

Requests and letters of recommendation: the case of Amyntas in the Zenon archive

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Abstract

Requests and letters of recommendation in Ptolemaic Egypt in the third century B.C. were some effective ways used by Greek immigrants to improve their conditions, to obtain a good job or to solve the problems facing them in their new country. Amyntas, the director of Apollonios Palace in Alexandria, was one of the most influential officials who wrote such requests and letters on behalf of some fellow Greek immigrants.

Keywords

Requests, Letters of recommendation, Amyntas, Greek immigrants in Egypt

Introduction*

After Alexander's conquest towards the end of the fourth century, Egypt was soon to become a target for Greek immigrants looking for a better life right from the early years of the Hellenistic Age. Egypt's image in the Greek mind was, for a long time, one of a rich and resourceful land.¹ The documents studied in this paper were among the means by which the new immigrants sought jobs, better employment and to facilitate their lives.² The strength of the request or the letter of recommendation was closely related to the status and influence of its sender and to his relationship

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¹ Cf. Lewis 1986, 8-36. All dates in this paper are B.C. unless otherwise noted.

² Von Reden 2007, 231-235.

with the receiver, as well as his relationship with the recommended person.³ This study focuses on the requests and letters of recommendation sent by Amyntas to Zenon in the third century, in an attempt to examine their impact and to determine their effectiveness in facilitating the lives of their carriers.

Both types of documents are best defined as an attempts: «to attain security and position through chains of protection and mutual personal connections, which often go back to the city of origin».⁴ They were used for many purposes. Some of the requests and letters were written to help new immigrants to get a job,⁵ to obtain a better position,⁶ to ask for a loan,⁷ or to get a good Kleros.⁸ Other letters were written to solve a problem,⁹ to help to get someone out of prison,¹⁰ or to exempt someone from compulsory services.¹¹ Sometimes some of these letters were written to Zenon to facilitate a meeting with Apollonios.¹² Most writers of such requests and letters were relatives or friends of the recommended person, but in some cases, the writers were just officials who wanted to achieve some benefits.¹³

Although we do not often know the outcome, some requests and letters had a positive reaction. For example, the letter written by Diokles to Zenon concerning one of the Egyptians called Paris, who had been enrolled in the list of Machimoi by Axapes, the Basilikos grammateus of Oxyrhynchite nome, has received a favorable response. Obviously, Diokles and Paris objected to the latter's enrollment in the list and Diokles asked Zenon to write to Themistokles and Petosiris, the royal scribe, to ask Axapes to solve this problem.¹⁴ Zenon honored his friend's request and wrote to Themistokles.¹⁵ In some cases, Zenon did not care to write or to give the requests the necessary attention. In a letter from Sisouchos to Zenon, he says: «I wrote previously about Ptolemaios (my son), requesting you to ask Hermaphilos and Python the banker and their associates to employ him as a clerk. Now I have sent Ptolemaios himself to you».¹⁶

³ The most famous example of the influential writers of such letters shows up in a note written by Polykrates to his father Kleon in which he asks his father to introduce him to the king to get a job as a surveyor because the recommendation in his father's presence would have a stronger effect (P.Petr. II 11). Apollonios' letter to Zenon on behalf of Nikomachos and Zoilos in which he asks him to give them a berth on one of the coasting vessels is another example (P.Cair.Zen. I 59002). For other examples of influential officials see, Von Reden 2007, 233; Kim 1972, 150-151.

⁴ Vandorpe 2008, 164. She wrote a bibliography about modern studies of letters of recommendation, see note no. 30.

⁵ P.Cair.Zen I 59192; P.Cair.Zen I 59342; P.Lond VII 2026.

⁶ P.Cair.Zen. I 59046.

⁷ P.Col. III 41.

⁸ P.Mich. I 3; P.Cair.Zen II 59284; P.Col. III 48.

⁹ PSI V 520; P.Cair.Zen IV 59590; Fischer-Bovet 2014, 246.

¹⁰ P.Mich. I 8.5.

¹¹ P.Cair.Zen. I 59042.

¹² P.Cair.Zen. I 590101; P.Cair.Zen. IV 59543; P.Mich. I 6.

¹³ P.Cair.Zen. IV 59543; P.Cair.Zen. I 590101.

¹⁴ P.Mich I, 160.

¹⁵ P.Mich I 82.

¹⁶ Keyes 1935, 34.

Amyntas: The man and the texts

Amyntas was the one responsible for the Apollonios Palace in Alexandria.¹⁷ Scholars differ regarding his origin; Rostovtzeff points out that he was Macedonian, on the basis of his status and functions.¹⁸ On the other hand, Fabienne Marchand and Richard Catling suggest that he might have been a Greek from Kaunos as Zenon.¹⁹ It is possible, however, that both Amyntas and Zenon knew each other since Apollonios appointed Zenon to help him in the estate around the same time when he appointed Amyntas to manage his palace. It is also possible that when Amyntas immigrated to Egypt, he brought with him his entire family since we find his mother, brother, and wife.²⁰ As the letter concerning his stable indicates, Amyntas was a wealthy employee who had a stable of horses,²¹ as well as an expensive house in Canopus, near Alexandria.²²

Amyntas appears in 41 papyri,²³ dating from 263-247, but most of the documents which survive date from 257, when the *dioiketes* Apollonios made a trip in the Delta and was accompanied by Zenon. Thus, all of the papyri concerning Amyntas come from the Zenon archive. About half of requests and letters that Amyntas wrote was sent to Zenon whose archive was rediscovered during the year A.D. 1910 and most of his documents was published by A.D. 1930.²⁴ Based on the number of the documents written by Amyntas, it can be argued that he possesses a small archive inside the huge archive of Zenon, and that his small archive consists of requests and letters that he wrote to Zenon, Apollonios and Kriton which shed light on the state of the Apollonios Palace in Alexandria and the supplies of the minister's trips and the products sent to the palace. The archive is of a particular importance, as far as my topic is concerned, since it reflects the conditions of the Greeks in the first century of Ptolemaic rule and the usefulness of letters of recommendation as a way to solve problems and obtain jobs.

The letters exchanged between Amyntas and Zenon show many of the tasks assigned to the latter as a manager of Apollonios' estate as well as the former's responsibilities. They include financial tasks such as giving orders to pay the salaries of workers at the Palace of Apollonios and disbursing

¹⁷ Evans 2009, 54.

¹⁸ Rostovtzeff 1922, 29.

¹⁹ Catling / Marchand 2014, 124-125. They studied Limyra decree (288/7 or 249 B.C.) issued in Lycia and honored two-persons called Sosigenes son of Zopyros and Amyntas son of Euthon. They compared it to P.Cairo.Zen. I 59045 (257 B.C.) which is a letter from Amyntas to Zenon introducing to him Zopyros the son of Sosigenes, from Kaunos. They concluded that Amyntas who was mentioned in Limyra decree was the same person referred to in the Papyrus of P.Cairo.Zen. I 59045 or maybe one of his descendants.

²⁰ P.Cair.Zen. I 59062; P.Col. III 19; P.Lond. VII 1942.

²¹ P.Cair.Zen. IV 59689; Westermann 1924, 238.

²² P.Ryl. IV 555; Colwell 1934, 353.

²³ Evans mentions that 26 documents attributed to Amyntas are written in several different hands. Amyntas obviously had many clerks who wrote his letters, for more details about Amyntas Language and an appendix of his documents, cf. Evans 2009, 50-71.

²⁴ Evans 2009, 59.

money to some other employees upon Zenon's requests.²⁵ Besides the financial tasks, Amyntas supervised the work inside the palace as indicated, for instance, when he harshly blamed a carpenter for his negligence.²⁶ He also wrote once to Zenon regarding a cook who had run away.²⁷ Moreover, he was responsible for receiving some of the products sent by Zenon and Apollonios to the palace.²⁸ He, moreover, sent many supplies from the palace to Zenon and Apollonios before their journey which took place in 258-257.²⁹

Furthermore, Amyntas was assigned several security tasks since we know that some slaves were arrested and transferred to his house. Being responsible for everything in the palace during Apollonios' trip to the Delta, he was the one to investigate the matter and question them.³⁰ He also supervised and arranged a trip, perhaps to the Syrian coast; this is evident in a letter in which he asks Zenon to prepare the boats for his journey.³¹ It appears also in the correspondence that the journey was prepared for one of the senior officials. Because of the many requests and the frequency of his letters to Zenon regarding the estate, we may note Amyntas' strong relationship with both Zenon and Apollonios. Besides, his distinguished position made many Greeks come to him to write requests and letters of recommendation on their behalf, either to Apollonios or to Zenon.

Amyntas' requests and letters of recommendations

In all, Amyntas sent five letters of recommendations and three requests to two officials; they were either related to daily life problems of the Greeks, or asking for assistance in obtaining employment.

Requests and letters of recommendation regarding problems

In this category, we have some problems faced by the Greek immigrants which caused them to

²⁵ P.Cair.Zen. I 59043; P.Cair.Zen. I 59027.

²⁶ PSI V 483; Litinas / van Minnen 2013, 283; Sapsford 2015, 111-112.

²⁷ P.Zen.Pestm. 24.

²⁸ P.Cair.Zen. I 59040.

²⁹ P.Cair.Zen. I 59066; P.Cair.Zen. I 59110; P.Cair.Zen. I 59547; P.Cair.Zen. I 59548; P.Lond. VII.1935; Thompson 1983, 71; Orrieux 1983, 63.

³⁰ P.Zen.Pestm. 36; Pestman 1981, 264-267; Clarysse 2007, 201-206.

³¹ P.Cair.Zen. I 59053; P.Cair.Zen. I 59054; PSI V 533. Edgar refers to the fact that Amyntas doesn't indicate clearly his destination and whether it was to the Syrian coast where Apollonios used to trade or up the river (P.Cair.Zen. I 59053). It is possible, however, that he went to the Syrian coast because of two reasons. First, the multiple requests of supplies which he asked Zenon to provide him with and which included two kinds of boats: *Kerkouros* and *Kybaiai*. Those big boats were used in the third century for sailing in the Mediterranean sea (Casson 1986, 163). He also asked Zenon to provide him with 150 rolls of papyrus for correspondences and accounts (P.Cair.Zen. I 59054). Second, this voyage took place immediately after Demetrios' failure in the commercial mission to Herakleia in northern Phoenicia (P.Cair.Zen. I 59038), and maybe Apollonios sent Amyntas to the Syrian coast for a new commercial mission or to remedy the mistakes of Demetrios.

seek Amyntas' help. The problems mentioned in the Greeks' requests to Amyntas dealt mainly with custody, jobs, and compulsory services.

Concerning custody, Amyntas wrote to Zenon a request, on the 29th of February, 257, requesting that his friend Demetrios be treated in a good manner in prison.³² Demetrios was imprisoned after failing to perform satisfactorily on a royal mission. The king sent him on a commercial mission to Herakleia in northern Phoenicia.³³ During his return, however, Demetrios was robbed by a pirate called Lysimachos. As a result, he was arrested, imprisoned, and his property was confiscated. Among the confiscated items were some silver plates, two wine-cooler and two Antipater-vases that belonged to Apollonios and were loaned to him upon his return.³⁴ Perhaps his crime was greater than the punishment since Zenon seems to have ignored the letter, prompting Amyntas to write to him a new request on 26 March 257, reminding him of Demetrios and asking him again to take care of him because he was being treated badly in this matter.³⁵ Perhaps the reason for writing such letters to Zenon, and particularly the second one, was that Demetrios was a friend of Amyntas, who loaned him some pots on his return. One wonders if Amyntas might have even wished to get Demetrios out of prison through his letter to Zenon.³⁶ We do not know, however, whether Amyntas' requests have succeeded in changing Demetrios' condition or he was left to suffer in prison; the papyri do not mention him again.

Concerning jobs and their performance, we have an early request dated 16 March 257, concerning a problem faced by someone who was working as a *koilourgos* and who was punished for neglect. He asked Amyntas to write to Zenon to forgive him and allow him to return to his work in Memphis, and to promise Zenon that he would perform his work in the future to the best of his ability.³⁷ At that time, Zenon was in Boubastos and his *koilourgos* went from Memphis (his workplace) to Amyntas in Alexandria to ask him to write this letter on his behalf and brought it back to Zenon in Boubastos. We are lucky this time to know that Zenon responded favorably to the request and forgave the man and agreed to return him to his job. It is important to note here that the *koilourgos* would not have travelled all these distances unless he was confident that Amyntas would willingly help him to get back his job and that Amyntas' letter to Zenon would be effective.

On May 5, 257, Theodoros, Amyntas' brother, asked Zenon to hand over a letter written by Amyntas to Apollonios, regarding Python's salary.³⁸ From another letter from Python to Zenon sent

³² P.Cair.Zen. I 59038.

³³ Terpstra 2019, 96.

³⁴ P.Cair.Zen. I 59038; Reekmans 1994, 133.

³⁵ P.Cair.Zen. I 59044.

³⁶ There is a similar request wrote by Herodes and Zeniketes to Zenon, to release a youth from prison either unconditionally or on bail. Cf. P.Mich I 85.

³⁷ P.Zen.Pestm. 23.

³⁸ P.Cair.Zen. I 59062; Bogaert 1987, 39.

on the following day, 6 May 257, we know that Python sent the latter 1000 drachmas with Theodoros together with a letter from Amyntas. Theodoros asked Zenon to deliver the letter to Apollonios at the right time, exploiting Amyntas' good relationship with Zenon.³⁹ While it is interesting to note the roundabout journey which Amyntas' letter has taken to reach Apollonios, it is also significant to observe that Zenon had to choose the right moment to deliver it. Moreover, it was also expected that Python's request would probably find a favorable response by Apollonios through Amyntas' mediation.

Among the problems that the Greeks faced in Egypt was the performing of public services and since some of them did not want to do so, they resorted to their influential friends who had some authority to excuse them.⁴⁰ In a letter written by Amyntas for a certain Alexandros he sought to help him to avoid the compulsory service. In this letter which he sent to Zenon, Amyntas referred to Alexandros as a relative of one of his friends, stated that he knew him well and asked Zenon to help exempt him from the compulsory service assigned to him due to his ill health.⁴¹ Since the letter is complete and provides us with a typical text in this and similar documents, it is worthy to quote it *in toto*:

Ἀμύντας Ζήνωνι χαίρειν. Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ ἀποδιδούς σοι τῆ[ν ἐπ]ι-
 τολήν τῶν φίλων τινὸς τῶν [ἐμ]ῶν ἐστὶν οἰκειὸς καὶ αὐτῷ δέ μ[οί] εἰσι συ-
 νήθειαι, τυγχάνει δὲ προκεχειρισμένος ὑπὸ τινος. Χαριεῖ οὐμ μοι συ[σ]πουδάσ[ας],
 εἰ ἔστιν ἐν δυνατῷ, ἀφεθῆναι αὐτόν. Ἔστι γὰρ καὶ τῷ σώματι ἀσθενέσ[τερος]
 διὰ τὸ ἐν ἀρρωστήματι εἶναι.

Ἔρρωσο.

As was the case with the *koilourgos* mentioned above, Alexandros went to Amyntas in Alexandria to ask him to write a letter on his behalf to Zenon and carried the letter from Alexandria to Boubastos to deliver it himself, thus travelling a long distance despite his supposed illness! It is also a distinctive feature of such letters that they were often delivered by the concerned person himself.⁴² Unlike other official or personal letter, they were not usually sent by mail.⁴³

Requests and letters of recommendation regarding employment

This type constitutes almost one third of the letters and requests during the third century, and many of these requests and letters were written to help their carriers to get a suitable job, or to move

³⁹ P.Lond. VII 1944.

⁴⁰ P.Hib. I 78.

⁴¹ P.Cair.Zen. I 59042.

⁴² P.Mich. I 6; P.Cair.Zen. I 59101; P.Cair.Zen. I 59111; P.Cair.Zen. II 59192; P.Cair.Zen. II 59283; P.Cair.Zen. II 59284; P.Cair.Zen. III 59342; P.Cair.Zen. IV 59590; P.Cair.Zen. IV 59603.

⁴³ Horn 1922, 500.

on to a better position. On February 29th 257, Amyntas wrote a letter of recommendation of which only tiny shreds remained, on behalf of a person named Molossos. The letter was sent to Zenon to deliver it to Apollonios, it concerned a recommendation for a job.⁴⁴ Molossos' case provides us with another example proving the usefulness of such letters. He seems to have found a job with Zenon in the Mendes Nome since we find a man with the same name sending a letter the following year to Zenon regarding the sale of flax. In the letter he advises Zenon to accelerate the sale because it is profitable to do so. On another occasion Molossos wrote regarding sales of papyri in the same nome and remarked towards the end of the letter that he was waiting for Zenon's answer on what to do.⁴⁵

On March 26th 257, Amyntas wrote to Zenon another letter about a person named Zopyros son of Sosigenes, in which he stated that Zopyros was from Kaunos – the same city of Zenon. It seems that this Zopyros was a person of interest to Amyntas as he wrote letters on his behalf to both Zenon and Apollonios. Unfortunately, we do not have Amyntas' letter concerning him to Apollonios but we find clues of it within Amyntas' letter to Zenon where he asks Zenon to introduce the man to Apollonios when the time is right to talk to him. He also asks Zenon to take care of him after the trip he had made for this meeting.⁴⁶ Zopyros might have newly arrived in Egypt at that time. Since he was from the same city as Zenon, Amyntas thought that the point is worthy to mention in the letter probably to encourage the latter to help a fellow citizen as well. It is noteworthy also that he confirmed the identification by mentioning the patronymic of Zopyros: Ζώπυρος ὁ [...] ἐστὶν υἱὸς Σωσιγένους τοῦ Καυνίου.

Another letter by Amyntas was written during the first half of the year 257. But this time he wrote it to Apollonios about a person called Menandros, who may have been working as an assistant to one of the palace officials, called Herakleides, but wanted to get a better job. So, Menandros asked Amyntas to write to Apollonios requesting a meeting with him along with some words of praise. Amyntas consequently wrote to Apollonios stating that: «Menandros, who works with Herakleides, asked us to write to you. He wants to meet you when the time is right to discuss few things with you. Please grant him your interest as he is the kind of man who would take care of your interests».⁴⁷ This letter indicates that while some Greek immigrants might have hoped to find merely a chance to work, there were at least some others who were always looking forward to improving their conditions by getting even better jobs. In this particular case, Menandros resorted to Amyntas hoping to reach the finance minister directly and the latter was also careful in his choice of words relying as it seems on Apollonios' previous knowledge of Herakleides.

⁴⁴ P.Cair.Zen. I 59039.

⁴⁵ P.Cair.Zen. III 59470; Lewis 1986, 54.

⁴⁶ P.Cair.Zen. I 59045; Fraser 1972, 68.

⁴⁷ P.Cair.Zen. I 59046; Keyes 1935, 33.

Conclusion

In considering the requests and letters of recommendation written by Amyntas, the manager of the palace of Apollonios, we can observe several points. First, in some cases, Amyntas wrote to Apollonios and to Zenon directly, perhaps due to the importance of the recommended persons to Amyntas as in the case of Menandros and Zopyros. Second, some of the letters merely requested that Zenon help the recommended person to meet Apollonios and to choose the appropriate timing for the meeting as in the case of Molossos. In these cases Amyntas was obviously relying on Zenon's discretion and position. Third, most of the letters included the reason for recommendation and expressions describing the candidate as: «one of the best men,» in case of Menandros, or indicating that: «he was from Zenon's Kaunos city», as in case of Zopyros, or that the person was suffering from: «ill health», in case of Alexandros. Fourth, Amyntas was a focal point for those who wanted a letter of recommendation to Apollonios, the Finance Minister of Ptolemy, and to the manager of his estate, Zenon. Even Python, the famous banker in Athribis, despite his frequent correspondence with and acquaintance of Zenon, considered Amyntas as a better mediator when he wanted to get his salary from Apollonios.

Although we do not know in many cases the outcome of the letters or the requests, and whether they proved influential or not, their frequency and mere presence indicate *per se* that they were acknowledged means of recommendation. Furthermore, on the basis of the number of the letters written by Amyntas, the man was considered by many people to have had some authority and influence which he could exercise on his lower staff. More interesting however, as his letter on Menandros' behalf shows, he seems to have had a special place among Apollonios' officials.

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