily count on the bearer to enforce the instruction as effectively as if he had appeared in person before the recipient. Therefore, the sender must make his presence felt as strongly as possible.

4 Various roles of the bearer

4.1 Delivering the letter to the proper address

The recipient of a letter normally has a given address, but this cannot be taken for granted: in some instances, the recipient is a moving target and the letter follows the tracks of someone who has departed elsewhere.


As soon as I reached Alexandria, I went off to Valerius; and they tell me that he left today. They took the letter so as to send it to the countryside.105

Assuming that the address is stable, already in the Ptolemaic period, some letter-bearers receive written directions that will help them to find their destination.106 Such directions also occur in the Roman period. In most cases, the sender writes them on the back of the letter, for the bearer to see.

[ἀπόδος εἰς] Ἀλεξ(α)νδρείαν εἰς Σεβα(στὴν) Ἀγορά(ν) ε[ἰς] τ[ὴν] . . . . . . . θήκην ὅστε Ἡρακλ(είδη) π(αρὰ) Σαραπίω(νος) . . . . . . . ονος το(ῦ) Σωσιπάτρου.

Deliver to Alexandria, to Augustus’ Market, to the (storing-place ?), for Herakleides, from Sarapion son of –on, grandson of Sosipatros.107

εἰς τὸ γυμνάσιον Θέωνι Νικοβούλ(ο)ῦ ἑλεοχρειστη.

To the gymnasium, for Theon son of Nikoboulos, municipal supplier of oil.108

105 P.Oxy. 59.3988.3-9 (II AD [?]).
106 P.Cair.Zen. 4.59653 (III BC).
107 BGU 4.1079 verso.1-4 (AD 41).
108 P.Oxy. 2.300 verso.12-13 (late I AD).
Deliver to the Isis (temple), to Apion, priest, from Theonas.\textsuperscript{109}

Deliver to Senthonis on the theatre square, from Gaius, tinker, on behalf of his brother Hype-rephanes.\textsuperscript{110}

In the third century AD, directions sometimes receive an explicit label: σημασία.

From Zosimos to his brother Euphrosynos, directions: to quarter # 1 of Antinoopolis, in the Heptanomia (...).

Deliver to Antinoopolis, to Silvinas, from Athenodoros, soldier. Directions: from the northern side of the temple of the Hermonthites, opposite the –store, towards the passage.\textsuperscript{112}

Some sets of directions are prepared on a separate sheet of papyrus and contain detailed information, in the following case for delivery in Alexandria.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{109} P.Oxy. 8.1155 verso.18-19 (AD 104).
\textsuperscript{110} PSI 13.1331 verso.35-36 (III AD).
\textsuperscript{111} P.Laur. 1.20 verso.2-3 (early III AD).
\textsuperscript{112} P.Meyer 20 verso.3-5 (early III AD). Other examples in P.Oxy. 14.1678 verso.28-31 (III AD); P.Oxy. 14.1773 verso.40-44 (III AD); P.Hamb. 4.267 verso.2 (incorporating P.Ross.Georg. 3.6; ca. AD 336-348). In BGU 4.1064.18-19 (AD 277/278), the σημασία is apparently written at the bottom of the letter. SB 6.9126 is a mummy label, the address presumably attached to a coffin (see P.Par. 18bis = W.Chr. 499, III AD).
\textsuperscript{113} Daniel 1984; Fowler 1985; Llewelyn 1994. For another striking example of directions for delivery in Alexandria, see P.Oxy. 34.2719 (late IV AD), interpreted by Gascou 2012.
\textsuperscript{114} SB 16.12550 (III/IV AD).
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4.2 Letter carrier

The bearer’s first and most evident role is to carry a letter from a sender to a recipient. The sender can be away from home; or he is unable to perform an action and entrusts it to a messenger.

(... ὃτι ἐν ὧν ἀποτελεῖται εἴμι καὶ οὐ δύναμαι ἐπεξεργαστῆται, χρείαν ἑξορκίζων.
(... because I am away from home and I cannot come and fetch (those items), although I need them.\textsuperscript{115}

τὸι ἀναδιδόντι σοι τὰ γράμματα ποίησον αὐτὸν γεύσασθαι τοῦ ὀίνου.
To the person who delivers this writing from me, make him taste the wine.\textsuperscript{116}

Senders seize opportunities as they arise.

(... τῷ ἀναδίκτῳ σοι τὴν ἐπιστολὴν ἀποειρήσασθαι.
(... to the person who delivers this letter to you – his name is Sarapion – since he is on his way to Alexandria.\textsuperscript{117}

[ἐπέμψαμέν σοι ταύτην τὴν ἐπιστολὴν διὰ τῶν φυλάκων ἑκπορευομένων, ἐπειδὴ δὲ ἄλλου οὐ δυνάμεθα πένσασθαι σοι; (...) ἀλλὰ πάλιν διὰ τῶν φυλάκων ἑπιστολὴν πένσασθαι ἡ διὰ Πανβεύτου.
We have sent you this letter through the police officers who were setting off, since we could not send it to you through anyone else (...). But in return, send a letter through the police officers or through Paesis son of Panbeus.\textsuperscript{118}

καὶ δὲ οὐ ἔδωκεν ἐδρῆς ἑπιστολὴν μοι πέμψων.
And through anyone you may find, send me a letter.\textsuperscript{119}

The bearer is expected to be a trustworthy person; depending on the additional business that he will conduct with the recipient, some degree of caution may be necessary. In the two following cases, the sender alludes to items other than a letter; but the process of transmission is similar.

\textsuperscript{115} P.Herm. 13.10-12 (IV AD).
\textsuperscript{116} P.Oxy. 12.1576.2-5 (III AD).
\textsuperscript{117} SB 24.16339.7-10 (= P.Harr. 1.153; III AD).
\textsuperscript{118} P.Iand. 2.10.2-5 (III AD).
\textsuperscript{119} P.Ross.Georg. 3.3.13-14 (= SB 3.7242; III AD).
Various roles of the bearer

When I find someone trustworthy, I shall send (the requested *chiton*).\(^{120}\)

ἐπεθέμην Σαραπίων[ι] τῷ άδελφῳ ἵνα ὅσα ἐὰν ἔχῃς μοι πέμψαι ἀσφαλῶς δι’ αὐτοῦ πεμφθῇ.
I imposed on my brother Sarapion that, whatever you may have to send to me, be sent securely through him.\(^{121}\)

The sender of another letter refers to τῷ παρα πόν ‘the person coming from [the recipient]’, then makes an explicit statement on the bearer’s behaviour.

ὅρα μή σε παραλογείσει {σε}, ὡς κοινῶς ἡγορακέναι παραλελόγισται.
Ensure that he does not cheat on you, since it has been common practice for him to cheat in the buying process.\(^{122}\)

In another case already mentioned above, the sender has asked the recipient for what looks like a list (τὸ παρτικλάριν μου), then adds that it should be sealed before sending (ἐσφραγισμένον πέμψις μοι), presumably to keep it confidential.\(^{123}\) The bearer’s negligence also appears to undermine the sender’s credit.

ή τῶν παρακομισζόντων (I. -μιζ-) ἀμέλεια διέβαλεν ἡμᾶς ὡς ἀμελεῖς.
The negligence of those who carry (the letters) has given the false impression that we were negligent.\(^{124}\)

Double-checking takes place, for instance, when the sender confirms safe receipt of a letter that confirmed safe receipt of a sum of money; the same person carries the letters both ways. This double-checking is justified by the fact that, sometimes, letters get lost along the way.

gινώσκειν σε θέλω ὅτι ἐκομισάμην σου ἔπετόλιον διὰ Ἐρμείνου τοῦ κοινοῦ φύλου ὡς κομισμένον[υ σο]υ παρ’ αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸν ἐμὸν λόγον ἀρ[α]βής (δραχμ[ὲς]) μ.
I want you to know that I received your letter through our common friend Herminos, stating that you had received from him 40 *drachmai* to be credited on my account.\(^{125}\)

\(^{120}\) P.Mich. 8.514.13-14 (III AD); see also PSI 8.900.5-6 (III/IV AD).

\(^{121}\) SB 16.12322. 5-7 (I AD).

\(^{122}\) P.Oslo 2.47.8-10 (AD 1).

\(^{123}\) SPP 22.61.3-6 (II/III AD). For additional references to similar cases in family letters, see Blumell 2014 : 48, n. 74.


\(^{125}\) P.Mert. 1.24.3-6 (ca. AD 200).
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I have received your letter by which you write to me that you sent me two letters. Know, brother, that I received only one.126

I want you to know that the letters, which you had announced by letter, and the book, which you had given to Pattape’s men, I received them all.127

Please let me know if you have received, either from Nikagoras or from Isidoros, either the wheat or the deposit, and if Diodoros also (brought) you the writing or not (...).128

Business letters in a private context were not the only ones to go astray: a strategos also acknowledges the loss of some official letters.

After I was appointed as strategos in year 1, in the month of Phaophi, I made copies of all the letters that were entrusted to me. Since, however, it happens that through the messengers’ fault some were lost, would you please let me know if you have a letter that lacks a reply from me.129

In a family context, a single sheet of papyrus can hold several letters, making it easier for the sender to reach simultaneously more than one member of his family.130 The sender can

126 P.Mich. 15.752.29-32 (late II AD).
127 P.Ross.Georg. 3.4.6-9 (III AD [?]).
128 PSI 1.95.2-7 (III AD).
129 P.Oxy. 60.4060.56-59 (AD 161), quoted by Cuvigny 2019: 81. In P.Lond. 7.2033.2-4 (257-248 BC), letters were eaten by mice; the same happens also in P.Panop. Beatty 1.390-391 (AD 298).
130 E.g. BGU 2.615 (II AD); P.Oxy. 36.2789 (III AD); also P.Wisc. 2.84 and SB 3.6263 (both AD 175-199), belonging to the Archive of Satornila and her sons; Rowlandson 1998: 143-144.
also bundle letters together. This presumably corresponds to the ἀπόδεσμοι that appear in the postal service maintained by the army in the Eastern Desert.

ἐπεμψά σοι τὰ ἐπιστόλια Αἰμιλιανοῦ καὶ Ῥοῦφου καὶ Χαρίτωνος.
I have sent you the letters of Aemilianus and Rufus and Chariton.

συνέδησα ἐπιστολήν μου καὶ ἄλλην τοῦ ἐνθάδε νομικοῦ πρὸς τὸν παρὰ σοι νομικόν.
I have attached my own letter together with another from the local notary, addressed to the notary who is established in your place.

κόμισον παρὰ Ἡραίσκο[ν] ἐπιστόλια δύο [ . , ] δεδ[εμέ]να (...).
Receive from Heraiskos two letters attached (...).

When the sender is forwarding a request from another person, he may send the original written request together with his own letter.

νομίζω δὲ τὴν δέσην αὐτοῦ μὴ ἐνιαὶ σοι φορτικὴν φίλω σου ὄντι. ἔπεμψα δὲ σοι καὶ ὑπὸ παρ᾽ αὐτοῦ γράμματα.
I believe that his request is not a burden to you since he is a friend of yours. Besides, I have sent also the writing I received from him.

4.3 Informant

The bearer of a letter may travel back and forth between the original sender and his correspondent, and can therefore deliver some information.

δὸς τῷ κομείζοντι σοι τὴν ἐπιστολήν τὴν λαογραφίαν Μνησιθέου καὶ τὸ ναύβιον, καὶ πέμψον ἡμένην περὶ τῶν βιβλίων ἢ ἐξήρτισας.
Give Mnesitheos’ poll-tax and canal-tax to the person who is bringing this letter to you, and send (a reply) to us about the books, (telling us) how you dispatched them.

131 Incidentally, this provides a possible explanation for the fact that some letters lack an address. It was suggested in P.Oxy. 31.2599 that a letter without an address could have been enclosed in a parcel.

132 Cuvigny 2019 : 80.


134 P.Oxy. 41.2983.4-7 (II/III AD).

135 O.Claud. 2.250.3-5 (II AD).

136 P.Oslo 2.60.8-11 (II AD).

137 P.Oxy. 2.296.3-7 (AD 37).
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The person who is carrying this potsherd is returning to me. Take care to write through him about the house census.\textsuperscript{138}

Requests for personal information about the recipient’s health belong for the most part to the category of family letters.

If this were not too much trouble for you, write me a letter about your health through the person who is carrying this letter.\textsuperscript{139}

The bearer may add some oral information to the content of a letter, or bring some feedback to the sender, either spontaneously or because he has been instructed to do so.\textsuperscript{140}

The bearer of a letter can also assist in administrative tasks on behalf of the sender. In one case, he brings some documents that require registration by an office, and will then forward them to an archive.

To the person who is delivering this letter to you, I have given two documents for registration, together with the letters accompanying them and 32 drachmai. So arrange the registration

\textsuperscript{138} O.Florida 14.13-15 (late II AD).
\textsuperscript{139} P.Oxy. 14.1757.17-22 (II AD). PSI 14.1440.5-7 (II/III AD) seems to contain a similar request for a reply to be forwarded through the bearer.
\textsuperscript{140} Head 2009 : 289.
\textsuperscript{141} P.Flor. 2.255.5-8 (mid-III AD).
\textsuperscript{142} BGU 3.829.6-7, corrected from the current text καὶ ἐ[π]ρ[ῃ]ξίον ϑέλει ὁ κομίζων ἃ σοι τῷ διο[ρ]θοσε τῷ ὑπόμνημα. This letter is similar to a business letter, but was actually written by a prefect of Egypt. See Schubert 2018a.
swiftly, as you are used to, then give them to him or to any person you may deem trustworthy at Didymos’ bank (for transmission) towards the archive or to Herakleides’ notary office.\textsuperscript{143}

4.4 Carrier of other items

The bearer of a letter often carries some goods for the recipient. The wording, however, can be misleading because the sender does not specify clearly who is sending the goods, and who is carrying them.

κόμισαι παρὰ Πετεχῶντ(ος) ἀγρίας ἁσταφίδος μ( ) α, ὃν εὐδήλωσεν Διογάς πέπομ[φέναι (...)].
Receive from Petechon one (…) of wild raisins, which Diogas indicated he had sent (…).\textsuperscript{144}

It seems that Petechon is the original sender of the goods; we do not know what precise role Diogas played in the transmission. The sender of the letter implies that the raisins are being brought together with the letter, although this is not said explicitly. In this other document, we can suppose that Kephalas is the bearer of the letter.

κόμισαι διὰ Κεφαλάτος Πετεχῶ(ντος) Σαλβίου τὴν λαογραφίαν μου (δραχμὰς) ιβ.
Receive through Kephalas son of Petechon, grandson of Salvius, the (amount for) poll tax, 12 drachmai.\textsuperscript{145}

In the following examples, a clear relation between the wares and the bearer of the letter can be established.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wares</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>cattle (?)</td>
<td>P.Oxy. 78.5180.2-5 (II/III AD).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>food</td>
<td>P.Mich. 3.213.7-14 (III AD).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>olives</td>
<td>P.Fay. 130.15-16 (III AD); P.Oxy. 14.1770.14-17 (late III AD).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pomegranates</td>
<td>P.Hamb. 1.90.11-13 (mid-III AD); P.Oxy. 14.1757.16-17 (later than AD 138).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>honeycomb</td>
<td>P.Laur. 1.20.11-12 (first half III AD).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cheese</td>
<td>P.Laur. 3.102 verso.10-12 (III AD).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bread</td>
<td>P.Mert. 2.85.9-11 (later than AD 229/230).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wheat (in jugs)</td>
<td>SB 5.8002.4-7 (III AD [?]).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{143} P.Oxy. 34.2726.12-28 (II AD).
\textsuperscript{144} SB 26.16608.25-29 (= P.Yale 1.77; ca. AD 100).
\textsuperscript{145} P.Oxy. 14.1756.4-7 (I AD).
dried fruit and pinecones | BGU 3.801.12-18 (II AD).
palm wine and other jugs | P.Brook. 17.4-9 (III AD).
basket | P.Mich. 8.481.5-8 (early II AD); BGU 2.615.11-13 (II AD); P.Med. 1.74.3-6 (= SB 5.7999; II AD); P.Oxy. 6.936.5-16 (III AD).
bags | P.Oxy. 6.937.29-30 (III AD).
clothing | P.Mert. 3.113.14-19 (II AD).
sandals | P.Oxy. 47.3356 (AD 76); PSI 3.206.8-11 (III AD).
shoe soles | PSI 13.1332.7-9 (= SB 5.7992; II/III AD).
purple dye | P.Oxy. 6.931.4-6 (II AD).
fleece, oil, medical supplies | PSI 8.900.3-5 and 14 (III/IV AD).
books | P.Mil.Vogl. 1.11 (first half II AD).
parchment | P.Oxy. 17.2156.7-11 (IV/V AD).
seals | P.IFAO 2.40.7-10 (III AD [?]).
money | P.Oxy. 36.2786.3-4 (I AD); BGU 7.1677.3-4 (II AD); P.Oslo 2.54.3-5 (II/III AD); SB 26.16762.7-9 (IV/V AD).
sealed order | P.Oxy. 14.1677.5-7 (III AD).
undefined | P.Oxy. 78.5180.2-4; P.Mil.Vogl. 4.254.4-7 (III AD); SB 6.9549.5-7 (III AD); PSI 3.236.10-15 (III/IV AD).147

In one instance, the letter’s bearer is carrying a basket with several items, and the recipient should get some other stuff from two different persons.

κόμισαι παρὰ Σύρου κλούιν ὕδων π καὶ βαυκάλιον ὄσον τριχούλεικον σινάπεως καὶ ἡμίχων ἐλαίου ῥαφανίνου καὶ βαυκάλιον ὄσον ἡμίχων μέλιτος καὶ τὸ ἐξιρίδιν. κόμισαι παρὰ Ἀγαθημέρου μελικηρίδα καὶ κόθραν πλακούντων ἄ ταῦτα δὺς τῇ ἀδελφῇ μου καὶ άσπάζου αὐτὴν λείαν. κόμισαι παρὰ τοῦ κομίζοντός σοι τὸ ἐπιστόλιον κλούιν ἔχον μ καὶ σφυρίδιον Κανωπικὸν ὄσον ζεύη γάρτων δ καὶ σζεύγη σκωρσελέινας.

Receive from Syros a basket of 80 eggs and a jug with 3 choinikes of mustard and half a chous of raphanos oil and a jug with half a chous of honey and the dagger. From Agathemeros receive a honeycomb and a pot of 10 cakes and 3 honey-sweet garlands; give these to my sister

146 Sandals are frequently sent together with a letter, see Russo 2004 : 36.
147 Mutilated text; it seems that the sender is forwarding some money through the bearer of the letter, asking that this money be transmitted to another person.
and salute her warmly. Receive from the bearer of the letter a basket containing 40 eggs (?) and a Canopic basket with 4 pairs of loaves and 6 pairs of (...).  

This suggests that several parcels were put together and placed into the hands of one person, together with the letter. The delivery of a basket – with unspecified contents – is also announced by the sender of a letter.

έάν σοι ἑνέκη καλάθιν ὁ κομιζόμενος σοι τὸ ἐπιστόλειον, πέμ[π]ω.

If the person who is carrying this letter delivers a basket to you, I am sending it.  

In the following case, the bearer of the letter is expected to, first, hand money to the recipient of the letter, who is the sender’s mother; second, with this money, she will reclaim from a pawnbroker some clothes that belong to her son; and third, the bearer will carry the clothes back to the original sender of the letter.


Receive from Chairemon, who is bringing this letter to you, one hundred and twelve drachmai, from which you will give to Sarapion, the friend of Apis, to redeem my clothes, one hundred drachmai, for the interest eight drachmai, and for the expense of the celebration, four drachmai.  

In another case, the bearer should collect some wine and he brings money to pay for it.


Please, brother, send two single monochora of wine through the person who is delivering this writing to you. You will receive from him 20 drachmai for their price.  

Judging from the preserved testimonies, the sending of additional items to the recipient happens mostly in family letters – less so in business letters – with the wording κόμισαι παρὰ τοῦ ἀναδιδόντος σοι τὴν ἐπιστολήν ‘receive from the person who is delivering this letter to you’. In a family letter that includes business matters, a rather complicated exchange takes place.

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148 P.Oxy. 6.936.5-16 (III AD); transl. Grenfell & Hunt. For another comparable instance, P.Mil.Vogl. 2.70.2-8 (II AD).
149 BGU 2.615.11-13 (II AD).
150 P.Oxy. 3.530.10-17 (II AD).
151 SB 6.9415 (17).3-9 (AD 249-268).
The bearers of business letters in Roman Egypt

In the following example, the bearer of the letter is not presented explicitly as such, but the various roles ascribed to Didymos, who appears in the letter, leave little room for a doubt that he is indeed carrying the message, together with some goods; and he must bring back some information.

diepempsiavanσι διὰ Διδύμου δέρματα βότια τὸν ὑπὸ ἄριθμον αὐτῷ μεταδόθη ὁ αὐτὸς Διδύμως καὶ ψάθως ἐμοῦ μόνου μεμπιστομένας ὑπὲρ Ἡρακλείδου πῆθι ὧν τὸ ἦμη ἵστ ἔστιν ἐμοῦ, τῆς δαπάνης πάσης τῶν ταῖς βοτίων καὶ πασῶν τῶν ψάθων ὡσὶ πρὸς Ἡρακλείδιον. τὰ ἄργυρα ἐὰν συνήλεξης εὐθέως διὰ ἐπιθήκης διασπέρισα μοι, δήλον μοι πόσα βότια παρέλεξας καὶ πόσης τιμῆς πιπρᾶσκετε, καὶ πόσαι ψάθαι ἀποκείμεναι ἀπὸ τοῦ πρωτέρου φορτίου, καὶ σὺν τούτοις πόσαι ἀπόκεινται. ταῦτα δὲ πάντα διὰ τοῦ αὐτοῦ Διδύμου δηλόως μοι. εὐθέως δὲ τὸν αὐτὸν Διδύμων ἀπόλυσον, ἢν μή ἐπὶ πλίν παρέλκηται παρὰ σοι.

I have sent you through Didymos some sheepskins – the same Didymos will let you know how many of them there are – and some mats, of which thirty-eight, dyed red, belong to me alone, eighty-one I own together with Herakleides; half of these are mine, but all the expense for the sheepskins and for all the mats is for Herakleides to pay. If you collect the money, send it to me at once by letter of credit. Tell me how many sheepskins you received and at what price they are selling, and how many mats are in stock from the last shipment and how many are in stock counting these. You are to let me know all this through the same Didymos. Let the same Didymos go at once, so that he may not be detained longer with you (…).

Also in two family letters, control devices appear; they allow the senders to ensure that goods accompanying the letter do not disappear along the way.

κόμισον […...] παρὰ τοῦ ἀναδιδοῦντι τῇ[αὐ] τά μου τὰ γράμματα ἁγ’ ἑγέρσιν ἐλέου καὶ διὸς αὐτὸ Ἴλεκτει, ἐχον ἐπιγραφὴν Ὡρίων [φ] (…).

Receive therefore (…) from the person who is delivering this writing of mine a jar of oil and give it to Hierax – it has the inscription ‘Horion’ (φ) (…).

152 P. Oxy. 59.3990.3-6 and 16-20 (II AD).
153 P. Oxy. 49.3505.3-19 (II AD ?); transl. A. Bülow-Jacobsen). For a similar situation, see also P. Oxy. 31.2596.3-9 (III AD).
37

Various roles of the bearer


Receive through Polion, who is delivering this letter to you, 2 jars of wheat with a seal depicting Sachyψις Kalos Megistos.155

To sum up, the delivery and the collection of items does not seem to be symmetrical: the former is far better represented in family letters, whereas the latter appears most frequently in business letters, as we shall see below.

4.5 Recipient of other items

In most instances, the bearer of a business letter is not bringing any goods to the recipient, but on the contrary has come to collect something.

water O.Krok. 1.78.4-6 (ca. AD 98-117).
wine O.Stras. 1.792.3-5 (I BC – I AD); P.Flor. 2.274.3-9 (AD 265); P.Prag. 1.111.2-7 (AD 249-269); P.Vind.Sijp. 26.12-14 (I late III AD); O.Kellis 140.2-5 (III/IV AD); SPP 8.968.3-5 (IV AD).
acacia juice and incense P.Ryl. 2.242.5-8 (III AD).

mustard (28 arta-bail) P.Fay. 122.3-6 (ca. AD 100).
olives SB 20.14242.15-16 (I AD).
oil P.Fouad 1.79.6-10 (III/IV AD).
rose oil O.Claud. 1.171.4-10 (ca. AD 100-120).
wool P.Mil.Vogl. 3.201.4-10 (= SB 6.9160; II AD).

hair P.Vind.Worp 12.7-10 (early I AD).
cloak and coat PSI 8.900.58 (III/IV AD).
geese PSI 3.236.34.35 (III/IV AD).
dried fish SB 24.15946.2-5 (I-IV AD).
wheat P.Mil.Vogl. 2.59.3-7 (II AD); P.Poethke 14.4-8 (II AD); P.Tebt.Quen. 22 (II/III AD).
barley (300 arta-bail) P.Mil.Vogl. 4.257.3-5 (AD 175).
straw SB 8.9914.3-5 (ca. AD 267).
fodder P.Ryl. 2.240.3-5 (mid-III AD).

155 SB 5.8002.4-8 (III AD [?]). On the interpretation of this seal, see Visser 1935 : 269. The label on the seal is grammatically faulty.
The bearers of business letters in Roman Egypt

waterskin O.Did. 361.2-4 (AD 76/77).
pruning-knives P.Brook. 75.2-6 (II AD).
key and tool BGU 3.775.9-12 (III AD).
medical supplies P.Oslo 2.54.5-9 (II/III AD).
written order P.Ryl. 2.241.1-7 (III AD).
money O.Claud. 1.145.4-11 (ca. AD 100-120); P.Oxy. 3.532.10-13 (II AD); P.Oxy. 59.3990.3-5 (II AD); P.Gen. 1².2.2-4 (II/III AD); P.Oxy. 14.1773.16-20 (III AD); P.Coll.Youtie 2.88.14-17 (IV AD); SB 24.16336.3-8 (= P.Harr. 1.110; IV AD); P.Herm. 13.3-7 (IV AD).
money (allowance for two months) and coat P.Oxy. 10.1295.13-16 (= Sel. Pap. 1.129; II/III AD).
false coinage P.Michael. 12.2-4 (I/II AD).

The amounts to be handed to the bearer can be quite significant, e.g. 28 artabai of mustard or 300 artabai of barley. Wine and money are the two commodities most often collected from the letter’s recipient.

The letter thus functions as an order for delivery or payment; the imperative παράσχες or παράσχο in ‘provide’ sometimes appears in small notes, first in the third century and then more frequently in the fourth.

To the person who is delivering this writing of mine to you, provide some fodder.156

παράσχο [τῷ] ἁναδιδοῦντι σοι τὸ πιττάκιον ὑπὲρ τιμ(ῆς) νο(μισματίων) β οίνου διπλά ὀγδοήκοντα ὀκτώ.
Provide, to the person who is delivering this ticket to you, eighty double measures of wine to the value of 2 solidi.157

One item that the bearer of a message must collect remains shrouded in mystery. The recipient is asked to provide the sender’s παρτικλάριον.158 This is clearly a transliteration of the Latin particularium, a word without attested parallels, diminutive of particula.159

156 P.Ryl. 2.240.3-5 (mid-III AD).
157 SPP 8.968.3-5 (IV AD).
158 SPP 22.61.3-4 (II/III AD).
159 Daris 1991 : 86.
Various roles of the bearer

From the context, where the sender specifies that this item should be sent under seal, one can surmise that it is a document, perhaps related to a soldier’s status.

4.6 Money transfer

In the catalogue provided in the preceding section, money is the commodity most often collected by the bearer. Letters allow the virtual transfer of money, where a payment made to the bearer balances the account in relation with a previous transaction.

καλὸς πυήσις τοῖς ἀναδιδόντι σὺ ταῦτα μοῦ τὰ γράμματα δοῦνε κενοῦ νομίσματος τάλαντα δ’ ὁ ἡμισυ, γι’(v.) (ταῦ.) β’ (δρ.) Γ, ἥν οὖν αἰτήσασα ἔσχον ἀπ’ αὐτὸ[ν ἐν τῷ Τυ]ραννίῳ εἰς λόγον φ[ορέτρο]ν.

Please give to those who deliver to you this letter of mine two and a half ταλάντα of new coin-age, that is, 2 ταλ. 3000 δρ., in return for that which I asked for and got from them in the Tyrannion on account of transportation charges (…).

καὶ ἔσχο(ν) παρ’ αὐτῶ[ν (δραχμὰς)] η, ἵν<α> δῶσεις αὐτῷ τὰς ἵσας.

And I received from him 8 δραχμαι, so that you should give him the same amount.

[ἐνθ’]έως δεξάμενός μου τὰ γράμματα ἔσχον τῷ Ἀλεξάνδρῳ τῷ καὶ ἀναδιδόντι σοι ταῦτα μοῦ τὰ γράμματα ἀργυρίῳ Σεβαστῶν ἱμαίματος τάλαντα ἔσχον τρία, γι’(οντα) (ταῦντα) ἔξ., ἀνθ’ ἐν ἔσχον παρ’ αὐτῶ[ν ἐν] Ἡρακλείους εἰς λόγον τιμῆς.

As soon as you receive this writing of mine, pay in full to my brother Isidoros, who is also delivering to you this writing of mine, sixty-three ταλάντα of imperial silver (= 63 ταλ.), for which I received from him here in town, for this price (…).

καὶ ἔσχο(ν) ποιήσεις μεταβαλόμενος Ἀλεξάνδρῳ τῷ διδόντι σοι τὴν ἐπιστολήν, ἄφ’ οὗ τὰς ἵσας ἵδη ἔσχον.

Please pay over (the price of the pig) to Alexandros, who is giving you this letter, from whom I have already received the same amount.

Thus, instead of forwarding money in cash, the sender makes a payment order, producing – as it were – a cheque to the bearer.

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161 SB 5.8002.9-10 (III AD [?]); see also O.Claud. 2.266 and P.Gen. 1².2, quoted above.
162 SB 26.16482.2-7 (late III / early IV AD).
163 P.Oxy. 42.3085.6-10 (III AD).
4.7 Escort

The bearer can be sent to fetch someone who is involved in a family or business relationship with the sender. In such cases, the bearer assumes no police duty, but is nonetheless entrusted with some authority on behalf of the sender.

Therefore I beseech you, as soon as you receive this writing of mine from Sarapammon, set off with him to (...). I too, when you were in need, did not neglect you, and for this reason I too, in my kindness, set off to see you.164

If this is not too much of a burden for you, hurry to Theon the cobbler and to Gerontios, and make them come to me together with the person who is carrying this writing to you, and also Diskourides the goldsmith.165

You shall send my sister through the person who is delivering to you this writing of mine.166

4.8 Police duties

Strictly speaking, warrants are not letters, or at least their format partially differs from that of a business letter.167 For most practical purposes, however, they function in a similar fashion. In warrants, the explicit mention of the bearer with a wording such as παράδοτε τῷ ἀποσταλέντι ὑπ’ ἐμοῦ στρατιώτῃ ‘deliver to the soldier whom I have sent’, indicates that the soldier carrying the warrant is entrusted with some kind of police authority that allows him to seize the wanted person. It seems virtually certain that he is also the bearer of the warrant.

Ursula Hagedorn noticed that, in the mid-third century, the format of warrants undergoes a change, presumably linked to the administrative reform introduced by emperor Philip the

164 SB 14.12026.5-12 (II/III AD).
165 P.Oxy. 34.2727.18-24 (III/IV AD).
166 P.Flor. 3.365.10-12 (III AD [?]).
167 On warrants (also called ‘orders for arrest’ or ‘summonses’), see esp. G.M. Browne in his introduction to P.Mich. 10.589-591; most recently P.Cair.Prelis.èmes 5 and BGU 20.2861; Drexhage 1989; Gagos & Sijpesteijn 1996; Schubert 2018b.
Various roles of the bearer

For a period of a few decades between the late third and early fourth centuries, warrants carry an explicit mention of the man who is obviously the bearer: he is sent forth to bring a person in the presence of the official who has issued the warrant. Before and after this short interval, the recipient is responsible for escorting the individual; or else, we should assume that the bearer’s mission is implicitly stated, which seems implausible, given the clear chronological boundary between both types of warrants. The wording used to describe the dispatch of the wanted person is also not the same in the two periods.

In the first example quoted below (II/III AD), the bearer does not appear, and the verb used for the dispatch is ἄναπέμπετε ‘send over’; in the second example (III/IV AD), a soldier has been sent, he is presumably carrying the warrant, and the order is expressed with the verb παράδοτε ‘hand over’.

ἀρχεφόδοις καὶ τοπάρχη κόμης Σοκνοπαίου Νήσου. ἄναπέμψεται Ἀβοῦ γέρδιν καὶ Καιεῦν γέρδιν καὶ γυναίκα Αβοῦτος ποτε τοπάρχου γερδίαναν καὶ ταύτης θυγατέραν οὕσαν γερδίαναν, ἐνκαλουμένους ὑπὸ Ἀμμονίου, ἐξαυτῆς.

To the chiefs of police and to the local chief of the village of Soknopaiou Nesos. Send over Abous and the wife of Abous, formerly local chief, and her daughter, all three weavers, who are being accused by Ammonios, immediately.

ἀρχεφόδοις καὶ δημοσίοις κόμης Φιλαδελφίας. ἐξαυτῆς παράδοτε τῷ ἀποσταλέντι ὑπ’ ἐμοῦ στρατιώτῃ Νόννον καὶ Ἰούλιον καὶ Πεσοῦριν Χρυσᾶ καὶ Πέκυσιν Ἐπαγαθοῦ καὶ Πλανητῆν καὶ Ἀμμονίου ἐνκαλουμένους ὑπὸ τὸν ἀπὸ τῆς κόμης ἦ ὑμείς αὐτοὶ ἤκετε.

To the chiefs of police and officials of the village of Philadelphia. Hand over immediately, to the soldier whom I sent, Nonnus, Iulius and Pesouris sons of Chrysas, Pekysis son of Epagathos, Planetes and Ammonios, who are accused by the villagers; or else come yourselves.

This phenomenon occurs also in an ostrakon that was – hesitantly – dated to the second century AD. The dating, however, is not secure enough to reject Hagedorn’s limitation to the late third and early fourth centuries.

168 Hagedorn 1979 : 73. On the administrative reform, P.Oxy. 61.4114-4116 (p. 91); Parsons 1967; Bianchi 1983.
170 P.Wisc. 1.24.2-5 (dated to II/III AD in the editio princeps; date corrected to III/IV AD by Hagedorn 1979 : 66).
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Ψενμώνθης ἀρχιφύλ(ακι) ἰβίωνος· παράδος τῷ διδόντι σοι τὸ ὀστρακὸν Παμώνθην 
Σεγκασή(μος).

Psenmonthes to the chief of police of Ibion. Hand over Pamonthes son of Senpasemis to the 
person who delivers this potsherd to you.\footnote{171 O.Bodl. 2.1992.}

In a similar way, a person sent on a police mission may require an escort. In the following 
case, the structure of the document is not that of a proper letter, but of a business note 
ordering the delivery of some goods. It was sent by the \textit{strategos} of the Prosoptite nome to 
the village chiefs (κωμάρχαι) and the chief of police (ἀρχέφοδος) of a village. Most proba-
ably the guard and donkeys should assist the bearer in bringing someone back to the \textit{strat-
egos}.

π(αρὰ) τοῦ στρατηγοῦ κωμάρχ(ας) καὶ ἀρχέφοδ(ω) κόμη(ς) Θερήσεως, δύο ὄνοις καὶ ἕνα
φόλακα τῷ ἀναδιδοῦντι ύμειν τὰ γράμματα παράσχεται (I. -τε) μέχρι τῆς Μέμφεως.

From the \textit{strategos} to the village chiefs and chief of police of the village of Theresis. Provide 
two donkeys and one guard to the person who is delivering this writing to you, (accompanying 
him) till Memphis.\footnote{172 P.Oxy. 31.2577\textendash}6 (mid-III AD); on the provenance of this papyrus, Hagedorn 2001 : 151.

4.9 Recommendation

4.9.1 \textit{Introduction and welcome}

The bearer of a letter often comes with a request for help addressed to the recipient. This 
help should benefit either the sender or the bearer himself; in the latter case, the letter serves 
the purpose of an introduction or recommendation.\footnote{173 Keyes 1935; Kim 1972.} The sender does not always specify 
if the recommended person is carrying the letter, or if the message has followed a separate 
channel of communication.\footnote{174 P.Oxy. 38.2844 (second half I AD), a private letter on a business matter, on behalf of a woman.}

In the context reminder of the letter, there is frequently a mention of the bearer in the nom-
inative, followed by ἔστι or τυγχάνει ὅν ‘he happens to be’.

ὁ ἀν[α]διδός σοι ταῦτα μου τὰ γράμματα βοηθός ἔστιν τῆς Αἰδιναρίας.

The person who is delivering this writing of mine is Haidinaria’s assistant (…).\footnote{175 P.Stras. 4.172.2-3 (early IV AD).}
Various roles of the bearer


The person who is delivering this writing of mine happens to be a relative of Stephanos’ father.¹⁷⁶

In the two preceding examples, the relation between the letter’s sender and bearer is indicated by the words βοηθός ‘assistant’ and ικίος ‘relative’; in other instances, the bearer is described as φίλος ‘friend’.¹⁷⁷ He can also be called υἱός ‘son’, even though the context indicates that the bearer’s father is already dead (see below).¹⁷⁸ A relationship with a third person can be mentioned.

τὸν ἐπιδίδοντά σοι ‘τὴν ἐπιστολὴν ὡς ἣνα ἡμῶν ἰδέ. ἐστιν γὰρ Εὐνοίῳ σύντροφος.

Consider the person who is delivering this letter to you as one of us; for he is close to Eunoios.¹⁷⁹

More extravagant wording also occurs.

(...) Θέωνα τὸν παράδοξον τὸν ἀναδιόντα σοι ταύτα μου τὰ γράμματα οἰκεῖόν μου ὑντα καὶ σχέσιν ἀδελφικήν ἔχοντα πρὸς με.

(...) the extraordinary Theon, who is delivering to you this letter of mine and is a relative of mine and enjoys the status of a brother towards me.¹⁸⁰

(...) ἐπιστέλλω σοι ὑπὲρ Διογένους, ἀδελφὸς φιλοσόφου γενομένος (...).

(...) I am writing to you on behalf of Diogenes son of (...), the nephew of a very close friend of mine, who was a philosopher versed in Epicurean matters (...).¹⁸¹

The recommendation can be short and quite vague, as when the sender does not specify what ought to be done but merely asks the recipient to make a deal with the bearer ἐιδώς ὅτι ἐμοὶ διαφέρει ‘because you know that this matters to me’.¹⁸² In a letter sent to a strategos presumably from a colleague who calls him ἀδελφός ‘brother’, the request also lacks detail:

¹⁷⁶ P.Princ. 2.101.7-9 (IV AD).
¹⁷⁷ P.Lugd.Bat. 25.31.4-7 (I/II AD); P.Oxy. 20.2275.6 (III/IV AD).
¹⁷⁸ P.Oxy. 9.1219.3 (III AD).
¹⁷⁹ P.Oxy. 55.3812.12-13 (late III AD).
¹⁸⁰ P.Oslo 2.55.3-7 (II/III AD).
¹⁸¹ P.Oxy. 51.3643.5-10.
¹⁸² P.Tebt. 2.448.2 (II/III AD).
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ἐν οἷς εἶχαν σου δέχται σπουδάσιμ ἀυτῶι ‘to give your care to him in whatever he asks you’. The sender of another letter gives the following justification.

Σωτήρα δέ, εξ οὗ τῷ ἡμῶν ἐσχον ἐπιστεύλαι σ(ο)ificaciones, παρατίθεμαι σοι, ἀδελφε, ἵνα ὅρας αὐτῶν ὡς Σερήνων τῷ μεικρὸν ἠμῶν ἀδελφῶν, οὐ μόνον διὰ τὸ ἡθος τὸ χρηστῶν ἀξιῶν τοῦ τυχεῖν ἄλλα κἂν (…).

Since I had an opportunity to send you a letter, I am putting Soter in your charge, so that you may look after him in the same way as our little brother Serenus: he deserves it not only because of his excellent character, but also (...).

The bearer may need some assistance in completing a negotiation where the help of an official is necessary.

Θεόν ὁ νεῖκος ἡμῶν παραγείνεται πρὸς σὲ πορευόμενος εἰς τὴν Νεικίου ἔνεκα ἀναγκαίου αὐτοῦ μεταφόροι ἵππος ὁ καὶ σὺ ἐπιτυσσάς ἐπὶ πάλα ἀπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτῶν· περιόν (I. περιόντα) δὲ νομίζω γεγραψάσαι σοι περὶ αὐτοῦ. (…) ἄλλα οίδα ὅτι καὶ ταύτα μου τὰ γράμματα πόλλ’ αὐτῶν ἀφελῆσει, εἰ τινὸς [σο]ὗ ἔρχεται ἐξή ἐπὶ πρὸς Ἀπιῶνον τὸν τοῦ Προσωπείτου βασιλικὸν εἶπε πρὸς ἑτέρον τινα, ἐὰν δεῖ[σθ]η καὶ αὐτοῖς γράφατε μὴ ὑπερήθη. (verso) Ἀπιῶνι υἱῶ βασιλικ(ο) γρ(αμματεί) Λητοπολ(ίτου) π(αρ) Ἀριστάγ(ρου) Ὀξ(υρυγχίτου).

Theon our son is coming to you on his way to Nikias’ house on account of a pressing incompleted negotiation of which you have perhaps been aware long since from his father; I think that he wrote to you about it while he was still alive. (…) But I know that this letter of mine also will be of much help to him, if he wants anything either from Apion the royal secretary of the Prosopite nome or from any one else, if you will ask them and not delay to write to them. (…). (Address on the back) To my son Apion, royal secretary of the Letopolite nome, from Aristandros of Oxyrhynchos.

Elsewhere, the recipient is asked to help because a superintendent has restrained the letter’s bearer and does not want to deal with him.

σ<o>ὁ ἀλώπου οὗτος [ύ]πα αὐτῶι, εἵπη μοι γὰρ ὅτι εἰ τι βούλεται διὸν αὐτῶι, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ἑγραψά σοι, ἐὰν γὰρ σὺ θελήσῃς, γείνεται αὐτῶι τὸ ἐγγόν.

You should suffer no damage from him, for he said to me: ‘If he wants anything, I give it to him.’ And for this reason I wrote to you. For if you wish so, his affair is concluded.

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183 P.Giss. 1.71.5-6 (= P.Giss.Apoll. 37, later than AD 117). The same wording appears in another document of the same archive, P.Giss. 1.88.5-6 (= P.Giss.Apoll. 41, AD 113-120).

184 P.Oxy. 14.1663.6-12 (II/III AD). Although Serenus is not explicitly described as the bearer of the letter, the context makes it quite clear that he is indeed carrying the recommendation.

185 P.Oxy. 9.1219.3-21 (III AD; transl. A.S. Hunt).

186 P.Mich. 8.515.3-5 (late III AD).
Various roles of the bearer

The bearer does not act on the sender’s behalf, but needs an introduction in order to conduct his own business. The superintendent’s behaviour, as well as the bearer’s alleged claim that he can provide whatever is asked of him, rather suggests that the bearer’s reputation has been compromised. Without the sender’s recommendation, he presumably has no chance of concluding his affair.

Recommendation letters may be very short and serve only the purpose of introducing or protecting a person; in other cases, as we shall see below, the aim of the letter can be more complex.

4.9.2 Preceding the sender

In many instances, the bearer acts as a substitute for the sender. Such is the function of most business letters, and such was the way people understood letters at the time. The bearer can also be dispatched to prepare the way for the sender.


Heras, who is bringing this letter to you, is a farmers’ secretary in Skandips and he has an apology to deliver for the delayed report. I ask you to accompany him to Marcus so that (Marcus) can receive him till my arrival.

In the following example, Ammonios, the accompanying person, is not specifically mentioned as the bearer of the letter, but the various tasks he undertakes strongly suggest that he is indeed carrying the message.

σκύληθι σὺν Ἀμμωνίῳ πρὸς τὸν στρατηγὸν ἵν’ αὐτῷ μεταδῶς ἔφ’ ὅ παραγείνομαι. ἐπίτηδες γὰρ ἐπέμψα τὸν Ἀμμώνιον. λήμψῃ παρὰ Ἀμμωνίου (δραχμὰς) μὴ εἰς συνοινὴν χρωματίνων ἐρίων καλάνων ἐκπερ λάβῃ παρὰ Λαμυρίου, ἐὰν δὲ ἁρα μή, σὴν αὐτὸς προχρήσεις. (...) λήμψῃ παρὰ Ἀμμωνίου φοινείς . . . δύο.

Hurry with Ammonios to the strategos so that you may inform him of the purpose of my visit; for this is the reason why I sent Ammonios. You will receive from Ammonios 48 drachmai for the purchase of wool coloured in blue-green, provided that you can get some from Lamyrios; or else, you shall borrow some yourself. You will receive from Ammonios two (...).\(^\text{188}\)

4.9.3 Advice

The bearer may carry a request for advice; the sender thus acts as a go-between, providing the bearer with access to the recipient. In one such instance, the bearer of the letter wishes to appeal to a strategos and needs some advice from the sender’s father.

\(^{187}\) P.Oslo 2.51.3-8 (II AD).
\(^{188}\) P.Haun. 2.22.4-9 and 13-14 (II/III AD).
The bearers of business letters in Roman Egypt

Gamma to koimizontos soi to epistololion melontos enortygeian tò strat[...]hw [...] , diapem psathai auton proz se opws genym[v] sou labh proteron peri to pragmatos.

Because Galates, who is bringing this letter to you, is going to meet the strategos … I thought to send him to you, so that beforehand he should receive your opinion concerning the matter.  

Beyond mere advice, the sender probably expects his father to introduce the bearer to the strategos himself.

4.9.4 Purchase

The bearer of a letter may be expected to make a purchase, together with the recipient, on behalf of the sender.

[...]

Please accompany Ailourion, who is carrying this letter to you, so that you may purchase for us some doves for the party.  

[...]

Please, my lord, make your best effort on behalf of Pasion, a friend of ours, who is delivering to you this writing of mine (...), to assist him in buying (...) the most beautiful carpets from those of whom you know that they have the very best.

The person who is delivering to you this letter of mine is buying some linen. I put him in your care, asking you to accompany him till he has made his purchase.

There seems to be a kind of universality in such proceedings, which find a striking parallel in Palladius’ history of Egyptian monachism, written in the early fifth century.

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189 See Blumell 2011: 36, publication of P.WaPS.05 (Washington State University Collection), lines 3-11 (transl. Blumell).
190 BGU 2.596.4-8 (AD 84). In P.Lugd.Bat. 25.31 (I/II AD), the nature of the intended purchase is lost.
191 P.Oxy. 20.2275 (III/IV AD).
192 P.Stras. 4.174.3-6 (II/III AD). The reading 'o'toi sigma[v]pi othete, provided in the editio princeps, seems awkward. Paul Heilporn (Strasbourg) kindly provided me with an image of the papyrus, where the reading sigma[...]the seems preferable.
Among them is also the endearing Aphthonios, who was my genuine friend and is presently the second in command in the monastery. With his impeccable credentials, they are sending him to sell their production in Alexandria, and to help in the purchase of the necessary goods.

The bearer can also be sent to collect a whole shipping of goods. The following example, which is quite straightforward in its wording, consists of only the three basic structural elements of a business letter, i.e. heading, required action, and closing greetings, together with a mention of the bearer. The required action is described in detail and takes most of the space in the letter.

The bearer of this letter is the captain Panemouos; see to it with all your care to embark his freight, as usual what you have in hand and have selected for lading. Send up the inspectors yourself to the examination, getting a donkey from the chiefs of police. After this give him your best attention and let him see the granaries, and prepare the grain collectors and the other officials concerned, whose names have sent to you by Harpocration, in order that there may be no delay.

The sender thoroughly describes the assistance needed from the recipient so that the bearer can perform the prescribed task. One element may explain the absence of any exhortation or justification: the letter is addressed to the sender’s assistant (verso: Ἀρχελάωι ὑπηρέτῃ). The hierarchical relation between the two makes any further argument unnecessary.

4.9.5 Escort and protection from hassle

The bearer of a letter may need protection along the way, especially if he is carrying some valuable items. The context of the following letter strongly suggests that the goods are in the same hands as the bearer of the letter.

194 P.Oxy. 1.63.3-18 (II/III AD; transl. adapted from Grenfell & Hunt).
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I have sent Eros, our man (slave?). Therefore I ask you to assist him so that, with your help, he may reach home safely. For I have given him for delivery 25 (...). If you find an opportunity, send someone to escort him for the delivery.\(^{195}\)

A letter of recommendation may also facilitate the transfer of a body from the Arsinoite nome downstream to Alexandria.

Therefore I ask you, my lord, to issue to them a written document so that no one will bother them along the way, so that I may bury the body and come to you.\(^{196}\)

A party of several men is sent forth to measure some fields, but they can expect to encounter some resistance. Therefore, they carry a letter for someone who will help them to get the business done.

Assist the persons who are delivering this writing of mine regarding Heronas so that, after you have made him compliant, you may accompany them until they measure the fields.\(^{197}\)

Collecting a fee for rental can also cause some resistance, which justifies sending a letter of recommendation in support of a farmer.


\(^{196}\) P.Oxy. 7.1068.23-27 (III AD).


\(^{198}\) BGU 16.2654.2-9 (6 BC).
In a brief business note typical of agricultural estates, the sender simply asks the recipient not to bother the bearer of the letter. This occurs again in a letter where the two presumed bearers are looking for work.

Hierax, who is delivering this writing of mine, is our former tenant. Therefore do not make trouble for him.\(^{199}\)

Please look after them and make sure that nobody creates trouble for them.\(^{200}\)

### 4.9.6 Hospitality and accommodation

An individual may need some assistance because he does not know the place where he has landed.

Please receive the person who is bringing this letter to you (…); for he is a stranger and does not know the place.\(^{201}\)

He may also need a place to stay, which the recipient is asked to provide.

Provide them also with a place to stay.\(^{203}\)

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\(^{199}\) SB 4.9439.2-5 (III AD).

\(^{200}\) P.Gen. 1\(^2\).75.10-13 (III AD).

\(^{201}\) P.Tebt.Tait 51.5-15 (II/II AD).

\(^{202}\) P.Oxy. 20.2275.11-12.

\(^{203}\) P.Gen. 1\(^2\).75.13-15.
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καλῶς οὖν ποιήσεις, ἀδελφέ, τούτον ὑποδεξάμενος ὡς ἐν ἔμε. ἄλλα καὶ τόπον ἐπειτήδειον αὐτῷ ἀπὸ ποδὸς ἐξηρτισμένον 'παράσχεις, ἀλ.' ἵνα ἐλθὼν μαρτυρήσει μοι τὰ τῆς προαιρέσεώς σου.

Please, brother, receive him as if he were myself. Provide him also with appropriate accommodation, accessibly (?) furnished, making sure that when he comes (to me) he testify to your goodwill.²⁰⁴

Another request for accommodation on behalf of the bearer shows how imprecise the boundary between business and family letters can be: this one starts with some detail about the premature birth of a seven-month infant; the real purpose of the message, however, is to secure accommodation for the bearer and several persons accompanying him.

Ἰνααρώος ὁ πατήρ τῆς μικρᾶς ὁ ἀναβιδούς σοι τὸ ἐπιστέλλων μετὰ Ἀκήτου τοῦ ὑιοῦ Παρομίως τοῦ γεροῦ καὶ μετὰ τὸν ἄλλον ἠλθαν εἰς 'Οξυρύγχῳ(ν) ἀνάγκην αὐτὸς ἐπιθετείς ἵνα ἐγράφῃ ἐν τοῖς τοῦ τιμωτάτου Ἱερονίκου. εὐ ὅποιο ὑπο[σ]εῖς δόσεις αὐτοῖς τὴν κλῆδα [τῆς] κέλλης τοῦ ἐν τῷ πυλῶν τῇ . . . τῇ πυλῇ τῆς ἐπιθετείς ἵνα έκει δώσῃ ἕως ἐκ τοῦ κυρίου σου.

Inaaroous, the little one’s father, who brings this letter to you, together with Akes, son of Pachomis, the weaver, and also with others, have come to Oxyrhynchus to complete an obligation that was placed upon them in the affairs of the most estimable Hieronikes. Please give them the key to the room of the (...) in the gateway, for Eudaimonis says that they have come first to your side so that they may remain there until they receive hospitality from your lord.²⁰⁵

4.9.7 Work and hire

The purpose of the introduction can be to secure some work for the letter's bearer.


I have sent you Drakon and Melanos, who are day-labourers of my master Ambrosios – for they are tanners – so that you produce leather with them till they have purchased some acacia pods.²⁰⁶

A similar situation seems to take place in the following example.

²⁰⁴ P. Oslo 2.55.7-14 (II/III AD).
²⁰⁵ SB 16.12606.9-22 (III/IV AD; transl. Rowlandson 1998: 293). Techosous alias Eudaimonis, the woman who is about to give birth, is also known from other documents as a prominent landowner; see Nielsen 1994.
²⁰⁶ P. Gen. 1².75.3-9 (early III AD).
Various roles of the bearer

Ἅρπαεσίς Παποντῶτος ὁ κομίζων σοι τὴν ἔπιστολήν ἐστὶν ὑπογέωργος Θεμιστοκλέους καὶ διὰ σπόρου ζ. (ἔτους) ποιῶ αὐτὸν ὑπογέωργον.

Harpaesisis son of Papontos, who is bringing this letter to you, is a sub-lessee of Themistokles, and throughout the sowing season of the 7th year, I make him a sub-lessee.207

4.10 Conclusion

Carrying the letter constitutes only part of the duties placed in the hands of the bearer. The letter may come with some goods, and more often an item must return to the letter’s sender; in both cases, in the absence of the sender, the bearer plays an essential role. Among the numerous tasks assigned to the bearer, by far the most frequent is the conveyance of money back to the sender.

Business letters are often used to introduce the bearer to the recipient, so that he may perform a task on behalf of the sender. Taken together, the cases listed in the above section on letters of recommendation do not provide us with a very consistent picture. Some letters work as short notes of introduction, while in others the sender develops a string of requests. The introduction or recommendation is seldom straightforward: the bearer may be shopping on behalf of the sender while also in need of accommodation; or he should be given some work, and requires also protection from hassle; or the bearer merely represents the sender, who will come later. In all cases, however, the sender seems to engage a portion of his own credit in the action; this empowers the bearer of the letter to ask for the recipient’s help. Thus the bearer does not carry only goods, objects or money together with the letter, but also a kind of immaterial currency consisting of the sender’s written support.

5 General conclusion

In the complex relationship between the sender and the recipient of a letter, physical distance is clearly the most important factor to be taken into account. Business letters, as opposed to family letters, serve the purpose of getting something done, which the sender cannot achieve personally. Therefore, he must send someone in his stead. A letter does not replace a person completely, but it is often better than nothing at all, in spite of the rhetorical exaggeration found in the following example.


We are surprised that you did not send your man Diogenes to us for this purpose, but that you were satisfied with one tiny letter.208

207 P.Oxy. 14.1661.2-7 (AD 74).
208 PSI 15.1553.9-11 (first half III AD).
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This specific mode of communication follows a set of formal rules that can be defined in terms of structure. Some basic elements appear in virtually every business letter; others consist of options, which the sender may activate at will, depending on his business. In addition, some elements occur always in the same part of a business letter, whereas others have no fixed place. Within this structure, the bearer of a letter holds an essential position, even when the sender does not mention him explicitly. He carries some of the competence or prestige of the sender himself. Clearly, in some cases a letter endows the bearer, as the embodiment of the sender, with a kind of symbolic power.

In that respect, our business letters from Roman Egypt pave the way for a metaphor used in letters from the Byzantine period, where the bearer is called an ἔμψυχος ἐπιστολή ‘living letter’.

δέδεξο μετὰ τῆς ἐμψυχοῦ καὶ τῆν ἄνυχον ἐπιστολήν, μετὰ τοῦ θαυμαστοῦ Γεροντίου ταύτα τὰ γράμματα.
Receive, together with the living letter, also the soulless letter; (i.e.) with the admirable Geron-tios, (receive) this writing.²⁰⁹

6 Appendix 1: P.Prag. 1.111 revisited

This broad survey of business letters, with a focus on their bearers, allows us to reconsider the edition of one such document, P.Prag. 1.111. There is a general agreement on the fact that we are dealing here with an order to deliver some wine. The detailed process, however, requires clarification.

The interpretation of P.Prag. 1.111 has developed in three successive stages. Rosario Pintaudi, who first edited the text in 1988, encountered a difficulty in lines 12-13 and 20; then Jean Bingen proposed some corrections and a brief interpretation;²¹⁰ finally, Dominic Rathbone put forward his own summary interpretation, which differed from Bingen’s.²¹¹

For the sake of clarity, it will be necessary to start with Pintaudi’s edition and translation, and then to observe how his text was corrected and interpreted by Bingen and Rathbone. I provide an English version of Pintaudi’s Italian translation.

Σιλβανός Ἡρώ-  
νεῖν τῷ φιλ(τάτῳ) χαίρειν.  
τῷ ἀναδίδοντι σο[ι]
Silvanos to his dearest  
Heroninos, greetings.

²⁰⁹ Synes. Epist. 85 (IV/V AD).  
Bingen suggested the following corrections.

10-12: ἵνα τὴν τιμὴν μεταβάλωμαι *** > ἵνα τὴν τιμὴν μεταβάλωμαί σοι. He rightly recognised in μεταβάλωμα the meaning ‘to forward money to another account’; see P.Oxy. 3.532.3-8: ἔδει (…) ἀναπέμψας τὰς (δραχμὰς) κ., εἰδὸς ὅτι αὐτότι μεταβάλόμην τοῖς κοινονοῦσι μου αὐτὰς ‘You should have (…) sent the 20 drachmai, knowing that I transferred them here to my partners.’ The use of μεταβάλωμα can also be compared with that of καταβάλλω eis λόγον ‘to make a payment on an account’, see e.g. P.Fay. 63.4-6 (AD 240): κατέβαλ(εν) εἰς τίν᾽ Ἀγριππίνῳ Φιλοξένου τοῦ κριτίστοι λόγον.

12-14: σήν>*ου δὲ τούτου χάριν > σήμιον δὲ τούτου χάριν. (with a full stop after χάριν).
Bingen (377) mentions ‘la lettre qu’Héroninos devra préalablement endosser (σήμιον).’ Although he offers no translation, his phrasing and his choice of accent imply that he interprets σήμιον as a verb in the imperative, ‘apply your signature’.

19-20: ἄλλα καλλ(ονή) ἦτο τὸ οἶνον δί(χωρον) ἦν > ἄλλα κάλλι(ον) ἦτο τὸ οίνο(α) τοῦ. The reading of τὸ οίνο(α) τοῦ seems inescapable. As for the proposed comparative κάλλι(ον), Bingen (377) offers a rough interpretation: ‘que ce ne soit pas de la piquette comme la fois précédente!’ i.e. ‘let this not be second-quality wine like last time!’

Bingen suggests that we are dealing with a kind of cheque: Heroninos is to hand it to Silvanos when he comes to the nome capital; the value of the wine will be recorded in the
accounts in exchange for the letter. Then, there is a mention of the *annona*, which he understands as a separate business. To this first interpretation, Rathbone replies by suggesting that the letter corresponds in fact to a sale of wine:

Another type of sale is possibly attested in P.Prag. 111, in which Silvanus, sending a man whom Heroninos did not know to collect some wine, wrote as proof of his authorship of the letter ‘you have given me the receipt (*sumbolon*) for the 15 art. wheat of the *annona*’ (from the plate I read ll. 12-13 as μεταβάλομαι σοι. σημείον δὲ τούτου χάριν = ‘As proof of this…’; I do not agree with the interpretation of J. Bingen (…)). The ‘proof’ may have been a pre-agreed fiction; possibly, however, Heroninos had paid in 15 art. as tax on Silvanus’ account for which Silvanus was to pay him.212

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Σιλβανός Ἡρώ-} \\
\text{νείνῳ τῷ φιλ(τάτῳ) χαίρειν.} \\
\text{τῷ ἀναδιόντι σο[ι]} \\
\text{ταῦτα μου τὰ γραμ[μα]τα} \\
\text{ἔν καὶ ἄνερχόμε-} \\
\text{νος κόμισόν μοι} \\
\text{τοῦτο τὸ ἐπιστό-} \\
\text{λιον ἵνα τὴν} \\
\text{τιμήν μετα-}
\end{align*}
\]

Silvanos to his dearest Heroninos, greets. To Heron, who is delivering to you this message of mine, give a *dichoron* of wine; and when you come back (to me), bring this letter so that I may transfer the value (of the wine) onto your account. As way of proof of this (i.e. of the

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212 Rathbone 1991 : 315, n. 70.
213 Youtie 1970; above, σημείον clause.
214 In the Heroninos archive, see P.Flor. 2.166.5: ἄλλα ἦτο ὁ χοίρος καλὸς ‘but let it be a good pig’; P.Flor. 2.175.8-9: ἄλλα ἦτο ἐπετήδιος (I. ἐπετήδιος) ‘but let him be appropriate’. The imperative ἦτο appears in our documents in the late second or early third cent. AD; see Mandilaras 1973 : 79, § 118; 292, § 682.
It now becomes possible to reconstruct the short story described in this document. Heron – whom Heroninos does not know personally – is carrying a letter from Silvanos. When Heroninos receives it, he should give some wine to Heron and keep the letter as a receipt for the wine he gave out. Later, he is expected to meet Silvanos and hand him the letter back; in exchange, Silvanos will credit Heroninos for the wine in the book of accounts.

There is a risk, however, that a stranger could come to Heroninos and claim some wine with a fake letter. Silvanos, upon receiving the letter in return from Heroninos, would declare that he never issued the order in the first place. As Rathbone correctly understood, this explains the mention of the annonα, an event that is not directly related to the present business – Bingen was right on that – but serves as a code of recognition between the sender and the recipient (12-14: σημι<ε>ίου δε τούτου χάριν).

Bingen correctly described this letter as a cheque. Until Heroninos hands the letter back to Silvanos, his account will display a loss of one dichoron; Silvanos will transfer (10-12: ἵνα τὴν τιμήν μεταβάλωμαί σοι) a corresponding credit when he gets the letter back. Silvanos has not fixed the price for the wine. Likewise, when on another occasion Heroninos writes to his son Heronas, he asks him to give a certain amount of wine to the bearer of the letter λαβὼν παρ' αὐτοῦ ὅ ἐὰν δώσῃ σοι κέρμα ‘accepting whatever money he will give you’. He also adds a note at the end of the message (11-12): ἐὰν δὲ ἄλω γομάριν θέλωσιν δός αὐτοῖς λαβὼν τὴν τειμήν ‘if they want another load of wine, give it to them and take the price (for it)’. As a short case study, the revision of P.Prag. 1.111 provides a confirmation of several elements that were described above, in particular the role of the letter’s bearer, the token of identification, and the importance of the bearer in the virtual transfer of money.

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215 P.Fl. 2.274.7-9.
Appendix 2: proposed corrections to papyri


- P.Prag. 1.111: see Appendix 1.


- P.Vars. 23.4: οὐκ ἔν ἔδοκεν. Correct to: οὐκ ἀνέδοκεν (i.e. ἀνέδοκεν).

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