

Episode 5

Bex: Welcome to the fifth episode of the Nile Chronicles. This is the episode where I really get into reading some of these letters out loud, not necessarily doing a deep dive into them. I have certain letters in mind and picked out. To really kind of tear apart and examine closely. But in this episode, I have a few smaller letters in mind. And again, these are all coming from the Bagnell and Cribiore, source, um, that, uh, is in my bibliography. It is a culmination of a bunch of different ancient Egyptian letters that have survived. And they kind of, they talk about the lettering and different things that we see linguistically happening and they also have their own interpretations of the letters, I believe. So it's a really interesting source. It's really the source behind the whole purpose of this podcast. Um, so like I previously mentioned at the end of last episode, these are all women's personal letters and private letters, and these are Huge. I

in the study of ancient Egyptian women or just ancient Egypt alone because these letters, even though they are from, we believe, higher status women, they're written by women. And they really, they really show their everyday happenings and what was going on in their lives because these letters were written for specific individuals. So there's no... There's no legal requirement. There's no, there's nothing. It's just women's raw words. Um, that's what these letters reflect. So let's get into it. In section seven of this book it talks about the language of the letters specifically in this book and The letters that were collected for this book were written in Egyptian and Greek. Then it goes into talk about how there were different letters used in Egypt as we already are aware of from the first episode of this podcast. And it talks about the arrival of Coptic Greek and how it was learned. And I did forget that this book does talk about literacy and really The only important part of it, I believe, is talking about the social location of Coptic. Um, and it's hard to discern where it took place. And there's good reason to think the teaching of Coptic happened in privileged spaces because And how rioting Egyptian and Greek characters took place in Egyptian temples and those temples were bilingual settings by the second century, if not earlier. And there's a final development of a standardizing writing system where around bilingual Christians...

And the last paragraph of it says, in reading the women's letters then, we start with few centuries about the authors. We must try to deduce their status from internal evidence in the letters and information that they give about themselves. or their addresses rather than imagining that a letter in Greek, Demotic, or Coptic tells us something of itself. Rather, access to writing, even if that means writing by others in most cases, was diffused fairly widely and was not limited to a small Greek-speaking elite. Now this book is titled, I don't think I actually ever said it, um. It is called Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC to 800 AD. So a wide span. It's by Roger S. Bagnell and Raffaella Cribiori. And there's a lot of content in this book, and it does talk about language, talks about literacy, it

talks about the importance of women's letters and women's voices, and it talks about Economic and social situations, and it talks about so much more, and it's a very in-depth book, and it talks about different papyri letters, about the corpus letters, for example, and You know, specifically, if you take a look at it, chapter seven, section seven is about language and chapter eight is about the economic and social situation. You know, it talks in chapter nine, household management and travel. And there's a lot in this, in this book. It talks about the different types of letters. And textile activity, household management, it talks about how, what we can deduce from these letters about these women's lives. Business and it goes on and I could do a whole podcast dedicated to this book, uh, truly if I Have a chance to sit down and read it in its entirety and I wish this podcast was solely on this one book and I could have made it on this book but I wanted to include other sources and other perspectives and to bring to Just more scholarship around this issue.

So what I'm primarily using from this book are the letters that it talks about. And the first one that I Bex I actually have to record the letters again and me actually reading them because I don't know where that audio went. I did, in fact, lose it. Um, but here, uh, but it's okay. This is why... You know, a lesson learned. Um, this is my first time actually recording anything with audio. So this first letter is, uh, written by Dionysia to Theon, written in 127 BC. The location written was probably Alexandria. We don't know the location of the addressee. And it was found in Hipponon. And it's written in Greek. So

Dionysia says,

Dionysia to Theon, her lord. Greetings in health. I myself am well. I continually keep the best remembrance of you for all good. And I... Pray to the gods that I may receive you and receive healthy... Let me start over. "Dionysia to Theon, her Lord, greetings and health. I myself am well. I continually keep the best remembrance of you for all good. And I pray to the gods that I may receive you. Healthy in many ways because you both rescued us from enemies and again left us and went away against enemies. No, then, as you gave instructions to carry out and sell the unnecessary goods when I brought out the mattress. Neon laid hands on it in the agora and with great violence seized it. It was judged for me that I had the right since you were absent rather than present to petition the city governor, but when After he had done such awful things to me, he appeared with me. It was decided that it, the mattress, should be sealed up and lie in the Archeon until you are present. For he said that you were not on military duty, and I was not military household, but you had sailed upriver because of work, and you were not on royal orders. I have been anxious all, been anxious to no ordinary degree because Marsyas sent a letter but you have not written anything to me. You will give me pleasure even now if you write back with news of yourself so that I may be free from worry. Please take care of yourself so that I may embrace you in good health. Greet Marcus and Ammonius, Aline, and her children greet you. Farewell, year forty-four Above all, I bid you remember how

you left me alone like the dogs, and you did not abide by what you exhorted. Even now, then, remember us.”

And the address just says, delivered to Theon from Dionysia. So the notes on this letter are the following. It says the hand is generally careful and largely detached. It has enough style to be recognizable as of its period, but it shows signs of stress and unevenness. The greetings are added as an afterthought, perhaps after farewell had already been written, and they are tucked in awkwardly. Despite a number of mechanical flaws scattered through the text, the writer's large vocabulary and complex syntax suggest overall someone with a good command of Greek. They are, there are some phonetic spellings and omitted syllable, not syl-able. Some superfluous letters and a remarkable but not unique middle of the verb to be. Dionysia writes to her husband Theon, who is upriver on military duty, seemingly in the company with a comrade named Marsyas, who has, unlike Theon, written home. In Theon's absence, Dionysia has had a scuffle in Agora with one Neon who beat her and seized some bedding she was trying to sell. Dionysia reproaches Theon in vigorous terms for the state in which she has been left, although apart from the Neon altercation, she gives no details.

So Dionysia, um, I don't remember what I spoke about the first time and that was actually my first reaction. To this letter. However, Dionysia is really just dragging Theon through the mud here. She is saying, you have left me. You, in modern terms, are a bum. You haven't actually written back to me. You're upriver. And you're not even on military business, so you're not even busy. Um, you haven't even written to me. Marsyas has written back. But why, why have you not written to me? Um, As you know, Dionysia is his wife and she's heard nothing and it's really funny because The structure of these ancient Egyptian letters, as you will probably catch on, starts with Dionysia to Theon, her lord. So it's my name to who I'm writing and my relation to that person. And then it says greetings and health. I myself am well. I continually keep the best remembrance of you for all good. And I pray to the gods that I may receive you healthy in many ways. So that's kind of a standard intro for these letters. It's greetings and health. I am well. All right. And then some reference to the gods. Uh, of the person that is being written to with their health and then it gets into the bulk of the letter and then it always ends with some sort of farewell. Farewell being the common word. Um, so Dionysia here, she starts off really great and then she's like, in your absence, I have been, I have been in a scuffle. I don't know if I would call it an assault, but I have been in a scuffle and now I don't have a mattress and I cannot get that mattress back until you come and you become present again. Dionysia, in this context, you know, she's just dragging her husband through the mud.

He could be off doing who knows what, but I love how this is stacked in the sense of formal writing in the beginning and then just laying it all out there and then formal writing in the end. As she says, take care of yourself so that I may embrace you in good health because it's all about the other person in this letter. And again, this is from husband to wife, which makes sense.

So the next letter I'm going to read is Is from a grandmother suggesting a name for a newborn girl. And this is in the second century BC. Everything about this letter is unknown. The location it was written, the addressee, the location found, no idea. It was written in Greek, so that's something. So this letter reads,

“Mother NN to Ptollis, Nikandros Lysimachos. Tryphania. Greetings. If you are well, it would be as I pray to the gods to see you well. I received the letter from you in which you inform me that you have given birth. I prayed to the gods daily on your behalf. Now that you have escaped from danger, I shall pass my time in the greatest joy. I have sent you a flask full of oil and manet of dried figs. Please empty the flask and send it back to me safely because I need it here. Don't hesitate to name the little one Kleopatra so that your daughter...”

and then we don't have the rest of that letter, and also I want to note that Cleopatra here is spelled with a K. So the notes that the book makes, it says the letter is written on the back of what seems to be a business letter in large detached letters penned along the fibers, the fibers of the papyrus, of course. Although reminiscent of school hands, they are formed, they are well formed and suggest at least a modicum of education. This may, but need not, be the writer's own hand. There are a number of phonetic spellings, but only one significant lapse in the Greek. The language is otherwise straightforward. The letter begins with... I address to several children and the use of the plural, but then it shifts to focus on the daughter who has given birth and to the use of the singular. The interest of this letter comes from the comments of the mother about her prayers for her daughter's safety in childbirth and her suggestion about naming the child Kleopatra. And it also has a note here about that intro starting with mother NN. And it says, this letter opens with a term of relationship rather than a name, but it is quite likely that her name figured somewhere in the ten letters or so following mother.

I love this letter so much. I love that we have it. I love that it still exists and I love that it is preserved. But I can't even imagine, uh, in modern day, like a grandma saying, uh, don't hesitate to name the little one Insert baby name here. Um, I think it's great. I, you know, this grandmother, she's well cared, you know, she's looking after her daughter who has just given birth. And again, we see that greeting. Uh, if you are well, it would be as I pray to the gods to see you well. So because she has mother, that's, and then lists her supposed children or at least family members. We know that her relation to these people is their mother. At least either, like, not stepmom, but, like, biological mom or if it's, like,

a... Was it daughter-in-law, brother-in-law? No, son-in-law? Yeah. However that works. So it could be one of those situations. But my favorite thing here is she asks for her flask back. Not only is she like, I have sent you these things, but I actually need that flask back and I need it returned safely because I need it here. Uh, I love that. And I think we always think of... Ancient Egyptians being very materialistic in the sense of the pharaohs and the queen, like, and the queens and everybody who has been buried with all of their belongings because that's just was, that was natural in death. To take everything with you to the afterlife. But here... You know, it could be assumed that she didn't have more than that one flask. Um, and she needed it for something else or maybe she just had plenty and was a hoarder. Uh, the world may never know. But I love how she's also just saying, I pray to the gods on your behalf. As if to say her children were not praying to the gods. And I, I had to include this letter. I really did.

So the next one I'm going to read is Isais to Hephastion. It is a sister writing to a brother in 168 BC. Let's see, here it is. Location written unknown, location of Jersey, Memphis, and it was found there as well. It was Memphis, Serapeion, and this letter is also written in Greek. And it reads,

“Isaias to her brother Hephastion, greetings. If this letter finds you well, and with other things going right, it would be as I continuously pray to the gods. And I myself am well. And a child and all those in your household who continually remember you. When I received your letter from Horace, in which you announce that you are in detention in the Serapeion in Memphis. For the news that you are well, I straight away thanked the gods. But about your not coming home when all the others who had been detained there have come. I am ill-pleased because after having piloted myself and your child through such bad times and been driven to every extremity owing to the price of wheat, I thought that now at least once you got home, I would enjoy some rest. But you have not even thought about coming home. Nor given any regard to our situation. How I was in want of everything even while you were still here. Not to mention this long lapse of time and such crisis during which you have sent us nothing. Moreover, since Horace who delivered the letter reported that you have been released from detention, I am thoroughly ill-pleased. Nonetheless, since your mother also is distressed, please, both, for her sake and for ours, return to the city. If nothing, more pressing holds you back. You will please me by taking care of your body so as to be healthy.”

Written in a second hand, farewell. Back in that first hand, year two, the fifth, thirty. Again, I love this letter. Esaias is writing to Hephastion Time to come home. Why are you not here yet? So the notes on this letter read, the letter is written in a good but largely detached documentary hand with only very limited ligature between letters. In several places, however, there are interlinear additions including the entirety of line six. Farewell. Should be in Isiah's hand. A different letter from Hephastion's brother Dionysus was written on the same day and in a, in much the same language and probably the same

writer produced both. The Greek is fluent and has some claims to style with complex constructions throughout. A fair number of corrections show both the care that was taken with the composition and the pains required to achieve this quality of language. This letter belongs to the papers found at the Serapion of Memphis, probably along with those of the Ptolemies. The Recluse, whose archive from the reign of Ptolemy the... 6th, is one of the most important bodies of evidence for Egypt in this period. Hephaestion, like Ptolemaeus, seems to have claimed that he could not leave the sanctuary because of an order of the god. Isais does not think much of this and supposes that Hephaestion's failure to come home is voluntary. Like, I just, there's so much happening in this letter and there's so much anger from, not anger, but frustration from a size to her brother, Hephaestion, for not coming home. And, you know, she's like, why am I picking up your slack?

If you... You know, she's thinking that him not returning is voluntarily, voluntary, and obviously there's a lot of miscommunication going on. It's just the way that she writes or this scribe is writing, like the way that she is talking. But you have not even thought about coming home nor giving any regard to our situation. I love how... That is drawn out because in modern terms, she's just saying you are a thoughtless person. Uh, we are over here suffering and we could really use your help. And I just love the character that this letter has behind it. Um... And then just the quick farewell. And again, we see that that letter structure being greetings. I hope this finds you well. I pray to the gods that you are well and I myself am well. I just love the, we have to make sure everybody is well before we get into the body of the letter and the purpose of each letter. And then in the end, it will please me by taking care of your body so as to be healthy. And that makes me wonder if this is an older sister. If Esaias is an older sister to Hephaestion, I wish we did have an indication of age in these letters of the people writing, but I don't believe we do. Maybe one day we will. Um, we can always hope, right? So, of course, I had to include that one. I just, the, like, sister brotherly communication through these letters because I do touch on another one.

It's my favorite thing ever because it's so brutally obvious that this is a sister riding to a brother. Um, I just love it. And then going on to this last one. Pardon me while I scroll because I don't have a paper copy of this book. I hope you're enjoying these letters so far. And I'm tearing them apart a little bit, but... The next several episodes are about diving into and just really focusing on one letter at a time and I hope you enjoy them. What? Hold on, I have to find this. Where? So this next letter, once I find it, because I haven't found that yet, um, I forgot to note what page it was on. Again, you know, you live and you learn, um, is about learning Egyptian. And this is a very quick letter. Let's see here. Here we go.

A note about learning Egyptian written in the 2nd century BC. Location writer, unknown. Location of address C, unknown. Location found, unknown. But what we do know is that this was also written in Greek. It's very brief, it's very short, so here we go.

It says,

“Discovering that you are learning Egyptian letters, I was delighted for you and for myself, because now when you come home to the city, you will teach the slave boys in the establishment of Faló, the enema doctor. And you will have a means of support for old age.”

That's the entirety of this letter. There's no greeting. There's no farewell. The entirety of the letter is written in a single sentence. And the note says, the hand is well made and clear with seraphs and other stylish traits. The entire letter is a single sentence, but With no open greetings, no names, and no concluding greetings or wishes for health, the Greek is of good standard with correct spelling and good vocabulary. That the author is a woman we know from feminine participle and pronoun. Ramadan argued that this is a letter of wife to husband rather than, and as supposed by others, from mother to son. Now, I, before I read that note and I was reading this letter for the first time, I thought it was mother to son. Let's see. And then it says the slaves in question must be Greek speaking, learning Egyptian in order to master a specifically Egyptian medical skill taught in the native language. Their masters will have wanted to exploit their increase to the slaves commercial value. That such training would generate. The reason I decided to do this letter is because it kind of is an anomaly compared to other ones as there's no real, we don't see that structure. It's a single sentence. And um, it's a single sentence and it's so straightforward and it is a woman writing as we know from the, the use of what the feminine Participle and pronoun. I think it's really interesting just to see the wide variety of things that these women were writing about And it also puts emphasis on the importance of learning Egyptian even when most of the time Greek was preferred in society and for a multitude of other reasons. And even though Amongst the scribes, Greek was preferred. So that's it for this episode. I hope you enjoyed it. I hope you found some sort of comedy in those letters and some very helpful information. I promise episode six through eight, those are all dedicated to, well, one is dedicated to one single letter because there's a lot happening and then I talk about, I think, one other letter. In the next episode, I fully can't remember, to be honest with you. So whatever I talk about, I talk about. But I do dive into single letters or compare to shorter letters written by the same author. So that's, that's a wrap on episode five. Until next time on The Nile Chronicles.