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# Who Needed Writing in Graeco-Roman Egypt, and for What Purpose? Document Layout as a Tool of Literacy

**Abstract:** Numerous aspects in the life of the inhabitants of Graeco-Roman Egypt were determined by actions that required writing, even in the countryside. The level of literacy, however, was very uneven among individuals and officials. The layout of documents was devised in such a way that it helped those with a moderate level of literacy to follow intricate administrative procedures. The specific case of blank windows is used to illustrate this phenomenon.

**Zusammenfassung:** Die Schrift übte einen gewissen Einfluss in vielen Angelegenheiten im Leben der Einwohner im griechisch-römischen Ägypten aus, sogar auf dem Lande. Die Tätigkeit des Schreibens und Lesens war allerdings unter einzelnen Personen und Beamten ungleich verbreitet. Der Umbruch der Urkunden half Leuten mit einer beschränkten Fähigkeit des Lesens, damit sie komplexe Verfahren verfolgen konnten. Der bestimmte Fall von leeren Fenstern wird verwendet, um dieses Phänomen zu veranschaulichen.

## Introduction

On October 21<sup>st</sup>, 137 CE, two peasants from the village of Soknopaiou Nesos, Stotoetis and Panouphis, submit a complaint to the strategos of the Arsinoite nome, district of Herakleides, in Middle Egypt: they are the victims of a fraud and have lost three hundred drachmas to a man called Horion. Horion came from the capital of the nome, and the two peasants apparently went there, made a payment, only to discover that Horion had disappeared with the money. The alleged transaction was for a purchase of wheat from Horion's father, but the said father was apparently not aware of the arrangement made by his son.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See P.Gen. I<sup>2</sup> 28 (= M. Chr. 109) < <http://www.ville-ge.ch/musinfo/imageZoom/?iip=bgeiip/papyrus/pgen4-ri.tif> > Trismegistos # 11223. For a similar case elsewhere in the same area, see P.Grenf. II 61 (Psenyris [Arsinoite nome], 197/198 CE), where a woman declares that she has been cheated of 800 Dr. by a wine merchant. On money theft, see DREXHAGE1988, 986–991. Many papyri quoted in this paper can be viewed online; when a digital image is available, it is usually recorded on <[www.papyri.info](http://www.papyri.info)>. When appropriate, reference is also given to a stable Trismegistos number; see <[www.trismegistos.org](http://www.trismegistos.org)>.

A look at an image of the papyrus shows that the petition submitted by Stotoetis and Panouphis was written by a trained professional: the elegant writing, the neat layout and the spelling all suggest a level of competence far above that of an Egyptian peasant from Soknopaiou Nesos. Nonetheless, Stotoetis and Panouphis found a way of filing a complaint, and we can assume that this was no hopeless endeavour, or else they would not have wasted time and money into hiring a professional scribe. We find ourselves in a complex network of people who write, are written about, also people who can read and others who need the help of others to do so.

To this should be added that we possess a second copy of this petition, with almost the same wording.<sup>2</sup> The most salient difference lies in the fact that one of the two plaintiffs adds that Horion also stole a box containing a girdle.<sup>3</sup> The two copies are not by the same hand, but the second document too was produced by a skilled scribe with a trained hand. The size of the papyrus sheet is comparable to the other copy, which suggests that the two sheets were cut off from a roll of standard size in use in a professional scribal office.<sup>4</sup> Since these papyri were found in Soknopaiou Nesos, they must have been copies kept by the plaintiffs – and not stored in a nome archive in the capital.

The issue of literacy in Graeco-Roman Egypt has already been subjected to intense scrutiny. Here I intend to provide a brief survey of the process of writing in Egypt at the time of the Roman Empire, with the aim of better understanding what the purpose of writing was in that part of the world. We shall then focus our attention on two kinds of documents that should illustrate more precisely how writing was put into use in a very concrete fashion. I shall adduce the example of the certificates of pagan sacrifice, putting emphasis on the layout of the documents; I shall also recall the case of business notes in the context of large agricultural estates.

## **Those who write, those who are written about, those who read: a brief survey**

The sands of Egypt have yielded a huge amount of written texts, dating mostly from the period between the arrival of Alexander the Great (332 BCE) and the Arab conquest (AD 642). More than sixty thousand documents have been published to this day, to which we should add a few thousand fragments of literary texts of various kinds.<sup>5</sup> Under the Ptolemies, and also during the Roman Empire, Greek was the main

<sup>2</sup> P.Brook. 3; Trismegistos # 10291.

<sup>3</sup> 13–15: βασιτ[ά]ξας μου και χειλωμα [έν] ᾧ νέ[α] | ζωνή.

<sup>4</sup> P.Gen. I<sup>2</sup> 28: H 21 × W 8.8 cm; P.Brook. 3: H 21 × W 10 cm. The height is exactly the same and the variation in width is slight.

<sup>5</sup> For an access to those texts, see <[www.trismegistos.org](http://www.trismegistos.org)>.

language of written communication in Egypt, but we also have many texts written in Egyptian (hieratic, demotic and coptic scripts), in Latin, as well as in a few other more exotic languages. Let us try to figure out who wrote, who was written about, and who read all this material.

The competence of writing is – by far – not shared equally by all individuals in Egypt.<sup>6</sup> It should be said from the outset that the available testimonies give us only a partial view of the oral and written skills of the population. Although the Greek language took precedence in written communication for almost a millenium, the resurgence of Egyptian in the coptic script during the Empire shows that it was probably the common language of oral communication in the countryside during that whole period. Stotoetis, the villager from Soknopaiou Nesos, presumably spoke Egyptian. When he filed his complaint against Horion, he resorted to the help of a scribe who could write in Greek to the strategos. It has also been suggested that the prevalence of Egyptian was even stronger among women, with the consequence that the home language in most households would have been Egyptian.<sup>7</sup>

Since we encounter people from all social backgrounds in our papyri, our written testimonies could impress on us the idea that we are dealing with a population where the skill of writing is shared almost universally, from villagers to the members of the social elite in the nome capitals. Such is probably not the case. There were various degrees of skill in writing, from those who could barely sign a contract to those who knew – with unequal degrees of success – how to craft complex sentences.<sup>8</sup> We should therefore make a distinction between those who actually wrote and those who needed writing but required help from someone else.

Nonetheless, writing was pervasive in the existence of virtually all inhabitants of Graeco-Roman Egypt. It could take many forms, the most current being letters and *memoranda* (ὑπομνήματα). Other formats can be found too. Based on the testimony of our papyri, we could establish a rough list of domains where writing was requested from individuals, in one form or another.<sup>9</sup>

Individuals who

- learned and taught writing as well as other school activities.
- needed to stay in touch with relatives, or who had to coordinate their business with partners at a distance.
- entered any kind of legal business, like contracts for sale, lease, hire, marriage etc.
- owned property, housing, land or cattle.

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<sup>6</sup> A summary of the topic can be found in HARRIS 1989, 276–281; see also 10, 116–146 and 201–203.

<sup>7</sup> See BAGNALL/CRIBIORE 2006, 21.

<sup>8</sup> See YOUTIE 1971.

<sup>9</sup> Here I shall leave aside the copying of books for literary purposes, which would be yet another vast domain to explore. On this point, see JOHNSON/PARKER 2009; on literacy in Greek and Roman literature, HOUSTON 2009.

- were liable to any kind of tax, starting with the poll tax.
- had any special civic status and needed to ascertain their rights.
- needed to submit a petition to an official.
- had to interact with the officials of the province, at all levels of the hierarchy.

Officials also wrote quite a lot. They had to:

- coordinate their various activities at all levels, which implies an abundant correspondence.
- submit reports.
- inform the population of orders received from above.
- keep detailed registers of people and property.
- assess taxes to be paid and submit accounts to the higher levels of administration.
- issue receipts for payments of taxes in kind and in cash.
- designate individuals for public service (liturgies).
- accomplish police duties.
- summon individuals to appear in court.
- keep minutes of meetings and court proceedings.

This very complex network of correspondence and recording becomes interesting when we observe the interaction between people through their writing. To come back to the case of Stotoetis and Panouphis, who filed their complaint to the strategos after having been cheated of three hundred drachmas, it would of course be desirable to follow the whole string of writing that this affair may have produced: once the strategos received the complaint, he will have written to a subordinate, asking him to check whether this accusation was credible and requesting that Horion be summoned in his presence. He must have informed Horion in writing about the nature of the complaint; Horion could thus oppose the accusation in writing, or challenge the summons. If he did not, the strategos would issue a decision and instruct subordinates to take proper action. Horion could be fined or sentenced to hard labour, which would produce even more red tape, from the issuance of the sentence to the order of liberation once the sentence was served.<sup>10</sup>

We cannot examine here all the links in this chain of possible paperwork. Let us nonetheless stop at one stage, namely the challenge to the summons, where we have a newly published parallel dating from the same period, but found in Oxyrhynchos.<sup>11</sup>

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**10** On this last element of the procedure, see SB XX 14631, 4–7 (= ChLA X 421 = CEL I 151; unknown provenance, 139 CE [under the Praefect C. Avidius Heliodorus]); SB I 4639, 3–6 (Alexandria, 209 CE [under the Praefect Ti. Claudius Subatianus Aquila]).

**11** P.Oxy. LXXXII 5316 (11 Nov. 133 – 26 May 137), published in 2016. The editor cites several cases where an accused person challenged not the summons, but the whole accusation, claiming that it had no grounding: P.Oxy. I 68 (131 CE), BGU VII 1574 (176/177 CE) and PSI Com. 14 (mid- to late second cent. CE).

Here, the accused person sends a *memorandum* to the strategos, summarizing the accusation and stating that the case is void. Unfortunately, the papyrus breaks off precisely at this point. Parallels to this document show that the accused person could react by hiring a person not only skilled in writing, but with a precise command of the legal phrasing.<sup>12</sup> Writing is therefore not a straightforward matter: as soon as things became serious, the ordinary Egyptian had to resort to the help of more qualified people, be it to file a complaint or to oppose an accusation. As for the strategos, he relied on a competent staff to settle such cases as efficiently as possible.

Writing is essential for the structure of the whole province of Egypt: its economy, administration and social networks cannot be envisaged without a very intricate web of correspondance and recording. The Romans did not innovate inasmuch as there was already a rather complex network of written communication in the Ptolemaic period; but they were masters at casting a wide net over the population, with as few loopholes as possible. Living in a paperless – or, as it were, papyrus-less – environment was almost impossible.

We should also remember that the exceptional documentation which we can use in the case of Roman Egypt was preserved due to special circumstances: a very ancient tradition of writing on papyrus in Egypt, a dry climate, and also settlements turned into ghost towns due to social changes and fiscal pressure. In other words, in spite of the long-held view that Egypt was a particular case within the Roman Empire, we have reached in the past decades a growing consensus that the elements of homogeneity are more significant than the differences. The culture of writing which we observe so clearly in Egypt was presumably present in most parts of the Empire; it so happens that, in other regions, the documents were not preserved in the same way. Our image of northern provinces, for instance, is fashioned for the most part after inscriptions, the purpose of which was very different from texts written on papyrus with a short to medium preservation expectancy.

## A focus on the layout of some papyri

After this admittedly broad overview of the situation, let us focus on a specific aspect of the layout of these documents. My starting hypothesis is that writing and reading belong to a dynamic process, and that a skilled writer will be able to produce a standard layout that does not only allow for reading, but that guides the reader in the actions that are expected from him. In an administrative context, a well-designed layout should accompany the process that is under way. We take this for granted in our age of computing and design; but would this also be the case in Roman Egypt? By

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<sup>12</sup> See e. g., among texts quoted in the preceding note, P.Oxy. I 68, where the intricate syntax betrays the presence of a person with legal training.

testing this hypothesis against two specific cases, I intend to show that the training of scribes in Roman Egypt went well beyond the mere process of writing: they knew how to create a layout that constituted an essential part of a given procedure.

In both cases, the papyri we shall examine were not produced by scribes working for the administration of the province: in the first case, we shall be dealing with documents copied by people working in private offices, who provided service for any individual requiring help in the preparation of an application to be submitted to the authorities; the second case pertains to messages produced by scribes in the service of an agricultural estate, in other words a private business with a well-oiled organization and staff.

The specific element which I would like to examine in the layout of these documents is made of ‘windows’: by windows, I mean spaces left purposely blank for someone else to fill in at a definite stage of the procedure. They are to be found everywhere in our modern administrative forms; in Greek papyri from Egypt, they are less prevalent, but some definite categories of documents display such windows in a systematic way. I intend to show that these windows constituted an essential element in some given procedures.

## Windows in certificates

The first case I shall adduce is that of the well-known certificates of pagan sacrifice.<sup>13</sup> Those certificates were produced during the so-called ‘persecution of Decius’ in the summer of AD 250. Following an edict from the emperor, every person in the Empire was required to perform several acts:

- declare that he/she had always performed sacrifices and libations for the gods;
- declare that he/she had repeated this act before a control commission;
- declare that he/she had actually ingested a share of the sacrifice;
- obtain from the control commission a certificate which ascertained that the act had been performed.

Our sources on this peculiar procedure are both literary (Christian apologetic writings) and documentary, the latter consisting of a group of 47 such certificates, in a diverse state of preservation. Of the 47, 35 (perhaps up to 39) were found together in the village of Theadelphia in the Fayum. Without going into much detail, it is worth recalling a few useful points about this small archive from Theadelphia.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> On the certificates of pagan sacrifice, see esp. KNIPFING 1923; RIVES 1999; SCHUBERT 2016.

<sup>14</sup> A list of certificates for sacrifice is provided in SCHUBERT 2016, 192–194. To this should now be added a further example of a certificate from Theadelphia, which came out too late to be included in this list: see CLAYTOR 2015.

Since those documents were found together, they were presumably copies that had been assembled by the control commission, and not certificates in the hands of individuals. One can compare the format, phrasing and writing, from which it emerges that: a) most of the certificates were cut from standard-size rolls (21 cm in height, comparable to P.Gen. 1<sup>2</sup> 28 and P.Brook. 3, discussed above); b) the phrasing is very consistent, with small variations depending on the model used by the scribe, a model based on a master version at the level of the nome; c) the certificates were all produced by scribes of professional skill, albeit not always with the most elegant hand.

Those documents indicate that the inhabitants of the village, when they were forced to appear before the control commission for pagan sacrifice, first had to seek assistance from a scribe who prepared a certificate following a model which had been provided to him. The only major variation was the name of the applicant. One must insist on the word ‘applicant’, for the procedure was devised in such a way that every individual had to apply for certification: the authorities asked for nothing, they simply issued an order. It must have been hard to escape getting involved in the procedure, because it entailed the specific act of tasting the offering from the sacrifice.

The control commission was probably established next to the altar for sacrifice. Applicants showed up, perhaps swore an oath about past performance of sacrifice, repeated the action in the presence of the commission and handed in the pre-filled form for the commissioners to sign. This is where our windows become relevant.

All certificates from the Arsinoite nome (not only Theadelphia, but also a few from other places) display a layout where the scribe wrote the main text of the application, then inscribed a date at the bottom of the sheet, leaving a blank window between the two. The window served a double purpose. First, we can observe that a moderately trained hand states that the control commissioners have witnessed the sacrifice: Ἀυρήλιοι Σερήνος καὶ Ἑρμάς εἶδαμέ(ν) σε θυσιάσσοντα « We, the Aurelii Serenus and Hermas, have seen you perform the sacrifice. »<sup>15</sup> Second, the window allows room for the actual signature of one of the two commissioners, Hermas, written in a very clumsy hand. Hermas abbreviates his name to EPM, followed by another abbreviation, ΣΕΣΗΜ for σεσημείωμαι.

What does this tell us on the writers and their actions? The commissioners received help from an assistant who knew how to write, although he always wrote the same sentence on the certificates. Of the commissioners Serenus and Hermas, we have no clue indicating that Serenus could write at all; and Hermas, who was next to illiterate, could barely sketch a rough signature. In other words, the level of writing

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<sup>15</sup> See e.g. SB I 5943, 14–15 <<http://ww2.smb.museum/berlpap/index.php/00318>> Trismegistos # 14001; Theadelphia (Arsinoite nome), June 16, 250 CE. The scribe, using a standard model, did not adapt it to the fact that this certificate was issued for a woman named Aurelia Charis. He should have written θυσιάζουσαν instead of the masculine θυσιασσοντα (i.e. θυσιάζοντα). SB I 4440 is a duplicate of this document.

skill is – in this case – inversely proportional to the position in the administrative hierarchy. The commissioners, and also to a certain extent their assistant, need some guidance, which is provided by the window left blank by a trained scribe.

As mentioned before, the model was presumably devised at the nome level, by an official with some degree of competence in preparing such forms. It should be said at this point that certificates of sacrifice have been compared, for their content, with other declarations that displayed a close structure, namely census declarations and declarations of death. Census declarations were no more than a declaration and required no signature from an official, which explains why the model does not include a window. Declarations of death are more interesting for our purpose because they also display, in a somewhat different way, another sort of window.

In P.Petaus 7, we find a declaration of death.<sup>16</sup> It is addressed to the royal secretary (βασιλικὸς γραμματεὺς) of the nome. The certificate was produced by a scribe who must have been working, on behalf of the applicant, in an environment similar to that of the Theadelphia certificates of sacrifice: the size of the papyrus sheet is comparable, the skill of the hand too, and the wording offers many similarities.<sup>17</sup> In this case, however, the window left by the scribe consisted of a blank space at the bottom of the sheet of papyrus, separated from the main text by a horizontal stroke. Inside this window, a member of the royal secretary's staff, in a fast and cursive hand, wrote a subscription on behalf of his chief, giving instructions to the village secretary (κωμογραμματεὺς).

We know from other documents that this latter man's skill in writing was about the same as that of Hermas: he could barely sign a document, and left mistakes when doing so.<sup>18</sup> In the case of the declaration of death, however, his lack of skill does not show because he is only the recipient of the document. He is told to check whether the person declared as deceased is actually dead, and is held responsible for this control.

This is not the end of the story: for the staff member has placed, between the instructions and a date, yet another window, leaving some space for the royal secretary to sign. In other words, he has created a window within a window. This man, however, is either very busy or unskilled in writing, and the royal secretary's personal assistant signs in his name and stead: 'I, Hermophilos, royal secretary, have signed through Horos my assistant.' This signature is dreadfully difficult to decipher, not because the assistant did not know how to write, but because his hand was very fast and he used abbreviations.

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**16** <<http://www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/ifa/NRWakademie/papyrologie/PPetaus/bilder/PK358r.jpg>> Trismegistos # 8801; Ptolemaïs Hormou (Arsinoite nome), 185 CE.

**17** Size: H 21 × W 10.3 cm.

**18** This is the famous village secretary Petaus, 'le scribe qui ne savait pas écrire', in the words of Youtie 1966. See P.Petaus 121 <<http://www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/ifa/NRWakademie/papyrologie/PPetaus/bilder/PK328r.jpg>> Trismegistos # 12630; Ptolemaïs Hormou (Arsinoite nome), ca 182–187 CE.



Let us summarize the result achieved by looking at those windows. In a fashion similar to what we find nowadays in many administrative forms, scribes in Roman Egypt knew how to provide blank spaces that guided implicitly the hand of the person whose next action was required. Here, the succession of a window inside a window illustrates the process quite neatly: first, a staff member fills in the available window, but he leaves a smaller window within for the royal secretary's signature.

Other such boxes appear elsewhere in the Petaus archive. To name only two instances, one could consider P.Petaus 60, a list of proposed tax collectors, written in two columns, where the scribe left some space between the bottom of the text and the date so that Petaus himself could, in his clumsy hand, indicate that he had transmitted the document.<sup>19</sup> P.Petaus 56 has an elongated shape.<sup>20</sup> This document was prepared in advance by a scribe for Petaus, who had to designate someone to accompany a shipload of wheat. This time, Petaus' assistant left a rather sizeable window, which was actually far too large for the name that was inscribed at a second stage of the procedure.

This descriptive approach based on the observation of a few *specimina* leaves open a fundamental question: are these windows an illusion projected by a modern scholar used to filling forms in his daily life? Although I am offering here a plausible interpretation, we still need a proof that these windows were really what our ancient scribes had in mind. In order to achieve this, we must add one more detail to the concept of window: that of window-filling. Whereas the second scribe of P.Petaus 56 filled in his window and simply left the blank spaces – as it were – open to the wind, in another case the scribe took care to close the remaining space after he had used the window. In P.Gen. 1<sup>2</sup> 18, a declaration for the control of the civic status of a young man, we witness the work of an exquisitely elegant hand: the man knew his trade better than most of his colleagues.<sup>21</sup> This document was submitted to an official in the capital of the Arsinoite nome, who inserted – in a trained but much more cursive hand – his signature in the window. Once this was done, he added a string of crosses in the remaining space, effectively filling the window. He probably wanted to avoid any addition by an unwanted third hand. This case therefore indicates without a doubt the intention of the scribes when they designed their windows.

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**19** P.Petaus 60 <<http://www.uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/ifa/NRWakademie/papyrologie/PPetaus/bilder/PK312r.jpg>> Trismegistos # 8762; Syron Kome (Arsinoite nome), May 26, 185 CE.

**20** P.Petaus 56 <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/a/apis/x-3005>> Trismegistos # 8824 Ptolemaï's Hormou (Arsinoite nome), 186/187 CE.

**21** P.Gen. 1<sup>2</sup> 18 <<http://www.ville-ge.ch/musinfo/imageZoom/?iip=bgeiip/papyrus/pgen4-ri.ptif>> Trismegistos # 11216; Ptolemaï's Euergetis (Arsinoite nome), Jan. 25, 187 CE.

## An estate and its business notes

The windows we have been looking at are but one element in a more complex design by which skilled scribes could guide their readers and prompt them to take appropriate action. There were other aspects of the layout that could help the reader.

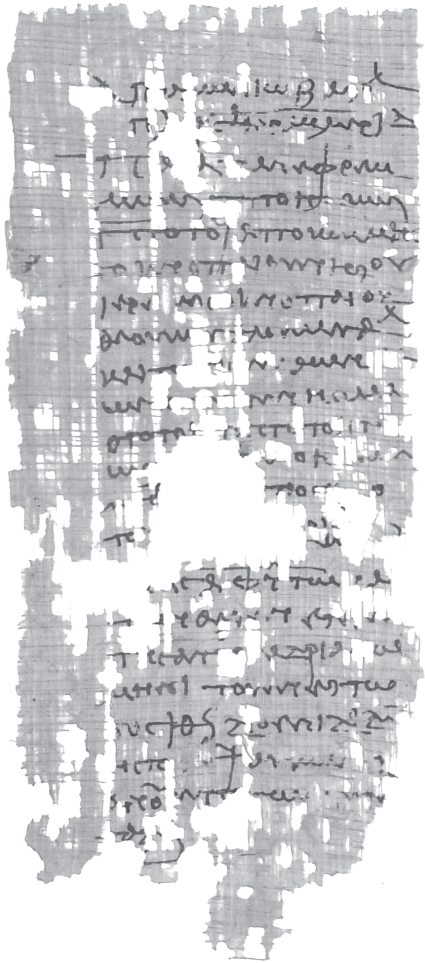
For instance, the heading was structured in a highly recognizable fashion. Most of the certificates and applications we have seen so far are *memoranda* – as opposed to letters – where the writer indicates first the name of the addressee (in the dative), then the name of the sender (with the preposition *παρά* followed by the name in the genitive). Between the first and the second element, the scribe regularly jumps to the next line, and the letter *π* of *παρά* becomes immediately recognizable. Often, the scribe sets off the line so as to make it even more conspicuous. Thus whoever receives the document knows at once that he is dealing with a *memorandum*, and where to look for the name of the sender.

This traditional layout undergoes a metamorphosis in the hands of scribes employed by the owners of large agricultural estates in the third century. We know of several such estates, the best documented being that of Appianos, who had hired a manager called Heroninos, hence the name of the large ‘Heroninos archive’.<sup>22</sup> In this huge lot of papyri, consisting of almost five hundred published texts (there are more awaiting publication), we find many business notes sent by various members of Appianos’ staff. Most of them are written by skilled scribes with a rather elegant hand; these men follow a standard format in their notes, allowing for great efficiency. We shall observe both similarities and changes in comparison with the certificates issued a century earlier, but the relation between the two seems unmistakable.

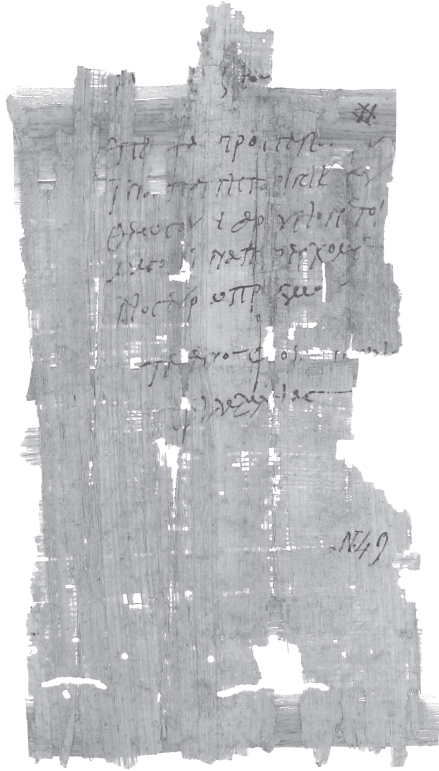
A sample of images taken from the papyrus collection at the Geneva Library, and comparable to the material mentioned above, will immediately show that the structure of the *memorandum* (ὑπόμνημα) has undergone a change:

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<sup>22</sup> See RATHBONE 1991.



**Fig. 1:** P.Gen. III 139 = Trismegistos # 11627  
 Notification of death  
 Soknopaiou Nesos, Nov. 27 – Dec. 26, 178 CE  
 < <http://www.ville-ge.ch/musinfo/image-Zoom/?iip=bgeiip/papyrus/pgen46-ri.ptif> >  
 © Bibliothèque de Genève / Viviane Siffert



**Fig. 2:** P.Gen. I<sup>2</sup> 72 = Trismegistos # 32143  
 Note about a wine delivery  
 Ptolemaï's Euergetis (?), 211 CE (?)  
 < <http://www.ville-ge.ch/musinfo/image-Zoom/?iip=bgeiip/papyrus/pnic49-vi.ptif> >  
 © Bibliothèque de Genève / Viviane Siffert

Ἀπολλωνίῳ βασιλ(ικῶ)  
 γρα(μματεῖ) Ἄρσι(νοῖτου) Ἡρακ(λείδου)  
 μερίδ(ος)  
 πα[ρ]ὰ Πανεφρέμ-  
 μεως Στροτήτεως  
 (τρίτου) Στοτοή(τεως) ἀπὸ κώμης  
 Σοκνοπαίου Νήσου  
 ἱερέως Σοκνοπαίου  
 θεοῦ μεγάλου μεγάλ(ου)  
 καὶ τῶ[ν] συ[ν]γνάων [θ]ε-  
 ῶν. ὁ συγγενής μου  
 Στοτοῆτις Στοτοήτε-  
 ως [του] Στ[ο]τή[ο]ήτεως  
 μητ(ρός) [ . . . ]τιος καὶ ὁ  
 τού[του] υἱός [ . . . ]ς  
 [ἱερ]εῖς α φυλ(ῆς) τῶν ἀψ-  
 τῶν θεῶν ἐτελεύ-  
 τησαν τ[ῶ] Ἄδριαγῶ  
 μηνὶ τοῦ ἐνεστῶ-  
 τος ἰθ (ἔτους). διὸ ἐπιδίδω(μι)  
 εἰς τὸ τ[α]γῆ(ναι) αὐτῶν τ[ὰ]  
 ὄνό(ματα) [ἐ]ν τῇ τῶν τετελ(ευτηκότων)  
 τάξει.

π(αρά) [Φ]ι[λ]ο[ξ]έ[ξ]γου.

ἔπε[μ]ψα πρὸς σέ πα[ρ]δ[ί]ο[υ],  
 ἵνα ἀπαιτῆ τὰ ρίνικ[ά]. εὐ-  
 θέως οὖγ ἀργ[ύ]ριον ἐτοί-  
 μασον ε[ἴ]να π[α]ρ[ε]ρχόμε-  
 νος εὖρω πρ[ὸ] ἐμοῦ.

(2<sup>nd</sup> hand) Τεσενούφ[ι] οἰγ[ο]π[ώ]λη  
 Φιλαδελφίας.

To Apollonios, royal scribe of the Arsinoite nome, district of Herakleides, from Panephremmis son of Stotoetis the third, grandson of Stotoetis, from the village of Soknopaiou Nesos, priest of Soknopaios, the very great god and of the gods that share his temple.  
 My relative Stotoetis son of Stotoetis, whose mother is (...), and his son (...), both priests of the first tribe of the same gods, died in the month of Hadrianos of the current 19th year. Therefore I submit (this declaration) in order that their names be placed in the register of deceased persons.

From Philoxenos.  
 I have sent you a slave who should collect the price for the wine. Therefore, hasten to prepare some silver so that I find it upon my arrival.  
 To Tesenouphis, wine merchant.

*memorandum (second cent. AD)*

*business note (third cent. AD)*

recipient (dat.)  
 from sender (παρά + gen.)  
 main text  
 greetings (εὐτύχει)

from sender (π' + gen.)  
 main text (short)  
 (optional) greetings (ἔρρωσθαί σε εὐχομαι),  
 sometimes with an additional remark  
 recipient (dat.)  
 (optional) date

date

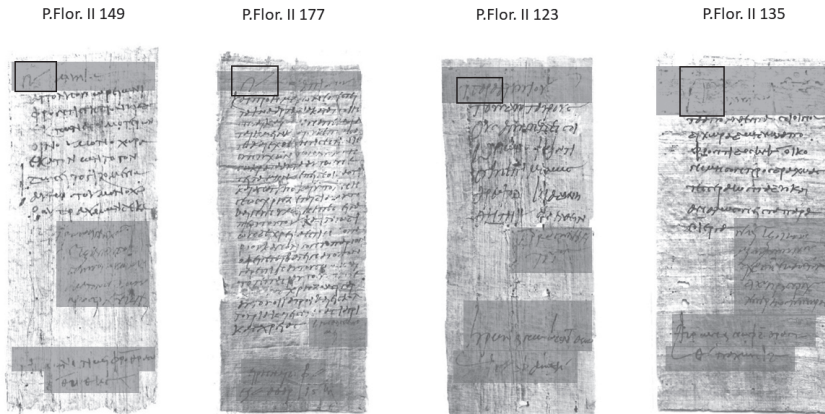
The main differences are:

- a) The recipient's name has moved from the top to the bottom of the document.
- b) Before the sender's name, the preposition *παρά* is replaced by the single letter *π*.
- c) The sender adds greetings in his own hand and sometimes inserts an additional remark.

There is also a fundamental difference in content and intent that may explain the evolution of the layout: whereas a *memorandum* is a note addressed by an individual to a representative of the authorities (strategos, secretary etc.), expressing due respect, a business notes is sent by a manager to a subordinate in a private estate, conveying an order. Let us now examine more closely the three differences listed above.

- a) Recipient's name: in the *memorandum*, putting the name of the recipient first in the heading constitutes a mark of respect, similar to putting the recipient's name first in the heading of a letter. In the business note, the hierarchic relationship is inverted; therefore, the sender take precedence. It is in fact not necessary to see the recipient's name at once during transmission: the business note is folded while it is being carried to the recipient, with an address written on the back side of the sheet, as in a letter.
- b) Sender's name preceded by letter *π'*: already in *memoranda*, the *π* of *παρά* was highly recognizeable and enabled the reader to immediately locate the sender. There were two shapes of *π*, either in three straight strokes or in a continuous arched shape. In business notes, the arched shape is used for the abbreviation, which works like a modern logo, i. e. a symbol.
- c) Greetings and additional remark: this point brings us back to the notion of windows in documents. The business notes, which emanate from managers, are not written by the managers: the task is left to skilled scribes. Those scribes, however, regularly leave a window between the main text and the name of the recipient so that the manager can first add his greetings, which would be the equivalent of our present-day signature. Whereas in *memoranda* the sender would end with a formal wish for well-being (*εὐτύχει* 'farewell', written by the same hand which copied the whole text), in business notes we find the traditional greetings found at the end of letters, not *memoranda* (*ἐρωσθαί σε εὖχομαι* 'I pray for your health'). Sometimes, the sender adds a personal remark in his own hand. On the notes, such remarks stand out because the writing is usually much less elegant than in the rest of the document.

In short, the evolution between the *memorandum* and the business note sent by managers in large estates seems to reflect a desire for enhanced efficiency in the process of communication. The use of a standard form means that both the actual sender and the recipient know at once where to find the relevant information. Once the scribe has prepared the note, the sender is presented a document with a blank window which



**Fig. 3:** Four business notes from the Heroninos Archive (outline). Images assembled from P.Flor. II (Comparetti 1911, no longer under copyright).

helps him to perform his own work: in the window, he can add his personal touch, first a greeting and perhaps also a personal comment.

The recipient's work is also made easier because the origin of the note is pinpointed by the symbol  $\pi'$ . The rest of the document is clearly structured so that the reader immediately knows where to find the relevant information. At the bottom, clearly separated from the rest, he can check the recipient's name as well as the date of expedition. Then, the actual order is placed in the center, together with any personal comment by the manager.

## Conclusion

The evolution from the *memorandum* to the business note paves the way for some more substantial changes in the format of documents, notably letters, in the fourth century, a topic which we cannot address here.<sup>23</sup> I can simply mention the fact that the windows, which are used in *memoranda* and business notes to guide subsequent writers in complex procedures where several individuals insert their own contribution to the document, remain blank spaces in letters of the fourth century: as Jean-Luc Fournet shows convincingly, their purpose is to separate different parts of a letter's structure.

We should nonetheless ask how those observations on the layout of documents impress on our perception of writers and readers. We have been aware for a long time of the fact that literacy is not a matter of black or white: there are varying degrees of competence in writing and reading. What we have seen here is that the relation-

<sup>23</sup> On this topic, see Fournet 2013.

ship between reader and writer is even more dynamic than one would suspect at first glance. A skilled scribe does not only provide a grammatically sound text with a legible writing: he can also adapt his document to an architecture that will guide his reader, who may himself constitute a link in a chain of writing and reading; for this reader will himself become a writer for the next reader. At the end of the chain, the ultimate reader thus receives a multi-layered document that should, if it is well made, allow more than a linear reading.

This takes us back to the initial story, that of Stotoetis and Panouphis. To the question ‘do they need writing?’, the answer is clearly ‘yes’: without the help of writing, they cannot file their complaint against the crook Horion, and there are many other areas of their existence where some kind of writing will be required. Since they are presumably unskilled in writing, they need the help of someone who will, at a cost, do the job in their stead. We have seen that these scribes do not satisfy themselves with copying the words uttered by an angry plaintiff: they know the standard phrasing; they can use models; and those models are sometimes structured so as to ensure that the layout will mirror the envisaged procedure. In this respect, symbols preceding the name of a sender, or windows indicating where a subsequent user should add his greetings or a remark, are helpful tools that improve the efficiency of the whole writing and reading process. When it comes to paperwork, we owe a huge debt to the Roman Empire.

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