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Wanting or asking?

Polite and impolite requests in Arabic papyrus letters

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Requests are a type of directive speech act in which the speaker aims to get someone to do something that that person might not have done without being asked. In the case of Arabic papyri, the scholarly attention requests have received has been limited mainly to petitions addressed to government officials and other figures of authority (Khan 1990a, b; Rustow 2020; Weitz 2022), and to commercial and private letters exchanged between equals (Grob 2010). In petitions, expressions inquiring about the addressee's willingness or ability to carry out the desired action, *in ra'ayta* ('if you think it a good idea') or *ra ra'yaka* ('think it a good idea'), are regularly invoked to mitigate the request's sense of imposition. Similarly, Arabic papyrus letters exhibit a predictable epistolary structure with fixed expressions signalling the correspondents' common background as a technique to mitigate the abruptness of requests formulated with an imperative (Grob 2010: 119). This paper examines another request formulation, regularly attested in Arabic papyrus letters, that of employing a verb with the meaning 'to want' (*arāda*; *aḥabba*) used in the first person. By tracing attestations of this formula diachronically from the seventh to the tenth century and analysing its use in context, it can be shown that constructions with *I/we want* in the papyri change over time from an expression of genuine desire to a conventional nicety. This change can be related to the important role of patronage and socially inter-dependent relationships in the medieval Islamic empire. It confirms a third-wave understanding of politeness as socially construed and conditioned by time and place.

Keywords: Arabic papyri, directives, Egypt, historical letters, patronage, requests, speech acts

1. Introduction¹

Ḥasan told me that you mentioned that I was rude to you in my letter. But my “rudeness”, from someone like me to someone like you, is in fact affection. And my words to you are only to remind you of your rights and obligations.²

As this quote from a ninth-century Arabic papyrus letter shows, correspondents in medieval Egypt were sensitive to matters of politeness. Unfortunately, the letter that the addressee mentioned to Ḥasan is not known to us and we cannot reconstruct what in particular he (or she) took exception to. It alerts us, however, to the intricacy of the rules and expectations in exchanges, even when the correspondents were well known to one another, and it reminds us that these rules were both predictable and yet not entirely stable, reflecting the degree to which the social relations that these rules reflected were themselves both highly structured and yet open to negotiation. By looking at other Arabic papyrus letters and analysing the language they use, with the help of insights from politeness studies, we can begin to understand how context-appropriate language worked and what underlying expectations regulated epistolary exchanges in early Islamic society – and what this might say about that society.

This paper focusses on requests in Arabic papyrus letters. Requests are directive speech acts in which the speaker seeks to get the addressee to perform an action he or she would not otherwise have undertaken, for the benefit of the speaker or a third party. Requests do not presuppose the speaker’s authority over the hearer, but aim, rather, to make the directive acceptable – polite – to overcome any possible obstacle and persuade the addressee to do as requested (Searle 1976: 12). Understanding politeness as a social practice invoking a moral order of entitlement, requests can be seen to fall into three categories (Kádár and Haugh 2013: 71–73, 93–106). Normatively sanctioned demands consist of requests – for example, for news, goods and services – that were expected within the social context in which they appeared. They are attested in commercial letters exchanged between traders, “private” letters that deal with familial and personal matters, and also in petitions directed to government officials within the frame-

1. I have used translations that accompany papyrus editions, transferring them into English with adjustments when necessary, as indicated.

2. أخبرني حسن أنك ذكرت غلظي عليك في الكتاب [...] وغلظي عليك إنما هو غلظ مودة من مثلي لمثلك (P. Marchands II 34 ll. 5–6). This quote occurs in a letter that Abū Hurayra, a textile merchant, writes to an unknown correspondent in the ninth-century Fayyūm. Rāḡib translates *ghilaḡ* with ‘dureté’ (i.e., ‘harshness’), but its association with boorishness, coarseness, roughness, thickness, impoliteness and crudeness, fits a translation of rudeness better than one of severity and callousness.

work of established petitionary procedures (Rustow 2020: 219–221). Extraordinary requests went beyond what could be expected within an exchange or relationship. The fulfilment of these requests was more complicated, and more deliberate strategies were therefore needed to ensure they achieved their goals. Such extraordinary appeals could be presented (together with requests that could be expected) in all the kinds of letters listed above and especially in the distinctive genre of “petition letters”. Petition letters were written with the sole purpose of remediating the sender’s problem and were directed at any individual expected to be able to effect or facilitate a positive solution. Unlike petitions, petition letters did not circulate in an administratively and legally institutionalised context, even if they did constitute a social practice. Finally, transgressive requests violated social expectations of what was appropriate or permissible.

What scholarly attention requests in Arabic papyri have received has been limited mainly to petitions addressed to government officials and other figures of authority (Khan 1990a, b; Rustow 2020: 207–244; Weitz 2022), and to commercial and private letters exchanged between equals (Grob 2010: 59–64, 120). In petitions, expressions inquiring about the addressee’s willingness or ability to carry out the required action, *in ra’ayta* (‘if you think it a good idea’) or *ra ra’yaka* (‘think it a good idea’), mitigate the request’s imposition. These were a fixed feature of Arabic petitions from the seventh through to the thirteenth century. As Grob (2010: 119) has shown, Arabic papyrus letters employed a predictable epistolary structure with fixed expressions summoning the correspondents’ shared background as a way to soften the impact of requests that were typically formulated with an imperative. Constituting a fixed feature of requests that could be expected, these expressions represent conventionalised or formulaic politeness markers that fit the specific social context of petitions and commercial and private letters (Grob 2010: 119; Terkourafi 2015: 13–15).

Imperatives, however, form only one of the four classes of directives identified by Kohnen (2008) – the others being performatives, modal expressions and indirect manifestations. Amongst the attested formulations to frame requests in papyrus letters are those that employ a verb with the meaning ‘to want’ (*arāda* and *aḥabba*) used in the first person. Such direct formulations or performatives of *I want* have been characterised as impolite in several models of politeness, including those of Leech (1983, 2014), since they foreground the desires of the beseecher (Self) over the beseeched (Other) in a way that is “face-threatening” (i.e., pressurising the Other to accede, lest the Self loses face). In Brown and Levinson’s (1987) model of negative and positive politeness, these formulations make demands on the beseeched without recruiting him or her into the sense of shared purpose that would constitute positive politeness. More recently, a third wave of politeness studies has combined the cultural values inherent in certain

linguistic forms with normative practice, using frequency and context to classify formulations according to their degree of politeness (Terkourafi and Kádár 2017; Jucker 2020: 1–17; House and Kádár 2021). Building upon these perspectives (Terkourafi 2005, 2012, 2015; Culpeper 2016), others have focussed on the normative and discursive criteria of (im)politeness to argue that questions framed with *I ask* can also be polite, depending on the conventions of the particular contexts in which they are used (in Latin: Dickey [2012: 323–325]; in Greek papyri: di Bartolo [2026] and Dickey [2016: 239–243]; and in eighteenth-century English: Jucker [2026]).

This article builds on these developments to examine how the use of expressions of *I want* in Arabic papyrus letters in early medieval Egypt can be understood as an epistolary strategy of (im)politeness. The paper follows a third-wave politeness studies approach by acknowledging that linguistic forms have intrinsic default values, but can be renegotiated and take on a different politeness value in specific social contexts (Jucker 2020: 13). As will become clear, *I want* is attested in all three request categories described above, whereby the expression developed through time from a genuine expression of desire to a conventionally polite way to express a request. This development should be related to shifts in the patterns of patronage and inter-dependent relationships that governed social interactions and, consequently, determined conceptions of politeness.

Phraseology was not the only tool at the requester's disposal. The writing material, its tooling and script, as well the operational dimension of conveyance and the ways in which the messenger, intercessor or petitioner delivered the request doubtlessly also played a role in reinforcing a total impression of politeness (Fournet 2009; Sarri 2018; Armory 2024). But these dimensions are largely lost to us. This study, therefore, examines only the written language of the papyrus letters.

I will start by introducing my data, requests in Arabic letters written on papyrus from the seventh to tenth centuries, mainly from Egypt. The next section deals with the formal aspects of request formulae used in the papyrus letters, showing a chronological development in the use of *I want* to formulate polite requests from indirect formulations in the form of speaker-based declaratives to performatives. Finally, I will present different social contexts in which requests were formulated with the performative *I want*. The conclusion connects the conventionalised polite use of *I want* to formulate requests to the medieval Islamic historical context.

2. Data: The potential and limits of Arabic papyri³

Arabic papyrology is a vibrant but relatively small and young field. For this paper, I have made appreciative use of the Arabic Papyrology Database of more than 4,300 texts of published Arabic papyri and paper documents from the medieval Islamic world, stretching from the Iberian peninsula to Central Asia and dating from the seventh to the sixteenth centuries.⁴ Most Arabic documents do not contain a date and are datable only approximately on the basis of palaeographical, textual or diplomatic features, or the individuals mentioned in them. The vast majority of Arabic papyrus letters, however, can be located in the ninth century, presumably reflecting an increase in the numbers of Arabic speakers in the Egyptian countryside, where most papyri have been found. The first sixty years of the Arab presence in Egypt starting in 639 CE have only yielded a handful of Arabic papyri and in the eighth century Greek and Coptic were still frequently in use alongside Arabic, including in the Arab administration. In the tenth century, paper was introduced, eventually replacing papyrus altogether. The rise of paper as the main writing material, coinciding with important political developments in Egypt, led to major changes in scribal and documentary practice, as can be seen in the surviving documents (Rustow 2020: 173–206).

Due to the everyday function of most papyrus documents and their history of being deposited on waste dumps, the identity of the individuals mentioned in them often remains unknown. In fact, most correspondents are entirely anonymous, as their names are not attested in the text of the letters, and addresses are omitted. In addition, the habitual use of (professional) scribes imposes further distance between the senders of the letter and their texts, suppressing clues that might otherwise allow us some insight into the correspondents' gender, occupation and religion, with the regularity of the Arabic script in these cases adding another layer of obstruction. The background of the unidentified correspondents is, therefore, usually difficult to establish with confidence. This is reinforced by the omission in documents in the Arabic language of titles or other references to a person's public function (Sijpesteijn 2013: 67; Hoyland 2008: 235). Finally, papyrus letters are seldom accompanied by their replies, leaving us with a one-sided view of the correspondence. Put together, the result is that the relationship between

3. Abbreviations of papyrus editions follow those of the Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic, and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca, and Tablets (see: Papyri.info) by John F. Oates and William H. Willis, and the Checklist of Arabic Documents (see: https://www.naher-osten.uni-muenchen.de/isap/isap_checklist/index.html) by Petra M. Sijpesteijn, John F. Oates, Andreas Kaplony, Eva M. Youssef-Grob and Daniel Potthast.

4. Accessed 9 September 2025 at: www.naher-osten.lmu.de/apd.

the senders and the recipients of the letters is invariably difficult to determine, obscuring a straightforwardly interactional assessment of politeness in Arabic papyrus letters. Understanding the atmosphere and nuances of the exchange, therefore, requires us to draw circumstantial information from the letters themselves.⁵

The following analysis is based upon letters on papyrus from the seventh to the tenth century CE in which a request to the addressee to undertake an action for the sender's benefit is formulated with a verb of wanting in the first person. The letters were selected by searching for *hababtu*, *ḥababnā*, *aḥbabtu*, *aḥbabnā*, *aḥibb(u/a)*, *naḥibb(u/a)*, *uḥibb(u/a)*, *nuḥibb(u/a)*, *aradtu*, *aradnā*, *urīd(u/a)*, *nurīd(u/a)* and *ḥabīb ilayya* in the Arabic Papyrology Database. This yielded 195 attestations, with *aḥbabtu*, *aḥbabnā* and *naḥibb(u/a)* not occurring once. Several letters contain more than one of the expressions under examination, and some words have been mislabelled in the database resulting in a reduced total number of relevant letters. Other letters were too damaged or too opaque to determine the context of their expressions. Related expressions such as *arjū* ('I hope'), *as'alu* ('I ask'), *arghabu* ('I desire') and *atafaḍḍalu* ('I prefer') are excluded from consideration here, except when they occur in combination with 'wanting'. Requests could also be formulated in the second person, as in *tafaḍḍalta/ī/um* ('would you be so kind'), *ḥababta/ī/um* ('would you like') and *shī'ta/ī/um* ('would you wish'), but these have not been included in the discussion. The papyrus letters were found in Egypt and probably also originated there.⁶ It is often not possible to identify the hierarchical relationship between the letter's correspondents, but in several cases the contents of the letter contain information on the nature of their interaction.

3. Formal aspects of wanting to ask in Arabic papyrus letters

Requests that straightforwardly call upon the recipient to undertake some task for the addressee's benefit are, throughout the period under review, regularly formulated in Arabic papyrus letters with a simple imperative, sometimes constructed with an imperfect or apocopate (Hopkins 1984: Section 138b; Grob 2010: 120; Kootstra-Ford and Bentein 2025: 271).⁷ Using the imperative for such direct

5. References to requests, their imposition or the failure to deal adequately with them also occur in papyrus letters, but these have not been taken into account in this paper as they do not contain request formulae.

6. The "exact" provenance of the papyrus is mentioned when known. When no provenance is given, it is not known where in Egypt the papyrus was found.

7. See the results when searching for common imperatives such as *istharī*, *ibtī* ('buy'), *bī* ('sell'), *iqbiḍ* ('receive') and *iba'th*, *ukhruj* ('send') in The Arabic Papyrology Database.

requests is conventional in requests that elicit actions in a way that is consistent with the expectations that are implicit in that relationship. This is true of hierarchically unequal relations (e.g., P.Qurra; P.MuslimState; P.DiemDienstschriften; P.Nessana; PHoylandNessana 56; Kootstra-Ford and Bentein 2025) as much as it is of exchanges between correspondents on more familiar terms, such as close family members or business associates (e.g., P.Marchands I, II, III, v/1).

Fixed expressions that incorporate imperatives are equally well-represented in requests to superiors and in other situations requiring delicacy. An example is the phrase *unẓur fī amrī/amrihi* ('look into my/their case'), which is often used in "petition letters". Similarly, the imperative also appears in the characteristic formulae used in petitions, "petition letters", and even in some everyday requests for deliveries and the like: *in ra'ayta an tafala kadhā fa-ifal* ('if you think it a good idea to do X, then do so') or *fa-(ra) ra'yaka* ('so think it a good idea') (Khan 1990a; Rustow 2020: 2011–20; Weitz 2022). Standardised formulations that occur in the closing part of letters, such as the demand to write to the addressee and share any outstanding needs or to convey greetings to others, which are in themselves expressions of a close relationship, generally use simple imperatives (Grob 2010: 69–70, 119). In these contexts, imperatives were the proper way to formulate directives. The common use of imperatives in Greek papyrus letters into the Islamic period has similarly been explained as a neutral or conventionally polite form of asking (Dickey 2010: 337, 2016; Koroli 2020; Kootstra-Ford and Bentein 2025).

Amongst the other ways in which to frame directives, those formulated as *I want*, based on the roots *ḥbb* and *rwd*, are attested in the Arabic papyri throughout the seventh-to-tenth centuries CE in different contexts from regular requests to extraordinary requests in petition letters. Most requests formulated as "I want (you to do) X" in the papyrus letters are formulated with an imperfect, but some use the epistolary perfect with present meaning (Diem 2004: 329–331). In this section, such requests are traced chronologically and in the different social contexts in which they appear. It is important, however, to emphasise that most attestations of *I want* occur in contexts that do not require any action on the part of the addressee. Rather, they communicate the letter sender's intentions, as in Example (1) to (3).

- (1) وأخبرك أنني أحب أن لو أنني قدرت أني أسلم عليكم⁸
 ('and I inform you that I want, if I can, to come and greet you')
 (P.JoySorrow 14 ll. 3–4, eighth century, provenance Fustāt)

8. The orthography of the Arabic citations was normalised for readability; *hamza*, *shadda* defectively written long vowels and diacritical dots were added, reconstructions of missing or unreadable text suggested by the editor were included in the plain text. No other adjustments were made.

- (2) ولعمري أطلعه في وجهك وعمر أحب أن أنزل الفسطاط
(‘And by my life, I tell you and ‘Umar openly: I want to leave Fustāṭ’)
(P.ReinfandtLeinenhandler ll. 12–13, dated c. 750, provenance Ihnās)
- (3) بما كتبت إلي أنك مشغول يا ابني فأحببت أن لا أثقل عليك
(‘...what you wrote me about being busy, my son, and so I did not want to impose upon you’)
(P.Marchands 11 13 l. v3, ninth century, provenance Fayyūm)

In papyrus letters dating to the seventh and eighth centuries, requests were typically not formulated as “I/we want/would like that you do X”, where X benefits the sender. Instead, “I/we want/would like you to do X” is used to call for actions that would be of benefit to the addressee, as in the following example.

- (4) وقد أحبيت أبقاك الله أن تخض نفسك مني بالسلام
(‘and I want, may God prolong your life, that you convey to yourself from me greetings’)
(P.JoySorrow 14 l. 1, eighth century, provenance Fustāṭ)

In Example (5), the letter-writer asks the addressee for information to help him to execute the addressee’s demands.

- (5) الذي أحب أن تكتب إلي به
(‘which I want you to write me about’)
(P.Mil.Vogl. 9 l. 5 with a correction by Vanthieghem [Clarysse et al. 2020:188], eighth century)⁹

Similarly, the regularly encountered addition to the final letter section, as in Examples (6) and (7), of a request to inform the sender of the addressee’s condition and “anything they need” should not be considered an imposition on the addressee. Diem (1997: 279–284) identified these as “pseudo-requests” of which the ultimate outcome constituted an imposition on the sender rather than the writer. As Grob (2010: 69–70, 123) has emphasised, such exchanges between familiar correspondents were in fact an expression of closeness emphasising solidarity and should, following a frame-based approach, be interpreted as an expression of conventionalised politeness.

- (6) اكتب إلي بخبرك وحالك فإنني أحب ذلك وأسر به
(‘write me about your news and your condition, for I want this and it pleases me’)
(P.SijpesteijnArmyEconomics ll. 10–11, dating from 632–800)

9. Two fragmentary early papyrus letters originating in the Arab chancery contain the same order to write the sender, but there is not enough context to interpret them (P.Berl.Arab. 11 24 l. 7; P.JoySorrow 42 ll. 20–21).

- (7) وما كانت لك من حاجة يا سيّد فاكته إليّ بها فأني أحبّ ذلك منك وأسرّ به
(‘and what you need, o lord, write that to me for I want that from you and it pleases me’)

(P.DavidWeillLouvre 12–13 ll. 15 right to 16 right, with corrections by Diem [1997: 280], eighth century, provenance Madīnat al-Fāris)

As one mid-eighth-century letter-writer explains in a variation of the formula (see Example [8]), adding this phrase demonstrated the sender’s affection for and loyalty to the addressee.

- (8) كن اكتب إليّ بهيتك وحالك وكلّ حاجة تكون لك فأني ممّن أحبّ حفظه وصلته
(‘write me about your state and your condition and any need you might have, for you are amongst the people I want to cherish and have a friendly relation with’)

(P.MuslimState 29 ll. 24–25, eighth century, provenance Fayyūm)

As in Examples (6) and (7), the “courtesy request” for information that occurred in the closing section of letters between familiar correspondents was regularly supported by the expression “for I want this and it pleases me”. In the early papyrus epistolary corpus, similar expressions could also be added to demands that the addressee undertake some action on the sender’s behalf. In Examples (9) and (10) from eighth-century letters, the directive is formulated with regular imperatives followed by an expression of the sender’s desire that this request is fulfilled. By adding “for I want this” (or a variation), attention is shifted from the addressee and the demand made of them to the sender, who will be pleased by the fulfilment of their wish, highlighting the earnestness of the request.

- (9) فإن رأيت يا أختي أمتعني الله بك أن تذهبي أنت نفسك وتسألني عنها حتى تقدرني عليها
وتلقنيها فافعلي فإنّ ذلك حبيب إليّ
(‘so if you think it a good idea, my sister, may God give me enjoyment through you, that you yourself go and ask about her so that you can reach her and meet her, then do so, for that would be desirable to me.’)

(P.JoySorrow 23 ll. 24–28, eighth century, provenance Fustāt)

- (10) وانظر أن تبعث إليّ بما وجدت من فيه فأني أريد إن شاء الله أرازيق بيت والخزانة والدار
والغرفة

(‘and see to it to send me what you find at his place for I want, God willing, utensils for the apartment, the storage, the house and the room.’)

(P.David-WeillLouvre 12–13 ll. 16 right to 18 left, provenance Madīnat Fāris)

Senders regularly repeat their request, sometimes more than once, heightening the sense of urgency. Interestingly, when directives are repeated in a letter, only the first request tends to be followed by a statement expressing how pleased the sender would be if his request was fulfilled. Example (11) comes from a letter in which a sender is arranging for the hiring of riding animals and other supplies to

facilitate his and his family's pilgrimage to Mecca. The sender repeats his request that the recipient organises the hiring, adding that this would please him after the first directive only. Additional instructions pertaining to the hiring process operate as repetitions that further reinforce the immediacy of his demand.

- (11) وقد كتبت إليك وبعثت إليك عشرين دينارا فتكارا لي للحجّ إن شاء الله فقد أردت ذلك
(‘I am writing and sending you twenty dinars to hire (riding animals etc.) for
me for the pilgrimage, for I want that;’)¹⁰ (P.JoySorrow 37 ll. 5–7)

Another letter dating to between 730 and 750 similarly motivates the addressee to respond positively to the sender's demand by repeating it several times throughout the letter. Using a series of imperatives the sender instructs the recipient to execute several commercial transactions, amongst which the most important is to pay an outstanding debt to a third person. As Example (12) shows, the sender supported his request at the end of his letter with a strongly expressed desire to collect the total amount from the third person and thereby complete this business transaction.

- (12) وإنما نحبّ جمعه والراحة منه
(‘for we want to collect it and be done with it [literally ‘a rest from it’]’)
(P.MuslimState 26 l. 13 with corrections by Diem [2017: 14], provenance
Fayyūm)

The speaker-based declarative *I want* functions here as an indirect manifestation in Kohnen's (2008) classification of requests in combination with, and in support of, the simple imperatives used throughout the letter to formulate the same request. Similarly, in the strongly hierarchical administrative communication between the governor, Qurra ibn Sharīk (in office 709–715), and his subordinate, Basileios, head of the Upper Egyptian district of Ishqūh/Aphroditō (see Examples [13] and [14]), and the slightly later letters exchanged between Nājid ibn Muslim (in office c. 730–750), pagarch of the Fayyūm, to his subordinate, ‘Abd Allāh ibn As‘ad, responsible for a smaller district of the Fayyūm (see Example [15]), directives were expressed with (negative) imperatives and energetics whilst varied indirect versions of *I want* appeared in supporting moves. Examples (13) and (14) provide examples of the governor Qurra exhorting his inferior, Basileios, to execute his administrative tasks accurately and punctually, using verbs of *wanting*, *hoping* and *desiring*.

10. Khaled Younes, in the original edition, translated the last words “Because I wanted to do so”, suggesting it pertains to the sender's wish to undertake the pilgrimage, rather than his request to the addressee to rent animals and other supplies to undertake the hajj.

- (13) فَإِنِّي إِن أَجِدُ عِنْدَكَ الَّذِي أُرِيدُ مِنَ الْإِجْرَاءِ وَحَسَنَ الْجَلْبِ أَحْسَنَ إِلَيْكَ وَأَصِيبُكَ بِمَعْرُوفٍ وَأَسَدُّ لَكَ أَمْرًا وَعَمَلًا وَأَنَا أَرْجُو إِنْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ أَنْ يَكُونَ كَذَلِكَ
(‘and verily, if I find with you that which I want of regular remittance and satisfactory consignment [of the taxes], I will treat you well, show you favours, support your business and position. And I hope, God willing, that it will be like this’)

(P.BeckerNPAF 1 ll. 2–7, with a correction by Grohmann P.Cair.Arab. 146, 710, provenance Ishqūh/Aphroditō)

- (14) وَإِنِّي لَا أَحِبُّ أَنْ يَرَى أَحَدٌ فِي عَمَلِكَ شَيْئًا يَكْرَهُهُ مِنْ عَجْزٍ وَلَا تَأْخِيرٍ وَلَا يَبْطُلُ فَإِنِّي قَدْ بَعَثْتُكَ حِينَ بَعَثْتُكَ عَلَى عَمَلِكَ وَأَنَا أَرْجُو أَنْ تَكُونَ عِنْدَكَ أَمَانَةٌ وَأَجْرَاءٌ وَتَنْفِذٌ لِلْعَمَلِ
(‘and I do not want that anyone notices in your work anything that he disapproves of, namely incapacity or delay. For I sent you, when I dispatched you to your post, while I hoped that there would be dependability, regular remittance and punctual execution of your work’)

(P.BeckerNPAF 1 ll. 16–22, 710, provenance Ishqūh/Aphroditō)

When Nājid ibn Muslim was asked by a third person to buy fifteen dinars worth of wheat, he passed this request on to his subordinate, ‘Abd Allāh ibn As‘ad, using the expression given as Example (15).

- (15) فَأَحْبَبْتُ أَنْ أَكْتُبَ إِلَيْكَ أَنْ تَلِيَ ذَلِكَ مِنْهُ
(‘so I wanted to write you that you take care of this for him’)

(P.MuslimState 20 ll. 8–10, c. 730–750, provenance Fayyūm)¹¹

These examples show that, in seventh- and eighth-century Arabic papyrus letters, *I want* was conventionalised for exhortations that primarily benefited the addressee, as a supportive expression in the conventionalised polite request to inform the addressee and convey any needs in the final greeting section between close correspondents. It followed or was in support of requests between familiar correspondents and in hierarchical relations formulated with simple imperatives in the body of the letter. Outside these contexts, “I want you to do X” was used in early papyrus letters for brusquely formulated requests. A seventh-century draft of a letter between two business associates demonstrates this well. As was customary in early letters, the text starts with a prescript, albeit an unusually short one (for other examples of early letters lacking one or more elements of the invocation, see Grob [2010: 41 n. 45]). Before the transitional element *ammā ba’d* (‘for what is

11. The addition *aḥbabtu ilāmaka dhālaka/aḥbabtu an u’limaka dhālaka* (‘I wanted to inform you of this’) in Arabic papyrus letters after mentions of the sender’s well-being in the opening formulae and after other announcements, seems similarly to reinforce the remark. Cf. YounesLetters 1 ll. 4–5, 19; P.JoySorrow 23 ll. 21–22, both eighth century; RāḡibLettres 19 v7, eighth to ninth century; P.Berl.Arab. 11 29 l. 8; 59 l. 8; 61 l. 9, all ninth century.

after'), that signalled the end of the prescript and the beginning of the body of the letter, however, the sender states:

- (16) وَأَنْتِي وَاللَّهِ مَا أَحَبُّ أَنْ تَرَدَّ عَلَيَّ فِي شَيْءٍ مَا دَمْتُ حَيًّا
(‘and I, by God, do not want you to disagree with me about anything as long as
you live!’) (P.DiemRemarkableDocuments 1 ll. v. 3–4)

Using *I want* in the opening order, which immediately followed a short address and greeting, and omits the usual opening eulogy, sets the tone of this blunt letter.

Papyri from the ninth century attest a different use of *I want* in polite requests from a speaker-based declarative as an indirect manifestation (i.e., “I want X”) to a performative (i.e., “I want you to do X”), following Kohnen’s (2008) classification of directives. Whilst imperatives continued to form the most common way to formulate directives in papyrus letters throughout, “I want you to do X” regularly introduced a request that the addressee undertake some action for the sender’s benefit, especially in cases where this could be expected, in extraordinary requests that required more cautious framing, and in less carefully formulated requests. These were so commonplace that they should be understood as standard constructions of common directives formulated with “I want you to do X”, or conventional politeness (Grob 2010: 28–32, 121–123). This constituted a shift in meaning of *I want* from a genuine desire which made it unsuitable for directives except in indirect manifestations in the seventh and eighth centuries to a conventionalised polite way to instruct the recipient with a performative in ninth-century Arabic papyrus letters.

Different strategies could be applied to mitigate the sense of imposition that the directive “I want you to do X” might engender. Instances include parenthetical elements such as slide-in blessings, constituting a single blessing on the addressee, invocations such as *in shā’a allāh* (‘God willing’), oaths (‘by God’) or expressions directly addressing the recipient (‘o Abū al-Faḍl’, ‘o lord’ and ‘o my sister’). In other cases, a verb was added such as *an tatafaḍḍala* (‘that you would be so kind’), *in shi’ta* (‘if you want’) and *in ra’ayta* (‘if you think it is a good idea’). Another commonly encountered hedge was the addition of *in shā’a allāh* (‘God willing’) after the request (Grob 2010: 57–62). Placed between *I want* and the content of the request, these phrases literally created a buffer on the page between the sender and the required action. In Example (17) different mitigating parenthetical elements are combined.

- (17) أَحَبُّ مِنْكَ أَكْرَمَكَ اللَّهُ أَنْ تَتَفَضَّلَ تَوَجَّهَ إِلَيَّ دَفَاتِرَ مَلَّاحٍ أَكُونُ أَقْرَأُ فِيهَا
(‘I want from you, may God honour you, that you are so kind to forward to me
some nice notebooks for me to read in’)
(P.Cair.Arab. 309 ll. r 5–7, with corrections by Diem [2012: 46]).

Interestingly, when a request was repeated in a letter, the first attestation used mitigations such as slide-in-blessings, invocations and additional verbs, whilst these were frequently omitted in subsequent repetitions of the request. A good example is the letter exchanged between two administrative officers with a request to verify some information on behalf of a third person. The sender asks the recipient to forward the verified surface measure of a piece of land using a slide-in-blessing after *I want* and repeating the request at the end of the letter without any mitigating remarks.

(18) قد أحببت أكرمك الله أن تكتب إلي بصحة مساحة الجنان الذي عند إسحاق الذي باسم عبد الله

(‘I would like you, may God honour you, to write me the verified area of the land which Ishāq is using, (but) which is (registered) under ‘Abd Allāh’s name;’ and you deliver the report so that it is known’)¹²

(P.David-Weill/Louvre 2 ll. 3–7; 9–10)

Adherence to a recognisable and conventionalised template in a letter section consisting of an introductory formula is another mitigating strategy. In Example (18), for instance, “I would like you” is followed by a parenthetical element in second place, in this case “may God honour you” before the topic of the request. *Qad* appears here not in its traditional grammatical function of temporal or aspectual modification (Wright 1898: I Section 362 z), but as discourse-structuring, thereby contributing to heavy coding (Grob 2010: 136–145).

4. Requests between equals

Requests formulated as “I want you to do X” are frequently attested in exchanges where the actions being demanded are to be expected, such as between business associates or close friends and family relations. In these contexts, “I want you to do X” could be used without mitigating expressions.

In some remarkable papyri, a correspondence can be traced beyond the single letter. This is the case of a ninth-century papyrus which contains the letter from a son to his father and the latter’s reply on the back of the same sheet. In his letter, the son insists that his father urgently pay the workmen on their vineyard who have come to the son to complain that their compensation has been delayed. The father replies that he can only pay the workmen (and his agricultural taxes due) by selling the wine that remains on the estate. Consequently, he needs the son to help him, as he writes:

12. Ed. princeps has: “et vous avez délivré le rapport pour qu’il en ait connaissance”.

- (19) وبِحَقِّي عليك إلّا ما داريت الأمر حتّى أبيع هذا النبيذ وأؤذي خراج الكرم وأدفع إلى كلّ واحد
 حَقُّه إن شاء الله
 ('and by my right over you, take care of the situation so that I sell the wine, pay
 the land-tax for the vineyard and give everyone what they are entitled to, God
 willing') (P.ReinfandtWeingutbesitzer verso ll. 6–7, provenance Ihnās)

The father mentions this explanation and justification for his delay in paying out the salaries three times in his reply to the son's admonition, but also to support his own urgent request that the son help him to organise the wine sale. Later in the letter the father adds more specific instructions:

- (20) وأحبّ أن تكتري قارب وتحمل فيه هذا النبيذ الذي بقي إن شاء الله
 ('I want you to hire a boat and to carry in it this wine that remains, God
 willing') (P.ReinfandtWeingutbesitzer verso ll. 9–10, provenance Ihnās)

"By doing this for me, you can be part of the solution to the problem you raised in your letter" the father seems to suggest. The urgency of the father's reasoned request and the familiar relationship between father and son obviates the need for mitigating parenthetical elements. The invocation "God willing" appears in this letter at the end of every reference to a future event, including actions to be undertaken by the sender, as it does in the instructions for the addressee in Examples (19) and (20). Repetition of the request reinforces the sender's sincerity. Another letter-writer formulates his request at first sight rather abruptly:

- (21) فأنا أحبّ أن تأخذ ذلك منه والكتاب إليّ بالذي يدفع إليه
 ('so I want that you to take that from him and write me what is paid to him')
 (P.RagibLocation ll. 9–11, provenance Fustāt)

The sender explains that Abū Ja'far claims to have paid the two dinars "minus a little bit" that were due for the rent of a room belonging to the sender to a certain Zayd, son of Muḏāḥim. The sender had subsequently instructed Zayd to remit the money to Yāsir, informing him that the dinars were intended for the maintenance of the sender's dependants. Now it is the addressee's task to pick up the money from Yāsir and inform the sender of the exact amount that Abū Ja'far has transferred, so that he can reclaim any outstanding dues from Abū Ja'far directly. The sender further asks the addressee, using an imperative, to look out for a new renter for the room, trying to rent it out for "eight, seven or even six dinar, but not to let it stand vacant". Within the relationship of the interlocutors – the addressee being in charge of looking after the sender's financial affairs – the directive is to be expected which is mirrored in its unmitigated formulation.

In letters exchanged between traders, requests were similarly regularly formulated simply as "I want you to do X" without any slide-in-blessings or other mitigating expressions. In a ninth-century letter, the sender combines extensive

opening and closing blessings which take up two-thirds of the letter with a request formulated as an unmitigated performative.

- (22) أَحَبُّ أَنْ تُوَجَّهَ إِلَيَّ بِدِينَارِ السَّاعَةِ مَكَانَ عَرَضْتُ
(‘I want that you immediately send me a dinar at the place I indicated’)
(P.RagibLettres 18b verso ll. 5–6)

In an exchange between Abū Hurayra and Abū al-Ḥasan, two commercial partners in the textile trade in the ninth-century Fayyūm, who were also brothers-in-law, Abū Hurayra emphasised that it was exactly because of their close relationship that they could tell each other freely how they felt. The letter consists of two parts. First, Abū Hurayra referred to some disagreement between them stating that even though Abū al-Ḥasan would never succeed in making Abū Hurayra change his mind and agree with him, he would nevertheless continue to consult with Abū al-Ḥasan and strive to please him. Abū Hurayra closed this part of his letter with a statement of their close relationship.

- (23) وَأَرْجُو أَنْ تُصِيرَ إِلَى مَا تُحِبُّ وَلَا تُخَالِفُنِي إِنْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ إِنِّي حَرِيصٌ عَلَى سُرُورِكَ وَسُرُورِ
يَسْرَتِكَ سُرُورِهِ
(‘I hope that things turn out as you want and that you do not disagree with me, God willing, for I strive for your happiness and the happiness of the one whose happiness makes you happy’)
(P.Marchands 11 30, l. recto 7, provenance Fayyūm)

Next Abū Hūrayra turns to another matter. Abū Ṣāliḥ, a business associate or agent of the two merchants, had informed Abū Hurayra that he wanted to buy cloth but that Abū al-Ḥasan had been tardy in bringing the textiles (?). Rather than reprimanding Abū al-Ḥasan, Abū Hurayra urges him to make sure he closes the deal by pressuring Abū Ṣāliḥ who might be inclined to delay.

- (24) وَأَنَا أَحْبَبْتُ عَنَانِيَّتَكَ لِتُحْزِكَ أَبَا صَالِحٍ أَكْرَمَهُ اللَّهُ لِتُعَجِّلَهُ فَإِنَّهُ رُبَّمَا مَدَّ فِي الْحَاجَةِ
(‘And I want you to take care [literally: I want your attention] to motivate Abū Ṣāliḥ and urge him [to purchase the cloth] because perhaps he is delaying the matter’)
(P.Marchands 11 30, l. recto 9, provenance Fayyūm)¹³

Between these two close family and business relations, requests were exchanged without the need for mitigating expressions using *I want*, together with the more regularly attested imperatives. When behaviour did not meet expectations within the relationship, the formulation “I want you to do X” could be used. In another letter, also between textile merchants in the Fayyūm, the sender, who calls the

13. Ed. princeps has *ليعجله* translating this as “afin qu’il s’empresse (de l’acheter)”. It seems more likely that the pronoun *hu* here refers to Abū Ṣāliḥ rather than the fabric, which in the next line is referred to with the feminine pronoun *hā*.

recipient “my brother”, shares at the outset of his letter his exasperation at handling the recipient’s affairs.

- (25) فوالله ما ربحت عليك فيها شيئا وما أخذت إلا بغضب
 (‘by God, it [selling your goods] did not earn me anything and it was difficult
 to get rid of it’) (P.Marchands v/1 9, ll. recto 6–7, provenance Fayyūm)

His chagrin about the situation is reflected in the formulations of his directives as “I want that you do X” – rather than the more common imperative – without mitigating expressions.¹⁴ The letter is peppered with oaths “by God” and “by my entitlement to you”, including the ominous variant shown in Example (26).

- (26) فبحقِّي عليك يا أبو علي إن اختلفتني
 (‘by my right over you, Abū ‘Alī, if you disagree with me’)¹⁵
 (P.Marchands v/1 9 l. recto 13, provenance Fayyūm)

In another ninth-century example, the sender of a letter accompanies his request, formulated with an unmitigated *I want*, with a threat. The sender of this letter is involved in some partnership with the addressee but had lost track of his profit share from some transactions the addressee has undertaken without informing him.

- (27) أحب أن يتعين الحال بيني وبينك وإلا والله خفت أن أغفك غاية الغم
 (‘I want there to be complete transparency between us, and if not, I fear I will
 have to create terrible circumstances for you’) (P.Berl.Arab. II 56 ll. 11–13)

Conversely, requests that required additional force were supported by language and phrases that added an extra layer of persuasion. One very long letter that, amidst a host of commercial exchanges, delicately broaches a sensitive matter, is a case in point. The sender has detected irregularities in his accounts, for which he believes an associate, a certain Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ, who appears elsewhere in the letter, is responsible. Example (28) contains the addressee’s request that the sender confront Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ, which is supported by the explanation that the addressee should act as requested because of his special relationship with Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ and by the reward that the sender will ask God to bestow on the addressee.

14. Whether Arabic commercial letters on papyrus show the same characteristics of “professional equality” that allowed for a certain bluntness in epistolary exchanges on paper (Goldberg 2012: 74) remains to be determined.

15. Ed. princeps: “ne me contrecarre pas”.

- (28) ولم أحب جعلت فداءك أن الأمر لمحمد بن صالح في أخذ حسابه وأحببت أن تأمر بالنظر فيه
 هناك فيما استخرج وأنفق ومحمد بن صالح قدس الله قبلك من أعظم الناس لك شكر
 وأحسنه قول وثناء والله أسأل أن يزيد في نعمائه عندك وفضله لديك
 ('I do not want, may I be made your ransom, to handle Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ's
 case, but rather I want you to order him to be examined there [i.e., by you]
 concerning what he collected and expended. For Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ, may
 God bless your presence, is among the most grateful to you and someone who
 speaks most warmly in your praise and I will ask for God's blessings and favours
 on you') (P.Bodl.Arab. 2 ll. 18–21)

The letter ends with an unusual expression of the sender's commitment to the addressee's well-being (see Example [29]).

- (29) وأرجو أن يعين الله على بلوغ رضاك فما أخذ نفسي لك بذلك
 ('and I hope that God will help me to accomplish your pleasure, for that consti-
 tutes my utmost desire') (P.Bodl.Arab. 2 ll. 36–37)

The expressions of close ties between the sender and addressee, and the addressee and Muḥammad ibn Ṣāliḥ, whose case is under review, support the request being formulated as "I (do not) want", because help is expected in a close relationship and the help offered strengthens such relationships. The multiple slide-in-blessings, including those in second place, which are in keeping with the conventionalised template followed in Arabic papyrus letters, mitigate the imposition of the request.

5. Requests in authoritative relationships

Another category of exchanges, whereby a positive response to a request is somehow anticipated, are petition letters containing extraordinary requests, and letters interceding on someone else's behalf or recommending someone. The requests are extraordinary because they do not belong to the regularly exchanged directives between close commercial or familial correspondents. The senders of these letters appeal to relationships of social inter-dependency and the resulting obligation to offer support. The commitment was, however, not guaranteed and letter-writers use various strategies of entreaty to remind their interlocutors of the rights and duties such socially inter-dependent relationships entailed, resorting to expressions of *I want* to express this entitlement as a form of what Jucker (2026), in his contribution to this volume, calls "supplication politeness".

Thus, we encounter frequently statements affirming the close relationship between the correspondents or, in the case of recommendation or intercession letters, with the person for whom help or a favour is asked. In a late ninth-century

intercession letter, the sender explains that the man hand-delivering his letter, called ‘Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, was due his land-tax. Apparently, he had difficulty paying it and was looking for some relief, which the addressee of this letter might be able to offer. The sender explains in his letter why ‘Abd Allāh has come to him for help, namely because of the sender’s good relationship with the addressee. Not only does this good relationship between the correspondents oblige the addressee to respond positively to the sender’s request, which is formulated as *I want*, doing so strengthens the ties of mutual inter-dependence between them.

- (30) لما يعرف من الحال بيني وبينك فأحب أعزك الله أن تعنا به وتقوم بحاجته وعليه خراج فأحب أطل الله بقاءك أن تأمر برفقه والصبر عليه حتى يتأتى له دفعه بمرحب لا بضرة وتقلدني في ذلك ما أشكرك عليه

(‘because he knows that you and I have a close relationship, so I want, may God strengthen you, that you look after him and take care of his need for he owes land-tax. And I want, may God prolong your life, that you order that he is shown friendliness and patience so that he can pay it [the taxes] easily, not under pressure. By doing so, you would do me a favour for which I would be thankful to you’)

(P.Hamb.Arab. II 17 ll. 6–9, provenance Armant, corrections by Diem [2006: 22])

Similarly, the sender of a letter asking the addressee to bring him an amount of dinars at a specific address and accompany him to someone’s house ends his *I want* request by stating:

- (31) وأرجو يثيبك الله بعنائك لنا الجنة معما يجب لك علينا من الشكر
(‘I hope that God will reward your efforts on our behalf with paradise, besides the gratitude that we will owe you’)

(P.Khalili I 19 ll. 19–21, corrections Diem [1994: 87])

Such demonstrations of gratitude were more than verbal expressions of thanks. The exchange of favours in response to requests fostered relationships of social inter-dependency which assigned rights and responsibilities to the parties involved. This is succinctly expressed by the writer of an intercession letter in Example (32).

- (32) إن صاحب كتابي إليك له مني ناحية أحب لها حفظه وإرفاقه
(‘I care for the one delivering this letter to you and therefore I want him to be protected and treated well’)

(P.RaghibLettres 14 ll. recto 3–4)

The sender feels obliged to help the letter-bearer because of their relationship and hence writes on his behalf to the addressee. But he also wants the letter-bearer to

realise how he benefits from this connection with the sender, and we can see this in Example (33) from the same letter.

- (33) فَأَحَبُّ أَنْ تَعْرِفَ لَهُ مَا أَعْلَمْتُكَ مِنْ حَالِهِ عِنْدِي وَتَسْتَوْصِي بِهِ وَتَحْفَظْهُ وَتَوَلِّيهُ مَعْرُوفًا حَتَّى
يَعْرِفَ أَثَرَ مَنَفْعَةِ كِتَابِي إِلَيْكَ فِيهِ
(‘I want you to let him know what I told you concerning his relationship with
me, that you take care of him, protect him and show him kindness so that he
realises the profitable effect of my letter to you about him.’)
(P.RaghibLettres 14 ll. recto 6–9)

By fulfilling the sender’s request, the addressee secured the ties of inter-dependency that bound himself and the letter-bearer, himself and the sender, and the sender and the letter-bearer. All these connections could be activated to obtain future favours. By laying out these (future) inter-connections, the sender, moreover, demonstrated his social capital as an additional argument to support his request. The sender mentions his request that the addressee take care of his acquaintance three times in his letter, emphasising his sincerity in wanting to resolve the letter-bearer’s predicament. In (papyrus) letters of entreaty such as this one invoking relationships of inter-dependency in Latin, Coptic and ancient Greek, urgency and pressure were similarly appealed to, to increase the chance that the request would be granted (Dickey 2012: 323–325, 2016: 239–243; Kotsifou 2012).

Letter-writers called upon their relationship with the addressee to ask for a restitution of rights that they assumed these ties entitled them to, but that they felt had been lacking at the moment that they were writing their letter. The following letter-writer complains that the addressee did not come to see him or even ask about him when he was ill, calling upon God to help him (instead?), as an introduction to his request. He uses several mitigation strategies such as adding a verb and ending his directive with the invocation “God willing”.

- (34) وَأَحَبُّ أَنْ تَتَفَضَّلَ تَأْمُرَ غَلَامَكَ أَنْ يَشْتَرِيَ لِي أَفِينًا عَلَى حَسَابِي وَمَالِي إِنْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ
(‘and I want you to be so kind and order your slave to buy me opium on my
account and at my cost, God willing’)
(P.Ryl.Arab. I VI 18 ll. 8–10)

These letter-writers demanded the help to which they felt their relationships of social dependency gave them a claim and which they voiced, rather fittingly, with the otherwise frequently used expression *I want* to articulate indignation for urgency and entitlement.

A group of papyrus letters that combine *I want* requests with technical language from the petitions submitted to government officials similarly appeal to pre-negotiated rights and obligations, in this case resulting from the relation

between rulers and subjects (Rustow 2020; Sijpesteijn 2022). The standard expression, *in ra'ayta an ... fa'alta/fa-if'al muwafaqqan* ('if you think it is a good idea, then do so and be successful') or variants thereof (Khan 1990a), form hybrid formulations of request in petition letters and other letters.

When a sender asks an addressee to deliver a letter to a third person, he formulates it as in Example (35).

- (35) فَأَحَبُّ أَنْ تَأْمُرَ بِإِيصَالِهِ إِلَيْهِ وَتَأْخُذَ جَوَابَهُ وَتَنْفِذَهُ إِلَى مَا قَبْلِي فَإِنِّي أَسْرَ بِذَلِكَ فَعَلْتُ إِنْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ

('I want you to deliver it to him, take his answer, and send that to me, for that would please me, then do so, God willing')

(CPR XVI 29, ll. 8–9, ninth–tenth century)

In another letter, the sender asks the addressee to intercede for him and his agent by ordering a village administrator to permit the sender's agent to winnow wheat, take away the grain, but leave the chaff, using the expression:

- (36) إِنْ رَأَيْتَ أَبْقَاكَ اللَّهُ أَنْ تَأْمُرَ ...
(‘if you think it is a good idea, may God preserve you, to order...’)

(CPR XVI 15 l. 4)

At the end of the same letter the sender asks the addressee to allow him to repay an outstanding debt in the future, using different formulations:

- (37) وَالَّذِي عَلَيْنَا أَكْرَمَكَ اللَّهُ فِي [...] فَإِنْ رَأَيْتَ أَنْ تَوْقِفَ إِلَيَّ ذَلِكَ وَإِنْ رَأَيْتَ غَيْرَ ذَلِكَ [...] فُلُو
كَانَ الَّذِي عَلَيْنَا فِيهَا مَوْقِفٌ [...] وَأَحَبُّ أَبْقَاكَ اللَّهُ أَنْ تَكُونَ مِنْ ذَلِكَ بَعِيدٌ وَتَتَوَكَّدَ عَلَى صَاحِبِكَ
فِي ذَلِكَ مُوَفَّقًا إِنْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ

('and that which we owe, may God honour you of [...] and if you think it is a good idea that it is postponed and if you do not think it is a good idea [...]. If only that what we owe would be postponed [...]. I want, may God preserve you, that you abstain from this [idea that the debt should be repaid immediately] and urge your colleague to do so as well, and be successful, God willing')

(CPR XVI 15 l. 8–14)

As in this letter, petition letters often use *in ra'ayta* ('if you think it a good idea') together with *I want*. The sender of the following letter, obviously feeling that his demands might be unhelpfully confrontational, repeats the request in his letter once with and once without mitigating expressions.

- (38) إن رأيت أبقاك الله أن تتفضل بدفع باقي الحساب فأني محتاج إليه وليس عندي سعة ويعز علي أن أتقضا منك حتى كنت أنت الذي تدفع إلي الذي يكون عندك فأحب أن تقضي حاجتي وتسعني بها

(‘If you think it a good idea that you would be so kind to pay the remainder of the account, for I need it and I do not have anything. I find it difficult to ask it from you and I would have preferred to wait until you paid me at your own initiative from what you have. And I want you to solve my need and help me out.’)
(P.ShahinBitte ll. 3–7)

As in this letter, many of the directives concern the payment of debts and rents and the accompanying softeners take the form of justifications and explanations, whilst additional verbs reflect the prevalence of borrowing practices amongst close relations, whom it is difficult to confront with unpleasant demands.¹⁶ Note how a creditor of the substantial amount of twenty dinars formulates it in Example (39).

- (39) وقد أردت مع الله بك أن تدفع إلي عشرين دينار فإن حاجة فكرت عملي وإني تعبت إليك وأنا مستحق منك

(‘I want, may God give me enjoyment through you, that you pay me twenty dinars, for a need reminded me of my work [for you] and I turn to you, although I am ashamed from you [because I have to ask you for the money]’)
(P.Khalili 134 ll. 4–8)

Lifted from the “official” petitions, the *in ra’ayta* (‘if you think it a good idea’) formula introduced in the papyrus letters retained its association with government rule and invoked the moral expectations governing the petition procedure (Rustow 2020: 219–221).

When behaviour fell short of what was expected within a relationship, letter-writers pointed this out, resorting to “I want you to do X” requests to express their desire about how the situation should be repaired. This can be seen, for instance, in the letter (see Example [40]) from a certain Khālid son of Ḥasan to Ibrāhīm, whose lack of patronymic might point to his enslaved status (Rāḡib 1996). Khālid is concerned about an order of animals for the slaughter feast that he placed with a third person called Abū Yazīd, who, Khālid writes, claimed that he would leave the animals with Ibrāhīm. Khālid urgently asks Ibrāhīm to inform him about the status of the order in case he has to obtain a slaughter animal himself. Khālid’s letter lacks the customary opening and closing greetings and blessings, and the sender formulates his request without any slide-in-blessings, instead calling upon Ibrāhīm directly two times and repeating his request to be informed about the status of his order at least five times throughout the letter.

16. I thank Arietta Papaconstantinou for this insight.

(40) بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ مِنْ خَالِدِ بْنِ حَسَنٍ إِلَى إِبْرَاهِيمَ سَلَامٌ وَإِنْ أَبُو يَزِيدٍ كَانَ قَالَ لَنَا إِنْ
يَشْتَرِي لَنَا بَدِينَارَ جَزْرٍ أَضْحَانًا فَلَا نَدْرِي اشْتَرَاهُ لَنَا أَوْ لَا وَقَالَ أَتْرَكَهُ عِنْدَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَتَّى إِذَا كَانَ
أَوَانُ الْأَضْحَا يَأْتِيَكُمْ بِهِ إِنْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ فَإِنْ كَانَ لَمْ يَشْتَرِ شَيْئًا فَارْتَبِ إِيَّانَا يَا إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَعَجَلْ
اكَتُبْ فَنَشْتَرِي نَجْدَةً وَإِنَّا نَحِبُّ نَعْلَمُ إِنْ كَانَ اشْتَرَى أَمْ لَا وَإِنْ كَانَ لَمْ يَشْتَرِ فَارْتَبُوا إِلَيْنَا
تَشْتَرِي هُنَا وَلَا نَتَوَكَّلُ عَلَيْهِ وَهُوَ لَمْ يَشْتَرِ شَيْئًا فَإِنِّي أَحِبُّ أَنْ تَعْلَمَنِي ذَاكَ لَعَلَّهُ نَسِيَ أَنْ يَشْتَرِي
وَالسَّلَامَ وَارْتَبِ تَسْتَوْصُ يَا إِبْرَاهِيمَ بِالْأَوَابِ كُلِّهِمْ إِذَا لَا يَلُومُكَ أَبِي فِي شَيْءٍ وَارْتَبِ إِلَيْنَا
كَيْفَ حَالُ الْأَوَابِ

(‘In the name of God, the Compassionate and Merciful. From Khālid son of Ḥasan to Ibrāhīm. Greetings. Abū Yazīd told us that he would buy us for one dinar sheep for our slaughter feast. But we do not know whether he bought it for us or not. He said:¹⁷ “I will leave it with Ibrāhīm, so that when the feast arrives, he will bring it to you, God willing.” So if he did not buy anything, write us Ibrāhīm, and do so quickly, so that we buy a lamb [ourselves]. We want to know whether he bought [it] or not. And if he did not buy [it], write us so that we buy [it] here and do not count on him, since he did not buy anything¹⁸ and I want you to inform me of that. Perhaps he forgot to buy it. Greetings. Write that you take care, Ibrāhīm, of all the animals, then my father will not blame you for anything. Write us what is happening with the animals.’)

(P.RaghibLettres 19, eighth to ninth century)

Whilst requests are regularly repeated in letters, Khālid’s persistence, including two references after the final greeting as a postscript, exceeds what is expected in this context. At the end of the letter, Khālid even adds a threat: if Ibrāhīm does not deal satisfactorily with the issue of the missing slaughter animal, the latter’s father will blame him for it. The grim tone of the letter is supported by the lack of customary opening and closing formulae, and the absence of softening slide-in-blessings or additional verbs in the *I want* formula. Whether warranted by a hierarchical master–slave relationship or because the sender is upset about the uncertainty of his order having been executed, the entire letter is confrontational.

In another letter the sender uses *uḥibbu* (‘I want’) when introducing the request that the addressee change his behaviour, using a veiled threat to convince them.

17. Rāgib translates this as an indirect quote (‘Il a dit qu’il la laisserait chez Ibrāhīm jusqu’à l’arrivée...’), but since the letter is directed to Ibrāhīm it is more likely that Abū Yazīd is quoted directly here.

18. Rāgib translates this as a separate conditional sentence (‘S’il n’a rien acheté, j’aimerais que tu m’apprennes ceci’ [‘If he did not buy anything, I would like you to let me know this’]), but there is no word indicating the conditional.

- (41) بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ مَدَّ اللَّهُ فِي عَمْرِكَ وَأَكْرَمَكَ وَأَتَمَّ نِعْمَهُ عَلَيْكَ إِنَّ الَّذِي مَنَعَنِي أَكْرَمَكَ
اللَّهُ مِنْ تَقَاضِيكَ ثَقُفْتِي بِكَ وَمَا أَوْفَلَهُ مِنْ حِرْصِكَ عَلَى سِرُّوْنَا وَاللَّهُ يَبْقِيكَ وَقَدْ عَرَفْتَ عَنَائِي
وَحِرْصِي عَلَى بَرِّكَ فَأَحَبُّ أَحَبِّكَ اللَّهُ أَنْ تَتَفَضَّلَ عَلَيَّ بِمَا أَنْتَ أَهْلُهُ كَمَا كَانَ هَذَا رَجَائِي فِيكَ
وَلَقَدْ كُنْتُ تَوَعَّدُنِي فِي مَحَبَّتِكَ أَكْثَرَ مِنْ جَمِيعٍ وَلَدَكَ فَتَفَضَّلْ بِمَا أَنْتَ أَهْلُهُ مَدَّ اللَّهُ عَمْرَكَ وَأَدَامَ
مَحَبَّتَكَ

(‘In the name of God, the Compassionate and Merciful. May God prolong your life, honour you and bestow His favours on you. What prevented me, may God honour you, from taking you to court to retrieve my money is my trust in you and your endeavour to please me which I hope for, may God let you live long as you know about my interest in you and my commitment to treating you honourably. So, I desire, may God desire you, that you would be so kind as to treat me in the way that can be expected from someone like you, as this is my urgent request to you. You have promised me your love more than all your children. So be so kind as to act as someone like you is expected to. May God prolong your life and let your love continue.’) (CPR XVI 26)

Based on the formulae and script, this letter can be dated to the late-eighth or early-ninth century (Diem 1993: 13). The sender uses *I want* to formulate a directive, but without giving explicit instructions to undertake some action for their benefit of the type “I want you to do X”. The addressee’s assignment is, nevertheless, obvious: they should give the sender back his money. Contrasting his own proper behaviour with the addressee’s laxness, threatening to take the addressee to court, and repeating his call that the addressee behave as he is supposed to, clearly puts pressure on the addressee. Similar language, including the threat to take the addressee to court if he does not pay up, occurs in the ninth-century letter that ‘Alī son of al-Ḥabīb sent to his business associate, Abū Ja‘far, shown in Example (42).

- (42) قَدْ أَحْبَبْتُ أَحَبَّكَ اللَّهُ أَنْ تَبْعَثَ إِلَيَّ بِكُمُ الْكَثَّانَ وَثَمْنَهُ وَلَا تَدْعُ ذَلِكَ وَقَدْ كُنْتُ أَوْعَدْتُنِي أَنْ
تَدْفَعَهُ إِلَيَّ قَبْلَ نَخْرَجَ وَلَمْ أُرِيدَ اتِّقَاضَاكَ بِالْفُسْطَاطِ وَتَحَقَّلْتُ لِي أَنَّكَ تَدْفَعُهُ مِنْ نَفْسِكَ قَبْلَ
اتِّقَاضَاكَ فَأَحَبُّ أَنْ تَبْعَثَ بِهِ إِلَيَّ إِنْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ
(‘I want you, may God love [want] you, to send me the amount of flax or¹⁹ its price, and do not delay this. You had promised me to deliver it to me before I would leave. I did not want to take you to court in Fuṣṭāṭ and you guaranteed to that you would pay it yourself before I would take you to court. So I want you to send it to me God willing.’) (P.Berl.Arab. II 57 ll. 3–5)

In these three letters, the senders confront the addressees with a service that they were supposed to deliver, based on agreements made or reasonable expectations, but neglected, employing the otherwise frequently used expression *I want* for impoliteness.

19. Diem considered the writing *aw* (‘or’) to have been a mistake for *wa* (‘and’).

6. Conclusion

Analysing requests in Arabic papyrus letters formulated with expressions of *I want* based on the roots *ḥbb* and *rwd* in the light of politeness theory helps us to understand contextualised epistolary strategies of persuasion operating in early medieval Egypt. By tracing the occurrences of *ḥbb/rwd*, we can begin to connect patterns of normative discourse to historical processes and cultural patterns. The use of the expression “I want (you to do) X” to formulate directives in Arabic papyrus letters was tied to genre conventions and power relations and its application changed over time. Its politeness meaning, in other words, was conditioned by time and place, moving from being a genuine – face-threatening – desire to being a conventionally polite request formula.

Attestations of *I want* using a form of *ḥbb* or *rwd* are deployed in different ways in the papyrological epistolary corpus, highlighting the development from a genuine expression of the sender’s desire, which was apparently deemed inappropriate or insufficient justification for directives, to a conventionally polite way to express requests.²⁰ In papyrus letters from the seventh and eighth centuries, requests formulated as “I want you to do X (for me or a third person)” occur only, and very seldomly, in “rude” letters. Rather, when using *I want*, letter-writers generally refer to actions that the addressee is invited to undertake for his or her own benefit. Although the desired actions are formulated in some early Arabic papyrus letters as “I want that the situation will be X”, whereby the addressee’s role in achieving X is obvious, they are most regularly expressed with simple imperatives. Similar formulations that ask the addressee indirectly to undertake some action appear in ninth-century letters, albeit in much smaller numbers than in seventh- and eighth-century letters (e.g., P.Berl.Arab. 11 80 and RagibLettres 14, both dating to the ninth century).

Starting in the ninth century, however, requests in situations where a positive reply can be expected, such as between close family members, friends and business relations, become commonly formulated as “I want you to do X”, whereby X benefits the sender. Such directives were generally accompanied by mitigating expressions: parenthetical elements such as slide-in blessings for the addressee, invocations and oaths, and addressing the addressee, additional verbs, or the conditional statement “God willing” added after the directive. Requests were often repeated in letters using slightly different forms. Typically, the first occurrence

20. The formulation of requests in middle to early modern English similarly underwent changes from conventionally being expressed as the speaker’s desire, to involving the addressee’s co-operation and, finally, into conventionalised “politeness markers” (Taavitsainen and Jucker 2008: 8).

was accompanied with the largest number of mitigating expressions, whilst subsequent references were more to the point, omitting even the “standard” slide-in blessing. This raises two important points. First, it shows that Arabic papyrus letters, which have often been described as being composed in an *ad hoc* and unstructured manner, formed one whole wherein seemingly unrelated elements were in fact parts of one coherent composition (see Grob [2010: 23–25]). Secondly, the use of requests formulated as *I want* varied, and the expression took on a different form, position and role in Arabic papyrus letters depending on the function of the request, the time of composition and its place in the letter.

Base requests were phrased in ninth-century Arabic papyrus letters with the bare *I want* in cases that concerned pre-negotiated rights and obligations. Social ties that were generally accepted as conferring mutual obligations were those between merchants, family members and close relations. Many requests in these contexts are formulated with “I want you to do X” although other expressions occur often as well.

More delicate calls for help, such as for intercession or reference letters and petition letters presenting extraordinary requests, involved an intricate embedding of the directive. Rather than dealing with institutionalised rights, the letter-writers operated in an arena where power was constantly negotiated through relationships of social inter-dependency (Mottahedeh 2001: 40–96; Rustow 2014; Hayes and Sijpesteijn 2024), and this activated responsibilities and rights for the people involved. The letter-writers point to these obligations and demand that their correspondents live up to them. Some letter-writers appeal to relationships of social inter-dependency to cultivate a sense of reciprocal closeness and intimacy with their correspondents, whilst others indignantly protest that their rights have been ignored. Both sets of utterances reflect the expectations of loyalty, dependency and obligation that came from socially inter-dependent relationships in early Islamic society. Indeed, the letters examined here probably give disproportionate emphasis to this obligation because they were selected for using the phrase “I want you to do X” to frame the directive. Using *I want* to formulate requests reflects the entitlement that letter-writers assumed in such relationships. It also explains why the directives formulated as “I want you to do X” are often repeated (multiple times) in the letters and are regularly accompanied by oaths raising the urgency of the request. This is strikingly voiced by senders who invoke *ḥaqqī ‘alayka* (‘my entitlement over you’) to support an *I want* directive. The technique can be seen in Examples (19) and (26), as well as Example (43) quoted below and taken from a third-century letter, in which a cloth merchant asks a textile worker whom he addresses as “brother” repeatedly to send the caps and other pieces of clothing the latter was supposed to repair on to a certain Ṭālib son of Waṣṣāf. The first request is mitigated with a parenthetical slide-in-blessing and

a second verb, but in the repetition such mitigating elements are omitted, whilst the request is supported by an oath.

- (43) وَأَحَبُّ أَعَزَّكَ اللَّهُ أَنْ تَتَفَضَّلَ وَتَوْضِلَ الْقَلَانِسَ إِلَى طَالِبِ بْنِ وَضَافِ الْفُوتِيِّ فَبِحَقِّي عَلَيْكَ إِلَّا
دَفَعْتُهَا إِلَيْهِ
(‘and I want, may God strengthen you, that you would be so kind to deliver the
caps to Ṭālib son of Waṣṣāf the Fuwatī and by my right over you, send him these
things’) (P.Berl.Arab. II 55, ll. 6–7)

Paradoxically, within relationships of social inter-dependency, a positive response to a request was expected and could be (forcibly) appealed to, but it was never guaranteed and had to be negotiated.

Requests continued to be formulated with *I want* in Arabic papyrus and paper letters in the tenth century and beyond, but the number of attestations thereafter drops dramatically. It remains to be examined whether expressions with *I want* in the Arabic and Judaeo-Arabic paper letters from Egypt occur in similar contexts as in the papyri, why formulating requests with *I want* fell out of use and what formulation eventually replaced it in the paper documents. In any case, what this and the earlier chronological shift in the use of the phrase *I want* in Arabic papyrus letters discussed in this paper show is that the politeness connotations of this expression changed over time and were conditioned by conventions of genre and power relations.

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