

## **Social aspects in ancient Egyptian letters from the Old Kingdom to the Late Ramesside period**

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While there has been considerable interest in ancient Egyptian letters, the methodology of the research has resulted in a ‘compartmentalization’ of focus on individual letters. This broader view studies a range of personal correspondence across the timeframes of ancient Egyptian history with the objective of providing new knowledge about social aspects such as administrative and legal systems, insight into the daily life of the people, their attitudes, and customs, plus the personal issues of social interaction such as complaint, condolence, friendship and enmity. The letters being considered are personal in the sense that they are not from royalty or a vizier and thus dealing specifically with matters of administration. The timeframes cover:

Old Kingdom: ca 2720-2200 BC (Dynasties 3-8)

Middle Kingdom: ca 2050-1650 BC (Dynasties 11-14)

New Kingdom: ca 1570-1070 BC (Dynasties 18-20)

Ramesside: ca 1293-1080 BC (Dynasties 19 and 20)

Late Ramesside: ca 1080-1070 BC (late 20<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and Renaissance)

The topics that the writers are concerned about are varied and include complaints/military issues/religious customs and personnel/daily life/shipping and water related issues/household requirements/personal enquiries/to the gods.

This paper looks at a selection of letters of complaint. Correspondence of this nature occurs in all the timeframes and a letter from each period has been chosen. The overall nature of the content of these letters is to draw attention to an unsatisfactory state of affairs and an important aspect of the writing which will be looked at is the ways in which the complaints have been formulated and expressed. Also discussed in conjunction with this is the other relevant information in these pieces of correspondence – the identities of the sender and recipient and the additional information revealed about them and other people mentioned, information that can, as it were, ‘bring them to life.’ Additionally there is the social and administrative information that can be found and the differing styles and modes of address. The final conclusion draws together the above to pinpoint the generic similarities and differences.

The inception of Egyptian writing has been dated prior to the Old Kingdom, to the late pre-dynastic period, and it has been suggested that the idea of writing was ‘introduced indirectly by “stimulus diffusion” from Mesopotamia.’<sup>1</sup> Few examples of personal epistolography have been found from the Old Kingdom, due no doubt to the distance in time and the destructive forces of nature on perishable papyrus. Many more letters have survived from the Middle Kingdom covering a range of topics. Those from the early Middle Kingdom include a corpus of letters from a farmer named Hekanakht which provide considerable insight into land ownership and familial relationships.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Baines (1983) 575.

<sup>2</sup> See Allen (2002).

As society and the state developed there was a focus on scribal training and education. The Book of Kemit, which has been dated to the late Eleventh Dynasty, appears to have served as a template for this and later periods with regard to epistolary formulae.<sup>3</sup> With the advent of the Twelfth Dynasty the personal letters reflected this increased attention to writing and style. A number of brief model letters were found on a single papyrus reflecting standard introductory and terminal epistolary formulae such as ‘It is the servant of the estate who addresses...’ finishing with ‘It is good of you to take note.’<sup>4</sup> This epistolary convention is also evident in a copy of a number of dispatches from this period of the later Middle Kingdom which had been sent from the Semna fortress in Nubia, the ‘Semnah Despatches’.<sup>5</sup> Fragments of original letters from other Nubian forts also attest to extensive military communication between the Nubian fortresses and the central administration. Additionally a large body of letters dealing with temple matters was found, correspondence amongst the priests and workers associated with maintaining the funerary cult of Sesostri II, in which the form of address uses the formula ‘This is a communication to the lord I.p.h.’<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the royal diplomatic correspondence with Mesopotamia, Syria and Asia Minor written in Akkadian, – the ‘Amarna letters’ from the reign of Akhenaten – the personal letters so far discovered from the Eighteenth Dynasty are few in number. Amongst them are two letters discovered in the city of Akhetaten which are historically important in that they reveal an ordinary person’s ability to call upon the Aten without having to use the Pharaoh as an intermediary.<sup>7</sup> Letters from the Ramesside and Late Ramesside periods are numerous and cover all the subjects listed above, including many aspects of daily life, military involvement and agriculture. From this period comes the large body of letters written by the workmen at the village of Deir el-Medina.<sup>8</sup>

The epistolary style of the personal correspondence from the Eighteenth Dynasty onwards into the Ramesside and late Ramesside periods<sup>9</sup> ranged from the straight-forward ‘sender to recipient’ style which varied in wording to reflect their relative status or to indicate the business-like nature of the communication. These introductory formulae could be followed, when appropriate to the nature of the letter, by what has been described as a ‘complimentary preamble’ which preceded the main subject of the letter. It included the opening words ‘in life, prosperity health’, followed by a passage in which various gods were invoked. Those mentioned are usually forms of Amun, but other references can be made to the sender’s own local gods. The sender finishes with a blessing and petition, the formula of which varied across these periods.

The changes in the epistolary style of the personal correspondence up to a point has equated with the historical periods and is helpful in assessing an approximate dating for the letters themselves, although there is a certain amount of crossover, an earlier style not being totally rejected by later writers. Aspects of the differing styles and their relevance have been noted in the letters chosen for this paper

On the question of literacy Baines and Eyre postulated a literacy quotient for the general population during the Old Kingdom of only 1%, and because of this continuing questionable

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<sup>3</sup> See Wentz (1990) 15.

<sup>4</sup> Wentz (1990) 69. Letter 78.

<sup>5</sup> See Smither (1945) 3-10.

<sup>6</sup> See Collier M. and Quirke S. (2002).

<sup>7</sup> Wentz (1990) 94. Letters 123,124.

<sup>8</sup> See Černý (1973) 1-383.

<sup>9</sup> See Bakir (1970).

standard of literacy, plus the fact that the sender uses opening words such as ‘says’, ‘communicates’, ‘sends a communication’, ‘addressed by’, it is presumed that in most cases the sender of a letter used the services of a scribe. With regard to the literate elite the authors note the portrayal of scribes in large numbers on elite tombs, whom they see as being depicted as serving the needs of the tomb owner. They therefore suggest the existence of a ‘literate sub-elite’ serving the needs of the upper administrative classes.<sup>10</sup> In one case only among the letters selected for this paper, that from Ahmose, has the sender been a scribe and therefore penned the letter himself. The recipient would have had it read to him by his own scribe or a literate intermediary. It is interesting to speculate whether the sender of the letter was able to read the communication to check that he or she was being accurately recorded. Perhaps the scribe did his own ‘editing’ to make the letter more forceful (or maybe less so).

The first piece of correspondence is a letter from the Old Kingdom<sup>11</sup> which was discovered amongst several fragments of papyrus in the Step Pyramid at Saqqara which have been dated to the Sixth Dynasty<sup>12</sup> because of the palaeography and referencing to pyramid building and names. The papyrus with this letter was found folded tightly and torn in two parts horizontally.

A commander of troops responds to a letter from the chief justice and vizier which has requested him to bring a detachment of crewmen of the Tura quarries to get clothing in his presence at the Western Enclosure. He begins with the abrupt opening words ‘It is the commander of troops who says’ and continues by protesting at having to travel to the vizier’s location given that ‘you are going to come anyway to Tura with the barge, whereas I, your humble servant, have to spend six days at the Residence with this detachment before it gets clothing.’ The commander argues that this is what obstructs the work in his charge contending that ‘it is one day only that needs to be wasted for this detachment to get clothing.’

The complaint is in the form of a declaration of fact, a response to a previous communication. The complaint is not couched in the form of a question – the commander does not ask ‘Why’ his recipient has acted in this way. It is a statement of the recipient’s action using a pejorative tone. It is implicit in his words that the chief justice and vizier should rectify the situation and amend his request by appreciating the detrimental effect that his action has had on the carrying out of the work at Tura.

The sender of the letter has not been named. It is possible that the title ‘commander of troops’ signifies that he is too important to need naming<sup>13</sup> and this hypothesis could also apply to the unnamed chief justice and vizier recipient who originated this response. The sender refers to himself as ‘servant’. This might be a mere term of politeness with no status connotation<sup>14</sup> or as an indication of the slightly more exalted rank of the recipient. Gardiner cites other Old Kingdom references that imply this latter usage.<sup>15</sup> It seems likely that the two people concerned are of almost equal standing given that the ‘commander of troops’, despite his abrupt address, would be unlikely to make a complaint couched in these critical terms if he were in a significantly subordinate role to the recipient, and the person whom he was addressing would

<sup>10</sup> For full details see Baines and Eyre (1983) 65-72.

<sup>11</sup> *Dynasty 6: P. Cairo JE 49623* See Wente (1990) 42. Letter no.40.

<sup>12</sup> Gunn (1925) 242.

<sup>13</sup> Gardiner (1927) 76.

<sup>14</sup> Gunn (1925) 244 n.1.

<sup>15</sup> Gardiner (1927) 76 n.1.

need to be someone with the authority to have issued such an order to him in the first place and therefore be responsible for retracting it upon receipt of his complaint.

The quarries at Tura were the primary source of stone for pyramid building so the commander there would have been in charge of a large number of men providing work of considerable importance. The letter implies the use of soldiers for manual work at times when they were not needed for military purposes, although presumably they were working alongside the regular quarrymen. This underlines the importance of maintaining a continuity of major supplies from the quarries.

The place he has been asked to come to is not precisely identified but was likely to be at the Djoser pyramid complex at Saqqara, especially given the fact that the document was discovered there. As mentioned the letter was found amongst other fragments there which related to pyramid building and naming. In terms of administration it could be inferred that the responsibilities of a chief justice and vizier at this time included being in charge of operations related to building work and supplies and he desired to emphasise his authority in this area by insisting that the men should be brought to him, both for the purpose of getting clothing 'in his presence' and additionally to enable him to review the men in terms of their well-being and capability. The tone of the commander's letter could then also be reflecting his annoyance at what he might see as a slur on his capabilities in seeing to the well-being of his men and as a military leader. The letter also indicates that bureaucratic requests were not automatically obeyed without question. Here the commander is offering a very much to the point alternative when he refers to the fact that the clothes could have been brought on the barge, and emphasising the wasted six days to be spent at the Residence.

As noted, in his opening words the commander omits his own name, nor does he name his recipient, the chief justice and vizier. Also missing is any kind of formal greeting citing the chief justice and vizier's responsibilities with the polite phrase 'In life, prosperity, health'. However the general refers to himself as the 'humble servant' of his recipient. He notes that the letter has been 'delivered to me, your humble servant', and repeats this phrase several times, observing one of the conventions of letter writing during the Old (and later the Middle) Kingdom. Perhaps, despite this seeming deference, the letter was folded and torn in half as a result of the vizier's immediate reaction to the commander's abrupt complaint.

The next letter is from the Middle Kingdom and has been dated to the early Twelfth dynasty, but its provenance is not known.<sup>16</sup>

A general, Nehsi, complains to a person named Kay that Senet has written to him saying 'no provisions have been delivered to her' although he had sent measures of barley 'to my household', and to Kay himself in the charge of Kay's son and daughter 'who fetched it with the barge.... So you should fetch it again.' Nehsi continues 'Moreover what is the meaning of [letting] yourself be turned away from your own daughter?' and suggests that by not handing over the provisions Nehsi sent, Kay will have 'succeeded in killing her.' It is therefore possible that Senet is another daughter to Kay. Nehsi then comments he has 'discerned the character of my stepmother' and asks whether Kay is pursuing his wife's wish 'by killing off my household', which implies Kay is Nehsi's father. The general wonders whether 'Now that word is sent to me that there are no provisions there, can I remain confident that I have given provisions to my household?' He concludes by writing that he will send back the barge again as soon as it has reached him.

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<sup>16</sup> *Dynasty12: P.BM 10549 See Wentz (1990) 65. Letter no.75.*

This complaint is in the form of questions that invite the recipient to explain his actions and in the case of the first question to rectify them. The opening question begins with the words ‘What is the meaning/ *in ir*’ of Kay’s failure to deliver the provisions and is followed by a direct request to remedy the situation by fetching them again. Nehsi’s second question of complaint, again introduced by ‘What is the meaning/*in ir*’, is regarding Kay’s behaviour towards his own daughter. The structure of this question is not one that requires a solution from the sender, but in its criticism of Kay’s actions requires the recipient himself to offer an explanation for his behaviour.

The letter does not reveal much in the way of personal details for the sender and recipient except that Nehsi is a general, whose letter reflects an authoritative personality used to having his orders carried out correctly, but there is no indication of Kay’s occupation or social status.

From a societal point of view the letter indicates familial responsibilities but is ambiguous regarding relationships. The inference is that Senet is Kay’s daughter with responsibility for Nehsi’s household and that Kay’s wife is Nehsi’s stepmother, making Nehsi his son. Despite his rank of general Nehsi has to rely on what appear to be family members to ensure the supply of provisions, in this case barley, to his household. There is no indication of their exact location or of where he himself is based. It would seem that there is some distance between them as the provisions are being transported by barge. The urgency of the general’s letter could be caused by a state of famine in the area where he and his family live, as the reference to Kay killing his own daughter implies that by not receiving the required measures of barley she and Nehsi’s household will die from starvation. It is important for him to ascertain what has happened as Senet’s letter must have taken some time to reach him. From a personal aspect family frictions are apparent from Nehsi’s accusation that Kay and his family are failing to hand over the provisions and the reference to his stepmother’s possible wish to make Kay deny his household food.

The opening words are a variation on the form of address normally used between relatives ‘X speaks to Y’ which would seem to confirm a relationship between Nehsi and Kay. The letter opens with the phrase ‘Communication by the general Nehsi...’, but adds a more elaborate greeting that could be designed to flatter Kay and make him more responsive to this urgent request – ‘How are you? Are you alive, prospering, and healthy? ... May Montu, lord of the Theban nome, and all the gods [help] you and provide you with a million years in [life, prosperity] and health...’ Invoking Montu as ‘lord of the Theban nome’ suggests a dating to the early years of the Twelfth Dynasty when this god had been elevated subsequent to the defeat of the Heracleopolitan dynasty.

There are few extant letters for the Eighteenth Dynasty, and this example is the second of two pieces found stuck to mummy wrapping.<sup>17</sup> It is ‘Addressed by Ahmose, Peniati’s (man), to his lord the chief treasurer Tai’, and asks why a maidservant ‘who was with me’ has been taken away and given to someone else. He asks ‘Let payment for her be accepted for her to be with me because she is only a child and unable to work.’ He further suggests that Tai command him ‘to bear her work load just like any maidservant.’ He cites a letter from the girl’s mother in which she reprimands him for allowing her daughter to be taken away, that she had not complained to Tai herself ‘because she is a daughter to you.’

This is another complaint framed as a question, which asks why/*Hr m* the sender’s maidservant has been taken away, and is followed by specific instructions as to how the

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<sup>17</sup> *Dynasty 18: Hatshepsut P.Louvre 3230b* See Wentz (1990) 92. Letter no. 117.

recipient might rectify the complaint. Ahmose suggests he himself remedy the situation and achieve the maidservant's return by making payment or taking on her workload. It is implicit in the wording of the letter that it is being sent in order to get an explanation and have his complaint addressed and resolved. In addition there is also a 'complaint within a complaint' in this piece of correspondence. This second grievance is from the mother of the maidservant and is also structured as a question, asking why Ahmose allowed this to happen. Implicit in the request is the requirement to rectify her complaint but she does not offer any suggestion as to how he should do this.

The two pieces are separate letters and in the first Ahmose is named as 'scribe'. In this second letter he is 'of Peniati'. On a Louvre palette (E.3212) dated to this period there is a description of 'The scribe Ahmose, lieutenant of Peniati, director of works of Hermonthis.' While the office Tai as treasurer designates him as superior to the scribe's master Peniati, Ahmose's referral to himself as 'Peniati's man' indicates to the recipient a scribal status that imbues his complaint with increased authority. At this point there is no more information about the treasurer himself.

The content of the letter reveals a personal situation, an aspect of social domestic *mores*. The relationship does not suggest that the child is a slave. The fact that the mother uses the words 'she is a daughter to you' suggests rather that her mother has entered into an agreement with Ahmose to be something of a father figure to the girl. The reason for her being in his care is not specifically stated. To ensure her return Ahmose asks that payment for her be accepted and as an alternative he even offers his own services as a substitute maidservant. The fact that he makes these offers suggests a moral responsibility – a private concern for the child rather than one connected with a business relationship with the mother based on training for her daughter in domestic service. Possibly the mother was in some way related to Ahmose. The content of the letter, while addressed to the chief treasurer, reflects a personal and private concern rather than any administrative issues and as such paints a picture of people and their problems rather than being a formal bureaucratic document.

The letter is without any elaborate greeting a variant of the *dd* formula, where a sender is addressing a recipient.<sup>18</sup> In this letter the wording is *dd tn* 'that which was said' by Ahmose to the treasurer Tai. Bakir sees this style as being indicative of business or official matters, a kind of modern 'memo form', and feels that this usage is emphasised in the letter by the combination with the use of 'master'.<sup>19</sup> However his letter can be seen as an exception – that the abrupt beginning combined with the content is indicative of personal concern rather than business related. As a professional scribe Ahmose would have penned the letter himself, and Peet comments on the neat script, 'with its entire lack of the abbreviations and almost senseless strokes and ligatures of the Nineteenth or Twentieth dynasty....'<sup>20</sup>

A number of letters have survived from the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties of the Ramesside period. This letter from the Twentieth Dynasty<sup>21</sup> is a letter from the mayor of Elephantine, Meron, to the chief taxing-master Menmarenarkht, regarding unjustified tax demands. While calling upon all the gods to keep the taxing-master healthy, Meron goes on to complain that 'The scribe Patjauemdiamon of the House of the Votaress of Amon has come...to demand that grain which has been specified for the House of the Votaress of Amon.' Meron

<sup>18</sup> Bakir (1970) 47.

<sup>19</sup> Bakir (1970) 48.

<sup>20</sup> Peet (1926) 70.

<sup>21</sup> *Dynasty 20: Ramesses XI P. Valencay No.1* See Wentz (1990) 130. Letter no. 156.

goes on to detail the measures of barley being demanded ‘100 *khar* measures’ and points out that there are ‘no field holdings yielding such an amount.’ The scribe explains that it is because of certain land holdings Meron has, namely the ‘*khanto*-land of the *gezira* of Ombi.’ But Meron denies ownership, declaring that the land in question is a ‘holding of some free tenants, who pay gold into Pharaoh’s treasury’ and is nothing to do with him. He also mentions that the matter of another holding ‘in the vicinity of Edfu’, has also been brought up ‘a mere four arouras of land...upon which I had put one man and one yoke of oxen who cultivated the scrap of land which they found usable in it.’ But avers that all the barley that came from there ‘40 *khar* measures’ he had handed over to Patjauemdiamon, swearing ‘with a firm oath’ that he hadn’t touched ‘a single measure or a single half measure thereof.’

In this letter neither of the complaints is phrased as a direct question demanding to know ‘why’ like the examples in the two previous letters. Instead Meron advises Menmarenarkht in a restrained and factual manner about the reasons he feels these tax demands are unjustified. It has the tone of a bureaucratic communication which reflects the administrative status of the sender and recipient as mayor and chief taxing master. Although as a third party the scribe is involved in the complaint, Meron does not attribute blame either to him or his recipient. As noted below Menmarenarkht is of a higher status than the mayor which would require a certain deference in Meron’s approach. The complaints in this letter are not lodged as personal grievances demanding explanation and redress, but are addressing, in a calm tone, what Meron suggests are bureaucratic errors.

The opening greeting makes it clear as to the identity and status of the sender and recipient, the mayor of Elephantine Meron, to the chief taxing master Menmarenakht. Meron addresses him using the imperative *ssnb* which translates as ‘make or keep healthy’ and is used only in reference to persons of very high rank.<sup>22</sup> In other contemporary letters Menmarenakht has the additional title of Overseer of the Granaries<sup>23</sup> which would signify his responsibility for Egypt’s two main sources of wealth. So Meron is taking his complaint to the highest financial authority.

The content of the letter can be seen as an insight into a differing structure of land management under Meron’s jurisdiction. The management of royal estates (*khanto*-land) was normally in the hands of people like Meron – the mayors of provincial towns. As such he would have been responsible for the cultivation of the land and its produce, and would have had to accept liability for any lack of stipulated provisions to the Treasury or any other recipient to whom they were directed. In this case it appears the land in question is no longer in this category but has been re-designated to become tenanted land, and he sees the tenants as having the responsibility for paying the due taxes. In this case the scribe demanding these is from the House of the Votaress of Amun. Other Ramesside documents relating to this form of taxation indicate that she was a person of royal blood with a position as high, or higher, than the royal wife and her ‘house’ is here demanding income in the traditional fashion.<sup>24</sup> The status of the demand is reflected in the fact that Meron sees fit to complain to such a high authority as Menmarenakht to rectify the situation. It also infers that this situation regarding tenanted land is an authorised one, that Meron has not taken a unilateral decision in this regard, and is not fabricating a story in order to avoid paying taxes. The final part of the letter where he declares that he had given the scribe Patjauemdiamon all the measures of barley that had been harvested

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<sup>22</sup> Gardiner (1950) 118.

<sup>23</sup> Černý 1939) 59.

<sup>24</sup> Gardiner (1950) 124.

from land as far away Edfu is an indication of the extent of the authority of the Mayor of Elephantine.

The opening form of address shows the rule of precedence in which the sender defers to his superior by putting the latter's name first 'May Amon [favour] Menmarenakht. The mayor of Elephantine Meron sends a communication.' The following 'complimentary preamble'<sup>25</sup> precedes the main subject of the letter and is in style of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties. There is the invocation to life, prosperity, health in the favour of a god, here Amun-Re. The latter is called upon again as Amon Re-Harakhti 'when he rises and sets and upon Knum, Satis, Anukis and all the gods of Elephantine.' Meron prays they may 'keep the chief taxing master healthy,<sup>26</sup> to give him...a long lifetime and a good ripe old age, and to give him favours in the presence of Amun-Re, King of the gods...and in the presence of Pharaoh.' Meron's use of this full preamble shows recognition of Menmarenakht's status.

This final letter is from the Late Ramesside period known as the Renaissance era, which coincided with the last 10 years of the reign of Ramesses XI.<sup>27</sup> In this brief and to the point communication the principal of the harem of Amun-Re, Herere, is berating the troop captain Peseg for not providing rations to the workers at the necropolis, a matter she has already written to him about – 'What's this about the personnel of the...noble necropolis... I wrote to you saying, "Give them rations," ... that you haven't yet given them any.' She demands that upon receipt of this letter Peseg looks for the grain she wrote about and gives the men their rations. The conclusion of the letter is fragmented but she demands 'Don't ...complain to me again. Have them prepared...' indicating a previous correspondence not to her liking.

This complaint follows the form of a question introduced by *jx* followed by a direct request to rectify the situation and has been prompted by the recipient's failure to act on a previous order. The complaint is not one that invites any explanation or justification but is a series of orders. The status of the sender, Herere, as noted below, enables her to express herself in this way to a male recipient.

The sender Herere was the maternal grandmother of the general Piankh, a major figure at Thebes, assuming high office there while Ramesses XI was still officially Pharaoh. In a letter dated to year 10 of the Renaissance she is noted as being in Elephantine, so possibly this letter was written then. Given his responsibility for providing rations to the 'noble necropolis' the troop captain Peseg would have been stationed close by at Thebes.

Once again the importance of food supply is apparent and a hierarchy within the social structure revealed, in that because of her position a woman is able to address a male troop captain in this way. As a principal of the harem of Amon-Re she has the authority to command Peseg to follow her orders. The manner in which she writes reflects this authoritative position and she implies Peseg has been insubordinate in questioning her previous command. The letter indicates the responsibility of a troop captain for the welfare of the personnel of such an important location and could be seen as confirmation of the military control at Thebes at this time. The introductory greeting is of the form sender to recipient 'The principal of the harem of Amon-[Re, King of] the Gods, Herere, to the troop captain Peseg.' There is no preamble of the complimentary kind – this is a terse note of complaint, straight to the point. It is a letter of command 'look for grain, give it to them' with the referral to a previous letter couched in the same terms 'I wrote to you saying "Give them rations".' The brevity of the letter is consistent

<sup>25</sup> Bakir (1970) 55.

<sup>26</sup> As mentioned the imperative *ssnb* is used which denotes a recipient of very high rank.

<sup>27</sup> *Dynasty 20: Year 10 of the Renaissance* Late Ramesside letter 38. See Wentz (1990) 200. Letter no. 324.

with the status of ‘one who must be obeyed’, emphasising the high status of Herere over a mere troop captain.

From a generic point of view these complaints are all concerned with a state of affairs in which the recipient has done, or failed to do, something that the sender of the letter wants him to rectify. The manner in which a complaint can be expressed has been shown to vary. In the first letter the complaint takes the form of a factual declaration of the recipient’s action with an implicit rather than a specific demand as to how he should remedy the situation. In the second and third letters the complaints are couched in the form of questions, asking why the recipient has acted in this way, and with instructions for sorting out the problem. The fourth letter is again a factual declaration of circumstances, while the fifth letter is another complaint in the form of a question with its following request for rectification.

The subjects of the complaints differ, and while these examples do not cover all the reasons for writing exemplified in other correspondence which falls under this topic heading,<sup>28</sup> they are an indication of what people felt was wrongdoing. As noted below emotions and belief were not the primary *raison d’être* for writing – first and foremost they were written to rectify what the sender considered a wrongdoing. However the tone of the letter can be used as an incentive to the recipient to take action – for example expressing anger, offering flattery, using an official style. These different approaches can be associated with the relative status of the sender and recipient. In terms of style the letters structured as questions show differing interrogative grammatical structures according to their period. In these three letters the questions are introduced by *jn ir*, *Hr m* and *jx* respectively.

Also indicated by the examples discussed here is that, unlike letters which fall into the other topic categories which are conveying information or enquiring after the recipient’s health and well-being, letters of complaint are not rhetorical in this way but require active action from their recipient. However, it appears that while the recipient was expected to take action he or she was not requested or seemingly obliged to respond to confirm that they had done so.<sup>29</sup>

Of these five letters complaining about an unsatisfactory state of affairs, four of them are concerned with practical matters rather than with emotions or belief. Of these four, two are concerned with the supply of provisions, one with the logistics of clothing supply and the other with a wrongful tax demand. From these letters it has been possible to discover societal information relevant to its period; the use of military personnel in the Tura quarries in the Old Kingdom, the responsibilities of the chief justice and vizier regarding building work and supplies and the fact that orders were not always obeyed without question; the personalities of a general’s family and his urgent need to supply provisions of barley to his household, reflecting what could be a time of severe shortage in the early Middle Kingdom and the possibility of famine. In both cases we learn that the manner either of communication or supply had to be by barge, an indication of the importance of the Nile as a means of contact. The letter regarding an unjustified tax demand from the Ramesside period reveals the differences in administrative structure under the mayor of Elephantine’s jurisdiction. The final brief Late Ramesside note once again shows the involvement of military responsibility within everyday requirements, in this case the supply of food to necropolis workers and the hierarchy in place that allows a woman to address a troop captain. The fifth example dated to the Eighteenth Dynasty is the exception. It differs by being a more personal and emotional complaint, dealing as it does with

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<sup>28</sup> See Sweeney for other topics (2001) 190-1.

<sup>29</sup> Sweeney (2001) 211.

the removal of a child from the care of the writer. This letter is of a more familial nature, looking at a problem arising from domestic responsibility.

The modes of address for each letter have differed across the timeframe in accordance with the subject matter and/or status of the senders and recipients. In the Old Kingdom letter, while the name of both sender and recipient have been omitted, either indicating that the people concerned are too important and well-known to each other to require their inclusion or to emphasise the annoyance of the sender, the latter also invokes conventional style by referring to himself as his recipient's 'humble servant'. The Middle Kingdom letter from the general Nehsi, despite the urgency of the complaint, uses a more formal and elaborate greeting asking after the recipient's well-being and invoking the gods which could be occasioned by the respect due to a familial relationship or as flattery to ensure attention to the complaint. The New Kingdom address is without an elaborate greeting, 'what says' the sender to the recipient, in the form used for business correspondence, although here it is a reflection of personal concern. In the Ramesside example Meron addresses the chief taxing master in a way used for people of very high rank, placing his name as recipient before Meron's and additionally using the 'complimentary preamble' due to the importance of his complaint and the status of the recipient. In the final letter from the Late Ramesside period there are no pleasantries and the form is just in the style sender to recipient in accordance with the commanding content and the status of the sender.

There have necessarily been differing opinions regarding translation and interpretation, given the condition of the primary sources and individual viewpoints. It has not been possible, due to the length of this paper, to detail and discuss these points with reference to the texts discussed here. However, the study of these differences showed that they did not alter the overall meaning from which the information and conclusions have been drawn.

Although this has been only a very small sample of private letters, it has provided an insight into letters of complaint and the ways in which these complaints could be expressed and structured. Also indicated is how, analysed in this way, personal correspondence can give insight into social structure, personalities and problems, similarity and differences, within the spectrum of historical timeframes, and reveals the importance of private letters as a primary source of social history in ancient Egypt.

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