

More Letters

by S.B.P. Haag

In the last two *Labyrinths*, we looked at several Roman literary letter-writers, Cicero and Younger Pliny in particular. In this and the next issue, I'll introduce you first to some otherwise entirely unknown writers of non-literary letters, and then to some letters attributed to famous Greeks and Romans and so preserved for posterity (or forged!).

As Shelton says in the Preface to *As the Romans Did*, an interesting and informative sourcebook for Roman social history (Oxford University Press, 1988), "our data about the Roman world are paradoxically both incomplete and yet overwhelming. The documents which survive are myriad in number ..., yet their survival was largely a matter of chance ... Most of the documents were never intended by their writers to be informative to subsequent generations." But from all these bits of written evidence, surviving on fragments of papyrus or potsherds or wax tablets, on stone or wood or clay, historians have of course been able to piece together a portrait of two thousand years ago and more which is again, in Shelton's words, "both incomplete and yet overwhelming" in its minuteness of detail.

The vast majority of non-literary, personal letters have survived on papyrus found in what was once Roman Egypt, and we can choose several of these to give some idea of the "human interest" they hold. (Probably the easiest source for you to consult on typical papyri is the book titled *Select Papyri*, eds. A.S. Hunt and C.C. Edgar, in the Loeb Classical Library series. Naphtali Lewis' *Life in Egypt Under Roman Rule* (Oxford University Press, 1983) also contains an interesting discussion of papyri by an expert in the field, who points out that Egypt alone has preserved "vast resources of information written on papyrus ... a 'view from below' [that] is a treat that no other part of the Greek or Roman world can offer us.")

The kinds of letters which have survived vary considerably, of course. Some are invitations, some official requests (or personal requests to officials), some purely personal (often incomprehensibly full of cryptic references). While it is frustrating not to know more about the people involved, these puzzling and partial glimpses of ordinary lives immeasurably 'far away and long ago' make compelling reading: (numbers refer to the Loeb edition, Vol. I)

108. *Horus greets most honoured Apion. Lampon the mousecatcher - I gave him a retainer of 8 drachmas for you so he will catch mice in Toka. Please will you send me the money? I also lent Dionysius, the overseer at Nemeræ, 8 drachmas and he has not returned them (just so that you know). Fare well! Pauni 24 (June 18th).*

Hunt and Edgar comment that it was usual to catch mice in the vineyards as the grapes began to ripen. It would be interesting to know how Lampon went about his job.

154. *Sarapammon to Piperas. I sent a letter to you by the baker, and maybe you know what I wrote you. And if you continue to be so stupid, I wish you luck! But if you are regretting it, only you know. Just remember that you owe rents and revenues for seven years, so if you don't send some payments you know your own risk.*

144. *From Alypius. I wrote to you earlier as well, asking you to provide details about the storage and shipment of the grain, but you did not take the trouble to do so, perhaps because you were aware you were in the wrong. Do it now, to avoid being forced to do it in a soldier's company! I bid you fare well, sir! To Heroninus, Thraso's steward. Year 12, Thoth 26 (AD 264, Sept. 22).*

This same Heroninus seems to have been a less than efficient agent, as eight years earlier he had received another letter of complaint:

141. From Appianus. If someone sends off even the smallest shipment, he ought to send papers with it and provide details of what has been sent and with whom. What you despatched was not enough to take a man and donkey off the job, for four baskets of overripe figs! It was clear enough too, from the figs' poor condition, dried up and withered, that the farm has been neglected. However, we shall have a reckoning together about these problems at some point. My agent at Euhemeria sent another fellow with a few things, and you both could send them with one man if you each kept in touch with one another. To Heroninus the steward.

Though many of the letters mention money in one way or another, equally many seem to be simply communications between friends and family, expressing concern and affection and asking after others' health and well being. Often, it's true, "father" or "mother", "brother" or "sister" are used only, as we might say, as "courtesy" titles for close friends. In other letters it's clear that families ties are involved:

138. To Stephanos from Hephaestion. When you receive my son Theon's letter, put everything aside at once and come home to me because of what has happened to me. But if you make light of the problem, as the gods have not been easy on me, so I shall not be easy on them either! Fare well!

It's hard not to wonder what had happened to Stephanos, and who Hephaestion was, and how he responded.

105. Hilarion sends very many good wishes to his sister [probably his wife] Alis, and to my lady Berous and Apollinarion. I want you to know we are still in Alexandria. Don't worry if the others do actually go home, I'll stay on here. I ask and urge you, look after the little one and the moment we get our pay I'll send it up to you. If you are by any chance pregnant, if you have a boy, that's fine, if it's a girl, expose it. You sent me a message with Aphrodisias that I wasn't to forget you. How could I forget you? So I ask you not to worry. Caesar's Year 29, Pauni 23 (1 BC June 17th).

Hilarion's letter has often been quoted because of his callous instructions to his wife to keep a baby boy but dispose of a girl. Even if poverty and too many inevitable pregnancies made exposure of infants common enough in the ancient world, the blunt distinction on the basis of sex shocks even if it does not surprise the modern reader. And otherwise, Hilarion sounds like quite a pleasant fellow ...

115. Taus sends very many good wishes to her lord Apollonius. Before anything else, master, I greet you and I offer prayers for your good health all the time. I was really worried, my lord, when I heard that you had been sick, but am grateful to all of the gods that they are keeping you safe from harm. I beg you, my lord, if it seems good to you, to send for us; if you don't, we feel as good as dead because we don't see you every day. I wish we'd been able to fly and come to you and offer you our affection and respect, for we are distressed at not seeing you. So don't be angry with us, but send for us! Fare well, my lord. To Apollonius the strategos. Epeiph 24 (July 19).

A letter sent by a dutiful son to his mother shows that he had joined the Roman navy at Misenum as a recruit. It is interesting to note that he wrote from Rome, where he had been given the details of the posting:

111. Apollinarius sends many good wishes to his lady mother Taesis. Before everything, I pray for your good health. I am well myself and am making my prayers to the gods here on your behalf. I want you to know, mother, that I arrived safe and well in Rome on Pachon 25th (May 20th) and was posted to Misenum, though I didn't yet know to what century as I hadn't gone to Misenum when I wrote you this letter. So, mother, please look after yourself, don't be worried about me at all for I've come to a fine place. It will be good of you to write a letter to me about your own welfare and that of my brothers and all your folks. If I can find a man [to take the letter] I'll be writing to you - I shall certainly not be behindhand in writing to you. I send many greetings to my brothers, to Apollinarius and his children and Karalas and his children. I also send my greetings to Ptolemaeus, and to Ptolemais and her children and Heraclous and her children. I send my greetings to everyone who loves you, each one by name. I pray you fare well. Deliver to Karanis, to Taesis from her son Apollinarius of Misenum.

A second letter from a recruit at Misenum, this time a man writing to his father, adds to our knowledge of Roman recruiting practices. Recruits were granted money for travelling to sign up, expected to advance more quickly if they were educated, were given Roman names on enrolling, and were (in the navy) in a "century" or company named after their ship. Perhaps Apion and Apollinarius had written their letters after consultation on how to word them ...

112. Apion sends very many good wishes to his lord father Epimachus. Before everything I pray for your good health, and that you are healthy and prosperous through everything, along with my sister and her daughter and my brother. I am thankful to the Lord Serapis that when I was in danger

*at sea he saved me right away. When I reached Misenum, I received three gold pieces as travel-money from Caesar. And I'm fine. So I ask you, my lord father, write me a letter, first about your own welfare, secondly about my brother and sister's, and thirdly, so that I can offer my affectionate respect to your hand [i.e. his father's writing] because you taught me well, and consequently, I hope to be quickly promoted, the gods willing. Give many good wishes to Capiton and my brother and sister and to Serenilla and my friends. I sent you, with Euclemon, a portrait of myself. My name is Antonius Maximus. I pray you fare well. My century is the Athenonica. To Philadelphia, to Epimachus from his son Apion. Deliver to Julianus the vice-secretary in the first cohort of the Apameni [at Alexandria], from Apion, for forwarding to Epimachus his father.*

From these thousands upon thousands of papyri, in one sense it is difficult to choose, but in another, it's easy, because all are equally intriguing as minute slices of lives so long forgotten.