OFFICIAL EPISTOLOGRAPHY AND THE LANGUAGE(S) OF POWER
PROCEEDINGS OF THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE
RESEARCH NETWORK IMPERIUM & OFFICIUM

PAPYROLOGICA VINDOBONENSIA

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Preface

The papers presented in this volume sum up the results of the First International Conference of the National Research Network (NFN) "Imperium & Officium: Comparative Studies in Ancient Bureaucracy and Officialdom" held in Vienna in November 2010 and addressing the topic "Official Correspondence and the Language(s) of Power". Its aim was to study communication strategies within an official context by analysing the rhetoric and general function of administrative letters in order to gain an insight into the underlying structures of governmental control and bureaucratic mentalities. For that purpose, we adopted a diachronic and comparative approach that also forms the basis of the collaboration within our research network by interconnecting different disciplines within the fields of Ancient Studies. Their shared characteristic is that they all benefit from access to large corpora of documentary texts. Geared to the needs of the Network's focus on polities and empires in the Ancient Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean World in the period from the first millennium BC to the first millennium AD, we are in the privileged position of having been able to draw upon the contributions a number of experts from the fields of Assyriology, Ancient History, and Arabic and Islamic Studies. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all of them for their valuable input during the conference and in the course of preparing these proceedings, as well as for their endless patience in awaiting this publication.

The period under consideration clearly exceeds the already comprehensive time frame of our Network's research by including some of the Bronze Age precursors of the Neo-Assyrian and the Neo-Babylonian empires. It thus covers a span of three millennia, ranging from the Third Dynasty of Ur (2110–2003 BC) to the sequence of state formations during the earlier Muslim period (7th–10th centuries CE). The volume is divided into three sections, each concerned with official epistolography in the Ancient Near East, the Classical World, or Late Antiquity, including Islamic civilisation, presenting the individual papers in chronological order. Section I consists of nine chapters, starting with an overview of the records of royal archives from Ancient Mesopotamia and a qualitative analysis of their information potential (FRAHM), then continuing with individual case studies of official letters from Ur III Mesopotamia (SALLABERGER), Amorite Mari (CHARPIN), the Old Assyrian merchant quarter in Kaniš in Central Anatolia (MICHEL), and the Neo-Assyrian (RADNER, BAKER/GROß, FALES) and Neo-Babylonian (JURSA/HACKL) as well as the Achaemenid (ROLLINGER) empires. Section II contains seven articles concerned with Ptolemaic Egypt (ARMONI), the Hellenistic East, in particular Seleucid and Attalid Asia Minor (HOFMANN and also TAEUBER),[1] and then the Roman Empire as a whole (TAEUBER, ANDO, ECK) as well as on the individual Roman provinces of Galatia (KEARSLEY) and Roman Egypt (BRYEN). Finally, Section III comprises six contributions concerning the post-Classical World, half of them addressing the Later Roman and Early Byzantine period (CORCORAN, TOST, FOURNET), with two of them confining themselves to the Egypt (TOST, FOURNET), and the other half dealing exclusively with Islamic Egypt (PAPACONSTANTINOU, REINFANDT, PROCHÁZKA/BSEES). The contributions are preceded by a programmatic introduction that gives an outline of the task and attempts to synthesise the empirical findings of the individual studies. We are particularly happy about the fact that several of the contributions contain translations of exemplary letters, either at their end or integrated in the text, from the respective subject areas

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[1] The written version of HOFMANN's original paper "*Mimesis vel aemulatio*? Die hellenistischen Anfänge der offiziellen römischen Epistolographie und ihre machtpolitischen Implikationen" has been published in *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte, Romanistische Abteilung* 131 (2014), 177-215.

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under study. These help to support the authors' argument while making the book a handy tool for a first approach of the sources. We are indebted to Martina Schmidl and Klaus Wagensonner, who provided technical support and assisted us with the editorial work, as well as Heather D. Baker and Craig Crossen, who corrected the English contributions in this book. Furthermore, we would like to thank the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) for financing our Network's research, the University of Vienna for providing infrastructural facilities as well as additional funding and, finally, the Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW) for publishing this volume in its series "Papyrologica Vindobonensia".

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Administrative Epistolography in Ancient Empires

An Introduction[*]

As historical sources, the ancient official epistolographic documents that are the subject of the papers gathered in this volume are useful in two ways. First, they shed light on the different levels of administrative structure and procedure, ranging from the minutiae of local management to the overall organisation of the governmental machinery, and thus elucidate crucial junctures in the formation and functioning of pre-modern state power. Second, the documents' diction, rhetoric, and style of argumentation elucidate particular discourses or *epistemai* that were founded on contemporary systems of values. Administrative correspondence was based upon a hierarchically structured network of interacting institutions and persons, and shaped by preconceived notions of what had to be said or written on specific occasions, and how it could be said. We may call this the 'power of language' or, following Foucault, the 'power of discourse'.[1] In short, these documents are a rich source for administrative mentalities and the 'deep structure' of governmental systems.

Thus the contributions in the present volume discuss two aspects of ancient administrative epistolography. As sources for administrative history, the letters can be sifted for features reflecting the needs of efficient official correspondence and therefore the *propria* of this subdivision of administration based on the use of the written word. As is demonstrated time and again throughout this volume, the characteristics of official and internal letters, communiqués, instructions, returns, and memoranda result from the interplay of several parameters, among which the subject matter as such is but one: equally important were the direction of information flow, the physical as well as the social distance between correspondents, their relative position within an administrative hierarchy, archival practices, and the function and form of dissemination envisaged for the missive in question. Moreover, communication strategies drew heavily on a wide range of rhetorical devices – well-chosen paternalistic gestures, threats, expressions of appreciation, attempts at persuasion – that reflect specific behavioural patterns shaped by a specific context. Ancient administrative letters (like modern administrative letters) did not merely relay 'hard' information, they conveyed messages beyond the textual surface: they functioned as an instrument of power that supported, and indeed created, collective identities and hierarchies within a given administrative or governmental system. One might call this aspect of administrative epistolography 'symbolic significance'. In some cases the symbolic significance of the written word overshadowed, if not eclipsed, the letter's practical administrative purpose. The title chosen for this volume, 'the language of power', refers to the specific dynamics of this process. These dynamics resulted from the interdependency of daily, routine practices and ideological superstructure and are the central theme of this volume, in which the documents discussed range from the beginnings of the formation of pre-modern statehood in Early Bronze Age Mesopotamia, extend through the Near-Eastern empires of the Iron Age and the Mediterranean empires of the Classical world, and include the period of transition from the (Post-) Classical to the Medieval worlds at the end of the first millennium AD.

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[1] Foucault 1970.

The state of the problem and issues of methodology

'Classical' institutional history is the most common approach to administrative history: its focus is the study of institutions and offices and their interaction with a view towards the reconstruction of governmental practices. This method is usually associated with the long-standing academic tradition of German *Staaten-, Institutionen- und Verwaltungsgeschichte*. It is grounded in the positivistic approach of 19th century historicism, emphasizes philology, and depends on access to massive corpora of textual and documentary sources. Its heuristic potential is without doubt and has time and again been demonstrated wherever new sources have to be processed or known information must be re-evaluated. The limits of this approach become apparent when it encounters the task of conceptualizing and structuring fundamentally fragmentary information, or account for documentary *lacunae*.

In this respect, historical research can benefit from a complementary theory-oriented and interdisciplinary approach aiming at modelling the evidence for comparative purposes. Only relatively recently have Ancient Studies systematically used methodological and theoretical input from other disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, cultural and literary studies, and economic and political science.[2] This has opened up new avenues for research and caused a paradigm shift in our approach to pre-modern administration and state-building,[3] resulting in a revision of the previous historical focus combined with an adjustment of methodological tools and central questions. It has also caused an extension and a redefinition of common terminology (e.g. *imperium* "empire" and *officium* "office") by incorporating new items and concepts that illustrate specific features of pre-modern state power, the manifestation of governance and compliance, the distinctive nature (and overlap) of public and private spheres, and so on. Given the new scholarly assumptions, what do terms such as 'progress', 'bureaucratisation', 'rationality', and the like stand for in the context of our sources? Such issues can only be addressed on the basis of a broad and diachronically comparative approach. A subject such as 'official epistolography' requires frequent recourse to sociolinguistics. Also important is the crucial question of how far distinctive communication patterns seem to have correlated with manifestations of 'bureaucratic rationality'.[4] From a heuristic standpoint, Max Weber's conceptualization and modelling of the different forms of dominion and governance as well as their transformation into bureaucratic forms of organisation and means of control serve as an important frame of reference.[5]

The papers gathered in this volume address, implicitly or explicitly, from different viewpoints the interplay between the symbolic import and the practical significance of the written word, and of how this interplay sheds light on the nature of empires and their governmental regimes (the present survey of the individual contributions points to some facets of the issue). Although it is a given that both features of written communication – symbolic power and communication of information – have always coexisted in the context of pre-modern societies, we may *a priori* assume that the latter typically was dominant in administrative milieus characterized by a higher degree of bureaucratic thinking. In contrast, distinctly traditional and patrimonial forms of governance may be assumed to have had a stronger need for the 'performative' aspect of letters or written messages. Thus, the prevalence of either in specific empires in the Ancient Near East and the Mediterranean basin will dictate the patterns of their administrative behaviour.

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[2] Manning/Morris 2005:1–44 emphasizes the Ancient Studies' backlog in methodology and its implications through an overview of Classical and Ancient Near Eastern scholarship. Until recently, both disciplines pursued separate paths of research.

[3] This shift in emphasis is most apparent within 'imperial studies', notably in connection with the continuing 'empire debate'; see, for instance, Morris/Scheidel 2009 and Bang/Bayly 2011, and more recently Bang/Scheidel 2013 on the nature of ancient states.

[4] Foucault's concept of 'governmentality' refers to the interplay of similar forces, though addressing governmental techniques and practices in a broader sense by including several forms of power regimes and institutions exercising surveillance and control in order to maintain a well-ordered and stable society; see Burchell/Gordon/Miller 1991.

[5] Weber 1980 [1925]:551–80.

Limits of the evidence

Although official and administrative letters survived in literary as well as in documentary contexts, the vast majority belong to the latter. The aforementioned distinction between the practical and symbolic features of written communication suggests a distinction between those texts that retained their utility for a brief period only and/or were intended for circulation within a closely circumscribed context and texts that were meant to be preserved and sometimes publicly displayed over an extended period of time. While the former were almost exclusively written on cheap and readily available materials, such as clay tablets, papyrus sheets, and such recycled material or waste products as potsherds (ostraca), the latter, especially 'display copies,' were normally recorded on more durable writing surfaces like stone or metal and occasionally were even cited in the literary works of ancient authors. These issues are explored in the present volume primarily in the Graeco-Roman context.[6] Ascertaining whether such 'secondary' publication reflects a particular significance attributed to the document by its author or recipient, or, for whatever reasons, its subsequent re-evaluation, is a matter of individual assessment. In any case, the intended publication of administrative missives by the sender was rather rare and required an explicit order (ECK:193). Monumental publication, when it occurred, presupposes a vital interest on the part of the writer, since considerable amounts of money had to be spent in order to monumentalize an inscription (ECK:186–87; 198): the interest in achieving an outward impact must be presupposed to have been present right from the beginning (CORCORAN:221). Although texts surviving on publicly displayed media are supposed to be close to the original documents, they do not necessarily reflect the original meaning or the principal's intention (CORCORAN:221) and often do not convey realities in their whole truth, since negative contents are either absent or suppressed (CORCORAN:221; ECK:187; HOFMANN:143–44). Furthermore, it is quite likely that, by being recorded in either an epigraphic or a literary context, the wording of those texts might have been simplified, shortened, altered in stress by additions, or elaborated to enhance the text's narrative qualities. Such additional 'medialization' sometimes went hand in glove with a translation of the document or the latter's reworking in other languages, owing to a particular purpose or target audience. (The most striking examples of such a practice, at least within the context of this volume, are ROLLINGER:121–26; see also ECK:190–91 and CORCORAN:219–20; 226–27.) Elsewhere, rulers or public authorities used translation to ensure that their directives were executed as desired (see, for instance, TAEUBER:156–57 in conjunction with source text 4 cited there). In this sense, the fact of dissemination appears to signal an imperial manifestation of a claim of authority that is owed to the political value and weight of the text. At the same time, it shows that 'rationality' indeed formed an integral part of governmental policy employing various modes of communication through legislation, correspondence, and visual imagery.[7]

Apart from the exceptional cases of public announcements, the information in administrative letters for the most part remained within the bureaucratic machinery, where it was either forwarded to another unit or filed in a public or an institutional archive and, eventually, discarded. This kind of source material is obviously much more representative for matters of daily routine than documents intended for display and provides insight into the 'administrative realities' that generated huge numbers of letters and other records. Although only a small proportion of these documentary texts (on clay tablets or on papyrus) have survived, they nevertheless form, in conjunction with the publicly erected stone inscriptions, the largest corpora of textual sources originating from the Ancient Near East and the Classical Mediterranean World. However, it is important to bear in mind that, notwithstanding the large numbers of texts recovered, we

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[6] But the mundane medium of the Ancient Near Eastern clay tablet could also be used effectively for display, as in the case of the huge copies of the 'Vassal Treaties' of the Neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon (Parpola and Watanabe 1988: No. 6) and his predecessor Sargon's Letter to the State God Assur (Mayer 2013:96–141). Monumental inscriptions in the Ancient Near East, however, did not normally have an epistolary form.

[7] Shown in exemplary fashion by ANDO in this volume. In his introduction, he supports (*ibid.*:165) the breaking away from a primarily telic understanding of this conception, emphasizing the more informal factors and manners of articulation that are located outside of the institutional framework and transcend the official mode of representation; see also reflections about 'rational' motives by KEARSLEY:183 and ECK:192–93.

possess only an extremely fragmentary and uneven record. This is the result both of differences in ancient administrative practice (and environmental conditions) and accidents of discovery. In antiquity, the use of writing and its daily practice was not only subject to culturally determined distinctions within an environment of multilingual societies, it was also subject to differences between administrative centres and peripheries, between urban and rural, between public and private, and among various milieus (ECK:198), and the availability of writing material. In the Eastern Mediterranean, for instance, most of the texts intended for publication were inscribed in stone, whereas in the western Roman Empire administrative bodies and public authorities increasingly used metal, especially bronze. This greatly reduced the likelihood of a western inscription's survival, since many of them were later melted down (ECK:187): thus, only a tiny fraction of legal and administrative texts engraved in bronze in the West happened to survive.

The modern place of discovery sometimes may, but need not necessarily, be a document's site of origin or storage, although in many cases these would have been located in or near an ancient administrative centre. This situation is aggravated by the rather erratic nature of archaeological exploration and the fact that just a few spots in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern have yielded substantial quantities of ancient clay tablets and papyri, while stone inscriptions were occasionally reused as building materials in later periods. The durability of the different writing materials must also be taken into account. Under favourable conditions, even unfired clay tablets are almost indestructible. Normally, such tablets are stable as long as they are unexcavated; but once above ground the drying process can degrade them rapidly – which is the main reason for the substantial tablet losses during the first decades of excavation in Mesopotamia. But papyrus is even more sensitive to weathering, especially humidity, and may decompose very quickly. This is the main reason that papyri, although papyrus was the most used writing material in the Mediterranean region since the Hellenistic period, are so rare: most papyri originate from peripheries, in particular from dump sites outside a few Middle Egyptian towns and settlements (TOST:240). In contrast, clay tablets are usually found in such central places as temple and palace complexes as part of large-scale institutional archives. Thus the circumstances of preservation and discovery create fundamental differences among textual sources that are in principle structurally similar.

The density of documentation likewise varies widely. While some periods are exceptionally well documented, others have left practically nothing.[8] For instance, the 25 years between 2048 and 2024 BC during the later reigns of the Third Dynasty of Ur is one of the most densely documented periods of Ancient History owing to the fact that the majority of the roughly 80,000 Sumerian cuneiform documents from the Ur III period (2110–2003 BC) that have been published or catalogued date to this quarter century – roughly 1,000–2,000 tablets per year (SALLABERGER:15).[9] The majority of the 22,500 Old Assyrian texts – the bulk of which are letters – found in Anatolian Kültepe date to ca. 1940–1835 BC (MICHEL:43). Most of the approximately 3,000 letters from the Neo-Assyrian Empire were written in the century between 745 and 645 BC: the roughly 1750 Babylonian letters from the subsequent period are both less numerous and less informative than their Assyrian forerunners (FALES:91; RADNER:61; JURSA/HACKL:101). For subsequent periods, especially the Graeco-Roman period, generalizations about the surviving numbers of written documents and the degree to which they are representative of ancient administrative practice are – with some exceptions (BRYEN:206)[10] – even more difficult to make. The

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[8] Habermann 1998 gives a general view of the uneven chronological distribution of more or less datable Greek papyrus documents from the 3rd century BC to the 8th century AD.

[9] Note that fewer than 700 of these texts are letters.

[10] Compare, furthermore, the (rather 'modest') total of about 440 royal letters recorded in inscriptions from the Hellenistic period; see HOFMANN:139. The collection of letters published by Pliny the Younger includes 51 replies that are reported to have been drawn up by Trajan or the imperial chancellery (as compared to the 121 enquiries or reports Pliny addressed to him): TAEUBER:154; cf. also the source-critical remarks, especially with regard to the private versus the official character of correspondence, by ECK:185. The greatest number of imperial letters, approximately 90 (again on the basis of epigraphic evidence) are attributed to Trajan's successor Hadrian; see TAEUBER:160–61. ECK:187–88 puts the total number of surviving letters, orders, decisions, and other documents Roman emperors or their chancelleries sent to various provincial officials at c. 425, as compared to c. 225 documents by provincial governors addressed to the emperor, more than half of which were issued by the *praefectus Aegypti* and most preserved on papyrus.

reasons are in the accidents of discovery (the archives or less coherent 'dossiers' produced by public or private entities that we have inevitably stand out as the proverbial tip of the iceberg; TOST:239–40)[11] and in 'materiality' and 'mediality' (ECK:196). However, when there is reason to see the uneven distribution of the sources as a reflex of ancient realities, instead of entirely aleatoric factors, it may be a consequence of varying degrees of centralisation and bureaucratisation within the administrative structures of ancient political systems (see, for example, BRYEN:209). In this light, the presence (or absence) of written documentation for official administration can be assumed to shed light on the nature of government in as much as a substantial written record reflects the potential as well as the 'reach' of the ancient state.

Another crucial point is that 'materiality' and the consequent 'mediality' are both closely connected to 'functionality': the choice of writing material and the use of language both depended on the purpose and social setting of the text.[12] Perishable writing materials were restricted to letters and other documents whose relevance was rather short-lived (on this correlation see also JURSA/HACKL:101). A similar logic explains the evident imbalance within the textual evidence with respect to the direction of communication: preserved clay tablet and papyrus archives tend to contain mostly 'incoming' from subordinate officials or units to superiors or central authorities (but cf. the letters of admonition examined by ARMONI in this volume), whereas public inscriptions are mostly copies of outgoing missives from an administrative centre to the periphery (TAEUBER:154–55; ANDO:166).[13] Similarly, epigraphic (monumental) texts focus on successful administrative acts and emphasize the compliance of the ruled (HOFMANN:143; TAEUBER:155; cf. *ibid*.:158–59 with source text 8 illustrating the case of a rare exception to this rule; see also ECK:190–91; 196) while clay tablets or papyri – archival texts – for the most part reflect routine business affairs, usually implying a need for action in response to certain (unexpected) events.

Definition: What is a letter?

The definition of a letter is not a given.[14] 'Emic' terminology is only revealing in that it opens a window to the way a culture understood the phenomenon of letter writing. Thus in Sumerian letters from the late third millennium BC there are no separate terms for "(oral) word" and "(written) letter" (SALLABER-GER:17) though there are in the subsequent Mesopotamian Middle Bronze Age (CHARPIN:37; MICHEL:45). Overall, the different chapters in this book concur that 'letters' were written messages from one person to another person or group; that senders and addressees were physically distant from one another; and that senders and addressees alike were present in the writing, the addressee being directly referred to in the verbal form by an order or a request. The openings and closings of letters used formulae of greeting and valediction. Although reciprocity[15] is an important feature of most correspondence, some letters discussed in this book were in fact one-way orders to subordinate officials, resembling the direc-

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[11] Archives and archival documents of the Ancient Near East, Classical Greece, Achaemenid Persia, the Hellenistic World, and the Roman Empire have most recently been treated in the conference proceedings of the research group "Legal Documents in Ancient Societies": Faraguna 2013. Three of the largest and most famous papyrus archives, the Ptolemaic Zenon (about 1800 documents, 263–299 BC), the Roman Heroninos (about 450 documents, 199–275 AD), and the Byzantine Dioskoros archive (about 550 texts, mostly from 6th century AD; in this context, see especially FOURNET in this volume), deal almost exclusively with matters of private business and bookkeeping, while the mass of documentary texts connected with the famous Apion family (5th–6th century AD) are at the interface between private and public affairs.

[12] Note the symbolic expression of power of bilingual inscriptions in which the positioning of one version of the text gives it visual priority, as described by KEARSLEY:178. Cf. ECK:189–90 on variations in diction and wording of documents due to differences regarding the social status of the persons concerned.

[13] Haensch 2009 assembles a series of case studies regarding state documents from the Roman period that were publicised by the order of the central authority and its specific institutions, by local communities, or by individual officials.

[14] For Late Antiquity, the most recent and exhaustive study is Fournet 2009 (mentioned by TOST:240, n. 13). It regards the complete corpus of the material published so far as well as all technical, formal, linguistic, and functional criteria of Greek letters from this era. A definition for Arabic letters has been given by Diem 2008:843, and for the preceding Roman Empire by CORCORAN:219–20. For the Ancient Near East, the collection edited by Berlejung 2006 is a convenient starting-point; see also, e.g., the references given by CHARPIN:31, n. 1, and, most recently, the essays on state correspondence in ancient empires collected in Radner 2014. All these definitions agree upon the basic characteristics of letters listed above in the main text.

[15] E.g., Diem 2008:843.

tives of modern administration, or reports to superiors that were not in need of answer. Letters recorded in monumental inscriptions on walls and stelae are a special case: they were intended for public display and by their very nature did not invite reply – which may or may not have been true of the original letters.

The functional background and administrative setting of letters influenced their content and design (the Roman Principate seems to have been something of an exception to this rule; ECK:191–92). But there are more differentiation criteria. From a functional point of view, internal letters among members of the authorities have to be distinguished from those directed to the subject population and from the latter to the authorities. Hierarchy played a role as well; a number of chapters deal with top-down letters from palaces to subordinate officials, while others study letters sent 'upwards'. Content is not useful for classifying the letter corpora at hand because the subjects treated are too varied (though two issues are mentioned much more frequently than others: the denunciation of injustice; and the need for surveillance; e.g., FALES:93).

Formally, one can distinguish between decrees, letters in the strict sense of the word, and rescripts; but there is considerable overlap, as well as some other genres. Petitions and their rescripts may be considered a special subgroup of letters. They were not intended as a form of communication but mainly as legal documents. In their form, however, they follow the textual patterns typical of letters. This tradition can be traced back to Ancient Mesopotamian administrative practice of the second millennium BC. Petitions reacted not so much to internal administrative needs as other administrative epistolary writings like routine reports, but originated from their authors' more or less *ad hoc* personal motivations. Accordingly, petitions were comparatively individual, free narratives (TOST:247). When petitions are found with parallel documentation, as in archives, the reconstruction of the stages of the administrative process is possible, thereby elucidating the rules governing the approach by individuals to the authorities (RADNER:68; BRYEN; FOURNET). Rulings and decrees that were the authorities' answers to petitions are likewise close to the epistolary genre; in the context of the present volume, they are of particular value in that to some extent they reveal the ideologies of the ruling groups and emic perceptions of 'good governance' – which can be said in general about the reactions of authorities to complaints about their subordinate bureaus; these give important insights into ideal conceptions as well as the factual limits of control over the administrative body (ARMONI; ANDO; CORCORAN; PAPACONSTANTINOU).

A word on terminology: In English 'document' can denote anything written, from letter to list to legal deed; but in German all documents can be termed 'deeds' (*Urkunden*). Occasionally, however, German tradition distinguishes between documents that convey a legal title (*Urkunden*) and others that do not (*Akten*; *Briefe*). Another distinction that has been inherited from 19th century diplomacy is between 'deeds' (*Urkunden*), 'records' (*Akten*), and 'letters' (*Briefe*), the generic term for all of them being 'documents' (*Schreiben*). All can be of legal content, but with significant differences: 'letters' have legal contents in exceptional cases only, while it is a regular feature of 'records' (albeit without legal title). Documents conveying a legal title are (dispositive) 'deeds': they contain both legal content and legal title.[16] To distinguish the special character of documents containing legal titles, they alone are denoted 'deeds' (*Urkunden*), while other writings are letters (*Briefe*), records (*Akten*), or lists (*Listen*). However, a second tradition in German documentary studies denotes all historical documents as 'Urkunden', regardless of whether or not they convey a legal title. As a consequence, there is a terminological ambiguity in the German chapters of this book that should be kept in mind: some papers distinguish between 'deeds' (*Rechtsurkunden*) and 'letters' (*Briefe*) (ARMONI; TAEUBER; ECK), while others denote both as 'deeds' ('Urkunden') (TOST).

Documents in administrative practice

Issuing letters

Though chanceries (as collectives) and scribes (as individuals) had a crucial role in the shaping of ancient administrative epistolography, explicit information about their activities is comparatively rare. From

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[16] Grohmann 1954:108.

Mesopotamia,[17] the Middle Bronze Age letters from Mari (CHARPIN) and the royal archives from Neo-Assyrian Nineveh (FALES; RADNER) show that the kings of these periods had staffs of secretaries who were responsible for incoming letters addressed to the ruler: they read and pre-sorted the letters, thus reducing the otherwise unmanageable number of letters to the king. Among the scribes were skilled translators. These secretaries were well-trained and specialized, and held influential and prestigious positions (BAKER/GROß). The standardized letter formats in the royal archives reflects the existence of chancellery styles and thus a differentiation between ordinary scribes and scribes belonging to a professional elite.

The chapters in the present collection provide comparative material for the different stages of letter production. Fair copies were only final products based on earlier drafts generally produced in the same chancery, often by the same scribe. But even the initial draft was conditioned by considerations of support, language, and format (FOURNET). The choice of language could be determined by the purpose of the letter and often had an influence on the letter itself because language conveys specific peculiarities and is more than a simple vehicle for meaning (SALLABERGER; JURSA/HACKL). The same applies to monumental inscriptions in which the choice of language was determined by the intended readership and had an impact on the text itself (ROLLINGER; KEARSLEY). The character of a letter was also influenced by whether it was written after dictation or formulated by the scribe himself. The role of the scribe in the process of letter production was crucial, even though his (never her, as far as we know) individual agency is often hard to discern.

Traffic of letters

The conditions of the transport of letters were challenging, and distance, speed of delivery, and privacy and security all had an influence on how, and in what number, letters were written and used. Empires in particular needed good communication infrastructures.[18] Highly effective and admirably speedy transport systems were created and maintained by the Neo-Assyrian rulers and their Achaemenid and Seleucid successors. While in transit, messages were protected: cuneiform tablets were put in cases of clay which were normally also sealed, thus giving authenticity and legitimacy to the letters and their couriers. Papyri were rolled or folded and closed with a seal.[19] The sealing of letters is of considerable help to the modern reader in identifying correspondents who may not be explicitly mentioned in the letter itself (MICHEL; RADNER).

Receiving of letters and reading habits

The fate of the incoming letter influenced its shape and contents. How was it received by the addressee, and how was it read? The surviving material implies that a multitude of letters with a bewildering variety of subjects arrived at offices and palaces every day. Neo-Assyrian palaces received an average of forty letters per day (FALES:93, n. 12). Such numbers leave the impression that governors spent most of the day reading and writing letters. But there were methods of sorting that made the floods of letters easier to manage, such as the delegation of incoming letters to deputy officials and the preferential treatment of letters concerning surveillance and denunciation.

Letters were not always read by the addressee in person but often aloud by a secretary/scribe. We can assume that the more highly-placed the addressee, the less he had to read himself. The contributions in this book suggest that there was an historical trend towards the self-read letter in the context of emerging forms of bureaucratic rationality, with a few 'atavisms' like early Islam. The case of monumental inscriptions is very different from that of clay tablets and papyri: they invited 'discourses' on their contents and thus had an impact on their audience. Inscriptions from Achaemenid Persia were definitely intended to be read and studied by succeeding kings who wished to respect the past and better understand the present.

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[17] For the Classical and Late Antique World, see e.g. the contributions by ECK and CORCORAN.
[18] See Radner 2014:*passim*.
[19] For Aramaic papyri and sealing practices cf. Porten 1980; for their Greek and Arabic counterparts cf. Vandorpe 1996 and Sijpesteijn 2012.

Some edicts and other official announcements engraved on stone were even copied on different media, like tablets (in Mesopotamia) and papyrus (in Egypt), and spread to the peripheries (ROLLINGER; KEARSLEY; ECK).

Archival practices

Many official letters were found in groups and in more or less well-circumscribed find-spots and can thus be easily grouped into archives or dossiers. In other cases, documents of more diverse provenance share a common epistolographic tradition, language, and general background, but do not necessarily form part of an ancient collection. Some papers in the present book address the issue of archiving (e.g., FRAHM:3–4; SALLABERGER:17–18; 27–28; CHARPIN and MICHEL:*passim*; FALES:92; HOFMANN:143–44; BRYEN:206–07; CORCORAN:219–20; TOST:238–40; FOURNET:255–56; REINFANDT:281–82). The function of archives in different administrations is not self-evident, and archival practices varied widely. Some institutions saw no need for long-term storage and retrieval and got on well with temporary repositories, which sometimes resulted in a "here and now mentality" in the letters themselves (FALES). Elsewhere there is evidence for sophisticated modes of long-term archiving. Archival practice (or lack thereof) had a strong influence on the shape and contents of letters. Institutions without letter archives had to work with extensive, often verbatim, quotations of former letters. Addressees had to be constantly reminded by their correspondents of what they themselves had previously written or decided. Sometimes official letters could start a second life as legal documents, serving as proof of obligations between correspondents (SALLABERGER). Their material value could be accordingly high, and there were cases where whole archives were stolen on purpose and later resold on the market.[20] The pillaging of archives was sometimes also a deliberate means of *damnatio memoriae* of political predecessors. A very different second life could await royal inscriptions that were reused as school texts and models for the training of chancery clerks.[21] The life spans and life-cycles of documents are important issues that must be kept in mind concerning the surviving ancient and early medieval documents (FRAHM; FALES).

Form and language

All administrative letters convey some 'objective' information in explicit form, but missives are also replete with (implicit) background information about the status and relationship of the letters' principals. In fact, the missives 'performatively' help establish and delineate the relationship between sender and addressee. Not only the explicit content, but also the implicit background exerted a strong influence on the text and its form. These issues play a key role in most of the papers in this volume.

Formulary and rhetorics

Official letters in general display a heavily formalised structure. Ancient Mesopotamian epistolography shows considerable continuity from the Neo-Sumerian to the Neo-Assyrian and Late Babylonian letter cultures, following a similar standard sequence that consists of an opening section (*salutatio*), the letter body (*narratio* plus *petitio*), and an optional final section containing closing formulae. Hierarchies are generally reflected in the form of address, though there was no rigorous consistency in the use of titles, epithets, patronymics, or other labels denoting function, identity, and social position (MICHEL; RADNER). A distinction between direct and indirect forms of address could also be made in cases of hierarchical difference and obeisance, indirect forms being required by the rules of conventional politeness (SALLABERGER; FALES; JURSA/HACKL; ECK). The use of refined titles appears in letters from Late Antiquity and

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[20] An incident from 14th century AD Egypt is referred to in Bauden 2013:36–37; see also El-Leithy 2011:424–25 and *passim* for documents, here especially petitions, from the Islamic era that were obsolete but deliberately kept as models for similar future writings.
[21] Stolper 2005:22.

early Islam (TOST; FOURNET; REINFANDT), in contrast to the unadorned style of the Roman Principate (ECK).

Under the formulaic surface, letters display markers of identity in the form of distinctive style and diction. Lexical choices and idiosyncratic word orders – linguistic 'idiolects' (FALES) – give something of a profile of the human behind the letter. Style can be precise and technical, or more personal. The latter was motivated by the letter writer's desire to employ strategies to respect the addressee's 'face' in communication. Patrimonial power structures required a general humbleness when a superior is addressed. Late Babylonian official letters from the sixth century BC used a more 'objective' way of stating requests at the expense of *ad personam* argumentation as compared to structurally identical Babylonian letters of the Middle Bronze Age (JURSA/HACKL). Change over time is also evident in the verbose letters of Late Antiquity, which even quote literature (FOURNET): they starkly contrast with the concise style of the letters of the Roman Principate. In general, administrative systems can be distinguished on the basis of the styles of argumentation and persuasion employed. During the Iron Age a growing 'bureaucratic rationality' (see below) was manifested by the fact that personalised allusions or appeals to personal friendship were no longer so commonly used as justifications for demands among officials; instead, scribes appealed to rational argument based on objective circumstances, as well as to a shared code of conduct (e.g., by invoking a higher authority). A possible important exception to this was the early Islamic era (PAPACONSTANTINOU; REINFANDT).

Idiomatic expressions, stock phrases, and verbal routines were often employed to convey specific information to the addressee, according to the cultural and communication milieu. The scribes moved freely between convention and rhetoric. Differences can be noted even in the earliest times: letters from the Sargonic period (23rd–22nd centuries BC) are generally personal and emotional in style whereas Ur III letters are dominated by conventional phraseology (SALLABERGER; FRAHM). It is not always easy to assess whether or not a text followed conventional rules. And even less is known about possible effects on recipients: letters that seem bald and chilly to us may have evoked a variety of responses from their addressees. They apparently contain both propositional phrases that conveyed information on objects and persons and stock phrases and topoi that encouraged performance. It is not at all clear whether letters of command were in fact understood by the addressees as information, order, or plea (PAPACONSTANTINOU) because over the course of time, literal expressions often became stereotypes, with threats, for example, no longer taken at face value, but as rhetorical devices encouraging the recipient of the letter to action (CHARPIN; RADNER; PAPACONSTANTINOU). A phrase like the Neo-Assyrian "(he speaks to my lord) half-heartedly" (*ina muttat libbišu*) apparently lost its strict meaning and became a euphemism for deceit and opposition, perhaps even resistance and conspiracy (CHARPIN; JURSA/HACKL). An example from Roman epistolography under the Principate is *ego volo vos curare* "I want you to take care of that" which was a factual order and must have been understood as such (ECK).

Official letters were written to state facts, influence addressees, and sometimes both. Politeness and persuasion were modes of influence. Etiquette had to be observed; but the success of a letter may often have been assumed to depend on strategic deviations from standard forms of expression. These 'strategic deviations' and their intention had to be recognizable to the correspondent, and here again it is the common cultural reference frame that is so thorny for the modern reader to assess. We can assume that forms of address and salutation were mostly standardised and dominated by conventional politeness, and that deviations from the pertinent rules of phrasing are indicative of rhetorical and persuasive intent. However, it is the bodies of letters, especially the appeal part (*petitio*), that provided most opportunity for strategic politeness and rhetorical devices of persuasion, and here only careful reading may reveal the shades of meaning intended by the author. A case in point are the Neo-Assyrian letters to the king and his courtiers in which the delicate task of rejecting an order was accomplished by carefully advancing counter-arguments in the spirit of constructive criticism: after questioning the factual basis of an order, alternative solutions were suggested that were sometimes even contradictory (RADNER). Such offering of choices by subordinates could play a role in imperial decision-making.

Letters: oral or written?

The role of human letter couriers is crucial for a proper understanding of the letters. Did couriers convey additional, perhaps crucial, information that was not contained in the letter itself? If so, such texts express only the sender's view and little or nothing of the addressee's perspective on the letter's subject. The implications of this on the utility of these documents as historical sources are serious.

The evidence collected here does shed some light on this issue diachronically and cross-culturally. That the human messenger was in some way the forerunner of the written letter[22] is evident from the Early and Middle Bronze Age Mesopotamian letter head, which contained the stylized admonition to the messenger "say to PN: (…)" or "if you'd say to PN (…)". In third millennium BC Mesopotamian administrations most of the internal communications had in fact been transmitted orally (SALLABERGER:26). Moreover, Old Babylonian letters of the Middle Bronze Age speak of 'tablets', i.e. material letters, whereas letters of the late third millennium still refer to the 'word' alone. In later periods, the role of the envoy was negligible (JURSA/HACKL:104); only in the case of diplomatic missives did the bearer of the message continue to also function as informant and negotiator (CHARPIN:37). An analogous observation can be made for the Hellenistic and Graeco-Roman World in general (e.g., HOFMANN:143), where diplomatic envoys were agents expected to act independently (to some degree) from the letter they carried, while normal letter couriers were subsidiary to written missives. The importance of the letter-bearer and of the oral message seems to have increased again in the early Islamic period (e.g., PROCHÁZKA/BSEES:299). In this context petitions must be excluded because they in particular needed the backing of a well-informed courier. In Roman times this contrasted with the general rule that requests to the authorities had in principle to be submitted in written form.

In general one should perhaps distinguish between documents resulting from routine matters of administration, and 'letters' that had been sent in response to the unusual and unforeseen (e.g., SALLABERGER; ECK). While the former could rely more or less on written letters alone, the latter often necessitated the flexibility of on-the-spot decision and negotiation. Logistics were obviously decisive in many cases. Solitary letters were faster because they could be passed from one courier to another, while the 'human letter' occasionally had to rest. But even here, specialised envoys and 'speed-letters' could be used side by side (RADNER).

An important area of uncertainty concerns the general writing ability in the cultures under investigation here. All that can be said is that the numerous references to writing in the administrative letters themselves suggest high literacy rates in all epistolographic cultures studied in this book: but obviously this only applies to administrative personnel.

The semiotics of letters in administrative practice

Our letters contain a wealth of detail concerning officials and institutions. Knowledge of the processes in a given administration and of the backgrounds of the personnel involved often helps give insights into the contents of letters and their intended impact on recipients. All the papers in this collection use this approach to get a better understanding of the letters.

Many of the letters studied in this book draw a picture of rule based on two main factors: denunciation and surveillance (FALES). Inner administrative control maintained by the denunciation of perceived faults is a constant theme in the letters. Where it is perceptible, this climate of denunciation permeates all hierarchical levels. But the letters barely hint at the probable ambiance of fear that went along with their production. This climate was encouraged by rulers and ruling elites because it stabilised patrimonial authority, tying lower-ranking officials to their rulers in a permanent client-patron ideological bind while keeping in check the privileges of the higher officials. The obligation to "inform the ruler/superior" incumbent on officials in some epistolographic cultures studied in this book is just another form of expression of the same administrative ethos (e.g., CHARPIN): the reports sent by officials to their superiors not only trans-

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[22] Note the etiology for the transition from the messenger to the written letter given in a Sumerian myth; FRAHM:5.

mitted factual news, but also had the task – executed by the use of pertinent implicit or explicit communicative signals within the letters – of asserting the official's loyalty to his master; the medium, to some extent, was the message. In such a context, the very act of writing a letter could be more meaningful than its content. According to the same logic, superiors were not obliged to answer and inform: much of the imperial communication surveyed here was unidirectional and intended as much to reassert or even create hierarchies and relationships of power as it served to convey actual information.

The specific conduct of officials in many of the chanceries studied in this book, on the other hand, reveal a certain 'ethos of service'[23] and some kind of common spirit that tended towards a mentality of rational bureaucratisation seen as crucial for the reliability of administrative procedures. Norms of conduct in office were expressed in coded language by certain stock phrases that reflected shared sets of values and expectations (BAKER/GROß). The 'ethos of service' apparently stood in contrast to the 'ethos of surveillance'. The latter was not so much a means of institutional control imposed on officials, as had been maintained by previous research,[24] but rather a self-imposed stipulation of good behaviour valid for everybody, "a mechanism so diffuse as to become an ingrained mental habit" (FALES). In general, the language and specific phrasing of the letters also served as a vehicle for the self-representation of officials as a distinctive social group. There is a "specific logic of strategies which groups use to produce and reproduce themselves, that is, to create and perpetuate their unity, and thus their existence as groups, which is the condition of the perpetuation of their position in the social space".[25] As an extension of this particular function of official epistolography, public display of such documents served to strengthen the position of the elites mentioned in them by enhancing their public image and communicating the legitimacy of rule to the population at large (ROLLINGER; HOFMANN; KEARSLEY).

In general terms, then, letters as tools of surveillance were a critical means for the running the empire: as expressions of loyalty, they helped to secure the cohesion of the state (RADNER; HOFMANN). Framing these characteristics within a Weberian concept of *Herrschaft* (domination), which is a domination that is based on the consent of the ruled, letter communication and the erection of inscriptions aimed at legitimising domination over peoples and territories by securing the compliance of regional elites and of representatives of the imperial centre employed in the periphery, thereby harnessing power structures and energy that might otherwise have been used for resistance (HOFMANN; KEARSLEY).

For all their ideological content and implicit function as a means for the establishment of hierarchies and structures of domination, administrative letters were undoubtedly also instruments for achieving tangible outcomes, often with legal ramifications. Written orders for the allocation of goods served as a formal justification for the recipient to take these goods from a storehouse. Other letters, such as answers to petitions, contained legal decisions of a binding character. The need followed to collect such records in archives together with other documents of administrative procedure rather than in separate archives of correspondence (SALLABERGER; MICHEL). To be efficient in such a practical sense, and to cover all possibilities of communication and negotiation between correspondence partners, letters had to find ways to compensate for all non-verbal gestures and strategies that are possible in oral face-to-face encounters (PROCHÁZKA/BSEES). Bureaucracy developed ways of transferring these performative elements into the written text through grammar, vocabulary, formulae, style, and narrative techniques, and into the semiotics of letters through material, design, and presentation. Accordingly, administrative letters were influenced both by their ideal genre rules and by the environmental conditions of document production. Diachronically speaking, some periods stand out for their tendency to develop administrative proceedings in which negotiation had a minimal role, i.e., to move in the direction of 'bureaucratic rationality'. This applies to the Neo-Babylonian and subsequent Hellenistic and Roman empires, in which there was a clear dominance of well-defined hierarchic structures over personal relationships. It is thus no surprise that several times in this volume structural parallels among the several traditions of administrative epistolog-

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[23] Postgate 2007:358 and the contribution by BAKER/GROß.
[24] Oppenheim 1968; Follet 1957.
[25] Bourdieu 1990:74.

raphy studied here emerge; they cover the whole time span studied in this book, but especially the millennium from the 6th century BC to Late Antiquity (JURSA/HACKL; TAEUBER; TOST).

Language(s) of power

Some chapters in this book emphasize official correspondence as records of past events, while others emphasize it as a means to get things done. In both cases the dominance of state bureaucracy in imperial daily politics is manifest. Large numbers of state letters as well as precision in the documentation of state transactions may lead to an image of dirigiste, and perhaps authoritarian, rule. It should not be overlooked, however, that private economic initiatives may have played a role as well, and indeed it is often difficult for the modern reader to draw a distinction in the letters between public and private affairs. 'State bureaucracy' is an ambiguous term for both the Ancient Mesopotamian and early Islamic periods.

Official letters reflect the mentalities of imperial government and bureaucracy. Administrative letters do not simply reveal the rhetorical and linguistic aspects of the 'language(s) of power' which connect officials to their own superiors as well as to subordinates, thus defining their radius of operation, they give an idea of the officials' personal and collective identities. These identities were employed in a network of administrative hierarchies sharing responsibilities and the perpetration of a common cultural, social, and economic background. Letter formulae were influenced by social stratification and the correspondents' reciprocal relationship. For the careful letter recipient, formulae alone conveyed information about the sender's social background.

Letters of official correspondence in themselves always conveyed social prestige and were symbols of sovereignty. They generated a specific language of power that was not necessarily identical with other forms of inner-administrative communication. It could transgress common hierarchies and was deliberately supported by imperial central powers to foster the inviolability and efficiency of governmental authority. But an in-depth study of the letters also reveals their limitations. There are cases of letters with impressive stock phrases, but their repeated sending exposes an inefficient bureaucratic apparatus of imperfectly compliant subordinates (PAPACONSTANTINOU). A bureaucracy that works by threat perhaps compels obedience, but is not necessarily a strong one. In the worst case, repeated demands for action are an indicator that the addressee in fact did not act at all. Over-emphatic letters often betray their true character as blunt weapons.

In conclusion, aspects of the contributions to this volume contribute to the discussion involving the famous *Achsenzeit* paradigm in the tradition of Karl Jaspers and Shmuel Eisenstadt.[26] The Axial Age hypothesis, as attractive as it is, has always suffered from an imbalance in its empirical underpinning. Our findings contribute material drawn from governmental structure and bureaucracy rather than from the nebulous structures of religious and philosophy that are normally invoked in support of Jaspers' and Eisenstadt's model. The conclusion that follows from several of the studies in this book that the relationship between officials in Iron Age and later states was a formal one based on objective rules instead of personal bonds of loyalty and obligation conforms to the Axial Age paradigm. These studies reveal that there was a trend over time away from patrimonial structures based on loyalty and personal relations rather than on merit towards administrative professionalism and rationality, or at least rule-bound predictability, in bureaucratic procedures. Official letters clearly display duties and common codes of conduct in office; these 'rules' were embedded in a coded language that reflected a shared set of values and expectations which served to circumscribe the officials' relationship with the state. This relationship could be determined by an 'ethos of service', which is an indicator that state administration operated on 'rational' lines in a Weberian sense of the word.

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[26] Jaspers 1953; Eisenstadt 1986; and recently, and in the same vein, Bellah/Joas 2012.

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I Epistolography in the Ancient Near East

E C K A R T   F R A H M

Some Like It Hot

Reflections on the Historical "Temperature" of Letters from Mesopotamian Royal Archives

The main objective of the present volume is threefold: to discuss the formal characteristics of letters from the ancient world, to assess their rhetorical strategies, and to illuminate the administrative contexts of ancient letter writing. This contribution has a slightly different emphasis. Based on a bird's eye view of Mesopotamian royal archives and some specific observations concerning Late Assyrian epistolography, it investigates the characteristics of Mesopotamian royal letters as historical sources and the features which set them apart from other types of texts that shape our views of the history of the ancient Near East.

First, some general reflections on the historiography of ancient Mesopotamia are necessary. Assyriology, according to an oft-quoted aphorism by William W. Hallo, deals with nothing less than "the first half of history."[1] The period of more than 3000 years covered by it represents a *longue durée* that exceeds the chronological extent of most other historical disciplines. Given the field's vast time frame, scholars are often at risk of adopting the cavalier attitude that "centuries don't matter," which sometimes leads to unwarranted generalizations about the 'Mesopotamian mind,' the 'Mesopotamian economy,' or 'Mesopotamian political ideology'.

To be sure, there are features that seem to have undergone little change through the centuries and millennia of ancient Near Eastern history.[2] Continuity can be observed in certain socio-economic institutions: for instance, the manufacture of textiles played a significant role in the economy of Uruk's Eanna temple from the late 4th millennium to the 5th century BC, a period of more than 2500 years[3]. Continuity was also an important aspect of Mesopotamian religion and politics. The deities An(u), Enlil/Illil, Enki/Ea, and Inanna/Ištar remained venerable members of the Mesopotamian pantheon for no less than three millennia, and the institution of monarchy dominated the Mesopotamian political landscape for an equally long time. But to claim that Mesopotamian civilization did not undergo any true historical change apart from the transfer of power from one ruler to the next would be to promote an orientalist fantasy: there is little doubt that the Mesopotamia of the Early Dynastic period was in many respects quite different from that of the Kassite, the Neo-Babylonian, and the Achaemenid era; and throughout its history Assyria followed a path very much its own. There is also evidence that key periods of Mesopotamian political history involved pronounced internal contradictions, powerful transformation, and a lot of drama.

Whether the modern student of ancient Near Eastern history emphasizes continuity or change, stability or chaos, depends to a significant extent on the sources, especially the written sources, which feature most prominently in his or her investigation. At issue here are first and foremost the sources that are more or less contemporary with the events they cover. Assyriological studies mainly based on administrative account texts and judicial documents may generate valuable insights into the economic and social structures that characterize specific periods of Mesopotamian history. However, though texts of this type can provide important information on matters such as the replacement of temple and state personnel or sudden

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[1] See Hallo 1990.

[2] For a recent collection of essays on various aspects of institutional continuity and change in the ancient Near East and Egypt, see Crawford 2007.

[3] See for the Late Uruk period Englund 1998:95–98, 150–53, and for the Late Babylonian period Kleber 2010.

shifts in commodity prices,[4] they usually do not allow us to determine the causes of these changes, and are therefore of little help in outlining the history, especially the political history, of the period from which they derive.[5] Somewhat ironically, the most important insight to be gained from such documents with regard to historical change is, in many cases, a negative one: when the archive issuing them suddenly comes to an end, there is good reason to assume that some disruptive event of great consequence must have occurred.[6]

Royal inscriptions, a second, very different Mesopotamian source type, are in several respects better suited for assessing the historical vicissitudes of a specific age. The royal inscriptions from the Middle and Neo-Assyrian periods are particularly enlightening in this respect. They offer remarkably rich information about the military campaigns undertaken by the Assyrian rulers, the political fate of their opponents, and the various building projects undertaken in Assyria.[7] And yet studying the history of a specific period mainly through the lenses of royal inscriptions may again create a picture dominated by notions of stability and continuity because in their inscriptions Mesopotamian kings systematically suppressed failure, and claimed that their activities followed time-honored political conventions (with everything becoming "bigger and better" over time, of course).[8] The few royal inscriptions which refer to radical changes tend to present them as acts of restoration to an (often fictitious) original pristine state.[9] The narrative in royal inscriptions never includes any suspense-creating elements and thus completely lacks drama. The conservative literary language the inscriptions typically use – whether the Sumerian of the earlier periods or the later Standard Babylonian variant of Akkadian – contributes to the impression that nothing ever really changes under the Mesopotamian sun: the actions reported in the inscriptions are merely re-enactments, albeit often on a larger scale, of a political script essentially unaltered from earliest memory.[10]

In summary, then, one could argue, using the metaphor introduced by Claude Lévi-Strauss and redefined in recent years by Jan Assmann, that investigations of Mesopotamian history mainly based on administrative account texts and judicial documents, but also investigations focused primarily on royal inscriptions, are likely to provide "cold" visions of the periods they deal with, visions in which the notion of historical change plays no major role.

Lévi-Strauss used his typology of "historical temperatures" with regard to the ancient societies themselves, classifying those that resisted the idea of historical change as "cold" and those emphasizing the power of historical transformation as "hot."[11] But Assmann, employing Lévi-Strauss's terminology in a more specific way, applied it not primarily to ancient societies *in toto*, but rather to the modes of historical memory that dominated those societies' relationship with the past. According to Assmann, cold modes of memory ("kalte Erinnerung") are cultural techniques to repress the notion of historical change, while hot ones ("heiße Erinnerung") use memories of historical change as spiritual energy to foster progress.[12] I

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[4]   See, for example, Vargyas 2001, a study of prices in 1st millennium Babylonia.

[5]   Here and elsewhere in this article, we simplify matters to some extent, to clarify our argument.

[6]   Such as the "end of the archives" during the time of Xerxes, which has been discussed by Waerzeggers 2003/2004.

[7]   For good introductions to the genre of Assyrian royal inscriptions, see Fales 1981 and Fales 1999–2001.

[8]   For Assyrian royal inscriptions as the medium *par excellence* of a highly traditional and one-sided "history from above," see Van De Mieroop 1999:40–59 (with an example of how Assyrian court scribes rewrote earlier versions of the annals of their royal masters in order to repress accounts of events that had turned out to be embarrassing).

[9]   See, for example, Sennacherib's statement that his newly built *Akītu* outside the city of Assur had early predecessors (Luckenbill 1924:135–36, lines 26–30). Another way Mesopotamian kings justified innovation was by citing omens providing divine support for the changes made. Sennacherib, in the aforementioned example, made use of this legitimatizing strategy too.

[10] See Frahm 1997:245–47.

[11] Lévi-Strauss 1962:309–10 describes the "sociétés 'froides'" as "cherchant, grâce aux institutions qu'elles se donnent, à annuler de façon quasi automatique l'effet que les facteurs historiques pourraient avoir sur leur équilibre et leur continuité" and the "sociétés 'chaudes'" as "intériorisant résolument le devenir historique pour en faire le moteur de leur développement."

[12] Assmann 1992:68–70. For an attempt, based on Lévi-Strauss's categories, to assess the historical temperature of ancient Mesopotamia, see Larsen 1987. Focusing on "science" and not so much on history, Larsen comes to the conclusion that the Mesopotamian mind can be characterized as "lukewarm."

believe that one can apply Lévi-Strauss's concept of historical temperatures to yet another category: the sources that modern historians use.[13] My claim is that most administrative account texts, judicial documents, and royal inscriptions from ancient Mesopotamia, because of their disregard for historical change, are "cold,"[14] and that there is a good chance that historical investigations based primarily on them will stress structural cohesion and historical continuity.

Another group of sources, however, offers a very different picture. These are letters from royal archives. Like royal inscriptions, letters from royal archives deal with political and military events; but, in contrast to the inscriptions, royal letters do not seek to generate fictions of coherence, "cold" visions of history that suppress notions of change and chaos. Instead, letters are "hot" – they address, often quite frankly, immediate problems.[15] Letters, like account texts, are records stored in archives. But, while the account texts document the day-to-day functioning of a household or institution that essentially works, letters reveal what is going wrong – political troubles, internal contradictions, ruptures, and threats. In contrast to royal inscriptions, letters are, as a rule, written in the vernacular of their age, which lends them a far greater immediacy.[16] The "language of power," which finds its most prominent expression in Mesopotamia in royal hymns and inscriptions, is obviously not absent from the letters of royal archives, but often has a somewhat shrill quality.[17] At the same time, we learn from letters that there were voices, not only from outside but also from inside the state, that sought to undermine the current administration.[18]

Mesopotamian tradition ascribes the origins of letter writing to very early times. The Enmerkar epic, a Sumerian narrative about a legendary ruler from the beginnings of Mesopotamian history, claims that cuneiform writing was invented so that kings could send letters to one another:

> Because the messenger's mouth was too *heavy*, and he could not repeat it (the message),
> The Lord of Kulab (i.e., Enmerkar) patted some clay and put the words on it as on a tablet.[19]

In actual fact, the earliest Mesopotamian letters discovered so far were written almost a millennium after the invention of writing – they date to the 24th century.[20] For the next 400 years, the number of extant letters remains rather small, even if one includes the possibly pseudepigraphical "royal correspondence of Ur."[21] Only towards the end of the 20th century BC do larger groups of letters begin to appear – first the thousands of mostly private and business-oriented communications of the Assyrian merchants from

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[13] The distinction between "hot" and "cold" can be applied not only to ancient societies, forms of historical recollection, and historical sources, but also to modern perceptions of history. In a recent study of the social, political, and economic transformations that occurred in the 19th century AD, Osterhammel 2009:914 writes: "Einige (*sc.* Theorien) betonen die Tiefe und Dramatik des Bruchs (…); man könnte ihre Versionen 'heiße' Theorien nennen. Andere sind eher 'kalt' und sehen eine lange Vorgeschichte und einen eher sachten Übergang."

[14] In the case of administrative and judicial texts, this coldness is a quality generated by the formulaic requirements of the genres in question. The authors of royal inscriptions, in contrast, actively produced it by selecting (and repressing) specific topics and by using a wide array of rhetorical strategies.

[15] For reflections on the fundamental differences between the goals of royal inscriptions and epistolographic documents, see Liverani 1990:25–26. The former, in Liverani's words, are prestige-oriented, while the latter pursue (practical) interests.

[16] While this applies to some extent to administrative texts and legal documents as well, the language of such texts is often more conservative: two examples are the archaic Sumerian of early Old Babylonian documents, and the frequent use of the preterite to express the past tense in main clauses in 1st millennium legal documents from Babylonia: letters from the latter period, in accordance with the spoken language of the time, instead use the perfect (see Streck 1995:122–24, 149–55). For the complex linguistic background of the international correspondence from the Amarna period, see, *inter alia*, von Dassow 2004.

[17] An example, from SAA 10, 68, is provided below.

[18] There are too many studies of Mesopotamian letter writing to list them here all, but mention should be made of Sallaberger 1999. A still useful, if slightly outdated, anthology of Mesopotamian letters from all periods is Oppenheim 1967.

[19] bar kin-gi₄-a ka-ni dugud šu nu-mu-un-da-an-gi₄-gi₄-da-ka / en kul-ab₄ᵏⁱ-a-ke₄ im-e šu bí-in-ra inim dub-gin₇ bí-in-gub (Vanstiphout 2004:84–85, lines 502–03).

[20] See the discussion in Michalowski 1993:2, 11–12.

[21] Most of the letters written between the 24th and the 21st centuries date to the Third Dynasty of Ur, from which 679 letters are known (see the contribution by W. Sallaberger in this volume). For an anthology of letters from early Mesopotamia, see Michalowski 1993, a volume reviewed by Neumann 1997.

Kārum Kaniš in Anatolia,[22] and then the 18th century royal correspondence from the age of Hammurapi of Babylon and Yasmaḫ-Addu and Zimrilim of Mari.

We can assume that from this time on, if not earlier,[23] letter writing was a practice of all rulers in Western Asia. Due to the vagaries of discovery, however, only a limited number of ancient state archives containing royal letters are known to us. The most prominent of these are the Mari archives, which cover the time from 1810 to 1761,[24] the archive of cuneiform letters from Tell el-Amarna in Egypt from the middle of the 14th century,[25] and the state archives, mostly from Nineveh, of the Assyrian kings who ruled from 745 to 612 BC.[26]

The letters from these archives are an extremely valuable source for reconstructing the political history of the eras in question, but one must take into account that most of them cluster around very short time spans, often no more than a few years. This is both a bane and a boon. On one hand, it restricts our ability to use the letters for the analysis of certain long-term trends. On the other hand, having hundreds of letters from very brief periods allows us to write extremely detailed accounts of what happened during these periods. The recent study by Dominique Charpin and Nele Ziegler of the fourteen-year reign of Zimrilim of Mari in *Florilegium Marianum* V[27] demonstrates the enormous potential of such an approach, once the (admittedly very serious) problem of putting the letters into chronological order is essentially solved. While punctuated by the *basso continuo* of the economic documents, which tell us, for instance, where the king of Mari resided at a given moment in time, Charpin's and Ziegler's account relies almost exclusively on the information the royal correspondence provides. The image emerging from this correspondence is full of historical drama – the heat is on. We see the various rulers of the Mari age shift their alliances, fight battles for supremacy, and participate in various acts of treason, all over a period of not much more than a dozen years. In short, the letters, like lightning in the night, brightly illuminate a brief moment in ancient Near Eastern history in all its complexity.

To give detailed accounts of short periods of time is one of the goals of the micro-historical approach, others being the study of individual personalities or of small communities.[28] From Mesopotamia, not only 18th century Mari provides material for this type of historical analysis. As was pointed out earlier, the Late Assyrian period has also yielded numerous letters from royal archives. Most of them again date to clusters of just a few years: notably the last years of Tiglath-pileser III, the reigns of Sargon II and Esarhaddon, and the first twenty years of Assurbanipal.[29]

While the Late Assyrian letters are, on the whole, less detailed and explicit than those from Mari, this deficiency is more than compensated by the availability of additional sources, such as royal inscriptions, omen reports, queries to the sun-god, prophecies, religious texts, and private documents. The evidence is so abundant that one could easily write a number of monographs on individual years of the period in question. Such a year-based approach – which is likely to produce "hot" historical narratives because it emphasizes the contradictions and tensions perceivable in short time spans – has been used in a number of impressive works by students of more recent historical periods. An outstanding example is Karl

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[22] See C. Michel's contribution to the present volume.

[23] D. Charpin, in a personal communication, pointed out to me that the early Old Babylonian letters from Ešnunna edited by Whiting (1987) are stylistically far less refined than the rhetorically "smooth" letters from the Mari archives. This may indicate that official epistolography experienced its real breakthrough only in the "classical" phase of Old Babylonian civilization.

[24] See Charpin/Ziegler 2003:1–20 (with remarks on the letters on pp. 16–18), and Charpin's contribution to the present volume.

[25] For editions and translations, see Knudtzon 1915 and Moran 1992. Pedersén 1998:38–42 provides a short overview of the Amarna archive and additional bibliography.

[26] Most (but not all) of these letters are now available in excellent modern editions in volumes 1, 5, 8, 10, 13, 15, 16, 17, and 18 of the series *State Archives of Assyria* (= SAA), edited since 1987 by Simo Parpola at Helsinki. For a helpful, if now slightly outdated, general description of the corpus, see Parpola 1981; for an historical evaluation, Fales 2001. Some basic information on the Nineveh archives from which most of the letters derive is found in Pedersén 1998:158–65. See also the contributions by Baker, Fales, and Radner in the present volume.

[27] Charpin/Ziegler 2003:169–262.

[28] Among the studies that have defined the micro-historical approach, Ginzburg 1976 and Davis 1983 deserve to be singled out.

[29] See the overview in Parpola 1981:136.