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Reading Ancient Mail

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'T is strange, the shortest letter which man uses
Instead of speech, may form a lasting link
Of ages . . .
Lord Byron, *Don Juan* (1837), Canto 3, stanza 88

I. INTRODUCTION

In preparing for my address, in this 176th year of our Society, I read a good many earlier AOS presidential addresses. There were many illustrious names among those, and so I am keenly aware of the daunting privilege of standing before you this evening. But as I read those earlier addresses, I was at least somewhat relieved to find that many of them began with the problem that prompted me to read some of them in the first place, namely, What can I talk about that will be of interest to such a diverse group of scholars? At the 1972 meeting, for example, the eminent Assyriologist Leo Oppenheim began by saying, "When it comes to after dinner speeches, the philologist . . . is at a sore disadvantage" (Oppenheim 1973: 259). Even more so, I can attest, when the philologist is one whose research tends to focus on comparative and historical grammar. When I contemplated talking about any of my current research projects—such as Proto-Semitic morphology or Hebrew etymology—I worried that some of you, who for some bizarre reason are *not* passionate about Semitic historical linguistics, might be asleep in moments. And as Stephanie Jamison pointed out in her wonderful address to the 2010 meeting, putting the audience to sleep is not the kind of "institutional immortality" one should strive for (Jamison 2011: 1).

So I decided to talk instead about my favorite type of text, the letter. We all have our individual reasons for getting into these fields of study. I have always been interested in languages and ancient history; in high school, I had the opportunity to study Latin, and then, at my small college, not only Greek but also Hebrew and even Aramaic. Ancient languages grabbed me, and have never let go. And the texts that bring those languages most vividly to life for me are letters. We all learn in high school about Ḫammurapi and his famous laws. But I still remember discovering, in college, that we can read letters of Ḫammurapi.[1] To me, this was, and still is, amazing. When I retired from teaching in the spring of 2017, I started trying to get my Latin back in shape, something I had long wanted to do. And the first Latin texts I want to read are letters. In fact, the year before I retired, at the 2016 AOS meeting, when I visited some of Boston's used bookstores, I bought only one book: a volume of Cicero's letters.

Presidential Address, 228th meeting of the American Oriental Society, Pittsburgh, March 18, 2018. I wish to thank Joel Brereton, Jo Ann Hackett, Stephanie Jamison, and Na'ama Pat-El for their advice and encouragement. The oral nature of the address has for the most part been retained. Translations are mine except as otherwise noted.

1. On writing and reading in Ḫammurapi's time see Charpin 2010.

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I have to issue a disclaimer: there is a rich and burgeoning scholarship on epistolography in the ancient Near East,[2] as there is in the Society's other philological traditions in which there is a large corpus of texts. For example, 2015 saw the publication of the monumental *History of Chinese Letters and Epistolary Culture*, edited by our colleague Antje Richter (Richter 2015).[3] But I myself am not a scholar of epistolography. I have, however, *read* a lot of ancient letters. It was my great fortune to teach courses in most of the ancient Semitic languages, and every year or two I had a graduate seminar devoted specifically to Old Babylonian letters, or Old Assyrian letters, or Aramaic letters. In my other courses, too, it wasn't long before the students were aware that, in any language, letters are my favorite type of text,[4] and *why* they are: I really want to know how they talked, these ancient people we study, to understand the grammar of their languages as deeply as possible; and letters, which are usually unedited, are the closest we can get to real, everyday speech. Indeed, among the many definitions of the genre of letters that I have read, one of my favorites is that letters are "conversation at a distance" (Sweeney 2001: 1).

As is true of letters in other ancient cultures, some ancient Near Eastern letters are official, while others are private, although it's usually not possible to draw a sharp line between the two. Many of the letters I will talk about are private letters, concerned with family matters or other aspects of daily life. Private letters presumably reflect less formal speech, and that also makes us linguists happy. They are also more fun: they provide glimpses of everyday life, of the thoughts and concerns of mostly otherwise unknown, unremarkable individuals.[5] So what follows is a personal tour through two millennia of ancient Near Eastern letters in a variety of languages on a variety of media, a small selection of favorites from among the many that I have enjoyed reading over the past four decades. Some of these letters are well known within each guild, but most are not, I believe, known across even the various branches of ancient Near Eastern studies, let alone more broadly. And since many of the cultures studied by members of the Society have preserved corpora of letters, I hope it will be of some interest to most. Indeed, letters, letter-writing, and epistolography might make a good topic for a plenary session.

II. AKKADIAN LETTERS (1): OLD BABYLONIAN

I mentioned how amazed I was to learn that we have letters of Ḫammurapi. The first letter I will present is not one of Ḫammurapi's, but it is from the time of his reign, nearly 3,800 years ago (in the so-called Middle Chronology, which places his reign at 1792–1750 BCE). It is probably my favorite letter.[6] A young man named Iddin-Sîn, who is away at school, writes to his mother Zinû. After the customary "may the gods sustain you forever for my sake"

2. A few years before delivering his AOS presidential address, referred to above, Oppenheim had published *Letters from Mesopotamia*, a wonderful collection of 150 Akkadian letters, as part of the celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of Chicago's Oriental Institute (Oppenheim 1967). Several volumes of the Society of Biblical Literature series Writings from the Ancient World have also been devoted to letters, e.g., Wente 1990, Michalowski 1993, Lindenberger 2003, Hoffner 2009; Dennis Pardee and I are currently preparing *Letters from Ugarit* for the same series.

3. Recent broadly based surveys of ancient epistolography include Yiftach-Firanko 2013, Radner 2014, and Procházka, Reinfandt, and Tost 2015.

4. In my *Introduction to Ugaritic* (Huehnergard 2012), for example, the first texts presented are not the famous myths, but letters.

5. It must be acknowledged, of course, that even private ancient letters normally reflect the upper echelons of society; indeed, in some ancient Near Eastern societies—though not all—only a few long-trained scribes could write.

6. Dossin 1934: text 111; re-edited in Veenhof 2005: text 165.

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(DN$_1$ DN$_2$ DN$_3$ *aššumī-ya ana dāriātim liballiṭū-ki*, ll. 4–6)—the equivalent of our starting an email with "hope this finds you well"—Iddin-Sîn launches into his reason for writing:

> [7] *Ṣubāt awīlê* [8] *šattam ana šattim* [9] *idammiqū;* [10] *atti ṣubāt-ī* [11] *šattam ana šattim* [12] *tuqallalī.* [13] *Ina ṣubātī-ya* [14] *qullulim u kuṣṣi?* [15] *taštarî.* [16] *Ina šīpātum ina bītī-ni* [17] *kīma akalim innakkalā,* [18] *atti ṣubāt-ī tuqallilī.*
>
> [7–9] The gentlemen's clothing gets better from year to year; [10–12] you decrease my clothing from year to year. [13–15] You have become rich by decreasing and *skimping on?* my clothing. [16–18] While wool is consumed like bread in our house, you have decreased my clothing.

So this is a schoolboy's complaint that could be heard today: "everyone else at school has better clothes than I do!" Iddin-Sîn isn't done complaining:

> [19] *Mār Adad-iddinam,* [20] *ša abū-šu ṣuḫār abī-ya,* [21] *šina? ṣubātê eššūtim* [22] [*lab*]*iš; atti ana ṣubātī-ya* [23] [*iš*]*tēn tattana?darī.*
>
> [19–20] The son of Adad-iddinam, whose father is an employee of my father, [21–22] is [wea]ring *two?* new garments; [22–23] you keep worrying about my [o]ne garment.

And in fact, Iddin-Sîn's father *was* one of Ḫammurapi's high officials, Šamaš-ḫāzir, so his schoolmate's father could very well have worked for his father. And still Iddin-Sîn isn't done:

> [24] *Kīma atti yâti* [25] *tuldī-nnī,* [26] *šâti umma-šu* [27] *ana leqītim* [28] [*ilq*]*ē-šu.* [29] *U kīma šâti* [30] *umma-šu <i>rām-ū-šu,* [31] *atti* [*y*]*âti ul* [32] *tarammī-nnī.*
>
> [24–25] While you gave birth to me, [26–28] his mother [ad]opted him. [29–30] And though his mother loved him, [31–32] you do not love me.

Many people were adopted in ancient Mesopotamia,[7] but our entitled young letter-writer obviously felt that not being adopted gave him better claim to parental care. Iddin-Sîn was probably well advanced in his studies when he wrote this letter; the signs are well formed, the grammar is very good, and the style is nicely done, with several refrains of "while my colleagues get X, I get the opposite." But Iddin-Sîn still had a few things to learn; as can be seen in the drawing of the tablet in Figure 1, what he had to say did not quite fit properly on the tablet: He got to the bottom of the reverse and then wrote two short columns of text on the left edge; writing on the left edge is not so unusual, but even that wasn't enough room, so the last line (l. 32) spills over to the lower edge between the obverse and the reverse, which *is* quite unusual. Well, he was upset . . .

The time of Ḫammurapi and his dynasty is referred to as the Old Babylonian period. The textual record of this period is very rich, including, according to the online French website Archibab, over six thousand letters from a wide range of sites.[8] In fact, enough Old Babylonian letters come from different cities that we can often tell where a letter was written just by the minor dialectal variations in the grammar. And since I am a grammarian, I can't resist a brief digression to demonstrate how remarkably complex the grammar of a letter can be. The following sentence, from a different letter,[9] contains a subject-less passive verb, which governs both a noun phrase with a relative clause and also an infinitive phrase, embedded in which is another subordinate clause:

7. See, e.g., Stone and Owen 1991.

8. http://www.archibab.fr/, accessed February 20, 2018, when a search for Old Babylonian letters yielded 6,626 hits. Over 2,700 of these have been transliterated and translated in 14 volumes of the series *Altbabylonische Briefe*. Nearly as many letters from the site of Mari have been published in the series *Archives royales de Mari*; Jack Sasson's 2015 monograph presents an anthology of some 850 Mari letters.

9. King 1898–1900: text 56, ll. 13–16; transliteration and translation in Frankena 1966: text 54.

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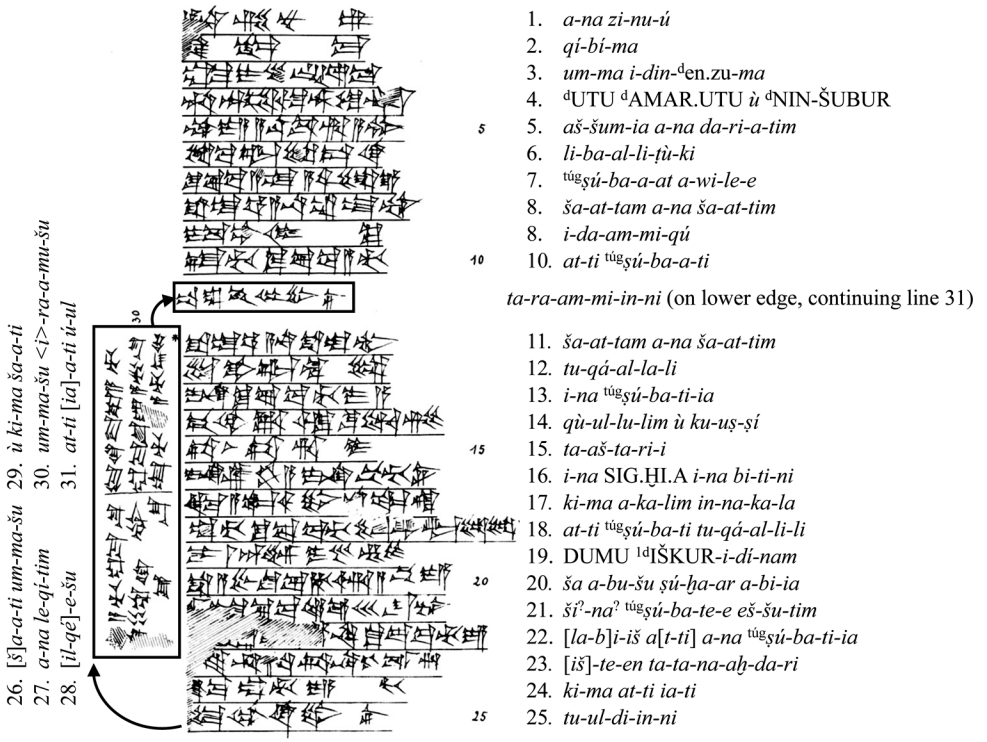

Fig. 1. Autograph copy of an Old Babylonian letter from Iddin-Sîn to his mother (Dossin 1934: text 111), with line-by-line transliteration (after Veenhof 2005: text 165).

Ana	*awīl-ê*	*šūt*	*pīḫātim,*	*ša*	*ina*	*Šaga*	*wašb-ū,*
to	man-PL	REL.PL	duty	REL	in	Šaga	dwell-3MP

aššum,	*inūma*	*ta-šappar-ā-šunūšim,*	*babbil-ī*	*ana*	*maḫrī-kun*[*u*
about	when	2-send.IPRF-PL-DAT.3MP	bearer-PL.ACC	to	presence-2MP

šapār-im]	*i-t-ta-špa*[*r*].
send.INF-GEN	3-PASS-PRF-send

A written order has been sent to the men responsible, who live in Šaga, about [sending] bearers to you, as soon as you write to them.

This is by no means unusual, and parsing out such grammatical details for myself is one of the reasons I so enjoy reading letters.

III. AKKADIAN LETTERS (2): OLD ASSYRIAN

From a century or so *before* the time of Ḫammurapi come Akkadian texts in a dialect called Old Assyrian. There are thousands of these, too, mostly letters between members of merchant families based in the ancient capital city of Assur in northern Mesopotamia who had extensive business dealings in and around the site of Kanesh, in Anatolia, present-day central Turkey. Cuneiform is a logo-syllabic writing system; some signs serve as logograms, representing whole words, while others are phonetic, representing syllables or part-syllables. In these Old Assyrian texts, however, the system is greatly simplified, with only a few logo-

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grams and a reduced set of phonetic signs. This simplified system could probably be learned quite quickly, and so members of the merchant families wrote many of the letters themselves instead of having to rely on professional scribes. Much of the business of these merchant houses was in textiles, and some of the Old Assyrian letters, like this one, concern an obvious problem in the storage and long-distance transportation of textiles:[10]

> [7] *Nišammē-ma* [8] *ṣubātū sāsam* [9] *laptū. Miššum* [10] *ṣubātē lā tāšurā-ma* [11] *têrta-kunu lā illikam?* [12] *U šumma Imdī-ilum* [13] *lā paṭāram* [14] *iqbiʔ-ak-kunūti,* [15] *īde kīma adi* [16] *ūmem anniʔem* [17] *tasaḫḫurā-ni?* [18] *Imdī-ilum ana* [19] *Burušḫaddem* [20] *ittalak.*
> *Aḫḫū-ni* [21] *attunu, lū ša* [22] *Šū-Laban lū ša* [23] *Aššur-imittī mala* [24] *ṣubātē iraddiʔ-u* [25] *nappišā-ma, "sāsam* [26] *laptū / lā laptū"* [27] *têrta-kunu lillik-am.*
>
> [7–9] We hear that the textiles are infested with moths. [9–11] Why didn't you examine the textiles, and (why) hasn't your report come? [12–14] Even if Imdī-ilum told you not to unpack (them), [15–17] does he know that you would delay until today? [18–20] Imdī-ilum has gone to Burušḫaddum. [20–25] As you are our brothers, air out all the textiles that he brings, whether of Šū-Laban or of Aššur-imittī, [25–27] and have your report—"infested / not infested with moths"—come here.

There is something charming in reading about moths in a 4,000-year-old letter.

While many of the men of these merchant houses were away doing business in Anatolia, their wives were often looking after things back in Assur. They could be important players in the family business, and so we have a good number of Old Assyrian letters written by women,[11] such as the following indignant letter from a woman to her husband:[12]

> [7] *Mīš-šu ša taštanappar-an-ni,* [8] *umma attā-ma: "ṣubātū ša* [9] *tuštenebbilī-ni* [10] *lā damqū"? Mannum* [11] *zakrum* [12] *ša ina bētī-ka* [13] *wašbū-nī-ma illak-ū-ma* [14] *maḫrī-šu ṣubātē* [15] *unnuḫ-ū-ni? Anāku* [16] *aššum-ī ina ḫarrān* [17] *ḫarrām-ma kaspum 10 šiqal ana* [18] *bētī-ka limqut-am* [19] *ṣubātē uštekkap-ma* [20] *eppaš-ma ušebbal-ak-kum.*
>
> [7-8] Why do you keep writing to me as follows, [8–10] "The textiles that you are sending are not good"? [10–15] Who is the person living in your house disparaging the textiles when they arrive before him? [15–20] I do my best for each business trip to make and send you textiles so that 10 shekels accrue to your house.

Obviously, relationships in a family business could get tense at times. This is illustrated by another Old Assyrian letter, in which the writer expresses his dread that his sister, named Aḫaḫa, will find out that his trip has been delayed:[13]

> [2] *Adî* [3] *26 mana kaspem, qātem* [4] *ša Aḫaḫa, ša ammakam ište* [5] *Ennum-Aššur meraʔ Šalm-eḫem* [6] *alqeʔ-u: Annêšam* [7] *attiklam-ma, umma anākū-ma:* [8] *"Ina erābī-yā-ma weriʔam ana* [9] *Burušḫaddem ušerrab-ma* [10] *kaspam 10 mana, pāniʔam-ma,* [11] *ša eppuš-u, ušebbal-šem."* [12] *Adi ūmem anniʔem ḫarrānum* [13] *ittaskir-ma* [14] *kaspum 10 mana ula imtaḫr-annī.*
> [15] *Abī-atta, ammakam* [16] *Ennum-Aššur ē-<i>ttalak-ma,* [17] *awātum ē-uṣī-šem-ma* [18] *lumun libbem* [19] *rabiʔam, ša adi balṭ-ākū-ni,* [20] *ē-aršī-šem.*
>
> [2–4] About the 26 minas of silver belonging to Aḫaḫa, [4–6] which I received there from Ennum-Aššur son of Šalm-aḫum: [6–7] I felt confident on my way here, thinking, [8–9] "When I arrive I will take the copper into Burušḫaddum, [10–11] and send the very first 10 minas of silver to her (Aḫaḫa) that I make." [12–14] But until today the road has been blocked and the 10 minas of silver have not reached me.

10. Larsen 1988: text 77; see also Michel 1998: 328–30. For the reading *ta-sá-ḫu-ra-ni* in l. 17, see Janssen 1991: 174. In l. 15, *i-dé* cannot be imperative (so Larsen, Michel), which is not attested for *idāʔum*; further, since *i-ta-lá-ak* in l. 20 is not subordinate, it is not governed by the *ki-ma* of l. 15.

11. Some fifty-seven letters sent by women are translated in Michel 2001.

12. The translation above is adapted from those of Veenhof 1972: 113–14 and Michel 2001: 430.

13. Larsen 1988: text 71. For the translation of ll. 10–11, see Kouwenberg 2017: 807.

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[15–16] As you are my father, Ennum-Aššur must not set out; [17] word must not get to her, [18–20] lest I suffer her considerable anger for as long as I live.

IV. AKKADIAN LETTERS (3): OLD AKKADIAN

These Old Assyrian texts are from the early second millennium BCE. But there are still earlier letters in Akkadian, from the last centuries of the third millennium. The following two Old Akkadian private letters appeal to me because of the similarity of their content to present-day emails. In the first one (Milano and Westenholz 2015: text 65), the sender addresses an underling in the third person, telling him to prepare a feast for an important visitor, not forgetting to feed the visitor's retainers as well:

[1] *Enma* [2] *Sikkūr* [3] *ana Imi-ilum:*
[4] *1 immaram* [5] *liṭbuḫ-ma* [6] *paššūram* [7] *lidammiq-ma* [8] *maḫar* [9] *U*[. . .[r.1]. . .].
[r.2] *U 10 akalam* [r.3] *10 šikaram* [r.4] *ana rādiʔē-šu* [r.5] *liddin.*

[1–3] Thus Sikkūr to Imi-ilum:
[4–5] He (you) should slaughter 1 sheep and [6–r.1] set a proper table to [lay] before U[. . .].
[r.2–5]Also, he (you) should give 10 (loaves of) bread and 10 (jars of) beer to his retainers.

The second Old Akkadian letter (Veenhof 1975–76: 105), as shown in Figure 2, is on a small round tablet that is perforated, presumably so that the messenger could carry it around the neck. It is between people who know each other well enough that the writer can say,

[4] *Aṣiḫḫ-am-mi.* [5] *Ana mīnim* [6] *atti u* [7] *Ibbi-ilum* [8] *in bētim* [9] *taṣaʔʔalā?* [10] *Ištēniš* [11] *šibā!*

[4] I am upset. [5–9] Why are you and Ibbi-ilum (perhaps the recipient's husband) quarreling in the house? [10–11] Live as one!

And then, without a break, the last line gives the actual reason for the letter:

[12] *Šamaššammē šūbilī-m.*

[12] Send me some sesame oil.

V. AN EBLAITE LETTER

The cuneiform tablet in Figure 3 is an even older letter. Indeed, it is one of the earliest known letters in a Semitic language. It is from the city of Ebla in present-day Syria, and dates to the twenty-fourth or twenty-third century. Eblaite, the language of Ebla, was closely related to Akkadian, but much of Eblaite was written with Sumerian logograms, and so its Semitic character is only partly evident. This letter is from an Eblaite official to the ambassador of a region called Hamazi (of unknown location) about an alliance between their respective rulers. It is therefore not a private letter, although the language reflects family relationships; the use of the word "brother" for "ally" or "partner" is something that one sees over and over again in letters, both official and private, throughout the long history of ancient Near Eastern correspondence. The first column of this long letter reads as follows (following Michalowski 1993: 13–14, text 2):

[1] *en-ma* [2] *i-bù*-KA×KID [3] AGRIG [4] É [5] EN [6] *ʔa*$_5$*-na* [7] SUKKALDU$_8$ [8] *an-tá* [9] ŠEŠ [10] *ù* [11] *an-na* [12] ŠEŠ

[1–5] Thus Ibu. . . , steward of the house of the ruler; [6–7] to the doorkeeper?: [8–9] "You (are) brother [10–12] and I (am) brother."

It is worth noting that in this 4,500-year-old letter, the words for the pronouns 'you' and 'I' in lines 8 and 11—*ʔanta* and *ʔana*—are essentially the same as they are in Modern Standard Arabic.

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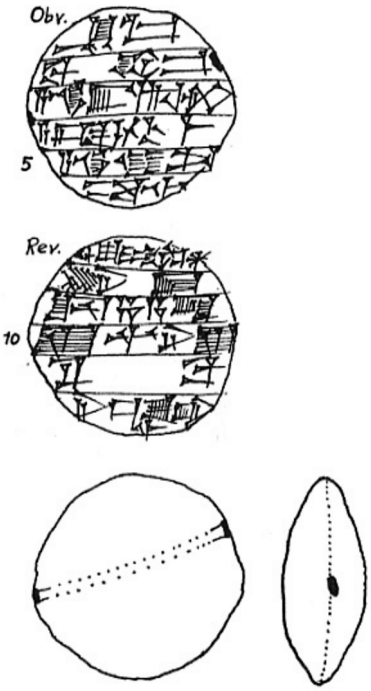

Fig. 2. Autograph copy of an Old Akkadian letter. Veenhof 1975–76: 105. (Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative: https://cdli.ucla.edu/, text no. P214919.)

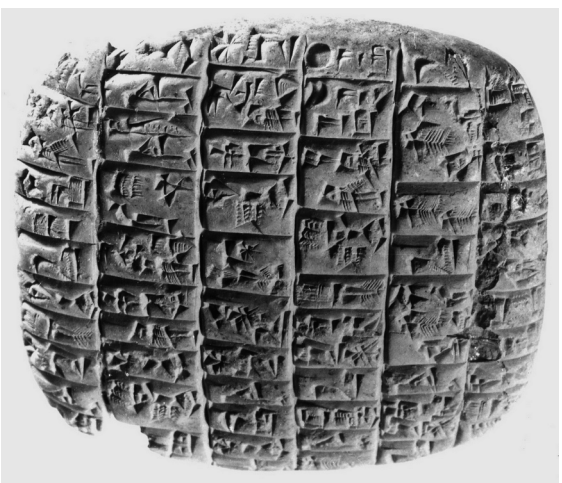

Fig. 3. An Eblaite letter, 24th/23rd century BCE. Fronzaroli 2003, text 3. (Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative: https://cdli.ucla.edu/, text no. P241900.)

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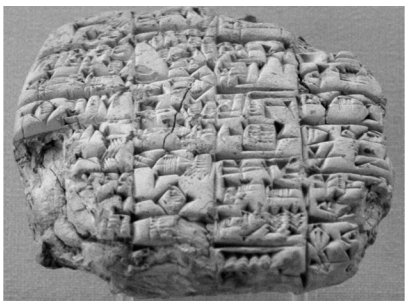

Fig. 4. The oldest cuneiform letter. Thureau-Dangin 1907. (Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative: https://cdli.ucla.edu/, text no. P247594.)

VI. THE OLDEST CUNEIFORM LETTER (SUMERIAN)

The Eblaite letter described above is very old, but the tablet shown in Figure 4 wins the prize; it is the first text in Piotr Michalowski's 1993 volume *Letters from Early Mesopotamia*, and Prof. Michalowski kindly confirmed for me recently[14] that it is still the oldest datable letter written in cuneiform that we have. It is therefore one of the oldest letters in the world. Written in Sumerian, in the city of Lagash, it is from one temple administrator to another, concerning the looting of temple property by neighboring Elamites.

Writing was invented in Mesopotamia, in the late fourth millennium. So it is interesting, as Michalowski notes, that we wait nearly a thousand years until the appearance of the first letters. It is especially interesting given that the Sumerians themselves, in one of their myths, considered letter-writing to be the very reason for the invention of writing. In the myth, we read that a certain king, Enmerkar, had to write a letter because his messenger was having trouble remembering his increasingly long messages to a foreign ruler:[15]

> His (Enmerkar's) speech was substantial, and its contents extensive. The messenger, whose mouth was heavy, was not able to repeat it. Because the messenger, whose mouth was tired, was not able to repeat it, the lord of Kulaba (i.e., Enmerkar) patted some clay and wrote the message as if on a tablet. Formerly, the writing of messages on clay was not established. Now, under that sun and on that day, it was indeed so. The lord of Kulaba inscribed the message like a tablet. It was just like that.

VII. EARLY EGYPTIAN LETTERS

That earliest datable cuneiform letter may or may not be the *world's* oldest letter; there is competition from Egypt. There are two Egyptian letters, written on papyrus in hieratic, that date to the reign of the late 5th Dynasty king Djed-ka-re Izezi (or Isesi), thus, roughly, the mid-twenty-fourth century, about the same times or perhaps a little earlier than the oldest Sumerian letter. Like so many letters both ancient and modern, those early Egyptian letters were written to register complaints, specifically, that food and fees that were due had not

14. Email of January 12, 2018.

15. Translation from the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature; http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section1/tr1823.htm, ll. 500–506. See also Vanstiphout 2003: 85.

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been received.[16] Letters are attested throughout ancient Egyptian history, often abundantly, but unfortunately, lack of time prevents me from saying more about them.[17]

VIII. AKKADIAN LETTERS (4): FROM THE LATE BRONZE PERIOD

Instead, we will jump ahead more than a thousand years, to the Late Bronze Age, when much of the Near East was divided among several great powers. A famous text corpus from this period consists of cuneiform letters excavated in Egypt, at El-Amarna, the site of the capital city founded by the colorful king Amenophis IV, Akhenaten. Those cuneiform letters formed part of the foreign office archives, and while most were from rulers of Egypt's vassal cities in the Levant, some were from the rulers of the other great powers of the day. El-Amarna text 7 is a very long letter to Akhenaten from the king of Babylon.[18] So it is not a private letter, although we might think of it as a "family letter," since these rulers also maintained the fiction that they were all brothers, all part of one big happy family. After the requisite pleasantries, the Babylonian king began by noting how angry he was that, during his recent illness, his Egyptian brother had not bothered to send him a get-well card. But when both the Egyptian ambassador and his own ambassador convinced him how far away Egypt was, and that therefore the Egyptian king had probably not even heard of his illness, he got over his pique. And so he was now writing to re-establish diplomatic relations, and also, of course, to ask his Egyptian "brother" to please send him large quantities of gold—and this time Akhenaten should be sure to check it himself; the last shipment was of very poor quality, and so, obviously, there must have been some flunky in charge of quality control.

I have studied this letter a lot, though not because of its interesting content, but rather—strange as it may seem—because of its orthography: some years ago when I was reading it with a class, I was struck by how carefully it was written. The cuneiform writing system, as we have already seen, has both signs for whole words—logograms—and phonetic signs. The phonetic signs can represent a vowel, consonant-plus-vowel, vowel-plus-consonant, or consonant-vowel-consonant. If you do the math, you can readily work out that the number of CVC signs can be quite high, and so they put an extra strain on both writer and reader; and yet, the CVC signs are actually redundant; the system also uses CV plus VC signs to write such syllables (for example, the syllable /bad/ could be written *ba-ad* as well as with the single sign *bad*). Finally, the writing does not obligatorily indicate gemination—consonant doubling—even though gemination is phonemic in Akkadian. Thus, the cuneiform writing system constitutes what is called a deep, or demanding, orthography: as with English spelling, the reader has to work hard to interpret a text.

Now, what I find so interesting about Amarna letter 7 is that it has very few logograms; it has almost no CVC signs; and gemination is indicated in all but one instance. That combination of consistency and transparency is rare in such a long text, and would have made the letter much easier to read.[19] As I mentioned, with this letter the king of Babylon is resuming diplomatic relations after a hiatus; and his scribe has taken great care to write such an important letter as unambiguously as possible.

A century and a half later, around 1200 BCE, the great powers of the Near East were dealing with instability, partly involving migrating groups called the "Sea Peoples." The identity

16. Translations of these Egyptian letters are given in Wente 1990: 55–56 and Strudwick 2005: 175–76.

17. For Egyptian epistolography see, e.g., Bakir 1970, Sweeney 2001, Depauw 2006.

18. See the transliteration and translation of El-Amarna 7 in Rainey 2015: 1.82–87, and the translation and notes in Moran 1992: 12–16.

19. I am preparing a more detailed article on the orthography of El-Amarna 7.

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of these peoples is much debated, but at least some of them were of Aegean origin. One of the other great powers of the period was the Hittite empire; one letter from a Hittite king, in Akkadian, is addressed to the prefect of one of the Hittite vassal states, the kingdom of Ugarit in the northeast corner of the Mediterranean.[20] The Hittite king writes to the prefect of Ugarit because, he says,

[5] *ittū-ka* [6] *šarru bēl-ka ṣeḫer;* [7] *mimma lā īde.*

[5–6] The king your lord there is young; [7] he knows nothing.

Thus, the prefect must have been serving as regent. The letter refers to people called "the Shikalaeans . . . , who live on ships" (*Šikalāyū . . ., ša ina muḫḫi eleppēti usbū-ni*, ll. 11–14) and who are thus part of those "Sea Peoples," and whose name has plausibly been connected with the island of Sicily. This letter was found at Ugarit; in just a few short years, the Hittite empire would be no more, and Ugarit would be destroyed.

Although Ugarit was a vassal state of the Hittite empire, its immediate overlord within the empire was the king of Carchemish. I want to consider just one short Akkadian letter from Carchemish, partly because, having written my dissertation on texts from Carchemish, they have a special place in my heart. This letter, also found at Ugarit, is from the king of Carchemish; it begins:[21]

[5] *Tēltu ša amīlê māt Ḫatti,* [6] *mā: "Ištēn amīlu ḫamiš šanāti* [7] *ina bīt kīli kalī-mi;* [8] *u kīmē iqta*[*bû*], [9] *mā: ina šērti* [10] *umaššarū-ka,'* [11] *u ittaḫna*[*q*].

[5] A saying of the people of Hatti: "[6–7] A certain man was held in prison for five years, [8] and when he was told, '[9–10] Tomorrow they will release you,' [11] he hanged himself."

It is not clear what that has to do with the rest of the letter, which is badly broken, as is so often the case. But it illustrates another intriguing aspect of letters, namely, that they sometimes contain a cliché or maxim like this "saying of the people of Hatti" that we would otherwise not know.

IX. UGARITIC LETTERS

Ugarit was a major port at the crossroads of several important trade routes, and texts in no fewer than eight languages have been found there. Many are in Akkadian, like the letters from the Hittite and Carchemish kings that we have just looked at; but many are in an indigenous language, Ugaritic, that was written in a unique cuneiform *alphabet*. The published corpus of Ugaritic texts includes over a hundred letters, most of which are to or from members of the royal family or other members of the royal bureaucracy. The following letter, for example, is to the queen of Ugarit from one of her sons.[22] It is just a short, keeping-in-touch letter—it doesn't actually say anything, beyond the formalities; this is the entire letter:

[1] *l . mlkt* [2] *ȧdty* [3] *rgm* [4] *tḥm . tlmyn* [5] *ʕbdk*
[6] *l . pʕn* [7] *ȧdty* [8] *šbʕd* [9] *w . šbʕid* [10] *mrḥqtm* [11] *qlt*
[12] *ʕm . ȧdty* [13] *mnm . šlm* [14] *rgm . tṯb* [15] *l . ʕbdh*

[1–3] Speak to the queen, my lady; [4–5] message of Talmiyānu, your servant.
[6–7] At the feet of my lady [8–9] seven times and seven times [10] at a distance [11] I fall.
[12–13] Whatever well-being (there is) with my lady, [14] may she send back word [15] to her servant.

20. RS 34.129, first published, only as a photograph, in Schaeffer 1978: pl. 11; edition by F. Malbran-Labat in Bordreuil 1991: text 12.

21. RS 20.216, edited by J. Nougayrol in Nougayrol et al. 1968: text 35, photo p. 720.

22. RS 9.479A; Dietrich, Loretz, and Sanmartín 2013: text 2.12.

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Fig. 5. A Ugaritic letter from the king of Tyre to the king of Ugarit, obverse (ll. 1–12). (Photograph courtesy of Wayne T. Pitard.)

A longer Ugaritic letter (Figure 5) was sent to the king of Ugarit by the king of Tyre, another important port city, to the south of Ugarit:[23]

[1] *l . mlk . ủgrt* [2] *ảḫy . rgm*
[3] *tḥm . mlk .* [4] *ṣr . ảḫk*

[1] To the king of Ugarit, [2] my brother, speak;
[3] message of the king of [4] Tyre, your brother.

After the usual pleasantries, the king of Tyre reports to his brother king:

[10] *ảnykn . dt* [11] *lỉkt . mṣrm* [12] *hndt . b . ṣr* [13] *mtt . by* [14] *gšm . ảdr* [15] *nškḥ .*

[10] Your ship [11] that [12] you had sent to Egypt [12–13] perished in Tyre—[13–15] they found themselves in a violent storm.

But, he goes on, the cargo and the crew were saved by the "chief of shipwrecks," and so his brother must not worry:

[15] *w* [16] *rb . tmtt* [17] *lqḥ . kl . ḏrʕ* [18] *bdnhm .*
w . ảnk [19] *k*[*l*] *. ḏrʕhm* [20] *kl. npš* [21] *w . ảklhm .* [22] *bd rb* [.] *tmtt . lqḥt* [23] *w . ṯtb . ảnk . lhm*
[24] *w . ảnyk . ṯt* [25] *by . ʕky . ʕryt*
[26] *w . ảḫy . mhk* [27] *b . lbh . ảl . yšt*

[15–16] But the chief of shipwrecks [17] got all the seed-grain [18] from them.
And I myself [19–22] received all their seed-grain, every person, and their food from the chief of shipwrecks, [23] and I returned (it) to them.

23. RS 18.031; Dietrich, Loretz, and Sanmartín 2013: text 2.38.

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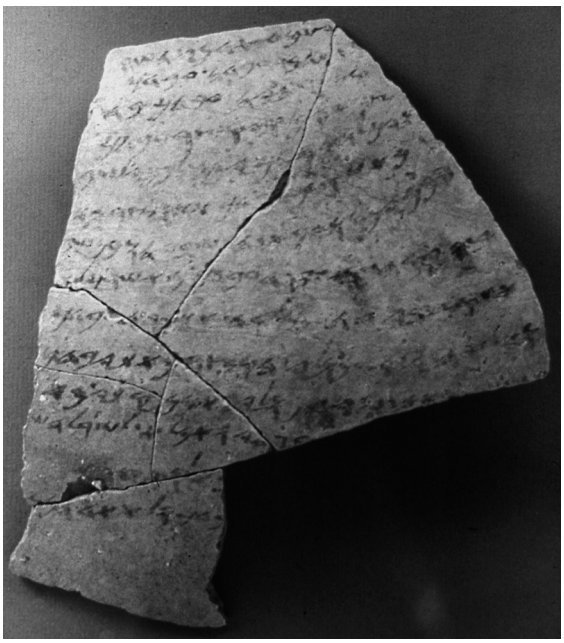

Fig. 6. A Hebrew letter from Meṣad Ḥashavyahu. Israel Museum (https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/378534).

[24] And a second ship of yours [25] is without rigging (lit., naked) in Akko.
[26–27] So my brother must not worry.

It seems unlikely that the king of Tyre was familiar with the indigenous script used at Ugarit, and so presumably this is an archival translation of his letter. No doubt the subtext is that his brother king could have his ships, cargo, and crew back once a substantive "thank you" had been received.

X. ANCIENT HEBREW LETTERS

We turn now to the first millennium BCE, the Iron Age, and although we have many thousands of cuneiform letters in Akkadian, in the dialects known as Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian, we will leave the cuneiform realm, and look instead at a few letters in languages that, like Ugaritic, were written in a consonantal alphabet, but now in ink, on ostraca or papyrus or leather, rather than in cuneiform. We begin with ancient Hebrew, in which some forty Iron-Age letters are preserved (Pardee et al. 1982; Lindenberger 2003). The two that I will present have generated a vast amount of scholarly discussion.

In the first (Figure 6), from about 625 BCE, a laborer complains to an official that at the end of the work day someone stole his coat.[24]

[1] *yšmʕ ʔdny . hšr* [2] *ʔt dbr ʕbdh . ʕbdk* [3] *qṣr . hyh . ʕbdk . bḥ*[4]*ṣr ʔsm . wyqṣr ʕbdk* [5] *wykl wʔsm kymm . lpny šb*[6]*t kʔšr kl* [ʕ]*bdk ʔt qṣr<h> wʔ*[7]*sm kymm wybʔ . hwšʕyhw bn šb*[8]*y . wyqḥ . ʔt bgd ʕbdk kʔšr*

24. Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 358–70, text *MHsh* 1; transliteration and translation after Cross 2003: 116–24 and Jo Ann Hackett (p.c.).

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klt[9][*y*] *ʔt qṣry zh* <*k*>*ymm lqḥ ʔt bgd ʕbdk* [10] *wkl ʔḥy . yʕnw ly . hqṣrm ʔty bḥm* [11] *hšmš* [. *k*]*l ʔḥy yʕnw ly . ʔmn nqty mʔ*[12][*šm hšb nʔ ʔt*] *bgdy wʔmlʔ . lšr lhš*[13][*b ʔt bgd*] *ʕb*[*dk wyt*]*n ʔlw . rḥ*[14][*mm . . . ʕ*]*bdk wlʔ tdḥnw* [15] . . . . . .

[1] May my lord the captain [2] hear the word of his servant. As for your servant, [3] your servant was harvesting in Ḥa[4]ṣar-Asam. And your servant harvested [5] and measured and stored, as usual before Sabba[6]th/quitting time. When your servant had measured <his> harvest, and [7–8] stored (it) as usual, Hawšiʕ-yahu son of Šobay came and took the garment of your servant. When [I] had measur[9]ed this harvest of mine, <as> usual, he took the garment of your servant. [10–11] All my brothers, the people who harvest with me in the heat of the sun, will testify for me. [Al]l my brothers will testify for me. In truth, I am innocent of gui[12][lt. Please send back] my garment. And if not, it is encumbent on the captain to retu[13][rn the garment of your servant. And let him gi]ve to him mer[14][cy. . . .your] servant and do not send him away. [15] . . .

Naturally, we would like to know more about how this worker was able to have a letter sent to someone in authority; did he write it himself? If not, how much did it cost him to hire a scribe to do it? A second Hebrew letter is clearer on this. It is from the site of Lachish; the Lachish letters describe the advance of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar's army on the kingdom of Judah, and so they can be dated precisely to 586 BCE. The writer of this letter is a soldier, who is replying to a letter from a superior:[25]

. . . lb [7] *ʕbdk dwh . mʔz . šlḥk ʔl . ʕbd*[8]*k* [.] *wky* [.] *ʔmr . ʔdny . lʔ . ydʕth .* [9] *qrʔ . spr . ḥyhwh . ʔm . nsh . ʔ*[10]*yš . lqrʔ ly spr . lnṣḥ . wgm .* [11] *kl . spr* [.] *ʔšr ybʔ . ʔly* [.] *ʔm .* [12] *qrʔty . ʔth wʕwd . ʔtnnhw* [13] *ʔl . mʔwmh . . .*

. . . [6–7] Your servant's heart has been sick since you sent (your message) to your servant, [8] because my lord said, "You don't understand it. [9] Call a scribe!"
As Yahweh lives, no man has ever tried [10] to read a letter to me; and what's more, [11] any scribe who would come to me, I didn't [12–13] call him, nor did I pay him anything. . . .

Not surprisingly, this letter figures prominently in discussions of literacy rates in ancient Near Eastern societies that used alphabetic writing.[26]

These Hebrew letters are especially important for grammarians because of the fact that they are unedited, unlike the text of the Hebrew Bible, which is by far our major source of information about ancient Hebrew. So the fact that the grammar of the Hebrew Bible is remarkably close to that of the letters is very comforting. And speaking of the Hebrew Bible, it too contains fragments of letters. The most famous—or infamous—is the one sent by King David to his general Joab, via the soldier Uriah, whose wife, Bathsheba, had caught David's eye (2 Samuel 11: 14–15):

[14] *Wa-yhî bab-bōqer way-yiktōb Dāwīd sēper ʔel-Yôʔāb way-yishaḥ bə-yad ʔÛriyyā.* [15] *Way-yiktōb bas-sēper lēʔmōr: Hābû ʔet-ʔÛriyyā ʔel-mûl pənê ham-milḥāmā ha-ḥăzāqā, wə-šabtem mē-ʔaḥărāyw wə-nikkā wā-mēt.*

[14] In the morning, David wrote a letter to Joab and sent (it) with Uriah. [15] He wrote in the letter: "Put Uriah at the front of the fiercest fighting, and move back from him so that he will be struck down and die."

Since the letter basically contains poor Uriah's death warrant, the episode suggests that a messenger bearing a letter did not always know the content of the letter he was delivering.[27]

25. Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 308–14, text *Lach* 3. Translation after Jo Ann Hackett (p.c.).

26. See, e.g., Rollston 2010: 128–30.

27. A similar case is the Bellerophon episode in Homer's *Iliad* (6.167–70), which concerns "a letter . . . bearing instructions for the death of the person who had to deliver it, a typically oriental theme" (Yiftach-Firanko 2013: 17).

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XI. EARLY ARAMAIC LETTERS

Aramaic is a language with a written history even longer than that of Akkadian, almost as long as those of Chinese and Egyptian, with Aramaic texts beginning in the ninth century BCE and continuing up to the present day. In the mid-first millennium BCE, Aramaic was replacing Akkadian as the lingua franca of the Near East, and a great many Aramaic letters are attested. Most have been found in Egypt, preserved for us by the dry climate there.

The Hermopolis papyri include letters written by members of a family in the northern Egyptian city of Memphis to other family members living in far southern Egypt. These letters, fortunately for us, never made it to their destination. One is a charming letter in which the sender insists on how well he is looking after a certain family member.[28] Egypt in this period was part of the vast Persian empire, and the community reflected in the letter is a very cosmopolitan one: it refers to the temple of Nabû, a Babylonian god, but the salutation includes the phrase "I bless you by Ptaḥ," an Egyptian god.

[1] *šlm byt nbw*
ʔl ʔḥty rʿyh mn ʔḥky mkbnt
[2] *brktky lptḥ zy yḥzny ʔpyk bšlm*
šlm bntsrl wʔrg [3] *wʔsršt wšrdr ḥrwṣ šʔl šlmhn*

[1] Greetings (to) the temple of Nabû.
To my sister Raʿiya from your brother Mak-kī-Bānīt.
[2] I bless you by Ptaḥ that he may show me your face in health.
Greetings to Bānīt-Srl, ʔrg, [3] ʔsršt, and Šrdr. Hor-wuṣ asks after their health.

The names of the family members are also varied: Mak-kī-Bānīt is a Babylonian name; Hor-wuṣ is Egyptian; still other names are Aramaic and Persian.[29]

In southern Egypt, the border fortress site of Elephantine has yielded a very large corpus of written material. There was a Jewish community at Elephantine in the fifth and early fourth centuries BCE, which has left us letters on ostraca and on papyrus. One of the ostraca seems to have been written to a babysitter:[30]

[2] *. . . ḥzy 1* [3] *ʿl ynqyʔ ʿd tʔt*[4]*h ʔḥṭb ʔl twk*[5]*l hmw ʿl ʔḥrnn* [6] *hn grs lḥmhm* [7] *lšw lhm qb 1 ʿd* [8] *tʔth ʔmhm*

[2–4] Look after the children by yourself until Aḥ-ṭāb arrives. [4–5] Don't entrust them to others. [6] If their bread has been ground, [7] knead 1 *qab* for them until [8] their mother arrives.

And then, interestingly, the writer says,

[8] *šlḥ* [9] *ly ʔmt tʿbdn psḥ*[10]*ʔ*

[8] Send (word) [9–10] to me when you will celebrate the Passover.

From roughly the same period, there are also Aramaic letters in the Hebrew Bible, such as the one in Ezra 4:11–16, written to the Persian king Artaxerxes I, which exhibit grammar very similar to that of the Aramaic letters found at Hermopolis and Elephantine.

XII. SABAIC LETTERS

I'll conclude this rapid tour of ancient Near Eastern letters with an example from a group of texts that have come to scholarly attention only recently. The ancient Semitic languages of the southern Arabian peninsula, such as Sabaic, the language of the kingdom of Sheba

28. Porten and Yardeni 1986–99: vol. 1, text A2.3 (p. 15).
29. On the role of letters in Persian imperial administration, see most recently Kottsieper 2013.
30. Porten and Yardeni 1986–99: vol. 4, text D7.6 (p. 158).

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(or Sabaʔ), have long been known through thousands of monumental inscriptions on stone and metal, such as building inscriptions and texts commemorating successful military campaigns or hunting expeditions.[31] Frustratingly for the grammarian, those thousands of texts are entirely in the third person. But a few decades ago, wooden sticks and palm-leaf petioles began to show up, incised with a cursive script that, when it was deciphered, proved to record those same Ancient South Arabian languages. Hundreds of these wooden stick texts are now known; they span a millennium and a half, from the early first millennium BCE until the coming of Islam. Some of them are letters, and we rejoice in the presence, at last, of some first and second person verb forms, although, confusingly, the senders of letters often refer to themselves in the third person, as they do in the following example, a letter in which three women write to two other women.[32] It begins with a standard salutation:

[2] *wlhn / lthḥywnn /*
wʿṯtr / wʔl³mqh / lyhṣbḥnn / lkmy / nʿmtm /
wbḏt / wfym / ʿb⁴rnkmw / fhʿs¹my / ḥmd /

[2] May you two be granted life through them (us).
May (the gods) ʿAthtar and ʔAl³maqah cause well-being to "light up" for you two.
Because wellness (is reported) fr⁴om you, they (we) have given thanks greatly.

After this salutation, we get to the point of the letter:

[4]*wbḏt / wldt / mrʔthn* [5] *ġlmm / wrbḫt / fʿs¹mm / ḥmdy /*

[4] Because their (our) lady has borne [5] a son and has recovered, they (we) have abundantly given thanks.

In other words, the letter was sent to report the birth of a son and the good health of mother and child. There are three more informational sentences, and then two short concluding sentences, just as we might close an email with "Let me know if I can do anything for you; be well":

[8] *. . . wḏtrḏwnn / s¹ṭrn⁹n /*
wlkmw / nʿmtm /

[8] What you two wish, writ⁹e.
Well-being to you.

XIII. CONCLUSION

In a recent book entitled *To the Letter: A Celebration of the Lost Art of Letter Writing*, popular writer Simon Garfield talks about the famous letters from the Roman garrison of Vindolanda in northern England. I was surprised that Garfield (2013: 31) referred to these as "where the evidence of letters begins," until I realized that, being British, he was referring to them as the earliest *British* letters. But then he began his chapter 3 with a reference to "the oldest letter that we have," by which he meant the famous Bellerophon letter in Homer's *Iliad*, and actual Greek letters of the fifth century BCE. Of course, most of the letters we have just looked at are earlier than any Greek letters, some of them millennia earlier. But we can agree with Garfield that ancient private letters enchant us because we see ourselves in them; as he says (2013: 39), "We all still need warm clothes, hearty food, reassurances of health."

The remarkable fact that we can be privy to the thoughts of people who lived so long ago is, I think, why many of us became philologists and members of this Society. And if, as your outgoing president, I can close with one piece of advice, to both students and colleagues, it

31. See the valuable online Corpus of South Arabian Inscriptions at http://dasi.humnet.unipi.it/.
32. Stein 2010: 1.427, text X.BSB 123, photo vol. 2, plate 117.

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is this: *to remember, from time to time, to be amazed, and even enchanted, by what we are so privileged to study.*

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