Preface

Letter writing was widespread in the Graeco-Roman world, as indicated by the large number of surviving letters and their extensive coverage of all social categories. Besides literary letters, which have survived by being copied in medieval anthologies, there is a large corpus of ancient letters that have survived on their original materials. The bulk of this corpus consists of letters on papyrus and ostraca, mainly in Greek, found in Egypt. There is also scattered evidence from other places, such as the Latin letters on wooden tablets from Vindolanda (England), which suggests that Egypt is atypical in terms of preservation, not in production.¹

Letter writing in the ancient world has been the subject of studies based mainly on literary letters, real or fictional.² Letters on papyrus have attracted the interest of scholarship since the earliest publications of papyri, but the focus has mainly been on their language and content, the variations in formula and structure, and specific themes.³ An aspect of letter writing, however, that has remained underexplored is the material, format and other visual details in ancient letters, which the present work attempts to address.

In the past, any such analysis was impeded by the difficulty of accessing photographs and the paucity of information provided by editors about the material and visual elements of ancient documents. However, thanks to the increasing availability of digital images and more sophisticated editions, we are now in a position to study such aspects across a wide corpus of ancient letters. Almost all the letters that are mentioned in this book have a published image in print and/or online: For printed images I provide a reference to the source that I have consulted. For online images I give the link to the papyrus edition in papyri.info, where there is a further link to the published image of the institution that holds each papyrus; this method has seemed preferable, because the papyri.info URLs are transparent and stable, and the links to images found there are generally kept up-to-date through the Heidelberger Gesamtverzeichnis der griechischen Papyrusurkunden Ägyptens (HGV).

In this book I have tried to sketch an overview of the changes in the trends of letter writing from the classical Greek world to the Roman Empire, through an examination of the development of the ways in which letters were used, their function and types, materials, format, and palaeography. Aspects discussed are the materials that were used for letter writing in antiquity, their survival patterns, the chronological development of their format from archaic to Roman times, the layout of letters, methods of authentication and the distinction between letters written by secretaries and letters written by their authors. The language of letters has not been covered extensively in

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¹ Bagnall 2011.
this book, however some aspects pertaining to linguistic style are discussed, to show what was regarded as “elegant” in relationship to the socio-cultural background of the writers and the function of each letter. Through this, it is hoped that the language of the letters will offer insight into the societies that created them.

The timeframe of the present work is ca. 500 BC–ca. AD 300, which is defined by the earliest Greek letters that survive on their original materials and the onset of the Late Antiquity. The latter is conventionally placed between AD 284, with the ascension and reforms of Diocletian, and AD 313, when Constantine the Great and Licinius issued the edict of Milan, which helped the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire, or AD 330, when Constantine founded Constantinople, the new capital of the Roman Empire. Focus has been placed on the Roman period, due to the rich papyrological evidence that has survived from Egypt and the introduction of new features in letters, such as the use of personal signatures as a means of authentication. Many of the features that were introduced in Roman times continued and got further developed in Late Antiquity; however, the evolution of letter writing in Late Antiquity has not been included in this project, because Late Antiquity has its own peculiarities related to religious, cultural and social changes that merit separate study.

The first chapter provides a general overview of the establishment and development of letter writing in the Graeco-Roman world, from archaic to Roman imperial times, in parallel with the development of the definition of the term “epistole” and its derivatives. It further examines the differences and similarities between literary and non-literary letters and some linguistic features that are characteristic in letters. The second chapter provides a closer view of the chronological, geographical, and typological distribution of the materials that were used for letters (lead, papyrus, ostraca, wood, leather-parchment). Chapter three examines the development of the format and layout of letters, discussing new features that were introduced in each period. Chapter four deals with the authentication of ancient letters, focusing especially on the handwriting of the farewell greetings and proposing a method to distinguish between changes of hands and changes in the style of handwriting in this position. At the end of the book, there are three appendices: In Appendix I there is a list of the known archives of letters, based on combined data from Trismegistos and HGV. Appendix II provides a list of the dimensions of a large number of completely preserved letters. In Appendix III there is a selection of letters with “handshifts”.

Literary texts are cited according to the text and translation of the Loeb Classical Library editions. Translations of ancient letters, if not otherwise indicated, are my own. Greek names have been transliterated into English according to the usual conventions, but common anglicised Latin words and grecicised Latin names are spelled in Latin in translations (e.g. Aurelius, Claudius, Flavius). The dimensions of letters are expressed in centimetres, w(idth) × h(eight).
The research for and writing of this book was completed in June 2015, when the manuscript was accepted for publication. Since then minor editorial changes have been made, but it has not been possible to take publications into account that have appeared since then.