

## LETTERS OF CONDOLENCE IN THE GREEK PAPYRI: SOME OBSERVATIONS<sup>1</sup>

A (short) study focussing on the subject "The letter of condolence in Graeco-Roman Egypt" is apparently still lacking in the papyrological literature<sup>2</sup>. Before presenting some observations on this topic I list the relevant documents known to me<sup>3</sup> (between ( ) are given the year of publication of the text in question, between [ ] the date of the document in question):

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a shortened version of a public lecture given in Amsterdam University within the framework of a series of such lectures organized by the 'Instituut voor Mediterrane Studien'. I am grateful to R.S. Bagnall for his kindly checking the English of my Manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> A full study of the subject of letters of condolence for an Oxford Ph. D. is currently made by Mr. J. Chapa (University of Navarra, Spain). For general modern literature on letters written on papyri see P.J. PARSONS, *The Papyrus Letter*, *Didactica Classica Gandensia* 20 (1980) 3-19 and J.L. WHITE, *Light from Ancient Letters* (Philadelphia 1986), pp. 188-220 (with extensive bibliography).

Modern general studies on the letter as (semi-) literary phenomenon have been written by H. KOSKENNIEMI, *Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des griechischen Briefes bis 400 n. Chr.* (Helsinki 1956; for letters of condolence see espec. p. 161) and K. TRAEDE, *Grundzüge griechisch-römischer Brieftopik* (München 1970). Slightly antiquated but still worth consulting is H. PETER, *Der Brief in der römischen Literatur* (Leipzig 1901). For a modern study of the condolence literature (cf., e.g., Seneca's *Consolationes*) see R. KASSEL, *Studien zur griechischen und römischen Kondolenzliteratur* (München 1958).

Ancient letters of condolence preserved through the literary tradition are:

- (1) Cicero, *Ad Fam.* IV (Sulpicius to Cicero, concerning the death of his daughter Tullia) and *Ad Fam.* V 16; (cf. also Cicero's *Brut.* 1.9).
- (2) Seneca, *Epist. Mor.* 63, 93, 99.

<sup>3</sup> See the introduction to *P.Oxy.* LV 3819 where, however, *P.Oxy.* 1874 and *SB XIV* 11646 are omitted. To be sure, # 7 in the above list (only fragmentarily preserved) is not certainly a letter of condolence, but the probability seems to argue in favour of this label. I omit *P. Wisc.* II 84 as I do not think that this is a letter of condolence. Also omitted is *P. Mich.* inv. 3724 (cf. *Tyche* 5 [1990] 179-180), as this is not a letter of condolence *per se*; the text, however, apparently refers to a letter of condolence sent earlier (J. Chapa [see n. 2] discussed this papyrus in a paper given at the occasion of the Copenhagen papyrological Congress, August 1992).

- (1) *P. Oxy.* I 115 (1898) = *W. Chr.* # 479 = J.L. WHITE, *op. cit.* # 116; photo in A. DEISSMANN, *Licht vom Osten*<sup>4</sup> 143-5 [II c. A.D.]
- (2) *P. Oxy.* XVI 1874 (1924) = *Sel. Pap.* I 168 [Byz.]
- (3) *P. Ross. Georg.* III 2 (1930; +photo) = G. TIBILETTI, *Le lettere private nei papiri greci del III e IV secolo d. C.*, # 1 (pp. 133-134) and J. HENGSTL, *Griechische Papyri* # 161; cf. C.H. ROBERTS in *Aus Antike und Orient. Festschr. Wilhelm Schubart* (Leipzig 1950), 112-115 [III c. A.D.]
- (4) *P. Princ.* II 102 (1936; +photo) = M. NALDINI, *Il Cristianesimo in Egitto*, # 34 [III/IV c. A.D.]
- (5) *PSI XII* 1248 (1943; photo in M. NORSIA, *Papiri greci delle collezioni italiane*, pl. XVIII) [235 A.D.]
- (6) *AJPh* 92 (1971) 661 # 3 = *SB XIV* 11646 [III c. A.D.]
- (7) (?) *P. Rainer. Cent.* 70 (1983; +photo) [III c. A.D.]
- (8) *CPR VI* 81 (1985; +photo) = *SB XVIII* 13946 [III/IV c. A.D.]
- (9) *P. Oxy.* LV 3819 (1988) [early IV c. A.D.]

It should be stressed beforehand that in 1936 the editor of *P. Princ.* II 102 was right in stating in the introduction to his text that among the papyri letters of condolence are rare<sup>4</sup>. Even today there seem to be among the hundreds of published papyrus letters fewer than 10 such letters.

Furthermore it should be stressed that apparently no such letters written in Latin<sup>5</sup> or Coptic<sup>6</sup> have been published yet and that almost all Greek letters of condolence date from the second century - fourth century A.D. (only # 2 above dates from later Byzantine Egypt; there are apparently no such letters from Ptolemaic Egypt known to date). These 'facts' may be just accidental.

All our letters come from Egypt, more specifically from Oxyrhynchus (## 1, 2, 5, 9), and Hermopolis (# 7), where these texts were found during 'controlled' excavations. # 8 was addressed to a person officiating in Alexandria, but the letter must have been found somewhere in the Egyptian *chora*<sup>7</sup>; maybe the addressee came from Hermopolis and the text was found there (cf. the name Hermodoros). ## 3 and 6 were perhaps written in and sent from Alexandria (for # 3 see Roberts's discussion, *loc. cit.*; for # 6 cf. the pro-

<sup>4</sup> In fact, he does not seem to have been aware of *P. Ross. Georg.* III 2, at least he does not refer to a publication mentioning it.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. P. CUGUSI, *Corpus Epistularum Graecarum*, Firenze 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. A. BIENDENKOPF-ZEHNER, *Untersuchungen zum koptischen Briefformular unter Berücksichtigung ägyptischer und griechischer Parallelen*, Würzburg 1983.

<sup>7</sup> There are no papyri found in Alexandria.

skynema-formula in lines 4-6), but in any case they must have been found outside of Alexandria elsewhere in Egypt; here, too, we are not better informed (in the case of # 6 it might have been in Bacchias in the Fayum, cf. the letter's address on the verso). Finally, the provenance<sup>8</sup> of # 4 seems completely irretrievable.

I offer a few observations:

- (1) The opening formula. The standard opening formula of a Greek letter is 'A to B 'χαίρειν', but in some of the letters of condolence a verb other than 'χαίρειν' is used instead (# 1: εὐψυχεῖν; # 3: εὐθυμεῖν). The editor of # 3 (and, following him, Koskenniemi, *op. cit.*, [n. 2] and later on White, cf. his commentary to his re-edition of # 1) believed that χαίρειν was avoided intentionally in view of the etymological meaning of the verb (= 'to rejoice', something militating against the character of a letter of condolence). In 4 letters, however, (# # 4, 6, 8 en 9) χαίρειν is used in the opening formula. # 5 has, like # 3, εὐθυμεῖν; the opening formula of # # 2 and 7 is lost. The balance, therefore, is clearly in favour of the verb χαίρειν and the supposed intentional avoidance obviously is a phantom.
- (2) The relationship between the writer of the letter, the addressee, and the deceased person(s). First a passage from N. LEWIS' *Life in Egypt under Roman Rule*, p. 80-81:

"It comes as something of a surprise to us to discover that amongst the thousands private letters that have been published the only letters of condolence, and those but a handful, relate to the deaths of children. Apparently the deaths of adults, whether young or old, were too routine a part of the human condition to call for special comment, even of a pro forma nature. The letters of condolence that we do find are, as is still so often the case in such missives, couched in a language of affective stereotypes".

This statement seems slightly misleading: not all of the ancient letters of condolence refer to the deaths of children. The relationships can be described as follows:

<sup>8</sup> It is always necessary to distinguish between 'the place a document was written' and 'the place a text was found'.

- Wilder, Chad  
=  
not in NB.
- # 1. The relationship between Irene, the author of the letter, and the addressee Taonophris (a woman) and Philo (= her husband?) is not stated; likewise, the relationship between the addressees and the deceased person is unclear (NB: εὐμοίρωι, line 4, is not a personal name, as the first editors thought), but it is very well possible that their son was involved (so the later editors of the text).
  - # 2. The exact relationship between the writer, the addressee and the deceased person (cf. line 15) is unknown.
  - # 3. Serenus writes (presumably from Alexandria, cf. Roberts's argument *loc. cit.*) to his mother Antonia (in the *chora*?), but the relationship between them and the deceased person is unclear, especially as the crucial word in line 2 has not been read in full. The first editor of the text suggested that Antonia's doctor could be meant (he restores in l. 2 [ἰα]τροῦ or [Πέ]τροῦ). The latter, however, seems impossible, as on the photo a diaeresis on top of an otherwise lost iota seems still visible; [ἰα]τροῦ, therefore, is the most attractive restoration, but the death of a personal (?) doctor as the subject of a letter of condolence is remarkable (cf. below).
  - # 4. A certain Alexandros writes to his 'brother' Ki-dienos because of the death of K.'s son.
  - # 5. A certain Menesthianos writes to his correspondent (his employer?) Apollonianos and A.'s son Spartiates (for the family see Aegyptus 49 [1969] 180) because of the death of another son of Apollonianos.
  - # 6. A certain Isidoros writes to a woman Tausenouphis because of the death of her husband (= I.'s brother Germanos? Cf. lines 6-8).
  - # 7. A woman writes to another woman, but the relationship between them and with the deceased person is not given.
  - # 8. A certain Eudaimon writes to his 'brother' Hermodoros because of the death of H.'s daughter.
  - # 9. A certain Ioulios writes to his 'father' Demetrios and his 'sister' Apollonia because of the death of his 'mother' Sarapias (r. 8-9).

A considerable number of letters of condolence preserved to date (# 4, 5, 8; cf. also # 1) refer clearly indeed to deceased children and at first sight Lewis's statement looks to have been correct at the moment of publishing his monograph (in 1983); he could not be aware of # 9, published only in 1988. Even so, however, # 6 (published in 1971) referred to the deceased person as being the addressee's husband (who may have been the brother of the writer of the letter.) We cannot even say that in all of these letters a direct family-relationship existed between the addressee(s) and the deceased person (cf. above ad # 3; # # 2 and 7 are uninformative).

The editor of # 9 rightly reminds us that terms of blood relationship (e.g.: 'father', 'brother', 'sister' and 'mother') need not be taken literally; in the society of the Near and Middle East people often use such terms of direct blood relationship, even if such a relationship is absent: a good friend becomes a 'brother' soon enough, as with us children often enough address adults familiar to them (neighbours, family friends, etc.) in terms of 'aunt' or 'uncle'. But I see no objection against taking the terms used in # 9 at face value and if this position is correct, this text really contains a letter of condolence written by a son who was absent at the moment of his mother's death. Such a situation of 'spatial separation' among family members may have occurred frequently enough, I presume (cf. # 3).

Remarkable is the sentiment expressed in these letters. Some letters are very short and their tone is 'matter of fact', while in others the writers make some real effort to find words of comfort fitting to the circumstances. In this respect the difference between ## 1 and 3 (cf. also ## 5 and 8) is striking and illustrative. Quite remarkable (and maybe even slightly repulsive) is the fact that the writers of these letters link their expressions of personal sympathy with completely different topics without much of a problem; cf. # 6. 13-15, in which the writer switches over to the subject of sending 100 walnuts, and # 9. 13-15, where after the expression of condolence a garment becomes the letter's subject. The most striking is # 5 in which the transmission of a declaration on oath becomes the next subject of the letter (cf. lines 21f.), while in lines 23ff. again the addressees are supposed to be 'comforted' by the message that the writer of the letter just lost a slave worth as much as 2 talents. On the other hand, the securing of personal property (# 3. 26ff.) should be seen in the light of re-structuring the family situation after the departure of the deceased person.

The comfort offered remains, as Lewis already observed, restricted to affective stereotypes like

- ταῦτα ἀνθρώπινα καὶ πᾶσι ἡμῖν τοῦτο κεῖται (# 9. 12-13),
- οὐδεὶς τῶν ἀπλῶς γεννωμένων ἀθάνατος; μακαρεῖα -- ἢ πρὸ τῶν συμφορῶν τὸν δύστηνον καὶ μοχθηρὸν βίον φυγοῦσα (# 8. 14-17)
- πάντων γὰρ τὸ [θανεῖν ἐσ]τιν (# 6. 10-11)
- τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ τοῖς θεοῖς ἀπόκειται (# 5. 11-12),
- δεῖ δὲ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον φέρει<ν> --- οὐδεὶς ἐν ἀνθρώποις ἀθάνατος, εἰ <μὴ> μόνος ὁ θεός (# 4. 10-11, 14-15)
- ἀλλὰ ἀνθρώπινον καὶ γὰρ καὶ ἡμεῖς τοῦτο διώκομεν (# 3. 2-3)
- οὐδὲν δύναται τις πρὸς τὰ τοιαῦτα (# 1. 9-10)

The author of this last text adds the remark that she has mourned just

as in an earlier case of death in her immediate neighbourhood and that she has observed her duty towards the deceased person completely (did she try to comfort him during his last hours?). The list of five persons sharing her own personal expression of condolence may seem impressive enough, but it remains doubtful whether such a list of names really brought much comfort to the addresses. After this follows the resigned remark (ll. 9-10) that nobody is able to do anything about this sad affair and the bereft relatives are exhorted to console themselves, as Irene cannot offer any consolation from her side: what a comfort!

Amsterdam

*Klaas A. Worp*