

Book Reviews

The Letter: Law, State, Society and the Epistolary Format in the Ancient World. Uri Yiftach-Firanko (ed.). Legal Documents in Ancient Societies 1. Philippika, Marburger altertumskundliche Abhandlungen 55,1. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013. Pp. 310.

Reviewed by Aaron Ricker, *McGill University*

The conventions of letters are such a common, automatic part of our lives, it feels like they must always have been around. Most of us are as likely on any given day to wonder about the evolution of the letter as we are to wonder about the previous life stages of our sun. Of course letters, like stars, do in fact have evolutionary histories, constituting both an important part of our own human story and the subject of ongoing, interesting investigative scholarly work. Yiftach-Firanko's *The Letter* contributes to this cumulative scholarly project of understanding by collecting thirteen papers from the first international colloquium of the Legal Documents in Ancient Societies group, held in 2008 at the American Academy in Rome. The resulting book naturally bears the positive and negative earmarks of an ambitious international collaboration. On the negative side, the English sections suffer from grammar issues and typos, especially in the Foreword and Introduction. It's also a shame that almost none of the many manuscript types and details discussed in the papers are represented visually. It seems doubtful that the inclusion of a few carefully selected images would have been too costly an addition to this already somewhat expensive volume (56€). On the positive side, *The Letter* clearly does the work that the widely international LDAS group exists to do (as described on p. 11), which is "to enhance collaboration among students of everyday communication in the Ancient Near East, the Ancient Egypt, the Greek and Hellenistic world, and the Roman State down to late Antiquity." The span of time and space covered in *The Letter's* review ranges from the first real (royal) "letters" of the Ancient Near East (stretching as far back as the twenty-first century BCE), through the Classical and Hellenistic environments of Greek oratory and *poleis* politics, to the long-lived Egyptian and/or Roman "contracts in epistolary form" (p. 155) of Late Antiquity. Before weighing in on the character and value of the volume as a whole, I shall very briefly summarize the foci of the 12 papers, since there are no chapters and since they appear in *The Letter* in roughly chronological order according to empire.

Ancient Near Eastern Contexts. Sophie Démare-Lafont (after helpfully and colorfully sketching the third-millennium BCE legendary origins and “written-speech” character of the Ancient Near Eastern royal letter form) reviews the development of Neo-Sumerian, royal Mari, and Neo-Assyrian royal administrative correspondence beginning in the twenty-first century BCE, tying the permutations of what she admits to be very dry and artificial epistolary formal habits to the very unique (and sometimes precarious) lives of courtly professionals. Dominique Charpin reviews the form and function of Mesopotamian judicial letters as living “voices” and “witnesses,” at a time (in the early second millennium BCE) when the letter was blossoming in variety of length, form, purpose, and social stratum. Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum reviews the form of the Middle-Assyrian legal summons, situating the seemingly abstract and exaggerated “orality” of its conventional written language within its reconstructed real-world function in legal and courtly settings.

Greek and Persian Contexts. Paola Ceccarelli reviews conceptions of the letter as preserved in the rhetoric of Attic orators, concluding that letter-writing was seen as a private convenience that “has to be kept under control” when it touches government and the public domain (p. 104), partly due to questions of secrecy and authenticity, and partly due to the frequency with which barbarian monarchs were expected to interfere with *polis* business by means of personal autocratic letters. Edward Harris argues against the scholarly conclusion (based on the language of business letters) that “business agent” was a recognized profession in ancient Greece. James Sickinger, in addressing the evolving relationship between official letters and Greek epigraphy in stone, expands and nuances Ceccarelli’s point about the traditional cultural association of government business by letter with “autocratic” foreign monarchs (as opposed to the more public processes and decrees of the “democratic” Greek *poleis*). Ingo Kottsieper’s paper treats an example of government business by letter that would surely have been seen by such “free Greeks” as an Oriental case in point: the Aramaic correspondence of the Persian satrap Aršames. Kottsieper’s review illuminates the ways in which the collection’s formal idiosyncrasies serve the kinds of hierarchy and security appropriate to a system of autocracy at a distance.

Greco-Roman Egyptian and later Roman Contexts. The remaining six papers all deal with the history of the *cheirographon* (a debt contract taking the form of a letter, innovatively bypassing the need for witnesses by virtue of being written in the debtor’s own hand), so I will be even more brief: Mark Depauw, Katelijn Vandorpe, Sophie Kovarik, and Andrea Jördens focus on the appearance, codification, and significant local permutations of the cheirographic form, within the religious, social, and legal contexts of Egypt’s Ptolemaic and post-Ptolemaic centuries (from the second century BCE through to the eighth century CE). The shift of focus to include non-Egyptian territories that begins with the papers of Kovarik and Jördens is extended by Éva Jakab and Johannes Platschek. Jakab moves the focus to Pueoli

and the *tabulae* of the bank of the Suplicii. Jakab uses these archives to show that in Roman law the *cheirographon* lost its epistolary character and to argue against the common habit of treating *cheirographon* as a synonym for the *epistula* legal document form (which does maintain a letter form, and which carries weight only as legal documentary evidence, not as a personal declaration of obligation). Platschek outlines the Roman procedural means used by debtors and creditors to settle questions of debt repayment involving the Roman act of question-and-answer *stipulatio* (an agreement often recorded in the form of a *cheirographon*, and the settling of which could include the legal use of informal letters).

In closing, I offer my evaluation of the volume as a whole. The stated goal of the colloquium (and thus the collection) was to “pinpoint evolution in the position of the letter as a legal document” (p. 11), and in this, the project succeeded admirably. As a legal tool, “the letter” as investigated and presented here shows a remarkable power and elasticity, in terms of time, place, and use. As such, Yiftach-Firanko’s *The Letter* is potentially a valuable resource for anyone studying the history of law or legal theory. From a Religious Studies point of view, this collection could also add some welcome perspective and depth (in terms of theory, approach, and historical detail) to scholars working with epistolary questions and contexts like those addressed in John L. White’s *Light from Ancient Letters* (1986), Stanley K. Stowers’s *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (1986), or Luther M. Stirewalt’s *Studies in Ancient Greek Epistolography* (2001). In terms of general topical orientation and even general interest, the “Introduction” alone (provided by Sophie Démare-Lafont, Michele Faraguna and Uri Yiftach-Firanko) offers a great deal of interesting and strangely affecting information; for example, the fact that Sumerian letter tablets were spoken of as having “mouths” and as being “killed” by destruction and “resurrected” by rewriting, or the fact that early Mesopotamian security measures included writing the same message twice—once on the legally binding tablet and once on its breakable clay “envelope.” Such details show a good editorial eye for the curious human and technological dimensions of what the deceptively familiar letter form has been expected to look like—and been trusted to do—in some of the less familiar real-world contexts of antiquity.