

GIULIO IOVINE

‘Dull, plodding, pedantic – much like yourself’.
Late Latin Letters in Egyptian Documents*

Abstract

About fifteen Latin texts from Late Antique Egypt are examined, all in letterform, produced or copied within provincial bureaus. They are put in context within the frame of late Latin epistolography, and the insurgence of Asianism in Latin literature and chancery style. Mistakes in orthography, morphology and syntax, suggest that the scribes, partially literate in Latin, could count on companions and grammar-books to alter, most of the times mistakenly, the stock documents they had when they needed to produce a new text.

Keywords

Late Antiquity, Latin literature, Latin epistolography, Late Antique Egypt, Late Antique bureaucracy

Alma Mater Studiorum - Università di Bologna

Riassunto

Vengono esaminati una quindicina di testi latini su papiro dall'Egitto tardoantico, in forma epistolare e di natura 'ufficiale', prodotti nelle cancellerie imperiali e provinciali. Essi mostrano uno stile analogo a quello della coeva epistolografia greco-latina - sintassi bombastica, astratti di etichetta. Contengono inoltre una serie di errori ortografici, morfologici e sintattici che possono essere spiegati solamente con l'intervento testuale (spesso a sproposito) degli scribi, che potevano avvalersi di manuali e libri di grammatica, sui modelli epistolari che avevano a disposizione.

Parole chiave

Tardoantico, letteratura latina tarda, epistolografia latina, Egitto tardoantico, burocrazia tardoantica

giulio.iovine2@unibo.it

Introduction

Among all the provinces of the Roman Empire, Egypt stands out as uniquely significant: a region where no fewer than three languages coexisted in everyday written communication (mostly, Egyptian and Greek; then, before the Arab conquest, Latin, Pehlevi and other neighbouring languages¹). This paper aims to shed some

* This paper has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no 895634 (Project LAREGRE). My gratitude to the organizers Oriana Giannini, Luca Ottavi and Niccolò Tempesti for welcoming me to the conference, and Eleni Bozia, Klaas Bentein and Chiara Monaco for accepting a preliminary version of this paper for their conference 'Multilingual Literary Practices in a Multicultural World, from Archaic Greece to the Byzantine Empire' at the Belgian Academy, Rome (14-15 November 2023). Unless otherwise specified, the translations of the Latin texts are mine. I'm also grateful to Owen B. Sheard (Burlingame, CA) for checking my English. For the quotation in the title, see *Star Trek - TNG 4.20 Q-pid* (Q talking to Picard). As almost all the dates mentioned in this paper are AD, I am omitting the acronym before Common Era dates, except when it is necessary to include it.

¹ I am here referring to the so-called 'papyrological millennium', i.e. the chronological fork between the Macedonian conquest of Egypt (332 BC) and the Arab conquest of Alexandria (641), which terminated the Late Antique stage of Egyptian history.

light on a very specific corner of this rich landscape: Latin documents in provincial bureaus of Late Antique Egypt, from Diocletian's reign (284-305) to the Arab conquest (642), read, copied and – perhaps – redrafted by Greek and Egyptian-native speakers. This study is part of a wider, ongoing investigation on the use of Latin language in that particular stage of Egyptian history, among whose precedents one naturally counts Fournet 2019; the dataset discussed in this paper is the most peculiar amidst the extant evidence. Most of the Latin presence in Late Antique Egyptian papyri consists of dating formulae², tags, and subscriptions to Greek documents³, or Latin frames to Greek documents – as in the records of proceedings⁴. What this paper will take into account is a particular (and numerically smaller) section of this group, containing fully Latin texts on papyrus, produced or copied in Egypt between the end of the third and the mid-sixth century AD; and within this section, a further sub-section made of official correspondence. After detailing the quantity and quality of the available evidence (1), this paper will dwell on their linguistic peculiarities, which on the one hand reflect the cultural, legal (2.1) and – more specifically – epistolography trends in Late Antique Roman Empire (2.2), as well as the new educational syllabus required in that period for Imperial bureaucracy (3); on the other hand, they bear witness to the imperfect grasp on the (Latin) language demonstrated by clerks working in provincial administration. From the abovementioned peculiarities, which will be listed and preliminarily classified according to their typology, some considerations will be made on the origin of the grammatical inconsistencies and oddities in these documents (4).

1. *The evidence*

More than fifty items are currently known among Latin Late Antique documentary papyri⁵, which display at least fragments of Latin lines. However, since most of them are no more than scraps, one can hardly ascertain whether the original text

² A full explanation in Iovine 2019, 163-206.

³ This specific typology will be discussed in a forthcoming volume originating by project LAREGRE. Details, however, can be found among the Powerpoint presentations of the LAREGRE seminars, available in <https://unibo.academia.edu/GiulioIovine/Talks-and-Conference-Presentations> (LAREGRE seminar 4: 'I will subscribe gentle adieux and greetings'. Latin Tags for Late Antique Documents').

⁴ No comprehensive monograph exists on the bilingual *Prozeßverhandlungen*, aside Coles 1966. The typology is extensively discussed in Adams 2003, 383-390 (= 3.VI.1) and Pedone 2020.

⁵ This and the following quantities have been gathered on the unpublished census of Latin and bilingual - or trilingual - papyri, *ostraka* and tablets from the Eastern portion of

was, in fact, completely in Latin or bilingual Latin-Greek. Items, on the other hand, which survive in a less fragmentary condition, still might not contain a proper text: lists of soldiers, for instance, only contain names⁶ while receipts for food provisions are at best a gathering of short and technical formulae where jargon, rather than grammar, is employed⁷. Our dataset will therefore include, pending further discoveries, only twelve items – for a total of fifteen texts, dated between 293 and 505 – which are complete enough, and of the right typology, to allow significant inquiries into their verbiage, syntax, and content. The list runs as follows:

1. Communications from Imperial chanceries:

a) **P.Lips. I 44**⁸ (composed around 293-304, copied around 324-327). The copy of an Imperial rescript⁹ from Diocletian and Maximian which confirms specific privileges for a company of athletes and actors probably residing in Alexandria.

b) **ChLA XVII 657**¹⁰ (c. 436-450). Fragments from two Imperial rescripts in *litterae caelestes*, from a *liber epistularum* where they were not adjacent. Text **A** appears to have been emanated in favour of an individual forced to sell to an Isidorus some property for a much smaller price than warranted by the current market. Text **B** declares that Thermutia, once a freedwoman, will return once again a slave after several mischiefs done, including a forced sale.

c) **ChLA XLIV 1301**¹¹ (c. 465-467). Copy of an Imperial constitution¹² on amnesty for criminals to be performed during Easter (*Osterindulgenz*). The speaking emperor is Leo I (457-474); the addressee, the praetorian prefect to the East Pusaeus.

the Empire, North Africa and Italy from BC I to VIII AD, produced within the frame of project PLATINUM (ERC-StG n° 636983). The final outcome of the project, containing all the extant Latin texts here discussed, is Scappaticcio 2025.

⁶ A reasonably well-preserved representative of this not abundant typology (at least in Late Antiquity) is *P.Mich.* X 592 (311-321, TM 21356). For the lists of soldiers in Roman army (particularly their layout and their slow disappearance in Late Antiquity), see the recent Salati 2020, 65-136.

⁷ For instance, the renowned triplet of receipts of *annonae* from Sergius, *actuarius* of the *legio V Macedonica*, dated 399: *SB XX* 14675 (P.Vindob. inv. L 119 = *ChLA XLV* 1328, TM 23788), *ChLA XLV* 1329 (= P.Vindob. inv. L 120, TM 18755) and 1330 (= P.Vindob. inv. L 121, TM 18756).

⁸ TM 22353.

⁹ For a complete treatment of the *rescriptum*, see Sirks 2021.

¹⁰ TM 69999.

¹¹ TM 70088.

¹² For *constitutiones*, see Riedlberger 2020.

2. Drafts of petitions:

a) **P.Abinn. 1**¹³ (340-342), from Flavius Abinnaeus to the Emperors Constantius II and Constans. Abinnaeus summarizes his career and then complains that when he was about – by Imperial decree – to assume command of the *ala* in Dionysias (Arsinoite), the soldiers had chosen someone else¹⁴. The draft bears visible erasure marks and interlinear additions and corrections.

b) **P.Mich. VII 461** (fourth century¹⁵), the draft of – probably – a petition. There are several corrections (e.g. in l. 5, where the scribe was unhappy with the tense of the verb) and interlinear additions.

3. Official letters to ensure food, victuals, and protection to soldiers and clerks:

a) **SB XVIII 13851** (293¹⁶). The letter, written by an unidentified Aurelius to some likewise unidentified *magistri*, orders them to provide the *adiutor memoriae* Alogius and his horse with food rations (*annonae* and *capita*) during his recovery in *Caesarea Palaestinae*, enough for him to recover from his illness and get back to the Imperial *comitatus* ‘retinue’¹⁷.

b) **ChLA XIX 687** (317-324¹⁸), recommendation letter¹⁹ from the *rationalis* Vitalis to the *praeses Phoeniciae* Achillius to recommend the clerk Theophanes, travelling from his post in Hermupolis to Antiochia. This papyrus, together with *P.Ryl. IV 623*²⁰ and others, is part of the so-called archive of Theophanes²¹.

¹³ TM 10014.

¹⁴ In his own words (l. 11-12): *uerum insinuatis sa[cri]s litter[is Vala]c[i]o comiti, officium respondit allegasse | al[i]osque huiuscemodi epistulas homines* ‘but when your sacred letter reached Count Valacius, the office replied that other men had forwarded similar letters’.

¹⁵ TM 70016.

¹⁶ TM 18365.

¹⁷ The papyrus is linked to a known historical fact. Between 293 and 294, the *Caesar* Galerius was hastening to Egypt from somewhere on the Danube, together with his retinue, to quash a revolt in the Thebaid. It is generally acknowledged that Alogius was part of this retinue, in his capacity of *adiutor memoriae*, probably an employee in the *officium memoriae* - the imperial office concerned with records and archives (details in Cugusi *CEL II*, p. 318-319, with attached bibliography). The letter was drafted in *Caesarea Palaestinae*, where Alogius fell sick (l. 3-5 *Alogio | adiutori memoriae apud Caesariam | quousque bonam ualitudinem perceperit*). Since the papyrus was found in Egypt, Alogius probably survived his illness and got back to Galerius; somewhere in Egypt, he discarded the papyrus.

¹⁸ TM 70001.

¹⁹ The genre of *epistula commendaticia* in Roman epistolography has been aptly outlined in Cugusi 1983, 40-41; 111-114.

²⁰ TM 17314.

²¹ Details on the archive of Theophanes and on his travel are in Matthews 2006.

c) **ChLA XLV 1320** (399²²), an official letter written by Flavius Gaiolus, *tribunus quintanorum*, to the tax collectors of provisions, to give supplies to four soldiers for their expedition to Constantinople. The supplies are described as *annonae* ('provisions') and *capita* ('forage'). The document must have functioned for the four soldiers as a travel permit while they journeyed from one camp to the next.

4. Official letters to soldiers, composed within military bureaus:

a) **P.Abinn. 2** (344²³), a letter to Flavius Abinnaeus (see 2a) ordering him to retire from his commanding position, and to instruct his designated successor in his new duties. Then comes the dossier in **ChLA XLIII 1248** (395-401), containing copies of three Latin letters referring to the Roman soldier Sarapio and documenting three stages of his career²⁴:

b) **ChLA XLIII 1248**, letter **II**: after his original enlistment as an *eques* (probably AD 383/384), his promotion to *cataphractarius* (395);

c) **ChLA XLIII 1248**, letter **I**: his further promotion to *decurio* (396);

d) **ChLA XLIII 1248**, letter **III**: his dismissal (401).

e) **P.Ryl. IV 609**²⁵ (505). *Epistula probatoria*²⁶ for a recruited infantryman in the *uexillatio* 'detachment' of Flavius Verte, quartered in Hermupolis. The sender is the supreme military authority in Upper Egypt, the *comes Thebaici limitis* Flavius Constantinus Theophanes.

5. Official letters of reprimand to clerks:

a) **ChLA XII 523** (P.Lips. inv. 270 B) and **P.Lips. inv. 2632 A**²⁷ (367-375). The two documents are drafts of the same reprimand letter, probably addressed to two different individuals, guilty of the same mistake and employing the same stock text. The addressee is a *rationalis* who will pay out of his own pocket the money he has stolen from the fiscal revenue. Of this specific document we have two almost identical drafts, which I took as representing only one textual item.

These fifteen texts in twelve papyri, whatever their typology, all employ the traditional form of the letter: a sender passes on some specific content to an addressee,

²² TM 70106.

²³ TM 10021.

²⁴ The letters are not the original ones, but copies arranged probably by Sarapio himself - and drafted by a scribe - after his dismissal from the army, to provide certification of his veteran status. More information and some context in Cugusi *CEL* II, p. 349-357.

²⁵ TM 17309.

²⁶ For this typology, Cugusi 1983, 276; Southern - Dixon 1996, 73-75.

²⁷ TM 69994.

adding a greeting formula and a final salutation, and employing the customary laudatory language attested in coeval epistolography (see below). That said, none of them is a proper, private letter²⁸. They are produced in two distinct, although strictly related, milieux: the Imperial chancery, mainly that of Constantinople, and the offices in the provinces of Egypt, be they responsible for the *militia armata* – the army – or the *militia inermis* – the administration²⁹. The significance of Latin – the reason, that is, for the involved individuals and offices for using Latin in these cases – must be looked for in this language’s traditional link to Roman power, emphasizing Rome’s and then Constantinople’s authority³⁰. In those very few occasions where the authorities, either military or civil, either high or low in the social ladder, choose to employ Latin in their documents, by just doing so they already transmit a message which is independent from the content of the text – reminding the addressee that the master, whatever their origin, is Roman and speaks in the language of the Romans. They do so with some differences, one must note, in the status of the addressees: the emperor addresses in Latin whomever he chooses, be they private citizens or public employees, whereas the military commanders and the provincial governors, or clerks in the offices, use Latin only for communicating inside their milieu: they speak to soldiers and clerks, not to private individuals, whom they address in Greek if need be.

From the bare text of these papyri one can extract two noteworthy features:

A) Their uniformity. The provincial bureaus in Egypt evidently relied on stock documents when producing for themselves the documents they wanted to issue. An Imperial rescript can only come from the capital; it can be copied, if any-

²⁸ Fournet 2019, 75-76 remarks how Latin private letters on papyrus, rare but attested in the first centuries of Roman Egypt, all but vanished in Late Antiquity.

²⁹ «Zweitens bringt die strikte Trennung in zivile und militärische Verwaltung durch die diokletianische Reform zwar eine Teilung des Staatsdienstes in eine *militia armata* und eine *militia inermis*, die *milites* in den Statthalterbüros sind aber nur mehr dem Titel nach Soldaten» (Palme 1999, 101).

³⁰ That should be the object of the monograph mentioned in fn. 3. Meanwhile, Adams’ considerations about Latin as ‘language of power’ and ‘super-high language’ in 2003, 545-75 and Garcea’s in 2019 are still relevant. As far as the Eastern Roman Empire is concerned, we owe to Millar 2006, 89-92 the concept of ‘dual-lingualism’, which tries to describe the reality of Constantinople’s court, where Greek was spoken but Latin was held as an artificial ‘language of state’, and allegedly imposed upon bureaucrats. Instead, on the absence of an actual linguistic policy in the Late Roman Empire, especially one favouring Latin over Greek, see Adams 2003, 630-637 and the more recent Adamik 2010, who believes that Latin was promoted in Late Antique East by its own growing prestige and the presence of the new Imperial residences, rather than by a specific decree.

thing, in the provinces. But, for instance, a recommendation letter for a travelling clerk, such as *ChLA* 687 (3b), could only be produced within a provincial office, or rather reproduced from an existing model. The very existence of *P.Ryl.* IV 623, a fragmentary text identical to that of 3b except for the addressee's name, and from the same hand, testifies to an archetype that could be copied when needed. In his travel from Hermupolis to Antiochia, Theophanes would have crossed *Thebais* – his own province – then *Aegyptus Herculia*, *Palaestina prima*, *Phoenicia* – where Achillius was *praeses* – and *Syria prima*, his final destination. For at least three out of these five provinces, he would have needed a letter with credentials to ensure his safe passage; also, a letter to Dyscolius when he would reach Antiochia. *ChLA* 687 is the letter for Achillius; *P.Ryl.* 623 represents the letter for Delphinus, *praeses* in either *Aegyptus Herculia* or *Palaestina prima* and, despite its worse condition, its gaps can be easily filled if one looks at 3b:

ChLA 687

Domino suo **Achillio** | Vitalis. |
 Cum in omnibus bonis benignitas tua sit praedita, tum | etiam scholasticos
 et maxime qui a me cultore tuo hono|rificentiae tuae traduntur quod hone-
 ste respicere uelit | non dubito, domine praedicabilis. Quapropter Theofanen
 | oriundum ex ciuitate Hermupolitanorum prouinciae | Thebaidos, qui ex
 suggestione domini mei fratris nostri | Filippi usque ad officium domini mei
 Dyscoli uexationem | itineris quodammodo sine ratione sustinere uidetur, |
 inimitabili religioni tuae trado, etc.

P.Ryl. 623

[Domino suo] **Delfini[o]** | Vitalis. |
 [Cum in omni]bus bonis benignitas tua sit praedita | [tum etiam s]ch[o-]
 las[tico]s et maxim[e q]ui a me cul[to]re tuo | [honorificentiae tuae tr]adun-
 tur [quod] hones[te r]espicerere | [uelit non dubito, d]omine p[raedi]cabilis.
 [Q]uapropter | [Theofanen oriundum] ex ciui[tate] Hermu[po]litanoru[m]
 | prouinciae Thebaidos, qu[i ex sugg]estio[ne do]mini m[ei] | fratris nostri
 Philippi] usq[ue ad of]ficium [domi]ni me[i] | Dyscoli uexationem itineris
 sine ratio]ne q[uo]dammodo sust[inere] | uidetur - - -]

The same holds for the two drafts in 5a (*ChLA* 523 and *P.Lips. inv.* 2632 A), which not only must come from the same model, but are very close in time. Both mention a *uir clarissimus* Mauricius as a superior in rank to both sender and addressee³¹. One can assume that in the archetype there was no specific name, since

³¹ See Bernini 2021, 278-279.

the gap would have been filled with the individual offender's name. The two copies feature different portions of the original document, which allowed A. Bernini to partially reconstruct it³²:

u.eri. ad decessorem grauitatis tuae culpam reduceres, si sedula.....osi
temporis c.....si eiocisses, ut eum tertia decima indictione inuenia.....essa
praeter.....re ad al..... contendis i..... e guarid. sit hu a.....lico..
ti ti..... deceat a pacti..... cassesum inpoteri, s quae i e s in al.....d repre-
hend..... de conexum breuem sectatus intra diem I. Kalendas Maias..., nisi
uniuersa reddideris atque ex litteris publicis uiri clarissimi Mauricii, qui te
nunc caruit, praeceptis nostris satisfecisse monstraueris. non in officium sed
in te seueritas castiget, ut dispendio familiaris rei quae sit sedulitas neces-
sitatibus publicis impertienda cognoscas. interea, ne ad inuidiam debitoris
cumulus uideatur esse collectus, in doriere f. e. io. am. oli. e. i collata satis a
te possit t. e. em emi tuo pe. eale.

uel praeter i- uel praeterit- uel praeterea || uel al. ç uel al. s uel al. x || uel
hi. a || fortasse -e publico || casse. u'm Inv. 2632 A 5 cas, se[.] Inv. 270 B 5
|| post diem, uel III uel IV uel IX || post Maias, fortasse es uel est || reddideris
Inv. 270 B 7 redditeris Inv. 2632 A 7 || publicis Inv. 2632 A 8 nihil Inv. 270 B
7 || nunc Inv. 270 B 8 nonc Inv. 2632 A 8 || carruit Inv. 270 B 8 Inv. 2632 A 8
|| monstraueris Inv. 270 B 9 manstrauerris Inv. 2632 A 9 || dispentio Inv. 270
B 10 Inv. 2632 A 10 || inpertienda Inv. 270 B 11 Inv. 2632 A 11 || inuidiam
Inv. 2632 A 12 inuidiem Inv. 270 B 11 || cumulus Inv. 270 B 11-12 comolos
Inv. 2632 A 12 || uideatur Inv. 2632 A 12 uitheatur Inv. 270 B 12 || doriere
fortasse δωρεά interpretandum || conlata Inv. 270 B 13 || fortasse tuo opere

A third instance is provided by *P.Ryl.* 609 (4e), a probation letter for a recruit of Fl. Constantinus Theophanes' *deuotissimi domestici* in Hermoupolis. The text runs as follows:

[¹ [Fl(auius) Cons]tantiu[s] Theofanes com(es) et uir inl(ustris) com(es)
deuu(otissimorum) domm(esticorum) et rei mīl(itaris) Th[e]b(aici) lim(i-
tis) 'Fl(aui)o' Ver'te siue Theodoti[o]]² u(iro) d(euotissimo) trib(uno) Her-
mupoli deg(enti).

³² From Bernini 2021, 277. *Caruit* instead of *caret* is odd, especially in association with *nunc* - one would expect *qui nuncusque te caruit* 'who has been so far deprived of you' or *qui nunc te caret* 'who is currently deprived of you' - and is explained by Bernini as a specific nuance of both the verb and the adverb: «L'utilizzo di *nunc* assieme a un perfetto può essere spiegato dando al verbo un valore risultativo e al deittico la funzione di evidenziarne l'estensione, che corrisponde al momento della redazione del testo» (2019, 279).

[³ Cum] opđulero sacra iussione domini nostri Anastasii piissimi ac trium-
 fatōris semper Augusti [⁴ e qua n]ūmeris şupp̄lementi causa i[u]nioreş ro-
 bustis corporibus adsociarentur, Heracleon fili(um) Çonstantinii [⁵ ortum
 e] ciuitati Ħermupolitana `in` uexillatione prudētiaē tuae pro tempore cre-
 dita edictio mea mīlitarē praē[cip]it, [⁶ eiusq]ue nomen şi ex gen̄tē oritur
 mīlitari et neque curialis nec praesid̄i aliş eşt neç inuecill[o c]orpoře n[ec] [⁷
 [inualid]uş nec censibus adscribtos matriculis eiusdem numeri inseri facito,
 annonas ei ex die Iduum [⁸]um Sabiniano et Theodōro uir̄is clar-
 rissimis consulibus ministrari curaturus cum çeęeris [con-]⁹-tuberna]libus
 suis muniis militaribus o[p]eram nauaturo ita tamem si octauum deçimū
 annū [¹⁰ compleui]sse dinoscitur.

A recent finding among the unpublished papyri from the Viennese collection, *P.Vindob.* L 169 *recto*, reveals a fragment from a text which was, in all likelihood, identical – but for the few ever-changing details – to that of the Rylands papyrus (4e)³³:

P.Ryl. 609

ei ex die Iduum

8 [.]um Sabiniano et Theodōro uir̄is clarissimis consulibus ministrari
 curaturus cum çeęeris [con-]
 9 [-tuberna]libus suis muniis militaribus o[p]eram nauaturo ita tamem si
 octauum deçimū annū
 10 [compleui]sse dinoscitur

P.Vindob. L 169

— — —
 1]IIII Kal(endarum) Nouembrium domino noştr[o] F̄l̄(auio) [
 2] çum ceteris contubernalibus şuiş [
 3] çompleuisse dinoscitur †
 — — —

P.Vindob. L 169 (after comparing it with the *P.Ryl.*)

— — —
 matriculis eiusdem numeri]
 1 [facito annonas ex die - - -]IIII Kal(endarum) Nouembrium domino
 noştr[o] F̄l̄(auio) [±28 co(n)s(ulibu)s]

³³ TM 832101. The papyrus is now published in Iovine 2024. An image of the papyrus can be found in <https://viewer.onb.ac.at/101FD0B2/> (consulted on 20 July 2024).

- 2 [ministrari curaturus] cū ceteris contubernalibus suis [muniis militari-
bus operam nauaturo ita tamen si]
3 [octauum decimū annū] compleuisse dinoscitur †
- — —

The date of enlistment, of course, must change, because the recruit cannot be the same soldier: one reads a different day and a different year (the consulship of Sabinius and Theodorus for the *P.Rylands*, the consulship of an unnamed but reigning Emperor for the *P.Vindob.*)³⁴. Yet, these texts prove once again that scribes in provincial offices had at their disposal painstakingly-worded antigraphs to produce their documents, and that this practice lasted as late as the beginning of the sixth century AD. One must assume that all the documents from the abovementioned list which do not come from the Imperial chancery, but were produced in the Egyptian provinces, must have been copied for a specific occasion from an available stock document.

B) Their syntax. The Latin employed is rarely the simple, effective, and unadorned Latin of the documents (be they letters or not) we can read in the previous three centuries of Roman power in Egypt³⁵. We now face a bombastic, convoluted syntax, so artificially complex that it borders on being plainly wrong, and forces the modern reader to make a considerable effort if they want to understand the text. Conversely, the messages these texts carry are most of the times quite simple when compared to the grammatical structure involved. A few instances suffice to elucidate the situation. From the Imperial chancery, *ChLA* 657 text A, l. 2-29 (1b):

Insup[e]r etiam precatur | empti[on]ale instrumentum, quod per ui[m a]c
necessitatem legibus inimicam | uili p[r]etio dato super possessionib[us] ad
se pertinentibus conf[ectum sit], |⁵ null[um] sibi praeiudicium gen[er]are |
sed e[xiguo p]retio quod re uera da[tum] est cum legitimis usuris refuso |
[eas se cum d]ebitis fruc[tibus re]cuperare. | [Denique] | [idem petitor de-]
siderat solacia ex militia sua debita |¹⁰ [ab Isidoro praefato u]surpatore sib[i]
restitui. | [.] carissi]me ac iucundissime, | [laudabilis itaque e]xper[i]entia

³⁴ So can be gathered from the title *dominus noster* ‘our lord’. This only partially narrows down the possible years of composition, from 398 (Honorius’ fourth consulship) to 611 (the consulship of Heraclius).

³⁵ A brief selection of documents where the texts is (almost) entirely available: *PSI* VI 729a (77, TM 70005), a purchase contract for a horse; *ChLA* X 424 (late first century, TM 69924), a letter of recommendation; *P.Diog.* 10, l. 1-5 (211, TM 10689), a testament; *P.Mich.* III 165, l. 1-3 (236, TM 21331), a request for a *tutor mulieris*; *SB* I 1010, l. 1-7 (249, TM 23051), a request for the *agnitio bonorum possessionis* of a relative who died intestate. A survey of Latin documentary typologies before Late Antiquity is in Iovine 2022, 552-557.

tua, | [si preci illi uerita]s inest | [et si res ad iurisd]ctionem suam pertine-
ret, |¹⁵ [praefatum Isidorum a]d solutionem debiti uix tandem sine ulla uana
dilatione | [cum petitore celebrandam iu]xta legum tenorem constringi, |
iniquos uero detentatores mancipiorum ad eum pertinentium | portionem
ipsi debitam resarcire, | nec ullum precatorem ex instrumento emptionali
|²⁰ pro memorata narratione per uim confecto praeiudicium pati, | sed hoc
uiribus uacuato | possessiones ad ipsum pertinentes cum debitis fructibus |
minimo pretio quod re uera accepisse probatur | cum legitimis usuris reddito
ab iniquis detentatoribus |²⁵ eum recipere praecipiat, | praefato scilicet Isi-
dor[o] | solacia siue emolumenta ex militia sup[er]a dicta petitori debita | quae
perperam in suum lucrum dicitur [uertisse] | restituere compellendo, etc.

The emperor's message is plain: he orders the local governor to force Isidorus to pay his debts. The syntax, on the contrary, is overflowing³⁶. The composer of the text produces a noteworthy hyperbaton between the abstract title indicating the governor (l. 12 [*laudabilis itaque e]xper[i]entia tua*) and the subjunctive *praecipiat* (l. 25), directly governed by it, in turn governing a sequel of infinitives embedded between noun and verb: *constringi* (l. 16), *resarcire* (l. 18), *pati* (l. 20), *recipere* (l. 25). Several other clauses are embedded between *e]xper[i]entia tua* and *praecipiat*: for instance, two hypothetical ones (l. 13-14 [*si preci illi uerita]s inest | [et si res ad iurisd]ctionem suam pertineret*). Note another hyperbaton in l. 15-16: *a]d solutionem debiti uix tandem sine ulla uana dilatione | [cum petitore celebrandam*, and how the writer avoids e.g. the simpler and more direct order 'NN *carissime ac iucundissime, praecipe / praecipias*' for a vocative and then an abstract noun ([*laudabilis itaque e]xper[i]entia tua*) governing a third person-verb. After *praecipiat*, a further addition governed by a gerundium: l. 26-29 *praefato... Isidor[o] | solacia... | quae ... dicitur [uertisse] | restituere compellendo*.

From the provincial chanceries, *P.Abin.* 2 (text 4a in the list):

[Flau]us Valacius `Fl(aui)o' Abinneo suo | salutem.
| [. . .]ar[i]o ex protectoribus iuxta diuinitus sancita subrogato [ti]bi eo
quod | [impe]rii iam tempora c[o]npluisse suggereris et milites alae quam
nuncusque |⁵ [duxis]se uideris et signa dominica solidamque inarmationem
eorundem | [actut]um trade. De singulis etiam pro tutela publica obseruan-
dis instruere | [cura] ne quam sub primitiis saltem suis erroris titubantiam
incurrat | [hisq]ue obseruatis deposita administratione supradicta propriis |
[atten]de u[t]i[li]tatibus. Bene ual[e].

³⁶ For the sake of the argument, and since I have no reason to doubt them, I am accepting the current supplements to the text, indicated by words within square brackets.

The letter is brief, but very wordy, and it employs several adornments like *com-
plesse suggereris* instead of *compleuisti*, *duxisse uideris* instead of *duxisti*, and the
recommendation to instruct his successor through the odd *ne sub... incurrat* 'lest
he should stumble in the uncertainty of a mistake, at least in the first moments in
the job.' The letter, most interestingly, given its peripheral context, employs several
collocations – *deponere administrationem* or *deposita(m) administratione(m)*³⁷,
*diuinitus sancita*³⁸, *tutela publica*³⁹, *propria* or *sua utilitas* 'one's own/personal
business'⁴⁰ – that also appear in contemporary legal and literary languages.

Some of these alterations in language and verbiage between the pre- and
post-Diocletian periods are all the more glaring if one looks at samples of the
same documentary typology before and after the change. The abovementioned
ChLA 687 (3b) and *P.Ryl.* 609 (4e) serve this purpose well. Recommendation and
probation letters are epistolary categories that exist before and after the watershed
of Late Antiquity – here approximately meant as the late third century⁴¹; both of
them are attested in papyri. As for the former type, a typical instance is *ChLA* X
424 (late first century⁴²), from an unknown military milieu in Egypt: a soldier,
Priscus, asks the fellow soldier Petronius, whom he styles *pater meus*, to take care
of the *duplicarius* Carus. The difference between this letter and, for example, the
abovementioned *ChLA* 687 (3b) is conspicuous. If one highlights in bold, in both
letters, the name of the recommended individual and the sentence actually recom-
mending him, and then the *formula ualetudinis* or final salutation, one realizes the
process of accumulation and ornamentation undergone by the typology:

<i>ChLA</i> X 424	<i>ChLA</i> 687 (3b)
Priscus Petronio patri suo salutem.	Domino suo Achillio Vitalis.
Apri duplicari Carum duplicarium ho- minem probum commendo tib[i] . Qui si qu[i]d egerit auxili tui rogo in meum honorem adiuues eum saluo pudore tuo. Opto bene ualeas. Salutem dic nostris	Cum in omnibus bonis benignitas tua sit praedita, tum etiam scholasticos et maxime qui a me cultore tuo hono- ⁵ -ri- ficentiae tuae traduntur quod honeste respicere uelit non dubito, domine prae

³⁷ The collocation is quite common in the *Theodosian Code* (e.g. I 5,11) and the *Digest* (I 51,8), where it specifically refers to a clerk in public service who quits his position; but very rare before and outside them. See e.g. Lampr. *Alex.* 42,4.

³⁸ See Rufin. *hist.* 6,13 and 19.

³⁹ See e.g. Dig. X 59,1.

⁴⁰ This collocation can be found e.g. in Lact. *epit.* 50,7; Aug. *serm.* 46,530; Ambr. *off.* I 24,115.

⁴¹ An excellent overview of epistolary typologies is in Cugusi 1983, 105-136.

⁴² TM 69924.

omnibus. | Salutem tibi dicunt nostri |
omnes.

| [Va]le.

dicabilis. Quapropter **Theofanen** | ori-
undum ex ciuitate Hermupolitanorum
prouinciae | Thebaidos, qui ex suggestione
domini mei fratris nostri | Filippi usque ad
officium domini mei Dyscoli uexationem
|¹⁰ itineris quodammodo sine ratione
sustinere uidetur, | **inimitabili religioni tuae**
trado, ut eundem praeter|euntem more
honestatis tuae benigne et humane | respi-
cere digneris. Iuro enim salutem commu-
nem | et infantum nostrorum, quod enim
eodem minime |¹⁵ petente beniuolentiae
<tuae> eundem insinuendum putauit.

Domine | dulcissime et uere |
amantissime, beatum te | meique
amantem semper | gaudear.

A similar process is witnessed for the probation letters. Two instances of *probatoria* can be quoted from Early Empire Latin documents: one *probatoria tironum* 'probation letter for recruits', *P.Oxy.* VII 1022 (103⁴³), and one *equorum* 'for horses', *P.Dura.* 56a (208⁴⁴). These are succinct texts: they give the names of the men or describe the horse(s) involved, they specify the unit they are destined to, and are drafted in a polite letterform. If one compares, in the table below, the main messages (in bold characters) of these two documents and of the best preserved probation letters in our list – the above mentioned *P.Ryl.* 609 (4e) – to the accessory words added to them, one can clearly see the differences. Also, the salutation formulae (*praescripta*) have undergone some material expansion in Late Antiquity. Marius Maximus, governor of Syria, or C. Minicius Italus, *praefectus Aegypti* – the senders of the two probation letters mentioned above – feel no need to specify who they are when addressing two military authorities quite below them in the provincial chain of command. Contrariwise, Fl. Constantinus Theophanes, very much their inferior in the military hierarchy (he is only a count), must lay down all his titles when addressing Flavius Verte:

⁴³ TM 78569.

⁴⁴ TM 44776.

<i>P.Dura. 56a</i>	<i>P.Ryl. 609 (4e)</i>
Marius Maxim[us] V[al]ent[ino] s[uo] sal[ute]m.	[Fl(auius) Cons]t[an]tinu[s] Theofanes com(es) et uir inl(ustris) com(es) deu(otissimorum) dom(esticorum) et rei m[il](itaris) Th[e]b(aici) lim(itis) Fl(auio) Ver'te siue Theodoti[o] u(iro) d(euotissimo) trib(u-no) Hermupoli deg(enti).
Ecum quadrimum rus(seum) person[a-]tum s(ine)· n(ota)· probatum a me Iulio Basso eq(uiti)· coh(ortis)· XX Pal(myrenorum) ⁵ c(ui)· p(raees)· (denariis) centum uiginti [q]uin[ue] in a[ct]a u[t] mos refer· et . . .]nota ex die [qu]ar[to . . .] Iunia[s] d(omino) n(ostro) Imp(eratore) Antonino A[ug]usto· III [e]t [G]et[a] Caesare it[e]r[um] co(n)s(ulibus)].	[Cum] op[er]ulero sacra iussione domini nostri Anastasii piissimi ac triumphatoris semper Augusti [e qua n]umeris supplementi causa i[u]niores robustis corporibus adsociarentur, Heracleon fili(um) C[on]stantinii ⁵ [ortum e] ciuitati Hermupolitana 'in' uexillatione prudentiae tuae pro tempore credita edictio mea militare praecipit, [eius]que nomen si ex gen[er]e oritur militari et neque curialis nec praesid[i]alis est neq[ue] inuecill[o] corpore n[on] [ec] [in]ualid]us nec censibus adscriptos matriculis eiusdem numeri inserto , annonas ei ex die Iduum [.]um Sabiniano et Theodoro uiris clarissimis consulibus ministrari curaturus cum ceteris [con]tubernaliis suis muniis militaribus o[per]am nauaturo ita tamem si octauum decimum annu[m] ¹⁰ [compleu]sse dinoscitur.
<i>P.Oxy. VII 1022</i>	
Exemplum epistulae. C. Minicius Italu[s] Celsiano suo sal[u]-tem.	
Tirones sexs probatos a me in ⁵ cohorte cui praees in nume[ro]s referri iube ex XI Kalendas Martias, nomi[na] eorum et icon[i]smos huic epistulae subiec[i].	
¹⁰ Vale frater karissim[e ⁴⁵].	

Text 3b (*ChLA* 687) and text 4e (*P.Ryl.* 609) are located at the beginning and in the concluding phase of Late Antique Egypt. Text 3b was produced in an Empire which, though divided and with different capitals, still had Rome at its core and – through the tetrarchy system – its own unity. Text 4e, on the contrary, was produced when there no longer was any Roman Empire but the Eastern one, where spoken Latin was very limited on the landscape and certainly almost nonexistent in Egypt. Yet, official letters are still produced, if seldom, in Latin, and in the

⁴⁵ A list of the recruits follows, then a short archival note of acceptance at l. 24-26: *accepta VI K(alendas) Martias ann(o) VI· | Imp(eratoris) Traiani n(ostri) per | Priscum singul(arem)* ‘Received on day 6 before the Calends of March, in the sixth year of our Emperor Trajan, by the *singularis* Priscus’.

same style. A style which must have been introduced directly under Diocletian: *SB XVIII* 13851 (3a), drafted in 293, still displays a sobriety in content and style which strongly contrasts another sample from the same typology, *ChLA* 1320⁴⁶ (3c); whereas texts like *ChLA* 687 (3b, 317-324) and *P.Lips.* I 44 (1a, ca. 324-327), drafted immediately after Diocletian’s reign, display the new style in its full bloom. This extreme makeover of Latin official texts on papyrus cannot be fully understood outside the wider frame of stylistic evolution within Imperial and provincial chanceries under Diocletian himself, and in the Late Antique Latin epistolography.

2. *The macrocosm: a context*

2.1. *When the Emperor speaks*

The narrow corner of Latin official letters on papyrus, whose representatives we have seen so far, is only a portion of a more extended development of official Latin and Greek documents in epistolary form within provincial chanceries in Late Antiquity. This development may be called with the umbrella term taken from Zilliarius 1949, ‘Byzantinismus’, and has been discussed by several scholars; aside from Zilliarius, the foremost as regards the present case are Koskenniemi 1956, Papathomas 2007 and Fournet 2009. Zilliarius particularly notices how Greek official letters on papyrus from the third century AD onwards, following the slow but steady transformation of the Roman government from enlightened despotism to military dictatorship, with bureaucracy growing to proportions unseen before,

⁴⁶ In the former text, the unnamed clerk, Aurelius [. . . .], addresses the *magistri* with a very matter-of-fact communication, only lightly solemnized, so to speak, by the mention of a *sacer comitatus* (l. 3-11): *annonas . . . as . . . capitum trium Alogio | adiutori memoriae apud Caesariam | quousque bonam ualetudinem perceperit | et proficiscenti per . . . em in sacrum | comitatum d(omini) n(ostri) Maximiani | nobilissimi C[a]esaris usque | ex die [. . .]um Iduum Dece[m]brium | in diem q[u]o ad comitatum | uenerit*. In the latter, Flauius Gaiolus uses a much more flourishing language (l. 3-6): *quattuor imfr[a] scriptis protectoribus ad adorandam diuinam purpuram dominorum | nostrorum principum die felicissimum pascharum direxi ad sacratissimum comitatum; | quibus iuxta annuo consuetud[i]ne annonas quaternas kapitum quatuor sine ulla mora | preuere curate cum statibus solitis*. Notice the *comitatus*, now *sacratissimus* instead of *sacer*; the very long *iuxta annuo consuetud[i]ne . . . cum statibus solitis* which replaces the very short *annonas . . . as . . . capitum trium* (for some possible supplements, such as *d̄uas / b̄inas / t̄ernas d̄a capitum*, see Cugusi *ap.* CEL III, p. 275); and the reason for the *protectores* to travel to Constantinople (*ad adorandam . . . pascharum*), whereas in 293 the clerk sees no reason to elaborate on the purpose of anyone’s mission.

tended to resort to abstract nouns in referring to the recipients when they were superior in rank (e.g. ἡ εὐλαβία ἐλάμβανεν ὁσιότητος σεμνότητος φιλανθρωπία), and to use an inflated and servile style ('Höflichkeitsstil' in Papathomias 2007)⁴⁷. These phenomena, already present in earlier Greek letters on papyri⁴⁸ but blossoming in the third century, expand in the fourth after Diocletian's reign and – despite not being mandatory at all for Late Antique letters in general – also appear in the Latin counterparts of official Greek epistolography in Egypt⁴⁹.

This development also concerns the written products of Imperial chancery – constitutions and rescripts emanated by the supreme offices of Roman power are, after all, often in epistolary form. These constitutions and rescripts can now be read in copies carved in stone, or within the great legal collections of Late Antiquity: the *Codex Theodosianus*, the *Corpus Iuris Civilis*. Their style perfectly aligns with that of the other items in the list⁵⁰. This is all the more glaring when one considers that the Imperial constitutions and rescripts preserved in the mentioned collections have been duly abridged by compilers when they consulted the originals in the Imperial archives⁵¹ (an instance of an original text might be seen in *ChLA* 657 – text 1b, which we have no reason to think was epitomized). This general change in style has been investigated – from different angles – by several scholars, including Vernay 1913, Volterra 1971, Eich – Eich 2004, and Dillon 2018. While Vernay identifies Diocletian and Constantine as the rulers under whom this alteration took place, he distinguishes between constitutions and rescripts as evolving towards the same style, but in different times and stages. Constitutions, Vernay argues, begin quite early to show the effects of the growing absolutism of Roman imperial power (their style inflates as early as the age of Nero), whereas rescripts, while embody-

⁴⁷ Zilliacus 1949, 39.

⁴⁸ See Koskeniemi 1956, 34-47, where φιλοφρόνησις, παρουσία and ὁμιλία are discussed as three pivotal elements of Greek epistolography. Several companions with instructions on letter-writing are also quoted (p. 59-61).

⁴⁹ Zilliacus 1949, 51-57.

⁵⁰ «Le style des constitutions impériales au Bas-Empire ne ressemble plus en rien à celui des jurisconsultes classiques. Celui du Haut-Empire en restait au contraire tout voisin. Autant nous trouvons dans la première période un style technique, direct, dépouillé de tout ornement, parfois même obscur à force de concision, autant le style impérial de la seconde époque se montre prolixe et verbeux. Les constitutions impériales ne se contentent plus de répondre à la question posée ou de définir la mesure prise. Elles veulent expliquer. Bien plus, elles veulent impressionner celui ou ceux à qui elles s'adressent. C'est qu'elles sont non plus de simples applications du droit à une espèce posée, mais bien des actes administratifs. Elles reflètent l'absolutisme vainqueur des libertés romaines et de l'esprit juridique ancien. Le pouvoir absolu crée le droit et l'impose» (Vernay 1913, 263).

⁵¹ As is convincingly argued in Volterra 1971.

ing the old and sober style until Constantine, explode in those years towards the inflated style. He attributes this change to the fact that constitutions were being composed by the contemporary literary celebrities when they were appointed to the office *ab epistulis* within the Imperial chancery, while rescripts were produced by the office *a libellis*, traditionally preserved for law practitioners and legal experts. It so happened that constitutions more acutely felt the effect of the literary trends and were, in turn, influenced by the changing face of Roman power; the rescripts were instead conservative. Under Diocletian and Constantine, the distinction between these offices vanishes, and the office *a memoria* absorbs much of their earlier duties. As a result, constitutions and rescripts are composed in the same style⁵². Similar conclusions are reached by Dillon, who attentively scrutinizes chancery prose before, during, and after Diocletian, and concludes that its reign is a milestone in a process that transforms all written production of the Imperial chancery from solid and meaningful to bombastic and verbose. One is under the impression that this change in the Imperial chancery affected all other chanceries in the provinces and spread epistolary models in official correspondence: petitions, recommendation letters, probation letters, and the like. The reason for this, Dillon argues, is that the emperor in Late Antiquity is a demi-god, and he speaks accordingly in a very ornate style like a god would. Everything concerning him is holy and must be reflected in his prose, which becomes self-important. This process, he maintains, probably began with Caracalla (i.e. was developed and brewed during the third century)⁵³.

2.2. Epistolography in Late Antiquity

The self-aggrandizement and stylistic inflation of chancery letters during and after Diocletian's reign is not confined, in fact, to chancery. When describing the main features of literary epistolography in Late Antiquity, both in Greek and Latin languages, Garzya 1985 pinpoints:

1. Their pervasiveness: Late Antique writers and the public are obsessed with the form of the letter, which crosses the boundaries between Greek and Latin literature and unites them;
2. The rhetorical muscles, so to speak: whereas ancient companions prescribe clarity, authors tend to be the murkiest and most convolute they can;
3. The reprise of ancient authors and tropes;

⁵² Vernay 1913, 271-274.

⁵³ Dillon 2019, 338-343. See partic. p. 338: «Roman imperial legislation indeed underwent a real stylistic transformation from the High Empire to Late Antiquity and [...] the reign of Diocletian was a milestone in this process. [...] In Late Antiquity, and in the reign of D. particularly, the rhetoric of Roman legislation became both argumentative and ornate».

4. The often-overexploited commonplaces;
5. The style, characterized by ceremonious refinement, mild kindness, polite detachment;
6. The protestations of love and exhibitions of civility towards the receiver;
7. The declarations, often disregarded, of brevity;
8. The sender's constant self-belittlement (in contrast to 6).

Whereas at least 2, 5, and 6 can be often found in the communications from Imperial chancery described in the previous chapter (and in texts 1a, b and c), it must be remarked – as already P. Cugusi noticed when examining those texts in the *CEL* – how language, *formulae* and style of the Latin official letters on papyrus are substantially identical to those from real authors of Late Antiquity, from the IV to the VII century. A selection of some noteworthy collocations from the former group reveals how these collocations – especially the courtesy titles consisting of abstract nouns and possessive adjectives – are consistently found in contemporary prose, not only in epistolography (or literature in epistolary form):

Text 2a (*P.Abinn.* 1), l. 1-6 *clementia piet[ati]s uestrae, domini perp[etui] ... ad sacra uesti[gi]a pietatis uestrae...*

l. 3 *qui ... [o]bsequium suum exhibentes...*

The courtesy title *pietas uestra* is in Cassiod. *var.* X 1,12; X 20,2; *Epist. pontif.* 770sq. = *epist.* 6 Thiel = *Collect. Avell.* n. 108 p. 501, 12 Günther. See also texts outside the domain of letter-writing, such as Anon. *de mach. bell.* 15,2; *Facund. defens.* II 2,109; VIII 5,160; then Arnob. *Iun. in Psalm.* 142, l. 33 for the courtesy title *clementia pietatis*.

For the collocation *obsequium exhibere*, see *Ennod. epist.* 4, 10, p. 106, 2; also non-epistolary texts, such as *Chromat. serm.* 8,83; *Aug. serm.* 103,39; *c. Faust.* 20,9.

Text 2b (*P.Mich.* 461), l. 6-9 *possit... re-ferrere etiam ad auctorita[t]em tua[m] ... ut ante iusionem amplitudinis tuae... pusillitatis meae nece[s]sit[ate]s [r]eferere ad scientiam auctoritatis tuae, domine*

The courtesy title *amplitudo tua* appears often in Late Antiquity letters – see e.g. *Ennod. epist.* 3,34, p. 96, 3; 4,25, p. 116, 8; *auctoritas tua* is very common in the Imperial constitutions and rescripts of the Theodosian Code, and attested also in common epistolography – see e.g. *Ianuar. epist.* p. 253, l. 202; *mea pusillitas* appears, on the contrary, very rarely: e.g. in *Hier. epist.* 119,11,17 and in non-epistolary texts where, however, the author

speaks in the first person: Gaudent. *serm.* 5,19 and Oros. *apol.* 3,3.

For the collocation *referre necessitates*, see e.g. Hier. *epist.* 155,88,2, or Conc. Carth. a. 345/348 p. 109 l. 266.

Text 3b (ChLA 687), l. 4-5 *honorificentiae tuae*, l. 11 *inimitabili religioni tuae*, l. 12 *more honestatis tuae*, l. 15 *beniuolentiae <tuae>*

Again, courtesy titles widespread in epistles: *honorificentia tua* in Lucif. *epist.* 2, l. 1-4 and Paul. Nol. *epist.* 23,10; *religio tua* in Ps. Athan. Lucif. *epist.* 4, l. 4; 95 and several passages of Augustine (e.g. *epist.* 113,3; 114,5; 251,23); *honestas tua* in Paul. Nol. *epist.* 25,1,21; Aug. *c. Iulian. op. imperf.* 1, 44,1; Hier. *epist.* 51,9,24; and *beniuolentia tua*⁵⁴, massively employed by St. Augustine (*epist.* 23,1,4; 23,8,192; 33,2,21; 35,3,55; 57,1,6; 61,1,3; 84,2,143; 108,1,2; 113,20; 151,9; 189,6; 235,16; 242,17 etc.), and visible in Hier. 47,1,3 and several other authors after the fifth century.

Text 4a (P.Abinn. 2), l. 8-9 *propriis [atten-] de u[t]i[li]tatibus*

The collocation *propria* or *sua utilitas* 'one's own/personal business' can be found in every sort of prose text, e.g. Lact. *epit.* 50, 7; Aug. *serm.* 46,530; Ambr. *off.* I 24,115; Cod. Theod. I 10,7,46; Ennod. *carm.* 1,8, *praef.* p. 529, 9.

Text 5a (ChLA 523), l. 4-6 *n[i]si] ... praeceptis nostris [satis]fecisse monstraueris*

Cf. Cassian. *inst.* VIII 6,21 *in eo quoque tuis praeceptis satisfacere studebo.*

The passages from the right column of the table above are, of course, no news to the scholars in Latin literature, who will remember Norden's considerations on the persistence of Asianism in that literature and its final triumph in the IV century⁵⁵. What is relevant to the present paper, is that the available dataset listed in

⁵⁴ In this case, it must be noted, the line between the etiquette title and the simple abstract term is very thin.

⁵⁵ I refer to Norden 1898. It is worth mentioning Mayer's alternative (if a bit idiosyncratic) explanation to the phenomenon, i.e. that Latin authors, having no viable model in

chapter 1 is not only closely linked to chancery Latin (2.1), but to late Latin prose too. A private letter between educated individuals, an official letter from the Imperial chancery to provincial authorities or the praetorian prefects, and an official letter from a *comes domesticorum et rei militaris Thebaici limitis* to a tribune in the Hermopolites (text 4e, *P.Ryl.* 609) are apographs of the same antigraph, or rather incarnations of the same archetype.

3. *Some considerations*

We are dealing with phenomena originating from a coherent and consistent cultural model, the roots of which, despite it shows first up between the very late third and the early fourth century, must be located between the second and the third, and in literature rather than in chancery. Vernay warns us that the new stylistic trends informing rescripts and constitutions were the result of trusting them to the most prominent literates of the day, who transferred to chancery – or perhaps, perfected there – a change that was already occurring in literature⁵⁶. In fact, the third century has long been acknowledged to be pivotal in the development of all the stylistic features of Late Antique literature, as well as the political shifts from Principate to Dominate, from majuscule to minuscule writing, and from a pagan to a Christian Empire. Unfortunately, most of Latin literature – and especially Latin epistolography – from that century is lost, therefore one is not able to follow the growth of the new style as closely and gradually as one would like⁵⁷; and yet, what little we have left does not contradict this reconstruction. Gasti pointed out how in the third century political instability and lack of consistent funding from rich patrons forced pagan intellectuals to stick as close as possible to ancient *auctores* and to tradition⁵⁸, something which sits well with the inflated style of the following century: those who produced the archetypes for the provincial copies

style - Cicero and Caesar being too talented and too much stylistically distinctive to be successfully imitated - ended up producing more and more imperfect renditions of what they perceived as a 'classical' style, the consequence being the bombastic texts of Late Antiquity (2005, 209-210). Another consequence - Mayer maintains - of trying to make Latin prose, a prose naturally simple and pragmatic, too complex, is obscurity - Sallust and Tacitus being the foremost instances. Mayer then mentions authors who never tried to shoot above their mark and delivered therefore a simple and elegant Latin prose: Pliny the younger, Seneca the Elder, Quintilian, Celsus, Petronius and Columella (*ibidem*).

⁵⁶ See again Vernay, fn. 50 and 52.

⁵⁷ As Cugusi remarks, specifically about epistolography (1985, 1115-1117).

⁵⁸ Gasti 2013, 15-18.

did not just stress the now quasi-divine relevance of the Emperor and everything surrounding him, but also wanted to imitate the ancient writers, thus reaffirming the 'Romanness' of the texts they were creating, in fact only accomplishing the creation of a more ornate form for the same simple contents. What Norden calls 'Asianismus' and Fontaine 'baroque' – two concepts which fit well with Latin epistolography, and not only that, from Diocletian onwards – has been declared by both of them to be deeply imbibed in Latin culture and to have been only dormant for the brief moment of Augustan classicism, finally triumphing in the late second century⁵⁹, where already Fronto and Apuleius show evident signs of it: emphasis, redundancy, musical effects, artificial complications in syntax and verbiage⁶⁰.

It is worth noting how Fronto often uses the collocation *domine dulcissime* (p. 43, 24; 72, 12; 73, 9; 75, 17; 76, 10; 77, 1, 27; 79, 6; 80, 4; 81, 7), which - if in his case, probably prompted by his personal relationship with the addressee Marcus Aurelius - is likely the origin of *domine dulcissime et uere amantissime* in text 3b (*ChLA* 687), l. 15-17. Perhaps not incidentally, the collocation is *only* found in Fronto, so not only quite earlier than the fourth century, but so circumscribed in spread, as to either suggest that it was a very rare syntagm, or that Fronto himself promoted its usage. The vocative *amantissime*, part of the affectionate formula in text 3b, is also found in Fronto's letters - only this time it is Marcus Aurelius who so addresses him (p. 29, 7 *uale mi amantissime*); then it becomes widespread in Late Antique epistolography, mostly associated with *pater* and *frater*. As regards Apuleius, the author of the text copied in *ChLA* 687 used a collocation (l. 9-10 *uexationem | itineris quodammodo sine ratione sustinere uidetur*) which first appears in *Apul. met.* I 26,6 *ubi me post itineris tam saeui uexationem sensit fabularum quoque serie fatigatum...*⁶¹.

Once definitely established, such a style could only have spread through those schools attended by would-be members of the clerical apparatus, or by the offspring of the ruling classes, whose families could afford the best education available in terms of rhetoric and philosophy. One finds that several Late Antique establishments – to quote those in the East: Constantinople, Alexandria, Berytus, *Caesarea Palaestinae*, Antiochia, even in the Panopolites – taught Latin language and law until the Arab

⁵⁹ See the detailed discussion in Norden 1898, 251-270; 573-656; and Fontaine 1986. Fontaine believes Latin literature to have struggled from the beginning between its own baroque tendency, typical of archaic authors, and the refinement inherited by Hellenism. This tendency was briefly contained by the Augustan parenthesis, and then slowly reemerged through Ovid, finally triumphing in the age of Nero.

⁶⁰ See especially Muñoz Martín 2005 for Fronto's prose.

⁶¹ The collocation is quite rare: see e.g. Cassian. *inst.* VII 17,6.

conquest⁶². Those who wanted to make a career in administration and climb the social ladder had to attend them and acquire at least a smattering of the language⁶³. They ended up working in the provincial offices, handling what little Latin was required in some very specific documentary typologies⁶⁴. The same establishments must have been set up in the West, except for the fact that their teaching language was Latin instead of Greek. We must understand that the Latin letters on papyrus which we have seen above – as well as, generally speaking, all Late Antique epistolography – are the product of the teachings in these schools, which in turn responded to the changes in style inaugurated in the highest echelons of Roman administration. The schools trained the intellectual élite – or at least the literate milieu – of the Empire(s). Both a Saint Augustin and a *cornicularius* in an office in Cappadocia could come out of them, and they would write letters in the way they were taught, following the literary trends of their time, the only difference lying in the *cornicularius* in Cappadocia not being a native speaker as Augustin was, and maybe a less effective writer than him.

4. *The microcosm: errors*

If the context of production of these Latin documents from Late Antique Egypt has been elucidated, something remains to be said concerning the exactness of these texts, or lack thereof, as far as phonetics, morphology and syntax – in short: grammar is concerned. It has been long acknowledged by scholars that these texts are fraught with mistakes, or at any rate, with linguistic peculiarities, more or less distant from the accepted standard of their age. The most glaring phenomena are listed below⁶⁵. Since the origin of the variation is not always clear, I have refrained

⁶² See Agosti 2019, 316-317; Pellizzari 2019, 132-135; Schuol 2010.

⁶³ Libanius bitterly laments how the young aristocrats progressively leave aside traditional Greek παιδεία and flock to schools of Roman language and law, seeking employment, better salaries and social climbing: see *Lib. Or.* 1,214, 234; 40,5; and 43,5, where he comments on those who go to Rome itself: ἐντεῦθεν ἀγωγαὶ συχναὶ νέων καὶ πλοῖα πλοῦν ἓνα τὸν ἐπὶ Ῥώμης φερόμενα κρότος τε τῶν κομιζομένων παιδαρίων ἐπὶ ταῖς μελλούσαις ἐλπίσιν. Αἱ δὲ εἰσὶν ἀρχή, δυναστεία, γάμος, ἐν βασιλείοις διατριβαί, τὸ διαλέγεσθαι βασιλεῖ (cf. Pellizzari 2019, 131-133).

⁶⁴ Ranks in Late Antique bureaus which are required to produce and read documents (therefore, one supposes, also in Latin) are *cornicularii*, *adiutores (principis)* or *primiscriuarii*, *commentarienses*, *ab actis*, *a libellis*, *cura epistularum* (Palme 1999, 108-111).

⁶⁵ Some of them can also be found in the database of the ongoing project ‘Computerized Historical Linguistic Database of the Latin Inscriptions of the Imperial Age’ (<https://lldb.elte.hu/en/database/>, consulted 4th September 2025).

from grouping the phenomena under different labels, leaving – when necessary – a few remarks on the individual phenomenon⁶⁶.

A) Orthography⁶⁷

<i>adscriptos</i> (4e, l. 7)	<i>adscriptus</i>	-os for -us might be influenced by the Greek inflectional system (-ος), therefore being a morphological phenomenon - or a combined (phonetic and morphological) mistake
<i>aduxi</i> (2a, l. 11)	<i>adduxi</i>	
<i>Aprelis</i> (4b, l. 10)	<i>Aprilis</i>	
<i>Blemniorum</i> (2a, l. 6)	<i>Blemmyorum</i>	Whereas -mn- for -mm- might be hypercorrected, <i>i</i> for <i>y</i> reflects perhaps Greek <i>upsilon</i> now sounding [i]
<i>carruit</i> (5a, l. 8 in 2632 ⁶⁸ , l. 5 in 523)	<i>caruit</i>	
<i>comolos</i> (5a, l. 12 in 2632)	<i>cumulus</i>	
<i>debotis</i> (3c, l. 2)	<i>deuotis</i>	<i>b</i> for <i>u</i> can be often seen in Latin and bilingual papyri from Egypt: it probably reflects the switch of <i>u</i> from [w] to [v] in Latin, and of Greek β from [b] to [v] ⁶⁹

⁶⁶ I have removed from the first version of the list phenomena which are attested and acceptable orthographical variations in standard Latin - mostly etymological spellings such as *conlata* (5a, l. 10 in 523) for *collata*, *inlustris* (4b, l. 10) for *illustri*, *inpertienda* (5a, l. 11 in 2632; 5a, l. 8 in 523) for *impertienda*; and case-ending variations such as *parentium* for *parentum* (1a col. II, l. 1; see Leumann 1977, 437). My gratitude to reviewers 1 and 2 for pointing this out to me.

⁶⁷ In alphabetical order.

⁶⁸ Peculiarities in 5a are distinguished between those appearing in *ChLA* XII 523 and those in P.Lips. inv. 2632 A.

⁶⁹ See Gignac 1976, 68 and Cugusi in *CEL* I, p. 30 with attached bibliography.

<i>Dionusio</i> (4c, l. 1)	<i>Dionysio</i>	<i>u</i> for <i>y</i> is sometimes attested in Latin documents on papyrus, mostly in personal names ⁷⁰ : the scribes might not have been always clear on how to render Greek <i>upsilon</i> in Latin alphabet ⁷¹ .
<i>Dionysada</i> (2a, l. 11)	<i>Dionysiados</i>	While <i>-a-</i> for <i>-ia-</i> is probably a slip rather than a phonetic mistake, <i>-da</i> for <i>-dos</i> might be morphological in nature (see section B)
<i>dispentio</i> (5a, l. 10 in 2632; l. 7 in 523)	<i>dispendio</i>	
<i>Dorotheus</i> (4d, l. 14)	<i>Dorotheus</i>	The loss of aspiration - perhaps a simple slip? - mirrors the wrong aspiration in <i>uitheatur</i> (see below)
<i>exigi</i> (2a, l. 9)	<i>exegi</i>	
<i>horiorum</i> (3c, l. 2)	<i>horreorum</i>	
<i>infra</i> (3c, l. 3)	<i>infra</i>	
<i>infrascriptos</i> (4c, l. 3)	<i>infrascriptos</i>	
<i>inuecillo</i> (4e, l. 6)	<i>imbecillo</i>	<i>Inb-</i> instead of <i>imb-</i> is an accepted variant (see fn. 66)
<i>itque</i> (4b, l. 9)	<i>idque</i>	
<i>iusionem</i> (2b, l. 7)	<i>iussionem</i>	
<i>iuidem</i> (1a, l. 3)	<i>ibidem</i>	

⁷⁰ E.g. in SB III 6223, l. 3 *Meuia* *Dionusario* (198, TM 18820); *ChLA* X 458, col. I l. 5 *Didumus Mesenes* (early third century, TM 69955); *P.Bagnall* 3, l. 1 *ab Aurelio Dionusio*; l. 2 *Artemidori Didumi* (239, TM 70139).

⁷¹ Several cases are attested, however, where the scribe knows how to write - and employs - an actual *y* in a Latin text: see Iovine 2020, 96-97.

<i>manstrauerris</i> (5a, l. 9 in 2632)	<i>monstraueris</i>	
<i>necuit</i> (1a, l. 15)	<i>nequit</i>	
<i>nonc</i> (5a, l. 8 in 2632)	<i>nunc</i>	
<i>numquan</i> (5a, l. 4 in 2632)	<i>numquam</i>	
<i>praeces</i> (1a, l. 8)	<i>preces</i>	Hypercorrection
<i>prepositis</i> (3c, l. 2)	<i>praepositis</i>	
<i>preuere</i> (3c, l. 6)	<i>praebere</i>	
<i>pusilitatis</i> (2b, l. 9)	<i>pusillitatis</i>	
<i>quatuor</i> (3c, l. 5)	<i>quattuor</i>	
<i>quibusquae</i> (1a, l. 5)	<i>quosque</i>	See section B) for the morphological problem
<i>redditeris</i> (5a, l. 7 in 2632)	<i>reddideris</i>	
<i>retulerint</i> (1a, l. 11)	<i>rettulerint</i>	
<i>senox</i> (4d, l. 18)	<i>senex</i>	Probably a slip of the pen, rather than a phonetic mistake
<i>scribto</i> (1a, l. 8)	<i>scripto</i>	
<i>sostris</i> (4c, l. 8)	<i>nostris</i>	Probably a slip of the pen, rather than a phonetic mistake
<i>statibis</i> (3c, l. 6)	<i>statiuis</i>	
<i>suscriptio</i> (1a, l. 10)	<i>subscriptione</i>	See section B) for the morphological problem
<i>tamem</i> (4e, l. 9)	<i>tamen</i>	
<i>uestia</i> (2a, l. 6)	<i>uestigia</i>	Perhaps a slip of the pen, omitting <i>-gi-</i> ?
<i>uithatur</i> (5a, l. 9 in 523)	<i>uideatur</i>	

B) Morphology⁷²

<i>adfuisse</i> (1a, l. 10)	<i>adfuissent</i>	Wrong form
<i>ciuitati</i> (4e, l. 5)	<i>ciuitate</i>	Wrong form
<i>constitutorum</i> (1a, l. 13)	<i>constituturam</i> ⁷³	Mismatch (it should agree with <i>comoediam</i> ⁷³)
<i>die felicissimum</i> (3c, l. 4)	<i>felicissimo</i>	Mismatch
<i>Dionysada</i> (2a, l. 11)	<i>Dionysiados</i>	Perhaps the wrong case is employed: the accusative (~ Διονυσιάδα) instead of the genitive governed by <i>prefectum alae</i> .
<i>eidem</i> (1a, l. 8)	<i>isdem</i>	Wrong form
<i>gaudear</i> (3b, l. 19)	<i>gaudeam</i>	Wrong form
<i>inquisita rei</i> (2b, l. 8)	<i>inquisita re</i>	Mismatch
<i>insinuendum</i> (3b, l. 15)	<i>insinuandum</i>	Wrong inflectional class
<i>inuidiem</i> (5a, l. 8 in 523)	<i>inuidiam</i>	Wrong inflectional class
<i>obtulitis</i> (2a, l. 7)	<i>oblatis</i>	Morphological mistake
<i>parentorum</i> (1a, l. 5)	<i>parentum</i>	Wrong inflectional class
<i>priores castris</i> (4c, l. 4)	<i>priora castra</i>	Wrong gender
<i>protectoris</i> (2a, l. 2)	<i>protectoribus</i>	Wrong form
<i>prouocauerint</i> (1a, l. 3)	<i>prouocauerit</i>	Wrong form
<i>quibusquae</i> (1a, l. 5)	<i>quosque</i>	Mismatch (it should agree with <i>suos</i>) ⁷⁴
<i>referere</i> (2b, l. 9)	<i>referre</i>	Morphological mistake
<i>referere</i> (2b, l. 6)	<i>referre</i>	Morphological mistake

⁷² In alphabetical order as well.

⁷³ After l. 12-13 *in quibus uel urbanae uictoriae uel antiquae Graec[i]ae uel ex n[utu n]o-stro | comoediam certamine constitutorum* the text is partly missing (l. 13-14 *no[. . .]q . [.]t neçç . [±11] | quae species priuilegi intra personam eorum quorum* etc.), so there is no certainty on what governed *constitutorum*.

⁷⁴ Unless we read *suis* for *suos* in l. 4-5 *quas diuorum | parentorum Aug(ustorum) constitutiones in suos quibusquae* (sic!) *concedunt*.

<i>suscriptio</i> (1a, l. 10)	<i>subscriptio</i>	Wrong form
<i>uidebantur</i> (4d, l. 8)	<i>uidebuntur</i>	Wrong form

C) Syntax⁷⁵

<i>praeditus in omnibus bonis</i> (3b, l. 1)	<i>in omnes bonos</i> , or <i>omnibus bonis</i> without <i>in</i>
<i>iuro... salutem... quod putavi</i> (3b, l. 13-15)	<i>iuro</i> + accusative mixed with <i>iuro</i> + <i>quod</i>
<i>soliti contemplatione</i> (2a, l. 13)	The scribe might be trying to say 'being [the Emperors] constant in the consideration of my struggles' (<i>laborum meorum</i>); otherwise, the mistake is morphological (<i>solitā</i> <i>contemplatione</i> 'in constant consid- eration' ⁷⁶)
<i>iuxta annuo consuetudine</i> (3c, l. 5)	<i>annuam consuetudinem</i>
<i>infra scriptis protectoribus</i> (3c, l. 3)	<i>infra scriptos protectores</i>
<i>qui nunc te caruit</i> (5a, l. 8 in 2632; l. 5 in 523)	<i>nuncusque</i> or <i>usque nunc</i> 'up to this point', since <i>caruit</i> is perfect
<i>cum opdulero sacra iussione</i> (4e, l. 3)	<i>obtulerim sacram iussionem</i>

⁷⁵ In (roughly) chronological order.

⁷⁶ The text - which in l. 13-14 underwent a revision by Abinnaeus himself, or the scribe assisting him - runs as follows: *cumque pateat ex suffragio eos promotos fuisse, me uero iudicio sacro, ideo soliti contemplatione memoratorum laborum meorum iuxta supradictos apices uestros tribun[um pr]aefecturae alae Dionysiados, amoꝝis per suffragium habentibus ipsorum castrorum promotionem, me constitui clementia uestra iubere dignetur*. The main clause *ideo... clementia uestra iubere dignetur*, governing *me tribunum constitui*, seems also to govern an incidental clause *soliti... meorum*. If *soliti* refers to the Emperors, therefore a plural nominative ('you who are constant in consideration of my struggles...'), this nominative remains grammatically unattached to the rest of the sentence; one would rather expect something like e.g. *cum soliti sitis contemplare labores meos*. Alternatively, one might think of *soliti* as a mistake for *solitā contemplatione* ('in the constant consideration of my struggles': see OLD [426] s.v. *contemplatio* 3.).

Many of these peculiarities are pivotal sources for the transition between Latin and Romance languages, and have been used as such in Historical Linguistics: e.g. the switch between consonants (*b* for *u*, *m* for *n*, *t* for *d*, *c* for *q*), the simplification of double consonants (*aduxi horiorum iusionem pusilitatis retulerint*, with the opposite phenomenon in *carruit* and *manstrauerris*), the switch between vowels (*e* for *i* and *i* for *e*, *e* for *ae*, *o* for *u*). Cugusi extensively commented upon them when discussing individual items in his monumental *Corpus Epistularum Latinarum*. For the narrower scope of this paper, it will suffice to say that these mistakes call into question the level of instruction and the proficiency these clerks might have had when it came to Latin. They are not unexpected in a context such as Egypt, where Latin was seldom, if ever, spoken, and not widely known. One must appreciate how the clerks working in the provincial offices were for the greatest majority Egyptians (or Easterners) by birth, who spoke Greek and/or Egyptian and had, in some cases, learned a rudimentary level of Latin in school (which could hardly have envisaged *spoken* Latin). It is not strange that the only two documents without any mistake in orthography, syntax, or morphology are the two Imperial documents: one original (*ChLA* 657 = text 1b), the other a copy (*ChLA* 1301 = text 1c), both produced in chanceries where Latin was well known and probably also spoken, especially if we consider how many Latin native speakers (rather above suspicion when linguistic competence was called into question⁷⁷) lived in Constantinople during and after the troubles occurring in the Western Roman Empire⁷⁸. In provinces, on the contrary, scribes were dealing with a foreign language. Their mistakes, however, cannot all be explained away with the same reasons.

Phonetical and morphological blunders and mismatches can, first of all, be the consequence of how a document is put together; more specifically, of its typology. Drafts, for instance, are likely to be a source of mistakes, since the creator of this specific content is producing something from scratch, rather than copying from a (supposedly correct) antigraph. When it comes, for instance, to *P.Abinn.* 1 (= text 2a), one can suppose that Abinnaeus – and/or the scribe assisting him – was composing a petition without a template, drawing from what they remembered of their Latin and standard sentences taken from companions and educational tools⁷⁹. Mistakes (*aduxi*, *Blemniorum*, *soliti contemplatione*, etc.) were therefore bound to be made. On the other hand, texts that allegedly relied on archetypes

⁷⁷ *P.Lips.* 44 (= text 1a) is also the copy of an Imperial pronouncement, but mistakes are abundant there; see a possible reason in fn. 79.

⁷⁸ On Latin-speaking fugitives to Constantinople from the floundering Western Roman Empire, see Garcea 2019, 58-70 and Agosti 2019, 316-317.

⁷⁹ In this, they behaved no differently than when they tried to write in their best Greek: see the dataset discussed in Luiselli 2010.

or antigraphs in the office archives, such as *ChLA* 687 (= text 3b), *P.Ryl.* 609 (= text 4e) or the *P.Lips.* (= text 5a), present subtler issues. Orthographical oddities can be the product of a scribe making mistakes while copying his antigraph: his imperfect pronunciation of Latin – inherited by his teachers at school? – and the interference of his own (flawed) memories would induce him to copy the wrong vowel (*Aprelis*) or consonant (*redditeris*), switching *e* for *ae* and the opposite (*praeces, prebere*), or to alter the quantity and quality of vowels and consonants (*manstrauerris*)⁸⁰. This might be even better explained if the scribes produced these documents under dictation, and the documents went unchecked after being drafted. This would ensure a noteworthy quantity of phonetic slips which were never corrected. It must also be noted how some of these variations might not have been perceived as mistakes altogether, if accepted in schools and textbooks as elements of a ‘Latin neostandard’ which was no longer strictly abiding to late Republican and early Imperial orthographical conventions⁸¹. However, morphological mistakes (*gaudear, obtulitis*) can also be observed, which imply someone wrongly inflecting a name or a verb according to rules he has learned, rather than wrongly copying a correct form. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the few but significant mistakes in syntax found in table C). The scribes here are not just copying a sequence of signs in a language they may or may not understand: they are being creative. They have a smattering of Latin, and are using it. These are oddities coming from someone composing a text of their own, rather than copying a correct one – but somehow unable to properly apply the grammatical rules of the language they mean to use.

The phenomenon which first comes to mind as a possible culprit is language contact (i.e., contact phenomena, allegedly detectable in Latin documents in Egypt from earlier stages)⁸². Yet, whereas some of the phonetic slips listed above can be referred to phenomena allegedly taking place in the coeval Greek language, none of the morphological or syntactical elements can be unambiguously referred to, or proven to descend from, morphological or syntactic features of the Greek or the Egyptian languages. Palaeography sheds no light here either. If anything, it’s the *Roman* writing which influences the Greek one from the fourth century onwards,

⁸⁰ Not to mention the scribe’s possible difficulty in dealing with the (occasional) chancery writing employed by the Imperial offices, the *litterae caelestes*. The struggle to transpose them in new Roman cursive, or *litterae communes*, might be the reason of so many orthographic blunders in 1a) (Marichal 1952, 339).

⁸¹ See Mancini’s considerations in 2005, particularly 140-145. My gratitude to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this paper out to me.

⁸² A famous instance is *ChLA* IV 249 (second century, TM 27148), discussed extensively in Leiwo - Halla-aho 2013.

creating the phenomenon called ‘graphical κοινή’⁸³. Another possible explanation is that the antigraphs the scribes were copying were flawed by themselves. Since it is unlikely that the samples produced by the imperial chanceries were written in a poor Latin, one can further suppose that, generation after generation, the scribes altered the stock documents they had in their archives by adding, moving, or removing sentences, being more creative in the handling of their models than is expected of a bureaucrat. They could even have been producing documents by themselves when not in possession – or not provided by the higher powers – of the latest version of the intended typology. These compositions might well have taken place in a similar way to that of *P.Abinn.* 1 (= text 2a): someone patching up ready-made sentences and further elaborating with official phraseology.

Reasons for this specific tendency cannot be established with any certainty. The concept of conspicuous consumption comes to mind⁸⁴. Since both the sender and the receiver of these documents had little knowledge of Latin, there was no need to be exact. The effort alone of composing in a tolerable, or even recognizable, Latin was enough to satisfy the mandates of bureaucracy and to demonstrate the document’s authenticity and provenance. The formats were likely marked by fixed features; the content of the letter – and the names of the referred individuals – might have been caught at a glance thanks to few selected – and expected – words, without the need to read the document in its entirety. Clerks who needed to refresh the Latin they had learned in schools could, in fact, access several tools and sources to support their grammar: conjugation tables⁸⁵, bilingual glossaries, and passages from famous authors with Greek translations and commentaries⁸⁶, probably also grammars, if the famous ‘Karaniis grammar’⁸⁷ – or a descendant – was still used in Late Antique Egypt⁸⁸. Of course, these supporting tools could not ensure the faultlessness of the documents thus produced⁸⁹.

⁸³ See Cavallo 1970 and Messeri - Pintaudi 2000.

⁸⁴ This suggestion was put to me by James Clackson, whom I thank.

⁸⁵ Like *P.Oxy.* LXXVIII 5161 (third-fourth century, TM 171906).

⁸⁶ See e.g. P.Sorb. inv. 2069 *verso* (late second-early third century, TM 64219 / LDAB 5438: see Dickey - Ferri 2010), the fragments from the *Catilinarians* re-published in Internullo 2011/2012 and those from Vergil in Fressura 2017, the bilingual fables such as that in *PSI* VII 848 (third-fourth century, TM 59043 / LDAB 138).

⁸⁷ In *P.Mich.* VII 429 (third-fourth century, TM 63851 / LDAB 5065); and see Scappaticcio 2015, 93-143.

⁸⁸ Full treatments of the abovementioned educational tools are in Scappaticcio 2015 and 2017.

⁸⁹ *Si parva licet*, my German grammar (*Themen Aktuell, Kursbuch + Arbeitsbuch*, Hueber Verlag, 2010⁵), even if often consulted, will not prevent me from making mistakes if I

5. *Conclusion*

If scholars in Latin language and literature are happier with errors rather than correctness, as they reveal the ongoing evolution of a language pushing through the conservative tendencies of grammars and schools, then the efforts of these Graeco-Egyptian clerks give us an interesting glimpse on the history of Latin language as a state-mandated idiom in a foreign land. Not only well-known stylistic trends in Late Latin literature can be detected in a region – Egypt – far from the acknowledged centres of that literature in Italy, Gaul, or Africa; also, the analysed items testify to generations of trained scribes dealing, to mixed results, with a language they learned in adulthood and know imperfectly and can therefore only read and write with difficulty. Both these elements can be collectively described as the survival of a cultural element in an alien terrain, a fact all the more noteworthy in a moment of ancient history, Late Antiquity, when cultural contacts between the Eastern Greek-speaking and the Western Latin-speaking part of the Mediterranean world was less and less intense, frequent, and widespread – especially after 395 – than when the Empire was, if not culturally or bureaucratically consistent, at least a geographically undivided entity.

try to write a text in German, a language I have studied fifteen years ago, and almost never spoken since.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Adamik 2010

B.Adamik, *Sprachpolitik im Römischen Reich: Zur Frage einer angenommenen sprachpolitischen Reform unter der Tetrarchie*, «Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae» L (2010), 409-418.

Adams 2003

J.N.Adams, *Bilingualism and the Latin Language*, Cambridge 2003.

Agosti 2019

G.Agosti, *Modelli latini per poemi greci? Sulla possibile influenza di autori latini sulla poesia epica tardoantica*, in A.Garcea – M.Rosellini – L.Silvano (ed.), *Latin in Byzantium I. Late Antiquity and Beyond*, Turnhout 2019, 313-331.

Bernini 2021

A.Bernini, *Due bozze di una reprimenda in lingua latina a un funzionario: P.Lips. inv. 270b e inv. 2632a*, «Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik» CCXVIII (2021), 265-281.

Cavallo 1970

G.Cavallo, *La κοινή scrittoria greco-romana nella prassi documentale di età bizantina*, «Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik» XIX (1970), 1-31.

CEL

Corpus Epistularum Latinarum Papyris Ostracis Tabulis Servatarum. I-III, collegit, commentario instruxit P.Cugusi, Firenze 1992-2002.

Coles 1966

R.A.Coles, *Reports of Proceedings in Papyri*, Bruxelles 1966.

Cugusi 1983

P.Cugusi, *Evoluzione e forme dell'epistolografia latina nella tarda Repubblica e nei primi due secoli dell'Impero. Con cenni sull'epistolografia preciceroniana*, Roma 1983.

Dickey – Ferri 2010

E.Dickey – R.Ferri, *A New Edition of the Latin-Greek Glossary on P. Sorb. inv. 2069 (verso)*, «Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik» CLXXV (2010), 177-181.

Dillon 2018

J.N.Dillon, *The Emperor's New Prose. The Style of the Legislation of Diocletian*, in W.Eck – S.Puliatti (ed.), *Diocleziano: la frontiera giuridica dell'impero*, Pavia 2018, 285-343.

Eich – Eich 2004

A.Eich – P.Eich, *Thesen zur Genese des Verlautbarungsstils der spätantiken kaiserlichen Zentrale*, «Tyche» XIX (2004), 75-104.

Fontaine 1986

J.Fontaine, *Le baroque romain antique. Un courant esthétique persistant à travers la littérature latine*, in F.Chamoux (ed.), *Questionnement du baroque. Études réunies et présentées par A. Vermeulen*, Louvain-Bruxelles 1986, 14-38.

Fournet 2009

J.-L.Fournet, *Esquisse d'une anatomie de la lettre antique tardive d'après les papyrus*, in R.Delmaire – J.Desmulliez – P.-L.Gatier (ed.), *Correspondance. Documents pour l'histoire de l'Antiquité tardive*. «Actes du colloque international, Université Charles-de-Gaulle-Lille 3, 20-22 novembre 2003», Paris 2009, 23-66.

Fournet 2019

J.-L.Fournet, *La pratique du Latin dans l'Égypte de l'Antiquité tardive*, in A. Garcea – M.Rosellini – L.Silvano (ed.), *Latin in Byzantium I. Late Antiquity and Beyond*, Turnhout 2019, 73-91.

Fressura 2017

M.Fressura, *Vergilius Latinograecus I*, Pisa-Roma 2017.

Garcea 2019

A.Garcea, *Latin in Byzantium: Different Forms of Linguistic Contact*, in A.Garcea – M.Rosellini – L.Silvano (ed.), *Latin in Byzantium I. Late Antiquity and Beyond*, Turnhout 2019, 43-70.

Garzya 1985

A.Garzya, *L'epistolografia letteraria tardoantica*, in M.Mazza – C.Giuffrida (ed.), *Le trasformazioni della cultura nella tarda antichità*. «Atti del convegno tenuto a Catania, Università degli studi, 27 sett.-2 ott. 1982», Roma 1985, 347-373.

Gasti 2013

F.Gasti, *Profilo storico della letteratura tardolatina*, Pavia 2013.

Gignac 1976

F.I.Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods. I. Phonology*, Milano 1976.

Internullo 2011/2012

D.Internullo, *Cicerone latinogreco. Corpus dei papiri bilingui delle Catilinarie di Cicerone*, «Papyrologica Lupiensia» XX/XXI (2011/2012), 25-150.

Iovine 2019

G.Iovine, *Data Epistula. Later Additions of Roman Dating Formulae in Latin and Greek Papyri and Ostraka from the First to the Sixth Centuries AD*, «Manuscripta» LXIII (2019), 157-230.

Iovine 2020

G.Iovine, *On Domitian's Letter in ChLA X 417 (P.Berol. inv. 8334)*, «Chronique d'Égypte» XCV (2020) 93-101.

Iovine 2022

G.Iovine, *Latin in Egyptian Documents between Caracalla and Diocletian*, in M.Capasso – P.Davoli – N.Pellé (ed.), *Proceedings of the 29th International Congress of Papyrology. Lecce, 29 July–3 August 2019*, Lecce 2022, 550-560.

Iovine 2024

G.Iovine, *Sette papiri militari latini dalla collezione di Vienna (ChLA XLIV 1297, 1299, 1302, 1308, 1309, XLV 1327, P.Vindob. L 169)*, «Tyche» XXXIX (2024), 87-116.

Koskenniemi 1956

H.Koskenniemi, *Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des griechischen Briefes bis 400 n. Chr.*, Helsinki 1956.

Leiwo – Halla-Aho 2013

M.Leiwo – H.Halla-Aho, *A Marriage Contract: Aspects of Latin-Greek Language Contact (P.Mich. VII 434 and P. Ryl. IV 612 = ChLA IV 249)*, «Mnemosyne» LV (2013), 560-580.

Leumann 1977

M.Leumann, *Lateinische Laut- und Formenlehre*, Munich 1977² [1926-1928¹].

Luiselli 2010

R.Luiselli, *Authorial Revision of Linguistic Style in Greek Papyrus Letters and Petitions (AD I–IV)*, in T.Evans – D.Obbink (ed.), *The Language of the Papyri*, Oxford 2010, 71-96.

Mancini 2005

M.Mancini, *La formazione del “neostandard” tardolatino. Il caso delle differentiae uerborum*, in S.Kiss – L.Mondin – G.Salvi (ed.), *Latin et langues romanes. Etudes offertes à József Herman à l’occasion de son 80^{ème} anniversaire*, Berlin-Boston 2005, 135-153.

Marichal 1952

R.Marichal, *L’écriture latine de la chancellerie impériale*, «Aegyptus» XXXII (1952), 336-350.

Matthews 2006

J.F.Matthews, *The Journey of Theophanes: Travel, Business, and Daily Life in the Roman East*, Yale 2006.

Mayer 2005

R.G.Mayer, *The Impracticability of Latin Kunstprosa*, in T.Reinhardt – M.Lapidge – J.N.Adams (ed.), *Aspects of the Language of Latin Prose*, Oxford 2005, 195-210.

Messeri – Pintaudi 2000

G.Messeri – R.Pintaudi, *I papiri greci d’Egitto e la minuscola libraria*, in G.Prato (ed.), *I manoscritti greci tra riflessione e dibattito. «Atti del V Colloquio internazionale di paleografia greca (Cremona, 4-10 ottobre 1998)»*, Firenze 2000, 67-82.

Millar 2006

F.Millar, *A Greek Roman Empire*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 2006, 89-92.

Muñoz Martín 2005

M.N.Muñoz Martín, M. C. *Frontón en la tradición epistolar*, «Florentia Iliberritana. Revista de estudios de antigüedad clásica» XVI (2005), 227-253.

Norden 1898

E.Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa vom VI. Jahrhundert v. Chr. bis in die Zeit der Renaissance*, Leipzig 1898.

Palme 1999

B.Palme, *Die officia der Statthalter in der Spätantike: Forschungsstand und Perspektiven*, «Antiquité Tardive» VII (1999), 85-133.

Papathomas 2007

A.Papathomas, *Höflichkeit und Servilität in den griechischen Papyrusbriefen der ausgehenden Antike*, in B.Palme (ed.), *Akten des 23. Internationalen Papyrologenkongresses. Wien, 22.-28. Juli 2001*, Vienna 2007, 497-512.

Pedone 2020

M.Pedone, *Apud acta. Studi sul processo romano alla luce della documentazione papirologica (IV-VI sec. d.C.)*, Firenze 2020.

Pellizzari 2019

A.Pellizzari, *La lingua degli Ἰταλοί. Conoscenza e uso del latino nell'Oriente greco di IV secolo attraverso l'opera di Libanio*, in A.Garcea – M.Rosellini – L.Silvano (ed.), *Latin in Byzantium I. Late Antiquity and Beyond*, Turnhout 2019, 131-142.

Riedlberger 2020

P.Riedlberger, *Prolegomena zu den spätantiken Konstitutionen. Nebst einer Analyse der erbrechtlichen und verwandten Sanktionen gegen Heterodoxe*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 2020.

Salati 2020

O.Salati, *Scrivere documenti nell'esercito romano. L'evidenza dei papiri latini d'Egitto tra I e III d.C.*, Wiesbaden 2020.

Scappaticcio 2015

M.C.Scappaticcio, *Artes Grammaticae in frammenti*, Berlin-Boston 2015.

Scappaticcio 2017

M.C.Scappaticcio, *Fabellae. Frammenti di favole latine e bilingui latino-greche di tradizione diretta (III-IV d.C.)*, Berlin-Boston 2017.

Scappaticcio 2025

M.C.Scappaticcio (ed.), *Corpus of Latin Texts on Papyrus*, Cambridge 2025.

Schuol 2010

M.Schuol, *Die Rechtsschule in Berytus. Römische Jurisprudenz im Vorderen Orient*, in R.Rollinger – B.Gufler – M.Lang – I.Madreiter (ed.), *Die vielfältigen Ebenen des Kontakts: Interkulturalität in der Alten Welt. Vorderasien, Hellas, Ägypten und die vielfältigen Ebenen des Kontakts*, Wiesbaden 2010, 161-184.

Sirks 2001

A.J.B. Sirks, *Making a Request to the Emperor. Rescripts in Roman Empire*, in

L.De Blois (ed.), *Administration, Prosopography and Appointment Policies in the Roman Empire*, Leiden 2001, 121-135.

Southern – Dixon 1996

P.Southern – K.R.Dixon (ed.), *The Late Roman Army*, London 1996.

Vernay 1913

E.Vernay, *Note sur le changement de style dans les constitutions impériales de Dioclétien à Constantin*, in *Études d'histoire juridique offertes à Paul Frédéric Girard*, Paris 1913, 263-274.

Volterra 1971

E.Volterra, *Il problema del testo delle costituzioni imperiali*, in B.Paradisi (ed.), *La critica del testo*. «Atti del II Congresso Internazionale della Società Italiana di Storia del Diritto, Venezia, 18-22 settembre 1967», Firenze 1971, 821-1097.

Zilliacus 1949

H.Zilliacus, *Untersuchungen zu den abstrakten Anredeformen und Höflichkeitstiteln im Griechischen*, Helsinki 1949.