

An Arabic Private Letter from the Eighth Century

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§1 The left part of a private letter sent by a certain 'Umar b. Muslim has been preserved. The message is addressed to his son and daughter and another person, presumably also from his household, perhaps his wife. The phraseology and handwriting are consistent with the conventional format of early Arabic papyrus letters, which suggests that the document dates from the eighth century, see [Grob 2010: 40–42](#). The subject matter remains obscure, but the mention of the *āmil* of 'Ushmūn is a point of interest. The term is generally understood to refer to an unspecified official, but in this context, it may also signify the representative of the financial director, see [Legendre 2016: 15–16](#). 'Umar b. Muslim appears to have been involved in the affairs or the network of the *āmil* of 'Ushmūn, possibly even as an official. The mention of 'Ushmūn may indicate a provenance from its region for the papyrus, but the text may well have been written elsewhere and may only make passing reference to the city.

§2 P.Heid. Inv. Arab. 734 belongs to the so-called 'Schott-Reinhard papyri'. They were part of the collection of C. Reinhard, the dragoman of the German Consulate in Cairo, which he acquired in Egypt in 1897. After his death, the collection was purchased by the industrial magnate and philanthropist Friedrich Schott and donated to the University of Heidelberg in 1904. On the 'Schott-Reinhard papyri', see C. Becker, P.Heid.Arab. 1, p. 5–6.

§3 The fragment is only complete on the top and the left side. Three distinct vertical folds are discernible, suggesting that the papyrus was broken along a vertical and a horizontal fold. The writing in black ink goes against the fibres on the recto, and parallel to it on the verso. Some Arabic words are visible between the lines, such as for instance on the top of the recto and between the third and the fourth lines. These words, which I have not been able to decipher, give a rather clumsy impression, suggesting that they were writing exercises. Some undecipherable traces of ink on the verso, especially below the address, could also indicate that the papyrus was reused for pen trials.

P.Heid. Inv. Arab. 734

15.6 (w) \times 12.2 cm (h)

Provenance unknown
8th century



[بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم]
[من عمر بن مسلم الى -ca.13-] د واحمد وفاطمة ابني عم
[سلم عليكم فاني احمد اليكم الله الذي لا اله الا هو
[اما بعد عافنا الله واياكم باحرسن عافيتها فاتمها في الدنيا
[والآخرة -ca.15-] والله محمود لم يحدث علي بعدكم
[الا خير -ca.15-] مع عامل اشمون وكتبت [-?.ca.-] عه
[-ca.20-] . [و قد كتبت الي بخبار من حالك
[-ca.15-] سمه العامل يستوصي به
[-ca.20-] ... شـ ...
[--- --- ---]

[‘]¹ In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. [‘]² [From ‘Umar b. Muslim to …]d and Aḥmad and Fāṭima, the children of ‘Umar. [‘]³ [Peace be upon you. I praise for your sake G]od besides Whom there is no god but He. [‘]⁴ [As for what follows, may God grant us and you the best of his health and may He perfect it in this world [‘]⁵ [and the hereafter …] and God is blessed. Nothing happened to me after you (pl.), [‘]⁶ [except good things …] with the ʻāmil of Ushmūn and you/I wrote … [‘]⁷ […] and you (sing.) have already written to me about the news concerning your condition… [‘]⁸ […] … the ʻāmil takes care of/has good intentions towards him/it [‘]⁹ […] …’ Back: ‘From ‘Umar b. Muslim to …’

§4 4–5 ʻāfānā Allāh wa-iyyākum bi-aḥsan ʻafiyati-hi fī l-dunyā / [wa-l-āḥirati: The same initial blessing can be found in P.Berl.Arab 2 75.5–6 (Fayyum, 8th c.). Cf. also P.Mird 42.4 (Khirbet al-Mird, 7th c.), P.JoySorrow 32.4 (Dimyāt, 8th c.), and P.JoySorrow 39.4 (Provenance unknown, 8th c.).

§5 5 wa-llah maḥmūd: This phrase was preceded by the sender's affirmation of his good health and was used to thank God for it, see [Grob 2010](#) : 49–50.

§6 5–6 *lam yahdut ʻalayya ba-da-kum ʻillā /hayrun*: For this phrase and its parallels, see Khaled Younes' comments in P.JoySorrow 8.4–5n.

§7 7 *qad katabta ʻilayya biḥabari min ḥāli-ka*: There is no exact parallel for this phrase, but one may compare the fragmentary P.Heid.Arab. 2 25.1 (provenance unknown, 8th c.): *min ḥabari-ka wa-ḥālikā* which may have contained a similar phrase to P.RagibLettres 4.7–8 (provenance unknown, 8th c.): *ḡā'a-nī kitābu-ka al-ʼawwalu wa-al-āḥaru wa-fahimtu mā ḍakarta fī-hi / min ḥāli-ka wa-ḥāli mā qibala-ka*.

Bibliography

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[Legendre, M. \(2016\)](#) “Neither Byzantine nor Islamic? The Duke of the Thebaid and the Formation of the Umayyad State, “ *Historical Research* 89: 3–18.

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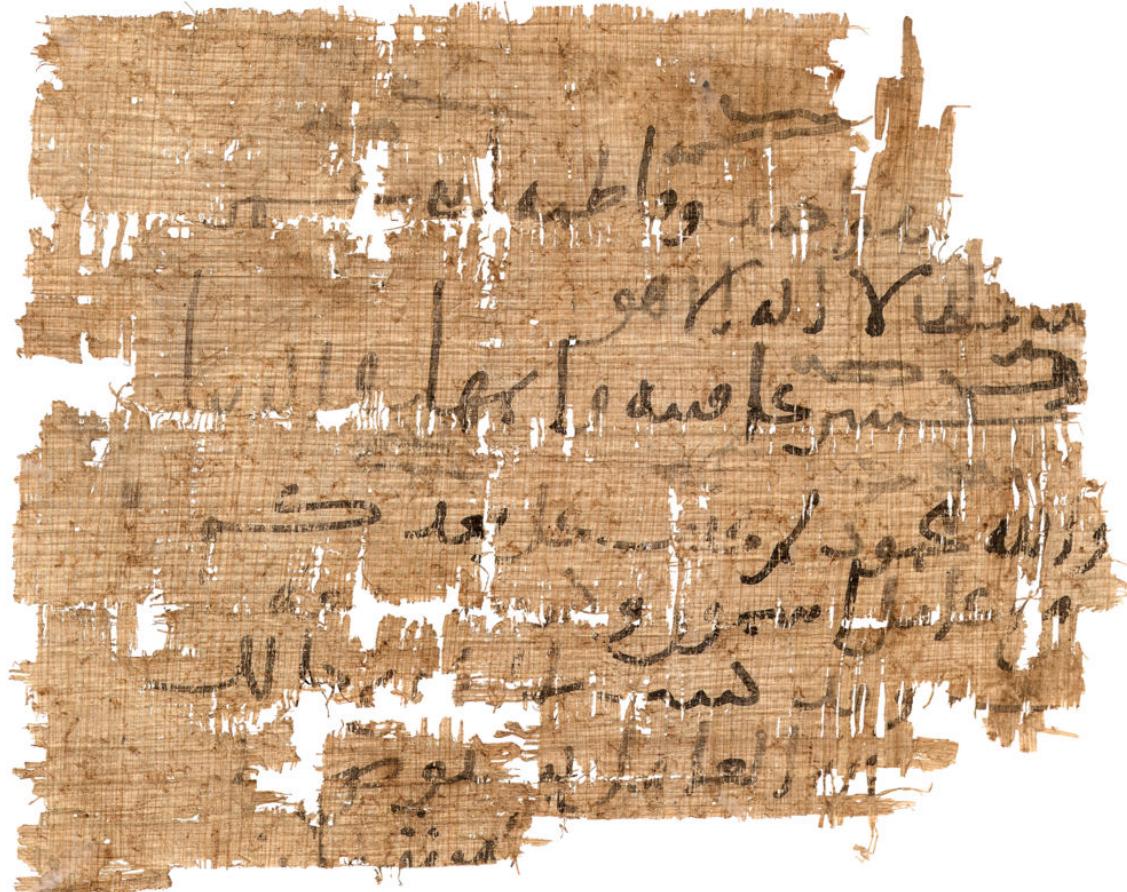


Fig. 1: P.Heid. Inv. Arab. 734 recto.

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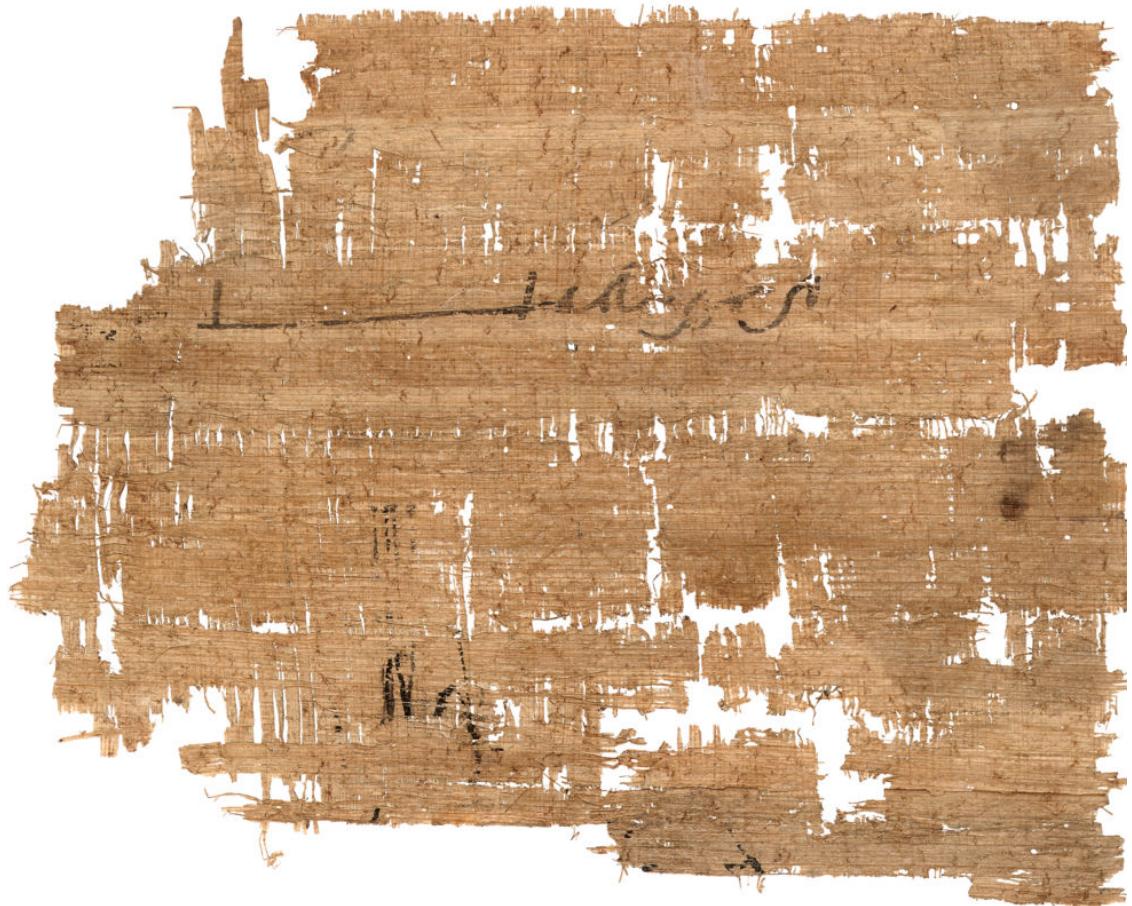


Fig. 1: P.Heid. Inv. Arab. 734 verso.

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