Building on his extensive experience with diverse Arabic documentary and literary texts, Werner Diem has made a speciality of identifying interesting genres of texts. In this volume he focuses on letters of intercession written on behalf or in support of a third party. Rather than asking for intercession in the after world, these letters deal with worldly matters, soliciting the addressee’s support in arranging for the payment/deferral of debts, career advancement, marriage plans and material help. As Diem writes in his introduction (p. 15), such letters abound in works of Arabic belles lettres, more than occasionally with a full section or chapter devoted to such letters, and in historical works, and are also represented in the documentary corpus. In spite of their being well-represented in the textual record, these kinds of letters have not received much scholarly attention. Diem sets out to present a philological and epistolary classification of the letters as preserved in documents and in works of literature and then to analyse the letters for a social and intellectual history, concentrating on the arguments presented by the senders of the letters to convince the recipients to offer their help to the third party (p. 17).

_Histoire de mentalités_ is a well-developed historiographical genre aimed to document and analyse the ways in which people in a certain historical period observed and interacted with the world around them. Despite the title of his book, it is not clear how Diem interacts with the historiographical debates raised by this school. He states in fact early on (p. 22) that the fact that the letters in his corpus are generally anonymised does not bother him as he is not interested in ‘events’ (_Ereignisgeschichte_), but rather explicating the social patterning and mentality of the Muslim world from the 8th to 14th century. While Diem mentions information on the year and place where a letter was written, if it is stated in the source, and points at peculiarities of “western” versus “eastern” authors, he does not specify any historical context for the themes, formulae or language used in the letters. In fact, Diem prefers to consider the letter corpus as a whole, justifying this approach in his conclusion on the grounds that “despite their wide geographical and chronological span the material truly presents a uniform cultural framework” (p. 337). One wonders whether, for a full study of the medieval Arab-Muslim worldview, related letters such as “direct”
requests for help, by the sender to the addressee and all the associated correspondence (responses, follow-up letters, letters about neglected requests for help) should not be analysed in the same way. What special insights does the focus on letters of intercession as defined by Diem offer?

The book starts with a catalogue of summaries of the 169 letters that Diem has identified — both actual specimens preserved on papyrus and paper, all from Egypt, and transmitted in works of Arabic literature — specifying the recipient and the third party on whose behalf the letter is written, the occasion that gave rise to the writing of the letter or case at hand, and a summary of the contents, divided into introduction, main part and closure. The sender is only identified if he or she is someone other than the author in whose book the letter is quoted. This catalogue forms the largest part of the book. The letters are classified according to transmitter in chronological order, with, starting from section 2.6, every-time first a summary of the main arguments as presented in the letters. It is not clear why the first five sections do not have such a useful summary. Biographical information on the authors of the letters that are preserved in works of literature, all well-known literati and in many cases active in the administration, can be found via references to C. B. Roehlmann's *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur* and al-Zirâlî's *al-ʾĀlam* in the footnotes as well as in abbreviated form in chapter 3 (pp. 245-247).

The seven letters preserved on papyrus and paper, the so-called "original letters," are discussed first. It seems some additional published letters could have been included in this section. See for example the late 2nd/8th-century letter in which someone writes: "Muhammad ibn Yahyâ, who is my servant, informed me that he intends a division of what was owned between him and his brother-in-law ... and I hope, may God prolong your life, that you will hear his and his brother-in-law’s words and lead them to truth and justice and divide what they had between them (A. Grohmann, *Die arabischen Papyri aus der Gießener Universitätsbibliothek*, Gießen 1960, 42-43). In a letter dated ca. 730 the sender asks the addressee to intervene for an unjustly treated individual (P.M. Siestein, *Shaping a Muslim State. The World of a Mid-Eighth-Century Egyptian Official*, Oxford 2013, 424-427). In a 3rd/9th-century letter the writer discusses extensively his troubles that have left him "in need of alms like a beggar." He then informs the addressee that he has written to his uncle asking him for some wheat. Probably because the uncle did not reply, he now writes the addressee to ask "your sister, whom I entrust to God, to talk to him (the uncle)" (D.S. Margoliouth, *Catalogue of Arabic Papyri in the John Rylands Library Manchester*, Manchester 1933, 40-41). Six letters were written to the well-known 3rd/9th-century Fayyûmîc textile merchant Abû Hurayra by his brother on this brother and his sister’s behalf asking Abû Hurayra to intercede with their father to help out the two siblings who "have no grain of wheat left in the house" (Y. Râqîb, *Marchands d’êtoffes du Fayyoum au IIIe-LXe siècle*, Cairo 1985, 39-53). These seven letters can perhaps also be counted as letters of intercession, although the third party in this case overlaps partially with the sender. Seven (fragments of) letters asking the addressee to take care of the letter-bearer in general terms preserved on papyrus and paper, dating from the 2nd/8th to the 6th/12th century (W. Diem, *Arabische Briefe auf Papyrus und Papier aus der Heidelberger Papyrus-Sammlung*, Wiesbaden 1991, 194-215 — Diem quotes only the letter from this series that he published himself, and that requests most explicitly help from the addressee in favour of the third party; Y. Râqîb, *Lettres arabes II, Annales Islamologiques* 16 [1980], 1-29, 18-19) compare well with similar letters from the literary sources listed in Diem’s catalogue (e.g. p. 150). There are doubtlessly more.

An interesting section at the end of the catalogue of summaries discusses similar letters preserved in the Cairo Geniza. While these are obviously also “original” letters, Diem has chosen not to discuss them together with the seven papyri and paper letters in Arabic script singling them out as “Jewish letters.” Of course the “original” letters preserved on papyrus and paper as well as those from the Geniza, are much shorter and less elaborate than the literary versions. The latter are also often directed at highly placed individuals, which is not surprising as they were written and collected by members belonging to the same élite. Despite such differences, Diem’s discussion shows that the “original” letters and those preserved in works of literature can be examined together to understand the social value system in place. In his analytical chapters, however, Diem quotes almost exclusively from the literary letters. Nor does he offer any thoughts on how and why the "original letters" differ from the literary ones and what the significance of his reconstruction of the value system in the last chapters is. This seems a missed opportunity, since in two cases in which he quotes an original letter (the same one on both occasions) they constitute exceptions (pp. 239-240). Some of the additional “original letters” as well as those from the Geniza, however, show the same exceptions, such as being written on behalf of family members, including women.

The catalogue is followed by a discussion of the letters’ different features, starting in chapter 3 with a presentation of the actors, the senders, addressees and the people on whose behalf the letters are written. Diem also discusses the occasions on which the letters were written, mentioning that a large number actually do not specify the circumstances in which the addressee is asked to act. Some of these is because, as the sender says, the person on whose behalf he acts, will recount his problem himself to the addressee. In other cases, however, the letter seems to function rather as a general recommendation or introduction, asking the addressee to take care of the person who delivers it and on whose behalf the sender writes without a specific problem having to be solved. Diem justifies including these letters because of the structure they share with the others — always three parties involved: sender, addressee, person on whose behalf the letter is written and who is often identified as ʾsaḥīb kitābī, “deliverer of my letter.” As discussed above, such letters are preserved on papyrus. Interestingly, similar letters are preserved in Greek papyri from Islamic Egypt in which the recipient is asked to take care of a case involving the letter-bearer (Gr. *grammatēphoroi*) (cf. F. Morelli, *Grammatēphoroi e vie della giustizia nell’Egitto tardo antico*, E. Cantarella (ed.), *Symposion 2005. Vorträge zur griechischen und hellenistischen Rechtsgeschichte*, Vienna 2007, 351-371).

Chapter 4, the most voluminous of the analytical chapters, is entitled “intercession strategy.” Diem discusses the different kinds of arguments presented by the letter writers to convince their addressees. Starting with ways in which the recipient is addressed with praise or appeals, Diem turns to more
general arguments that are used such as the honour that is bestowed on certain (i.e. generous and helpful) kinds of people, and the role of fate, referring to the dire straits of the people on whose behalf the sender writes. The letters’ introduction often states the reasons why the sender decided to write the letter, but also why the addressee should respond favourably to the quest for help. Sometimes the rewards in doing so of all three parties is listed. In one letter (p. 56) the sender starts by quoting Qur’an 4:85 “Whoever intercedes for a good cause will have a reward therefrom.” He continues by stating that the rewards in the form of thanks and praise will come to the interceder, the addressee who offers his help, but also to the person on whose behalf help is asked, as he/she is humiliated by putting his/her trust in the others and is unsure about what will happen. Asking the addressee to take care of a stranger is another argument that is often quoted in the introduction, offering it simply as the self-evident reason for the writing of the letter (pp. 29-30) or by writing that there might be a time that the addressee will be a stranger somewhere and will be in need of similar help (p. 65). The argument that the strong should support the weak and especially that those who are doing well should come to the rescue of those whom fate did not treat so well occurs often and harks back to common motifs in Near Eastern thought (e.g. p. 69).

Diem rightly includes a short chapter discussing 13 answers to letters asking for intercession which are transmitted in the literary record (pp. 325-336). It is essential to include such letters to gain a full understanding of the strategies that individuals in the medieval Muslim world employed to obtain help from others via an intermediary and what social-ethical system underlay them. Examples can also be found in the documentary record. One additional part of the process, which offers similar insights, remains, however, unstudied in this book. These are letters from the other end of the process: requests for (oral or written) intercession from the addressee. Such letters — I limit myself to examples preserved on papyrus and paper from Egypt — contain the same arguments — praise, gratitude, complaints — that Diem identifies in the letters of intercession. For example, in a 4th/5th-century letter on papyrus the sender complains: “I have written to you more than one letter but cannot find that you have written to your sister about my claim,” continuing with an account of how badly the sister handled his case and asking help from God and the addressee in solving it (Margoliouth, Rylands, 47). In another 4th/5th-century letter the letter sender asks the addressee to retrieve three donkeys and some other property (māl) which were taken from him by a certain Ibn Tayfūr with whom the addressee has a close relation (Margoliouth, Rylands, 42-43). In a 4th/10th-century letter the writer asks a judge to allow him to write to him so that he can inform him off a terrible situation that the judge should be informed about and allowing him to “occupy himself with a case that requires much reflection” (R.F. Khoury, Chrestomathie de papyrology arabe, Leiden 1993, 142-143).

In the conclusion (chapter 6), Diem repeats in compact form the different themes that the letters cover, including a section on the “value system (Wertvorstellung)” they pertain. Many letters mention that offering help will contribute in some way to the relation between sender and addressee. In one letter the intercessor starts by mentioning his continuing loyalty to the addressee and the friendship that exists between them (p. 69). Diem concludes that personal relations are the single most important argument used in the letters (pp. 240-242). Some of the authors whose letters appear in this volume, such as al-Qāḍī Abū al-Fādīl (pp. 107-135) or Ibn Abī al-Khīṣāl (pp. 67-91), were, however, professional letter writers whose skills as stylists and litterateurs seem to have been at least as important a reason for soliciting their help as their potential relationship with the addressee. This might explain why these professionals wrote hardly any letters of intercession for family members — in addition to Diem’s explanation that such letters would be suggestive of subjectivity due to the blood relationship between writer and third party. Interestingly, “original letters” more often mention family relationships between letter writer, addressee and third party.

Diem further concludes that religion plays only a marginal role in the letters of intercession (pp. 348-349). Diem’s definition for a religious argument seems, however, rather narrowly defined as explicit remarks that offering help to a third person is a religious command (p. 48) or as quoted Qur’anic verses with the same message (p. 63). In doing so, he passes by more subtle but surely very significant religious motives mentioned in the letters such as the description of the person for whom help is asked in a 6/13th-century letter preserved on paper as being a “virtuous and pious person” (pp. 29-30). Also the explanation offered by a sender that he writes the present letter because he has vowed to do anything in his might to help the descendants of ‘Ali points surely at a religious motive (p. 37). In another letter the sender writes that since God has bestowed favours on the addressee, people now expect him to help them (p. 33). Another intercessor states that intercession was practiced by the prophet Muhammad and is accepted by God. In the same letter the intercessor expresses his hope that God will reward the addressee for his good deeds (p. 66). The frequent requests to help someone on their pilgrimage to Mecca (p. 92; p. 126), help someone who completed the hajj (p. 83), is a sharif (pp. 88, 114), descendent of the prophet Muhammad (pp. 93, 110), muezzin (p. 84), judge (p. 96), scholar (pp. 105, 112, 113, 118), preacher (p. 116) or someone who applied himself in jihad (pp. 111) are in fact implicit religiously inspired motives justifying the help asked for. Presenting the addressee as possessing piety and religiosity (p. 127), thereby suggesting this would naturally bring him to reply positively also puts the request in a religious context. The fact that several letters are written during the fasting month of Ramadan when good deeds, especially the giving of alms and helping of the poor, as well as a general reflection of one’s actions is encouraged (p. 73), is obviously also closely linked to religious motives.

The book ends with full translations of 17 selected letters from different authors (chapter 7). This part allows non-Arabists to get the full experience of the rich rhetorical style of the letters. Unfortunately none of the “original letters” are translated here. As stated in his preface, Diem aims with this volume explicitly to reach out to non-Arabists, discussing the letters in translation only and moving all notes on linguistic and philological issues to the footnotes (p. 13). The book is indeed accessible for non-specialists who can through the summaries, the full translations and the thematic treatment familiarise themselves with the material. The book makes it possible for scholars working in other linguistic, regional and chronological domains to use these texts for comparative studies. Diem has indeed produced a monument for these very interesting and important letters, taking them
out of their multiple separate publications and presenting them here together. The letters invite us to now undertake further historical analytical work. This book is the necessary first step showing us how vast and interesting the Arabic source base is.

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