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'I am fine!': Information about the sender's health in the Greek private letters of the Roman period

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Delphine Nachtergaele

‘I AM FINE!’

**INFORMATION ABOUT THE SENDER’S HEALTH
IN THE GREEK PRIVATE LETTERS
OF THE ROMAN PERIOD***

ONE OF THE EPISTOLARY FORMULAS in Greek private papyrus letters was the phrase in which the sender reassured the addressee that he was in good health. It appears in approximately 170 private letters. Often such information was placed immediately after a wish for the addressee’s well-being:¹ most scholars therefore considered the two phrases as two parts of one and the same formula,² like, for example, the one found in

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¹Sometimes the two parts were contracted into an elliptic phrase, e.g. in *UPZ* I 61, ll. 4–5 (161 BC [TM 3452]): *εἰ ἔρρωσθε, καὶ παντὸς δ’ ὑγίαινον*.

²F. ZIEMANN, *De epistularum Graecarum formulis sollemnibus quaestiones selectae* [= *Dissertationes philologicae Halenses* 18/4], Halle 1910, p. 305; F. X. J. EXLER, *The Form of the Ancient Greek Letter of the Epistolary Papyri (3rd c. B.C. – 3rd c. A.D.): A Study in Greek Epistolography*, doctoral dissertation, Washington 1923, pp. 103–107; H. KOSKENNIEMI, *Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des griechischen Briefes bis 400 n. Chr.* [= *Suomalaisen Tiedeakatemia toimituksia*, Sarja B, 102/2], Helsinki 1956, p. 131; R. BUZÓN, *Die Briefe der Ptolemäerzeit. Ihre Struktur und ihre Formeln*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Heidelberg 1984, p. 9.

PSI IV 331, ll. 1–2 (257–256 BC [TM 2025]): *εἰ ἔρρωσαι, εὖ ἂν ἔχοι. ἐρρώμεθα δὲ καὶ ἡμεῖς*, ‘If you are well, that would be good. We are well too’ (my translation).

This example is rather typical of early Ptolemaic letters. Towards the end of the Ptolemaic period, however, the opening formula and the initial health wish were formulated in one phrase. This resulted in formulas like in *P. Tebt.* I 59, ll. 1–3 (99 BC [TM 3695]): *Ποσειδώνιος τοῖς ἐν Τεπτύνει ἱερεῦσι χαίρειν καὶ ἐρρώσθαι, ὑγίαινον δὲ καὶ αὐτός*, ‘Posidonios to the priests in Tebtynis, greetings and health. I myself was well too’ (my translation).

In Ferdinandus Ziemann’s view, the second part of the formula – with the information about the sender – was eventually omitted in many documents and only the shortened phrase *χαίρειν καὶ ἐρρώσθαι* or *χαίρειν καὶ ὑγιάειν* survived.³ According to him, the information about the sender’s condition disappeared along with the Ptolemaic health wish, when in the Roman period a new health wish with a completely different structure arose: *πρὸ μὲν πάντων εὐχομαί σε ὑγιάειν*, ‘before everything I pray that you are well’ (my translation). Nevertheless, Ziemann pointed to three Roman letters in which the sender still confirmed his well-being right after the health wish *πρὸ μὲν πάντων εὐχομαί σε ὑγιάειν*. They have been considered mere remnants of the old formula.⁴ My investigation, however, has revealed that there are in fact twenty-one such occurrences from the first three centuries AD,⁵ and that they are not random relics from the old health wish.

³ ZIEMANN, *De epistularum Graecarum formulis* (cit. n. 2), p. 312.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 321–322. Francis EXLER, too, gave examples of the combination of the Roman health wish with information about the sender’s health, but he did not discuss them (EXLER, *The Form* [cit. n. 2], pp. 107–108).

⁵ *SB* VI 9165 (1st half of 1st c. AD [TM 25290]); *P. Mich.* VIII 475 (TM 27088), 476 (TM 27089), 478 (TM 27091), 480 (TM 27093), all dated to AD 100–125; *O. Claud.* II 283 (TM 29700), 303 (TM 29716), both written around mid-2nd c. AD; *P. Mich.* VIII 495 (AD 107–185 [TM 27105]); *P. Bingen* 74 (AD 130–199 [TM 78042]); *P. Mich.* VIII 491 (2nd c. AD [TM 27101]); *BGU* II 632 (2nd c. AD [TM 28196]); *BGU* III 794 (2nd c. AD [TM 28088]); *BGU* XI 2129 (2nd c. AD [TM 26963]); *P. Giss.* I 97 (2nd c. AD [TM 27875]); *P. Lund.* II 1 (2nd c. AD [TM 28115]); *BGU* I 27 (2nd or 3rd c. AD [TM 28211]); *SB* V 8027 (2nd or 3rd c. AD [TM 27373]); *O. Lund.* 14 (2nd or 3rd c. AD [TM 74875]); *P. Col.* X 278 (AD 225–275 [TM 31838]); *SB* VI 9194 (AD 275–299 [TM 30754]); *P. Hamb.* III 227 (3rd c. AD [TM 30070]). I omitted phrases such as the one from *P. Oxy.* XIV 1770,

Let me start by quoting one of the occurrences:

πρὸ μὲν πάντων εὐχομαί σε ὑγιαίνειν καὶ εὐτυχεῖν μοι, ὃ μοι εὐκταῖόν ἐστιν, ὑγιαίνω δὲ καὶ αὐτός, 'Before everything, I pray that you are well and prosperous, which is my prayer. I myself am well too' (*P. Mich.* VIII 476, ll. 3–4 [my translation]).

The quote comes from a letter from the Claudius Tiberianus archive. This archive is dated to the early second century AD and was found in Karanis. It is a bilingual archive which contains private letters in both Latin and Greek.⁶ The main correspondents are Claudius Terentianus, a soldier in the army and a sailor in the Alexandrian fleet, and Claudius Tiberianus, a veteran.⁷ The fact that the two protagonists are linked to the Roman army is not so surprising, as Karanis was inhabited by many Roman veterans. Also three other letters from this archive have a similar initial health wish in which the sender refers to his own well-being:

πρὸ παντός εὐχομαί σε ὑ[γ]ιαίνει[ι]ν, ὑγια[ί]νω δ[έ] καὶ ἴ[σ]ω, 'Before everything I pray that you are well. I myself am well too' (*P. Mich.* VIII 475, ll. 4–5 [my translation]);

πρὸ μ[ὲν πάντ]ω[ν] εὐχομαί σε ὑγιαίνει[ι]ν, [ὃ μοι εὐ]κταῖόν ἐ[στι]ν, ὑ[γ]ι[α]ί[νω] δὲ καὶ αὐ[τ]ός, 'Before everything, I pray that you are well,

ll. 1–8 (late 3rd c. AD [TM 31812]): κυρία μο[υ μητρι] ἄμα τοῖς κυρ[ίοις μου ἀ]δελφοῖς πλείστ[α vac.] χαίρειν. προηγου[μένως] εὐχομε ὑμᾶς ὑγι[αίνειν] καὶ εὖ πράτ'τεω. γ[νώσκειν] ὑμᾶς θέλω ὅτι μετ[ὰ πάντων] ὀλοκληροῦμεν, 'to my lady mother together with my lords brothers, very many greetings. First I pray that you are healthy and well. I want you to know that we are well with all (our people)' (my translation). In this letter, the information about the sender's well-being is part of the body of the letter, whereas the health wish – and, consequently, also the information about the sender's condition – belongs to the opening of the letter (cf. the classification in J. L. WHITE, *The Form and Function of the Body of the Greek Letter. A Study of the Letter-Body in the Non-Literary Papyri and in Paul the Apostle* [= *Society of Biblical Literature. Dissertation Series* 2], Missoula, MT 1972, pp. 1–5).

⁶ For a long time, this code alternation between Latin and Greek proved to be problematic. I recently proposed a new approach and a new explanation, in which the interlocutors to the conversation (e.g. people greeted in the letter) and symbolic value of Latin as the language of the Roman military identity played an important role (Daniele NACHTERGAELE, 'The code alternation in the Claudius Tiberianus archive', to be published in *Glotta*).

⁷ Terentianus addresses Tiberianus as 'father', but the view that the two were actually father and son has recently been questioned by Silvia STRASSI, *L'archivio di Claudius Tiberianus da Karanis*, Berlin 2008, pp. 109–126.

which is my prayer. I myself am well too' (*P. Mich.* VIII 478, ll. 3–4 [my translation]);

[πρὸ] μὲ[ν π]άντ[ω]ν εὐχομαί σε ὑγιαίνειν, ὑγιαίνω δὲ καὶ αὐτός, 'Before everything, I pray that you are well. I myself am well too' (*P. Mich.* VIII 480, l. 3 [my translation]).

P. Mich. VIII 476 and 478 were found in Karanis but were probably written in Alexandria.⁸ In fact, also five⁹ other letters with information about the sender's health originate from this very same polis. In other words, (at least) 33% of the letters under investigation (i.e. seven out of twenty-one documents) were (presumably) sent from Alexandria. This high percentage is not due to a disproportionately large number of Alexandrian letters being preserved: quite the contrary, out of a total of 2149 private letters on papyrus dating to the first three centuries AD, only 82 originate from Alexandria.

The overrepresentation of documents from Alexandria is not the only geographical peculiarity: also many letters with information about the sender's health have a Latin background. Firstly, in several letters onomastics hints that the correspondents were probably Latin-speaking; for instance, the bipartite names Claudius Tiberianus and Claudius Terentianus point to a Latin identity. Like the Claudius Tiberianus archive, also the archive of Gaius Iulius Agrippianus to which *BGU XI 2129*

⁸ It is suggested that also *P. Mich.* VIII 480 was sent from Alexandria (H. C. YOUTIE & J. G. WINTER, *Michigan Papyri*, VIII: *Papyri and Ostraca from Karanis*, Ann Arbor 1951, p. 16), but I am not completely confident that this is the case: whereas *P. Mich.* VIII 476 and 478 have a *proskynema* formula before Sarapis, which mainly appears in letters written from Alexandria (cf. H. C. YOUTIE, 'Grenfell's gift to Lumbroso', *Illinois Classical Studies* 3 [1978], pp. 90–99), *P. Mich.* VIII 480 has a *proskynema* before before τοῖς ἐνθάδε θεοῖς, 'the local gods'. As a *proskynema* is normally performed before the main god of the town the sender is writing from, this might be an indication that *P. Mich.* VIII 480 was not written in Alexandria. To be on the safe side, I will only include the letters which (almost) certainly were written in Alexandria, and I will therefore exclude *P. Mich.* VIII 480.

⁹ Viz. *BGU XI 2129*, *P. Giss.* I 97, *P. Bingen* 74, *P. Col.* X 278, and *SB VI 9194*. The first two letters are thought to have been sent from Alexandria based on the information of the archives to which the two letters belong, viz. the archive of Gaius Iulius Agrippinus and the archive of Neilos, respectively. The three other letters are linked to the metropolis as they have a *proskynema* formula for Sarapis.

belongs, is a Latin-Greek bilingual archive, with Roman protagonists. Further, the senders of *P. Mich.* VIII 495 and *BGU* II 632 were called Iulius Germanus and Antonius Maximus respectively.

Secondly, several letters with information about the sender's well-being came from a Latin(ized) context. I have already discussed the letters from the Claudius Tiberianus archive, which were found in Karanis. Also two letters were found in Karanis: *P. Mich.* VIII 491 and 495.¹⁰ In these letters, correspondents might well have had a Latin background: this is further suggested by the sender's name in *P. Mich.* VIII 495 (cf. above) and by the place of sending of *P. Mich.* VIII 491, namely Italy. The sender Apollinarios writes to his mother Taesis reporting that he has reached Rome alive and well. His journey to Italy was clearly a part of his military duties (l. 7). Also *BGU* I 27 was written in Italy: another Apollinarios informs a certain Eirenaios about his arrival in Rome and, related to this, about his state of health.

Some other letters originate from highly Latinized areas of Egypt. Three letters with information about the sender's health come from the Eastern desert: *O. Claud.* II 303 is unfortunately severely damaged; *O. Claud.* II 283 does not consist of anything more than philophrontic phrases and a request to send some items; in *SB* VI 9165 the female sender asks for writing materials.

So far we have already encountered several letters with connections to the army. Also some of the other documents with information about the sender's own health involved the military, for instance *BGU* XI 2129 was sent to the veteran Iulius Agrippianus. Also in *P. Lund.* II 1 the sender was a soldier. *BGU* III 794 is about a certain legionary, Maron; unfortunately, the letter is damaged, so there is no precise information about this person or about the correspondents. In other words, in quite a number of letters the sender who is reassuring the addressee that he is fine, is an (ex-)soldier. Could it be that a military man and his relatives are more concerned about well-being, as danger is always lurking in a soldier's life? This may be a possible explanation, especially in the letters sent by soldiers from far-away

¹⁰ The latter to the archive of Sokrates the tax collector. STRASSI linked this archive to the Tiberianus archive (STRASSI, *L'archivio* [cit. n. 7], pp. 160–163).

places such as Italy (*P. Mich.* VIII 491 and *BGU* I 27). However, fighting was not a major part of soldiers' lives; they are also often used as a convenient manual labor force.¹¹ The explanation is thus not completely satisfying, and there might have been other elements playing a part in the relatively extensive use of the information formula in the letters from soldiers.

There is probably a link between the high number of occurrences of information about the sender's health in military-related letters on the one hand and in letters from a Latin(ized) context on the other hand. It is common knowledge that the army was one of the only parts of the Graeco-Roman society where Latin was intensively used and had a strong influence. Could it be that the phrase with information about the sender's health mirrors a Latin formula? Indeed, like the early Ptolemaic bipartite health wish, the Latin initial health wish had a bipartite structure with the wish itself followed by information about the sender's health: *si vales, bene est; ego valeo*, 'if you are well, that is good. I am fine too' (my translation).¹² Unlike the Greek phrase, it remained in use for many centuries and it spread all over the Roman Empire. The formula appeared in the Vindolanda tablets, dated to the late first – early second century AD, for example *T. Vindol.* I 52, l. 2: *frater si vales b[ene e]st vero ego valeo*, 'brother, if you are well, that is good. I am certainly fine too' (my translation).¹³ The

¹¹ R. ALSTON, *Soldier and Society in Roman Egypt. A Social History*, London 1995, pp. 78–79.

¹² Several scholars considered the formula *si vales, bene est; ego valeo* a loan translation from Greek (ZIEMANN, *De epistularum Graecarum formulis* [cit. n. 2], p. 302; EXLER, *The Form* [cit. n. 2], pp. 107–108; KOSKENNIEMI, *Studien zur Idee* [cit. n. 2], p. 131). However, the fact that the Latin formula also appeared in the Vindolanda tablets makes the loan translation hypothesis unlikely: Northern Britain never came in contact with the Greek language or the Greek epistolography. Features of the Vindolanda (epistolary) language are therefore generally considered authentic Latin (E. DICKEY, 'The Greek address system of the Roman period and its relationship to Latin', *Classical Quarterly* 54 [2004], pp. 494–527). Latin and Greek thus developed a similar phrase independently from each other. Note that KOSKENNIEMI remarked that a similar formula was already used by Plautus (KOSKENNIEMI, *Studien zur Idee* [cit. n. 2], p. 131). This makes the hypothesis of a calque from Greek even more doubtful.

¹³ *T. Vindol.* I 52 is the only Vindolanda letter with the standard initial health wish *si vales, bene est; ego valeo*. Initial health wishes are in general quite rare in the Vindolanda material. Sometimes *ad hoc* phrases are inserted and in some of those phrases the sender gives information about his own well-being: *ego certe cum hoc scripsi valebam recte*, 'I at any rate when I wrote this was in very good health' (*T. Vindol.* III 664, ll. 2–3 [HALLA-AHO's

phrase is also attested in a first century AD letter from Vindonissa (*C. Epist. Lat.* 16 = *T. Vindon.* 43.190) and in a papyrus from Oxyrhynchos, dated to the Augustan era (*C. Epist. Lat.* 10 = *P. Oxy.* XLIV 3208). The existence of a Latin counterpart of the information formula could explain the marked geographical pattern of occurrences, namely that the *topos* almost exclusively occurred in Latinized or multicultural environments. Further, the chronology is also compatible with the idea of interference from Latin: the first occurrence of a Roman health wish (πρὸ μὲν πάντων εὐχομαί σε ὑγιαίνειν) combined with information about the sender's health was found in a letter from the Eastern Desert.¹⁴ This seems to suggest that the *topos* first occurred in Latin(ized) environments.¹⁵

translation]), *ut scias me recte valere quod te invicem fecisse cupio*, 'I want you to know that I am in very good health, as I hope you are in turn' (*T. Vindol.* II 311, ll. 3–5 [HALLA-AHO's translation]), and *scias me recte esse quod te invicem facere cupio*, 'Know that all is well with me and I wish that the same may be true for you' (*T. Vindol.* III 670, ll. 3–4 [HALLA-AHO's translation]); see H. HALLA-AHO, *The Non-Literary Latin Letters. A Study of their Syntax and Pragmatics*, Helsinki 2009, p. 46–47.

Another idiosyncratic initial health wish in which the sender reassured the addressee that he was well, is found in a *stilus* tablet from London: *certiores vos esse credo me recte valere si vos indicem [f]ecistis*, 'I believe that you know that I am well, if you have been so in your turn' (*C. Epist. Lat.* 87, ll. 2–4 [HALLA-AHO's translation]); see HALLA-AHO, *Non-Literary Latin Letters*, p. 47.

Interesting is also *T. Vindol.* II 291, a letter by Claudia Severa to Sulpicia Lepidina. In the final health wish (ll. 12–14) the sender connects her wish for the addressee's well-being to her own health: *vale soror anima mea ita valeam karissima et habe*, 'Farewell, sister, my dearest soul, as I hope to prosper, and hail' (translation from the edition). Normally, the final health wish is *vale, cura/opto (ut) valeas*, or *opto te bene valere* (HALLA-AHO, *Non-Literary Latin Letters*, p. 52): the phrase only deals with the addressee's health. The fact that both aspects – the sender's and the addressee's health – appear, makes the content of this letter somewhat similar to the initial health wish in *T. Vindol.* I 52 (see above).

¹⁴ It is dated to the early first century AD.

¹⁵ The *topos* is certainly attested in Alexandria from the beginning of the second century AD onwards (*P. Mich.* VIII 476, 478, and 480 are dated to AD 100–125; *P. Giss.* I 97 to AD 113–120; *BGU XI* 2129 to AD 103–148). From the six letters from other parts of Egypt, three are dated to the second century AD, two to the second or third century AD, and one to the third century AD. So, although the vague dating of many letters makes it difficult to get a precise picture, letters with information about the sender's health are attested in the Latinized parts of Egypt, and in Alexandria, earlier than in other parts of Egypt.

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the Latin phraseology influenced the Greek one: the existence in Roman times of a Latin formula informing about the sender's well-being probably helped preserve its Greek counterpart, at least in some of the Greek letters. In this respect, we cannot only explain the relatively high number of letters with that *topos* written in Italy, the Eastern Desert, and Karanis, but also of those from Alexandria: this melting pot of different cultures, languages and contexts (private, business, military, etc.), was a likely environment for linguistic innovations and variants to expand. In the polis, the custom of informing your addressee about one's health could have easily spread from the specific Latin context to other contexts. It then probably diffused – to some extent – to other parts of Egypt.

In conclusion, this paper is one of the many recent studies¹⁶ showing that Latin influenced the Greek epistolary language, refuting the view that the linguistic influence was a one-way process from Greek to Latin.

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¹⁶ See, e.g., DICKEY, 'The Greek address system' (cit. n. 12), and Delphine NACHTERGAELE, 'The Asklepiades and Athenodoros archives. A case study of a linguistic approach to papyrus letters', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 53 (2013), pp. 269–293.