

A letter of protest from the Old Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

There has been a considerable focus on ancient Egyptian letters due to the recognition of their importance as primary sources of social and historical knowledge. The personal correspondence from ancient Egypt exemplifies the extra knowledge such letters are able to provide. Their importance lies in their additional information regarding ancient Egyptian society – daily life, religious affairs, military achievements – in comparison with other types of visual and textual evidence. To illustrate this point the following study focuses on one of the few surviving letters from the Old Kingdom. It concerns a commander of troops' complaint in response to a communication from the chief justice and vizier ordering him to bring his battalion to receive their clothing.

KEYWORDS

sender – recipient – reason for writing – the problem – historical context – location

خطاب احتجاج من الدولة القديمة

سوزان ثورب

الملخص

هناك تركيز كبير على الخطابات المصرية القديمة بسبب أهميتها كمصدر أساسي للمعرفة الاجتماعية والتاريخية خلال تلك الفترة. تمثل المراسلات الشخصية من مصر القديمة المعرفة الإضافية التي يمكن أن توفرها هذه الرسائل. وتكمن أهميتها في معلوماتها الإضافية المتعلقة بالمجتمع المصري القديم – الحياة اليومية والشؤون الدينية والإنجازات العسكرية – وذلك عند مقارنتها بأنواع أخرى من الأدلة البصرية والنصية. ولتوضيح تلك النقطة، تركز الدراسة هنا على أحد الخطابات القليلة الباقية من الدولة القديمة. يتعلق الأمر بشكوى أحد قادة القوات رداً على خطاب من رئيس المحكمة والوزير يأمره بإحضار كتنيته لاستلام ملابسهم.

الكلمات الدالة

المرسل – المستلم – سبب الكتابة – المشكلة – السياق التاريخي – الموقع

There has been a considerable focus on ancient Egyptian letters due to the recognition of their importance as primary sources of social and historical knowledge. They provide that additional extra dimension to firstly the visual and textual representations on private stelae. These commemorate the individual concerned, together with family members. They were intended as a means of remembrance, reflecting the person's occupation, piety, achievements in life. These aspects are looked at from an idealistic perspective to serve as a positive memorial to the deceased, so the information that can be discerned from the content on the majority of cases does not truly give insight into the people, events or social interaction. Secondly, tomb and temple walls are important sources for ancient Egyptian daily life, religious affairs and military achievements. The scenes depicted reflect trades and crafts, agricultural work, reli-

gious festivals, military action. The accompanying inscriptions have enabled knowledge of the people concerned, their lives, occupations and achievements. However, in contrast to letters, they do not provide the personal touch – personal in this context being details of actual issues and events that occurred to the people in their everyday lives.

Studies focusing on this have included letters within a corpus of other texts, those within certain time frames, those related to specific topics, grouped by same sender and/or recipient. An additional approach has been on structure and wording.¹ The following study focuses on one of the few surviving letters from the Old Kingdom. Its objective will be to evidence the insight from a single piece of correspondence into actual events, together with the people involved – writers and recipients, their status and relationship, any issues, the means of resolving them, their environment and location.

The letter is the most complete one of fragments of papyrus found in 1925 during the excavation by Cecil Firth of the pyramid complex of Netjerikhet at Saqqara, in which there was a courtyard with a number of small chapels (Firth 1925: 155–159). These appeared to have been used as a “papyrus archive” (Sperveslage 2011: 40) suggested by their discovery there. These were given to Battiscombe Gunn who notes they were “found in the middle of a small room, a few centimetres above the floor” (Gunn 1925: 242) located “near the northern end of the long narrow passage that connects the entrance to the pyramid complex with the Heb-seid court” (Ryholt 2021: 121). The following almost intact letter was discovered in two pieces amongst this group. Together with the other papyri it has been dated by Gunn “to the end of the Sixth Dynasty not only by its palaeographical characters which are fairly decisive...” but by the information discerned in the other papyri in which the names of Merenre and Neferkare are mentioned. He also comments that “The writing is in a good, practised hand, of a type characteristic of the late Old Kingdom” (Gunn 1925: 243).²

A commander of troops is responding to a letter from the chief justice and vizier who has ordered him to bring his men to receive clothing in the chief justice and vizier’s presence.³

(1) [Year] 11 first month of summer, day 23. (2) Says the commander of troops:

(3) There has been brought to this servant a letter from the chief justice and vizier with regard to bringing a battalion of the gangs of Tura (4) to get clothes in his presence at the administrative building of the west side.⁴ Now this servant protests against the requirement of out-of-the-way locations since the letter-carrier (5) is to come to Tura together with a stone-barge. Now this servant has had to spend 6 days at the Residence (6) together with this battalion before it is clothed. It is an

1 See for example: the Hekanakhte Papyri (Allen 2002: 243–255); Lahun Papyri (Collier – Quirke 2002); Amarna Letters (Moran 1992); Late Ramesside Letters (Černý 1939); Late Ramesside Letters (Wente 1967); Late Egyptian Miscellanies (Gardiner 1937); Letters to the Dead (Gardiner – Sethe 1928); the letters of Aamose of Peniati (Glanville 1928: 294–312); Egyptian Epistolography from the Eighteenth to the Twenty-First Dynasty (Bakir 1970); Correspondence and Dialogue: Pragmatic factors in Late Ramesside Letter-Writing (Sweeney 2001). For details of these and other works see Thorpe (2021: Appendix).

2 For additional details of this papyrus see Gunn (1925: 242–243).

3 Primary and secondary source references: Cairo JE 49623, Gunn (1925); Gardiner (1927); Wente (1990: 42, letter 40). Also translations Roccati (1982: 294); Strudwick (2005: 177).

4 For references to this interpretation rather than “very beautiful *srh* building” see Posener-Kriéger – Cenival (1968: 294, Pls. XIV, Z11, IV, F35).

obstruction to this work by this servant, since it is only one day (7) that needs to be wasted for this battalion when it is clothed. Says this servant: Let the letter-carrier be informed.

(1) [rnp] 11 3bd1 šmw sw 23 (2) jmj-r-mš^c dd (3) jw jn s sš n t3yty s3b Bty n b3k jm r jnjt Bst ^cprw r-3w 4) r hbs r-gs.f hr srh jmy-wrt sk b3k jm hr mdt m dbhw k^chw sk jry md 3t (5) m jw r r-3w hn^c wsh^t sk b3k jm jt.f hrw 6 m hnw (6) hn^c Bst tn n hbst.s snkn k3t pw m-^c b3k jm sk hrw js pw w^c (7) hbt.f n Bst tn hbst.s dd b3k jm jmj rh jry md 3t

Looking first at the writer and recipient, their status and relationship, the address by the sender gives neither his name nor that of his recipient. He begins with the brief *dd jmy-r-mš^c*, “Says the commander of troops,” commensurate with the directness of his letter. John Baines notes that the briefness of this opening address is “...in keeping with the mostly low level of direct expression of religious and personal concerns from the period...” (Baines 2001: 5). His protest is structured in a factual manner not as a question. The sender does not ask the reason for his recipient’s action. His letter is a pejorative one concerning the chief justice and vizier’s action. The form of address, in which the sender gives only his rank, *jmy-r-mš^c*, “commander of troops,” could be that his name was known to his recipient and he wanted to emphasise the formality of his letter. It could indicate “the officer in question was too important to need naming” (Gardiner 1927: 76). For a similar reason he does not name the chief justice and vizier who has prompted the complaint.

The sender notes the letter has been brought to *b3k jm*, “this servant.” The commander refers to himself in this manner five times. Gunn suggests this is following a formula used as a term of politeness but not denoting an inferior status (Gunn 1925: 244, footnote 1). In a study of p. Boulaq 8 with regard to facework and discernment, the term *b3k jm* in ancient Egyptian letters has been identified as a form of discernment politeness using a low-power pronoun – a mandatory way to address a superior (Almansa-Villatoro 2020: 6). Other Old Kingdom usage of this form is seen as “an expression used between equals” (Gardiner 1927: 76, footnote 1). From an hierarchical perspective it has been noted that while in the Fourth and Fifth Dynasties the office of commander of troops reflected a high-ranking official, in the Sixth Dynasty it was “... borne only by relatively lower-ranking individuals” (Eichler 1993: 234). Another viewpoint is that “one should note the curtness with which the *mr-mš^c* of the quarrying teams working at Tourah addresses the vizier... the letter is not addressed and no formula of politeness comes to assuage the protest...” (Posener-Kriéger 1976: 463, footnote 1).

Regarding the status of the sender, I would argue he would be unlikely to make a complaint couched in these critical terms if he were in a significantly subordinate role to a recipient with the administrative authority both to have issued such an order to him in the first place and be able to retract it. Overall it is a combination of “curtness” and “politeness” that he has used to achieve his objective.

The status of the unnamed recipient of this letter is indicated by his title – as chief justice and vizier he would have been in charge of the administration, the judiciary and the overall associated bureaucracy. Normally an additional title would appear giving an indication of a particular responsibility. The Fifth Dynasty King Djedkare addresses a chief justice and vizier as “overseer of scribes of royal documents Rashepses” (Wente 1990: 18, letter 2; Roccati 1982: 78–98), another as “an overseer of works Senedjemib” (Wente 1990: 19, letter 4; Roccati 1982: 125). Nigel Strudwick acknowledging the importance of this title inclusion has researched

and listed the “principal sources of information as to the responsibilities of the vizier in the Old Kingdom” (Strudwick 1985: 329–330).

This initial greeting is to a letter motivated by “a state of affairs which is unsatisfactory,” (Sweeney 2001: 190) where the recipient has done, or failed to do, something that the sender of the letter wants him or her to resolve. In this case it is the complaint the commander of troops has made to the chief justice and vizier: *with regard to bringing a battalion of the gangs of Tura (4) to get clothes in his presence at the administrative building of the west side.*

He objects to his authoritative insistence that the men receive their clothes *r-gs*, “in his presence”. The commander’s words offer a very much to the point way of resolving the problem when he notes that the bearer of the letter came *hn^c*, “together with” the stone-barge – therefore the clothes could have been brought with him on it. He complains: *It is an obstruction to this work by this servant, since it is only one day (7) that needs to be wasted for this battalion when it is clothed.*

In his final words the commander emphasises *jmj rh jry md 3t*, “Let the letter carrier be informed” so that he can be made aware of the need for him to be responsible for transporting the clothing, obviating the requirement for the commander to bring the battalion to the chief justice and vizier. The above interpretation and discussion of the form of address and the manner in which the sender states his complaint have evidenced a close equality in status between the commander of troops, and his recipient a chief justice and vizier. The nature of the complaint has been a source of knowledge regarding an aspect of military procedure – a battalion needed to be provided clothing by the administration. As there is no designation of the recipient’s specific function it is this reason for writing, that indicates this chief justice and vizier’s responsibility. Strudwick emphasises the importance of this, commenting “what matters is that the vizier is shown concerned with the administration of labour-organisation” (Strudwick 1985: 330).

The place to which the commander has been asked to come with his battalion to obtain clothing is referred to as the *srh jmy-wrt*, “administrative building of the west side.” Its location has been identified as being “in the Memphite region... situated within the largest and most prominent royal monument in all of Egypt at the time, the mortuary complex of the renowned king Netjerkhet” (Ryholt 2021: 135). Known as Temple T, the building is noted as having undergone considerable modification to such an extent “it seems hardly likely that such a prominent location as Temple T should have been given over to lower ranking officials... that they would have had the privilege and resources to modify and rebuild this edifice.”⁵ This administrative connotation is in keeping with a location for a chief justice and vizier to whom the commander of troops has been told to bring his men for their clothing.

The responsibility of the vizier has been listed, among other roles, as “overseer of works” / “overseer of all royal works” (Strudwick 1985: 300–335). Regarding Temple T “its prominent location and security measures... we may entertain the possibility that the converted building represents a vizier’s office... an office used for the central administration... where he would have been present during regular visits and inspections in the area” (Ryholt 2021: 138). The letter’s reference to the *hnw*, “residence” as the place where *sk b3k jm jt f hrw 6*, “this servant has had to spend 6 days” could therefore be seen as the same administrative office building.

5 For detailed information of the work involved see Ryholt (2021: 135–136). See also Hagen – Soliman (2018: 81–82).

The place from which the sender is writing, the quarries at Tura (Raou), were a source of stone for pyramid building located south of Cairo on the eastern shore of the Nile, about 13–17 km from Giza. The commander of troops there would have been in charge of the men needed to pre-cut the stone. Gunn suggests that the letter confirms the use of *mšꜥ*, “soldiers” for manual work when they were not needed for military purposes and cites examples evidencing this (Gunn 1925: 244–245). In this instance they are working alongside the regular quarrymen. This situation is also recognised by Faulkner who refers to the fact that a person of this military rank “performed duties not only of a strictly military nature” but those connected with “the forced labour employed on public works consisting largely of conscript troops under military command” (Faulkner 1953: 33). He notes that “the only army unit mentioned in the Old Kingdom texts is the *ḥst* (battalion)” (Faulkner 1953: 32) as denoted in this letter. Their presence and the objection to their absence underlines the importance of maintaining a continuity of this important material from the quarries. A differing interpretation of *jmj-r-mšꜥ* is that it refers to the leader of an expedition rather than to a commander of troops – an expedition that would have been sent by the king for procurement of the stone (Sperveslage 2011: 43). I would argue the reason for writing, the wording and the content of the letter are more in line with the military connotations noted by Gunn and Faulkner.⁶ The letter has evidenced the involvement of the military in organised labour of this kind when not on active duty.

LITERACY AND DELIVERY

There is the question of literacy amongst the senders and recipients of personal letters of this nature. Scribal involvement could have been needed in their composition and writing. Baines and Eyre note that “at the highest estimate of literate administration (10,000) and the lowest population estimate (1 m), one per cent would have been literate in the Old Kingdom...” (Baines – Eyre 1983: 67). In this instance Gunn presumes scribal writing noting “the scribe was able to write on the average only eight or nine signs with one charging of his pen... the writing is in a good, practiced hand, of a type characteristic of the late Old Kingdom” (Gunn 1925: 243). However, the sender and recipient of this letter – a commander of troops and chief justice and vizier – are likely to have been of the administrative percentage that did not require the services of a scribe.

Additionally, looking at the question of delivery, in the absence of any postal system personal correspondence such as this would have been sent by a trustworthy messenger. Details of the actual means of delivery and the identity of the messenger are infrequently noted in the textual content of personal correspondence. In this letter there is an exception with regard to the aspect of delivery as the sender notes the “letter carrier is to come to Tura together with the stone-barge.”

⁶ As opposed to the comment noted above regarding a devaluation of the title to be “borne only by lower-ranking individuals” (Eichler 1993: 234).

CONCLUSION

Letters, such as the one discussed in this study, are not able to employ vocal tones and body language to influence their recipient. It is the way they address the recipient, the structure of the wording, the manner in which they convey their message that are the means of provoking a response or action. This is exemplified by the analysis of this letter which has shown the knowledge that a piece of correspondence can provide regarding the people involved, status and relationships, actual events, location, historical context.

With regard to status and relationships – the commander of troops has used a form of greeting giving neither his name nor that of his recipient. The brief “It is the commander of troops who says...” is consistent with the continuing terseness of his response in protest at his recipient’s order and the suggested solution to the issue. The manner and structure of the content have reflected some equality of status between sender and recipient.

The letter has been a source of knowledge regarding an aspect of military procedure together with an actual event associated with it – a need for the provision of clothing. Additionally, evidencing the responsibility of a chief justice and vizier for its provision. The issue which was the commander of troops’ reason for writing refers to bringing a “battalion of the gang of Tura”. As referenced the word *βst*, “battalion” is the only army unit mentioned in the Old Kingdom texts. Consideration of other interpretations led to the conclusion that there was military involvement at the quarry – an insight from this letter into an ancient Egyptian military duty when not in action.

The mention in the letter of the *srh jmy-wrt*, “administrative building of the west side” where the men are to be brought has prompted discussion of the various suggestions and comments as to its location and identity as a bureaucratic office facility. From an administrative aspect this piece of correspondence shows that bureaucratic requests were not automatically obeyed without question. The letter was found in two pieces, each of which was folded tightly. It appeared from the manner of the creases that the letter had first been folded and then perhaps torn (Gunn 1925: 245). A “fanciful” thought from Gardiner was that the action was the vizier’s reaction to “what he may have regarded as a rather impertinent disputing of his own high authority” (Gardiner 1927: 78).⁷

In conclusion – the content and structure of this letter of protest have evidenced the insight a single individual piece of correspondence can provide. It has substantiated the argument that individual letters are an important primary source of information and additional knowledge regarding actual issues and events in ancient Egyptian daily life – that extra dimension, the personal touch.

7 However Ryholt comments “A personal examination of the letter in the Cairo Museum shows that it was not in fact torn; it had been folded up as was customary, twice horizontally and then nine times vertically, and is simply broken along the lower horizontal crease” (Ryholt 2021: 137, footnote 49).

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