(official) letter   אִגֶּרֶת

1. Statistics

Torah: 0. Nebiim: 0. Ketubim: 10. Total: 10.

2a. Literal Use

This word for a letter occurs in Late Biblical Hebrew only (6x in Neh., 2x in Est. and 2x in 2 Chron.). In nearly all these cases it refers to an official letter, for instance the letter about Purim Esther and Mordecai wrote, designated as אִגֶּרֶת הַפֻּרִים הַזֹּאת, 'this letter about Purim' (Est. 9:29; see also v. 26), the official letters Nehemiah requested from the Persian king (Neh. 2:7-9), or the letters about Pesach sent by king Hezekiah (2 Chron. 30:1, 6). In Neh. 6:5, 17 and 19 the word is used in a more general sense. The word also occurs as אִגְּרָה/אִגַּרְתָּא in Biblical Aramaic, always designating official letters (Ezra 4:8, 11; 5:6). A Persian equivalent seems to be → נִשְׁתְּוָן.

2b. Figurative Use

Not attested.

3. Epigraphic Hebrew

Not attested.

4. Cognates

The origin of the word is disputed, but it would seem certain now that it is a loan from Akkadian *egirtu*, possibly via Imperial Aramaic (Mankowski, *ALBH*, 22-5; Tawil, *ALCBH*, 5-6). The borrrowing hardly went the other way round (Cherry 2009, 22). Although a Middle-Persian origin has become unlikely now, it is certainly the Persian empire with its extensive administration and correspondence that promulgated the use of this word everywhere in the post-Babylonian era. All Aramaic languages inherited it. Since the basic meaning seems to be 'one-column tablet' (Radner 1997, 60-3), it is not impossible that Semitic words denoting a 'baked brick' are related (Cohen, *DRS*, fasc. 1, 7, under # 4). However, at an early date it became a customary term for a document written with ink on papyrus which before despatching was folded and sealed with a clay bulla (→ חֹתֶמֶת / חוֹתָם).

5. Ancient Versions

All ancient versions have understood the word correctly.

6. Judaic Sources

The word may probably be restored in the Aramaic text 4Q203, Frag. 8:3. It occurs in many later Judaic sources.

7. Illustrations

For a folded and sealed letter on papyrus, see e.g. De Moor 1986, Pl. 43.

8. Archaeological Remarks

[Will be added later on.]

9. Conclusion

In distinction to the more general term → סֵפֶר, which only occasionally designates a letter, אִגֶּרֶת is mainly used for letters of an official nature in Late Biblical Hebrew. This in accordance with the fact that it is a loanword from Late Akkadian which became the common term for an official letter or document in the Aramaic *lingua franca* of the Persian empire. Such a letter was usually written in ink on a sheet of papyrus that was folded and tied together with a string. The unauthorised opening of the letter was prevented by pressing a bulla of moist clay on the string and imprinting it with the seal of the sender. Opening a letter (פתח, cf. Neh. 6:5) involved breaking the seal.

Because of the unfavourable climate in Israel relatively few fragments of Hebrew letters on papyrus and skin have been preserved from earlier times. However, the presence of ostraca on which letters were written in a fluent style with black ink testifies to an extensive correspondence in the pre-Persian period too.

10. Bibliography

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Last update: 17-05-2011   K.A.D. SMELIK