OFFICIAL EPISTOLOGRAPHY AND THE LANGUAGE(S) OF POWER
PROCEEDINGS OF THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE
RESEARCH NETWORK IMPERIUM & OFFICIUM

PAPYROLOGICA VINDOBONENSIA

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Contents

I Epistolography in the Ancient Near East

W ALTHER S ALLABERGER

Special Cases and Legal Matters

Diction and Function of Letters in the State of the Third Dynasty of Ur (2110–2003 BC)

1. Letters in the Ur III Period: State of Research

The three or four decades under the later rulers of the Third Dynasty of Ur ('Ur III', 2110–2003 BC) stand out as the most densely documented period of the ancient Near East. About 80,000 Ur III documents of mostly administrative character have been published or catalogued, most belonging to the final years of the dynasty's second king Sulgi (2092–2045), to the reigns of his successors Amarsuena (2044–2036), and Šusuen (2035–2027), and to the first years of Ibbisuen (2026–2003). From the 25 years between Sulgi 44 and Ibbisuen 2 survives an annual documentation of one to two thousand cuneiform tablets of administrative and legal character,[1] stemming from the central administration of the state, from the capitals of provinces, and from some smaller public and private households.

The sheer number of texts, and the accuracy in the documentation of the transactions, conveys the impression of a dominant bureaucracy that controls the state's economy. The king was supreme in the administrative hierarchy; governors ruled the single city states, i.e. the provinces of the empire. The more important organisations included the temples with their extensive management of agriculture, the cities, centres for animal husbandry, handicrafts workshops, and storehouses of the textile and milling industries. The economic transactions within and between these organisations were noted in administrative documents. It is little wonder that every description of the period based on the documents speaks of 'managers' or 'officials' acting within the 'administration' of the 'state'. This has resulted in an image of the Ur III state as a dominant bureaucracy featuring statism or *dirigisme*, in which the king and his officials controlled the economy and regulated and supervised the nature and extent of all transactions and duties. Historians generally "keep in mind the bias of the documentation used in our historical reconstructions: almost all of our texts derive from the state bureaucracy and describe the state's activities. It would thus be easy to see the Ur III state as a highly authoritarian one, documenting and directing all the movements of its dependents. But within this abundance of state records we see traces of economic activity that was not controlled by it. People often simultaneously provided services to the state and interacted economically with others on their own behalf".[2] Nevertheless, as the preceding citation from a recent textbook on the history of the ancient Near East makes clear, the world of the administrative documents seemingly reflects an 'authoritarian' economic regime of the state. For the sake of clarity it should be stated that the somewhat ambiguous expression 'state bureaucracy' here includes both the state or royal sector (e.g., the royal court, foreign relations, army, etc.) and the provincial economy of the governors.

The letters from this period clearly form part of the administrative documentation. Edmond Sollberger, who collected all letters known at his time, describes their format as follows: "The Message is normally an order, more rarely a prayer, to do something, or to give something, to a third party. (…) The tone is casual and impersonal".[3] Piotr Michalowski views the letters as part of the administrative apparatus within the general framework of an authoritarian state, and he describes them as communications from offi-

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[1] Molina 2008:47.
[2] Van De Mieroop 2007:82.
[3] Sollberger 1966:3. How successful Sollberger 1966 was in collecting Ur III letters becomes clear when one considers the publication history of Ur III documents (Molina 2008): Sollberger collected 373 letters, that is 55% of those available today, at a time when perhaps only 20,000 Ur III documents had been published, just a quarter of the material known today.

cials to their subordinates: "(…) as a rule these [i.e., the letters from Early Mesopotamia] are documents from economic archives, and not private missives. This is particularly true of the Ur III letters, which are largely 'letter-orders,' that is, orders to subordinates in an official chain of command".[4]

Piotr Steinkeller, with reference to the economic activities of the foresters in the province of Umma, has postulated that letter-orders were used for every assignment of goods: "A party wishing to withdraw forest products from the warehouse needed first to obtain authorization from either the head of the fiscal office or the governor of Umma. The official in question then prepared a sealed letter-order, which instructed the overseer of the forest sector to disburse the products in question. Upon receiving the letter-order, which could be delivered either by the withdrawing party or his representative, the overseer made the disbursement. The transaction was duly recorded in a receipt tablet".[5] Steinkeller provided the graph below (Fig. 1) to clarify his interpretation:
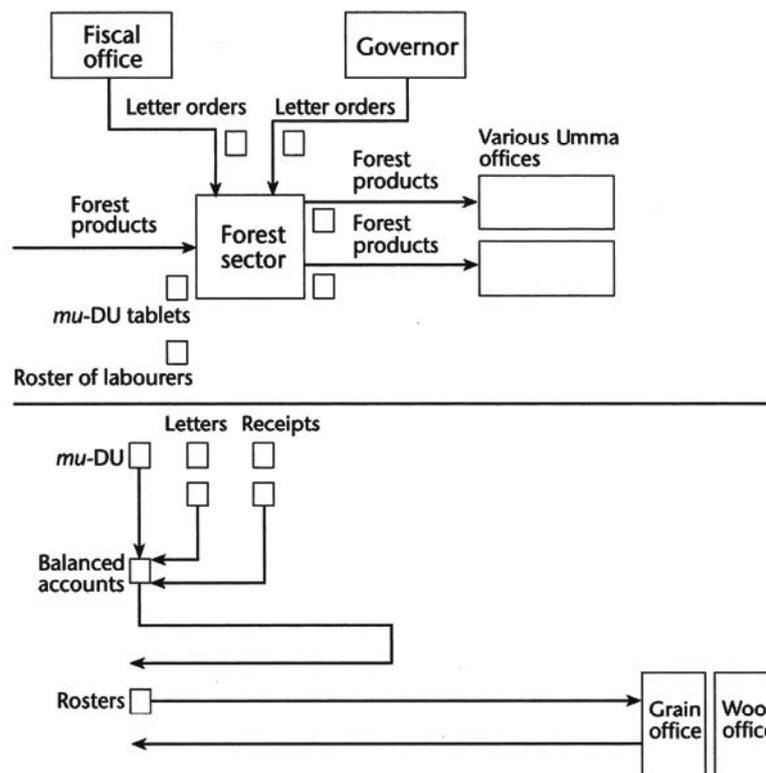
Fig. 1: Letters in the chain of orders at Umma; from Steinkeller 2003:53 (© Oxford University Press)

Thus, though acknowledging the existence of a private sector,[6] these scholars concur on the preponderance of state control and the role of letters "in an official chain of command".[7] Dissenting voices exist, however. Recently Lance Allred (2010) studied the Ur III letter corpus, and concluded: "Examples appear to reflect the private activities of individuals rather than the official business of the Ur III state".[8] We will return to this argument below.

Any progress in this discussion must be based on a careful re-evaluation of the function(s) of Ur III letters. The present contribution is based on the corpus of 679 published Sumerian and Akkadian letters of the period, which I have transliterated and analysed according to various criteria: language, the address

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[4] Michalowski 1993:4.
[5] Steinkeller 2003:51.
[6] Van De Mieroop 2007.
[7] Michalowski 1993:4.
[8] Allred 2010:11.

formulae including sender and addressee, the presence or absence of sealings, the topics treated, the main function(s) of the letter or its segments, and the specific verbal strategies that are relevant to text function, including verbal routines, rhetorical devices, reported speech, indirectness and other politeness features, etc. The pages that follow certainly do not exhaust the material studied; but the broader background is not based on superficial impressions from a cursory reading and thus allows more confidence in general statements and quantifications.

2. Features of the Ur III letters in a diachronic perspective

The corpus of Ur III letters on which this study is based consists of 679 letters, 662 in Sumerian and 17 in Akkadian.[9]

By definition a letter is a written verbal message composed by the sender and intended to be read by the addressee. Even in cases when neither sender nor addressee are named on the tablet, the definition as a 'letter' remains unquestionable when the addressee is referred to in the verbal form, usually an order or a request: "may he (i.e., the addressee) give it to PN ($\text{ḫe}_2\text{-na-ab-šum}_2\text{-mu}$)." The reference to the addressee is, however, missing in notes appended to administrative texts that consist of an infinite verbal form, for example: "it has to be investigated" ($\text{en}_3\text{-bi tar-re-dam}$, e.g., UET 3 1107, 1195, 1357). In such cases there is no verbal reference to an addressee: the note merely alludes to some future action, perhaps by the scribe himself or a partner in his office. Since the communicative situation is different, such texts as UET 3 1107 etc. cannot be categorized as 'letters', which are defined by the presence of both sender and addressee.

The distribution of the Ur III letters by provenance (Table 1) corresponds by and large to the general distribution of administrative documents.

Provenance	Number of letters	Percentage of localised letters	Distribution of administrative texts[10]
Girsu (provincial archive)	271	45%	32%
Umma (provincial archive)	179	30%	37%
Nippur (various households)	78	13%	5%
Puzrišdagan (state archive)	33	6%	18%
Ur (various households)	16	3%	6%
Garšana (military organisation)	10	2%	2%
Uruk	3	< 1%	< 1%
Ešnuna	3	< 1%	< 1%
Isin	2	< 1%	< 1%
Susa	2	< 1%	< 1%
provenance not yet identified	83		

Table 1: Provenance of Ur III letters

The texts from Girsu and Umma once belonged basically to the archives of the governors of those city states.[11] The higher percentage of letters at Girsu remains inexplicable. There are remarkably few letters in the royal or state archive from Puzrišdagan, an organisation that mostly dealt with the management of the royal cattle herds and of animals for slaughter. Proportionally more letters come from Nippur, where mainly smaller households of both communal and more private character were excavated.[12] The comparison between Nippur and Puzrišdagan suggests that letters were used more frequently in smaller adminis-

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[9] The identification of letters does not exactly correspond to those given in BDTNS (http://bdtns.filol.csic.es, last access 2011/03/11), although this tool was extremely helpful for retrieving some references.
[10] Molina 2008:52.
[11] E.g., Sallaberger 1999b; Steinkeller 2003.
[12] van Driel 1994.

trative units than in a state organisation; but the high proportion of letters in the provincial archives of Girsu, the mightiest province of her time, and Umma seems to preclude any too simple explanation.

A typical Ur III letter consists of the following parts[13]:

a. The address, including sender and addressee   *optional (see below)*
b. The message, sometimes with an 'exhortation'   *obligatory*
c. The date   *optional (13%)*
d. The seal-impression   *optional (?30% preserved)*

This general scheme is illustrated by two examples from the state administration of cattle at Puzrišda-gan, an archive from which about 13,800 administrative documents have been published.

(1) Letter from Abbakala to Udeniŋsaga concerning the transfer of 1 lamb (*TrDr* 89, fig. 2, plate 1):

If you'd say that to Udeniŋsaga:
He should give 1 lamb from the arrivals to Išdukīn! He (*sc.* Udeniŋsaga) should not discuss it again!
(Seal inscription:) Abbakala, scribe, son of Luninŋirsu.[14]

(2) Letter from Urmes to Zazi concerning the transfer of 1 ewe (MVN 3, 352, fig. 3, plate 1):

If you'd say that to Zazi:
He should give 1 good ewe to Diŋirkašŋu! He (*sc.* Zazi) should not discuss it again!
(Seal inscription:) Urmes, son of Lana, fattener of cattle.[15]

Sumerian letters are formulated in the third person. The letter format presupposes an order to the messenger who delivered the letter, the individual addressed in the second person in the address formula, "If you'd say that (to addressee)." In a few instances the messenger, identified by the second person reference, appears within the message itself.[16] Such cases demonstrate that the address formula reflected an actual practice and was not only used as a conventional expression. A similar role for the messenger, who could transfer goods and execute the orders of his master, was still well known in the Old Babylonian period, as is testified by the letters of that period.

The verbal form used here, "If you'd say that to him" (u_3-na-a-du_{11}), is characterized by the conditional marker, designated as the 'prospective' in Sumerian grammars. This form is used for an action that is perceived as primary to, and a precondition for, a subsequent action. Edzard 2003:122–23 in his Sumerian grammar correctly identified its use in the letters as a 'polite imperative'. This employment of 'if' is, as noted by Edzard, a common strategy in polite expressions. It is termed a 'hedge' in politeness theory and employed to mitigate the tone from one of command to one of request.[17]

According to the address formula, a Sumerian letter is phrased as a message told to the messenger ("tell him that …"). Consequently the addressee of a Sumerian letter is referred to in the third person, so all requests and orders are also third person 'precatives', e.g., "he should give it to me".[18] The sender appears always in the first person.[19]

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[13] Modified after Sollberger 1966:2.
[14] (1) u_4-de_3-niŋ$_2$-saga$_{10}$ (2) u_3-na-a-du_{11} (3) 1 sila$_4$ mu-ku$_x$(DU)-ta (4) SUḪUŠ-ki-in (5) ḫe$_2$-na-ab-šum$_2$-mu (rev.) (6) na-mi-gur-re (Seal) (1) ab-ba-kal-la (2) dub-sar (3) dumu lu$_2$-^{d}nin-ŋir$_2$-su.
[15] (1) za-zi-ra (2) u_3-na-a-du_{11} (3) 1 u$_8$ saga$_{10}$ (4) diŋir-kaš-ŋu$_{10}$ (5) ḫe$_2$-mu-na-ab-šum$_2$-mu (rev.) (6) na-bi$_2$-gur-re. (Seal) (1) ur-mes (2) dumu la-na gurušta.
[16] Examples include TCS 1, 134: 3–5 "after you have received (the grain …)" (šu ba-ti-a-zu); TCS 1, 204 "with you, at your place" (ki-za). In *AoF* 15, 231: 5–6 the messenger is the recipient (ḫa-ra-ab-šum$_2$-mu, the addressee "should give it to you"), similarly Birmingham 2, 159:13.
[17] Brown/Levinson 1987:163.
[18] As mentioned above, the second person in Sumerian letters usually refers to the messenger (*pace* Sollberger 1966:3). A second person usage for the addressee, either a calque from Akkadian or simply an unreflected verbalisation of face-to-face communication, is extremely rare and the best examples stem from small archives. CUSAS 3, 1037, a letter from Garšana (on the Sumerian of the Garšana letters and Akkado-Sumerian bilingualism see Sallaberger 2011), reads first "the gardeners should not give it …", and then, "It should be deducted from *your* account" (ša$_3$ dub-*za* ḫa-ba-tur-re) – certainly refer-

The sender is not named in examples (1) and (2) above. The address formula naming the sender in Ur III letters reads: "What PN (i.e., the sender) says" (PN-e na-ab-be₂-a). But of 656 well-preserved Sumerian letters only 32, that is not quite 5%, identify the sender in the address formula. The sender could, however, be identified by the impression of his cylinder seal either on the tablet itself, as is true of examples (1) and (2), or on a case enclosing the tablet. There exist numerous examples of letter tablets that confirm the equivalence of seal owner and sender. For 201 letters sealings are preserved and mentioned in the publications; but one may assume that many more of the letters that exist once had a case with a seal impression of the sender.

In 69 – more than 10% – of the letters, neither sender nor addressee are named and the texts are not sealed. In such instances the case may have contained the missing information, but one must not exclude the possibility that the messenger knew the addressee personally or by sight.

The address formula of letters in Akkadian corresponds roughly to Sumerian usage, and this remained the standard letter formula in the early second millennium, the Old Assyrian and Old Babylonian periods: *ana* PN (i.e., the addressee) *qibī-ma umma* PN(-*ma*) (i.e., the sender),[20] "Speak (i.e., the messenger) to PN (i.e., the addressee), thus PN (i.e., the sender)."

Of the 17 letters in Akkadian only five name the sender, but 13 the addressee; and in seven cases the seal impression of the sender is known. Usually the addressee is referred to in the second person, and orders and requests are thus phrased as imperatives, e.g., "Give!" (*idin*). However, one Akkadian letter from Umma observes Sumerian diction by employing the third person (*ASJ* 12, 54, see text (4) below).

The letters were used in administration and were kept together with administrative records, with which they share style, phraseology, and lexicon. This entails both the use of certain key administrative expressions that appear in both text groups and the specific structure of Sumerian archival texts[21]. The administration took into account: (1) the form of a transaction or registration and thus often employed verbs in a specific technical use; (2) the persons involved, which were identified by their names and sometimes their function; and (3) the objects, specified according to their quality and quantity. The objects a document featured were mentioned at the very beginning of the text proper, although in Sumerian prose the direct object conventionally appears directly before the verb. Letters (1)–(2) deal with one requested animal, "1 lamb from the arrivals." Examples of multiple-item lists are given in letters (7)–(8) below. Placing the qualified and quantified object(s) of the transaction at top is a stylistic feature that is shared both by documents and administrative letters.

The majority of the Ur III letters are orders written in a precise and technical style similar to that of examples (1) and (2) above. A more personal tone surfaced only later in Akkadian letters. In the Old Babylonian period, two centuries after the end of the Ur III state, around 1800 BC, one started to write more personal greeting formulae in letters, such as "my father" or "my brother," and the addressee was referred to by second or third person according to rank.[22] In this way even administrative letters received a more personal tone, since the letter writer employed various strategies to respect the addressee's 'face' in communication.[23] Should we thus regard the Ur III letters as an early and primitive step in the evolution of letter writing?

Although an evolution of the genre cannot be denied, a simple line of historical development must not be postulated, because in the preceding Sargonic period (c. 23rd and 22nd centuries BC) letters were writ-

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ring to the account of the addressee, not of the messenger. NRVN 1, 252, a small note from Nippur without address, includes only the imperative "Release him (PN)…" (šu ba-ra). Even if the imperative would be directed to the messenger, he would act as addressee of the message.

[19] The first person is mostly indicated by possessive pronouns (-ŋu₁₀, -ŋa₂), by the indirect object reference ma- in verbs (e.g., ma-an-du₁₁, "he said to me"), and (rarely) by the independent possessive pronoun, e.g., ŋe₂₆-e or ŋa₂-da nu-me-a "without me" (TCS 1, 22; not a personal name as interpreted by Sollberger).

[20] *NATN* 555 uses Old Akkadian *en-ma* for *um-ma*; *RA* 24, 44 is the only text with enclitic *-ma* after the sender's name.

[21] Sallaberger 2000 [2005].

[22] Sallaberger 1999a.

[23] Cf. Brown/Levinson 1987.

ten in both Sumerian and Akkadian with a personal and emotional style that nearly parallels Old Babylonian examples.[24] A Sumerian letter from Adab, a request for a chariot, illustrates this style:

(3) Sargonic letter from Ilištakal to his lord, requesting a chariot (Adab 636 = Kienast/Volk 1995:48ff. Ad 8):

If you'd say that to my lord, what Ilištakal says:
"Give me a two-wheeled roofed chariot as a present!" – this is what I said to him (i.e., the addressee). But he didn't give it to me as present.
But now[25] a man of mine has seen it: a two-wheeled roofed chariot is available at Kibabbar in the house of Bazigen.
If his (i.e., the addressee's) messenger returns, he should give it to me. I am his strong servant. Come on, he should please my heart! The respective tablet lies before him (i.e., the addressee). Thus he should consider it in his mind.
And then I will please his heart (with a return-gift).[26]

As this example shows, Sargonic letters used emotive, almost poetic formulations like "I am his strong servant" and "to please one's heart" that were unknown a century or two later in the Ur III corpus. To the phrases from example (3) above we may add a phrase for distress found in two Sumerian Umma letters: "God has given me lamentations!"[27] Similarly, in an Akkadian text one finds both the exclamation *a-e a-e* "woe! woe!" and the rhetorical question "Who is like my father?" (*mannum kī abī⟨ya⟩*, CUSAS 13, 169).

So the technical language of the Ur III letters cannot be explained as a primitive step in the development of letter writing. Moreover, language does not play a decisive role. As has already been mentioned, Akkadian letters more often address the recipient directly by the second person, which results in a tone resembling face-to-face communication. However, the Ur III letters in Akkadian are also administrative in character and feature formulae similar to the Sumerian ones. An Akkadian letter from Umma (text (4)) that uses the third person looks like an Akkadian paraphrase of a Sumerian letter, and even includes a phrase in Sumerian:

(4) Akkadian letter from Šusulgi to Diŋirsaga from Umma concerning a loan of silver to be repaid in barley (*ASJ* 12, 54):

Say to Diŋirsaga:
1 shekel of silver he (i.e., the addressee) should give to Ursulpa'e.
(Sumerian, perhaps direct quote from a loan document:) After the harvest 420 liters of barley (i.e., the equivalent for the silver plus the interest due) should be given.
(Akkadian:) The matter should not turn up again!
Seal inscription: Šusulgi, royal soldier, son of Ilaya.[28]

To summarize: The bureaucratic correspondence with its technical style is characteristic of the Ur III period; but this style is neither conditioned by the choice of language, i.e. Sumerian or Akkadian, nor can it be explained as a primitive step in the development of epistolography.

3. Verbal routines as indication for the function (illocution) of letters

The administrative Ur III letters are mostly commands directed to the addressee, hence the wide-spread use of the term 'letter-orders' to designate these texts. But there exist some 40 Ur III letters (about 6% of

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[24] Kienast/Volk 1995; Sallaberger 1996; Catagnoti 2003.

[25] The interpretation of e_3-ne_2-$eš_2$ as a by-form of i_3-ne-$eš_2$ "now" is due to Wilcke 2007b:223, n. 51.

[26] (1) lugal-$ŋu_{10}$ (2) u_3-na-du_{11} (3) i_3-li_2-$iš$-da-gal-e na-be_2-a (4) 1 ^{ŋeš}gigir2 e_2 umbin 2 (5) ba-ma in-na-du_{11} (6) nu-ma-ba (7) e_3-ne_2-$eš_2$ (8) ki-babbar-ra^{ki}-ka (9) e_2 ba-zi-ge-ka (10) 1 ^{ŋeš}gigir2 e_2 umbin 2 (11) al-$ŋal_2$ (12) lu_2-$ŋu_{10}$ igi im-mi-du_8-am_3 (13) lu_2 $kiŋ_2$-gi_4-a-ka-ni (14) u_3-mu-gi_4 (r.) (15) ḫa-ma-ab-$šum_2$-mu (16) urdu2 kala-ga-ni-me-in (17) ga-na $ša_3$-$ŋu_{10}$ $ḫe_2$-eb_2-$ḫul_2$-le (18) im sar-ra-bi (19) ⌜igi⌝-ni-$še_3$ [$ḫe_2$]-$ŋal_2$ (20) ur_5-e ^{ŋeš}ŋeštu-ga-na (21) $ḫe_2$-na-[ni]-⌜ib_2-ru-gu_2⌝ (22) u_3 $ŋe_{26}$-e $ša_3$-ga-ni ab-ḫul2-li-in.

[27] ir_2 an-ne_2 ma-a_5, CUSAS 13, 171 (Maiocchi 2009:208–09 differently), *USP* 63 = Kienast/Volk 1995:Um 1.

[28] (1) *a-na diŋir-sa_6-ga* (2) *qi_2-bi_2-ma* (3) 1 GIN2 KU3.BABBAR (4) *a-na ur-^{d}sul-pa-e_3* (5) *li-di_3-in* (6) egir $buru_{14}$-$še_3$ (7) 1.2.0 še gur (8) $šum_2$-mu-dam (9) *a-wa-tum* (10) *la i_3-tu-ra-am* (Seal) (1) šu-^{d}sul-gi (2) aga_3-us2 lugal (3) dumu i-la-a.

the total) mostly of administrative content that cannot be classified as commands, a sufficient proportion to suggest that the term 'letter-order' is too specific.

More importantly, a message of the kind "he should give something to someone" does not identify the exact function of the letter but only indicates that this is a command. Certainly such a text is 'bold on record,' without any polite mitigation (using the terminology of Brown/Levinson 1987). But does that imply that during its time it was considered impolite, as our translations might suggest to modern readers? How can we know that such a message can be labelled an order to a subordinate, as Michalowski[29] assumes? What were the functions of such letters – that is, what verbal action did the sender perform with regard to the addressee by writing the text? A command to transfer items to another person could have been understood either as information (e.g., by answering a question), as an order, or as a plea to a reluctant or procrastinating addressee.

So the performative force of a text cannot be judged only from a translation and our understanding, since rules of communication may greatly differ between cultures. At the level of the phrase – that is, the speech act itself – the performative aspect has been labelled the 'illocutionary act': it is what the sender 'does' by the utterance of a phrase without considering his intentions. At the level of the text this is called its 'function.'[30]

The command to give out (Sumerian $šum_2$) goods to someone is the dominant theme in Ur III letters, appearing about 385 times in 640 reasonably well preserved Sumerian letters. This phrase seems to define the function of the letters within the administration, and this is the reason for the place of the letters in the model of Steinkeller (2003, see above p. 16). But the assumption that every transaction of goods had to be requested by a letter poses more problems than it solves. For instance, of the 13,800 surviving documents from the state organisation of Puzrišdagan there exist only between 20 and 30 letters on animal administration, among them our examples (1) and (2), so that it is difficult or impossible to plausibly reconstruct a management structure of the royal cattle that was based solely on the communication via letters for transactions.

Although a fair portion of the Ur III letters contain only the propositional phrases that convey information on objects and persons, additional phrases do occur that support the performative aspect, mostly routine formulae. These verbal routines, called "exhortations" by Sollberger[31], are of the greatest help in determining the function of a letter – that is, its illocutionary act.

In examples (1) and (2) the phrase "He should give it (the object identified in the text) to PN!", which is qualified by its propositional content (to give an object to a person), is followed by a second phrase "He should not discuss it again!" The latter expression, used in these two as well as in numerous other letters and thus a stock phrase, does not convey any specific information and can therefore be used in varying contexts to support the request. Routine formulae such as this one fulfil an important function in communication, since they present the concern of the scribe in an unequivocal way. Precisely because it was a frozen expression could the addressee clearly understand the sender's intention.

The most important routine formulae that support commands are:
a) "He should not bring it (i.e., this matter, enim-bi) back on it (i.e., into oral discussion, ka-ga)!"[32] – in other words, "He should not discuss it again!" ((enim-bi/ka-ga) nam-mi-(ib₂)-gur-re, 95 attestations). This is phrased in Akkadian *awātum lā iturram* "The matter should not turn up again!"[33]

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[29] Michalowski 1993:4.

[30] Sallaberger 1999a:132–37 discusses how the terminology of speech act theory and of linguistic pragmatics can be adapted to the study of ancient Mesopotamian letters.

[31] Sollberger 1966:4.

[32] Sollberger 1966:4 *sub* 6.3.1. (a) translated the phrase literally as "Let him not come back on this order", i.e., "He must not argue." However, this translation, adapted by Michalowski 1993 and others, does not take into account that the verbal form is transitive.

[33] See text (4), TIM 2, 91: 8. Cf. the discussion of Hilgert 2005:352–53 ("er soll nicht anfechten"). He reads du₁₁-ga "said" instead of ka-ga "in the mouth"; the latter reading is informed by the comparable expression ka-ga ge-n "to settle (lit. make firm) (the matter) orally (lit. in the mouth)."

This formula intends to prohibit additional inquiries and thus any further delay. Formally this phrase is a prohibition; but since it is directed against additional efforts, namely delay and inquiries, it is an indirect request to deal with the letter's message immediately without phrasing it as a direct order to hurry. There are some other verbal expressions which are also not direct orders but phrased in an indirect way, thus avoiding the face-threatening act of a request bold on record.[34]

b) "Who is like my brother?" (a-ba ses-ŋu₁₀-gen₇, 19 attestations, once *mannum kī aḫīja*, TIM 2, 91: 3), plus in a single letter to a woman "Who is like my mother?" (ITT 3, 6511). This phrase solicits personal loyalty on the basis of symbolic kinship, the term 'brother' treating the peer official as a family member and thus establishing personal proximity. It is even used as a term of address in one Ur III letter (*AuOr* 17/18, 220 no. 10) – the only such phrase of address besides "to my lord" (lugal-ŋu₁₀) – and twice as apposition to a personal name ("to PN, my brother").[35]

The stock phrase "Who is like my brother?", formulated as a rhetorical question and thus evoking a response from the addressee, refers to personal proximity and can be regarded as the standard expression for a polite request. The phrase usually follows the propositional request "He should give something to someone," and can be combined with other stock phrases, notably "He should not discuss it again!" Pragmatically as well as by its propositional content, the phrase "Who is like my brother?" corresponds closely to the standard early Old Babylonian phrase "If you are my brother" that precedes the central request in polite letters.[36] The presence of the phrase is an important clue to the exact nature of a letter's request. A request without the routine formula "Who is like my brother?" certainly cannot simply be classified as a 'polite' letter. But given the fact that the addition of only the one phrase makes a letter a polite one, a simple request without any additional phrase has to be regarded as neutral in terms of politeness. And of course the indirect reference to the addressee in the third person produces a mitigation of the direct imposition of the request.

The routine polite formula evoking solidarity can even be found in letters to the city governor. In the two published instances the senders remain unknown; but given the letters' contents, and the plausible social constellations at Umma, the senders may well have been generals stationed in the region of Umma.

(5) Letter to the governor (of Umma), no seal impression (Nisaba 9, 268):

If you'd say that to the governor:
He should investigate the matter of Lugalʾaddari! Who is like my brother?[37]

(6) Letter to Urlisina, the governor of Umma, no seal impression (YOS 4, 114):

If you'd say that to the governor:
He should water the field of the Amorite Urduŋu! Who is like my brother?[38]

c) Other verbal routines express a sense of urgency that the request be fulfilled:

"It is flood!" i.e., "It is very urgent!" (a-ma-ru-kam, 30 attestations), Akkadian *abbūtum* ("*apputtum*," Sallaberger 1999a:163).

"Quickly!" (ul₄-la-bi; 11 attestations, none at Girsu).

"He should not let the day pass!" (u₄ na-bi₂-ib₂-zal-le, 3 attestations, Girsu); similarly "Today it should be accomplished" (u₄-da sa₂ ḫe₂-e, SAT 3, 2172, Umma).

All routine formulae call for the prompt accomplishment of the requested action and thereby indicate that the administration did not work as smoothly as the simply formulated letters and documents suggest

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[34] Using again the terminology of Brown/Levinson 1987.

[35] Both are letters from Nippur, and both read PN ses-ŋa₂ instead of ses-ŋu₁₀-ur₂; TCS 1, 28; BdI 2, II 53.

[36] Sallaberger 1999a:185–90.

[37] (1) ensi₂-ra (2) u₃-na-a-du₁₁ (3) enim lugal-ad-da-ri-ka (4) en₈ ḫe₂-be₂ (5) a-ba ses-ŋu₁₀-gen₇.

[38] (1) ur-ᵈlisin-na-ra (2) u₃-na-a-du₁₁ (3) a-ša₃ urdu₂-ŋu₁₀ ŋar₇-du₂-ka (4) a ḫe₂-ma-de₂-e (rev.) (5) a-ba ses-ŋu₁₀-gen₇.

and that in particular cases more effort had to be expended to get things done. The urge for action implies that the letter's request was less about the requested action itself than about its prompt fulfilment. The implication that the routine formulae were used to urge expeditious action in unusual circumstances is consistent with the evidence of Puzrišdagan, namely the small number of letters there in comparison to the whole mass of documents. The routine formulae, especially of types a) and c), suggest that letters were employed when problems turned up in administration – for example, when delays occurred or were foreseen, or when unusual transactions had to be executed.

4. Main topics of Ur III letters

The transactions of goods recorded in administrative documents include those that occurred on special or unforeseen occasions, such as the provision of expenditure of gifts and food to royal messengers or to diplomatic guests upon their arrival. It is no surprise that a fair number of Ur III letters deal with such non-routine expenditures. These include letters from the king, who would provide for the needs of royal emissaries and messengers travelling in the provinces. Two letters are quoted here; they are closely related to corresponding expenditure documents.

(7a) Flour needed for a spontaneous offering by the king; from Girsu (*AuOr* 17/18, 221 no. 12):

If you'd say that to Luniŋira:
40 litres of fine emmer flour, 10 litres of flour 'for heaping up,' 10+x litres of emmer flour: for (god) Dumuzi, (offerings according to) the heart's desire of the king; via Namḫani, royal cup-bearer.[39]

An administrative document for a similar royal offering for Dumuzi reads as follows.

(7b) Expenditure for offerings (TCTI 2, 5071, dated Šusuen year 2/month 8):

2 jugs of good beer concentrate, 20 litres of fine emmer flour, 20 litres of fine flour, 10 litres of emmer groats: for the material for offerings (according to) the heart's desire of the king for Dumuzi; via Lāqīp, royal cup-bearer. (Date).[40]

(8) Food and gifts for a visiting foreign sovereign; from Girsu (TCS 1, 257):

If you'd say that to Urnungal:
3 kor (i.e., 900 litres) of beer and bread, 2 fattened sheep, 3 grass-fed sheep, 1 pomp garment of third quality, 10 *guzza* garments of third quality, 10 top woven garments, 5 kor (i.e., 1,500 litres) of dates: he (*sc.* Urnungal) should give that to Ḫulibar![41]

Ḫulibar, ruler of Iranian Tu(ḫ)tu(ḫ)li, was an important ally of the Ur III state, and he and his attendants were lavishly served during his visits to Sumer.[42] The large quantity of dates that were ordered for Ḫulibar in our letter was probably an extra gift of a speciality of Sumer.

Administrative letters sent by the king can be added to these 'exceptional' occasions that required a written letter for a transaction. Text (9) deals with the gifts for a royal messenger that passed through Umma: the reference to "my messenger" makes it certain that it is the king who is meant by the title lugal. In text (10) the king ordered provisions for people from Kimaš, apparently Elamite troops serving in Babylonia whose maintenance was a state responsibility. Text (11) is an Akkadian letter by the king to the governor of Umma about the grain provision for a priest of a deity in Girsu – a strange combination of factors that is hard to explain.

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[39] (1) lu$_2$-niŋir-ra (2) u$_3$-na-a-du$_{11}$ (3) 0.0.4 zi$_3$ sig$_{15}$ (4) 0.0.1 zi$_3$ dub-dub (5) 0.0.1+[x] eša (r.) (6) ^{d}dumu-zi (7) ša$_3$-ge kuru$_{13}$-a lugal (8) ŋiri$_3$ nam-ḫa-ni sagi lugal.

[40] 2 dug dida saga$_{10}$, 0.0.2 zi$_3$ sig$_{15}$, 0.0.2 zi$_3$-gu, 0.0.1 eša, niŋ$_2$-siškur$_2$-ra ša$_3$-ge kuru$_{13}$ lugal, ^{d}dumu-zi-še$_3$, ŋiri$_3$ la-gi-ib, sagi lugal. (Date).

[41] (1) ur-^{d}nun-gal-ra (2) u$_3$-na-a-du$_{11}$ (3) 3.0.0 kaš inda$_3$ gur (4) 2 udu niga (5) 3 udu u$_2$ (6) 1 ^{tu9}niŋ$_2$-lam$_2$ 3-kam us$_2$ (r.) (7) 10 ^{tu9}guz-za 3-kam us$_2$ (8) 10 tu$_9$ saŋ uš-bar (9) 5.0.0 zu$_2$-lum gur (10) ḫu-li$_2$-bar-ra (11) ḫe$_2$-na-ab-šum$_2$-mu.

[42] Administrative Girsu documents that list similar expenditures for Ḫulibar are ITT 3, 5155. 6062; ITT 5, 6783; a parallel letter is TLB 3, 66.

(9) Letter by the king to Urlisina, the governor of Umma (YOS 4, 117):

What the king says, if you'd say that to Urlisina:
1 silver ring of ⅓ mina, 15 garments, 30 litres of scented oil, 120 litres of sesame oil, 1 cattle, 10 sheep and goats – he should give that to my messenger![43]

(10) Letter by the king to the governor of Umma (BPOA 1, 1234):

What my lord says,[44] if you'd say that to the governor of Umma:
2,555 litres of barley per month, he should give that to the people from Kimaš![45]

(11) Akkadian letter by the king to Urlisina, governor of Umma (*RA* 24, 44):

Thus the king, speak to Urlisina:
60 kor (i.e., 18,000 litres) of barley, give that to the *lumaḫ*-priest of Inana of Girsu![46]

The special occasions that required letters can help us better understand the Ur III letter corpus. The foregoing examples demonstrate that the specific context of a letter cannot be identified by the structure of its text, which usually consists of one phrase only, or by its diction, which is rarely more than "he should give something to someone." The context of a letter can be inferred from the parties involved and by the relationship of the letter to administrative text types. This approach reveals that many letters deal with deviations from standard administrative procedures. Constant control of the personnel performing labour in various institutions with persons arriving and leaving implies a continual adjustment of the amount of barley distributed for their subsistence. The preserved documentation concerning labour and grain rations in the provincial archives is enormous and testifies to the bureaucratic efforts to keep record of all changes. Letters concerning such changes are usually phrased as simple commands to give grain; but additional information – as in text (12) on the period and the work to be done (here the job of "carrier" so characteristic for labour service) – indicates that a basic change in the ration lists is involved.

(12) Addition of a person to the roster for rations (BPOA 2, 1829, Girsu):

If you'd say that to Lukašŋu:
40 litres of grain for Lugalniŋenše, son of Niŋurum, for the job of brushwood carrier of (goddess) Nanše from the month of the harvest on – he should give it to him![47]

Deletions from, as well as additions to, the ration rosters could be announced by a letter. The key Sumerian term for the former is šu bar, "to release someone/something," which appears in more than 10% of the Sumerian letters (69 attestations). These releases not only concerned persons, who sometimes had been kept in debt slavery, but also goods which had been detained. Both the administration of persons and the cessation of an existing labour relationship appear in text (13).

(13) Release of workers after harvest for a (military) expedition (TCS 1, 173, Girsu):

If you'd say that to Nani:
Each brick layer should harvest 3 *iku*, smooth out(?) 3 *iku*, and thresh exactly 3 kor of grain. As soon as he (*sc.* Nani) has finished the account on this work, he should release them! They are going on an expedition. He should bind the water bags for it![48]

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[43] (1) lugal-e (2) na-ab-be₂-a (3) ur-ᵈlisin-na-ra (4) u₃-na-a-du₁₁ (5) ⅓ˢᵃ ḫar ku₃-babbar (6) 15 tu₉ ḫi-a (7) 0.0.3 i₃ du₁₀-ga (r.) (8) 0.2.0 i₃-ŋeš (9) 1 gud (10) 10 udu maš₂ ḫi-a (11) lu₂ kiŋ₂-ge₄-a-ŋa₂ (12) ḫe₂-na-ab-šum₂-mu.

[44] The unique wording "my lord" (lugal-ŋu₁₀) can only be understood as being expressed from the viewpoint of the scribe who wrote the letter.

[45] (1) lugal-ŋu₁₀ (2) na-be₂-a (3) ensi₂ ummaᵏⁱ-ra (4) u₃-na-a-du₁₁ (5) 7.4.1 5 sila₃ še gur-ta-am₃ (r.) (6) iti-da (7) lu₂ ki-mašᵏⁱ-ke₄ (8) ḫa-ba-ab-šum₂-mu.

[46] (1) um-ma šar-ru-um-ma (2) a-na ur-ᵈlisin-na (3) qi₂-bi₂-ma (4) 1,00.0.0 še gur (5) a-na lu₂-maḫ (6) ša ᵈinana (7) ša ŋir₂-suᵏⁱ (8) i-di₃-in.

[47] (1) lu₂-kaš-ŋu₁₀ (2) u₃-na-a-du₁₁ (3) 0.0.4 še lugal (4) lugal-niŋen₆ᵏⁱ-še₃ (5) dumu niŋ₂-u₂-rum (6) u₂-il₂ ᵈnašše{ᵏⁱ}-še₃ (rev.) (7) iti ŠE.KIN-ku₅-ta (8) ḫe₂-na-ab-šum₂-mu.

The documentation in the form of administrative texts often conceals the legal obligations that existed between the individual and the provincial or state organisations in the Ur III state. Not only releases, but other legal matters appear in the epistolary corpus, giving details about the personal liability of individuals who performed various tasks.[49]

Another topic of great importance was the assignation of arable land to individuals as their subsistence plot. The distribution of land was of central concern to the king and the city governors. This is confirmed by an apparently authentic late copy of an Ur III royal letter that deals with fields,[50] and by letters in the 'Royal Correspondence' of Ur, a corpus of letters devoted to the management of land allegedly sent by and to the Ur III kings, but surviving in apparently somewhat expanded versions copied two or three centuries later in the Old Babylonian schools.[51]

The role of the king leads us to the Ur III administrative letters directed "to my lord" (lugal-ŋu₁₀), which often apparently refers to the king. Most such letters are reports about the proper fulfilment of a task.

(14) Report "to my lord" on the distribution of fields (Umma; BPOA 1, 563):

If you'd say that to my lord:
He (*sc.* my lord) has told me to issue land at the Abagal field for the runners and to find their front side bordering on the subsistence plot of the city governor. Since my lord has left (it follows a list of 9 fields with the respective names proving that the subsistence plots have been assigned); it (i.e., the place for the fields) was found on the border and they (already) worked on it.[52]

Although various topics in the Ur III letters can be identified that deal with exceptional transactions in special cases or with changes in the existing order, there are a large number of simple orders to hand over everyday goods. For example, roughly one-sixth of the Umma letters, more than 30 texts, deal with transactions involving reeds, six of these letters even being written by the city governor himself. Our conclusions thus far suggest that these did not deal with 'normal' expenditures of reed, but with somehow 'exceptional' cases. It would seem hard to prove that assumption without a detailed study, but it is remarkable that Agu, the most prominent person in the handicraft of reeds and wood in the province of Umma, does not appear in a single one of those letters. The governor disposed of the reeds harvested directly for his household on fields in the province of Umma, but the transport of reeds to his largest workshop apparently did not necessitate the writing of a letter. Therefore concerning the transfer of reeds it appears that letters were only necessary for transactions that deviated from everyday practice – which is consistent with our preliminary conclusions about the role of Ur III administrative letters.

5. *Written and oral communication*

Another way of determining the role of letter writing in Ur III society is to trace the paths of communication as reflected in the letters themselves. Old Babylonian letters, for example, repeatedly refer to 'tab-

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48 (1) na-ni-ra (2) u₃-na-a-du₁₁ (3) 1 šidim-e 0.0.3ᴳᴬᴺᴬ²-am₃ ḫa-gur₁₀-gur₁₀ (4) 0.0.3ᴳᴬᴺᴬ²-am₃ ḫa-ab-tab-be₂ (5) še 3.0.0 gur-am₃ (r.) (6) ḫa-sag₃-ge (7) a₂-ba ni₂-ka₉ i₃-ni-a₅ (8) šu ḫa-bar-re (9) kaskal-še₃ i₃-su-be₂-eš (10) ᵏᵘˢa-ŋa₂-la₂-bi ḫa-kéše₂-e.

49 Instances of the personal liability of office holders have been studied most notably by Waetzoldt/Sigrist 1993; Wilcke 2005 and 2007a; Paoletti 2008:143–46. The situation in the Old Babylonian period as reconstructed by van Koppen 2002 also has to be considered here. Allred 2010, however, assumes that letters deal with more 'private' legal affairs; but he neither cites these studies, nor does he link the evidence of the letters to the private liability arising from the performance of an 'official' duty.

50 Neumann 1992.

51 Michalowski 1976.

52 (1) lugal-ŋu₁₀ (2) u₃-na-a-du₁₁ (3) a-ba-gal a-ša₃ kaš₄ (4) zi-zi-da (5) saŋ-bi mu-ba (6) šuku ensi₂-ka (7) us₂-sa pa₃-de₃-[...] ma-an-du₁₁ (r.) (8) u₄ lugal-ŋu₁₀ ba-ŋen-na-ta (9) 4.1.3 gana₂-gud (10) 6.0.0ᴳᴬᴺᴬ² ensi₂ (11) 0.1.3ᴳᴬᴺᴬ² ur-am₃-ma (12) 1.0.0ᴳᴬᴺᴬ² lu₂-ib-gal (13) 2.0.0ᴳᴬᴺᴬ² DINGIR-bi₂-la-ni (14) 1.0.0ᴳᴬᴺᴬ² lu₂-diŋir-ra NU-banda₃ gud (15) 1.0.0ᴳᴬᴺᴬ²lu₂-du₁₀-ga NU-banda₃ gud (16) 0.1.3ᴳᴬᴺᴬ² ses tab-ba-ni (17) 1.0.0ᴳᴬᴺᴬ² a-ab-ba saŋ-du₅ (l.Rd.) (18) us₂-a i₃-pa₃ kiŋ₂ bi₂-in-ke₃-eš₂.

lets', i.e. past and future letters, and therefore these letters appear as elements within long chains of written communication. The situation was surprisingly different in the Ur III period: not a single explicit reference to a "letter" appears in the 679 Ur III letters, although the word itself is attested in contemporary administrative documents. The Sumerian word for "letter" is based on the standard address formula "If you'd say that to him" (u₃-na-a-du₁₁); and the Akkadian loanword *unnedukkum* was used for "letter" in the South during the Old Babylonian period. In some Ur III administrative texts that list food expenditures for the messengers that were hosted at the caravansaries of the provinces, the expenditure is justified "because of the letter of the grand vizier" (u₃-na-a-du₁₁ sugal₇-maḫ-ta; cf. Notizia 2009:41; 290). Letters are sometimes referred to in administrative documents:

(15) Administrative document about a transaction ordered by letter (*AuOr* 17/18, 219 no. 4, Girsu):

20 litres of sesame oil, 5 strings of figs of 6 cubits length: the exorcist Ursaga has received it. The pertinent letter of the grand vizier is available at the storehouse. Charged. (Date: Year Šusuen 8/month 11)[53].

The letters routinely refer to the "word" (enim) of the official: "because of the word of the governor" (enim ensi₂-ta);[54] "it is a word of the palace" (enim e₂-gal-kam);[55] "it is a word of the accountant" (enim bešeŋ-dub-ba-kam) etc.[56] Since a word for "letter" did exist in the administrative language, the use of the term "word" instead of "letter" cannot be taken to be an imprecise reference to letters.

So the letter *per se* must be viewed as exceptional in the apparatus of administration, which was usually based on oral face-to-face communication. This agrees with our conclusions that the main topics of the letters involved special situations (see section 4), with the meaning and full form of the verbal routine "He should not discuss it again" (see a) in section 3), and with the usage of verbs for transactions. In Sumerian and Akkadian Ur III letters most transactions were referred to by the verb "to give" (šum₂, 382 attestations), whereas "to bring, to send" (tum₃, de₆) was extremely rare (18 attestations, of which 11 are commands). But in Old Babylonian letters, where exchange of letters is constantly mentioned, goods are often "sent" (*šūbulum* etc.), not merely "given" (*nadānum*). All these factors suggest that face-to-face communication was predominant in Ur III administrative practice.

6. Letters as legal documents and the archival selection

These observations on the use of letters in the Ur III period lead to a relatively coherent picture of the administrative practices of the time: the administration of at least the governors' archives was overseen by a relatively closed group of individuals who mainly communicated face-to-face.

Sealed tablets, including most letters, were legal documents about transactions that had to be stored like administrative documents. A written order for an allocation of goods served as the formal justification for dispensing these goods from the storehouse. The role of the letters becomes even clearer if we consider their provenance. The Umma letters, for example, most probably stem from one place, the administrative archive of the province's governor. As suggested by documents like text (15), the letters were kept as records in the central administrative archives; but there were no separate archives of correspondence.

The character of the letters as legal documents also explains why the letter tablets themselves, and not just their cases, were so often sealed. In a very few instances the inner tablet of a letter with a request was also provided with a case at the transaction on which the transfer is noted (Michalowski 1993:nos. 121–23). The best example is represented by the following pair of texts:

(16) Transfer of barley on both a letter-order and a receipt tablet (*JCS* 24, 134 = LEM 121):

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[53] (1) 0.0.2 i₃-ŋeš (2) 5 ŋešpeš₃ 6 kuš₃ (3) ur-sa₆-ga lu₂-mux(KA×SU)-mux(KA×SU) (4) šu ba-ti (r.) (5) u₃-na-a-du₁₁ sugal₇-maḫ-bi (?) (6) e₂-kišeb₃-ba-ka mu-ŋal₂ (7) zi-ga (8) iti ŠE.KIN-ku₅ (9) mu ma₂-gur₈ maḫ ba-dim₂.
[54] BPOA 1, 1094; cf. ITT 5, 6766, MVN 4, 182, TCS 1, 113; 247; 334; TJAMC pl. 57.
[55] Birmingham 2, 157; TCS 1, 130, cf. "of the king" lugal-kam TCS 1, 2; 171.
[56] ITT 2, 4145, cf. "of the administrator," šabra *JCS* 28, 167 n.3; "of the grand vizier," sugal₇-maḫ TCS 1, 230; "of the overseer," ugula-kam YOS 4, 137.

Tablet (i.e., letter): If you'd say that to Ḫesa: He should give to Šuʾadad 95 kor of barley in the temple of Šara. He should not discuss it again!

Case (i.e., receipt document): 95 royal kor of barley, the animal inspector Šuʾadad has received it from the house administrator Ilumbani; in the temple of Šara.

Seal: Šuʾadad, royal animal inspector, son of Gamilum.[57]

In many cases, as in the above, the letter-order involves three parties: the sender, the addressee, and usually a third person as recipient. The sealed letter was kept in the archive to justify the chain of command, but usually could not be used as a receipt tablet.[58] Such receipt tablets, sealed for approval by the recipient, were kept for the balanced accounts of an organisation and then sent to the central accounting office of the province.[59] In text (16) the link between order by letter and receipt is directly attested.

Furthermore, the letters themselves quite often specify the correct registration of the administrative transactions. Because of the extremely concise and succinct formulation of the text, any information recorded must have been of relevance. So the sender was not only concerned that his orders were fulfilled, but also that the necessary book-keeping procedures were undertaken correctly. Letters indicate to which account the goods should be charged (zi-g, 33 attestations in commands), or if and how a receipt tablet should be written (kišeb₃ šu ti, 32 attestations in commands). "He should receive a sealed tablet (i.e., a receipt)" is the standard command that indicates how the transaction should be concluded.

By their format with seal impressions, by their relationship to administrative texts, and by their explicit additional commands, the 'letter-orders' thus can be fitted into the administrative documentation that is legally relevant for the fulfilment of individual duties.

Another group of letters actually served as legal documents in the archive of the governor of the city state, who was the chief justice of his province and in whose archive the documents for legal procedures were kept.[60] The key Sumerian expression is "for (his) attention" (literally perhaps "it is to be directed to the ear", ŋeštu-ga ru-gu₂-dam), and letters containing this formula may be considered affidavits. In text (17) the address formula follows the main information of the text.

(17) Declaration on the existence of bandits (Girsu, TCS 1, 6):

Atu, Luʾurub, Lugalma[gure] are bandits. They live at [Paras]iga.
What the lamentation singer [says], if [you'd say that] to Ur[…].
He (i.e. the addressee) should give that (information) to the governor.[61]

In the case of the affidavits the structure of the letters offers clues as to their function. The address formula is reasonably well preserved in 656 of the 679 Sumerian letters, and only 85 of these do not name an addressee. Nine letters without addressee note only the sender, although the sender is mentioned in less than 5% of the total corpus of letters (32 attestations; see above). Most of the nine letters which name only the sender can be understood as affidavits that were kept in the archive of the governor[62]; four of them even include the oath "by the name of the king" (mu lugal).[63] Their status as affidavits which explicitly identified the person who could serve as a witness in a legal case – namely, the sender of the letter – thus conditioned the format of these letters.

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[57] Tablet: [(1)] ḫe₂-sa₆-ra [(2)] u₃-na-a-du₁₁ [(3)] 1,35.0.0 še gur [(4)] ša₃ e₂ ᵈšara₂-ka [(5)] šu-ᵈIŠKUR-ra [(6)] ḫe₂-na-ab-šum₂-mu (r.) [(7)] na-mi-gur-re. Case: [(1)] 1,35.0.0 še gur lugal [(2)] ki DINGIR-ba-ni šabra-ta [(3)] šu-ᵈIŠKUR šuš₃ [(4)] šu ba-ti (r.) [(5)] ša₃ e₂ ᵈšara₂. Seal: [(1)] šu-ᵈIŠKUR [(2)] šuš₃ lugal [(3)] dumu ga-mi-lum.

[58] A receipt tablet was dispensable when the addressee had to give the goods to the sender of the letter. On this situation in Old Babylonian letters see Charpin 2013.

[59] Cf. Steinkeller 2003.

[60] Falkenstein 1956/1957.

[61] [(1)] 1 a-tu [(2)] 1 lu₂-urubᵏⁱ [(3)] 1 lugal-ma₂-[gur₈-re] [(4)] lu₂ sa-gaz-m[e] [(5)] [para₁₀-s]ig-gaᵏⁱ-a (r.) [(6)] [i₃]-durunₓ-eš₂ [(7)] [g]ala-e [(8)] na-a[b-be₂-a] [(9)] ur-[…] [(10)] u₃-[na-a-du₁₁] [(11)] e[ns]i₂-ra [(12)] ḫe₂-na-ab-šum₂-mu.

[62] The texts are: Birmingham 2, 130 (fragmentary); BPOA 1, 368; ITT 5, 6874; MVN 3, 377; MVN 11, 169; Nakahara 42 pl. 11; NATN 555; YOS 4, 233; 275. The only command among these nine letters is YOS 4, 233.

[63] BPOA 1, 368; MVN 3, 377; Nakahara 42 pl. 11; YOS 4, 275.

7. Conclusions

Our observations on the corpus of administrative correspondence from the Ur III period lead to some general conclusions on the role of these letters.

Ur III letters, most often formulated as requests for transactions, frequently stress the urgency of the requested transaction by stock phrases. Letters were written for special situations that deviated from routine procedures, especially if matters of the royal sector were involved, and they also induced modifications and rearrangements in existing legal relations. Furthermore, Ur III letters served as legally valid documents that permitted transactions at a distance confirmed by the sealing of the sender. Reports were sent mainly to superiors; orders were written to subordinates or to "brothers" on the same social stratum.

In the preceding discussion I have frequently pointed out the close link between legal and administrative matters. Administrative texts always documented legally relevant transactions, and specific cases or problems occasionally necessitated the composition of a letter. The letters actually confirm the personal liability of individuals in state service. Many examples of this have been collected from various documents by Wilcke,[64] who, citing as examples sales in official contexts and debts and debt slavery, defined the Ur III economy as basically an entitlement system of obligations and compensations. This description of the basic dynamics of the economy overcomes the obvious difficulties of a classification by the main organisation(s), which has not led to satisfactory results. Thus Garfinkle[65] has seen the Ur III economy as a mixture of *oikos* economy, patrimonial domination, and the persistence of local hierarchies; and Allred 2010 has tried to make the best of the letters within the traditional models: "(…) these documents [i.e., the letters] quite often concern the private, often legal, affairs of particular individuals. Moreover, letter-orders lend weight to recent arguments that distinctions between the public and private sphere in ancient Mesopotamia were not so clearly made by the ancient Mesopotamians themselves".[66] The preceding discussions have shown that the letters instead demonstrate the role of the individual within the administration; so perhaps models based on organisations (private, *oikos*, state, etc.) are less successful in describing the basic dynamics of the Ur III economy.

The small number, and the form and diction, of the letters indicate that usually transactions were carried out without further regulations and orders.[67] As was stated above, the small number of letters, their focus on exceptional cases, and their references to oral orders and to personal transactions indicate that administration was carried out by a relatively small circle of persons[68] who must have interacted basically face-to-face. Much routine was at work in the affiliation to households, labour duties, land allotments, and the acquisition and supply of goods and products.

Our new assessment of the letters results in an improved evaluation of the bulk of the Ur III administrative documents. These documents do not point to a regulative state regime with constant control of each single transaction from the highest to subordinate levels; however, they do show that in the state of the Ur III dynasty written documents were regularly issued even for routine transactions.

The letters preserved in the archives may lead to an impression of limited literacy – that is, that writing outside the royal court, scholarship, and poetry was used only in administration and not for other areas of communication. Such limited literacy did obtain elsewhere in the ancient Near East, for example at Ebla or in the Middle Elamite period. But it is very unlikely such was true during the Ur III period because during the subsequent Old Babylonian period practically every Babylonian household was literate. The impression of limited literacy is the misleading consequence of the selection criteria of the archives; the legal affidavits sent to the governor, for example, instead indicate a rather wide-spread use of writing. Letters which did not primarily serve as administrative or legal documents are quite rare; among them is a group of letters from the Nippur region that can be compared to early Old Babylonian exemplars.[69] But it

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[64] Wilcke 2007a.
[65] Garfinkle 2008.
[66] Allred 2010:10.
[67] Similarly Allred 2010.
[68] Cf. Dahl 2007.
[69] Pomponio/Stol/Westenholz 2006:nos. II 50–58.

remains unknown how an Ur III merchant would have formulated a private letter home to his wife and family.

The Ur III letters are focused on the propositional content, the transaction, so that verbal features of politeness were largely omitted. A letter from the king to a governor does not differ fundamentally from one between two persons working in cattle administration, the only difference being that the ruler is identified as "king" (lugal) and not by his name. The absence of a 'language of power' in the letters is thus consistent with a less regulative conception of the Ur III state. This conception is also based on the analysis of the preserved letters that served not so much as orders to subordinates, seemingly an expression of a dominant state control, but as legally relevant documentation for particular transactions. But due to the selection of the archives, the Ur III letter corpus gives only one specific view on the economic and social conditions of this fascinating early empire.

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PLATES

Figure 2: Letter (1) (TrDr 89), after CDLI P134762 (www.cdli.ucla.edu, accessed 2011/11/03, © Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative). The cylinder seal of the scribe has been impressed on the obverse of the clay tablet after the text was written (left); a clearer impression of the scribe's seal showing the inscription identifying the scribe was placed on the reverse of the tablet (right).

Figure 3: Letter (2) (MVN 3 352), obverse, after Owen 1975, Pl. 18. The seal is impressed on the reverse of the clay tablet (no illustration).