Visual Types of Greek Documents from Late Antique Egypt

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Abstract: This paper presents a general overview of some of the visual features of Greek documents that originate from Egypt’s multilingual environment in the period from the fourth to the eighth centuries CE. Special focus is laid on various ‘shifts,’ more precisely on changes in the use of writing materials, their formats, sizes, and alignment directions, the occurrence of particular scripts and their ‘technical’ function, but also ways and methods by which documents, especially legal deeds, were issued. The draft was written under the auspices of the project “Papyri of the Early Arab Period Online: Digitization and Online Catalog of Unpublished Documents,” which is funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s program “Scholarly Communications.” An earlier version had been presented on the occasion of a workshop addressing “Documentary Typologies Part II: Visual Types of Arabic Documents” at the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies of the University of Zurich, 24–26 January 2018.

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The aim of this paper is to give a general view of the visual appearance of documents in terms of their format, layout, and script as far as we can assess such features in the record of Greek papyri from the fourth to the eighth centuries CE. With regard to the workshop’s focus on Arabic documents, this brief introduction may be used primarily for the purposes of comparison. The choice of topic seems more or less obvious, since the period of consideration in this paper partly predates, partly coincides with the early decades of Arab rule in Egypt. At the same time, practices of written communication, of legal dealings, and of record keeping underwent some changes that among others manifest themselves in a shift in the use of writing materials, in variations in the documents’ shape, in the way or by whom pieces of writing were drafted and issued, and, finally, but also in the introduction of new languages and scripts. But before getting into details, there are two caveats we need to be aware of: First, it is often difficult to tell whether the occurrence of new document types and formats we are inclined to notice indeed reflect changes in writing and documentation habits. Apart from that, it also remains unclear to what extent such changes were motivated by political, social, or other factors. However, one cannot even rule out the possibility that the evidence on which this impression is based is rather accidental, let alone the fact that in any case it results from an uneven chronological and geographical distribution of our available source material. Second, the quantity and range of types and formats of Greek documents that have already been published and studied must be judged critically, since editions of texts first and foremost represent traditions of scholarly preferences and interests. We may reckon that certain groups of documents have attracted and still attract more attention than others. As a consequence, our perception of an overall pattern will inevitably remain incomplete.

Next to papyri, ostraca or potsherds featuring writings with pen and ink formed the most commonly used writing material in Greco-Roman Egypt. According to the database of the *Heidelberger Gesamtverzeichnis der griechischen Papyrusurkunden Ägyptens* that lists all published Greek papyrus documents from Egypt including related texts from other geographic regions or written on other materials and that currently contains more than 60,000 records,¹

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¹ Figures of published Greek documents from Egypt and their distribution referring to writing materials are as follows (as from January 2018):

Papyri in total: approx. 38,000, with approx. 7,000 dating from the Ptolemaic period, approx. 18,000 from the Roman period, approx. 10,000 from the late Roman/Byzantine period, and approx. 3,000 from the early Arab period.
nearly one-third of the Greek documentary evidence considered there is preserved on potsherds. Being a waste product, these potsherds usually served as a cheap substitute for papyri wherever and whenever the latter were neither available nor affordable. This is probably why ostraca for the most part are to be found at rather isolated sites and in peripheral areas along the fringes of the Eastern and the Western deserts or in the deep south of Egypt. Their shape and size were especially suitable for short texts such as receipts, accounts, orders for payment, and notifications. In both respects, their peripheral provenance on the one hand and their form of usage on the other, as well as with regard to sources and methods of supplying, recycling, and reusing, at least small pieces of parchment and ostraca share some significant similarities. But unlike the situation in the Ancient Near and Middle East, parchment came into general use in Egypt at a comparatively late date. Up to the late sixth and early seventh centuries, it had been used almost exclusively for Christian literary texts, occasionally also for sub-literary genres (magical texts), and, in some very few instances, for private Coptic letters. Their use bound to a distinctive social and cultural setting is therefore beyond doubt. Maybe not before the Sasanian rule, but most certainly in the wake of the Arab conquest, things must have changed considerably, since the vast majority of Greek, but also Greek-Coptic bilingual parchment documents we know about (at this stage approximately 300 out of 350) date from the seventh and eighth centuries, thus covering the last years of Byzantine rule and the early decades of Arab rule. And we may wonder whether this introduction of new writing materials for the purpose of issuing tax receipts as well as business documents was in any way related to the obvious gradual decrease in the use of potsherds for similar purposes. It bears pointing to the fact that about 75% of all Greek ostraca date from the Ptolemaic and Roman periods between 300 BCE and 300 CE, whereas the remaining 25% are of later date. And of these, only one-tenth dates from the Arab period. With regard to fact that potsherds and parchment documents shared the same contexts of use and moreover a similar small-sized format, we may therefore consider a change in the use of writing materials with one having replaced the other.

From early Hellenistic times to the early Arab period (and beyond), the choice of the documents’ format, size, and the direction of writing depended as much on material properties
and manufacturing features as on utility and practicality. The production of papyrus rolls is well known. Individual sheets of papyrus were pasted together forming a roll with the right margin of left sheets being stuck over the left margin of right sheets. This technical feature also determined the direction of writing, at least on the inside of the roll (recto). In Greek texts where the direction of writing goes from left to right, the lines generally, though not always, run with the fibres and parallel to the length of the inside of the roll. But for writing documents that run from right to left, as is the case with Arabic texts, the roll was usually turned 180° in order to avoid interference during writing due to the upward step of the splice. When the text length was more or less unpredictable, the roll or a part of it was, for practical reasons, turned 90° and sometimes even cut in half, which means that the lines of the written text on the recto ran across the fibres, which is referred to as transversa charta. Variations in document types, which may have responded to new bureaucratic demands and shifts in administrative practices unless they simply reflect the coincidental nature of our documentary record, will therefore also have yielded new formats and affected the document’s size and alignment direction. In the period from the fourth to the eighth centuries CE, we observe trends towards an increased use of horizontal formats superseding the previously predominant vertical shapes. This particular pattern applies mostly to small-sized documents such as individual receipts relating to tax payments or private business transactions, official instructions and orders that were usually written transversa charta. But there are also a number of texts of more substantial length, for instance contracts or letters that suggest a similar pattern of change.

Another striking peculiarity relates to the emergence of new cursive handwritings due to a growing impact of Latin minuscule writing in the period from Diocletian onwards that had a lasting effect on the shape of some letters of the Greek alphabet. It can be seen most notably in a different writing of the Greek letters “delta” and “eta,” and lead to a transition that, at least in an institutionalized and professionalized context of documentary practice, finally resulted in a general abandonment of the two-line system of majuscule scripts in favour of minuscule writing styles using a four-line system. Less skilled handwriting that in most cases was a hallmark of private correspondence or private business records in contrast tended to be less formal and to maintain a rather ‘conservative’ appearance, that is a two-line system. The early Arab period saw the shaping of two main types of minuscule writing, one that reveals an easy and flowing cursive featuring long strokes above and below the level of the line. It is typically found in the administrative and legal contexts of letters, business documents, and

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2 E.g., SPP III 86. 78. 145. 166. 168.
deeds. This kind of handwriting differs significantly in style from another one turning up in accounts, orders for payment and other forms of record-keeping texts whose writing is of a very regular, almost calligraphic character. It also entails numerous abbreviations usually indicated by either strokes or supra-linear letters. The wide use of abbreviations seems to link to Roman role models commonly known from Latin inscriptions. In addition, we can notice an increased use of specific symbols for monetary values, but also for technical terms, especially with reference to taxation. At the same time, professional chancery hands that we are very familiar with from Roman and Byzantine official letters and documents disappeared gradually. They had employed a very formal and stylized form of handwriting with the aim of functioning as ‘visual marker’ and by indicating their close connection to the political power centre. Since the early Arab period gave rise to new visual features, most notably by using not only different writing systems, but also by relying on an enhanced multilingual interaction, the use of chancery scripts from then on confined itself to the address on the back of official or business letters. That way, it continued to further efforts to establish identity and to provide a valuable means of exploiting the full potential of communication strategies. Special cases are ‘ecclesiastical scripts’ such as the ‘patriarchal chancery’ having evolved from the ‘biblical majuscule’ used in literary texts that found its way into letters and documents drafted within a monastic environment from the fourth century onwards. However what all these Greek handwriting patterns have in common is that they either fulfilled an essentially ‘technical’ function by hinting visually at the type of document and its practical aim or at the social background of the corresponding parties involved.

The specialization in writing practices even hit the field of private legal transactions, thus marking another step in this process as well as a significant break with previous habits. From the fifth century onwards, private professional notaries called tabelliones in Latin, and either symbolaiographoi or nomikoi in Greek, who were appointed by the state, were commissioned to draft and execute private legal contracts (leases, purchases, loans, sureties, and dispute settlements). They had taken over this task from public officials that had handled such matters in earlier periods. This shift in responsibilities is also reflected visually in the introduction of a new document format. Both the profession and the format continued to exist into the eighth century.

One final element that left its visible mark in the visual appearance of documents remains to be mentioned, that is to say a language shift that came along with social transitions in the wake of either political events and regime changes or under the impact of cultural and religious movements. They prompted the dissemination of Coptic from the fourth century CE.
onwards as much as they promoted the spread of Arabic later on. Language shifts usually resulted in the development of multilingual writing patterns. They manifested themselves either in the parallel existence of written languages by defining separate contexts of use, and occasionally also by giving birth to new types of documents, or in an interaction, which produced ‘multilingual documents.’ With regard to visual and structural features, we may generally distinguish between four categories of ‘multilingual documents:’ firstly, ‘translated documents’ consisting of parts of text of identical or nearly identical content, but written in different languages; secondly, ‘complementary documents’ with their main body written in one language and small annotations in another; thirdly, ‘integrated documents’ combining different languages by treating them on roughly equal terms; and finally, ‘re-used documents,’ or more precisely ‘re-used writing materials,’ since their sections have nothing in common except that they originate from different contexts. By applying a model Lucian Reinfandt and I have more recently worked on and which we refer to as ‘Sprachschwelle’ (‘threshold of language’), we might assume some kind of underlying chronological sequence by loosely linking the, presumably partly overlapping, categories of ‘translated documents’ and of ‘complementary documents’ to a rather early stage of language interaction. At least one of the two remaining categories comprising ‘integrated documents,’ appears to represent an advanced stage of development, whereas the re-use of documents written in other languages may just as well have started before.