Glimpses into Daily Life: Two Arabic Papyrus Letters from Third/Ninth-Century Egypt

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Abstract: This article showcases the edition and study of two Arabic papyrus letters from third/ninth-century Egypt, currently housed in the papyrus collection of the Austrian National Library. The first letter, P.Vindob. A.P. 01754, records an invitation for lunch. The second, P.Vindob. A.P. 01764, is felicitations for marriage. The themes of these two letters are widely present in literary handbooks but hardly found in documentary letters on papyrus. The importance of these two original letters lies: first, in their contents that illuminate in some detail part of people’s everyday social interactions and practices in early Islamic Egypt, and second, in the crucial role of the letter itself as an important pattern of interaction among geographically distant relatives and friends.

Keywords: Early Islamic Egypt, social history, Arabic papyri, private letters, lunch, marriage

Letter-writing was the most vital method of distance communication in the past. People in ancient societies, although the majority of them could not significantly read and write, used to send letters to each other on many occasions, both sad and happy, to bridge the short and long distances separating them.1 Arabic documentary letters written in early Islamic Egypt comprise the largest corpus of the surviving bulk of Arabic papyri, published and unpublished. The overwhelming majority of these letters are palaeographically dated after the 2nd/8th century, i.e. 3rd-4th/9th-10th centuries.2 Beside giving us the opportunity to hear the actual voices of their authors and to see closely the routine of their daily lives, letters provide us with certain useful information on many technical issues relating to letters’ delivery, the distance separating the correspondents and the like. The two original letters published in this article are unique and show that written communication became a daily concern for some people in third/ninth-century Egypt. In other words, the letter was an inherent part of people’s everyday social interactions. Both letters (P.Vindob. A.P. 01754 and P.Vindob. A.P. 01764), currently kept at the papyrus collection of the Austrian National Library, were acquired in Egypt, but we lack information about their exact provenances. Alike the vast majority of Arabic private letters on papyrus from Egypt,

* I would like to thank Bernhard Palme, director of the Papyrus Collection of the Austrian National Library, for his permission to publish these two papyri.


our two letters bear no date. Their palaeography and epistolary formulae point to a composition date in the 3rd/9th century. Let us now allow the letters to speak for themselves.

**P.Vindob. A.P. 01754: Lunch Invitation**

The first letter (P.Vindob. A.P. 01754), with anonymous sender and recipient, contains a unique lunch invitation, a rarity among Arabic papyri. Luckily, the papyrus is well preserved except for a few holes and tears in the right-hand side that caused the loss of a few characters, but they can easily be reconstructed on the basis of the context as well as parallels. The letter comprises 6 lines, starting with the *basmala* on the top as common in all Arabic letters. The sender starts his letter by wishing blessings for the addressee (*juʿiltu fidāʾaka wa-llāhu yubqīka*, line 2). He then extends his invitation to the addressee to have lunch with him the same day he wrote the letter (*qad aḥbabtu an yāṣīra ghadāʾaka ʿindī al-yawm baʿda al-zuhr*, lines 3-4), stating that the invitee’s acceptance would make him overwhelmingly happy (*wa-tasurrunī bi-dhālika mutafaḍḍilan in shāʾa allāh*, lines 4-5). The sender finishes his invitation with blessings, different than the initial ones (*abqāka allāh wa-aʿazzaka wa-akra maka*, line 6). The letter closes with the expression *wa-kutiba* (it has been written), which is commonly used in Arabic papyrus letters.

Unexpectedly, the letter does not have an address on the back as most of the Arabic papyrus letters do, commonly written around the vertical axis at the same height as the *basmala*. Needless to say that the address is very important for the safe and smooth delivery of the letter. The lack of address in our letter, strongly suggests that the letter/invitation was most likely dispatched informally with a carrier who must have been very familiar with the addressee’s residence. As it is clear from the letter, the distance separating the inviter and the invitee must have been very short, as he, the invitee, should reach the inviter’s house in the afternoon for lunch. The letter was certainly penned and sent/delivered in the morning. All in all, the letter’s carrier cannot be but the sender’s servant (*ghulām*).

This unique lunch invitation also reveals interesting information on the daily mealtimes, particularly the midday meal/lunch, which appears to be the main meal of the day. As the letter states, the lunch will be served at the inviter’s house in the early afternoon. The letter exciplicitly says: *baʿda al-zuhr* (line 4). This time slot can simply be rendered as ‘in the afternoon’ or more specifically ‘after the noon-prayer’ (i.e., *baʿda ṣalāt al-zuhr*). The latter is likely since it gives a more specific time range than

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4 For relevant characteristics of the script, see below.

5 See the commentary to line 6.

6 See the commentary to line 6.

7 Grob, *Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters on Papyrus*, pp. 95, 173-177, 181.


the former, which might extend to the time of al-ʾaṣr (middle and late afternoon). There is no doubt that the invitee fully recognizes the lunchtime slot proposed by the inviter and would be there in time in case he accepts the invitation.

Unfortunately, not much can be said about the lunch banquet on the basis of this tiny piece of evidence. We also lack information on the reason for this lunch invitation. One may wonder, is there a special occasion for this invitation (e.g., wedding, birth, etc.) or simply practicing ʿīṭ ʿām al-ṭaʿām (feeding food)? Are there other people invited or only our anonymous invitee?

**The Islamic Practice of ʿīṭ ʿām al-ṭaʿām**

ʿīṭ ʿām al-ṭaʿām is a noble quality that is highly encouraged in the Islamic faith. The Islamic concept of ʿīṭ ʿām al-ṭaʿām is not confined to giving food to the poor and needy but also includes inviting people (e.g., relatives, friends, neighbours, etc.) to banquets to foster sociality and cordiality among Muslims. A considerable number of Quranic verses as well as prophetic reports emphasize the importance and rewards of ʿīṭ ʿām al-ṭaʿām. According to the Quran (76: 8), the righteous, awarded paradise in the hereafter, are those who selflessly (give food to the poor, the orphan, and the captive, though they love it themselves, saying, “We feed you for the sake of God alone: We seek neither recompense nor thanks from you. We fear the Day of our Lord- a woefully grim Day”). The prophetic Sunna, in addition, praises the practice of ʿīṭ ʿām al-ṭaʿām and considers it one of the best deeds in Islam. Among the many traditions related to this topic is the famous authentic ḥadīth narrated by ʿAbd Allāh b. Ṭām b. al-ʿĀṣ (d. 65/685). He said: A man asked the prophet: “Which deed in Islam is the best?” The prophet replied: “To give food, and to greet everyone, whether you know or you do not”.

Another authentic ḥadīth was narrated by ʿAbd Allāh b. Salām (d. 43/633). He said: the prophet said: “O people! Spread the greeting of peace, give food, retain the ties of kinship, pray at night while people are sound asleep, and you will enter paradise in peace”. On the other hand, those who withhold food from both humans and animals are threatened with severe punishment in the hellfire. The Quran warns that withholding food from the poor and needy is a token of ingratitude to God (69: 33-34; 74: 43-44; 107: 1-3).

P.Vindob. A.P. 01764: Marriage Congratulations

The second letter, P.Vindob. A.P. 01764, is sent from a certain Abū Muḥammad to two addressees named only with their kunyas (Abū ʿAlī and Abū ʿUmayr) in the address on the back. The letter is a reply to a previous letter from the two addressees, in which they informed the sender, Abū Muḥammad, that their respective [two adult]

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10 Monnot, “Ṣalāt”, *EF*, vol. 8, p. 928.
11 al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, pp. 13, 17, 1556 [nos. 12, 28, 6236]; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, p. 39 [no. 39].
children are marrying each other. Abū Muḥammad penned this letter to convey his sincere felicitations on this happy occasion. The letter starts after the basmala with a very common imploration of God’s blessings on the two addressees (ḥafiṣakumā allāh wa-‘āfākumā wa-amta’a bikumā, line 2). Abū Muḥammad then confirms the receipt of the addressees’ previous letter and that he understood what they mentioned concerning the milāk (marriage) of their [two adult] children (qad fahimtu mā katabtumā wa-mā dhakartumā min milāk waladikumā, lines 3-4). He then makes supplications for them all, i.e. the two addressees, the two spouses as well as the family members on both sides (fā-amta’a allāh ba’daqum bi-ba’d wa-bāraka lakumā wa-atamma ni’amahu ‘alaykumā, lines 4-5). The sender left a blank space at the end of line five to indicate the onset of a new section in the following line. Unfortunately, the letter breaks off with the beginning of the new section. Only upper traces of letters can be seen, which are not enough to recognize whether Abū Muḥammad moved on to another topic or just formulated the closing of the letter.

The address on the back contains only the kunyas of both addresses. No full names are given. Moreover, the place of delivery is unrecorded, which raises the question of the letter delivery like the first one. As mentioned above, the letter is an answer to a letter from the two addressees. One might then expect that the carrier of the addressees’ letter might have waited to collect the answer from the sender. But it is also possible that the letter was sent later through someone else. In any case, the letter must have been delivered informally either through servants, intermediaries or family members. The regular contact between the sender and the two addressees, either living in the same place or very close to each other, indicates a short distance.

In view of the identification of the two male addressees (Abū ʿAlī and Abū ʿUmayr) mentioned in the address on the back of the letter, the interpretation of the sentence milāk waladikumā, lines 3-4, would at once become flawlessly clear; the son of Abū ʿAlī got married to the daughter of Abū ʿUmayr or the other way around. The Arabic word walad refers to both males and females as well as singular and plural. The word walad in this context certainly refers to both, the bride and the groom. The intimate voice of the letter does not only celebrate the marriage of the two spouses but also the affinity between the two families, indicating a very strong bond of kinship or friendship/partnership between all three, i.e. the sender and the two addressees. In case the address was not recorded on the back or was for one reason or another lost, one would have translated and interpreted the word waladikumā in line four differently, i.e. masculine singular (your son). The two addressees in this case would be the groom’s parents.

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The **Milāk** (Marriage Ceremony)

The *milāk* or *imlāk* defines the marriage ceremony where the marriage contract is drawn up, typically before the consummation of marriage.\(^\text{15}\) The root *m-l-k*, from which the terms *milk/milāk/imlāk* are derived, is associated with ownership, authority and dominion. Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) differentiates between two forms of *milk*:

1. *milk al-nikāḥ/milk al-ʿisma* denoting ownership in marriage,
2. *milk al-yamīn* (ownership by the right hand/lawful concubinage), as described in the Quran (4:24; 23:6; 70:30), which authorizes sexual relations between the male owner and his female slaves. Only males could exercise these two forms of *milk*.\(^\text{16}\) According to the Quran (4:3), a free man is permitted a maximum number of four legitimate wives at a time and as many female slaves as he can afford to maintain. On the other hand, it strictly prohibits any kind of sexual relationship outside marriage and lawful concubinage (32:258).\(^\text{17}\) The term *milāk* denoting marital *milk* is attested only once in an Arabic papyrus letter sent from a fiancé to his fiancée, discussing her choices for the banquet of the marriage ceremony whether to bring fresh fruits or dried fruits (*wa-akhbirīnī mā arfaq li-l-milāk al-fākiha al-yābisa am al-fākiha al-raṭba li-anna fākiha al-raṭba aḥabbu ilā al-nās al-yawm min al-fākiha al-yābisa,* “Inform me of what is better for the marriage ceremony, fresh fruits or dried fruits, because fresh fruits are preferred by the people today over dried fruits”).\(^\text{18}\) The term *milāk/imlāk* is also attested in the Cairo Geniza documents in the meaning of engagement/betrothal.\(^\text{19}\)

**Editions**

**Letter 1: Lunch-Invitation on Papyrus**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P.Vindob. A.P. 01754(^\text{20})</th>
<th>10 × 10.5 cm</th>
<th>3rd/9th</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provenance unknown</td>
<td>Fig. 1</td>
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\(^{16}\) For more information on the Islamic legal marriage and slavery-related terminology, particulary *milk al-nikāḥ* (ownership in marriage) and *milk al-yamīn* (ownership by the right hand/slave ownership), see Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam*, pp. 164-186.

\(^{17}\) Peters, “*Zinā*”, in *EF*, vol. 11, pp. 509-510.

\(^{18}\) Cf. *P.JoySorrow* 1.11-14, 2nd/8th, provenance unknown.


\(^{20}\) A short description and a digital image of the papyrus are available at the Austrian National Library’s digital catalogue at http://data.onb.ac.at/rec/RZ00021426
Fig. 1: P.Vindob. A.P. 01754 © Austrian National Library.

Well preserved dark brown papyrus written in a practiced hand in black ink with a medial thick pen parallel to fibres in contrast to the more common transversa charta practice in the Islamic period. The original cutting lines are preserved on all sides. Few holes and tears in the right side of the papyrus have resulted in some damage to the text, but they can easily be reconstructed. There are no diacritical dots. Verso is blank. The script does not show any usage of linea dilatans/mashq or abusive ligaturing and the orientation of the overall writing line is mainly horizontal, which are typical characteristics of the 3rd/9th century letters. Of the characteristics of the script, the letters sīn and shīn are constantly written with three denticles (bi-sm, line 1; wa-tasurrunī, line 4; shā'ā, line 5). Ṣād, dād and ẓā’ are oval (yaṣīr, line 3; al-zuhr, line 4; mutafaḍḍilān, line 5). The lām-alif ligature is v-shaped (mutafaḍḍilān, line 5). Final attached yā’ extends backward (wa-tasurrunī, line 4), while independent yā’ finishes unusually low, without turning upwards on the left side resembling the letter nūn (ʿindī, line 4). The writer dipped the pen into ink three times to write the letter. The first dipping covered the first two lines. The second was at the beginning of line
3, while the third dipping was before writing the last word in line 4 and continued until the end of the letter.

1. In the name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful
2. May I be your ransom and may God prolong your life
3. I would like that you would come to have lunch
4. with me today in the afternoon and make me happy
5. by kindly doing so, if God wills.
6. May God prolong your life and preserve you and honor you, and it has been written.

2 juʿila fidāʾaka wa-llāhu yubqīka Of juʿila only the jīm is preserved, which is followed by a downward loop as a connecting stroke with the next missing character. It resembles much the way the qāf and alif in abqāka and the mīm and kāf in akramaka are ligatured in line 6. The reconstruction of this initial blessing is made on the basis of many parallels. The eulogy wa-llāhu yubqīka is attested in papyrus letters, cf. CPR XVI 26.5, 2nd/8th, provenance unknown. See also wa-llāhu yubqīka fī ʿażīm ʿāfiyatihi (P.David-WeillLouvre 19B.2-3, 3rd/9th, provenance unknown); fa-as alu allāh an yubqiyaka (P.JoySorrow 13.10, 2nd/8th, provenance unknown, and the references cited in the commentary).

3 qad aḥbabtu an yaṣīra ghadāʾaka The word aḥbabtu is not entirely clear due to the lacuna and the effacing of the ink. The beginning of the ḥāʾ is attached to the preceding alif. The formula is very well attested in Arabic papyrus letters. The ghayn of ghadāʾaka is linked to the rāʾ of yaṣīra. There is an ink spot below the kāf of ghadāʾaka.

4 ʿindī al-yawm baʿda al-ẓuhr wa-tasurrunī The ink is effaced at the beginning of this line. The writer dipped the pen into ink before writing the final word in the line (wa-tasurrunī). The tail of the mīm of al-yawm is long compared to the short oblique tail of the mīm of bi-sm in line 1.

5 bi-dhālika mutafaḍḍalan in shāʾa allāh This expression is very well attested in Arabic letters of request as well as petitions. For letters, see for example P.Ryl.Arab. I XV 35.5, 3rd-4th/9th-10th, provenance unknown; P.Khalili I 31.15-16, 3rd/9th, provenance unknown. For petitions, see P.Ryl.Arab. II 11.28, 3rd/9th, provenance Asyūṭ. The denticles of the shīn of shāʾa are written with less emphasis than the denticles of the sīn.
6 abqāka allāh wa-aʿazzaka wa-akramaka wa-kutiba The final blessings on the addressee are different than the initial ones. In the vast majority of Arabic letters, the final blessings recapitulate the initial ones in script and content.21 The expression wa-kutiba is commonly used in Arabic papyrus letters to signal the closure of the letter.22 This expression appears also in legal documents from the 1st/7th century, cf. P.BruningSunna, dated 44/664-665, provenance probably Upper Egypt; P.TillierDebts 3, dated 48/667-668, provenance probably Fustāṭ. The alif of wa-akramaka is intersected with the nūn of an in the preceding line. The initial kāf of wa-akramaka is written differently (hairpin-shaped) than the kāf of wa-kutiba (only a round stroke). The final kāf of abqāka and aʿazzaka are written as an oblique stroke resembling the letter alif. Similarly, the final kāf of akramaka has a very short horizontal stroke. Compare it with the long final kāf of fidāʾaka and yubqīka in line 1, ghadāʾaka in line 3 and bi-dhālika in line 5.

Letter 2: Marriage Congratulations on Papyrus

P.Vindob. A.P. 0176423 12,8 × 18 cm 3rd/9th Figs. 2-3
Provenance unknown

Fig. 2: P.Vindob. A.P. 01764 recto © Austrian National Library.

Dark brown papyrus, torn off at the bottom. The original cutting lines are preserved on the other three sides. Two scraps, now detached from the papyrus, are currently placed to the left of the papyrus. The papyrus fibres are frayed at the top without damaging the beginning of the text on recto but causing some damage to the address on verso. The text is written in a well-practiced hand in black ink with a medial thick pen at

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23 A short description and a digital image of the papyrus are available at the Austrian National Library’s digital catalogue at http://data.onb.ac.at/rec/RZ00021427
right angles to fibres. The letter is written in the middle of the papyrus sheet, leaving wide blank margins on all sides. It is structured in paragraphs with fair spaces between lines. The orientation of the overall writing line is mainly horizontal. Only the beginning of lines 1, 2 and 3 shows a low degree of hanging. There are no diacritical dots. The verso contains the address in one line. Initial and medial kāf̱s are written as an oblique or even as a short vertical stroke (Cf. ḥafiẕakumā, wa-ʿāf̱akumā, bikumā, line 2; katabtumā, wa-dhakartumā, line 3; waladikumā, baʿdaq̱um, line 4; lakumā, ʿalaykumā, line 5).

Fig. 3: P.Vindob. A.P. 01764 verso © Austrian National Library.

Recto:

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم 1 ↓
حفظكمآ الله وعافاكمآ وأمنع بكما 2
قد فهتمت ما كتبتما وما ذكرتما من ملاك 3
ولنكمآ فأمنع الله بعضكم ببعض وبارك 4
لكما وأتم نعمة عليكمآ (vac.) 5
وسرتي (؟) ................ ع........ 6

Verso:

لأبي علي وأبي عمیر (؟) من أبي محمد ←
Recto:

1. In the name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful
2. May God preserve you and keep you in good health and may He grant you enjoyment of life
3. I understood what you wrote and what you mentioned concerning the marriage of your [two adult] children. May God grant you enjoyment of life and bless you and complete His favors upon you (vac.)
4. I was pleased ………………

Verso:

To Abū ʿAlī and Abū ʿUmayr (?) from (vac.) Abū Muḥammad

1 The first part of bi-sm is slanting. A long connecting stroke (linea dilatans/mashq) is attested between the sīn and mīm. The mīm of bi-sm has a short slanting tail compared to the long downward tail of the mīm of al-Raḥīm. The ink is smudged below the ḥāʾ of al-Raḥīm.

2 ḥafīẓakumā allāh wa-ʾāfākumā wa-amtaʾa bikumā The dual form is used consistently in the initial blessings for the addressee. The final alif of katabtumā is written differently, resembling somewhat the shape of an inverted letter V. For the term milāk denoting marital milk, see the discussion above. For the Arabic word walad, see the discussion above.

3-4 qad fahimtu mā katabtumā wa-dhakartumā min milāk waladikumā Ḥopkins, Studies in the Grammar of Early Arabic, pp. 94-95 [§ 84.ii].

4-5 fa-amtaʾa allāh ba-ḍakum bi-baʿḍ wa-bāraka lakumā wa-atamma niʿamahu ʿalaykumā In this eulogy, the dual alternates with the plural, as it refers to the two addressees as well as to the two spouses. A blank space is left at the end of line five indicating the beginning of a new section in the following line.

6 In this line only traces of letters can be read. The reading wa-sarranā at the beginning of this line is tentative. Only the loop of the wāw, three denticles of the sīn and the upper tip of a third letter are preserved. A tiny slip of papyrus fibre is flipped over covering the upper traces of the second word on this line.

Verso The address is written around the vertical axis at the same height as the basmala on recto. The first part of the address can either be read as ilā ʿAlī (to ʿAlī) or li-abiʿ ʿAlī (to Abū ʿAlī). The latter is more likely, for three reasons: 1) the calligraphic form (rasm) closely resembles the rasm of abī of both, the second addressee and the sender; 2) it is reasonable that both parties (i.e., the sender and both addressees) are all identified with their kunyas, and 3) the lower traces of the first character indicates the base of a v-shaped lām-alif ligature rather than a free-standing alif. The lām of ʿAlī extends vertically downwards without bending to the left to write the letter yā which

24 Grob, Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters on Papyrus, pp. 188-189.
25 Hopkins, Studies in the Grammar of Early Arabic, pp. 94-95 [§ 84.ii].
26 Grob, Documentary Arabic Private and Business Letters on Papyrus, p. 190.
is common in this ligature. The name of the second addressee is not entirely clear due to the loss of papyrus fibres. The reading ʿUmayr is uncertain. The ink is effaced in the name of the sender, Abū Muḥammad, but the reading is certain.

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27 For the omission of the final yāʾ/‘alif maqṣūra after the lām, see Hopkins, Studies in the Grammar of Early Arabic, pp. 57-59 [§ 55].
نوافذ على الحياة اليومية في مصر خلال القرن الثالث الهجري: رسالتان عربيتان على ورق البردي

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الملخص:
يقدم هذا المقال دراسة وتحقيق لبرديتين عربيتين يعودان إلى القرن الثالث الهجري/التاسع الميلادي، وهما محفظتان حاليا ضمن مجموعة البردي بالمكتبة الوطنية النمساوية بفيينا. البردية الأولى (P.Vindob. A.P. 01754)، عبارة عن رسالة تتضمن دعوة خاصة للغداء. أما البردية الثانية (P.Vindob. A.P. 01764)، فهي عبارة عن رسالة تتضمن تهيئة بالزواج. تمكن أهمية هاتين الرسائلين في أمرين: أولهما، مضمونهما الفريد الذي يكشف لنا بعض جوانب التفاعلات والمعاملات الاجتماعية اليومية في مصر خلال العصر الإسلامي المبكر، وثانيهما، الدور المحوري للرسائل المكتوبة كنقطة مرجعية للتواصل بين الأقارب والأصدقاء المتباعدين جغرافيا خلال العصور القديمة.

الكلمات الدالة: مصر الإسلامية، التاريخ الاجتماعي، البردي العربي، الرسائل الخاصة، الغداء، الزواج