



Historisches Kolleg

Digitales Kolloquium

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How to ask: Strategies of entreating in medieval Eurasia

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ABSTRACTS

Aurélien Montel (Université Lyon)

Pledge to the caliph. Reflexions about a letter to Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III (317/929)

In 317/929, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III, who was the Umayyad emir of al-Andalus, proclaimed himself caliph. During his reign, he managed to build a very specific political relation between the Iberian peninsula (al-Andalus) and the opposite shore of the Mediterranean (*al-‘idwa*), ie. the Far Maghrib. Indeed, while he ordered the conquest of several coastal places to be conquered, he also secured many pledges of allegiance from local Berber emirs.

Much of these allegiances were publicly pledged by those emirs, who had to choose between the Umayyad caliphate of al-Andalus and the Fatimid caliphate of al-Qayrawān. Fortunately, many of the letters addressed by the Maghrāwa emir Muḥammad b. Ḥazar (fl. 920-950) to the Andalusian court were copied and preserved in the *Muqtabis fī aḥbār ahl al-Andalus* of Ibn Ḥayyān (987-1076), including the one in which he recognized ‘Abd al-Raḥmān III as the rightful *imām*.

Those documents give us an invaluable insight regarding the entreating strategies that were deployed by to justify an allegiance to the Umayyad caliphate of Cordoba. Indeed, some of the arguments brought by Muḥammad b. Ḥazar were common in the medieval Islamic world, while other were more specific to his own identity, agency, strategy, location, history and culture.

Clara Luhn (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität)

Su Shi’s (1037–1101) Letters of Recommendation

The Chinese Song 宋 dynasty (960-1279) featured an elaborate system concerning the selection and placement of civil and military officials. In order to obtain a position or to be promoted to another, a candidate had to collect and file the necessary documentation. In most cases, these documents included a biography, examination results and evaluations, as well as a number of sponsorship endorsements. Senior sponsors wrote statements that guaranteed the behavior of a junior. The system was strictly regulated: Not only could a senior official only make a limited number of endorsements, by endorsing a candidate he also was made legally responsible for the candidate’s actions.

In my contribution to this workshop, I will examine the letters of recommendation that the famous official, poet and polymath Su Shi 蘇軾 addressed to the Song court in the years

between 1086 and 1094 CE. While a basic structure of opening and closing formulas and certain set phrases can be identified in these petitions, it is nevertheless evident that Su Shi tailored his arguments closely to the candidate and post in question. My main interest lies in the various qualities Su Shi highlights in his candidates and in the different strategies he employs to convince the court of these qualities. Interestingly, these strategies more often than not do center on the responsibilities of the emperor rather than on the suitability of the applicant.

Florian Hartmann (RTHW Aachen)

Request – Supplication – Demand – Order:

The “Petitio” in the Letter Writing Theory of the European Middle Ages

Communication in the European Middle Ages was strongly influenced by social expectations and traditional etiquette. This is especially true for communication by letter. But it was not until the 12th century that the strict rules developed into a coherent teaching system. It was then that the first manuals for composing Latin official letters were written, the so called “*artes dictandi*”. There were no models for this even in Latin antiquity, where the manuals of rhetoric were limited to oral speech. According to the medieval manuals, it was mandatory to divide the letter into five parts, one of which was the *petitio*, the request. According to a 12th century author, this request could be made in eight ways, by pleading or command, threat or advice, by admonition, warning, or improvement or simply without all of these. It goes without saying that the accomplished letter author could only write the request correctly, if he knew exactly the social order and the hierarchical relation between sender and receiver. So, it is not surprising if the manuals also contain discussions on the order and hierarchy of society. In addition to the theory, they regularly offered a whole series of sample letters in which subjects plead, officials demand, and rulers give orders. In the paper I will present the definitions and forms of the *petitio* in the medieval Latin letter theory. The starting point is two works from the 12th and 13th centuries in northern Italy where the genre began to flourish.

Beverly Bossler (Brown University)

Categories of Patron-solicitation Letters in Song dynasty China (960–1279)

By the tenth century, China already had a long-standing tradition of soliciting patronage to help with political advancement. Under the Tang dynasty in the eighth and ninth centuries, patronage had been critical to success in the examination system, which in turn was a critical path to high office. Under the newly-established Song dynasty in the late tenth and eleventh centuries, the examination system was greatly expanded and opened to new groups of people. That shift gradually changed the nature of the elite class, and with it, practices of patronage. The work I am presenting here is part of a larger project that examines how patronage practices changed over time, as well as the broader implications of patronage practices for social life in the Song period.

The texts I will be presenting for this workshop represent a first step in categorizing different forms or modes of patron-solicitation letters in the Song. I will be exploring such aspects as how the rhetoric of letters that ask for political sponsorship differs from that in letters that seek economic aid, and how letters to strangers differ from those with whom the speaker has an established relationship.

Cecilia Palombo & Eline Scheerlinck (Universiteit Leiden)

Asking for a friend. Travel requests and social relationships in Umayyad Egypt

We will discuss Egyptian documents from the Umayyad period related to traveling. The need for moving regionally and inside the province of Egypt, be it because of work, trade, tax evasion, a problem with the justice system, or other motivation, led individuals to request permits and safe-conducts. Travelers and people stranded away from home asked the help of acquaintances and local authorities in order to be able to leave, continue their trip, or return home. Such requests sometimes resulted in the production of written documents and, in some contexts, they put in motion administrative procedures, thus overlapping with political efforts at the provincial level to control and regulate people's mobility. While at times a single petition might be enough to solve somebody's problem, at other times the documents reveal the intervention of various subjects and several moments of negotiation. A first request related to traveling might also cause more written documents to be prepared and exchanged; when the state was involved, the cumulating documents corresponded to as many administrative steps.

At the workshop, we will present a few examples of cases in which somebody's request for assistance in order to travel resulted in additional requests. These examples allow us to explore situations in which requesting a service or a favor activated several and different social relations, thus showing us multiple levels of dependency linking the petitioners to their social environment as well as to broader political structures.

Antonella Liuzzo Scorpo (University of Lincoln/UK)

Beyond Epistolary Standards? Reassessing Friendship in Thirteenth-Century Iberian Political and Diplomatic Communication

Letter-writing in the Middle Ages was a rhetorical art that encompassed several spheres: from familial and scholarly exchanges to political and diplomatic communication. The latter, including peace treaties and agreements, were regarded as legal documents and framed by established formulae and chancery practices. Yet, there were instances in which epistolary standards were broken and this often served to convey or challenge specific messages. The use of the rhetoric of friendship provides a significant example. Official letters from the chancery of James I of Aragon (r.1213-1276), as well as the 'invisible' letters and speeches, not always preserved in chancery records, that appear in his own chronicle-autobiography, the *Llibre dels fets* (*Book of Deeds*), offer an insight into cross-cultural and multi-layered communication practices.

The analysis of these sources will be useful to examine several important points. First, how the rhetoric, discourse and performance of friendship, which were based upon widespread cultural models, constituted a cross-cultural tool of communication, while legitimizing the establishment and preservation of social networks and their related power structures. Second, while diplomatic negotiations were aimed at achieving peace and mutual benefits, this did not prevent the adoption of politics of exclusion, intimidation and fear, in which the rhetoric of friendship could also play a strategic role. Finally, the chosen language of communication, that could vary in the passage from oral to written form (as for the case of Arabic-speaking leaders sending messages in the Catalan or Aragonese vernaculars through interpreters, later translated also into Latin in the official agreements; and vice versa), reveals the symbolic relevance of 'code-switching' as well as of the multilayered dynamics and interactions between different political communities. The complex social, ethnic and cultural landscape of the Crown of Aragon – and by extension of Iberia and the Mediterranean – provides a

fascinating example to reflect upon changes and continuity in modes of political and diplomatic communication, in which the rhetoric of friendship remained central to promoting, explaining and legitimising different types of social connections and exchanges.

Jialong Liu (Universiteit Leiden)

Hidden Private Entreating behind Public Stele texts during Mid-late Tang China

Provincial governors became super powerful during mid-late Tang China. Various categories of public steles were bestowed on them by emperors for different reasons. There were clear rules of how to apply for such steles in the Tang code and some texts on the steles were still preserved. The rules and surviving texts suggest no clues of private entreating. However, some letters between applicants for steles and authors who were ordered to compose texts for steles proved that private entreating was inevitably involved. This paper selects two governors in Weibo Province, Tian Xu and Tian Hongzheng, with their entreating, to show the hidden private communications behind public texts. In the case of Tian Xu, he tried bribing the text composer but was rejected. The composer even petitioned to the emperor requesting not to award the stele any more. Thus, Tian Xu's private entreating was made public. In the case of Tian Hongzheng, he just expressed his greetings to the composer and his entreating was not made public. This paper investigates different entreating strategies that the two provincial governors chose, the reasons why one entreating was successful while the other one failed, and the composers' values based on which they reacted to the entreating. This paper proves that private entreating was of great importance even after the emperors' approval. Powerful provincial governors were not that strong in private occasions and they had to rely on the Tang court to acquire legitimacy.

Oded Zinger (Hebrew University)

Letters of Request to Women from the Cairo Geniza

In recent years, a great deal of scholarly interest has been dedicated to petitions and petitioning in historical Islamic societies. Attesting to the reciprocal yet unequal expectations and obligations between clients and patrons, petitions and petitioning were important aspects of vertical cohesiveness of these societies. Other studies turned their gaze to

the epistolographic practice and meaning of intercession and the rhetorical and social aspects of letters of request more broadly.

Since letters of request or formal petitions convey and perform public political power and since women seldom exerted such power, when women appear in such letters they are usually on the requesting end. However, when the rare cases in which we find women on the receiving end of such letters and petitions can serve as a precious occasion to compare them with those directed to men.

This study will examine several letters of request addressed to Jewish women in medieval Egypt identified in the Cairo Geniza, focusing especially on the cases in which the writer was not related to the woman. These letters contain some aspects of formal petitions while differing radically from them in terms of what is requested, the formulas employed and the physical aspects of the documents. While studying women's petitions and letters of request sheds light on the gendered aspects of need, agency and dependency of Jewish women, studying letters addressed to women sheds light on the nature and limitations of their power and position in society.

Antje Richter (University of Colorado, Boulder)

Pleading Illness in Early Medieval China: Rhetorical Strategies in Letters and Memorials

Pleading illness is one of the most effective strategies to escape social obligations of all kinds. Apart from caring for or mourning the loss of one's parents it was the only socially accepted excuse to escape onerous official, social, or familial obligations in ancient China. Because claiming to be ill was such an exceptional tool, and because it is relatively easy to pretend being sick, claims of illness were often suspected of being feigned. It is no surprise, then, that pleading illness became an essential and highly charged rhetorical practice. A writer's facility in this subgenre of persuasion could decide whether their wish to decline an official position or to step down from office would be granted by their superior or their reasons rejected as implausible. My presentation will introduce rhetorical strategies of pleading illness as we find them employed in different types of written communication transmitted from early medieval China (ca. 200–ca. 600 CE). I will ask the following questions of my material: How do these personal letters and memorials to the throne proceed in making their arguments? What role do descriptions of physical complaints play within the narratives they create? And, is it possible

to connect the rhetoric of these texts to the success or failure of the plea? The inquiry contributes to our knowledge of early medieval Chinese epistolary culture and deepens our understanding of conceptions of health and illness during the period.

Hannah-Lena Hagemann (Universität Hamburg)

Reconciling Rebels in the Early Islamic Period

Rebellion in pre-modern Islam is often portrayed as a break-down of social relations. There is certainly truth to this, but it is also a one-sided description: rebellion was not (just) a violation of social order but in fact represented one instrument among many in the repertoire of power politics and one of several courses of action to express a multitude of grievances. Rebellion could thus also serve to build up social relations by establishing or re-confirming relationships of (inter)dependence. The material discussed for this workshop contribution will demonstrate this by focusing on the aftermath of rebellion in the early Islamic period (7th-10th century CE), and specifically on the question of how rebels were reconciled (or not) to the authorities they had previously opposed. It will look at the mechanisms by which reconciliation was attempted (e.g., intercession or requests for a safe-conduct) as well as the language in which such appeals were couched and the points of reference (e.g., religion, familial or tribal solidarity, ties of friendship, injustices suffered) that were utilised to produce the desired outcome. A closer look at specific historical circumstances may help explain why some appeals were successful, while others failed to secure reconciliation.

Maxime Théron (Université de Strasbourg)

***To dare and to write* : the case of administrative letters from Middle Egypt in the 6th and 7th centuries**

The presentation will focus on coptic administrative letters coming from the hermapolitan nome (Middle Egypt) and dating from the 6th and 7th centuries A.D. They are the witnesses of an administrative correspondence at the local level between officials of village institutions and concern economic and social problems often in connection with taxation.

The corpus is notably characterised by a large number of letters beginning with the formula „It is your servant who dares to write to his Lord“ which was identified as specific to Middle

Egypt and particularly to the hermapolitan nome (DELATTRE, 2005). The implementation of this formula responds to multiple influences. It is on the one hand part of the history of Late Antique epistolography and its rhetoric (particularly with the identification of individuals at the beginning of the letters). On the other hand, it has to be explained by the actual hierarchical and administrative relationship between the correspondents, as A. Delattre noted. Most often, the terms „servant“ and „lord“ are followed by an anthroponym, a title or function allowing to identify more precisely the correspondents. Should this formula therefore be associated with particular personalities, both for the senders and the recipients? To which specific administrative issues is it used for? Is it associated with other formulae or epistolary uses? The group of letters showing the formula of the „servant who dares to write to his Lord“ will give a perspective on Coptic Middle Egyptian administration and its strategies of supplication between the 6th and the 7th centuries.

Ed Hayes (Universiteit Leiden)

Entreating the Imams: Between Petition and Fatwa

Numerous letters to and from the Shi'i Imams, or more often, excerpts from letters, exist in the normative hadith texts preserved by the community of the Twelver Shi'a and written down between the 10th - 11th centuries CE. These letters have usually been treated by scholars along with other normative texts to study how they were used to give legal and theological opinions probative force rooted in the thought and practice of the divinely-guided Imams. My presentation departs from this scholarly approach to look into the social and institutional context of these letters, and to see how they functioned as ways of linking the Imams with the community of men and women who recognised their charisma. I will argue that, studied in this way, the form, style, function and context of letters to and from the tenth and eleventh Imams (in the second half of the 9th century CE) show the Imams in a hybrid role: in some contexts resembling administrators and judges responding to petitions regarding practical problems; and in other contexts resembling muftis and jurists issuing legal and theological *responsa*. This material sheds light on how the Imami community functioned, but also provides an important framework for seeing how epistolary institutions functioned in society, providing structure and systems of redress to people beyond governmental administration.

Petra Sijpesteijn (Universiteit Leiden/Historisches Kolleg)

From cocksure confidence to rueful regret: Three letters from ninth-century Egypt

Three papyrus letters from ninth-century Egypt are all written by the same person, a certain Abū Yūsuf, to the same person, namely Abū Yazīd. The male correspondents seem to be business partners who also share a strong personal, or perhaps familial relationship. Although these two individuals are not known from any other historical source, we can make out quite a bit about their situation from these letters. What is especially interesting is that as Abū Yūsuf's situation seemingly deteriorates over the course of the three letters, the tone in his letters to Abū Yazīd, i.e. the requests he makes and especially how he formulates them, change significantly. We will look at Abū Yazīd's shifting position and the reflection thereof in the letters he writes to his partner and friend asking for his help.