

THE MESSAGE AND THE MEDIUM:
SOME OBSERVATIONS ON EPISTOLARY COMMUNICATION
IN LATE ANTIQUITY*

Lincoln H. Blumell

Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, USA

That there are many kinds of letters you are well aware; there is one kind, however, about which there can be no mistake—for indeed letter writing was invented just in order that we might inform those at a distance if there were anything which it was important for them or for ourselves that they should know (Cicero, *Fam.* 2.4.1).¹

In antiquity, the most common form of communication between two or more parties who were physically separated was the letter. As a result, letters often constitute important source texts for a wide variety of issues and figure prominently in early Christian literature. However, to fully utilize the evidence provided by letters in any particular investigation it is important to realize that these texts are conditioned by a number of internal and external factors that can affect the message(s) they convey. To elucidate some of these important factors this study will primarily, though not exclusively, survey the epistolary evidence provided by the papyrological remains of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt (third century BCE through fourth century CE). The advantage of using this particular set of data resides in the fact that it allows one to study the original letter, as opposed to some later copy, and so it is possible to evaluate certain factors that could not otherwise be considered. In particular, this study will focus on a couple of important aspects of epistolary communication

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1. Translation adapted from D.R. Shackleton Bailey, LCL 205, pp. 235-37.

that ought to inform our analyses of ancient letters, but that are sometimes overlooked and yet were crucial factors in the writing, sending and receiving of a letter.

After laying some necessary groundwork, wherein certain terms will be defined and some mediums of epistolary exchange discussed, this paper will seek specifically to examine the role(s) of scribes in the production of a letter and the role(s) of letter carriers in the transmission and delivery of a letter. Looking at scribes, this study seeks to examine why scribes were periodically conscripted to write a letter, what roles they could have played in the actual writing process and how they contributed to the message. Turning to letter carriers, this study will then attempt to give greater clarity to the role they played in conveying a letter and also the role they played in the delivery of the letter. In particular, this study will seek to flesh out the oral component of letter delivery and how letter carriers were often entrusted with oral information that either supplemented the written letter or formed an integral part of it. Therefore, while epistolary correspondence is often regarded as a distinctly written form of communication, it should become clear that in addition there was often an equally important oral component to the message.

By considering the respective contributions of scribes and letter carriers to the whole epistolary process this examination seeks to elucidate the interplay between the message and the medium in late antiquity. Furthermore, by keeping in mind the different roles scribes and letter carriers played one can readily see how the message between sender and receiver was often facilitated and filtered via multiple mediums that not only influenced and shaped the way the message was received but also the way the message was conceived. This is readily applicable for the study of many New Testament letters, especially the Pauline corpus, where it is made explicit in certain letters that Paul either employed a scribe and/or entrusted a letter carrier with accompanying oral information that directly pertained to the written message. Therefore, the insights gained from elucidating the larger roles scribes and letter carriers played in the whole epistolary process should be of particular interest to those interested in the textual metafunction of the letter.

Terms, Definitions and Physical Mediums

Before proceeding into an examination of the respective roles scribes and letter carriers played in the whole epistolary process, it is necessary to take a moment and consider a couple of preliminary items. First, concerning

the subject of letters, what exactly does this study understand a ‘letter’ to be, since there was a wide range of documents in late antiquity that included epistolary features, such as petitions, orders and invitations, to name just a few, and a number of different terms used for a letter (γράμματα [*litterae*], ἐπιστολή/ἐπιστόλιον [*epistula*], βιβλίον/βυβλίον [*charta/codicillus/libellus*])?² A useful definition that is by no means comprehensive but that effectively expresses the core of what a letter is for the purposes of this study is drawn from Michael Trapp’s work on Greek and Latin letters:

A letter is a written message from one person (or set of people) to another, requiring to be set down in a tangible medium, which itself is to be physically conveyed from sender(s) to recipient(s). Formally, it is a piece of writing that is overtly addressed from sender(s) to recipient(s), by the use at beginning and end of one of a limited set of conventional formulae of salutation (or some allusive variation on them) which specify both parties to the transaction. One might also add, by way of further explanation, that the need for a letter as a medium of communication normally arises because the two parties are physically distant (separated) from each other, and so unable to communicate by unmediated voice or gesture; and that a letter is normally expected to be of relatively limited length.³

Under this broad definition there is a wide range of different types of letters, and not every single one referenced in the present study fits perfectly within this definition; nevertheless, it is sufficiently inclusive to easily accommodate most of the texts that will be considered.

Secondly, to more fully elucidate the relationship between the medium

2. For a useful discussion of the different Greek technical terms employed for letters, see M. Luther Stirewalt, *Studies in Ancient Greek Epistolography* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), pp. 67-87.

3. Michael Trapp (ed.), *Greek and Latin Letters: An Anthology, with Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 1. Cf. Ps-Libanius, *Ep. chs.* 1-3, who gives the only definition from antiquity of what constituted a letter: ‘The epistolary style is varied and divided into many parts. It is therefore fitting that someone who wishes to write letters not do so artlessly or indifferently, but with greatest precision and skill... A letter, then, is a kind of written conversation with someone from whom one is separated, and it fulfills a definite need. One will speak in it as though one were in the company of the absent person. It is divided into a great number of types, for the fact that a letter is designated by the single name does not mean that all letters commonly so called are of one style and one type’ (translation taken from Abraham J. Malherbe, *Ancient Epistolary Theorists* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988], p. 67). Cf. Ambrose, *Ep.* 66.1, who tersely defines a letter as the ‘speech of those not present’.

and the message it is worthwhile to briefly outline the different physical mediums available for letters. To begin, letters were written on different sorts of physical mediums. The earliest extant letters written in Greek date to c. 500 BCE and were written on thin sheets of lead (μολίβδος).⁴ Even though there are a few scattered literary references to lead as a medium for epistolary communication and a handful of other texts preserved on lead, on the whole it seems to have been a fairly extraordinary medium for letter writing.⁵ It would appear that the most common material for letter writing in late antiquity was papyrus. Though papyrus was only manufactured in Egypt, and at times Egypt placed embargoes on exporting it, papyrus seems to have been the medium of choice for letter writing as well as for any type of writing in general.⁶ Already by the fifth century BCE Herodotus could report that papyrus had a fairly wide circulation outside of Egypt so that it was the best medium for writing;⁷ some thousand years later Augustine could similarly remark

4. The earliest such letter (*SEG* 26.845.3), found at Berezan on the Black Sea and measuring 153 x 65 mm, was sent either from or to the colony of Olbia established by Miletus. This letter was discovered rolled up, perhaps undelivered, and protruding out of a high embankment. The Greek dialect of the letter is Ionic, which was the dialect of Miletus, and contains an address on the outside that reads: ‘The lead (τὸ μολίβδιον) of Achillodorus to his son Anaxagoras’. It is interesting to note that Achillodorus used the word ‘lead’ to identify the letter and he may have done so since there was no word for ‘letter’ that readily came to mind. On this letter, see John Chadwick, ‘The Berezan Lead Letter’, *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philosophical Society* 19 (1973), pp. 35-37; William Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 56-57; Patricia A. Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions: The Letter in Greek Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 28-31. Two other Greek letters written on lead and of a similarly early date, fifth century BCE, are *SIG³* III 1259 and *SIG³* III 1260 from Athens and Olbia respectively. On these letters, see W. Crönert, ‘Die beiden ältesten griechischen Briefe’, *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 65 (1910), pp. 157-80.

5. Plutarch, *Mulier. virt.* 254d; Dio Cassius, *Hist. rom.* 66.36; Frontinus, *Strateg.* 3.13.7; Parthenius 10.3. The Leuven Database of Ancient Books (LDAB) lists one text written on a lead sheet, a love spell written in dactylic hexameter, *Suppl. Mag.* 1.49 (= *SEG* 38.1837) (II/III).

6. Pliny, *Nat.* 13.11.

7. Herodotus, *Hist.* 5.58. Likewise, the earliest extant Israelite letter from the first half of the seventh century BCE is written on papyrus. On this letter, see F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp *et al.*, *Hebrew Inscriptions: Texts from the Biblical Period of the Monarchy with Concordance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 381-84.

that papyrus was still the most common medium for letter writing.⁸ In Egypt the evidence for the use of papyrus as a medium for letter writing is overwhelming. Of the just over 7,500 published letters from Egypt between the third century BCE and seventh century CE about 90 per cent are preserved on papyrus.⁹ After papyrus, the next most common writing surface was broken pieces of pottery or flakes of limestone that effectively served as ‘scrap paper’ and are known as ostraca.¹⁰ Though some have suggested that this medium was often used instead of papyrus to write letters because it was a much cheaper alternative and the cost of papyrus could have been prohibitive, such reasoning needs clarification.¹¹ To be sure, the further one was outside of Egypt, the more expensive papyrus would have been as a natural result of greater transportation costs accrued from shipping; nevertheless, for most persons above the social level of a peasant or an unskilled laborer, papyrus for a letter was not regarded as expensive and was certainly not cost prohibitive.¹² Rather, in most cases, it was likely that a particular letter was written on an ostrakon, instead of papyrus, because the former was more readily available and could adequately serve as an acceptable medium for the communication.¹³ To

8. Augustine, *Ep.* 15.1: ‘Does this letter (*epistula*) not show, if we are short of papyrus (*chartae*), we at least have an abundance of parchment (*membranas*)?’ At present, the latest dated document preserved on papyrus is a papal letter from 1057 CE. See OCD³, p. 1110.

9. The Heidelberger Gesamtverzeichnis (HGV) currently lists the number of published letters at 7,544. Of this total 6,712 (89 per cent) are written on papyrus.

10. Of the 7,544 published letters the HGV lists 820 (11 per cent) ostraca; however, depending on one’s definition of a ‘letter’ this number could probably be expanded.

11. John Muir, *Life and Letters in the Ancient Greek World* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 15; Trapp, *Greek and Latin Letters*, pp. 6-7. Such reasoning is typically based upon a reference in Diogenes Laertius who preserved a story that Cleanthes, the notable student of Zeno, had to take his notes on ostraca because he did not have enough money to buy any papyrus (*Vit. phil.* 7.174).

12. Naphtali Lewis, *Papyrus in Classical Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 129-34; cf. T.C. Skeat, ‘Was Papyrus Regarded as “Cheap” or “Expensive” in the Ancient World?’, *Aeg* 75 (1995), pp. 74-93.

13. For example, a number of letters from Egypt preserved on ostraca were written within a military context by various troops and garrisons stationed in the Eastern Desert. Due to the remoteness and isolation of the Eastern Desert it is more likely that ostraca were used because there was a shortage of available papyrus, not necessarily because the military could not afford papyri. On this point, see Roger S. Bagnall and Raffaella Cribiore, *Women’s Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC–AD*

expand on the latter point, when one compares letters written on papyrus to letters written on ostraca it becomes evident that the former tend to be more detailed and formal, whereas the latter are more casual and laconic, which could suggest that ostraca tended to be used when the nature of the discourse was less formal and so the medium of the message could accordingly change. Of course, one cannot rule out the possibility that on occasions letters written on ostraca are more terse and to the point because the predetermined size of the ostrakon necessitated brevity and concision.

Beyond papyri and ostraca other mediums for letter writing are attested, but on the whole their use seems to have been somewhat extraordinary. Thin sheets of wood were occasionally used for letter writing, the most well-known example being found among the Vindolanda Tablets,¹⁴ but in late antiquity wood seems to have been used only as a secondary or tertiary alternative when papyrus or ostraca were not available.¹⁵ Similarly, parchment was used in exceptional circumstances, but only when papyrus was not available,¹⁶ since it was extremely expensive and only tended to be used in the production of fine codices.¹⁷ When parchment was used

800 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), p. 34.

14. The fort of Vindolanda (Chesterholm) was one of a number of garrisoned outposts along Hadrian's wall. To date about 170 letters from the fort have been published. See T.Vindol. I, II, III *passim*.

15. There are only six letters from Egypt written in Greek on wood: SB I 3939 (date ?); SB XVI 12808 (III CE); SB XIV 11939 (I–IV CE); O.Douch III 259 (IV/V CE); O.Douch III 290 (IV/V CE); O.Douch III 342 (IV/V CE). There is only one Coptic letter written on wood: P.Kell.Copt. 5.42 (355–380 CE). See K.A. Worp (ed.), *A New Survey of Greek, Coptic, Demotic and Latin Tabulae Preserved from Classical Antiquity* (Leuven: Trismegistos Online Publications, 2012). Based on various literary references it would seem that wooden writing tablets in various forms (δέλτος, πίναξ), either hinged or having a wax overlay, were not an uncommon medium for epistolary communication, Greek and otherwise, in the centuries prior to Alexander's conquest (Homer, *Il.* 6.168–170; Herodotus 7.239.3; cf. Plautus, *Curc.* 410). Later, both Cicero (*Fam.* 9.26) and Pliny (*Ep.* 9.26) report using wooden tablets to write drafts of letters and take notes.

16. Augustine, *Ep.* 15.1; cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 7.2; cf. 2 Tim. 4.13, where parchment is grouped with books: *καὶ τὰ βιβλία μάλιστα τὰς μεμβράνας*.

17. To give some idea of how rarely parchment was used in letter writing, there are only four extant letters written on parchment from Egypt and one from Dura Europos: PSI III 208 (late III CE); PSI IX (late III CE); P.Dura 46 (late III CE); P.Iand. II 12 (III/IV CE); SB III 7269 (V/VI CE). A search of Coptic letters on the Brussels Coptic Database (BCD) lists only one letter written on parchment, O.Crum VC 116.

as the medium for a letter it was likely done so because it was a leftover scrap from a scriptorium or bookshop that could not be used for a codex but could accommodate a short letter.¹⁸

There are other physical mediums upon which letters were written but they are extremely rare and were necessitated under exceptional circumstances. Various writers stretching from Herodotus to Augustine detail how during times of scarcity, economic turmoil, or times of war and conflict, letters could be written on a number of unusual mediums because acceptable writing surfaces were unavailable or because letters needed to be sent secretly so they had to be easily hidden. Accordingly, there are references to letters being tattooed on body parts or inscribed on clothing or personal jewelry in order to ensure the confidential delivery of an important message.¹⁹ In fact, in Aeneas Tacitus's manual on siege warfare he devotes an entire section to the subject of how to send and receive letters secretly and details a number of unusual mediums upon

Additionally, in the Duke collection P.Duk.inv. 5(b) is an unpublished fragment of a Coptic letter written on parchment. This letter was written over a washed-out text with part of Plato's *Parmenides* in Greek (P.Duk. inv. 5[a]). See William H. Willis, 'A New Fragment of Plato's *Parmenides* on Parchment', *GRBS* 12 (1971), pp. 539-52. At least in Egypt, parchment codices are extremely rare before the third century CE and only become more common in the fourth and fifth centuries. For example, a search on the LDAB reveals that at Oxyrhynchus parchment appears to have been used most in the fourth and fifth centuries based on a survey of extant fragments. Statistics for literary parchment remains at Oxyrhynchus are as follows: First century, 1; second century, 4; third century, 10; fourth century, 40; fifth century, 39; sixth century, 14; seventh century, 5. On the cost of parchment in bookmaking, see Roger S. Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 50-69; Lincoln H. Blumell, *Lettered Christians: Christians, Letters and Late Antique Oxyrhynchus* (NTTSD, 39, Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 179-80; Chrysi Kotsifou, 'Books and Book Production in the Monastic Communities of Byzantine Egypt', in William E. Klingshirm and Linda Safran (eds.), *The Early Christian Book* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), pp. 54-66 (60-61).

18. Blumell, *Lettered Christians*, pp. 176-81; AnneMarie Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord: Christian Identity and the Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 144-51.

19. Herodotus 5.35, where he reports how Histiaeus relayed a letter to Aristagoras through the medium of a slave's head. Since he was worried the message might be intercepted he took his most trusted slave, shaved his head, tattooed the message on his scalp, and waited for his hair to regrow before he sent the messenger. For other stories of secret letters in Herodotus, see 1.23 and 7.239. See also Plutarch, *Lys.* 19; cf. Aulus Gellius, *Noct. att.* 17.9; Thucydides 1.131; Ammianus Marcellinus 18.6.17; Augustine, *Ep.* 15.1.

which letters could be written.²⁰

A corollary to the medium of the letter is the length of the letter.²¹ For the most part the extant papyrus letters are rather short, to the point, and typically averaged not more than about 90 words (including introduction, body, and valediction).²² Of course, some letters can be much shorter, and the shortest letters in the papyri average about 20 words.²³ If there is any general observation to be made about the length of a letter in the papyri it is that economy and utility seem to have often been driving factors as most letters tend to get to the main point of the letter quickly and are not prolonged with lengthy digressions. While this could be the result of a number of different factors, like restrictions imposed by the size of the physical medium or matters of urgency,²⁴ one potential factor, which will be pursued in greater detail shortly, is the possibility that brevity in a

20. Aeneas Tacitus 31.1-35.

21. Something could also be said here about the physical size and format of the letter. The most comprehensive study of the typical dimensions and layout of papyrus letters is J.-L. Fournet, 'Esquisse d'une anatomie de la lettre antique tardive d'après les papyrus', in Roland Delmaire, Janine Desmulliez and Pierre-Louis Gatier (eds.), *Correspondances: Documents pour l'histoire de l'antiquité tardive* (Lyon: Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée, 2009), pp. 23-66.

22. By comparison, the average letter written by Cicero is about 225 words, Seneca 995 words, and the Apostle Paul 2495 words. For these statistics, see Randolph E. Richards, *Paul and First-century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 163-64; Lincoln H. Blumell, 'A Note on Dionysius of Alexandria's Letter to Novatian in Light of Third-century Papyri', *ZAC* 14 (2010), pp. 356-61 (357-58).

23. On the other hand, the longest extant letter in the papyri is P.Ammon I 3 (26 May to 24 June 348 CE); the first part of the letter is missing but the preserved portion that includes the latter part of the letter is made up of six columns containing 190 lines of text.

24. Though I have been unable to locate any explicit references in the papyri a common complaint in a number of letters was that the letter was unusually short and to the point because a letter carrier suddenly became available and so the letter had to be written with great haste before the letter carrier departed: Cicero, *Fam.* 10.4.1: 'I have had to produce this letter on the spur of the moment, for the messenger of the *publicani* was in a hurry, which accounts for its brevity'; Jerome, *Ep.* 32.1: 'There are two reasons for writing you a short letter, first, because the messenger is in a hurry, and secondly, because I am very busy with other work, and did not wish to spend time on what I must call amusement'. Ausonius to Paulinus of Nola, 'I have composed this brief production in haste the very morning after the evening mentioned above. For your messenger is only waiting to take back a reply' (Paulinus of Nola, *Ep.* 43.1; cf. Fronto, *Ad M. Caes.* 1.3.9).

letter was sometimes the by-product of an accompanying oral message.

Scribes and Letters

Since the term ‘scribe’ is a well-worn one that is frequently invoked in discussions of ancient texts, it seems only fitting to begin the present section on scribes and letters with some discussion of this vague term. In the modern sense the term ‘scribe’ is often used to designate someone who worked primarily in the capacity of a writer or copyist and who spent most of their time copying texts or drafting documents. In Greek, the term typically translated as ‘scribe’ is *γραμματεύς* and in fact it has a wide range of meaning that transcends strictly one who copied texts or produced documents.²⁵ When one surveys the relevant sources it becomes evident that while a *γραμματεύς* could at times be involved in literary pursuits, like drafting documents or copying a text, the term was multidimensional and was imbued with a number of different meanings. In the papyri from the Greek and Roman periods there are numerous references to scribes (*γραμματεῖς*), but the overwhelming majority refer to individuals who worked in the lower echelons of provincial administration and whose primary responsibility did not include copying texts or drafting documents.²⁶ In fact, though one might suppose that a high level of literacy was a necessary prerequisite for such scribes, this is not the case, as there is evidence that certain administrative scribes were basically illiterate.²⁷

25. For a lengthy introduction to the term *γραμματεύς* and its appearances in classical literature, see PW, s.v. *γραμματεῖς*.

26. Here I am thinking of the village scribe (*κωμογραμματεύς*), the toparchy scribe (*τοπογραμματεύς*) and the royal scribe (*βασιλικὸς γραμματεύς*). Perhaps a better rendering of the term *γραμματεύς* in these contexts is ‘clerk’ as it more completely encompasses the range of activities involved in the holding of these administrative posts. Here I believe most English translations of Acts 19.35 nicely nuance the reference to the *γραμματεύς* of Ephesus by rendering the term ‘town clerk’. On the respective duties of these scribes, see Livia Capponi, *Augustan Egypt: The Creation of a Roman Province* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 44-45; John F. Oates, *The Ptolemaic Basilikos Grammateus* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995); F. Oertel, *Die Liturgie: Studien zur ptolemäischen und kaiserlichen Verwaltung Ägyptens* (Leipzig: Scientia Verlag Aalen, repr. 1965), pp. 164-65, 384-85.

27. The primary qualification to hold such posts was not literacy, although this was probably expected, but rather that one owned land and met certain financial criteria to perform a liturgy and was eligible for nomination. See Naphtali Lewis,

Since the word γραμματεὺς often connoted administrative activities, and not what we might imagine as ‘scribal’ or literary activities, other terms were employed to describe persons who functioned in explicitly literary capacities like those who copied texts and drafted documents and who can probably be imagined as ‘professional scribes’. One such term, derived directly from the Latin *librarius*, was the Greek λιβράριος, and like its Latin counterpart had the primary meaning of copyist or secretary.²⁸ Another Greek term regularly used to describe a person engaged solely in scribal activities is βιβλιογράφος.²⁹ For letters specifically, the term ἐπιστολεύς was used and usually referred to a personal scribe of

‘Exemption from Liturgy in Roman Egypt’, *Atti dell’ XI congress internazionale di papyrologia* (Milan: Istituto lombardo di scienze e lettere, 1965), pp. 508-41. There is evidence that a certain Petaus, who was village scribe of Ptolemais Hormou in the Arsinoite nome from c. 182–187 CE, was barely able to write and could not read. See Herbert C. Youtie, ‘Pétaus, fils de Pétaus, ou le scribe qui ne savait pas écrire’, *Chronique d’Egypte* 41 (1966), pp. 127-43.

28. For example, the ‘scribe’ (λιβράριος) who drafted a number of documents in the Babatha Archive finishes the documents in the following way: ‘I, Theenas the scribe, the son of Simon, wrote (this document)’ (Θεενας Σίμωνος λιβράριος ἔγραψα). See P.Yadin I 17.43 (21 Feb. 128 CE); P.Yadin I 18.73 (5 Apr. 128 CE). Also P.Yadin I 15.38 (11 Oct. 125 CE): ὁ δὲ γράψας τοῦτο Θεενας Σίμωνος λιβράριος. Also P.Yadin I 20.73 (19 June 130 CE); P.Yadin I 21.34 (11 Sept. 130 CE); P.Yadin I 22.39 (11 Sept. 130 CE): ἐγράφη διὰ [Γερ]μανοῦ λιβραρίο[υ]. Cf. P.Col. VIII 221.12 (143 CE); P.Oxy. I 43.5.16, 19 (295 CE). Here Latin is useful because it has two primary terms for scribe that nicely emphasize different scribal capacities. The first is *scriba*, and is roughly equivalent to γραμματεὺς, and while it can refer to a scribe in the traditional sense, like the term γραμματεὺς, it often had administrative overtones and did not explicitly refer to text production. This is reinforced by a statement from Cicero, who states of the *scribae* of Rome that, ‘the order [of the *scribae*] is honorable, for to the good faith of these men are entrusted the public laws, and the sentences of the magistrates’ (Cicero, *Verr.* 3.79.183). A survey of their activities suggests that their primary duty was not writing per se, but that they acted primarily as clerks, registrars, accountants and cashiers. The best treatment of the *scribae* of Rome is still found in Theodor Mommsen, *Römisches Staatsrecht* (3 vols.; Graz: Akademische Druck, 3rd edn, 1952), I, pp. 331-39. On the functional differences between *scribae* and *librarii*, see Livy 38.55; Cicero, *Agr.* 2.13; Horace, *Ars* 354.

29. Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters: Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 23-26, who also notes other terms for scribes who worked in the literary sphere (e.g. καλλιγράφοι [calligraphers], νοταρίοι [notaries], προχειροφόροι [stenographers], ταχυγράφοι [shorthand writers]).

the emperor who oversaw official correspondence.³⁰ Though there is little direct evidence that persons serving as professional scribes were explicitly trained in letter writing, letter composition was an integral part of a higher education.³¹ Therefore, if we are going to begin to imagine who the ‘scribes’ were who were drafting personal correspondence or the correspondence of prominent individuals or provincial and imperial administrators it is principally these professional scribes (λιβράριοι, βιβλιογράφοι, ἐπιστολεῖς) who must be considered in most cases.

Though it is sometimes supposed that letters written by scribes were most often done so because the individual was illiterate and could not write their own letter, such an assumption belies the evidence for scribal involvement in letter production. To be sure, when necessity demanded illiterate people would certainly have sought the services of a professional scribe to write a letter, and a scribe would have provided such services for a fee;³² however, the problem comes when one supposes that this was the only or even the primary reason why a scribe might be employed in the epistolary process. In fact, in a somewhat ironic twist, the extant evidence

30. IG 14.1085.6-7: ἐπιστολεῖ τοῦ αὐτοῦ Ἀυτοκράτορος. In Latin this office was known as the *ab epistulis* and later as the *magister epistularum*. On his specific letter writing functions in the imperial court, see Fergus Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (London: Duckworth, 2010), pp. 224-28. There is one reference to an ἐπιστολεύς in P.Kell. I 54.24 (IV CE) that can hardly be taken as a reference to the imperial ἐπιστολεύς, and probably refers to a local scribe.

31. Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 215-19. The only extant school exercise that specifically deals with letter composition is P.Vindob.G. 15574 (IV/V CE). On this exercise, see Raffaella Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), p. 208 (no. 147). Additionally, Ps.-Demetrius’s *τύποι ἐπιστολικοί*, a typological work on different kinds of letters, is addressed to a certain Heracleides to prepare him to become a professional letter-writer of sorts.

32. Direct evidence for scribal rates in letter writing is scant. Diocletian’s *Edict of Maximum Prices* stipulated the maximum rates scribes could charge for writing literary works and petitions: ‘To a scribe for writing, 100 lines, 25 denarii; For second quality writing, 100 lines, 20 denarii; To a notary for writing a petition or legal document, 100 lines, 10 denarii’ (*Edictum Diocletiani de pretiis rerum venalium*, col. vii. 39-41). In SB XX 14599.9-11 (early III CE), an account for a bookshop or scriptorium in Oxyrhynchus, a rate of 28 drachmas is paid for copying 10,000 lines of text. See H.I. Bell, ‘The “Thyestes” of Sophocles and an Egyptian Scriptorium’, *Aeg* 2 (1921), pp. 281-88 (286-87). Also, in P.Oxy. XLIII 3138 (III CE) an ὀρθογράφος is paid 600 drachmas for copying a petition.

suggests that persons of high status, which necessarily presupposed literary competency, tended to be the ones who most often used scribes to write their letters.³³ One need only skim the personal correspondence of Cicero to see how often he employed *librarii* to write his letters.³⁴ Likewise, the epistolary exchanges between Marcus Cornelius Fronto and Marcus Aurelius shows the degree to which scribes were used in the writing of letters; on one particular occasion Marcus Aurelius complains to Fronto that he has just finished dictating thirty letters to various scribes and was completely out of breath.³⁵ Marcus Aurelius was not alone in his dependence on scribes to help manage his epistolary correspondence, as it is clear from a number of different sources that emperors typically had a whole retinue of scribes and other assistants to help them deal with all their incoming and outgoing mail.³⁶ In particular, Pliny the Elder alleges that Julius Caesar was so proficient at dictating his letters to his scribes that he could ‘dictate to his scribes (*librarii*) four letters (*epistulae*) at once on his important affairs or, if otherwise unoccupied, seven letters at once’.³⁷

Of course the emperor was not the only administrator to rely heavily on scribes to deal with his epistolary correspondence as there is much

33. Roger S. Bagnall, *Reading Papyri, Writing Ancient History* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 25, who notes, ‘One might almost say that there was a direct correlation between the social standing that guaranteed literacy and the means to avoid writing. But this should not be taken to mean that men of this standing did not do a fair amount of writing all the same.’

34. Cicero, *Quint. frat.* 3.1.19; *Att.* 5.17.1; 7.13.3; 8.12.1; 8.13.1; 11.2.4; 14.21.4; 16.15.1.

35. Fronto, *Ad M. Caes.* 4.7: ‘At last the messenger (*tabellarius*) is starting, and at last I can send you my three day’s budget of news. But I cannot say anything, to such an extent have I exhausted my breadth by dictating nearly thirty letters (*epistulae*)’ (translation taken from C.R. Haines, LCL 112, p. 185). What is also very interesting about this reference is that it appears that Marcus Aurelius was using his scribes to compose not just official correspondence but also personal correspondence. See Millar, *Emperor in the Roman World*, pp. 215-16.

36. Plutarch, *Caes.* 63.7; Philo, *Leg. all.* 42; Suetonius, *Vesp.* 21; *Tit.* 6.1; *Dom.* 13.2; Dio Cassius, *Hist. rom.* 51.3.2; 69.1.4; 78.36.5; *Scriptores Historia Augusta, Sev. Alex.* 31.1. The demands of letter writing were often so immense that it was a cause of some displeasure. This is aptly illustrated by a statement in Plutarch that is attributed to Seleucus who reportedly said, ‘If people knew how laborious was the mere writing and reading of so many letters (*ἐπιστολαί*) they would not pick up the diadem which had been thrown away’ (Plutarch, *Mor.* 790a.).

37. Pliny, *Nat.* 7.91.

evidence that lesser officials like governors, *strategoi* or prominent municipal officers also had scribes on their staffs to help them keep up with official correspondence.³⁸ Likewise, wealthy individuals could easily retain the services of a professional scribe if they were not in the mood to write a letter and some, like Cicero, at times relied on trained slaves to write much of their personal correspondence.³⁹ Moving beyond the spheres of administrators and wealthy elites on the one hand, who either out of necessity or luxury relied on scribes to write their letters, or on the other hand, illiterates, who employed scribes because they were unable to draft their own letters, scribal evidence in letter writing transcended both these extremes. In early Christian literature there is strong evidence that scribes were used early on in letter writing and that at least six letters attributed to Paul betray indications that they were written, at least in part, by a scribe of some sort.⁴⁰ Similarly, the little available evidence

38. The *strategus* particularly had the aid of the royal scribe (βασιλικὸς γραμματεὺς) even if this scribe performed a number of other administrative duties. Plutarch reports that when Caesar was proconsul of Gaul he would always be accompanied by scribes, even while riding, so he could dictate letters (Plutarch, *Caes.* 17.7). P.Yale I 61 (22 May 215 CE) reveals that when the Prefect of Egypt was sitting in judgment in Arsinoe he received 1,804 petitions in only two days! To respond to all these petitions would probably require an army of scribes!

39. In P.Herm. 6 (c. 313–317 CE), the hand of the subscription establishes that it was written by a scribe. However, the sender, a certain Hermodoros, the brother-in-law of Theophanes, is otherwise known to have been quite literate. Cicero often relied on his slave Tiro to compose his letters (Cicero, *Att.* 5.20.9; 13.25.3). In P.Oxy. IV 724 (1 March 155 CE), apprenticeship for a shorthand writer, one catches a glimpse of how a slave might be trained with various literary skills so that they could more effectively, and more usefully, serve their master. In this contract the ex-cosmetes of Oxyrhynchus (a civic official with responsibility for ephebes) contracts a ‘shorthand writer’ (σημιογράφος) to train his ‘slave’ (δοῦλος) in Greek shorthand for a period of two years.

40. Romans 16.22; Gal. 6.11; 1 Cor. 16.21; Col. 4.18; Phlm. 19; 2 Thess. 3.17-18. On Paul’s use of scribes, see Randolph E. Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991) with updates in Richards, *Paul and First-century Letter Writing*; cf. J. Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul the Letter-Writer: His World, his Options, his Skills* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), pp. 8-35. I do not take the reference to Silvanus in 1 Pet. 5.12 (διὰ Σιλουανοῦ ὑμῖν τοῦ πιστοῦ ἀδελφοῦ, ὡς λογιζομαι, δι’ ὀλίγων ἔγραψα [‘Through Silvanus, whom I consider a faithful brother, I have written this short letter’]) to be taken as the scribe but rather as the letter carrier. On this interpretation, see Randolph E. Richards, ‘Silvanus Was Not Peter’s Secretary: Theological Bias in Interpreting Διὰ Σιλουανοῦ... Ἐγραψα in 1 Peter 5:12’, *JETS* 43 (2000), pp. 417-23.

for contemporary Jewish letters shows that scribes were regularly employed.⁴¹ Later, with the evidence of Origen, which is certainly exceptional, Eusebius reports that to aid him with his work a wealthy patron provided him with a retinue of scribes almost comparable to what one might find in the imperial court: ‘For as he [Origen] dictated there were ready at hand more than seven shorthand-writers (ταχυγράφοι), who relieved each other at fixed times, and as many copyists (βιβλιογράφοι), as well as girls skilled in beautiful writing (καλλιγραφεῖν)’.⁴²

There are various ways to detect the presence of a scribe in a letter. Perhaps the most obvious is if the sender explicitly states that a scribe was employed. A scribe is most often seen indirectly when the sender tells the recipient that the letter is being dictated or is being written under unusual circumstances.⁴³ Another way to detect the presence of a scribe is if the scribe informs the addressee of their presence directly in the letter. Perhaps the most well-known example of this is in Rom. 16.22 where Tertius, ‘the writer of the letter’ (ὁ γράψας τὴν ἐπιστολὴν), makes himself known and sends greeting.⁴⁴ In the papyri there are a few similar cases

41. The Bar-Kokhba letters (c. 132–135 CE) show the extent to which scribes were employed for contemporary Jewish letters. Although all fifteen Bar-Kokhba letters are written in the first person by Shimeon, the son of Bar-Kokhba, no two letters display the same handwriting, establishing the use of scribes, and some even mention the name of the scribe who actually wrote the letter: P.Yadin 50 (Aramaic), P.Yadin 54 (Aramaic), P.Yadin 63 (Aramaic). Likewise, in other letters from the Naḥal Hever area that also date to the early second century the presence of scribes can be detected since the writing style of the valediction or subscription at the end of a letter sometimes differs markedly from the body of the letter. P.Yadin 52 (Greek) is another example of a letter where a scribe was employed. The valediction reads, ‘Soumaios, farewell’, and is clearly not in the same hand as the body of the letter. Likewise in DJD XXVII 30 (Hebrew) the subscription at the end of the letter is in a different hand than the body of the letter. For scribal evidence in letter writing in a much earlier period, see Jer. 36.4, 32; 45.1.

42. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.23.1-2.

43. Cicero, *Att.* 4.16.1: ‘The bare fact that my letter is by the hand of a scribe will show you how busy I am’; *Att.* 5.17.1: ‘This letter is dictated as I sit in my carriage on my road to camp’ (cf. Cicero, *Att.* 2.23; 3.15.8; 7.13; 8.15; 12.32.1; 13.32). See also Fronto, *Eloq.* 2; *Ad M. Caes.* 5.47.

44. See also Cicero, *Att.* 5.20.9, where Cicero informs his friend Atticus that if his scribe Alexis wished to send him greetings, then he really should put them in a letter of his own, instead of continually putting them in Atticus’s letters: ‘I am obliged to Alexis for so often adding his salutations, but why does he not do it in a letter of his own’ (translation taken from D.R. Shackelton Bailey, LCL 8, p. 87).

where a scribe writing a personal letter appends his own greetings, but on the whole it is very rare.⁴⁵ When a scribe feels so inclined to explicitly insert himself into a letter it is no doubt because he is familiar with the recipient and feels that the personal touch will be well received and not intrusive; additionally, one would probably have to assume that the scribe had the permission of the author of the letter. Another way to detect the use of a scribe in a letter would be through the presence of an illiteracy formula at the end of the letter where it would be explicitly stated that the letter was being written on behalf of someone who could not write.⁴⁶ Of course, for personal letters sent between friends and associates, the illiteracy formula would not be used because such formula were reserved for official documents, letters included, where it was necessary to specify that a scribe was employed.⁴⁷

In letters where there is no explicit reference to a scribe, perhaps the easiest way to determine the presence of a scribe is through the style of the handwriting; however, this naturally requires that one is able to examine the autograph copy. Handwriting was often seen in antiquity as peculiar and distinct and persons could be recognized by the style of their hands.⁴⁸ When looking at the paleography of a letter, if the handwriting shows proficiency, in that it is smooth and flowing with uniformly spaced letters

45. P.Oxy. XLII 3057.29-30 (I/II CE): Λεωνᾶς ἀσπάζομαι σε, δέσποτα, καὶ τοὺς σ[ο]ύς πάντας ('I, Leonas, greet you master, and all your people'). On this scribal greeting, see BL 8.265; cf. Lincoln H. Blumell, 'Is P.Oxy. 3057 the Earliest Christian Letter?', in T.J. Kraus and Tobias Nicklas (eds.), *Early Christian Manuscripts: Examples of Applied Method and Approach* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 97-113 (99-100). For other examples, see P.Oxy. XLIX 3505.24-25 (I/II CE): ἀσπάζομαι σε Διονύσιος ('I, Dionysius, greet you'); P.Oxy. LVI 3860.43-44 (late IV CE); P.Herm. 13.13-16 (IV).

46. On the use of illiteracy formulae, see Herbert C. Youtie, "'Because They Do Not Know Letters'", *ZPE* 19 (1975), pp. 101-108; Herbert C. Youtie, 'ΑΓΡΑΜΜΑΤΟΣ: An Aspect of Greek Society in Egypt', *HSCP* 75 (1971), pp. 161-75; Herbert C. Youtie, 'Βραδέως Γράφων: Between Literacy and Illiteracy', *GRBS* 12 (1971), pp. 239-61; Francis Xavier J. Exler, *The Form of the Ancient Greek Letter of the Epistolary Papyri (3rd c. B.C.–3rd c. A.D.): A Study in Greek Epistolography* (Chicago: Ares, repr. 1976), pp. 124-27.

47. I have not yet been able to locate any personal letter that uses the illiteracy formula. In personal letters, or even private documents as a whole, it was common for the scribe to remain anonymous. See Herbert C. Youtie, 'ΥΠΟΓΡΑΦΕΥΣ: The Social Impact of Illiteracy in Graeco-Roman Egypt', *ZPE* 17 (1975), pp. 201-21 (209).

48. Fronto, *Ad Ver. Imp.* 2.6; Cyprian, *Ep.* 9.2.2, where handwriting is used as the basis to determine a forged letter; Basil, *Ep.* 19; 20.

and regularity in letter formation, then it suggests that it was written by a scribe.⁴⁹ When one looks at the hands of most official letters one is often struck by the exquisite quality of the hands, which displays a chancery style characteristic of professional scribes that at least from the second through fourth century CE is marked by generous letter sizes, uniformity of script and serifs on certain letters.⁵⁰

Another indicator that a scribe was used in the writing of a letter is if the script of the introduction and body of the letter is written in one hand and the conclusion or valediction in another. To add a personal touch when a letter was written by a scribe it was not uncommon for the sender to subscribe (ὕπογράφειν) the letter using their own hand and add a salutation or a brief note at the bottom.⁵¹ In fact, this phenomenon is directly attested at the end of five of Paul's letters where it may be assumed that he added a personal subscription with his own hand:⁵²

ὁ ἀσπασμὸς τῆ ἐμῆ χειρὶ Παύλου 1 Cor. 16.21 (I, Paul, write this greeting

49. For example, P.Oxy. XLII 3057 (I/II CE) contains a number of these paleographic qualities and in this letter one can be sure it was penned by a scribe since he interposes himself into the letter. See Blumell, 'Is P.Oxy. 3057 the Earliest Christian Letter?' pp. 108-109, and see also P.Fay. 110 (11 Sept. 94 CE), which displays similar paleographic qualities; even though there is no overt reference to a scribe in this letter it seems likely it was penned by a scribe.

50. A nice example of this style is P.Oxy. XIX 2227 (c. 207–210 CE), a letter from the prefect (?) and P.Köln 351 (30 July 190 CE). On chancery style in letters, see Raffaele Luiselli, 'Greek Letters on Papyrus First to Eighth Centuries: A Survey', *Asiatische Studien/Etudes asiatiques* 62 (2008), pp. 677-737 (690-91).

51. Since this was such a widespread phenomenon there are numerous letters in the papyri where the hand of the subscription is different than the hand of the body of the letter. Cf. Libanius, *Ep.* 1223; Julian, *Ep.* 98; Cicero, *Att.* 8.1.1: 'However in that letter of Pompey's, at the end and in his own hand, are the words "as for yourself, I advise you to come to Luceria. You will be as safe there as anywhere"'. Likewise, there are examples of holographs where multiple letters exist from a single sender but are all written in a different hand, thus establishing the use of a scribe. For example, P.Amh. II 131 and 132 are both letters from a certain Sarapion (c. 90–133 CE). The first letter (131) to his wife is written in a very nice hand while the second letter (132) written to his son is written in a terrible hand. It seems a reasonable assumption that a scribe drafted the letter to his wife while Sarapion wrote the letter to his son.

52. For more analysis of this epistolary phenomenon in the Pauline letters, see Jeffrey A.D. Weima, 'Sincerely, Paul: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings', in Stanley E. Porter and Sean A. Adams (eds.), *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 307-46 (337-40).

with my own hand).⁵³

ἴδετε πηλίκοις ὑμῖν γράμμασιν ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ Gal. 6.11 (See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!)

Ὁ ἀσπασμὸς τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ Παύλου Col. 4.18a (I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand)

ὁ ἀσπασμὸς τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ Παύλου, ὃ ἐστὶν σημεῖον ἐν πάσῃ ἐπιστολῇ· οὕτως γράφω 2 Thess. 3.17 (I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is the mark in every letter of mine; it is the way I write)

ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ Phlm. 19a (I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand)

While the foregoing analysis has hoped to bring some clarity and greater precision to the term ‘scribe’, the ubiquity of scribes in letter production, and how one might reasonably be able to detect the use of a scribe in a letter, this examination will now shift and seek to elucidate exactly how a scribe may have worked in concert with the sender to compose a letter. Here this study seeks to explore whether a scribe merely acted as a passive transcriber and simply wrote word for word what the sender dictated, or whether the scribe might have played a more proactive role in the composition process and actually helped the sender craft the letter and thus influenced the presentation of the message.⁵⁴

Due to the nature of the source evidence the impression that is often given is that when a scribe was involved in the letter writing process he often played the role of a transcriber and simply wrote out verbatim the *ipsissima verba* of the speaker. For example, on one notable occasion Cicero reported that when he was writing a letter to his friend Varro he had to slow down his speech to the point of dictating ‘syllable by syllable’ (*sed syllabatim*) because he was using a slow scribe who could not transcribe at the rate of normal speech.⁵⁵ While this slow diction might help ensure that everything in the letter was recorded as the author intended,⁵⁶ it was

53. All Greek text from the New Testament is from NA²⁸ and English translations are from the NRSV.

54. On the different roles scribes could have played in the composition of the letters of Paul, see Richards, *Secretary in the Letters of Paul*, pp. 23-53; cf. Richards, *Paul and First-century Letter Writing*, pp. 81-93.

55. Cicero, *Att.* 13.25.3.

56. Of course, a scribe could always mishear a word and write another. For

also very tedious and sometimes caused the speaker to lose his train of thought or grow excessively weary.⁵⁷ Of course, there were scribes, like Cicero's Tiro, who had mastered shorthand and were able to transcribe letters at the virtual rate of dictation.⁵⁸ In such cases it may probably be assumed that it was the scribe's responsibility to convert the shorthand rough draft into a final polished version that was devoid of symbols and employed full spelling; thereupon the letter would be presented back to the sender, or perhaps read back if the sender were illiterate, to get final approval.

We see this very process in operation in an episode described in the *Historia Augusta* where it is reported that Severus Alexander often spent his afternoons in the presence of scribes and other staff having his letters read back to him, checking for errors, and subscribing the letters and adding additional information:

The afternoons he always devoted to subscribing and reading letters (*subscriptioni et lectioni epistularum*) with the heads of the bureaus of Imperial Correspondence in attendance...the scribes (*librarii*) and those who administered the particular bureau re-read everything to him, so that Alexander could add whatever was necessary in his own hand (*sua manu adderet si quid esset addendum*), but always on the basis of the opinion of whoever was regarded as the most expert.⁵⁹

example, there are a few cases in clearly Christian letters where the plural *θεῶν* is written instead of the singular *θεόν* (P.Oxy. XVI 1929.2 [VI]; P.Abinn. 36.11 [mid IV]) and one may only guess that the scribe writing the letter heard what was said but misinterpreted what was being implied. Alternatively these mistakes may have been simple orthographic errors.

57. Quintillian complains how a slow scribe prevents full concentration on the task at hand: 'If the scribe (*librarius*) is a slow writer, or lacking in intelligence, he becomes a stumbling block, our speed is checked, and the thread of our ideas is interrupted by the delay or even perhaps by the loss of temper to which it gives rise' (*Inst.* 10.3.20).

58. When Cicero complained to Varro about the scribe who could only transcribe 'syllable by syllable' (*Att.* 13.25.3) he also pointed out that Tiro 'could follow whole sentences' (*qui totas περιοχὰς persequi solet*) at a time and implies that he knew shorthand. Cf. Seneca, *Ep.* 14.208, who notes that shorthand enabled scribes 'to take down a speech, however rapidly uttered, matching the speed of tongue by speech of hand'. On shorthand, see also Plutarch, *Cat. Min.* 23.3-5; *Caes.* 7.4-5; Suetonius, *Tit.* 3. Later, Plutarch (*Cat. Min.* 23.3-5) credits Cicero's scribes as the first to record dictation in shorthand; Seneca credits slaves, serving as scribes (*Ep.* 14.208).

59. *Scriptores Historia Augusta, Sev. Alex.* 31.1. Translation adapted from David Magie, LCL 140, p. 239. Severus Alexander was certainly not the only emperor to

In addition to elucidating the general context in which a dictated letter was checked and subscribed, the episode also reveals how scribes sometimes played a more proactive role in the whole epistolary process. In the last part of the reference we see Severus Alexander receiving editorial input from his scribes and it says that their input affected what he appended to his letters. This episode therefore nicely illustrates how at times a scribe moved beyond the capacity of a recorder, wherein he simply acted as a stenographer and wrote out what was said, and played a greater role in the composition of the letter as he took on certain editorial responsibilities. However, the extent of the editorial license given to the scribe probably depended on a number of factors like the competency of the scribe, the literacy of the sender or the relationship between the author and scribe. Given the seemingly close relationship between Tiro and Cicero, there is evidence that Tiro had certain editorial prerogatives when scribing for Cicero and that he could make certain editorial suggestions to Cicero who would then decide whether to accept or reject them. On one occasion Cicero boasted in a letter that he had found an error in Tiro's writing and remarked with some glee that he had corrected his corrector (i.e. Tiro).⁶⁰ Admittedly, the reference is terse and not explicit; nevertheless, it is hard not to detect in it some acknowledgment on the part of Cicero that Tiro was endowed with certain editorial responsibilities in the drafting of his letters.

To more concretely illustrate how a scribe may have actually functioned in an editorial capacity in the drafting of a letter it is worth turning to a letter written by Marcus Cornelius Fronto and sent to Domitia Lucilla, the mother of Marcus Aurelius. Though the letter is not extant, Fronto, in a letter sent to Marcus Aurelius, informs the emperor that he has also included a letter to his mother and asks him to pass it along.⁶¹ However, because the letter was composed in Greek, Fronto's second language, he entreats the emperor to have it looked over and instructs that if there is any 'barbarism in it' (*si qui inerit barbarismus*) it is to be smoothed out and corrected before the letter is delivered to Domitia. It is regrettable that nothing more is said about this letter, either by Fronto or in a later

subscribe his letters: Plutarch, *Caes.* 63.7; *Philo, Leg. all.* 334; *Scriptores Historia Augusta, Marc. Ant.* 15.1.

60. Cicero, *Fam.* 16.17.1: 'But look you here, sir [Tiro], you who love to be the rule of my writings (*sed heus tu, qui xανών esse meorum scriptorum soles*), where did you get such a solecism as "faithfully ministering to your health"?'

61. Fronto, *Ad M. Caes.* 1.8.7.

letter by Marcus Aurelius, so that we might be able to get a clearer picture of exactly how this editorial process took place. All the same, based on the instructions of Fronto, it seems likely that if any editorial changes were made they were largely cosmetic and did not radically change the content of the letter or its message. Along these lines, while I have not been able to locate any explicit references, I find it hard to imagine that when a scribe was approached by an illiterate individual to draft a letter that the scribe would not automatically assume some kind of editorial role and provide suggestions or recommendations in terms of form and style and thereby play an active part in the composition of the letter.

Moving beyond the role of an editor there is some evidence that at certain times and under certain circumstances a scribe could be given considerable license over the composition of a letter. In such cases, it seems, a scribe was given no more than a general outline to follow and was effectively awarded *carte blanche* authority to compose the letter as he saw fit so long as it adhered to the general outline stipulated by the sender and adequately conveyed the intended message.⁶² In such cases the vocabulary, style, form and even certain parts of the letter's content would have been solely the scribe's; however, it would be a mistake to assume from this that the sender was not regarded as the author. For all intents and purposes the letter was still considered to be authentically the sender's, even though the message was mediated primarily through the voice of the scribe, as the sender was always expected to read over the final draft and ensure that it accurately conveyed what he intended. In such cases the subscription at the end of the letter effectively functioned as the sender's seal of approval and recognition that he was taking full responsibility for its content.⁶³

62. Bagnall and Cribiore, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt*, pp. 7-8, who point out that at times a scribe was instructed 'to write a letter to a particular person with specified content, then left to compose the letter himself'.

63. That this was indeed the case may be illustrated from two quick examples. The first may be found in a letter from Cornelius, a third-century bishop of Rome (c. 251–253 CE), to Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (c. 258 CE) (Cyprian, *Ep.* 49.1.4). In this letter Cornelius tells Cyprian about the struggles the Roman church was experiencing and how it was only gradually being reconciled in the wake of Decian's persecution and how many confessors, who once belonged to the rigorist party of Novatian, were coming back to the faith. However, much trouble had recently been stirred up by the circulation of some letters by Novatian, which the confessors had unwittingly subscribed because they had not read the letters' contents but signed them anyway and were therefore responsible for them. The other example comes from Eusebius's

The most explicit evidence for this kind of scribal scenario comes from examples where the outgoing message was not properly checked and approved by the sender with the result that the message caused some embarrassment or problem. In a letter to his brother Quintus, who was serving as Proconsul of the Province of Asia, Cicero chides him because he had heard from Statius, the Freedman of Quintus who had recently joined his staff, that in times past Quintus was not properly checking his outgoing mail with the result that certain letters written by scribes had been sent that caused embarrassment and were the subject of criticism:

In sending out official letters (I have often written to you about this) you have been too ready to accommodate. Destroy, if you can, any that are inequitable or contrary to usage or contradictory. Statius told me they [letters] were often brought to your house ready written, and that he read them and informed you if they contained anything inequitable, but that before he entered your service there had never been any sifting of letters, with the result that there were volumes of dispatches sent out which lent themselves to adverse criticism. I am not going to warn you about this now. It is too late for that, and you are in a position to know how many warnings I have given on various occasions and with no lack of particularity.⁶⁴

While some of the exact details are vague, the way Cicero details the episode presupposes some kind of scenario where in the past, before the arrival of Statius, Quintus had invested various scribes with considerable authority over the drafting of his letters but had then failed to properly check them before they were sent out.

Certain types of letters, like official correspondence, probably lent themselves more readily to a scenario where the scribe was invested with more compositional control over the letter since such kinds of letter tended to be more formulaic and tended to employ a set vocabulary and style. Turning to personal letters the matter is more difficult to determine. While there was surely some kind of a symbiotic relationship between the scribe and the sender, in the absence of explicit evidence there is no foolproof methodology capable of determining the specific role a

Life of Constantine (*Vit. Const.* 2.23), where Eusebius guarantees the authenticity of the contents of a letter by Constantine because it contained a subscription in his own hand: ‘It is taken from the authentic royal law preserved among us, in which also the subscription in his own hand is like a seal guaranteeing the trustworthiness of his words’ (ὃ καὶ τῆς αὐτοῦ δεξιᾶς ἔγγραφος ὑποσημείωσις τῆς τῶν λόγων πιστώσεως οἷά τι σφραγίδι κατασημαίνει τὴν μαρτυρίαν).

64. Cicero, *Quint. frat.* 1.2.8. Translation adapted from D.R. Shackleton Bailey, LCL 462, p. 55.

scribe played in the composition of a personal letter and whether he was entrusted with the task of composing the entire letter based on some loose instructions. The closest explicit references I can locate that illustrate a context where someone like a scribe would be given full authority over a personal letter comes from the correspondence of Cicero and represents a rather unusual case. On two occasions Cicero handed over complete epistolary control of a letter to a trusted friend since he was unable to send a letter personally. In 58 BCE when Cicero was banished from Rome he wrote to his close friend and confidant Atticus and asked him to compose and send letters in his name to anyone he thought necessary so that he would not be forgotten during his banishment.⁶⁵ Ten years later Cicero repeated the request and asked Atticus to write more letters:

I am so fearfully upset both in mind and body that I have not been able to write many letters (*litteras*); I have answered only those who have written me. I should like you to write in my name to Basilius and to anyone else you like, even to Servilius, and say whatever you think fit.⁶⁶

What makes this example so noteworthy, and in fact quite unusual, is that Cicero gives Atticus absolutely no guidelines whatsoever for the letters, neither does he intend to look them over before they are sent. It was usual, even when scribes were given considerable or almost total control over the production of a letter, for them to be informed of the purpose or occasion of the letter and to have the final draft checked over and approved by the sender.

Looking at the Pauline letters in light of the foregoing examination of scribal epistolary capacities, even if one is not able to ascertain with any degree of certainty the compositional responsibilities Paul had invested in the various ‘scribes’ who wrote at least some of his letters, there is a wide range of possibilities based on precedent. On the one hand, Paul may have relinquished little if any compositional prerogative to those who acted as his scribes and so they may have merely acted akin to stenographers and recorded Paul’s very words with little or no editorial input or deviation. On the other hand, the possibility should not be ruled out *a priori* that persons who acted as Paul’s scribes played a more proactive role in the epistolary process, especially if they were

65. Cicero, *Att.* 3.15.8: ‘If there is anyone to whom a letter ought to be sent in my name, please write one and see that it is sent’.

66. Cicero, *Att.* 11.5.3. Translation adapted from D.R. Shackleton Bailey, LCL 97, p. 197.

trusted associates, and contributed to the actual composition of a given letter by influencing its grammar, style, diction or even content. With these scribal possibilities in mind, differences between the letters of Paul could perhaps be accounted for at times more readily through the use of different scribes than by assuming pseudonymous authorship.

Sending Letters and Letter Carriers

Moving beyond the writing of a letter, and how scribes might have been employed in that process, it is worthwhile now to examine the sending of the letter and the role of letter carriers. An important, though oft overlooked, aspect of epistolary correspondence was the actual transmission of the letter from point A to point B since it potentially affected the message, both when and how it was received. As letters by their very nature are documents sent and delivered by an intervening party, who effectively acts as an *in absentia* agent for the sender, it is worth looking at the role letter carriers played in the transmission and delivery process since they invariably impacted the reception of the letter and potentially even the subsequent interpretation of the letter by the recipient.

As is well known, in late antiquity there was nothing like a postal service in the modern sense that operated on a regular basis and was available to anyone wishing to send a letter. For official communication (i.e. communication directly relating to matters of administration and military activity), letters, missives and other sorts of official correspondence were conducted via the services of the *cursus publicus*. This system, which was initiated by Augustus so that official communication could readily flow across the empire, was based along military lines with staging posts located at various intervals along major highways and roads where couriers could refresh themselves en route to their final destination.⁶⁷

67. Suetonius, *Aug.* 49.3: ‘To enable what was going on in each of the provinces to be reported and known more speedily and promptly, he [Augustus] at first stationed young men (*iuvenes*) at short intervals along the military roads, and afterwards post-chaises (*vehicula*). The latter has seemed the more convenient arrangement, since the same men who bring the dispatches (*litteras*) from any place can, if occasion demands, be questioned as well’ (translation adapted from J.C. Rolfe, LCL 31, p. 229). Under Diocletian it seems that the *cursus publicus* was divided into two divisions, the express post (*cursus velox/ὄξυς δρόμος*) and the slower wagon post (*cursus clabularis/πλατὺς δρόμος*). See especially H.G. Pflaum, *Essai sur le cursus publicus sous le Haut-Empire romain* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1940); cf. Erik J. Holmberg, *Zur Geschichte des cursus publicus* (Uppsala: Lundequvist, 1933).

Since the *cursus publicus* was reserved for official communication, ordinary persons wishing to send personal correspondence could not draw on its resources and were left to make their own arrangements to send their mail.⁶⁸ Therefore, for most private individuals, having a letter delivered was sometimes a difficult task.⁶⁹

Such persons effectively had one of two options:⁷⁰ (1) informally conscript a friend or acquaintance who was travelling in the direction the letter was being sent to convey the letter;⁷¹ or (2) pay a private letter

68. There are a handful of cases where prominent persons were able to draw upon the resources of the *cursus publicus* for personal use. Pliny once reported to Trajan that he used the *cursus publicus* for personal reasons (Pliny, *Ep.* 10.120) and the future emperor Tiberius used the resources of the *cursus publicus* in 9 BCE when he learned that his brother Drusus was on the point of death (Valerius Maximus 5.3). Similarly, in the post-Constantinian period there are examples of a prominent bishop drawing upon the services of the *cursus publicus* to send an important letter. Since Constantine had allowed bishops to use the resources of the *cursus publicus* to travel to the Council of Nicaea and subsequent councils (Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 3.6; Ammianus Marcellinus 21.16.18) some bishops may have thought that a precedent had been set. In the later Theodosian Code there are a number of edicts that explicitly forbid private persons from using the *cursus publicus* and offer stiff penalties (*Cod. Theod.* 8.5.62, 63).

69. E.G. Turner, *Greek Papyri: An Introduction* (repr., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 130, who notes: ‘It was an easy matter to take a sheet of papyrus (the back of a business document would do), write on it, roll or fold it, pull out a fibre to act as a wrapping string, and close it with a lump of clay impressed with one’s seal ring; it was more difficult to find a friend or messenger to carry it to its destination, and no doubt many letters often went astray’. Cf. Luiselli, ‘Greek Letters on Papyrus’, pp. 683-86; Bagnall and Cribiore, *Women’s Letters from Ancient Egypt*, pp. 37-38.

70. Personal letters of commendation represent an exception because persons being recommended transported the letter themselves and would present it personally upon arrival to the recipient. See Lincoln H. Blumell, ‘A Second-century AD Letter of Introduction in the Washington State University Collection’, *Tyche* 26 (2011), pp. 33-39. See also Hans-Josef Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament: A Guide to Context and Exegesis* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), pp. 72-77; Chan-Hie Kim, *Form and Structure of the Familiar Greek Letter of Recommendation* (Missoula, MT: SBL, 1972); C.W. Keyes, ‘The Greek Letter of Introduction’, *AJP* 56 (1935), pp. 28-44.

71. P.Mert. I 24.3-5 (c. 200 CE): γινώσκεις σε θέλω ὅτι ἐκομισάμην σου ἐπιστόλιον διὰ Ἑρμείνου τοῦ κοινοῦ φίλου... (‘I want you to know that I received your letter through Hermeinos our common friend...’). Since happenstance letter carriers seem to be the general norm, news that an associate was travelling to a particular location often prompted a letter to be written. These letters begin with what might be termed an ἀφορμῆ-formula where the letter begins with the sender explaining to the addressee

carrier to transport the letter to its desired location.⁷² In cases where a friend or acquaintance conveyed a letter they often served as a return letter carrier and would bring back a return letter from the recipient to the sender of the first letter.⁷³ When a friend or associate could not be readily conscripted it appears that just about anybody, including a complete stranger, might be used to transport a letter if they were going in the same direction as it was being sent.⁷⁴ Even if a friend or stranger

that they thought to send a letter since there was a ready letter carrier: SB XIV 11881.4-6 (IV CE): ‘Finding the opportunity of this letter carrier I salute...’ (καιρὸν εὐροῦσα τοῦ γραμματηφόρο[υ] προσαγορεύω...); P.Oxy. XVII 2156.3-5 (IV CE): ‘Having just been given a favorable opportunity by a man who is going to you, I thought I must send you a greeting’ (εὐκαιρον καὶ νῦν δεξάμενος ἀφορμὴν τοῦ γεινομένου πρὸς σὲ ἀναγκαῖον ἐνόμισα προσειπεῖν σε); P.Lond. V 1658.34 (IV CE); P.Oxy. XVI 1929.3 (IV/V CE). On the use of this formula, see Giuseppe Tibiletti, *Le lettere private nei papiri greci del III e IV secolo d.C.: Tra paganesimo e cristianesimo* (Milan: Pubblicazioni della Università Cattolica, 1979), pp. 80-82. In Ps.-Libanius’s *ἐπιστολιμαῖοι χαρακτήρες* (*Epistolary Styles*) he states that the ‘friendly letter’ (φιλική) may begin by stating that one has many ‘sterling letter carriers available’ (εὐπορήσας γραμματηφόρων) (*Ep. ch.* 58) and so use the availability of letter carriers as the pretext for writing.

72. Nothing is known about the actual costs of hiring a professional letter carrier to convey a personal letter but depending on the distance it could have been very expensive and the sheer cost would have prohibited most people from sending a letter in this way. For wealthy persons the cost may not have been prohibitive (Pliny, *Ep.* 3.17), but it seems that they tended to use trusted servants or slaves to perform such tasks: BGU I 37.3-4 (12 Sept. 50 CE). The correspondence of Cicero reveals that he frequently sent letters via slaves. His epistolary interlocutor L. Papirus Paetus had acquired two slaves solely for conveying his letters (Cicero, *Fam.* 9.15.1).

73. O.Florida 14 (late II CE): ὁ φέρων σοι τὸ ὄστρακον συνστρέφει πρὸς ἐμέ. διὰ αὐτοῦ μὴ ἀμελήσης γράψαι (‘The one who is bringing you the ostrakon is returning to me. Do not neglect to write by way of him’); P.Lond. VI 1927.53-58 (mid IV CE): οὖν ἐπιστεύσαμεν ὅτι εἰ θέ[λημα θ](εο)ῦ ἐστὶν τοῦ ἡμᾶς σοι ἀπαντᾶ(ν) [ἀγγελ]εῖς πρῶτον διὰ τοῦ φέρον[τός σοι] τὸ ἐπιστόλιον. δὲς οὖν [αὐτῷ τῆ]ν ἀγγελίαν ὃ τι βούλει ἢ οὐ [βούλει] ἀνέλθωμεν... (‘We were very confident therefore that if it be God’s will that we should meet you, you will inform us by him who brings you the letter. Give him therefore the message whether you desire or not that we should come up’); P.Flor. II 255 (mid III CE): καὶ δῆλωσόν μοι διὰ τοῦ κομίζοντός σοι αὐτὴν ὅστις ἐκομίσθη (‘indicate to me through the one bringing it [i.e. the letter] everything that was received’); Cf. P.Köln II 111.16 (V–VI); P.Vindob. Worp 23.8 (VI–VII); Symmachus, *Ep.* 61.

74. P.Oxy. LVIII 3932.1: ‘I received your maternal kindness’s letter through the most admirable guard Anelius’; P.Oxy. LIX 4006.1-3: ‘This I write as a third letter... (I sent) one by the stable lad who brought the jujubes, and a second likewise with Appa Cyrus the soldier’; P.Oxy. XXXI 2595.6-8 (III CE): καὶ γὰρ πολλοὶ Ὀξυρυγχεῖται

was not going the whole distance to the place of the final destination of the letter, they might still be asked to bear the letter part of the way and then hand it over to someone else, another friend or a stranger, who could complete the task.⁷⁵ Consequently, the delivery of many a personal letter was sporadic and many letters did not always make it to their intended destinations. As a result, complaints about lost letters or allegations of epistolary dereliction or failure to write are so ubiquitous in the extant personal letters that they could almost be considered a cliché.⁷⁶

Looking at the terminology used in the letters themselves for ‘letter carriers’ there are a number of different designations employed, and though some have argued that accordingly there was no standard terminology used for letter carriers in late antiquity this observation

ἔνουσι ἐνθάδε. μέμφομαι δέ σε ὅτι οὐπω μοι ἀντέγραψας (‘For there are many Oxyrhynchites here. I blame you that you have not written to me’); SB III 6263.6-8 (late II CE): τοσαύτας ὑμῖν ἐπιστολάς διεπεμψάμην καὶ οὐδέμειάν μοι ἀντεγράψατε, τοσοῦτων καταπλευσάντων (‘I sent you numerous letters but you have not replied with one, even though numerous people have sailed down’); P.Mich. VIII 491.13-14 (II CE): ‘And, for my part, if I ever find someone (to carry the letter), I will write to you; I certainly will not hesitate to write to you’. In some letters it is clear that the letter carrier is not trusted and this might suggest the individual is a stranger: P.Mich. VIII 481.5-8; P.Oxy. II 300.3-6; Cicero, *Att.* 1.13.

75. In PSI IX 1080 (= P.Sel. I 132) (III? CE) the writer of this letter informs his friend that the letter that he forwarded to him has been delivered. In P.Mich. VIII 490 (II CE) a man writes to his mother and asks that she send a letter. He then informs her that if she can find no one who is going in his direction she should simply give it to a mutual friend who can then forward it. In P.Mich. VIII 465 (20 Feb 108 CE) a third hand, neither that of the scribe’s nor that of the author’s, has inserted some additional material into the address on the back of the letter. Perhaps this hand was that of the letter carrier who was passing the letter off to someone else and giving them more instructions on how to deliver the letter. Similarly, in P.Meyer 20 (early III CE) the address on the back of the letter and accompanying instructions are given in different hands.

76. P.Mich. VIII 496.6-9 (II CE): ἐγὼ γὰρ ἤδη χάρτην ἀνήλωσα γράφων σοι καὶ μόγις ἐν ἐπιστόλιόν σου ἐκομισάμην (‘For I have already used up a papyrus roll writing to you and I received barely one letter from you!’); P.Mert. I 28.4-11 (late III CE); P.Mich. VIII 466.4-9 (107 CE); P.Mich. XV 751.4-6 (II CE). Sometimes the letter carrier is blamed for the breakdown in communication as in P.Mich. VIII 499.12-14 (II CE): πολλάκι σοι ἔγραψα, κα[ὶ] ἢ τῶν παρακομιζόντων ἀμέλεια διέβαλεν ἡμᾶς ὡς ἀμελεῖς (‘I have written to you often, and the negligence of those who carry the letters has slandered us as negligent’). See also Jerome, *Ep.* 76.1, where a ‘faithless and negligent’ letter carrier is accused of failure to deliver a letter.

is not entirely accurate.⁷⁷ While it is often true that a person entrusted with bearing letters is not explicitly identified as a ‘letter-carrier’ using any technical terminology, but is commonly identified through the use of generic substantives like *κομίζω*,⁷⁸ *παρακομίζω*,⁷⁹ *φέρω*,⁸⁰ *δίδωμι*,⁸¹ *ἀναδίδωμι*,⁸² *ἀποδίδωμι*,⁸³ there were various technical terms used for letter carriers. The earliest explicit term used for a ‘letter carrier’ of sorts was *βιβλιαφόρος* (also *βυβλιαφόρος*, *βυβλιοφόρος*). This term was used principally in the Ptolemaic period to identify official letter carriers and royal messengers who conveyed official correspondence.⁸⁴ Little attested in the Roman period, this position seems to have been largely replaced by the *ἐπιστοληφόρος* (also *ἐπιστολαφόρος*, *ἐπιστολοφόρος*).⁸⁵ At least for the

77. Peter Head, ‘Named Letter-Carriers among the Oxyrhynchus Papyri’, *JSNT* 31 (2009), pp. 279-99 (282).

78. P.Vindob. Worp 12.7-9 (early I CE); P.Oxy. XLVII 3356.19-20 (76 CE); BGU II 596.5-6 (10 May 84 CE); BGU III 811.6 (98–102 CE); BGU III 829.1-3 (10 Jan 110 CE); P.Oxy. III 530.10-12 (II CE); P.Oxy. VI 931.4-6 (II CE); P.Oxy. VI 936.13-14 (III CE); PSI VII 832.6-7 (III CE?); P.Oxy. LVI 3865.27-29 (late V); P.Köln II 111.16 (V–VI).

79. P.Mich. VIII 499.12-14 (II CE).

80. P.Col. III 6.14-15 (257 BCE); PSI VI 570.2 (252 BCE); P.Mert. II 62.4-6 (7 CE): Ἰ[σίδωρος [ὁ] φέρων σοι τὴν ἐπιστολὴν ἔστιν μου ἐκ τῆς οἰκίας (‘Isidorus, the one bringing you the letter, is from my house’.); PSI VIII 943.13-14 (II CE); PSI VIII 943.13-14 (II CE); PSI IX 1054.7-8 (III CE); P.Lond. VI 1927.53-58 (mid IV CE); P.Vindob. Worp 23.8 (VI–VII).

81. SB XIV 11646.14-15 (III CE?).

82. BGU VII 1677.3-4 (II CE); P.Brem. 52.2-5 (113–120 CE); P.Giss. 69.3-4 (118/119 CE); P.Giss. I 88.4-5 (113–120 CE); P.Mert. II 80.7-8 (II CE); P.Mil. II 74.3-4 (II CE); P.Mil.Vogl. III 201.8-9 (II CE); P.Oxy. III 352.10-14 (II CE); P.Oxy. XIV 1757.12-13 (II CE); P.Oxy. XXXIV 2726.12-13 (II CE); P.Oxy. LIX 3990.3 (II CE); P.Mil.Vogl. IV 254.5-7 (II/III CE); P.Oxy. I 63.3-5 (II/III CE); P.Oxy. X 1295.15 (II/III CE); P.Tebt. II 448.1 (II/III CE); PSI XIV 1440.5-6 (II/III CE); P.IFAO II 40.7-8 (III CE); P.Lond. II 479.17-18 (p. 255) (III CE); P.Prag. I 111.3-5 (249–269 CE); SB V 8002.4-5 (III CE?).

83. P.Köln IX 365.3 (II BCE); BGU VIII 1871.3-4 (6 Nov.–5 Dec. 61 CE); P.Strasb. IV 174.3-4 (II/III CE).

84. P.Tebt. III.2 951.1 (III BCE); P.Ryl. IV 555.2 (9 Feb. 257 BCE); P.Count 30.28 (254–231 BCE); SB XIV 11308.11 (22 Dec. 251 BCE); P.Hal. 7.6 (4 Dec. 232 BCE); BGU VI 1232Fr. 1.2, 8 (111–110 BCE); P.Oxy. IV 710.2 (20 Sept.–19 Oct. 111 BCE). See also Diodorus 19.57.5; Polybius 4.22.2. In LXX Est. 3.13 and 8.10 *βιβλιαφόρος* is employed to describe the letter carriers of the Persian king.

85. There are only two late inscriptions from Egypt that attest the title of *βυβλιαφόρος*: SEG 24.1222 (IV–V): Πτολεμαῖος Ἐρμοφίλου βυβλιαφόρος; SEG

first few centuries the ἐπιστοληφόρος was a liturgical appointment within the framework of the *cursus publicus* whereby a village would appoint at least one individual, or perhaps multiple individuals depending upon need, with the task of conducting some of the official correspondence to and from the village and working closely with various local officials.⁸⁶ By the third century another designation for ‘letter carrier’ emerged with the office of the γραμματηφόρος. Like the ἐπιστοληφόρος, the γραμματηφόρος was a liturgical appointment and it is conceivable that at times these two offices were basically equivalent and that the different titles could be used interchangeably.⁸⁷ However, as one moves into the fourth and subsequent centuries it seems that the ἐπιστοληφόρος remained a strictly official letter carrier, organized on the basis of the nome, whereas the γραμματηφόρος became a more generic term to identify anyone, regardless if they were performing a liturgy or were a professional letter carrier, who was conducting a letter.⁸⁸ Therefore, in the Byzantine period a γραμματηφόρος could simply refer to a private individual or traveler who agreed to carry a letter.

Two other terms for letter carriers that are also attested with some frequency and deserve brief treatment are ταβελλάριος and σύμμαχος. The ταβελλάριος (also ταβουλάριος and ταβουλλάριος) is the Greek equivalent of the Latin *tabellarius* (*tabularius*) and has the general meaning of a courier or messenger, thus the term was employed in a number of different contexts. In the early Roman period persons identified as *tabellarii* worked as official letter carriers conveying missives and others

24.1221 (IV–V): Πτολεμαῖος Ἐρμοφίλου βιβλιαφόρος INΦXI. In Photius’s Lexicon he equates βιβλιαφόρος with ἐπιστοληφόρος (Lexicon Beta 308: Βυβλιοφόρον· τὸν ἐπιστοληφόρον).

86. P.Petaus 84, pp. 284-85; P.Kellis I 54, p. 154. In P.Petaus 84 the villages and guards furnished one ἐπιστοληφόρος in rotation for a period of time. See Naphtali Lewis, *The Compulsory Public Services of Roman Egypt* (Florence: Edizioni Gonnelli, 1982), p. 29. There is only one reference to an ἐπιστοληφόρος in Greek literary sources before the sixth century; Eusebius uses the term ἐπιστοληφόρος (*Hist. eccl.* 1.13.2) when he refers to the letter carrier of King Abgar and seemingly employs the term in a technical sense.

87. Based on a couple of references it seems that the γραμματηφόρος worked in the express post: ‘letter carrier of the *cursus velox*’ (γραμματηφόρου τοῦ ὄξεως δρόμου, P.Flor. I 39.6-7 [=W.Chr. 405] [29 Aug. 396 CE]; P.Oxy. LI 3623.8-9 [359 CE]).

88. L. Mitteis and Ulrich Wilcken, *Grundzüge und Chrestomathie der Papyruskunde. Band I, Historischer Teil* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1912), p. 374; Bagnall and Criboire, *Women’s Letters from Ancient Egypt*, p. 39.

sorts of imperial correspondence in the service of the *cursus publicus*.⁸⁹ In the papyri and ostraca of the first couple centuries there is typically a connection between military correspondence and references to *tabellarii* and this may probably be explained by the fact that *tabellarii* frequently worked and were organized along military lines.⁹⁰ While it has been argued that *tabellarii* were largely replaced in either the second or third century by *frumentarii*, who also served as couriers and letter carriers for the *cursus publicus* (albeit with an especial military function),⁹¹ up through the seventh century in the papyri and ostraca *tabellarii* are still attested. Perhaps then the later references to *tabellarii* should be taken as generic references to letter carriers without any distinction being made

89. In the late Republican period it seems that *tabellarii* were distinguished by three types: *tabellarii privati*, who were either freedmen or slaves and who carried private correspondence for a fee; *tabellarii publicanorum*, who worked for companies of *publicani* to conduct letters and other sorts of documents; and *tabellarii publici*, who worked for the state and conducted official correspondence. Turning to the Roman period there is only evidence for the *tabellarii publici* who worked in the *cursus publicus* and were now titled *Augusti* or *Caesaris tabellarii* or *tabellarii diplomarii*. See Holmberg, *Cursus publicus*, pp. 35-52; CIL 6.8543.

90. In ostraca from the Mons Claudianus, a quarry and military post in the Eastern Desert, there is an exceptionally high cluster of references to *tabellarii*: O.Claud. I 145.9 (c. 100–120 CE); O.Claud. I 157.6 (II CE); O.Claud. I 161.8 (c. 100–120 CE); O.Claud. I 170.6-7 (c. 100–120 CE); O.Claud. I 176.4 (98–117 CE); O.Claud. II 250.6 (mid II CE); O.Claud. II 282.7 (mid II CE); O.Claud. II 287.6-7 (mid II CE); O.Claud. II 290.3 (c. 140 CE); O.Claud. II 357.5 (late II CE); O.Claud. II 358.8 (138–161 CE); O.Claud. II 363.5 (II CE); O.Claud. II 366.7 (II CE); O.Claud. II 380.3 (138–161 CE); O.Claud. II 408.4 (first half II CE); O.Claud. IV 881.2 (c. 150–54 CE); O.Claud. IV 886.2 (c. 150–54 CE); O.Claud. IV 896.2 (c. 150–54 CE). In connection with military correspondence the office of *στάτωρ* (Lat. *stator*) is worth mentioning. While a *στάτωρ* served as a Roman military officer and worked on the staff of the provincial prefect in a number of different capacities that included bodyguard and escort, one of his principal responsibilities was letter carrying and conveying important correspondence. See Capponi, *Augustan Egypt*, p. 134; cf. *OGIS* 665.23. It can also be noted here that for correspondence relating to military affairs it was not uncommon for ordinary soldiers to be entrusted with the task. See Richard Alston, *Soldier and Society in Roman Egypt: A Social History* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 83-84. In Acts 23.23-33 the letter of the tribune Claudius Lysias to Felix was delivered by ‘soldiers’ (*στρατιῶται*).

91. Holmberg, *Cursus publicus*, pp. 105-106. A Greek equivalent for the Latin *frumentarius* was often *ἀγγελιαφόρος* and sometimes *γραμματηφόρος*. See Hugh Mason, *Greek Terms in Roman Institutions: A Lexicon and Analysis* (Toronto: A.M. Hakkert, 1974), pp. 19, 32.

between whether they were informal or official.⁹² The other term used regularly for persons who conducted letters was *σύμμαχος*; little attested before the fourth century, the *σύμμαχος* seems to have worked largely as a personal assistant or agent who conveyed messages, mail and other items for wealthy individuals.⁹³

With the rise of Christianity in the first few centuries one sees the growing importance of letters; between the second and seventh centuries alone there are about nine thousand extant letters written by various patristic authors (excluding papyri).⁹⁴ Beginning in the fourth century, some of this correspondence could have been conducted via the services provided by the *cursus publicus*, nevertheless the overwhelming majority of these letters were conducted via unofficial means.⁹⁵ In terms of sending letters it seems that Christians were often no different than most others and had similar challenges, and mostly relied on friends, associates or just about anyone who was available to transmit their correspondence.⁹⁶ However, with the rise of an organized ecclesiastical hierarchy and the gradual emergence of bishoprics one begins to see church correspondence conducted between bishops or other church leaders primarily via trusted clergy, such as deacons, subdeacons, acolytes, and on a rare occasion a bishop from a minor episcopal see.⁹⁷

Speed of Transmitting a Letter

92. It therefore seems that the term *tabellarius* functions similarly to *γραμματηφόρος* in the later period.

93. P.Oxy. I 223.10 (IV); SB I 5196.6 (V).

94. Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), p. 15; cf. Trapp, *Greek and Latin Letters*, p. 18.

95. I can think of only one papyrus letter in the pre-Constantinian period, P.Vind. Sijp. 26 (mid-III CE), sent between two Christians occupying the lower strata of provincial administration that was likely relayed via official lines of communication. On this letter, see Blumell, *Lettered Christians*, pp. 125-28.

96. On letter carriers in Jewish correspondence, see Peter Head, 'Letter Carriers in the Ancient Jewish Epistolary Material', in Craig A. Evans and H. Daniel Zacharias (eds.), *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2009), pp. 203-19.

97. Ignatius, *Eph.* 2.1; *Phil.* 10.1; 11.1-2; *Smyrn.* 10.1, 12.1; Cyprian, *Ep.* 8.1.1 (subdeacon); 9.1.1 (subdeacon); 20.3.2 (subdeacon); 36.1.1; 44.1.1 (deacon); 47.1.2; 52.1.1 (acolyte); 55.2.1 (presbyter); 59.1.1, 9.4 (acolyte); 67.1.1 (bishops); 75.1.1 (deacon); 79.1.1 (subdeacon).

With any letter there was always a chronological gap between the writing and sending of the letter, and the reception of the letter by the addressee. The ‘epistolary time’ that transpired between the sending and receiving could potentially affect the message since the received letter would inevitably be filtered and interpreted in light of intervening events.⁹⁸ For example, if a letter was unusually slow in reaching its final destination it is conceivable that the reception and interpretation of the message could be interpreted differently since the chronological context had shifted and changed. Therefore, doubtless at least some letters arrived chronologically garbled, so to speak, because of the time delay, which either affected how the message was received or at the very least engendered in the recipient some temporary confusion or bewilderment as they tried to process the implied context of the message.⁹⁹ Of course, this problem could have been easily averted if the sender dated the letter; however, outside of official letters, which typically were dated and contained a regnal formula, personal letters very rarely contained a date.¹⁰⁰

98. Thomas E. Jenkins, *Intercepted Letters: Epistolarity and Narrative in Greek and Roman Literature* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2006), p. 39.

99. On a few different occasions Cicero laments that he received three or four letters from the same individual on the same day due to the different speeds of the respective letter carriers and expresses perplexity at how to arrange and interpret them (Cicero, *Fam.* 7.18; 11.12; *Att.* 3.15; cf. Fronto, *Ad M. Caes.* 3.12; also Josephus, *Ant.* 18.308, where imperial letters providentially arrive in the reverse order). To avoid causing confusion if multiple letters were being sent close together the sender might sometimes put all the letters into a bundle (*fasciculi*) and arrange them sequentially (Cyprian, *Ep.* 59.2.1; Synesius, *Ep.* 88; Cicero, *Att.* 2.13.1; 5.11.7). Since Caesar was sending the senate so many letters it is reported that they were bound in codex form before sending to keep them organized (Suetonius, *Jul.* 56.6). Perhaps the most notable example of a delayed letter was Augustine’s first letter to Jerome (*Ep.* 28) that was sent in either 394 or 395 CE and did not reach Jerome for nine years (arrived c. 403/404). In the meantime Jerome had learned that Augustine had written a book attacking him, which caused subsequent tensions. Had Augustine’s first letter, which was very conciliatory in nature, arrived in a timelier manner, Augustine and Jerome might have had a more amicable relationship in the earlier parts of their careers.

100. Only a handful of personal letters in the papyri are dated (e.g. P.Fay. 110) whereas the overwhelming majority contain no date at all. Noting the general absence of dates on personal letters, Exler remarks: ‘The reason may be that the need of dating the letters was not so urgent then as it is at present, in view of the fact that the carrier ordinarily was able to supply by word of mouth such information as the written document might lack’ (Exler, *Form of the Ancient Greek Letter*, p. 98); cf. Blumell, *Lettered Christians*, pp. 20-21; John White, *Light from Ancient Letters*

Determining the rate at which letters typically travelled is difficult to assess given the number of variables involved. It can safely be assumed that in most cases letters sent via the *cursus publicus* were conveyed at a much faster rate than personal letters sent via a happenstance letter carrier.¹⁰¹ Given that speed was one of the primary purposes of the *cursus publicus*, in extreme circumstances communication could cover a distance of over 150 km in a single day.¹⁰² For example, P.Panop. Beatty 2 (Jan.–Feb. 300 CE), a papyrus that lists the incoming mail to the *Strategus* of the Panopolite nome over the course of a two month period and that records the date of dispatch and arrival of certain letters, reveals that some letters were transported a distance of almost 200 km on the same day.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, it is important to remember that such speeds represent the exception rather than the rule and that an average rate of about 50 Roman miles a day was more typical.¹⁰⁴ In Procopius's lucid sixth-century description of the *cursus publicus* he reports that letter carriers using the horse relay system could usually cover five and sometimes as many as eight staging posts in a single day.¹⁰⁵ Though the

(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), pp. 7-8.

101. Pliny, *Ep.* 10.64, where Pliny grants a letter carrier a permit to use the resources of the *cursus publicus* since it will speed up his journey.

102. Eldon Epp, 'New Testament Papyrus Manuscripts and Letter Carrying in Greco-Roman Times', in Birger A. Pearson *et al.* (eds.), *The Future of Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 35-56 (52). In order to traverse such distances in a single day, letter carriers would employ horses and the *cursus publicus* was set up in such a way that fresh horses were available at each relay station so that the letter carrier could quickly transfer horses and be on his way. See Colin Adams, *Land Transport in Roman Egypt: A Study of Economics and Administration in a Roman Province* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 58-60; Holmberg, *Cursus publicus*, pp. 102-103.

103. Here I am dependent on the descriptions given in Turner, *Greek Papyri*, pp. 139-40; White, *Light from Ancient Letters*, pp. 214-15.

104. A.M. Ramsay, 'The Speed of the Imperial Post', *JRS* 15 (1925), pp. 60-74 (65-69); cf. Raymond Chevallier, *Roman Roads* (trans. N.H. Field; London: B.T. Batsford, 1976), pp. 194-95, who believes that on average the distance covered by the *cursus publicus* in a single day was around 75 km.

105. Procopius, *Hist. arc.* 301-305: 'The earlier Emperors, in order to obtain information as quickly as possible regarding the movements of the enemy in any quarter, sedition or unforeseen accidents in individual cities, and the actions of the governors or other persons in all parts of the Empire, and also in order that the annual tributes might be sent up without danger or delay, had established a rapid service of public couriers throughout their dominions according to the following system. As a

distances between staging posts could certainly vary it seems that on average they were about eight miles apart;¹⁰⁶ therefore, according to Procopius the average distance covered ranged somewhere between 40 and 64 Roman miles a day.¹⁰⁷

Travel rates for personal letters carried by happenstance couriers are difficult to determine with any degree of certainty. As mentioned above, personal letters were rarely dated, and additionally they were almost never docketed when they were received.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, at least with personal letters in the papyrological record, in many cases it is difficult to determine their place of origin as well as their final destination given that such information is rarely made explicit. In the absence of any substantial evidence it may be assumed that letters sent via a friend or associate probably took about the same amount of time that it took for a typical traveler to traverse the same distance, although stopovers and the letter carrier's personal business may have prolonged the time before delivery.¹⁰⁹ When one surveys the letters sent between prominent bishops

day's journey for an active man they fixed eight stages, or sometimes fewer, but as a general rule not less than five. In every stage there were forty horses and a number of grooms in proportion. The couriers appointed for the work, by making use of relays of excellent horses, when engaged in the duties I have mentioned, often covered in a single day, by this means, as great a distance as they would otherwise have covered in ten.' Translation adapted from H.B. Dewing, LCL 290, pp. 346-47.

106. Chevallier, *Roman Roads*, pp. 186-87.

107. A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602* (2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), I, pp. 401-403.

108. Letters contained in the archive of Zenon represent the exception since more than 150 of the Zenon papyri have been docketed with the date (and often) the place of receipt. The docketed letters in this collection reveal that sometimes a letter might move very quickly. P.Mich. I 28 was sent from Aphroditopolis on Mechir 5 (20 March 256 BCE) to Zenon in Philadelphia, a distance of some fifteen miles, and was docketed by Zenon on the very same day. On the other hand, it took P.Zen.Pestm. 37 dated Mechir 28(?) (1 April 257 BCE), some 14 days to reach Zenon in Philadelphia (docketed Dystros 11 [14 April]), even though it was sent from the Memphite nome less than 100 km away. For a concise summary and analysis of the speeds at which some of the letters in the Zenon archive were carried, see Epp, 'Manuscripts and Letter Carrying', pp. 53-55.

109. Calculating the rate at which overland travel could be accomplished is notoriously difficult, given the number of variables involved at any one time (terrain, weather conditions, road conditions, stopovers, exigencies, sickness etc.). The standard estimation commonly employed is that in most cases a person travelling by foot could cover a distance of about 30 km per day. While such a travel rate seems plausible it

or other notable ecclesiastics in the fourth and fifth centuries who were separated by great distances across the empire it seems that it was not unusual for it to take a year or even two for a letter sent via a conscripted letter carrier to arrive at its final destination.¹¹⁰ In the case of professional letter carriers it may be assumed that they delivered a letter more quickly, given that they were being paid for their services. Nevertheless, if they were conducting multiple letters to different locations it is conceivable that delivery time may have been no different than when conscripting a friend, depending on the order in which certain letters were delivered.

Letter Carriers and the Oral Transmission/Supplementation of a Letter

Looking with greater detail at the role letter carriers played in the actual delivery and presentation of a letter, it is becoming clear that in certain cases letter carriers supplemented and expanded the letter by providing important oral details. That is, at times a letter may have only functioned as one component of a larger message that was being conveyed by the letter carrier, and the message in its entirety could have both a written and spoken component that were inseparable so that the former could not be properly and accurately interpreted without the aid of the latter. Accordingly, the letter carrier served to extend and clarify the message so that it was properly contextualized and interpreted in the intended manner by the recipient.

Just as we are well aware of the shortcomings (at times) of written communication since it cannot always convey the intended message with full clarity and precision, so too some ancients were aware of the limitations and ambiguities of writing and this may have been one of

may be wondered whether such a rate could be sustained over a long period of time. Pliny (the Elder) reports that the longest route from Koptos to Berenike, a distance of some 350 km, could be made in twelve days (*Nat.* 6.102), which assumes an average 29.2 km/day. Much later, Justinian's *Digest* (2.11.1) assumes that litigants can travel about 30 km per day to appear in court. The *Gnomon of the Idios Logos* BGV V 1210 (c. 149 CE) section 100 may also elucidate travel within Egypt as it sets forth some general timetables for when documents need to be registered in Alexandria. Documents from the Thebaid need to be registered within 60 days while documents from other cities, presumably from the Delta, only have 30 days.

110. Martin R.P. McGuire, 'Letters and Letter Carriers in Christian Antiquity', *Classical World* 5 (1960), pp. 148-53, 184-85, 199-200 (200); cf. Paulinus of Nola, *Ep.* 17.1.

the primary reasons why letter carriers were often entrusted with oral instructions and other oral information relevant to the letter.¹¹¹ In his *Phaedrus*, Plato presents Socrates as giving a detailed excursus on the limitations of the written word that could help partially explain the need for an oral message to accompany a written one:

For writing, I guess, Phaedrus, has this shortcoming—and really it is the same as with painting. For the products of painting stand there as if they were living but, if you ask them something, they preserve a total solemn silence. Just so with the written word; you would imagine they were saying something on the basis of thought, but if you ask them something about what they are saying because you want to understand, you get only the one, self-same meaning all the time. And every verbal communication, once it is written down, rolls off in all directions, indiscriminately both among those who understand it and among those for whom it is not at all suitable, and it does not know to whom it should and should not address itself. When it is taken wrongly and unjustifiably insulted, it always needs its father to come to its aid, for it cannot on its own defend or help itself.¹¹²

Keeping the ‘Socratic’ limitations of the written word in mind, the fact that a letter could not clarify itself or be questioned for additional details upon receipt, or could be misinterpreted, one can see how it might be advantageous to provide the letter carrier with oral information so that they could play the role of commentator and interpreter and even provide other key details, not included in the letter, that clarified the intended meaning of the letter.

If one surveys the roles letter carriers played in the delivery of correspondence in the Classical and Hellenistic periods it becomes readily apparent that they regularly supplemented the written letter with oral commentary and instruction.¹¹³ In fact, it seems that often the

111. Of course, there could have also been other, pragmatic reasons why a sender would want to provide the letter carrier with additional oral instructions regarding the letter. In the event of the loss of the letter the message could still be delivered because the messenger knew the content of the message. Euripides, in *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, tells the story of how Iphigeneia sends a letter back to Argos with Pylades. Since the letter is an important one and the journey is long and dangerous it occurs to Pylades that the letter could get lost so Iphigeneia decides to recite the letter to Pylades so at the very least he can deliver the message orally in case the letter gets lost along the trip (Euripides, *Iph. Taur.* 769-794).

112. Plato, *Phaedr.* 275d-e. Translation adapted from H.N. Fowler, LCL 36, pp. 565-67.

113. It is worth noting here that when Thucydides employs the term *ἐπιστολή* he uses

two were seen to go hand in hand and that the contents of a letter were verified by the oral supplements of the letter carrier(s) and that these supplements were in turn confirmed by the written letter.¹¹⁴ As a result, it is not unusual to sometimes find that in this period letter carriers were sometimes styled as ‘heralds’ (sg. κήρυξ) or ‘messengers’ (sg. ἄγγελος), even though they were conveying written correspondence, because the oral component of the message was either a central part of the message or a necessary supplement.¹¹⁵ Turning to the papyri from this period, there are a few letters that show how letter carriers were given accompanying oral instruction that constituted part of the message but was not written in the letter.¹¹⁶ Perhaps what is most significant about these letters, for the

the term generally to refer to any communication sent through a messenger, whether it is a strictly oral message or a written one. It was not until the time of Xenophon and other orators that ἐπιστολή came to be used with more regularity as a term for written correspondence. See Stirewalt, *Studies in Ancient Greek Epistolography*, pp. 82-84; cf. White, *Light from Ancient Letters*, pp. 191-93.

114. The events surrounding the delivery of the ‘letter of Nicias’ in Thucydides exemplifies this point (7.11-15). When Nicias wanted to inform the Athenians how their forces were being hard pressed in Sicily in the summer of 414 BCE he was worried that if he sent messengers with only oral instructions they might inaccurately relay the message, so he determined to fix the message by writing it, but provided the messengers with oral instructions so they could supplement the message and clarify it with additional insights (7.8): ‘But fearing that his [Nicias’s] messengers might not report the actual facts, either through inability to speak or from lapse of memory, or because they wanted to please the crowd, he wrote a letter (ἐπιστολήν) thinking that in this way the Athenians would learn best his own view, obscured in no way by any fault on the part of the messenger, and could thus deliberate about the true situation. So the messengers whom he sent departed, bearing the letter (τὰ γράμματα) and the verbal reports (ὅσα ἔδει αὐτοὺς εἰπεῖν) which they were to deliver...’ (translation taken from C.F. Smith, LCL 169, p. 17).

115. C. Bradford Welles, *Royal Correspondence in the Hellenistic Period: A Study in Greek Epigraphy* (repr., Chicago: Ares, 1964). pp. xxxix-xl.

116. The first is P.Col. III 6 (257 BCE), a letter sent by a woman named Simale to Zenon to complain of the ill treatment of her son at the hands of a certain Olympichos. After relating some of the details surrounding the mistreatment of her son and petitioning Zenon to take action, she concludes the letter by relating that the person carrying the letter will provide additional details: ‘The remainder learn from the one who brings this letter to you, for he is not a stranger to us’ (ll. 14-15: τὰ δὲ λοιπὰ πυνθάνου τοῦ φέροντός σοι τὰ γράμματα. οὐ γὰρ ἀλλότριος ἡμῖν ἐστίν). In the second letter, SB III 6799 (June/July 248 BCE) written about a decade later, the sender, a certain Korrhagos, writes to a certain Proxenos to relay some information and to discuss the sending of a previous letter. At the end of the letter Korrhagos tells

present purposes, is that they are personal letters, which shows that it was not just with official correspondence that letter carriers might be tasked with delivering accompanying oral information pertaining to the letter.

Turning to the Roman period there is still evidence that letter carriers were frequently provided oral instructions, supplements and clarifications that were to be relayed at the time of delivery. Returning to Suetonius's description of the *cursus publicus* under Augustus, Suetonius details how one innovation introduced at the time was to have the same letter carrier convey the letter the entire distance of the trip.¹¹⁷ The reason for this innovation was so that the letter carrier could then provide supplemental details about the letter, since he had personally received the letter from the sender, and could answer questions about the correspondence if needed: 'The latter has seemed the more convenient arrangement, since the same men who bring the dispatches (*litteras*) from any place can, if occasion demands, *be questioned as well (interrogari quoque)*'.¹¹⁸

Here the correspondence of Cicero is extremely elucidating, even if it likely represents a somewhat exceptional case. Due to the sensitive and at times furtive nature of some of Cicero's correspondence he and his epistolary interlocutors were at times very particular about the letter carriers entrusted with certain correspondence since if it fell into the wrong hands there could be serious ramifications.¹¹⁹ Therefore, to minimize the possibility of sensitive information falling into the wrong

Proxenos that there are additional details but that the letter carrier will provide them: 'But the one bringing you the letter will say the other things' (l. 10: τὰ δὲ ἄλλα ὁ φέρων σοι τὴν ἐπιστολὴν ἐρεῖ). The third letter is UPZ I 59.24-25 (1 Sept. 179 BCE or 29 Aug. 168 BCE), but the evidence for the oral delivery of a message is indirect. In this letter the sender informs the recipient in a return letter that the letter carrier had provided some oral information (apparently not contained in the first letter) that caused some discomfort. In this case it seems that the letter carrier was simply spreading gossip and had not been entrusted with a specific oral message for delivery.

117. The *cursus publicus* was functionally modeled on the earlier Greek and Persian systems of communication where mounted horsemen operated between relay stations. However, one difference was that in the Persian system a different rider was assigned to carry the correspondence at each new station. Thus, the rider that finally delivered the letter was in most cases a different person than the one who had initially received the correspondence from the sender. This is based on Xenophon's description of the Persian system in *Cyr.* 8.6.17-18.

118. Suetonius, *Aug.* 49.3. Emphasis added.

119. Cicero, *Att.* 1.13: 'Since your departure, there have been some events worthy of recording in writing to you, but they must not run the risk of the letter being lost, or opened, or intercepted'.

hands, care was taken not only to ensure that important correspondence was sent with only the most trusted carriers, but that especially sensitive information was sometimes sent orally with the letter carrier to supplement and clarify the written message.¹²⁰ Also, on a few occasions, when Cicero received incoming mail, it is even evident that he was somewhat perturbed that a particular letter carrier was not able to provide additional oral commentary on a letter and so wrote back to the sender with some dismay, chiding him for the brevity of the letter and for failing to provide the letter carrier with additional information.¹²¹ Therefore, a short letter might sometimes indicate that it was expected that the letter carrier would provide additional details and commentary to flesh out the message in its entirety.¹²²

Turning to the papyri there are a number of instances from both the Roman and Byzantine periods where it is either explicitly stated by the sender of the letter that the letter carrier will convey accompanying information pertinent to the letter or where it is clear from a return letter

120. Cicero, *Fam.* 11.20.4; 11.26.5. On unreliable letter carriers: *Fam.* 1.7.1: ‘If [letter sending] happens less frequently than you might expect, here is the cause: that my letters are not of such a type that I care to entrust them to others wantonly. As often as I can find trustworthy men to whom I can safely give letters, I shall do so’; *Att.* 1.13: ‘In these letters, I am urgently exhorted by you to write back, but what makes me rather slow is that I cannot find a faithful message-bearer. How few are they who are able to carry a rather weighty (*graviorem*) letter without lightening it by reading?’; *Att.* 1.18: ‘I shall hide all the stings and troubles of my private worries, nor shall I entrust them to this epistle and an unknown messenger’.

121. Cicero, *Fam.* 4.2.1. See also *Fam.* 3.5; 10.7; 1.8.1; 3.1.1. Josephus was able to find out more oral information from the letter carrier once he got him drunk (*Life* 217, 226-227, 229). From the letters of Seneca it seems that it was expected that letter carriers would either provide additional oral information or would be expected to answer questions about the content of the letter or about the status of the sender: ‘I received your letter many months after you had posted it; accordingly, I thought it useless to ask the letter carrier what you were busied with. He must have a particularly good memory if he can remember that!’ (*Ep.* 50.1).

122. On this point Chan-Hie Kim’s work on papyrus invitations is worth mentioning since he argues that due to the laconic nature of most invitations it is to be assumed that there was some accompanying oral component delivered alongside the invitation by the bearer of the invitation. See Chan-Hie Kim, ‘The Papyrus Invitation’, *JBL* 94 (1975), pp. 391-402. The general brevity of the extant letters of recommendation in late antiquity may perhaps be partially explained by the fact that the letter carrier was also the recommended party who would have to convince the recipient of the letter that the recommendation was justified.

that oral information had been received alongside the reception of an earlier letter.¹²³ Likewise, the use of greeting formulae at the end of a letter could suggest the oral extension of the letter by the letter carrier.¹²⁴ However, where one finds considerable evidence that letter carriers often conveyed oral material alongside a written letter is the Christian letters. In fact, the oral component of letter carrying can already be observed in a few places in the New Testament. In Acts 15 when it reports that the ‘Jerusalem Council’ issued a letter to the churches of Antioch, Syria and Cilicia, not only did the letter state the decision of the gathering but it also explicitly stated that the letter carriers, specifically Judas and Silas, would ‘themselves tell you the same things by word of mouth’ (αὐτοὺς διὰ λόγου ἀπαγγέλλοντας τὰ αὐτά [Acts 15.27b]). After the letter is delivered in Antioch, Acts goes on to report that when the letter was delivered Judas and Silas ‘said much to encourage and strengthen the believers’ (διὰ λόγου πολλοῦ παρεκάλεσαν τοὺς ἀδελφούς καὶ ἐπεστήριξαν [Acts 15.32b]). The way the whole episode is presented presupposes that the letter carriers would extend the letter with oral instruction that is integral to the message being conveyed. Turning to some of Paul’s letters one can see a similar phenomenon. In Ephesians and Colossians specifically, Paul informs the recipients that the letter carrier is conveying some of the message orally:

²¹Ἴνα δὲ εἰδῆτε καὶ ὑμεῖς τὰ κατ’ ἐμέ, τί πράσσω, πάντα γνωρίσει ὑμῖν Τύχικος ὁ ἀγαπητὸς ἀδελφὸς καὶ πιστὸς διάκονος ἐν κυρίῳ, ²² ὃν ἔπεμψα πρὸς ὑμᾶς εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο, ἵνα γνῶτε τὰ περὶ ἡμῶν καὶ παρακαλέσῃ τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν. Eph.

123. BGU II 596.5-11 (10 May 84 CE); here the letter carrier will relate additional information about a request concerning a purchase for a festival; P.Mert. II 80.7-10 (II CE): ὁ ἀναδούς μοι τὸ ἐπιστόλιον ἀνέφαινε λέγων ὡς ἐκπλέκει Ἄρειος δούς τὰ κολλήματα τῷ βασιλικῷ (‘The one giving me the letter declared saying that Arius unfolded the roll and gave it to the royal scribe’); P.Oxy. XLVI 3313.12, 25-27 (II CE): the letter carrier Sarapas will provide additional information regarding the purchase of some roses upon delivery of the letter; P.Oxy. XLIX 3505 (II CE ?): the letter carrier Didymus, who is repeatedly mentioned in the letter, will provide additional details about some purchases and business transactions; P.Oxy. LVI 3865.27-33 (Late V CE): ἀκούω γὰρ παρὰ τοῦ κομίζοντός σου τὸ γράμμα ὅτι ἀκμὴν εἰς τοὺς ε.οὺς τῆς Ἀκούτου σχολάζεις καὶ ἐπ’ οὐδενὶ ὠμίλησεν ἐν Πακέρκῃ εἰς ἀπαίτησιν (‘I hear from the one bringing your letter that you are still spending your time on the...of Akutu and that on no account did he speak in Pacere on the subject of the exaction’).

124. P.Brem. 52.2-5 (113–20 CE): [ἀ]σπάζ[ομ]αί σε [δ]ιὰ X[. . . .]οῦ τοῦ ἀναδιδ[ό]ν[το] σοι τ[ὸ ἐπιστ]όλιον (‘I greet you through C s the one who carries up to you the letter’).

6.21-22.

So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus will tell you everything. He is a dear brother and a faithful minister in the Lord. I am sending him to you for this very purpose, to let you know how we are, and to encourage your hearts.

⁷ Τὰ κατ' ἐμὲ πάντα γνωρίσει ὑμῖν Τύχικος ὁ ἀγαπητὸς ἀδελφὸς καὶ πιστὸς διάκονος καὶ σύνδουλος ἐν κυρίῳ, ⁸ ὃν ἔπεμψα πρὸς ὑμᾶς εἰς αὐτὸ τοῦτο, ἵνα γνῶτε τὰ περὶ ἡμῶν καὶ παρακαλέσῃ τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν, ⁹ σὺν Ὀνησίμῳ τῷ πιστῷ καὶ ἀγαπητῷ ἀδελφῷ, ὅς ἐστιν ἐξ ὑμῶν· πάντα ὑμῖν γνωρίσουσιν τὰ ὧδε. Col. 4.7-9.

Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts; he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here.

Working through Christian letters diachronically after the New Testament one can often see that the message in its entirety was not confined solely to the letter but was also carried orally by the letter carrier. On a number of occasions Ignatius of Antioch explicitly states that the letter carrier is bringing more word and the implication at the end of Polycarp's letter to the Philippians, wherein he commends the letter carrier Crescens, similarly presupposes the same context.¹²⁵ To avoid being overly pedantic, all that can be said here is that if one reads closely the Christian letters from the third and fourth centuries one can frequently glimpse letter carriers conveying an oral message alongside a written one.¹²⁶ Nevertheless, the correspondence of Synesius, the famous fourth-century bishop of Cyrene, is worth citing in a few places because it so aptly illustrates this point. Like certain other popular bishops in late antiquity, Synesius primarily employed deacons and other lesser clergy to transmit his correspondence. Since they were familiar with Synesius's ministry and by Synesius's own account were very trustworthy, it seems that often the primary message was sent orally and that the letter was sometimes sent to supplement and clarify the oral message delivered by the letter carrier. In one very brief letter, addressed to a 'brother',

125. Ignatius, *Phld.* 10; *Smyrn.* 11.2-3; *Eph.* 2.1-2; Polycarp, *Phil.* 13-14.

126. Cyprian, *Ep.* 44.1.2; 44.2.2; 45.1; 47.1.2; Paulinus of Nola, *Ep.* 5.14; 11.4; 20.3; Sidonius, *Ep.* 9.3.2.

Synesius informs him that the heart of the message is not being conveyed by the ‘lifeless letter’ (i.e. the written letter) but rather by the letter carrier who is identified as the ‘living letter’.¹²⁷ In another letter Synesius tells the recipient, a man named Trypho, that the letter carrier ‘will tell you all about this in conversation much better than I could do in writing’.¹²⁸ Finally, in one other letter Synesius states at the outset that the message is really being conveyed orally by the letter carrier: ‘A lengthy letter shows that it is put into the hand of a letter carrier who is not an intimate of the writer; but the excellent Acacius [the bearer of this letter] knows my whole mind. He will tell you even more than I have directed him because he is fond of you.’¹²⁹ While many other examples could be given, these should suffice to illustrate this point.¹³⁰

To conclude this section a couple of observations about the relationship between letter carriers and the conveyance of accompanying oral information should be made. First, in cases where the letter carrier is given part of the message orally or is provided with oral supplements to the written letter, the impression one gets is that the particular letter carrier was thought to be a trusted friend or an associate/agent who could accurately and faithfully relay the oral component of the message. In such cases it even seems that at times the letter carrier acted not just as an intermediary between the sender and recipient but that he was invested with authority to carry on and extend the dialogue and in a way vicariously stood in for the sender who could not be physically present. The second

127. Synesius, *Ep.* 85: Δέδεξο μετὰ τῆς ἐμφύχου καὶ τὴν ἄψυχον ἐπιστολὴν, μετὰ τοῦ θαυμαστοῦ Γερωντίου ταῦτα τὰ γράμματα.

128. Synesius, *Ep.* 119: οὐκ ἐμοῦ γράφοντος ἀναγινώσκειν ἀλλ’ αὐτοῦ λέγοντος ἀκούειν σε δεῖ. Cf. *Ep.* 69 and 117.

129. Synesius, *Ep.* 53: Μῆκος ἐπιστολῆς ἀνοικειότητα κατηγορεῖ τοῦ διακομίζοντος. ἀλλ’ ὁ θαυμαστὸς Ἀκάκιος οἶδε μὲν ὅσα καὶ γὰρ, ἐρεῖ δὲ καὶ ὧν οἶδε πλείονα τῶν τε σὸς ἐραστῆς εἶναι... Cf. *Ep.* 85 where Synesius expresses similar sentiments.

130. The evidence derived from the letters of Symmachus illustrates the same point with letter carriers. In a number of places the letters of Symmachus, the fourth-century Roman aristocrat, demonstrate that the letter carrier was given considerable oral supplements that were to be delivered in private conversation at the same time that the letter was given to the addressee (*Ep.* 1.11; 1.46; 1.87.2; 1.90.1; 2.11; 2.21; 3.30; 4.44; 6.13; 8.31; 9.37). In one letter, which discusses a grain shortage, Symmachus specifically tells the addressee that the letter carrier has been given all the details about the shortage and will pass them along when the letter is delivered so that the recipient ‘will learn more by listening than by reading’ (*plura igitur auribus quam lectione noscetis*).

point, which relates in some ways to the first, is that one gets the impression that at times the oral message delivered by the letter carrier was preferred to the written one and that in some ways carried more authority because it was transmitted *viva voca* through an intermediary who could extend the communication, explain and clarify it, and effectively represented the source of the message (i.e. the sender).¹³¹

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is hoped that this foray into the respective roles scribes and letter carriers played in the production, transmission and delivery of a letter has been insightful and elucidating. In addition to reminding us how grateful we ought to be for the modern technologies of email and texting, which enable written correspondence to be easily composed, copied and transmitted almost anywhere in the world at the push of a button, this study should also remind us that the whole epistolary process in late antiquity was often a group project where more than one person directly influenced the message being sent. As this examination has sought to demonstrate, in the actual writing of a letter a scribe could take on a wide variety of roles that ranged from a mere recorder or transcriber, where they simply wrote exactly what the sender dictated, to the composer of the entire letter where they were given considerable literary license over the production of the letter. Turning to letter carriers and the roles they could play in the transmission and delivery of a letter it becomes evident that, as with scribes, they worked in different capacities. At one extreme is the letter carrier who solely hands over the correspondence to the addressee, much like a modern postal worker, and plays virtually no role besides basic delivery. On the other hand, it is sometimes evident that the letter did not represent the sum total of the message and that the letter carrier was entrusted with delivering part of the message orally or serving as an authority on the message who could answer questions, clarify epistolary ambiguities and details and generally extend the message. Keeping in mind the different capacities scribes and letter carriers played, one can readily see how the message between sender and receiver was often

131. Here the famous statement of Papias of Hierapolis about his preference for learning the stories of the apostles via a ‘living voice’ (ζώσης φωνῆς), or someone who had actually seen and heard them, instead of ‘from books’ (ἐκ τῶν βιβλίων), has some contextual relevance (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.40).

facilitated via multiple mediums that not only influenced and shaped the way the message was received, but also the way the message was initially conceived.

The observations derived from the foregoing examination of the different roles scribes and letter carriers played in the epistolary process are readily applicable to the study of New Testament letters. The letters contained in the New Testament arose out of the larger epistolary culture of late antiquity and in most cases should not be viewed as exceptional but largely as products of this culture that adhere to and are situated in the practices and conventions of the time. As a result, New Testament letters can often be elucidated by considering wider epistolary norms.

It is evident from certain letters of Paul that he employed scribes (1 Cor. 16.21; Gal. 6.11; Col. 4.18a; 2 Thess. 3.17; Phlm. 19a), one of which is even mentioned by name (Rom. 16.22), and while there are no other explicit references to the use of scribes in any of his other letters this does not preclude the possibility that they may have been used. As noted previously, scribes rarely made themselves known, especially in letters, and few senders of letters felt inclined to inform the addressee that a scribe had been employed because it was such a commonplace occurrence. As the papyrological evidence demonstrates, most often the only way to detect the presence of a scribe is through distinct changes in handwriting within a single letter or across multiple letters sent from the same individual, but to make this observation requires recourse to the original letter. Therefore, many letters from antiquity that have come down to us via later copies may have originally been written by scribes even if there is no explicit evidence in the extant copies. Moving beyond Paul's letters to other New Testament letters, while it is conceivable, and even probable, that scribes were used, no letter betrays any explicit evidence. Turning for a moment to the role a scribe could have played in the production of a given New Testament letter, a number of possibilities exist, which range from a simple recorder and writer all the way to an active participant who influenced and shaped the final product. Granted that there is no direct evidence for how Paul may have employed his scribes and so one can only speculate, it is not inconceivable that they could have played a significant role based on wider epistolary precedent. In fact, how Paul employed his scribes has direct implications for his letters in terms of their grammar, vocabulary and style.

Moving from letter composition to letter delivery, there are multiple references to letter carriers in the New Testament: Judas and Silas, along with Paul and Barnabas, convey the apostles' letter in Acts 15.23-29 to the

church in Antioch; Tychicus, a close confidant of Paul, delivers Ephesians and Colossians (Eph. 6.21; Col. 4.79); and Silvanus is identified as the letter carrier in 1 Pet. 5.12. Additionally, it seems probable that Phoebe, a servant of the church of Cenchreae (Rom. 16.1), and Onesimus (Phlm. 12), served as the letter carriers of Romans and Philemon respectively, since they were being recommended. Perhaps the most important observation about letter carriers that has implications for New Testament letters has to do with their role as commentators and extenders of the written message. As this examination has shown, letter carriers did not just deliver the written letter but in some cases were entrusted with important oral information that either supplemented or clarified the letter or otherwise extended the written correspondence; therefore, the letter was only one part of the larger conversation and required accompanying oral information to be properly contextualized and understood. Since we can see this very phenomenon in the New Testament, as Tychicus was entrusted with additional oral information for the Ephesians and Colossians (Eph. 6.21-22; Col. 4.7-8) and the bearers of the apostles' letter in Acts 15.23-29 were similarly entrusted with supplemental oral instruction and exhortation, some New Testament letters should be regarded as but one component of a larger message. In such cases it may be that the intended message, in its entirety, cannot be fully grasped or understood apart from the medium through which it was sent.