

LEAD-LETTER DAYS: WRITING, COMMUNICATION AND CRISIS IN THE ANCIENT GREEK WORLD*

I. INTRODUCTION: WRITING AND LETTER WRITING

Communication through writing is a deliberate choice, and the mere fact of recording something in written form makes a difference to how it is interpreted. Scholars have explored the significance of the choice to write in the ancient world, in particular with regard to public documents, and it is clear from these assessments that the process of writing cannot be explained by any single factor. For example, although it may be appealing to argue that inscribing laws and displaying them for all to see was part of a process of democratization (because it made it easier to check precedent and ensured an end to arbitrary interpretations and judgments), analyses of the development of written law in Athens have suggested that these explanations are too simple.¹ In fact, writing may be used to conceal and make secret, or to reinforce an impression of power and enforce submission, rather than encourage participation.²

The lead letters that have been discovered across the Mediterranean provide further perspectives on the uses of writing in the ancient world (for details of the letters see Appendix § 1).³ Although dating is in many cases difficult, analysis of letter forms and, in some cases, archaeological context, suggests that the surviving examples were produced in the Archaic and Classical periods. Moreover, a number

* The following abbreviations are used: Eidinow (2007): E. Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk among the Ancient Greeks* (Oxford, 2007); Jordan (2000): D. Jordan, 'A personal letter found in the Athenian agora', *Hesperia* 69.1 (2000), 91–103; Jordan (2003): D. Jordan, 'A letter from the banker Pasion', in D. Jordan and J.S. Traill (edd.), *Lettered Attica: A Day of Attic Epigraphy* (Athens, 2003), 23–39; Vinogradov (1998): Y. Vinogradov, 'The Greek colonisation of the Black Sea region in the light of private lead letters', in G.R. Tsatskheladze (ed.), *The Greek Colonisation of the Black Sea Area* (Stuttgart, 1998), 153–78; Wilson (1997–8): J.P. Wilson, 'The "illiterate trader"?', *BICS* 42 (1997–8), 29–56; DT: A. Audollent, *Defixionum Tabellae* (Paris, 1904); DT4: R. Wünsch, *Defixionum Tabellae Atticae IG III.3* (Berlin, 1887); NGCT: D. Jordan, 'New Greek curse tablets (1985–2000)', *GRBS* 41 (2000), 5–46; SGD: D. Jordan, 'A survey of Greek defixiones not included in the special corpora', *GRBS* 26 (1985), 151–97; SM: R.W. Daniel and F. Maltomini (edd.), *Supplementum Magicum* (Opladen, 1992). This article was substantially complete before January 2009 so we have been able to take only limited account of items which came to our notice after that date.

¹ R. Thomas, 'Written in stone? Liberty, equality, orality and the codification of law', in L. Foxhall and A.D.E. Lewis (edd.), *Greek Law in its Political Setting: Justifications Not Justice* (Oxford, 1996), 9–31 at 12.

² G. Camassa, 'Aux origines de la codification écrite des lois en Grèce', in M. Detienne (ed.), *Les savoirs de l'écriture en Grèce ancienne* (Lille, 1988), 130–55.

³ The appendix collects and details the surviving letters known to us with further bibliography for ease of reference (catalogue numbers are used throughout this article). It expands on Jordan's corpus (Jordan [2003], 30–5) and includes letters found on *ostraka* (§ 2).

of letters written on *ostraka* (see Appendix § 2) imply that people may also have been writing letters on other, less durable materials, which have not survived.⁴ Altogether, these letters suggest that there may have been far more, and far more widespread, uses of writing than have been assumed for this period.

The field of literacy studies has grown to embrace the idea that people read and write for a variety of culturally and contextually specific purposes; and, in turn, writing and reading activities acquire meaning from the socio-cultural context in which they are conducted.⁵ For example, Hyde notes how the development of literacy among merchants in Venice and Florence in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was connected to long-distance commerce and the need accurately to record financial transactions, correspondence, bills of exchange and contracts.⁶ These activities, in turn, helped to create a new class of ‘professionally literate merchants’, whose literacy differed from the literacy of clergy and lawyers, and whose skills had developed earlier, in a different context. Rather than matching the literacy of these more scholarly groups, merchants tended to stress numeracy and calculation. Their literacy was more like that of civil and clerical administrators and large landowners.

In contrast, although the material evidence of the lead letters is admittedly sparse and fragmentary,⁷ sufficient evidence remains to allow us to identify a particular genre of literacy practice in the ancient world: private communications between (mostly, and as far as we can tell) individuals, which we can interrogate for evidence of how, why and when it was used, and what role it played in the socio-cultural contexts of writers and recipients. To do this effectively means not only exploring the letters themselves for what they can tell us about their composition and reception, but also setting what we can then deduce about the practice of letter writing (and receiving) in the context of other, similarly private expressions of literacy, notably curse tablets.⁸ What will become clear is that both these genres seem to have been used in situations of crisis, when their writers were facing significant risks.

⁴ This is certainly the case with curse tablets, for example, for which we have evidence of the use of wax, copper, tin, *ostraka* etc., as well as the more frequently found lead (Eidinow [2007], 201); see also n. 50 below for other media.

⁵ N. Besnier, *Literacy, Emotion and Authority: Reading and Writing on a Polynesian Atoll* (Cambridge, 1995); B. Daniell, ‘Narratives of literacy: connecting composition to culture’, *College Composition and Communication* 50.3 (1999), 393–410.

⁶ J.K. Hyde, ‘Some uses of literacy in Venice and Florence in the thirteenth centuries’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser. 29 (1979), 109–29.

⁷ For the editing of lead letters see the detailed references given in the Appendix. The following works bring together a number of examples of letters: Jordan (2003), 30–35; Vinogradov (1998), 153–78.

⁸ In this vein, it is important to note two main approaches in the current study of literacy (Besnier [n. 5], 6). Comparative-ethnographic studies draw our attention to the differences and similarities manifested by different literacy events and practices within a particular society: e.g. comparing the implications of how children are taught to read – and to use reading – in different communities. Event-centred studies, on the other hand, focus on a particular type of literacy practice investigating how it is shaped by the context in which it takes place, be it at school or in a church service, or in the practice of writing a letter. Besnier regards the two approaches as complementary, arguing that it is necessary to look at a communicative event both in contrast with other events (paradigmatically) and in terms of its own particular context (syntagmatically). As noted, in this article we have attempted to do this with the lead letters by looking at them in contrast with curse tablets, as well as exploring how their context may have shaped the nature of their creation.

The geographical spread of these letters and the nature of their content is a good place to begin to assess this picture. Many of our writers were based in distant trading posts in Spain or the Black Sea area, facing the challenges of life in a frontier town: as we will see, the content of some of these letters suggests difficulties in arranging or enforcing contracts. Many of those writing were (regularly?) involved in risky trading arrangements that either could break down, or already had collapsed, with more or less serious consequences, in a context that perhaps lacked civic structures that might ensure redress under such circumstances. These observations draw our attention to a particular context for and constituency of letter writers, which we will explore further in this paper.

Our interest in exploring this phenomenon, therefore, is not because we want to argue for a grand(er) theory of literacy among the Greeks, or to draw another, firmer line between orality and literacy, contrasting their respective cognitive consequences.⁹ Rather, we are interested in exploring what these letters can tell us about (i) the social status of and relationships between the correspondents, (ii) the character of their communication, and (iii) the different kinds of literacy that existed in ancient Greece during this period.

First, however, let us consider the notion of private versus public. We describe these letters as private in the sense that they are communications between individuals, or individuals and groups, and are not concerned with 'state' affairs (although, the fragmentary state of the evidence makes it hard to rule this out definitively). In a number of cases, the letters appear to be between a distant merchant and an agent in the field.¹⁰ But even when they include family members, the material often relates to a business transaction of some sort. For example, even though it is fragmentary, letter E4b, found in Olbia and dated to the last quarter of the sixth century, seems to be an instruction to the writer's son (-μαι υἱεεῖ) to perform some sort of transaction (iron implements ([σι]δήρος) and skins (σ[ί]στυρν[αν]) are mentioned, perhaps as part of an exchange).¹¹

Nevertheless, we have to be careful with our assumptions about what 'private' may mean in terms of literacy practice. While accepting that it is likely that many, if not most, individuals could and did read to themselves in silence, it is very difficult to know in what contexts, or by what mechanisms, these ancient letters were composed or read.¹² Research on literacy among communities ranging

⁹ For example, for orality, such characteristics as memory-based, traditional, formulaic and participatory are emphasized; for literacy, analytic, rational, cognitive, abstract forms. The so-called autonomous model of literacy argues that literacy provoked crucial progress in human cognition from one set of characteristics to the other (e.g. E.A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* [London, 1963], J. Goody and I. Watt, 'The consequences of literacy', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 [1963], 304–54, and W.J. Ong, 'Literacy and orality in our times', *ADE Bulletin* 58 [1978], 1–7) but more recently, research has focussed on the links between literacy and cultural practices, and literacy and power structures (B.V. Street, *Cross-cultural Approaches to Literacy* [Cambridge, 1993], 7–12, characterizes this approach as 'ideological'). See also Daniell (n. 5), at 394–6 and J. Collins, 'Literacy and literacies', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995), 75–93. Both provide useful overviews of the debates.

¹⁰ See letters D2 and E5 (Appendix § 1), discussed in detail by Wilson (1997–8), at 38–9, 45–7.

¹¹ Vinogradov (1998), 158–9 restores δέκεσθ' ... [σι]δήρος καί σσαίος ... [ἀπ]οδώσεν μη[δέν ?...] ἐόντων μ[ὴ ...] καὶ σ[ί]στυρν[αν]. A1, A3 and E2 are also letters between family members which include transactions of some sort. For further details see Appendix.

¹² See M. Burnyeat, 'Postscript on silent reading', *CQ* 47.1 (1997), 74–6; W.A. Johnson, 'Towards a sociology of reading in Classical antiquity' *AJP* 121 (2000), 597–627.

from fifteenth-century English villagers to early twentieth-century African miners demonstrates that the composition and reception of letters can be both oral events and collective activities, rather than the perhaps more commonly assumed single writer–single reader (or silent writer–silent reader) scenarios.¹³

Although we can speculate, it is impossible to know for certain if these letters were written by the authors themselves or by scribes; in constrained circumstances or at leisure.¹⁴ When we examine the corpus of lead letters from these periods, we find a number of formulaic openings, which may indicate that, at least among certain social groups (scribes, traders, etc.), particular conventions for letter writing were emerging or developing.¹⁵

The most common opening formula found in these letters is the name of the sender in the nominative, with the recipient's name in the dative, and sometimes the addition of *χαίρειν* (e.g. B1, E2, E5). The letter from Mnesiergus, in which he asks his family to send him some skins (A1) begins 'Mnesiergus is sending greetings and good health (*χαίρειν καὶ ὑγιαίνειν*)', and this formula may also be found in a couple of other letters.¹⁶ *Παρά* is used as an opening formula on occasion: E3, for example, a letter which seems to involve some sort of exchange, starts with *παρά*; the preposition here may indicate the sender or addressee – unfortunately it is too fragmentary to tell.¹⁷ But in later letters, this formula (preceded by the dative of the addressee and followed by the genitive of the sender) tends to be used to indicate the relative status of sender (lower) and recipient (higher).¹⁸

¹³ H.J. Graff, *The Labyrinths of Literacy: Reflections on Literacy Past and Present* (London, 1987), 25–6 on the relationship between orality and literacy. Fifteenth-century English villagers: A. Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500–1700* (Oxford, 2000), 364–74; African miners: K. Breckenridge, 'Love letters and amanuenses: beginning the cultural history of the working class private sphere in southern Africa, 1900–1933', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26.2 (2000), 337–48.

¹⁴ Orthographic comparison can only give the vaguest impressions based on the regularity of the handwriting of people about whom we know little.

¹⁵ Our earliest evidence for the circulation of collections of model letters dates to the second century B.C.E. (Ps.-Dem. *Typoi Epistolikoi*; see C. Poster, 'A conversation halved: epistolary theory in Graeco-Roman antiquity', in C. Poster and L.C. Mitchell [edd.], *Letter-writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present* [South Carolina, 2007], 21–51, at 23); there is also documentary evidence for instruction in letter writing, e.g. *P. Paris* 63, 164/3 B.C.E. (see J. Muir, *Letters and Life in the Ancient Greek World* [London, 2008]) and *P. Bon.* 5 (on a papyrus of the fourth or fifth century C.E. (see M. Trapp [ed.], *Greek and Latin Letters: An Anthology with Translation* [Cambridge, 2006], no. 49, p. 275; both also discussed by Poster [2007], at 38). However, P.J. Parsons, 'The papyrus letter', *Didactica Classica Gandensia* 20 (1980), 3–19 at 8 suggests that the conventions found across the papyrus letters may be less a result of people consciously referring to particular models, and more that 'ordinary people thought in clichés'.

¹⁶ A fragmentary letter from Agde also seems to include this formula (C1: *χαίρειν καὶ ὑγιαίνειν*); *ὑγιαίνειν* is restored on A2 by Vinogradov (1998), 154 (see n. 62 below for possible reconstructions of the text).

¹⁷ See Vinogradov (1998), 156 for restoration. The opening is also found on E1 (Achillodorus' letter to Protagoras), E12 (the so-called 'priest's letter': a letter from Olbia written on a fragment from an amphora) and perhaps on side B of the highly fragmentary D1.

¹⁸ On the status indications of this formula see Poster (n. 15), 40. Certain formulae noted here reappear in the later Egyptian papyrus letters: *ὑγιαίνειν* appears in letters dating from the first century B.C.E. to the first century C.E.; see also the use of the vocative (below, n. 20). We can add to this the use of *παρά* with the genitive, which appears in Egyptian letters dating from the third century C.E.; and possibly *ἔρωσο*, which is restored at the end of letters B1 and E9, and is a formula of farewell that appears in letters of the Ptolemaic period. See Parsons (n. 15), 6.

More elaborate forms are also found. The letter from Lesis, a slave treated harshly in a foundry, begins with the note that 'Lesis sends a letter (*ἐπιστέλλει*) to Xenocles and his mother' (A3).¹⁹ The third-person form of the verb here suggests the use of a scribe, but the rest of the letter then moves into the first person, so it is possible that Lesis had adopted a formal third-person opening and written the letter himself. One may wonder, however, why a slave with such good levels of literacy would be sent to work in a foundry (on the grounds that it would be a waste of his training) but the letter does not hint at the type of work Lesis was sent to perform, nor indeed what he ended up doing. It is not implausible that Lesis wrote the letter himself, but there is little evidence either way.

The stylistic opposite seems to happen in Achillodorus' petition to his son Protagoras (E1). This starts with a dramatic vocative of the recipient, but then goes on to use a third-person opening formula to a letter (*ᾧ Πρωταγόρῃ, ὁ πατήρ τοι ἐπιστέλλει*) and, in the instructions that follow (which direct Protagoras to assist Achillodorus), refers to Achillodorus in the third person: is this because it was written by a scribe, or was it a common style adopted by the writer?²⁰ In contrast, the letter from the banker Pasion (A4), which directs an associate to prosecute Pasion's enemies, also starts by announcing that Pasion is sending a letter.²¹ Furthermore, it also puts the verb 'to send' in the first person (*ἐπιστέλλω*), suggesting that the letter was written, as well as being sent, by Pasion.

Clues to the circumstances of their reading are perhaps easier to find: for example, both Articon (E2) and Mnesiergus (A1) wrote their letters 'to the *oikos*', implying that a single recipient was not intended.²² The writer of E3 seems to address a group of people who are involved in an exchange with him.²³ Similarly, in A3, Lesis writes to his mother as well as Xenocles, while Achillodorus addresses his letter to his son Protagoras with directions to speak to Anaxagoras (E1). It seems that letters were not always considered personal items only to be read by the recipient.

Similarly we can only speculate about the method by which these letters were transferred – although we can perhaps draw on the information given in later letters about delivery arrangements.²⁴ Similar patterns of delivery might be assumed

¹⁹ Jordan (2000), 97 suggests this formula would have been familiar to Athenians. If so, this would suggest that letter writing was fairly widespread, at least among certain sectors of communities. E12, from Olbia, contains a similar phrase (*ἐπιστέλλεις πέμπ[ων]*). L. Dubois, *Inscriptions grecques dialectales d'Olbia du Pont* (Geneva, 1996), 58 notes that these two verbs are found together with the sense of 'giving instruction' in Homer (*Il.* 11.765–6 and 24.780).

²⁰ E. Dickey, *Greek Forms of Address: From Herodotus to Lucian* (Oxford, 1996), 196, 201–5 notes that it is rare to find a letter beginning with a vocative, and that they tend to begin 'with a formulaic salutation'; the omission of *ὁ* fits with Dickey's findings for the use of vocatives in letters in this period. In contrast, as Parsons (n. 15), 6 notes, the use of the vocative as an opening formula seems to be revived in Egyptian papyrus letters of the Roman period.

²¹ For the identity of this associate see the discussion by J.D. Sosin, 'The new letter from Pasion', *ZPE* 165 (2008), 105–8 at 107.

²² Articon (E2) is writing to his family to warn them about their possible eviction and to give them directions about what to do should this occur. Mnesiergus (A1) requests some skins be sent to him.

²³ The verb [*ἀπο*?]*δοτε*, though restored, is in the plural. A slave-girl, in the possession of a man named Melanus, is to be returned in exchange (?) for something. See Vinogradov (1998), 154–6.

²⁴ As Parsons (n. 15), 3–19, at 5, describes, some of these later papyrus letters appear to have been carried by official letter-carriers (*P. Ryl.* II 78.24, *P. Oxy.* XII 1587), while others of these letters were dependent on the chance appearance of a willing carrier (*P. Mich.* VIII

for these lead letters: the official letter carriers of the later period may not have existed, but it may be that certain people could be trusted to carry letters without divulging the contents or context of the letter to anyone but the intended recipient. (A number of the letters appear to have been folded, which may indicate a desire to protect and/or to conceal their contents, but could also simply be for ease of transport.²⁵) But other more transparent periods of history suggest the possibility that those who carried letters knew their contents; indeed, that they may have been chosen *because* they were thought to have some sympathy with the cause of the letter writer.²⁶

It is also possible that those carrying a letter leaked its contents as they made their way from place to place, so providing a secondary channel for the circulation of information. This would mean that in situations where it is possible that a letter was abandoned or lost – and this could have happened before it reached its recipient – the message it contained may still have been communicated, perhaps especially if the messenger was a local person who knew the communicants involved. So, for example, although Lesis' letter (A3) was found in the Athenian agora, not far from the 'industrial district', leading scholars to believe that it was 'lost in the post', it is possible that his message was nevertheless delivered.²⁷ Achillodorus' letter (E1) suggests a similar scenario: he is writing to his son Protagoras who is ordered to tell Anaxagoras and his wife about Achillodorus' plight, a message which may have been communicated whether the letter arrived at its destination or not. These examples draw our attention to the interplay between written and oral communication in real-life situations.

II. WHY WRITE?

Recent work has sought to develop an understanding of letter-writing theory and practice in antiquity, but the focus inevitably tends to be on 'literary' letters, and evidence for the Archaic and Classical periods is meagre.²⁸ In terms of functional categories among these letters, one letter could perhaps be described as introductory (E11: a letter which seems to present a slave), but the majority comprise instructions and petitions. This is perhaps not surprising given that ἐπιστέλλω can be rendered not only as 'I send a message' but also as 'I command' (Thuc. 5.37). Some seem (at least from the information they provide) quite straightforward; for example, D2

503.2, *P. Mich.* VIII 490.5). Letters might be carried by someone from the local community (the baker: *P. Tebt.* 424; the cutler: *P. Oxy.* 1676) or by a stranger (see address details on *P. Oxy.* XIV 1678.28). Some specify the need for a dependable friend to make a delivery (*P. Ryl.* IV 604.30); others lament the lack of one – and the subsequent failure of a letter to arrive (*P. Phil.* 35, *P. Mert.* II 82.8, *P. Mich.* VIII 499.12).

²⁵ Compare the careful folding and sealing of papyrus letters.

²⁶ Fox, (n. 13), 364; Breckenridge, (n. 13), 337–48.

²⁷ *Contra* Jordan (2000), 92–3.

²⁸ C. Poster and L.C. Mitchell observe that this is a neglected field of scholarly inquiry, see their 'Introduction', in C. Poster and L.C. Mitchell (edd.), *Letter-writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present* (South Carolina, 2007); for an analysis of the categories of Isocrates' letters see R.G. Sullivan, 'Classical epistolary theory and the letters of Isocrates', in the same volume, at 7–20. Epistolary studies tend to focus on letters as literary devices: see R. Morello and A.D. Morrison (edd.), *Ancient Letters: Classical and Late Antique Epistolography* (Oxford, 2007).

gives instructions about buying a boat and perhaps a cargo. Others communicate a sense of urgency, but the reasons for this are often unclear. For example, does Mnesiergus' request to be sent cheap skins (A1) have a similar motivation as the request of the trader in B1 who needs to be sent a certain amount of wood immediately? Are the instructions to exchange (unknown) items in E4b similar to the directive in E3 to return a slave-girl as soon as possible? What situations lie behind these letters?

In seeking an answer to these questions we have observed that a striking number of letters appear to have been written in a context of crisis. These are concerned with situations of asking for assistance, hoping that their recipient might be able to intervene to remedy a problem, to act to remove the writer (or other parties) from danger, or to make arrangements to help the writer in some other way. The context for these requests often seems to be a broken relationship of some sort, where people have fallen out, seized each other's property, or acted violently. As we will go on to explore, these letters reveal how individuals dealt with aspects of their lives when they were in a position of difficulty or insecurity, and they often specify the remedy.

Trapp, in his recent collection of Greek and Latin letters, describes lead letters as recording the 'mundane transactions' of life – but what does mundane mean for our letter writers?²⁹ It may be that many of them expected to face certain dangers because of their risky activities, but the letters that survive predominantly seem to reveal *unusual* events in the lives and experiences of the people involved. Whilst we can make no judgement, for example, about how regularly individuals were seized as part of property disputes, it was surely not a common occurrence in the life of Achillodorus. Indeed, it prompted him to write despairingly to his son Protagoras (E1), telling him that Matasys has seized him as part of a quarrel he has nothing to do with, and imploring Protagoras to take action:³⁰

O Protagoras, your father [Achillodorus] sends you this command. He is being wronged by Matasys, for he [Matasys] is enslaving him and has deprived him of his position as carrier. Go to Anaxagoras and tell him the story, for he [Matasys] asserts that he [Achillodorus] is the slave of Anaxagoras, claiming: 'Anaxagoras has my property, slaves both male and female and houses ...' (lines 1–6; tr. Jordan 2003)

But although such events may have been unusual, examining the nature of the letters and the situations they describe reveals some common themes.

Characters

It goes without saying that much of the literary evidence from the Archaic–Classical period was written by, or associated with, the male citizen elite. However, these letters are connected more closely, through their writers, recipients and subject matters, with those outside this group – women, slaves, traders. The letters are

²⁹ M. Trapp (ed.), *Greek and Latin Letters: An Anthology with Translation* (Cambridge, 2006), 10. Only letters A1 and E1 appear in his corpus.

³⁰ The dispute is between Matasys and Anaxagoras (Achillodorus' former master?). Matasys mistakenly thinks Achillodorus is Anaxagoras' slave. See J. Chadwick, 'The Berezan lead letter', *PCPhS* 19 (1973), 35–7; B. Bravo, 'Une lettre sur plomb de Berezan. Colonisation et modes de contact dans le Pont', *Dialogues d'histoire ancienne* 1 (1974), 110–87 at 121–34; Dubois (n. 19), 50–5, no. 23; Wilson (1997–8), 36–7.

found on the geographical margins of the Greek world (Olbia, Emporium), as well as on the mainland (Athens, Torone), and there are also a number of non-Greek names recorded here.³¹ The letters therefore give voices to people who have tended to remain silent in our sources. They also show that writing a letter was considered to be an appropriate response to particular events in a person's life and a way in which they might attempt to control what might happen in the future. Whilst the people who appear in these letters are otherwise unknown to us,³² we can examine the socio-cultural context of letter writing, as well as the circumstances that prompted people to write in this way in order to see some of the ways in which they negotiated their personal situations. Doing so illuminates the complexity of relationships between individuals within the ancient world, reveals the kinds of activities and emotional bonds that occurred in relationships that were working, and suggest when, and in what type of situations, relationships might break down.

The number of women who appear in the letters is striking; moreover, they occur in prominent roles. For example, it is to his mother that Lesis writes asking for her intervention to rescue him from the foundry where he is being mistreated (A3):

Lesis is sending a letter to Xenokles and to his mother by no means to overlook that he is perishing in the foundry but to come to his masters and find something better for him. For I have been handed over to a man thoroughly wicked. I am perishing from being whipped; I am tied up! I am treated like dirt – more and more! (tr. Jordan 2003)

As Jordan points out, the letter implies that Lesis' mother, along with Xenokles, was instrumental in arranging for Lesis to work in the foundry, but also, and crucially, that she had the power to remove him. This may not necessarily have been a legal power, but clearly Lesis felt that if she was informed of his mistreatment, she would be persuaded to try to effect a change. Whatever Lesis' legal status – be it slave, or free man sent as an apprentice to the foundry³³ – the emotional ties between Lesis and his mother were clearly strong. He believed that appealing to his mother would help his plight, and this suggests that his mother had an influential role within their household.

Another woman who appears in a position of responsibility is Thathaie,³⁴ who is recorded in the letter from Apatorius to Leanax as the business partner of Heraclides

³¹ For example, Matasys (E1), Tielar[-] (D1), Basped[-] (D2). Indeed, there are further letters written in an (undeciphered) Iberian language found in Emporium. The excavators believe they have something to do with trade, and therefore they provide a parallel with some of the letters written in Greek (see especially D1 and D2 also from Emporium). See E. Sanmartí-Gregó, 'Una carta en lengua iberica, escrita sobre plomo, procedente de Emporion', *Revue archéologique de Narbonnaise* 21 (1988), 95–113 and n. 47 below.

³² The possible exception to this is Pasion, who *may* be the well-known banker. Although the name is not uncommon, it would be extraordinary to have a personal letter from a known individual from the ancient world. In favour of such an identification are the appearance of Nicostratus, Deinon and Arethusius in the letter: three men who were pursued in the courts by Pasion's son Apollodorus ([Dem.] 53). But this is hardly secure: the letter has no reliable provenance and is only known via a photograph taken 'at a shop in Athens ... some point before the Second World War'. See Jordan (2003), 23–30, at 23, n. 1.

³³ See E.M. Harris, 'Notes on a lead letter from the Athenian agora', *HSPH* 102 (2004), 157–70, at 162–4 and F.D. Harvey, "'Help! I'm dying here": a letter from a slave', *ZPE* 163 (2007), 49–50 *pace* Jordan (2000), 97.

³⁴ Wilson (1997–8), 38 reads the masculine name Thathaies, but M. Dana is surely correct to read the feminine form, see 'Lettre sur plomb d'Apatorios à Léanax. Un document archaïque

(E5). Along with Heraclides, she is the person to whom Leanax is urged to send his records (*διφθέρια*, records written on skins) in order to prove the confiscated goods are his own. Thathaie appears here to be an important, and well-known, part of the trading network in the Black Sea region.³⁵ But not all women in the letters are as prominent as Thathaie or as relied upon as Lesis' mother. Some women appear as commodities to be traded, as is the case with the slave-girl recorded as part of a transaction in a letter from Berezan (E3).³⁶

Indeed, slaves occur on a number of occasions in the letters. In some, they are recorded as carrying out tasks: for example, a slave is the recipient of a message on a fragment of an *ostrakon*, ordered to bring some items for his master (Appendix § 2: A6).³⁷ Another slave appears as part of a domestic reorganization on an *ostrakon* found in Gorgippia (E14).³⁸ In others, they are the object of commercial transactions, for example, a letter from Phanagoria records that a slave named Phaylles was exported from Borysthene, and sold (presumably) in Phanagoria where the letter was found (Appendix §1, E11). In E5 Apatorius asks Leanax what he should do with the slaves of Thymoleus.³⁹ Others offer more dramatic information: fear of enslavement is palpable in the letter from Achillodorus quoted above (E1). As we saw here, Achillodorus has been seized by Matasys who thinks that he is the property (i.e. the slave) of a third man, Anaxagoras. Achillodorus protests his innocence and instructs his son to inform Anaxagoras of the situation and move their family out of danger.⁴⁰

These letters also reveal the importance of familial relationships and the concerns of the family unit. Achillodorus intends his wife to be the co-recipient of the message (E1) he directs to his son, Protagoras; at least he wants her to flee to the city as well:

Tell this to Anaxagoras and his [Achillodorus'] wife. A second command to you: take your mother and your brother who are at Arbinatai to the city. (lines 9–10; tr. Jordan 2003)

Articon (E2) writes 'to those at home' (*τοῖς ἐν οἴκῳ*) informing them of their imminent eviction. Mnesiergus (A1) is reliant on his family (he sends his letter *τοῖς οἴκοι*) to send him cheap leather items, presumably to be used as clothing or

d'Olbia du Pont', *ZPE* 148 (2004), 1–14 at 9, 12. R.A. Santiago Álvarez and M. Gardeñes Santiago agree that the name belongs to a woman, but do not like the aspirated form of the (attested) name *Ταταία* and prefer to read the text as *Ῥαθαίη*. They suggest that she is the non-Greek (Iranian?) wife of Heraclides. See 'Algunas observaciones a la "lettre d'Apatorius à Léanax"', *ZPE* 157 (2006), 57–69 at 61–2.

³⁵ As mentioned above (p. 32), writing seems to be particularly important within these trading networks. See also the Pech-Maho 'contract' and the Iberian material (n. 47 below).

³⁶ Other women appear in letters A7, A8, D3, E1 and E10.

³⁷ M.L. Lang, *The Athenian Agora XXI: Graffiti and Dipinti* (Princeton, 1976), 8 (her B2) restores the text as *παῖ, τοῖ Φαλά[νθοι] ἄλος κα<ι>νὸς κλ[ιντῆρ]ας φέρει* ('boy, bring other new couches for Phalanthus') but A.N. Oikonomides, 'Graffiti-inscriptions from the excavations of the Athenian agora at Kerameikos', *Horos* 6 (1986), 43–64 at 51–2 reads a completely different message: *παῖ, τοῖ Φαλία[ι μεγ]άλος κανὸς κα[ί] ἡμάντ]ας φέρει* ('boy, put on Philias big baskets and leather straps'; Philias is thought to be a donkey).

³⁸ Vinogradov suggests this is a message to give (?) an axe (*πέλεκος*) to a slave: Y. Vinogradov, 'A letter from Gorgippean rural estates', *Ancient Civilisations from Scythia to Siberia* 4.3 (1997), 232–44 at 236–8.

³⁹ See Dana (n. 34), 6, 10. C1 also presumably refers to some kind of transaction involving slaves as the words *πρήξω* and *δεσπότης* are visible.

⁴⁰ See n. 30 above.

bedding. A similar request on a fragmentary letter from Olbia (E4b) was discussed above.⁴¹ The close bonds between members of the *oikos* are evident here.

There are many letters written between business partners involved in a variety of trading activities. Apatorius, Leanax and Meno (E5) are evidently business partners involved in a dispute with Heraclides and Thathaie. They corroborate each other's version of events, and can be relied upon to furnish proof to do so. Similarly the writer of E9 instructed Hermaeus to send someone (*ἀπέστειλα*) to 'take care of the fifty such-and-such, and to bring them back from the person who originally was responsible for them.'⁴² Meanwhile, the writer of B1 warns one Tegeas that if he does not act immediately, his deal will be rescinded.

Situations

A wide variety of personal circumstances are described within the letters, but a number of themes recur. Here, we review the diverse situations, and the problems they involve, before discussing why writing a letter may have seemed to offer a solution to those problems. The messages in these letters predominantly comprise the needs of their writers with regard to specific business arrangements – and related difficulties – be they loans, confiscations, or personal conflicts. The writers tend to set out the problems or difficulties they are experiencing and then set out the requirements for a solution; many require the recipient to act. So, Tegeas (B1) is required to send the writer of his letter seven talents of wood in the next seven days if he wants to save their deal (see also A2 where the recipient is also required to send (*κατέθετο*) something). Apatorius demands that Leanax send *διφθέρια* to prove his ownership of the property that has been seized (E5). This pattern suggests that the recipient of a letter in Emporium (D1) who must send something to someone, is also involved in rescuing a deal ([*ἐπρη*]ξε κείνο[s... ἄλλοι καὶ Ὅ[---]). The same explanation may lie behind the instruction that a slave-girl in the possession of Melanus is to be returned (E3), or that the buyer of a slave in Phanagoria (E11) must settle his accounts (*πάντα θέλομεν [χρῆ] ἀποδ[όσ]θαι*). Presumably, the instruction to a trader in Emporium (D2) to buy a half share in something, to contact a man named Baped[-] and to fit out a ship also furthered the business interests of the writer.

Personal relationships are also visible in these letters, many of them concerned with conflicts. For example, in A4, Pasion directs an associate to prosecute his enemies. The nature of the conflict can only be guessed at, but Pasion specifies that 'they are wronging me and plotting [against me]' and the time has now come for the escalation of the conflict through the law courts.⁴³ As already discussed, Achillodorus' seizure was part of a dispute between Anaxagoras and Matasys (E1). Achillodorus claims he has become unintentionally and unfairly mixed up in a quarrel that has cost him his liberty. In E2, Articon is evading his landlord, Myllion,

⁴¹ See p. 32. This text is written on the back of another letter (E4a), but it seems probable that these are separate letters. E4a refers to items which are to be/have been seized, E4b to an exchange of some sort. Vinogradov (1998), 157–8 suspects two hands here but does not make the obvious inference that these are two separate messages. If so, this is a clear example of the reuse of lead for letter writing. See further the comments in the Appendix.

⁴² SEG 50.704.

⁴³ Jordan (2003), 28 is surely correct in interpreting *μετελθεῖν* in the 'technical sense of "prosecute"'.

along with his other creditors, and now fears eviction. A further dispute is referred to on a letter from the Black Sea (E7), in which the writer tells the recipient (Protagoras) that a third party has information about Protagoras' family which he will use against him. This information, the writer claims, is easy to refute, and threats are made against the third party. It seems that the writer and Protagoras have a common enemy and are trying to outmanoeuvre him:

Protagoras! If he starts to use his cunning against me, it will not bother me: I have at my disposal something regarding your kin, and which I can easily refute. If he is really going to go to much trouble that quickly, then let him first give this up so that he may be considered a civilised man...
(tr. Vinogradov 1998)

As far as we can tell, when family members are mentioned in these letters, they appear as allies (to be relied upon or protected), rather than enemies. Of course, we cannot state for certain that none of the broken relationships in these letters was between family members, but none is advertised as such, and where we can make any judgement about the identities of parties in a dispute, it seems unlikely. For example, Pasion was certainly not related to Nicostratus, one of his enemies (as Nicostratus is identified through his brother Dinon: see also [Dem.] 53.4). If this Pasion is the well-known banker, the presumption would be that the other men referred to in this letter were citizens since they are the objects of prosecution. In letter E1, it seems unlikely that Anaxagoras and Matasys were related, given that one has a Greek name and one does not.

Many of these letters convey a sense of urgency, either directly stated, as in the case of Tegeas (B1), or implied by the instructions in the letter. The slave-girl in Melanus' possession (E3) is to be returned as soon as possible ([ὥς τάχιστα]). The trader in D2 is to perform his transaction quickly (τάχιστα). Arcesimus wants Eumelis (A7) to come as quickly as she can (ὅς τάχος);⁴⁴ Pasion wants to attack his enemies now (A4); Apatorius wants Leanax to prove his ownership of the confiscated goods as soon as he can so he can have his property returned (E5). If we think of the letters as oral and collective modes of communication, rather than literary entities written by or to individuals, then we can understand how their messages, and the urgency they convey, could encompass a larger social group – and we can see this in some of the letters. For example, Articon is warning his family of the likelihood of imminent eviction and instructing them where to go should this occur (E2). The instructions to Protagoras, the son of Achillodorus, will involve his mother and brothers (taking them from Arbinatae to the city in order to remove them from the danger of also being enslaved (E1)). Lesis wants immediate action (by his family) to remove him from his intolerably violent situation (A3).

These letters therefore show individuals writing about the situations in their lives that concerned them, the problems they faced, and the resolutions that they thought would aid them. These letters are not the high-register writings of a political elite, nor are they the voices of the *demos* mediated through the inscriptions of the *polis*. They represent neither geopolitical concerns nor everyday, mundane occurrences, but dangers faced by the letter writers and/or recipients. They reveal the things which people considered important to them in their daily lives – sometimes, indeed, life itself.

⁴⁴ Lang (n. 37), 9 (her B7) says this was added 'as an afterthought'.

III. SAFETY AND SECURITY

Even though the letters largely concern matters that need serious attention and involve people asking for and giving instructions to others over vast distances, their emotional tenor varies. Some of the letters reveal the specific dangers that the writers are facing – usually in the form of the actions of others – and the need for immediate action. Others, although they still communicate a sense of urgency, are calmer and more objective in their tone.⁴⁵ In each case, the question remains: why choose to write the message down rather than communicate it orally?

Literary parallels provide us with some initial arguments: on the one hand, a letter might be regarded as a poor alternative to the more trustworthy delivery of a message face-to-face, since it could not argue, explain or make a case for itself.⁴⁶ On the other hand, Thucydides (7.8.2) explains Nicias' choice to send a letter to the Athenians rather than an oral report. Nicias, engaged in the ill-fated Athenian invasion of Syracuse, watching the enemy grow steadily stronger, fears that the facts would not be accurately reported in oral form. He gives a variety of reasons why an oral report might prove inadequate: incompetence in speaking, failure of memory, speaking to please the crowd. Both arguments remind us that letter writing existed in a wider context of (often rhetorical) communication. To understand the choice to use it, we need to explore the possible function(s) it served.

Writing a message down at least creates a record of events – perhaps especially useful in contexts where several different languages were in use, for example, at a trading post. Some of these letters deal with exchanges made between Greeks and non-Greek peoples (D1, D2, E5) and these highlight the importance of documentation in situations where there could have been a barrier to communication.⁴⁷ The letters provide us with examples: in E5, Apatorius refers to the records that Leanax apparently keeps, and how the production of these records will prove ownership of the goods that have been confiscated. It suggests not only the mechanics, but also a mentality, of record-keeping among at least some of those involved in these transactions – and of course has implications for the use of, and attitudes to, written evidence in legal contexts.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ E. Griffiths, 'Fighting the future: Euripidean letters and Thucydides' Athens', in C. Cooper (ed.), *Politics of Orality: Orality and Literacy in Ancient Greece*, Vol. 6 (Leiden, 2007), 277–92 argues that this is characteristic of letters used in Euripides' dramas.

⁴⁶ A trope in some of Isocrates' letters (1.1; 3.4) discussed by Sullivan (n. 28), 9.

⁴⁷ There are also a number of extant writings from non-Greek peoples, particularly in the western Mediterranean, e.g. the Pech-Maho 'contract' written in Greek and Etruscan, three tablets from Pech-Maho, Enseune and Gruissan in an Iberian language and thought by the excavators to be concerned with trade, and a lead letter also in an Iberian language from Emporium which probably has something to do with an exchange of some kind. See Wilson (1997–8), 40–4; H. Barbouteau and Y. Solier, 'Découverte de nouveaux plombs, inscrits en Ibère, dans la région de Narbonne', *Revue archéologique de Narbonnaise* 21 (1988), 61–94; Sanmartí-Grego (n. 31), 95–113.

⁴⁸ For Apatorius and Leanax see Wilson (1997–8), 38–9. The switch from oral to written evidence in Athenian courts is usually accepted as having taken place c. 380 B.C., while written contracts acquired special status in *dikai emporikai* in the later fourth century (nevertheless, widespread suspicion of written documents remained); see S. Todd, 'The purpose of evidence in Athenian courts' in P. Cartledge, P. Millett and S. Todd, *Nomos: Essays in Athenian Law, Politics and Society* (2004), 29 n. 15, and below, n. 64.

Secrecy as well as security may well also have been a concern. A letter would be written because, in each case, an oral message might too easily be 'leaked'. This explanation is suggested by two stories given in Herodotus: the first tells how Histaeus, the ruler of Miletus, hid an urgent message for his friend Aristagoras – an incitement to rebel against the Persian king – by shaving the head of his messenger-slave, tattooing the message on to his scalp and allowing the hair to regrow; the message was carried by the messenger, but on his body, rather than in his hand or mouth. The other story describes how Demaratus, a Greek living in exile among the Persians, revealed King Xerxes' plans to invade Greece to the Spartans by means of a message written on the wood backing of a writing tablet, and then hidden under a layer of wax so that it seemed blank.⁴⁹

Although we know little of the contexts in which these letters were written, it is not hard to imagine, in a number of cases, that the writer and/or recipient would have preferred the contents of their message to remain secret; for example, Lesis' plea to his mother that he be freed from his intolerable situation (A3) or Pasion's conviction that he has been wronged and must have his revenge (A4). Others of the letter writers may have been writing their message down to keep it from hostile or competitive eyes.

These considerations alert us to the possible existence of different kinds of communities of readers. It may be that written messages were deemed secure simply because they were indecipherable to many. Alternatively, it may be that letters were used for particular purposes within specific communities, for example, transferring information that was sensitive within a particular community, such as competing traders, but meaningless outside that community.

IV. CURSES AS CONTEXT

We turn attention now to another literacy practice, binding curses (*defixiones* or *katadesmoi*), in order to contrast their content and context of writing. These, like our letters, were also inscribed on small sheets of lead.⁵⁰ They certainly involved sensitive information, and were probably created in secret. As with the letters, most of the information we have about curse writers, and their motivations for writing a curse, rests on inferences drawn from the information the curse texts give us about targets. A number of different contexts for the writing of binding curses have been identified, and the corpus of texts is usually divided into five different categories: judicial, 'love', commercial, theatrical and 'border-area' curses (which combine the formulae for prayers for justice and binding spells).⁵¹ However, these categories have been challenged.⁵² Although it may be possible, even likely, that some of these curses, like the lead letters, were written by traders and merchants,

⁴⁹ Herodotus 5.35 and 7.239. The *skytale* was a communication device or technique used by Spartans, comprising a message written on leather and wrapped around a stick. Later writers say it was used for conveying secret messages, but Classical writers do not; see *OCD*³, s.v. *skytale* 1415.

⁵⁰ As with the letters, other materials were used as well; curses are attested on copper, tin, *ostraka*, limestone, talc, papyrus, gemstones, bronze and wax.

⁵¹ H. Versnel, 'Beyond cursing: the appeal to justice in judicial prayers', in C.A. Faraone and D. Obbink (edd.), *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (Oxford, 1991), 60–106.

⁵² Eidinow (2007), 139–55.

it is close to impossible to work out which ones those are. One tablet, from Panticapaeum in the Black Sea area, does explicitly mention the navigator of a ship (*SGD* 170) among a group of people who may or may not be being cursed for trade-related reasons. Beyond such superficial similarities, curses on the one hand and letters on the other appear to have little to do with each other. After all, one communication is directed at supernatural entities, pleading for ‘magical’ restraints, the other sent to mortals with very concrete demands. But, as we shall see, comparison highlights certain parallels.

First of all, there are similarities in their emotional content and context – both forms of communication are written in times of perceived crisis. The writers of the letters seem to be uniformly concerned with trying to control the course of dangerous or potentially dangerous events. Curses were written by or composed for men and women who hoped to limit the inevitable risks of a dangerous situation by ‘binding’ their victims.⁵³ Their targets are people or some particular aspect of a person or group of people, and they tend to use a variety of recognizable formulae.⁵⁴ Closer examination of the curse texts even reveals some evidence that the writers themselves saw a relationship between cursing and letter writing and, in some examples, made this explicit.

Letters to the dead?

Both letters and curses contain instructions regarding the resolution of a problem. One seeks a supernatural solution, the other a mortal response, but when we start to explore the language of the curses, we see that there are some similarities. It appears that in formulating their pleas and their instructions, curse writers drew inspiration from other forms of communication.

A couple of tablets make explicit reference to themselves as letters, but use different formulae from the lead letters.⁵⁵ These include *DTA* 102 (fourth century, Athens) in which the writer describes himself as sending a letter (ἐπιστο<σ>λὴν πέμπων) to the *daimons* and Persephone, conveying (κομίσας) to them the victim, Tibitis. *DTA* 103 (a fourth-century curse from Piraeus) begins Ἐρμ[ῆ] καὶ Φερσεφ[ό]ν[η] τήνδε ἐπιστο[λ]ήν ἀποπέμ[πω] (‘I am sending this letter to Hermes and Persephone ...’).⁵⁶

More intriguingly, perhaps, we can trace a connection, albeit faint, between the genre of letter writing in later periods and these lead curses. The verb κομίζω is found in a papyrus letter dating to the third century B.C.E., while παρατίθωμαι, found in *DT* 86 (dated no later than the Hellenistic period) is also used in later

⁵³ See Eidinow (2007), 141–52. These spells seldom ask for a punishment, or threaten a horrible end (see, from this period, *SGD* 89), and for this reason seem less malicious than later binding-curse tablets (where threats of horrible ends appear more frequently, e.g. *DT* 93 and *DT* 129).

⁵⁴ For example a list of names, verbs of binding or restraining (often repeated), and reference to specific details about the target, such as parts of the body, aspects of the target’s life, workshop or tools, or members of their household. See Eidinow (2007), 144.

⁵⁵ Of the few tablets that refer to themselves, the usual term is just ‘the lead’. *DTA* 45: ἐν δεσμ[ώ]ι μολυβ[δίν]ωι; *DTA* 55: ἐν μολύβδωι; *SGD* 124: ἐν τῷι βολίμωι; *NGCT* 79: ἐμ βολίμωι. Letter E1 also refers to ‘the lead’ (τὸ μολίβδιον) in the three line summary at the beginning of the text, see Dubois (n. 19), 51, no. 23.

⁵⁶ For full texts and translations of these curses see Eidinow (2007), 378–80.

Greek letters of introduction.⁵⁷ The verb ἀποδίδωμι is common in papyrus letters, but is not found as a compound in the curse tablets, although other compounds of δίδωμι are common.⁵⁸ There may be something of the idiom of letter writing in these curse texts. However, this does not mean that the curse texts of this period should be regarded as ‘letters to the dead’, or even as instructions for the dead to act against the living via the intercession of the underworld gods.⁵⁹ Some may address the corpses with which, presumably, they were buried (for example *DTA* 100, *DT* 43), while a few curses invoke the dead in general (*DT* 52 and 68, *SGD* 20). However, these recipients are expected to behave as witnesses or overseers, rather than being expected to carry out the instructions in the text and ensure the binding. The instructions – or pleas – for binding are intended for the gods, who are often addressed in the vocative. The rare imagery of the letter should instead be considered alongside other references to business and legal arrangements, which, as we have seen, are also common topics of the letters.

Perhaps most relevant here are the echoes of language that evoke business arrangements, for example, the verbs used in curse texts that evoke public legal and business documents. Some (especially early Sicilian tablets) use compounds of γράφω meaning something like ‘I register’, and there are also compound verbs of τίθημι and δίδωμι, which seem to mean something like ‘I consign’. In these cases, the victim is sometimes registered or consigned πρὸς or παρά certain gods or the dead, where the Greek may mean ‘in the presence of’, echoing its use to describe the presence of witnesses in fourth-century B.C.E. legal and business transactions.⁶⁰ Here we are reminded of the language of some of the letters.

In other texts some kind of transaction model seems to be being evoked. For example, in a series of tablets from the temple of Demeter in Cnidus (*DT* 1–14), the idea seems to be that the victim of the curse is ‘handed over’ to the will of the god. In other texts, this is extended to an exchange: *SGD* 54, according to one reading, mentions a gift; it may be that the victim is being offered to the gods of the underworld as a gift, or that a separate gift is intended to persuade the gods to do the agent’s bidding.⁶¹ A tablet from Alexandria, Egypt, dating to the third century C.E. (*SM* 54; *DT* 38), presents its targets to the supernatural powers using, as the editors observe, the language of orders for arrest and delivery recorded in the documentary papyri (*P. Hib.* I 54, 20–22; *P. Abinn.* 51, 15–16).

Public documents may be echoed in the invocation of θεοί. Ἀγαθὴ Τύχη, which is regularly found in public inscriptions and opens at least one curse tablet (*SGD*

⁵⁷ Κομίζω: *P. Cairo Zeno* 59603; παρατίθωμαι: see C.W. Keyes, ‘The Greek letter of introduction’, *AJPh* 56 (1935), 28–44, at 39 on *P. Oxy.* 1663, and 42 for date of development of use.

⁵⁸ See Keyes (n. 57), 39–40.

⁵⁹ This more direct relationship with the dead seems to have developed later. See S.I. Johnston, *Restless Dead: Encounters between the Living and Dead in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley, 1999) and Eidinow (2007), 148–50.

⁶⁰ As interpreted by C.A. Faraone, ‘The agonistic context of early Greek binding spells’, in C.A. Faraone and D. Obbink (edd.), *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (Oxford, 1991), 3–32, at 5. See e.g. *IG* II² 2724 (319/8): ‘boundary marker of the property, house and garden mortgaged upon the covenants deposited with (παρά) Gniphonides’. E. Carawan, ‘Oral “agreement”, written contract, and the bonds of law at Athens’, in C. Cooper (ed.), *Politics of Orality: Orality and Literacy in Ancient Greece*, Vol. 6 (Leiden, 2007), 321–42, at 323 n. 10 gives further examples.

⁶¹ See Faraone (n. 60), 24, n. 15; see also *SGD* 109, from Lilybaeum, Sicily, second century B.C.E., which uses a similar gift formula.

18).⁶² The use of lists in Athenian curse tablets, Gordon has argued, may be meant to evoke the civic lists of *atimoi* and others who had offended against the state.⁶³ The gods of the underworld, to whom the curse was directed, were being invited to react to the list of names on the curse tablet as citizens reacted to these lists of names, that is, in condemnation. This may have seemed to increase the authority of a curse, and thus the power and reliability of that particular request.

We have mentioned already the idea that writing down an agreement might form a useful record of it, especially in a context in which different languages were spoken. The same might be said of writing down a curse; more specifically it may be possible to draw a parallel between the development of written curses and that of contracts from oral to written form. In the case of private contracts, even as it became common to record the specifics of an arrangement in writing, the binding nature of the agreement continued to depend on an oral acknowledgement of the transaction.⁶⁴ It seems likely that binding curses were also originally made orally, and that this aspect continued. It may be that we can argue for a parallel with contract writing and suggest that inscribing them may also have been a way of invoking permanence – the creation of a physical embodiment of the agreement – as well as perhaps a way of ensuring that the details of the agreement were correct.⁶⁵

Supporting this approach, we do find phrases that talk about wanting the curse to hold and not be released, and some of these make particular reference to the idea of writing the curse down. For example, in a curse from Pella, Macedonia, we find ‘And were I ever to unfold and read these words again after digging (the tablet) up, only then should Dionysophon marry, not before’ (see Eidinow [2007], 452–3); *DT* 52 asks that Hermes Chthonius ‘bind these things and read them for as long as they are living’. So the physical act of writing becomes part of the ritual process of binding. This may, in turn, cast light back on the expectations of those who wrote lead letters – perhaps they also turned to writing as a way of, literally, impressing (into the lead) the urgency of their concerns.

The language models used in cursing suggest the wider imaginative processes that were drawn on by those who were composing both letters and curses. The writers of curses appear to have been influenced by a variety of activities, including civic practices, trading experiences and the language of contracts, as well as letter writing. In the case of curses, these were used as models for understanding the particular kind of arrangement they were trying to set up with (various) supernatural figures. The letters, though fewer are extant, seem to be similarly influenced by

⁶² See examples and brief discussion in P.J. Rhodes and R. Osborne, *Greek Historical Inscriptions, 404–323 B.C.* (Oxford, 2007), at xix. A.E. Raubitschek, ‘Inscriptions’, in G.R. Davidson and D.B. Thompson (edd.), *Small Objects from the Pnyx I* (Princeton, 1943), 1–11, at 10–11 (no. 17) reads *θεοί* (vocative) at the start of letter A2 which would be an interesting echo of a public document, if the reading is correct. However, Vinogradov (1998), 154 says the iota is unclear (therefore *θεοί*) and restores the word as the beginning of a personal name: *Θεογ[νήτωι] χαίρει(ι)ν καὶ Γναθίωι*.

⁶³ R. Gordon, ‘What’s in a list?’, in D. Jordan, H. Montgomery and E. Thomassen (edd.), *The World of Ancient Magic: Papers from the first International Samson Eitrem Seminar at the Norwegian Institute at Athens, 4–8 May 1997* (Bergen, 1999), 239–78. See also Isoc. *Antid.* 15.237 with R. Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, 1992), 137.

⁶⁴ Carawan (n. 60), 322: ‘the decisive “agreement” was made out loud’. This would also be the inference from letter E5. See also the Pech-Maho contract: Wilson (1997–8), 48–50.

⁶⁵ See C.A. Faraone, ‘Aeschylus’ *Hymnos Desmios* (*Eum.* 306) and Attic judicial curse tablets’, *JHS* 105 (1985), 150–4.

at least some of these experiences and, in turn, to provide a model of writing themselves.

V. RELATIONSHIPS AND RESPONSES IN CRISIS

Viewing the lead letters alongside other types of written communication demonstrates the importance of recognizing the socio-cultural context of literacy. As has been recognized, writing in the ancient world may have been used to provide information, or conceal it; may have added legitimacy or authority to a message conveyed. This is as true for personal letters as it is for *polis* decrees or curse tablets.

Although we know little about the circumstances or ritual (supernatural or social) of the composition of either the letters or curses, the material results of both activities provide us with startling pictures of the personal relationships and activities of particular individuals. Specifically, they both offer us insights into the responses of these people in moments of crisis, and reveal possible parallel patterns of thought and behaviour. One area of common ground between both activities was the use of writing to request action. Writing was, therefore, an important part of this communicative process, but in neither case should we separate literacy from orality: the spoken and written messages go hand in hand.

Letters and lives

The lead letters in themselves are a valuable source for social historians. They not only provide us with a glimpse of the lives of people about whom we have very little information, but they also reveal *how* those people responded to their concerns and that the written form was an important part of this response. Much of the written evidence from the ancient world comes from elite groups; few other people speak in their own voices. These letters are a contribution (albeit small) to adjusting that balance. They are not associated with the political elites, but detail a range of concerns of people who are, in many ways, on the margins of *polis* life – slaves, traders, women.

Letters, like curse tablets, do much more than simply demonstrate the literacy of certain categories of people. They reveal contexts of literacies and the nature of relationships between otherwise unattested individuals in the ancient world. Letter writing was one option deemed suitable when specific action was required and the person needing assistance was physically separated from the recipient of the letter. In this way, they draw our attention (directly or through implication) to individual attitudes towards and expectations around interpersonal behaviour, and the kinds of actions and values that were considered important in maintaining, or breaking, relationships.

These communications between unknown individuals show that it was not only elite groups who were interested in maintaining the cooperative values of their community. Subjects that we find discussed in the contemporary writings of the social and political elite – aspects of justice, the appropriate way to make an exchange, or maintaining the *oikos* – are also apparent in these letters. Although traders, women and slaves are often seen as civic ‘outsiders’, the letters demonstrate that

they shared an interest in community values – making a significant addition to our understanding of the role of elites and non-elites in shaping civic life. They suggest that, if only through their activities, these ‘outsiders’ helped to define the ways in which these values were shaped and expressed in the communities to which each writer/recipient belonged.

Letters and literacy

Comparison of the letters and curses shows that writing was often thought appropriate in situations when assistance was needed. The level of detail varies: the letters, albeit brief themselves, tend to provide much more information about context than the curses.⁶⁶ Both types of text show their writers attempting to resolve a situation by seeking external help, be it mortal or supernatural. In neither case do writers record open questions such as ‘What shall I do?’ By the time they turn to write their letter or curse, they have decided, and they write to request specific action be taken to remedy the problem that they have identified. In each case, the request is formulated in its own idiom, be it the vindictive and perhaps more explicitly desperate formulaic incantations of the curses or the briefer, more peremptory (but just as desperate) orders of the letters.⁶⁷

This decisive approach to managing difficulties is reminiscent of the ways in which individuals appear to use oracles, as demonstrated by the oracle question tablets from Dodona. In these, we find the writer confronted with a problematic situation and, rather than asking the oracle for general guidance (‘What shall I do?’ or ‘Whom shall I marry?’), consultants describe what they have decided to do and ask for affirmation, or ask to which gods they should make sacrifice in order to make sure that their chosen course of action is successful.⁶⁸

The three genres of writing are, however, very different: traditionally we might cast these, respectively, as evidence for merchant activity and literacy; for magical practice; for religious activities. Of course, we are not denying the differences between their particular contexts. But we are suggesting that it is also informative to consider them side by side, as evidence for the attempts of individuals to exert

⁶⁶ Some letters give a relatively full account of the situation, for example Achillodorus’ letter (E1); while others suffice with a briefer narrative or just a demand for action (D1). Most of the curse tablets give us little background information (although the curse tablet written by Phile, from Pella mentioned above is a vivid exception, see E. Voutiras, *Διονυσιοφάντος γάμοι: Marital Life and Magic in Fourth-century Pella* [Amsterdam, 1998], Eidinow [2007], 214–5). On the other hand, curse tablets make it clear, through their choice of target, who, in the view of the writer, posed a serious problem; and some (so-called border area curses) note that the writer of the curse has suffered an injustice or accuse a target of doing wrong (see Versnel, [n. 51], with Eidinow [2007], 229–30).

⁶⁷ This functional aspect of letter writing appears to continue in the documentary papyrus letters, and most commentators emphasize that these letters appear to be written primarily to ‘transmit information, orders and requests over a distance’ (R. Criboire, *Writing, Teachers and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt* [Atlanta 1996], 5), and are short and businesslike (Parsons [n. 15], 10). Morello and Morrison (n. 28), p. x note how this ‘didactic agenda’ will, over time, allow for the inclusion and adaptation of ‘features from almost any other genre for best effect’, and (in the same volume) Hutchison offers an intriguing analysis of the rhetorical strategies used in three letters (*P. Oxy.* 2190 and *P. Oxy.* XLVIII 3396–7) and the ‘shaping of language to affect a reader’. Parsons (n. 15), 10 emphasizes that although the papyrus letters are, in general, very businesslike, they also have a crucial social function in maintaining relationships.

⁶⁸ See Eidinow (2007), 132–7.

some kind of control over what happens in the future, and to do this by trying to negotiate difficult or potentially dangerous relationships in the present.

Taking this approach encourages us to consider this material not just in terms of literacy in general, but with regard to the kind of literacy it reveals, that is the context of production and the particular needs of the people writing or being written to. Looking at it in this way casts the personnel of these letters, and their activities, in another light. These letters reveal the interactions that underpinned the maintenance, and destruction, of social ties within communities, and show us the crucial involvement of members of social groups that are usually described as marginal to communities. Thus, they show us women engaged in setting up or resolving problematic situations, reinforcing literary evidence that suggests the importance of women's opinions within their families and communities.⁶⁹ Similarly, we see the interactions of traders sorting out essential, sometimes life-threatening, questions about trust and fairness.

These documents also draw attention to the role of merchants in the development of literacy, but from a different angle than is usually assumed. Not only might they need literacy because of the immense distances they travel or the kinds of transactions they are conducting, but also because they were risk takers. This aspect is also apparent in the published question tablets from the oracle sanctuary of Dodona. Questions about sea travel and related work appear to form the largest category of inquiries in this collection. It appears that negotiating risk through attempting to control the future was particularly important for merchants.

Written and oral communication

The wider issues highlighted by reading the letters alongside curses and oracle tablets prompt us to think about the use of writing more generally. Letters, curses and oracles are all forms of writing borne out of contexts of crisis. Each developed its own idiom and its own concerns, but across the genres we note a shared approach to problem solving and the importance of writing. In each case, the written texts provide us with a writer's problem and his decision; and the choice to write this information down rather than, or as well as, communicating it orally seems significant in each context. However, the written text should not necessarily be seen as being in conflict with, or having a stronger force than, oral testimony, but as an additional mode of communication.⁷⁰

At the beginning of this article we asked to what extent the letters contributed to questions about writing in general. It is clear from the discussion that writing – and the epigraphic habit – was more common in a wider range of circumstances than has previously been thought. Although the evidence is sparse, there is clear

⁶⁹ See for example, Apollodorus' appeal to the jurors in *Against Neaira* to consider their wives' reactions to their decision: [Dem.] 59.110–11.

⁷⁰ It is hard to evaluate, but it should be pointed out that we do not find 'nonsense letters' like the 'nonsense questions' discovered among the question tablets at the oracle of Dodona. This suggests that the oral delivery of the question at Dodona took precedence over the written text, whereas this might not necessarily be the case for the letters. See Eidinow (2007), 129; A.P. Christidis, S. Dakaris and J. Vokotopoulou, 'Magic in the oracular tablets from Dodona', in D. Jordan, H. Montgomery and E. Thomassen (edd.), *The World of Ancient Magic: Papers from the first International Samson Eitrem Seminar at the Norwegian Institute at Athens, 4–8 May 1997* (Bergen, 1999), 67–72, at 62, no. 2.

indication of common formulae and categories of letter writing in this comparatively early period. However, although the choice to write down a message is an important one, we should not see this choice as an either/or situation or a strict oral/written dichotomy. Instead, both forms of communication should be seen as working hand in hand. If this is the case, then it is less important whether the individuals involved in the letter's production and delivery could read the text or not: oral and written process would have worked in harmony with one another.

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Newman University College, Birmingham

ESTHER EIDINOW

e.eidinow@newman.ac.uk

Trinity College, Dublin

CLAIRE TAYLOR

claire.taylor@tcd.ie

APPENDIX: CATALOGUE OF PERSONAL LETTERS

The following tables catalogue the personal letters known to us and referred to in the main text. They detail writers, recipients, as well as other people mentioned in the letters, alongside the type of request made and the epistolary formulae used. The alphanumeric system of reference derives from Dana (2004), and enables the reader to see easily which letters are found in which geographical area:

A: Attica

B: Chalcidice

C/D: Western Mediterranean

E: Black Sea.

These geographical regions are maintained for the letters on *ostraka* in Appendix 2.

1. Personal letters on lead

A1: Petition and instruction. Formula: name in nom. + ἐπέστρελε + dat. of recipient + χαίρεν καὶ ὑγιαίνει. Early 4th c., Attica.

Writers Who?	Recipients		Others		Main Bibliography
	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?	Who else?	
Mnesiergus	M. away from home, presumably during winter, and needs some cheap skins. He will repay at an unspecified date.	Family ('those at home'). On good terms since he exchanges pleasant-ries with them.	M. in Athens and his relatives in Attica, or vice versa? Letter found in Chaidari (deme of Hermus), approx. 7 km from city.	Nausias or Thrasycles or his/ the son (fellow demesmen of M. or business contacts?) are deliverers of letter and expected to be in pottery district.	Jordan (2003), 32-3, no. VI

A2: Instruction. Letter 'inscribed with a sharp instrument on one face' (Raubitschek). Formula: χαίρεν καὶ ὑγιαίνει + dat. of recipients, 425-325, Phyx, Athens.

Writers Who?	Recipients		Others		Main Bibliography
	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?	Who else?	
Arignotus? Theognetus? (see n. 62 above for possible reconstructions)		Gnathius? His name is mentioned in the dative, but he could be the recipient of the instruction rather than the letter.	Unknown. Found in fill on Phyx.	A slave? (restored by Vinogradov)	Raubitschek (1943), 10-1, no. 17. Vinogradov (1998), 154, n. 2 (no. 16)

A3: Petition. Opisthographic; well preserved; v. neat handwriting, no word division (use of reed stilus). Folded. Formula: nom. + ἐπιστῆλῃεἰ + dat. of recipients. Early 4th c., Athens.

Writers		Recipients		Others		Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/Relationship	Where?	Who else?			
Lesis.	Slave/metic mistreated in foundry.	Mother and Xenocles.	Unknown. Found in a well in the Athenian agora.	Xenocles not Lesis' father but perhaps <i>prostates</i> of Lesis' mother.	Remove Lesis from intolerable situation and abuse at the hands of employers; find better situation for him.	Jordan (2000); Harris (2004); Harvey (2007)	

A4: Instruction. Folded. Formula: nom. + ἐπιστῆλῃω + acc. + inf. (Jordan: reading <Δ>καίῃαρχο as a gen. and therefore patronymic of Pasiton) or nom. + ἐπιστῆλῃω + dat. (Sosin: reading <Δ>καίῃαρχο as a dat. and therefore recipient of the letter). Before 370/69, Attica?

Writers		Recipients		Others		Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/Relationship	Where?	Who else?			
Pasiton.	Banker (?) attempting to prosecute enemies.	Satyron (?), presumably (citizen) agent of Pasiton. (his <i>prostates</i> ? See Jordan) or Dicaearchus (?), an associate of Pasiton.	Unknown. But within Athens/Piraeus area if Pasiton is identified as the well-known banker.	Nicostratus, the brother of Deinon, and Aretheusius are named as targets of prosecutions. Glaucetes and Acontodorus also mentioned.		Take revenge on enemies.	Jordan (2003); Sosin (2008).

B1: Petition + instruction. Letters 'confidently written on one side' (Henry). Folded. Formula: nom. + dat. of recipient + χαίρειν. c. 350–325, Torone.

Writers		Recipients		Others		Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/Relationship	Where?	Who else?			
-tus.	Trader in wood who is unable to make a deal in his current location.	Tegeas, a trading partner of the writer.	-tus is in M[ende?], the letter was found in Torone (i.e. a short boat trip away)		Send 7 talents of wood immediately (within 7 days) or -tus will break off the arrangement.	Henry (1991 [1993])	

B2: Unpublished. No information, but fourth century from Mende. See Jordan (2003), 32, no. V.

C1: Instruction? (fragmentary and unclear). Formula: $\chi\alpha\iota\rho\epsilon\upsilon\alpha\iota\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \acute{\upsilon}[\gamma\iota\alpha\lambda\epsilon\upsilon\alpha\iota]$ (line 5). 4th/early 3rd c., Agde?

Writers		Recipients		Others		Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/Relationship	Where?	Who else?			
Unknown.	Trader?	Unknown (has salutation which might indicate familiarity).	Agde (Agathe?) Could be adjective or place name.	Leather worker? (<i>σκυτεὺς</i>); master (in gen.: <i>δεσποτοῦ</i>).	Request for goods or slaves?	Jordan (2003), 34, no. X. Lejeune et al. (1988), 39–40, 47.	

D1: Instruction? May have been rolled up. Writing on both sides. Formula: may have $\pi\alpha\rho\acute{\alpha}$ formula on side B. c. 425–400, Emporium.

Writers		Recipients			Others	Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/Relationship	Where?	Who else?			
Unknown.	Trader arranging a sale?	Tielar[---]? An Etruscan name? Perhaps the owner of a ship.	Unknown. Found in Emporium.		Send something to someone because it is not right?	Santiago and Samarti (1989) with Santiago (1990).	

D2: Instruction. Rolled. Formula: letter ends with $\chi\alpha\iota\rho\epsilon$. c. 530–500, Emporium.

Writers		Recipients			Others	Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/Relationship	Where?	Who else?			
Unknown.	Trader arranging a sale.	Employer-employee?	Letter refers to a deal in Saiganthe (Saguntum?) as well as the Emporitans.	Recipient encouraged to seek help of Bapsed[-] (an Iberian?) in some sort of trans-action.	Instructions to buy half share in something and to fit out a ship.	Wilson (1997–8), 46–7; Santiago (2003), 167–70; Sanmarti-Grego and Santiago (1988), 3–17.	

D3: Fragmentary, but ‘well written’ (Jeffrey, *LSAG* notes). c. 425–400, Emporium.

Writers		Recipients		Others		Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?	Who else?			
Unknown.				Pythagoras, Agathocles, and Nymphite. Few other readable words.			Jordan (2003), 35, no. XIII.

E1: Petition + instruction. Folded/rolled. End of line 3 in boustrophedon. Written on both sides. Formula: Side A: recipient in voc. + nom. + dat. of recipient + ἐπιστρέλλε. Side B: gen. of possession (Ἀχιλλοδώρο τῷ μολίβδιον) + παρὰ + acc. c. 500, Berezan.

Writers		Recipients			Others		Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/Relationship	Where?	Who else?				
Achillodoros.	Achillodoros has been seized as the property of Anaxagoras owing to non-payment of debt. Achillodoros denies he is Anaxagoras' slave.	Son of Achillodoros, Protogoras and Anaxagoras.	Refers to movement between a place called Arbinatae and the city.	Anaxagoras and Matasys in dispute: Anaxagoras has allegedly seized property of Matasys, who retaliates by seizing Achillodoros. Shipyard master (?) mentioned in connection with resolving dispute.	Order to Protogoras to a) tell Anaxagoras and his wife of Achillodoros' plight, and b) take his mother and brothers from Arbinatae to the city.	Bravo (1974); Dubois (1996), 50–5, no. 23; Wilson (1997–8), 36–7.		

E2: Instruction. Folded. Written on both sides. Formula: nom. + dat. of recipient + *χαίρειν*. c. 350, Olbia.

Writers		Recipients			Others	Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?	Who else?			
Articon.	Warning family of possible eviction.	Family.	Recipient told to go to Sytakoi (place?) or Sytakes/Atakes, a person/family?) or to Agatharces' house.	Family in danger of eviction by Myllion; can find refuge with Agatharces; Cerdon as creditor.	Order to family about what to do if they are evicted.	Dubois (1996), 63–6, no. 25.	

E3: Instruction. Folded/rolled. Boustrophedon. Formula: *παρά* (recipient/sender?). c. 540–535, Berezan.

Writers		Recipients		Others		Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?	Who else?			
Unknown.	Some sort of exchange.	Group have transaction with writer?	Unknown. Found in Berezan.	Slave-girl in Melanus' possession is to be returned.		Return something, including a slave-girl as soon as possible.	Vinogradov (1998), 154-6, no. 1.

E4a: Instruction. Opisthographic; ‘carefully executed’ (Vinogradov). Folded. Tablet reused.¹ c. 525–500, Olbia.

Writers Who?	Recipients		Others		Main Bibliography
	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?	Who else?	
Unknown.			Found in the agora at Olbia.		Vinogradov (1998), 157–60, no. 2 (recto). Instructions to household/business partner (?) concerning items of value to seize/which have been seized (wood, Lydian plate)?

E4b: Instruction. Opisthographic; ‘carefully executed’ (Vinogradov). Folded. Tablet reused. Formula: Side B: dat. of recipient? c. 525–500, Olbia.

Writers Who?	Recipients		Others		Main Bibliography
	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?	Who else?	
Unknown.	Directions to the writer’s son for some kind of transaction.	Son?	Unknown. Found in the agora at Olbia.		Vinogradov (1998), 157–60, no. 2 (verso). Letter mentions iron implements to be exchanged for something; clothing made from skins.

¹ E4a and E4b are written on the same tablet, but are different letters, and demonstrate the reuse of the lead tablet. Indeed, Vinogradov (1998), 157–8 suspects two hands, but does not suggest that the tablet itself was reused, nor that we have two letters here: ‘it is noteworthy that the double-pointed punctuation is only found on the *recto*, and moreover the supposition that two hands were responsible for inscribing the two texts deviates from the identity of the handwriting which one particularly senses in the forms *kappa* and *mu*’. Dana (2004) follows Vinogradov in reading this as one letter.

E5: Petition. Folded/rolled. Written on both sides. Formula: Side A: nom. + dat. of recipient. Side B: dat. of recipient + nom. of sender. End 6th c., Olbia.

Writers Who?	Recipients		Others		Action requested	Main Bibliography
	Situation	Recipient/Relationship	Where?	Who else?		
Apatorius.	Apatorius has had his goods confiscated. He wants Leanax to send him records to prove Leanax's ownership.	Leanax, the employer of Apatorius?	Unknown. Found in the agora at Olbia.	Meno, a business partner of Apatorius, who corroborates story. Heracles, son of Eutherus, and (wife?) Thathiae have seized goods; Apatorius thinks records will disprove claim. Also mentioned, sum of 27 staters; slaves of Thymoleus.	Request for records (<i>diphtheria</i>) to prove ownership.	Dana (2004); Santiago Alvarez and Gardenes Santiago (2006).

E6: Unpublished. Unknown date, Olbia (necropolis). Baticon writing to Diphilus. See Vinogradov (1998), 154, n. 2, no.3.

E7: Petition. Sounds like a conversation. Folded. Formula: begins with voc. of recipient. c. 450–425, Olbia.

Writers Who?	Recipients		Others		Action requested	Main Bibliography
	Situation	Recipient/Relationship	Where?	Who else?		
Unknown.	Writer and recipient are embroiled in some kind of dispute with a third party.	Protagoras, a friend of the writer.	Unknown. Found in settlement on the Zhivakhov hill, Gulf of Odessa. Perhaps sent from/to main settlement in Olbia?	A man is causing difficulty for writer and Protagoras. Writer has information on Protagoras' kin.	Threats made against third party if he continues dispute.	Vinogradov (1998), 164–6, no.4.

E8: Unpublished. No details given. Nymphaeum. See Vinogradov (1998), 154, n. 2, no. 9.

E9: Instruction. Small hole indicates ‘fastened to a wood support with a nail’ (*SEG*). Formula: nom + [dat + *χαίρειν*]. c. 400–350, Panticapaenum.

Writers		Recipients		Others		Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?	Who else?			
Hermæus.	Some kind of exchange.	Employer? Agent?	Unknown.	Someone sent by Hermæus to perform exchange.		Take care of 50 somethings and return them 'from the person who originally was responsible for them.' (<i>SEG</i>)	<i>SEG</i> 50 (2000), 704.

E10: Fragmentary and unpublished. Rolled, text ‘scratched with a thin spike stylus’ (Finogenova). Late 6th/early 5th c., Hermonassa. Mentions a woman. See Finogenova (2003), 1019.

E11: Instruction. Folded. c. 530–510, Phanagoria.

Writers		Recipients			Others		Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?	Who else?				
Unknown.	Writer is selling a slave.	Buyer of slave.	Found in Phanagoria; mentions slave export from Borysthènes (i.e. Olbia).	Slave is named as Phaylles.		Pay all debts (i.e. for purchase of slave).	Vinogradov (1998), 160–3, no.3.	

2. Personal letters on ostraka

A5: Instruction. Formula: recipient in voc? Mid 6th c., Attica.

Writers Who?	Recipients		Others		Action requested	Main Bibliography
	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?	Who?		
Unknown.		Relative/ workmate of [Thamne]us the recipient.	Unknown. Found in Athenian agora.		To put the saw under the threshold of the garden gate.	<i>Agora</i> XXI: B1.

A6: Instruction. Formula: recipient in voc. c. 500, Attica.

Writers Who?	Recipients		Others		Action requested	Main Bibliography
	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?	Who else?		
Slave owner.	Redecoration of home (Lang)/kit- ting out a donkey (Oikonomides).	Slave (<i>παῦ</i>).	Unknown. Found in Athenian agora.	New couches for Phala[nthus] (Lang)/a donkey called Phal[ias] (Oikonomides).	Bring couches/ baskets and leather straps.	<i>Agora</i> XXI: B2; Oikonomides (1986), 51–2.

A7: Petition. Formula: nom. + imperative. c. 490–450, Attica.

Writers Who?	Recipients		Others		Action requested	Main Bibliography
	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?	Who else?		
Arcesimus.	Unknown.	Eumelis, perhaps wife/relative/slave.	Unknown. Found in Athenian agora.		Come ‘as quickly as you can’ (<i>ὅς τάχως</i>).	<i>Agora</i> XXI: B7.

A8: Fragmentary. Mid 4th c., Attica.

Writers		Recipients		Others		Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?	Who else?			
Woman? (Oikonomides)	Wife in Corinth complaining about treatment by husband?	Woman's relatives?	Unknown. Found in Athenian agora.	Another woman is using 'my own personal things'.	Complaint.	<i>Agora</i> XXI: B10 (identified as contract); Oikonomides (1986), 57–8, no. 17.	

A9: Possible letter: description of past action? Formula: nom. + ἐπέστελε (imperfect) + dat. of recipient. 425–400, Attica.

Writers		Recipients		Others		Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?	Who else?			
Sosineus.		Glaucus.	Glaucus is in the <i>asty</i> (in prison according to Oikonomides's restoration); Sosineus is not.		Not a request, but description of past action. Not a letter?		<i>Agora</i> XXI: B9; Oikonomides (1986), 49.

E12: Instruction. Formula: ἐπιστελέλεις πέμπ[ον]. c. 540–535 (Vinogradov), c. 400 (Dubois), Olbia.

Writers		Recipients		Others	Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?	Who else?		
A priest.	A religious situation (the letter seems to start with some kind of religious instruction (1, 3); a number of Olbian cults are mentioned (8); also damaged altars (7, see Dubois on this line). But a number of trees (11) also suggests a commercial cargo; there is also mention of a shipwreck.	Unclear.	South of the citadel of Olbia, but written in an alphabet that it is impossible to locate, at least in Olbia (see Dubois).	Slaves have escaped after a shipwreck; also hunters of horses.	Unclear, although there may be some religious instruction.	Dubois (1996), 55–63, no. 24; SEG 51.970.

E13: Formula: voc. + ἀποστελῶ σοι ἐπιστολήν. 3rd/2nd c., Olbia.

Writers		Recipients		Others	Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?	Who else?		
Unknown.		Eutyches.		The bodies/slaves? (σωματῶν)		SEG 36.949

E14: Instruction. Formula: nom. + [dat.]. c. 350–325, Gorgippia.

Writers		Recipients		Others	Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?			
Apollonides.	Organizing domestic matters.	Apollonides' son?	Unknown.	Recipient instructed to give (?) a <i>pelekos</i> to slave. Also, gardener, in context of vines and vegetables.	To give (?) the <i>pelekos</i> to the slave.	Vinogradov (1997).

E15: Instruction. Formula: dat. of recipient. 3rd c., Olbia.

Writers		Recipients		Others	Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?			
Unknown.		Letter seems to be addressed to the ship owners.	Unknown. Found in agora at Olbia.	Menandrus.	Instruction not to return items to Menandrus or hold them for him.	Dubois (1996), 66–7, no. 26.

E16: Possible letter, due to restored formula: [ἐπιτο]τελέε. c. 300, Panskopje.

Writers		Recipients		Others	Action requested	Main Bibliography
Who?	Situation	Recipient/ Relationship	Where?			
Unknown.			Found in Panskopje.	Citizens of Olbia.		SEG 51.984.

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