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Autor: Giele, Enno

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SIGNATURES OF “SCRIBES” IN EARLY IMPERIAL CHINA

Enno Giele, Universität Münster*

Abstract

Administrative manuscripts from the early imperial period often end in listing titles and names of one to three, seldom four, different functionaries. These have been interpreted by many as signatures of those responsible for the drawing up of the respective documents. But are they really signatures in our modern sense, indicating in an individualized, inimitable way personal responsibility and proof of notice taken? Against this stands the fact that usually more than one individual is thus listed but only one hand can be discerned. Also, the names listed are not identical with the senders of the documents specified elsewhere in the texts. This indicates a conception of responsibility for the written that is decidedly different from ours. While it may be impossible for us to know details about the division of labour between those functionaries listed, the present article discusses patterns in the composition of the “signatories” lists from different offices and periods. Against this background, it evaluates the use and importance of seals as a means of verification, legitimation and, moreover, secrecy.

Anybody who has ever had some business to do in an office in China, Taiwan, Japan, or South-Korea will have noticed that customers, citizens, and officials signing their name onto some document are the exception. Instead, small individual name seals – or large official ones – used with red sealing color are the socially and officially accepted means of verifying or taking responsibility. This, as will be shown shortly, is not some modern fad, but an age-old tradition. Thus, any investigation into East Asian signatures will most naturally have to deal with the predominant practice of sealing before being able to situate the practice of signing names within and against this background.

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1 Sealing practices

From archaeological sites dated to the first Chinese Empires numerous seals (*yìnzhāng* 印章) and pieces of clay that show the impression of seals in relief (*fēngní* 封泥) have been obtained.¹ But even the use of colour instead of clay is traceable to quite early a time. The earliest recorded seal imprints made with red and black colour occur on silk fragments that date from the 4th c. BC and to about 100 AD respectively.²

The more regular use of clay for sealing things added one dimension to the possible purposes of sealing. Aside from verification and legitimation, both of which continue to be the prominent features of signing today, clay allowed for secrecy much in the same way as seal wax in Europe in later ages. This shall be briefly demonstrated.

Usually, official correspondence as well as archival material was written onto one side of oblong pieces of very thin bamboo or on slightly thicker strips of wood. The latter were used especially in northern China, where bamboo was rare. Each strip could be about one to two-and-a-half centimetres broad and about one *chǐ* 尺, that is, circa 23 cm long. Besides this most ubiquitous standard of strips, there was a variety of other sizes and shapes reserved for different purposes by proprietary rules or just out of practical considerations.³ Chinese tradition has produced a variety of terms to designate these different formats, e.g. *jiǎn* 簡, *dú* 牘, *zhá* 札, *dié* 牒, *liǎngháng* 兩行, etc., but these are not always easy to distinguish from one another.⁴ As far as sealing is concerned, a major

1 For a recent, richly illustrated introduction to the subject, see Sūn Wèizǔ 2002; also Zhōu Xiǎolù and Lù Dōngzhī 2000.

2 Both are believed to be marks of the producer of the silk textiles which may have been used as trade goods, but both have not been deciphered and their actual meaning remains a matter of conjecture. For illustrations, transcriptions of the accompanying brush inscriptions and descriptions, see Xióng Chuánxīn 1975: 49, 52, and pl. 1.2; and Gānsù shěng wénwù kǎogǔ yánjiùsuǒ (ed.) 1991: no. 1970AB; see also Ledderose 2000: 160.

3 For a discussion of the format – especially the length – of strips in relation to the importance of their contents, see Hú Píngshēng 2000.

4 The problem is not only that several of these terms are used for cross-definitions of the pattern “A means B” and “B means A” but also that often there are conflicting explanations for a single term. Finally, as in the case of *liǎngháng*, “two columns(-strips)”, or *jiǎn* 檢, “address labels” (for which see below), archaeology has turned up at least two different candidates for these formats and it is not entirely clear whether both were actually called by the same name or whether they were somehow further differentiated. These problems shall be dealt with on another occasion.

difference was between two basic formats, one them being those more or less narrow strips that were bound together with two or more strings so that the whole multi-strip document (*cè* 冊) could be rolled up, containing the writing inside. The other basic format was a single board (*fāng* 方 or *bǎn* 版). This could be several centimetres broad and they were not usually bound together with other strips or boards, and contained shorter texts. Unlike most multi-strip documents, the boards were inscribed on both sides, if necessary. This format seems to have been used often for private letters. Alternatively, private letters were also written on rectangular sheets of silk. Otherwise the use of silk as stationery was mostly limited to specially valuable texts, like canonical writings or other literary pieces, that were carefully written out.⁵

The use of silk as stationery was comparatively rare, certainly because silk was much too expensive to be used for the day-to-day business of official correspondence. For this, paper would have been a much cheaper alternative. But although the earliest evidence for paper or proto-paper stationery derives from the imperial Qín 秦 period, a wide use of paper – as can be demonstrated from the Jin 晉 period onwards – has not yet been attested for the early days of the empire.

Correspondence on both silk and paper would have been folded and then probably placed between two boards specially designed to function as a kind of envelope. The upper board was thicker in the middle, where it had a small square mould or seal case (*fēngníxiá* 封泥匣) with narrow openings at the sides. Both boards were tightly bound together by strings running through the openings and across the bottom of the mould. Wet clay was pressed into the mould onto the strings. A seal was then imprinted into the clay that soon dried and became hard. At this stage the strings could not be removed and the bundle could not be opened any more without breaking the seal.

For correspondence written on multi-strip documents the procedure must have been the same, save that the seal case did not encase the documents but was attached either directly to the strip-roll or to a container or bag into which the document had been put beforehand.

5 Certain diagrams and maps were also found written on silk, but it would be wrong to assume that these types of spreadsheet materials inevitably needed to be drawn out on large silk sheets. Actually, bamboo or wooden strips tightly tied together yielded a perfectly acceptable surface for pictorial materials as the Shuihǔdì 睡虎地 *Rishū* 日書 manuscript demonstrates; see, for instance, the diagram on the recto side of strips 115–124 or the picture of a human figure on strips 150–154 (Shuihǔdì Qín mù zhújiǎn zhěnglǐ xiǎozǔ 1990: 98–99 and 101).

Indeed, this technique of sealing was not limited to written correspondence. It was demonstrably also applied to sealing bags or other containers. The strings used to fasten these ran through the mould of a small wooden receptacle, were covered with clay and likewise sealed. For example, many bamboo caskets found in early Chinese tombs, like the Hàn tomb of Mǎwángduī, have been sealed in this way.⁶

It is probably due to the great variety of containers and bundles that could be sealed in this way that we are left with a wide variety of differently shaped wooden receptacles.⁷ Not every formal feature of these has been explained satisfactorily. Yet, seal cases tied to documents or goods that were to be delivered by the postal services or couriers usually were at least large enough to fulfil the function of a modern envelope for mail. That is, they were used to record the address and other information pertaining to the delivery. The address was often written in large, bold script onto the flat surface of the seal container, though sometimes also on an extra board. Owing to this function, both the seal cases as well as the special boards are called *jiǎn* 檢, literally “(things to) inspect”, or just “address labels”.⁸

The correspondence was now ready for delivery. The seal was clearly visible from the outside and indicated the sender. If the mail was an official document, the sender would use his official seal specifying only his title. Private letters were sealed with private seals, often showing only the name of the sender.⁹ Exceptions to this rule seem to have required extra recording, like “so-and-so uses his private seal in the capacity of such-and-such”.¹⁰

Official seals (*yìn* 印 or *zhāng* 章) and the accompanying sashes (*shòu* 綬) were subject to strict regulations as regards their size, material, decoration, inscription, and uses. They were manufactured and handed over to an official or a vassal by the authorities, when he took up his position, and – what is even more

6 Húnán shěng bówùguǎn et al. (ed.) 1973: vol.2, pls. 209–210.

7 For illustrations of several different sizes and forms, see Sommarström 1956: pl. 14.

8 Some of these address labels also record goods that were delivered. Such records indicate that these address labels were attached to bags. For *jiǎn*-labels, see Ōba 1992:210–46.

9 I have been unable to find a clear definition of the terms *guānyìn* 官印, “official seal”, and *sīyìn* 私印, “private seal”, in the early tradition. However, innumerable examples do indicate the distinction made above. Private seals could probably take any shape, form, and inscription. Most seem to have been inscribed only with the name of their owner, but some also included his or her title or other additions. Official seals never included the name of the official; see Wagner 1994:268–70, 332–3, 459–60.

10 For an example, see the last strip of the imperial instruction concerning the summer solstice in 61 BC cited below.

important for our concern – care was obviously also taken to ensure that they were given back, once the official was removed from his post or died. For the same reason, it has been argued that there existed a regulation forbidding to put official seals into tombs, so that nobody could dig them out and use or fake them.¹¹

Even more important was the fact that the seal had to be affixed to the sash and accompany the official everywhere. Only he himself was able to and responsible for using his seal. This gave the seal a kind of guarantee function, although it is not known how strict the regulations were followed, especially in the lower echelons of the administration.

Private seals on the other hand could obviously be manufactured quite freely as a silken letter from Xuánquánzhì 懸泉置 indicates. The sender, who did not write the letter himself except for a crudely executed additional sentence at the end, requests the carving and procuring of a seal by an acquaintance:

• 呂子都願刻印，不敢報，不知元不肖，使元請子方，願子方幸爲刻御史七分印一，龜上，印曰：“呂安之印”。 (II 0114 (3):611)

[...] – Lǚ Zǐdū wishes (to have) a seal carved, (but he) does not dare to tell (you) this. Not knowing that I am incapable,¹² (he) made me ask you, Zǐfāng. Please be so kind to carve him one secretary’s (?)¹³ seal of 0.7 inches

11 The latter regulation – if actually existent – presents a problem for the interpretation of seals that are nevertheless found in tombs. It is possible, though not sure, that these are replicas. See Wagner 1994: 270.

12 This is a self-deprecating phrase of the sender using his name, Yuán 元, to refer to himself.

13 The term *yùshǐ yìn* 御史印 is not understood in this context. During the Hàn, the *yùshǐ* were a kind of prosecutor or secretary in the central as well as in royal administrations. This does not seem to fit the context here. Perhaps, this *yùshǐ* is an anachronism from pre-imperial times, meaning “servant” or a mistake or variant for *yùfū* 御夫 (or 禦夫), “driver”. But even with these meanings, it is strange to find an official title mentioned for what is obviously a private seal.

(i.e. 1.6 cm),¹⁴ a top (in the form of) *a turtle*,¹⁵ the inscription reading: ‘Lǚ Ān’s seal.’ [...]¹⁶

Now the letter was delivered. At checkpoints along the road of delivery and at the final destination the seal would be inspected by the authorities forwarding the mail. Their ledgers could look like this:

北書: 三封, 合檄, 板檄各一.

其三封, 板檄: 張掖太守章, 詣府; 合檄: □□印, 詣張掖太守府牛掾在所.
[...]

(A8-157.14, pl.362)¹⁷

Northbound writings: three sealed envelopes: closed and open dispatches,¹⁸ one each.

The three envelopes and the open dispatch sealed by the governor of Zhāngyè go to the office [of the governor’s lieutenant, *dūwèi* 都尉]. The

- 14 The standard side length of official seals (always with a square base) was 1 inch (*cùn* 寸) or c. 2,3 cm.
- 15 The two graphs for “turtle top” seem to have been added later than the rest of the text, perhaps even by a different hand, as their colour and form is different. The reason for this must remain speculation. Following Chinese palaeographic convention, the different hand is marked by a different font.
- 16 Cf. transcription and annotation in Hú Píngshēng & Zhāng Défāng 張德芳: *Dūnhuáng Xuánquán Hànjǎn shìcuì* 敦煌懸泉漢簡釋粹, Shànghǎi gǔjí, 2001:187–91. A photo of the manuscript is found, among other sources, in *Wénwù* 2000,5:inside cover.
- 17 Generally, the best published transcription of most of the so-called “old” Jūyán- 居延 strips found in the 1930s is by Xiè Guìhuá 謝桂華 et al. 1987. I use this, but punctuate and make adaptations if necessary on the basis of the plates in Láo Gàn 1957, the number of which is given after the number of the strip. Before the strip number I add the number of the archaeological site (here A8, i.e., the company fort of Jiǎqú 甲渠), so as to be as precise as with the so-called “new” Jūyán-strips found in the 1970s, for which see below. This strip has also been translated in Loewe 1967 as MD 3, no.7.
- 18 On the terms of *héxí* 合檄, probably two boards placed face to face, so that the writing was concealed inside, and *bǎnxí* 板檄, probably a board the writing on which was not concealed, see Yú Háoliàng 1985: 180–181.

closed dispatch sealed by [...] ¹⁹ goes to the present whereabouts ²⁰ of the head of the cattle bureau ²¹ from the office of the governor of Zhāngyè. [...]

Or like this:

書五封, 檄三

二封王憲印, 一封孫猛印, 一封成宣印, 一封王充印,

二封呂憲印, 一封王彊印.

• 二月癸亥令史唐□發.

(A8-214.24, pl.358)

Five writings in sealed envelopes, three dispatches:

Two envelopes with the seal of Wáng Xiàn, one envelope with the seal of Sūn Měng, one envelope with the seal of Chéng Xuān, one envelope with the seal of Wáng Chōng; two envelopes with the seal of Lǚ Xiàn, one envelope with the seal of Wáng Qiáng.

• In the second month on the day *guǐhài* directing clerk Táng [...] ²² opened ²³ (them).

On the address labels, we often find brief scribblings beside the address that clearly are of a different hand. The translation reads this in the sequence in which it was taken down. ²⁴

- 19 Xiè Guihuá et al. 1987 write this as *niújùn* 牛駿 (or Niú Jùn, if it is an individual's name), but the published photo makes such an interpretation doubtful, especially if the graphs in question are compared with the clearly legible *niúyuàn* 牛掾 further down the same column.
- 20 On *zàisuǒ* 在所 and related terms, see Yú Háoliàng 1985: 190–191.
- 21 No such bureau is known from other sources and Niú 牛 may also be a family name – as seen on strip A33-20.12A. But the use of “family name + title” to identify individuals is not well documented in the wooden strips documents. For a seal probably belonging to an also otherwise unknown “horse office”, *mǎfǔ* 馬府, see Sūn Wèizǔ 1993: 200. However, the latter could also be interpreted either as “[Mr.] Ma's office” or as “the chief of staff's (*dàsī-mǎ*) office”; cf. Ráo Zōngyí; Lǐ Jūnmíng 1995: 141.
- 22 Xiè Guihuá et al. 1987, read this graph as *zòu* 奏, “to memorialize”, and note that previous transcriptions have read it as *fèng* 奉, “to present”. The published photo is not clear enough to decide the issue, but whatever the graph is, it should be a personal name, since the preceding Táng 唐 was used predominantly as a family name and as such would have been followed by a personal name.
- 23 Loewe 1967 (MD 2, no.1) reads “dispatched” for *fā* 發. I opt for “opened” because there is no address specified to which the letters could have been dispatched.
- 24 Sometimes, such a record is also seen on the backside of the last strip of multi-strip letters rather than on the address label. An example is the Jūyán strip A33-10.34 cited below. Another is the strip EPT56:283 in Gānsù shěng wénwù kǎogǔ yánjiùsuǒ et al. 1994.

王彭印
甲渠官

四月乙丑卒同以來。

(A8-133.4, pl.206–7)

(To:) The (company) office of Jiǎqú.

Seal of Wáng Péng.

In the fourth month, on the day yǐchǒu, private Tóng came with this.

This probably reflects the practice, on the part of the recipients of mail, of recording the inscription of a seal when breaking it to open the mail and reading the message. In this way, although the seal had fulfilled its role and had to be destroyed, it was still possible to check its contents through the means of files. The very existence of these address labels in considerable amounts and the specific inscriptions on them clearly indicate that these matters were filed in some way. Unfortunately, we do not know for how long.

To sum up, seals – as far as can be reconstructed from archaeological finds – were primarily used as a means to

- ensure postal secrecy, because they made it impossible to open letters and other containers undetected;
- identify the sender of a letter or the one who was responsible for closing it or any other container that could be closed by means of strings and sealed;
- legitimize the content of mail, at least in theory and at least if the seal was an official one. This is because rather than just name the sender, his (official) seal theoretically guaranteed that only he himself could have applied the seal and was thus responsible for whatever the sealing contained.²⁵

Though it is a natural drawback of the sealing practice that direct identification and legitimation is possible only as long as a seal remains intact, the early Chi-

25 It would be instructive to experiment with seals impressed in clay rather than in colour, so as to find out how difficult (or easy) it is to tell fake from original. But even if it would turn out that clay seals were easy to fake, the ancient regulations concerning official seals in themselves show that there was at least an attempt to use them for legitimation in the sense that only the owner of the seal was able to use it and its use thus guaranteed that the message came from him. For the sake of completeness, it should be noted that especially with important military commands, there were other, more effective means of preventing forgeries than just seals.

nese administration took systematic measures to record the inscription of seals on official correspondence before breaking them, so that the basic information on “who sealed what” could be traced even after the destruction of a seal. These records cannot, of course, be considered signatures, because they were definitely not made by the individual who had used the seal. For signatures to exist alongside a full-fledged sealing practice, there must have been other uses or other circumstances that shall be investigated below.

2 Signatures in general

Now, with the sealing practice sketched above firmly in place, what kind of functions could have remained for signatures to fulfil? How should we define signatures at all, apart from the obvious condition that these are names personally and manually written by the individual to whom the name belongs? Today, we use signatures as evidence that

1. the signatory has personally seen what he or she signed;
2. he or she acknowledges or even accords with its contents;
3. thereby taking responsibility for its accuracy as well as;
4. lending authority to it (as much as his or her position in relation to the issue allows).

As will become clear below, by far not all of those names recorded in ancient Chinese documents that have been termed “signatures” (or *qiānshǔ* 簽署 or *shǒumei* 署名) by other scholars do in fact fulfil all of these conditions. However, for the sake of brevity I shall continue to use the term – albeit in quotation marks – for these records of names, even though I do not consider most of them to qualify as genuine signatures.

Interestingly, unlike usual writing, modern signatures do not have to be actually decipherable. On the contrary, they are often rather undecipherable without an additional explanation as to whose name they signify. They derive their *raison d'être* from their being individualistic, hard to imitate. Theoretically, seals can achieve everything a signature can and still be decipherable. Ancient seals could even guarantee postal secrecy as we have seen. The advantage of

signatures on the other hand is that everyone able to write can readily make use of them. Also, they cannot be taken and misused by others as seals can.²⁶

So, was it to force the officials to stand up to their duty and sign in person rather than just leaving their seals to their assistants and spend the day in leisure, that signatures were introduced in early China?

Let us review the evidence. This may be divided into three patterns: “Signatures” of subordinate officials, sometimes – though not always correctly – called “scribes”, “signatures” of their superiors, and signs of receipt. Of these, the signs of receipt have been discussed long ago by others, whose efforts shall not be repeated here.²⁷ The other two types of alleged “signatures” have also been discussed before by others,²⁸ but, I think there is considerable room for further observations. Since both are involved subjects, this article will first focus on the “signatures” of subordinate officials. The “signatures” of their superiors will be dealt with on another occasion.

3 “Signatures” of “scribes”

3.1 *The early period (from the Qín to the middle of the 2nd c. BC)*

Among the wooden manuscripts from Lǐyé 里耶, dated to between 221–208 BC, we find many boards that have been used as stationery for official letters being sent back and forth. As a result, several different hands may be discerned on a single board and within a text that concerns one and the same issue. Unlike on the later manuscripts from the Hàn period, the Qín clerks here are not identified

26 The question of what is easier to fake, a seal or a signature, is difficult to answer. At first glance, a seal seems much less individualistic, because it is decipherable. To fake a signature that one is not even able to read seems harder. On the other hand, a seal remains the same, and if a master copy is kept, it is possible even for the untrained eye to tell fake from original. This is not so easy with signatures that, just because of their individualistic fuzziness, are a little different each time and it takes a graphologist, a number of samples for comparative purposes, and technological support to detect well-done fakes.

27 See Chén Pán 1975: 79a–86b on *huāyā* 花押; Loewe 1967, vol.2, p. 379, esp. Loewe’s reconstructed manuscript TD3. Signs of receipt together with another type of individualized marking, namely an imprint of one or more fingers, a method of “signing” that played a role only later on in Chinese history, have been discussed among others by Niida 1939: 79–131, table & pls. 1–18.

28 Chén Mèngjiā 1980: 104–109; Ōba 1992: 252–267; Xíng Yitián 1999: 560–565; Wāng Guihǎi 1999: 71–73.

by their position, but only by their individual name, often followed by the graph *shǒu* 手.²⁹ This has been interpreted as a sign of personal handwriting, but may also mean that the individual thus specified has “handled” the matter and was thus responsible for it. Other names are followed not by *shǒu* but by *xíng* 行, “forwarded”, or *fā* 發, “opened”. Still, I suspect that those individuals, too, may actually have written their names and the preceding parts of the letters themselves.³⁰

If so, the names could be called real signatures, taking the place of seals, that could not be attached in the necessary number onto such small boards. In the following example I have identified the parts written in different hands by letters A–D and rearranged the text in the translation so as to make the sequence clearer. Note that the last signature by Rén 壬 on the verso side belongs to the individual who has written the entire text on the recto side:³¹

(A) 卅二年正月戊寅朔甲午, 啓陵鄉[齋]夫敢言之: 成里典, 啓陵郵人缺. 除士五(=伍)成里甸, 成. 成爲典, 甸爲郵人. 謁令, 尉以從事, 敢言之.

(J1 (8):157r)

(B) 正月戊寅朔丁酉, 遷陵丞昌卻之啓陵. 廿七戶已有一典. 令有(=又)除成爲典, 何律令應? 尉已除成, 甸爲啓陵郵人. 其以律令. /氣手 (C) /正月戊戌, 日中, 守府快行.

(D) 正月丁酉, 旦食時, 隸妾冉以來. /欣發 (A)壬手 (J1 (8):157v)

(A) In the 32nd year [215 BC], in the first month, which began on a day *wùyín*, on the day *jiǎwǔ* [the 17th day of the month], the overseer ([*sè*]*fū*) of the Qíling commune (*xiāng*) presumes to report: In Chéng village a chief (*diǎn*) and in Qíling a postman are lacking. To appoint the commoners of Chéng village Gài and Chéng – Chéng as chief and Gài as postman – (we) are calling upon the prefect and the defender (*wèi*) in order to (be able to) discharge (our) duty. This I presume to report. Rén handled (this).

29 It is quite possible that this reflects only a local practice, since on a Qín clay tablet dated to 334 BC not only the clerks’ names and *shǒu* but also their titles are given. See Ráo and Wáng 2000: 56.

30 Alternatively, others may have written these parts for them. Anyway, the various textual parts ending in individual names and *shǒu*, *xíng*, and *fā* seem to be written each by a different hand or at least written on different occasions, since, mostly, there is also a marked difference in the color of the ink.

31 For a photo and a transcription, albeit faulty, see Húnán shěng wénwù kǎogǔ yánjiùsuǒ et al. 2003: 13–14 and 19. For a more detailed discussion, see Giele 2004: 24–25.

- (D) In the first month, on the day *dīngyǒu* [the 20th day], at the double-hour of breakfast, the female bond servant Dān came with (this). / Xīn opened (it).”
- (B) In the first month that began on a day *wùyín*, on the day *dīngyǒu* [the 20th day of the month], the deputy of Qiānlíng (prefecture), Chāng, returns this to Qǐlíng. Twenty-seven households³² already have a chief. To let Chéng also be appointed chief, which statute or ordinance does this correspond to? The defender has already appointed Chéng and Gài as postmen of Qǐlíng. Act according to the statutes and ordinances! / Qì handled (this).
- (C) / In the first month, on the day *wùxū* [the 21st day], at (the double-hour of) noon, Office Guard Kuài went to forward (this).

A similar document has been unearthed from an early Hàn time tomb at Gāotái 高台 (M18:35), dated to 173 BC. This shows two individuals that have “signed” by adding *shǒu*, “handled”. But here it is much more difficult to decide whether different hands were involved or not.³³

After all, it is also possible that textual parts ending in such a “signature” were copied as a whole by the scribe who wrote the subsequent part of the text. This is obviously the case with an entire set of almost identical copies of twelve boards from Lǐyé, nos. J1(9)1–12.³⁴ These are transcripts of a string of official communications between Dòngtíng 洞庭 province and two subordinate prefectures, Qiānlíng 遷陵 and Yánglíng 陽陵, concerning twelve debtors who were registered and sought after in Yánglíng while they were doing service in Qiānlíng. The recto side of each of these boards clearly is written but in a single hand, though it consists of three differently dated parts (on some of the boards continuing onto the verso side), the latter two of which conclude with “Dān handled (this)” (Dān *shǒu* 儻手) and “Kān handled (this)” (Kān *shǒu* 堪手). Both Dān and Kān are thought to have been scribes at Yánglíng. The scribe who wrote these texts, however, is certainly the one who has signed as “Jìng handled (this)” (Jìng *shǒu* 敬手) in the lower left corner of the verso side of most of the

32 It is unclear to me what these twenty-seven households that already have a village chief refer to. Qǐlíng is introduced as a commune which should have been much larger and was also not headed by a *diǎn*, “chief”.

33 See Húběi shěng Jīngzhōu bówùguǎn 2000: 222–223 for transcriptions and line-drawings and pl. 34 for a photo.

34 The best pictures of these boards to date are published in Guójiā wénwùjú 2003: 64–69. The clearest among the twelve boards as regards the different parts and hands described above is board no. J1(9)4 (see ill. 1).

boards.³⁵ He is thought to be from Qiānlíng. In a clearly different, bold hand, the verso sides also contain an order by the temporary lieutenant (*jiǎwèi* 假尉) of Dòngtíng province. This was written and signed by “Jiā handled (this)” (*Jiā shǒu* 嘉手) (see ill. 1). Depending on the assumed nature of the boards, he was either a scribe in the lieutenant’s office or a colleague of Jìng in Qiānlíng prefecture, who added the contents of the provincial order to the archival copy that was kept in the prefectural archives.³⁶

3.2 *The period of maturity (from the middle of the 2nd c. BC to Latter Hàn)*

As the early empire was coming of age, administrative practice also became more professional and involved. Sometime around the middle of the second century BC, the usage of *shǒu* 手 after signatures was being discontinued. Moreover, each official, also on the local level, was now always identified by his name *and* his title.

35 As regards the vexing problem of identifying hands, there is of course no hope for us to ever be able to actually *prove* that someone did or did not write a document that carries his name. There is always the possibility that the scribe simply did not record his own name. All statements in this respect are therefore necessarily made in terms of probability. In this case, I assume that Jìng was responsible for writing the entire text on the recto side not only because it seems to be of the same hand as his “signature” on the verso side – an observation that, admittedly, is always problematic if based on no more than on two or three graphs – but also because of two further considerations: 1) Jìng is the only name recorded here and there is no other text than that on the recto side to which it could be reasonably related, the size and style of the other graphs on the verso side being clearly different. 2) The nature of this relationship is implied by many other examples that demonstrate that, if only one clerk left his name in the lower left corner of either the front or the back side of the strip or board, it was usually – though not always – the one who wrote the text. If one consents with the majority of scholars that *shǒu* 手 means “personally written by [...]”, this point becomes even more apparent. This whole issue will be discussed at length below.

36 This is the suggestion of Xíng Yítíán (forthcoming) who presents a detailed discussion of the formal characteristics of these boards and their mutual relationship. I would like to thank Professor Xíng for making his work available to me before publication.

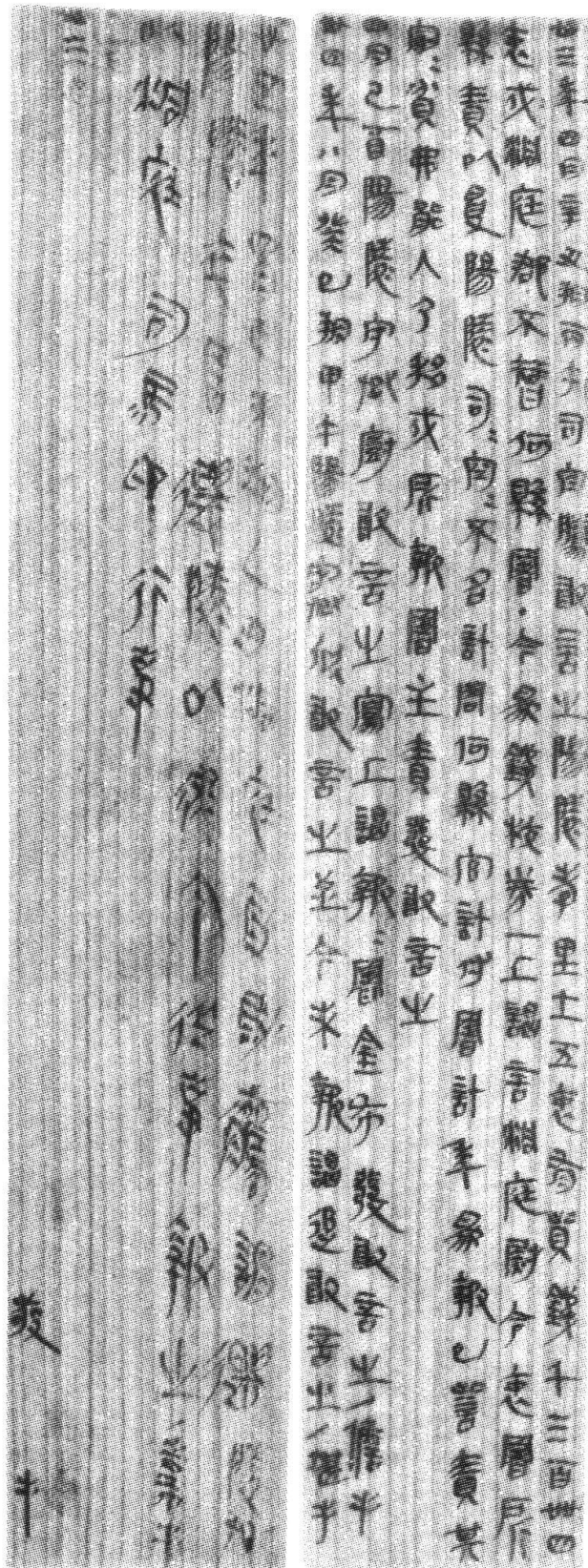


Illustration 1: Liye J1(9)4B (left) and J1(9)4A (right).

Among the wooden strips from the Northwest that go under the designation of Jūyán 居延 or Edsen-gol and Dūnhuáng 敦煌 strips we find a considerable amount of manuscripts that end in giving titles and names of subordinate officials – so-called *shǔlì* 屬吏 – who are known from traditional sources as making up the staff of bureaus (*cáo* 曹) on all levels of administration in the Hàn period and who were freely chosen for their job by their superiors. The exact job descriptions of these officials can mostly only be guessed at. Their relative ranking, however, has been reconstructed. Thus, a *yuàn* 掾 usually headed such a bureau, being assisted by a number of junior bureau heads (*shàoshǐ* 少史 or just *shǐ* 史), associates (*shǔ* 屬), and directing clerks (*lìngshǐ* 令史) in descending rank. At least, this was the hierarchical structure of bureaus in the central government as it is described in the traditional sources.³⁷

Except for the above-mentioned, we often find in the manuscript texts other subordinate officials, most prominently adjutant clerks (*cùishǐ* 卒史) and their writing assistants (*shūzuǒ* 書佐),³⁸ lieutenant clerks (*wèishǐ* 尉史), and platoon clerks (*hòushǐ* 候史). All of these, with the exception of the adjutant clerk, ranked below the directing clerks. This is clearly demonstrated by the order of their appearance in the manuscripts.

So as to show how these subordinate officials figure in the source texts, I shall cite a concrete example. The following is the protocol of the consecutive forwarding of an imperial instruction down through the echelons. The instruction, that is also preserved but not reproduced here, concerned the resting of

37 *Xù Hànzhi* 續漢志 24: 3559 (Zhōnghuá shūjú ed. of the *Hòu Hànzhu* 後漢書). This states that bureau heads of the top officials in the central administration ranked equivalent to 300 bushels (*bǐ sānbǎi shí* 比三百石), while associates ranked equivalent to 200 bushels (*bǐ èrbǎi shí* 比二百石). However, in provincial bureaus their nominal income was probably lower.

38 Note that the reading of 卒 should properly be *cui*, like 倅, “adjutant”. The common reading *zú*, “conscript”, would make no sense. Reading *cui*, one understands why *cùirén* 卒人 could even be a honorary appellation for the lieutenant commander, also a kind of “second-in-line” behind the provincial governor. For the loan, see Gāo Héng 1989: 572. It is interesting to note that as far as the evidence permits us to see, the number of adjutant clerks and writing assistants was very often the same within one office; cf. Yán Gēngwàng 1961: 109. This is confirmed by the provincial statistics on a manuscript found at Yīnwān 尹灣; see Jì Ānnuò 1997: 44 (810). The adjutant clerks seem also to have had an educational function, and it is not impossible that the writing assistants were actually their trainees.

weapons and other ritual stipulations during summer solstice of the year 61 BC (see ill. 2).³⁹



Illustration 2: A33-10.29 to 10.33.

39 The whole reconstructed document is shown in correct sequence and discussed in Ōba 1992: 13–22. The illustration used here is from Dù Zhèngshèng (gen. ed.) 1998: 78.

元康五年二月，癸丑朔，癸亥：御史大夫吉下丞相。承書，從事，下當用者，如詔書。
(A33-10.33, pl. 70)

In the fifth year of (the reign period) *yuánkāng*, on the *guīhài* day [the 11th day, corresponding to March 8th, 61 BC] of the second month, which began on a *guǐchǒu* day, chief prosecutor (Bǐng) Jí hands (this) down to the chief minister. Upon receiving this letter, set to work and hand (this) down to those who are to use it, as according to the imperial instruction.

二月丁卯，丞相相下車騎將軍中二千石（車騎將軍，將軍，中二千石，二千石），郡太守，諸侯相。承書，從事，下當用者，如詔書。
少史慶，令史宜王，始長。
(A33-10.30, pl. 29)

On the *dīngmǎo* day [the 15th day] of the second month, chief minister, (Wèi) Xiàng, hands (this) down to the general of cavalry and chariots, the generals, the officials ranking fully 2,000 bushels, the officials ranking 2,000 bushels, the provincial governors, and the administrators of the vassal states. Upon receiving this letter, set to work and hand (this) down to those who are to use it, as according to the imperial instruction.

Junior bureau head, Qìng; directing clerks Yíwáng, Shǐzhǎng.

三月丙午，張掖長史延行太守事，肩水倉長湯兼行丞事下屬國，農，部都尉，小府，縣官。承書，從事，下當用者，如詔書。／守屬宗，助府佐定。

(A33-10.32, pl. 28)

On the *bǐngwǔ* [i.e. the 24th] day of the third month senior clerk Yán of Zhāngyè, conducting the business of the governor, and Tāng, chief of the granary of Jiānshuǐ, concurrently conducting the business of the deputy governor, hand (this) down to the lieutenants of the dependant states, of the agricultural garrisons and of the divisions, as well as to the lesser office (?) and the prefectural authorities. Upon receiving this letter, set to work and hand (this) down to those who are to use it, as according to the imperial instruction. / Probationary associate Zōng, helping assistant of the (governor's) office Dìng.

閏月丁巳，張掖肩水城尉誼以近次兼行都尉事下候，城尉。承書，從事，下當用者，如詔書。／守卒史義。 (A33-10.29, pl. 28)

On the *dīngsì* [i.e., the 6th] day of the intercalary month⁴⁰ commander Yì of Jiānshuǐ city in Zhāngyè, on behalf of his being close in sequence (to the lieutenant commander), concurrently conducts the business of the lieutenant commander and hands (this) down to the company captains and the sergeant of the city. Upon receiving this letter, set to work and hand (this) down to those who are to use it, as according to the imperial instruction. / Probationary adjutant clerk Yì.

閏月庚申，肩水土吏橫以私印行候事下尉，候長。承書，從事，下當用者，如詔書。／令史得。 (A33-10.31, pl. 28)

On the *gēngshēn* [i.e., the 9th] day of the intercalary month the military functionary Héng of Jiānshuǐ [company], using (his) private seal to conduct the business of the company commander, hands (this) down to the sergeant and the platoon commanders. Upon receiving this letter, set to work and hand (this) down to those who are to use it, as according to the imperial instruction. / Directing clerk Dé.

Except for the first step that brought the document from the office of the chief prosecutor to that of the chief minister, each protocol ends with one or more names and titles of subordinate officials. At least three such officials are listed for the office of the chief minister, two for the provincial headquarters of the governor, and one each for the office of his lieutenant commander as well as for one of the companies further down the hierarchy.

A glance at the published photos convinces us that these names cannot be signatures in the original hand any more, because the whole document is a transcript in one hand.⁴¹ If one of the signatories is responsible for actually writing out the document before our eyes, it could only be directing clerk Dé from Jiānshuǐ company whose name is seen as a single “signatory” on the last strip. Since the site A33, at which this document was found, has been reasonably identified as the Jiānshuǐ company site, the extant manuscript could have been either an archival copy of a letter – now lost – that was actually sent further

40 Contrary to most reference works concerning the ancient Chinese calendar, like Xú Xíqí 1997: 1561, this manuscript shows that the intercalary month of 61 BC followed the third rather than the fourth month, because in the fourth month there was no *dīngsì* day.

41 For the theoretical premise as regards identifying hands in manuscripts, see note 35 above.

down the echelons or a letter that was for one reason or another not sent as ordered.⁴²

In any case, because it is a chain letter that originated in the capital and had to be distributed down the echelons to every office in the empire, we cannot reasonably expect the names on any but the last level to be real signatures. After all, in the office of the chief minister the document that obviously went to all provinces and feudal kingdoms had to be copied about 120 times! At the next level, in the provincial governor’s office, it was still about fifteen times. In other words, the single manuscript instruction that we possess is but one of a host of similar instructions. Even at the second to the last level – as far as the document is preserved – i.e., at the office of the lieutenant of Jiānshuǐ division, the instruction, going to the companies and the commander of the city, had to be copied at least four times.⁴³

In order to assess what might be genuine signatures, it is of course necessary to turn to documents that have not been transmitted through so many different stages as the above-cited example, but represent communications between directly related offices. Still, it is interesting – and highly relevant for the question of signatures, too – to see that there is more than one official listed at the end of the strips from the higher levels of administration. Comparing similar datable cases allows us to detect certain patterns in the make-up of these groups of subordinate officials, depending on the hierarchical level of administration they were employed in. Also, it can be surmised that the nature of the documents to be written out as well as the number of recipients played a decisive role for

42 I tend to think that it was a letter not sent because it would be logical to retain as an archival copy the original letter from the office of the lieutenant of the division to which the company scribe adds his own protocol. It is also not impossible that this very letter was actually returned to the company after having been sent around to the platoons. But all these explanations must remain unproven assumptions.

43 Three companies, Jiānshuǐ 肩水, Tuótuō 橐他, and Guǎngdì 廣地, are known to have been administrated by the lieutenant of Jiānshuǐ division; see Nagata 1989: 435–436. As for the title *chéngwèi* 城尉, “sergeant of the city”, little is known. But since *chéng* in the manuscript sources from the northwest usually refers to a city of the prefectural level, and since the *chéngwèi* is named only after the company captains, it may be surmised that he was for the prefect what the *dūwèi* 都尉 was for the provincial governor. It is unknown how many prefectural cities the lieutenant of the Jiānshuǐ division regularly communicated with. Moreover, there is only indirect evidence, at best, for a prefectural city at or near Jiānshuǐ. But as the document itself in the beginning mentions one sergeant of the city by name, there was at least one of them.

the constitution of those groups of subordinate officials. The findings are summarized in the following table.

Level	Signed by								Cases	Dated to
	掾 bureau head	(少)史 junior bureau head	卒史 adjutant clerk	屬 asso- ciate	令史 direct- ing clerk	尉史 lieuten- ant clerk	候史 platoon clerk	(書)佐 writing assistant		
丞相府 chief minister	1	or 1	or	1	1-3				5	40-32 BC
九卿府 ministers	1		1	or 1				1	2	74-40 BC
太守府 governors	1		1					1	3	78-61 BC
			1	1					1	61 BC
	1			1				1-3	4	AD 9-27
都尉府 lieutenants	1	or	1					1	6	61-28 BC
	1	or	1	1				1	2	?
	1			1				1-3	8	AD 1-29
縣庭 prefects	1		or		1 ⁴⁴			0-2	11	67 BC- AD 29
候官 companies	0-1 ⁴⁵				1	or 1			24	58-22 BC
					1	or 1			3	AD 9-23
	1				1	or 1			18	AD 19-31
部 platoon							1		3	65-53 BC

Table of subordinate officials named at the end of wooden strips documents from Northwest China

Since the data are mostly fragmentary, some generalizations have been inevitable. Note that especially in the higher echelons the number of recorded cases is too few to build large hypotheses on. Clear differences in the make-up of these groups can be observed between the levels of

44 In the prefectural offices, a bailiff, *sēfū* 番夫, is listed sometimes instead of the directing clerk.

45 On some documents from companies a multitask functionary called *shilì* 士吏 is listed first, presumably fulfilling the tasks of a bureau head.

- platoons with their own clerks;
- companies where, especially since the Latter Hàn, two officials were detailed for clerical work, the directing clerk or the lieutenant clerk being the most typical figures;
- the prefectural offices where up to three people were working and where we have the first instances of writing assistants;
- the officials with a nominal income of 2000 bushels, i.e., the ministers in the capital and the provincial governors, as well as their lieutenants. Here, the bureau staff is most diverse and we have adjutant clerks and associates instead of directing or lieutenant clerks;
- the top level of government, where we find directing clerks again, but no writing assistants.

According to conventional interpretation, the designations *shǐ* 史 and *shūzuǒ* 書佐 should indicate, that all or most of these subordinate officials were trained scribes or at least scribes’ trainees.⁴⁶ But were each of them equally responsible for each document that carries their respective names? And did they really sign it personally? To answer these questions, several observations may be instructive:

1. As with the Qín and early Hàn boards discussed above, the handwriting of the main text of a document is usually identical with that of the “signature” at the end but often unlike other, obviously later additions to the document. The following example, mentioned above already, is particularly clear on this point (see ill. 3). Following Chinese convention, the part that is thought to be a later addition in a different hand is typed in another font. Note that the signature at the very end of the text on the back side (B), belongs to the individual who has written the text on the front side (A). In the translation, this is emphasized by a rearrangement of the text in chronological order as it was written.

46 As various records show, the ability to read and write a certain amount of characters in a certain script style was one of the qualifications for clerks, the requirements being more demanding the higher the position of the scribe; this will be dealt with in detail in a forthcoming study; for now, see Hulsewé 1959: 243. On the lowest level of bureaucracy, the qualification may have meant to be able to read and write in the “clerical script style” (*lishū* 隸書); see Yú Háoliàng 1985: 202–203, on *shǐ* 史 and *bù shǐ* 不史.

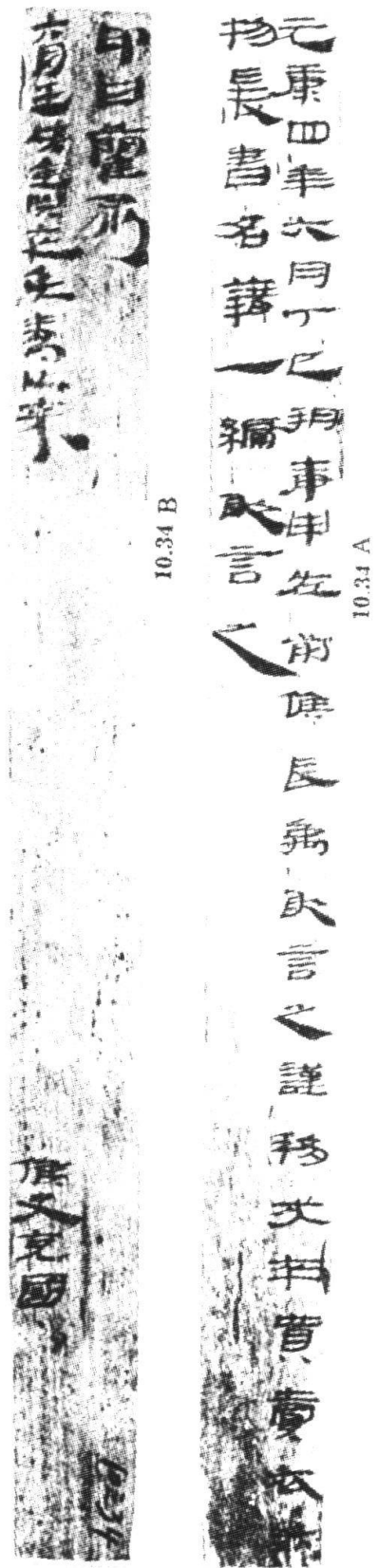


Illustration 3: A33-10.34 B (left) and A33-10.34 A (right).

元康四年六月丁巳朔，庚申，左前候長禹敢言之：謹移戍卒賣衣，財物爰書，名籍，一編。敢言之。 (A33-10.34A, pl.67)

印曰：「蘭禹」。

六月壬戌金關卒延壽以來， 候史充國 (A33-10.34B, pl.68)

In the fourth year of (the reign period) *yuánkāng*, on the *gēngshēn* day [the 4th day, corresponding to Juli 9th, 62 BC] of the sixth month, which began on a *dīngsì* day, the commander of the Left Vanguard Platoon, (Lìn蘭) Yǔ, presumes to report: I respectfully transmit the records of the testimonials and name lists (in the case) of those garrison soldiers who have hired out or sold clothes and valuables for money. This, I presume to report.

Platoon clerk Chōngguó.

The seal (inscription) reads: Lìn Yǔ.

In the sixth month, on the day rénxū, private Yánshòu of the Jīn checkpoint came with this.”

2. If the above-cited examples seem to imply beyond doubt that the individual who signed at the backside of the strip or board also wrote the main text on the frontside, this connection becomes problematic with documents “signed” by two scribes. Such is the case with two strips of the aforementioned imperial instruction of 61 BC. Even though the manuscript that we have now is a transcript made at a low level of the hierarchy, it is obvious that at the some higher levels the instruction and its protocol of transmission had been handled by two individuals. Whom should we regard as the one who actually wrote the text? The instruction of 61 BC cannot tell us, but on the wooden strip A33-20.12 (pl. 67, 68) we find a report from two platoon clerks that was presumably sent to the Jiānshuǐ company, in the ruins of which the strip was found. The names of both clerks appear on the verso side, separated by a hook-shaped enumeration diacritic. The published photo is not of such a quality as one would wish for (see ill. 4), but for what can be seen, it appears that the two “signatures” are executed in very similar hands, if not indeed in the same hand. They are also likely to be the same as that of the main text on the recto side. If this is true, it implies that, at best, only one of the names could have been a real signature. Even if the names were written by two different individuals, this raises the question of why two scribes signed what probably only one of them wrote.



Illustration 4: A33-20.12 B.

3. In some cases, the same or nearly the same string of titles and names can be identified on different manuscripts. The lists of subordinate officials at the end of strips EPF22.68, 71A, 153B, and 462B, for instance, share the same bureau head (*yuàn* 掾) Yáng 陽 and mostly the same probationary associate (*shǒushǔ* 守屬) Gōng 恭, but have different writing assistants (*shūzuǒ* 書佐), namely Kuàng 況, Fēng 豐, Bó 博, and Cān (or Sān) 參. Only strip 153B is slightly different insofar as it has “concurrent probationary associate Xí” (*jiān shǒushǔ Xí* 兼守屬習) instead of the “probationary associate Gōng” (see ill. 5).

Three of the documents are dated to between AD 27 and 29.⁴⁷ The fourth strip (no. 68) specifies only month and day, but probably belongs to the same time frame as the other three strips because it shares with one of them (strip 153, dated to AD 29) the same set of superior officials in whose names the letters were sent. Actually, almost the whole first column of text is nearly identical on strips 68 and 153A. As the titles and names of the superior officials also disclose, the commands on all four strips originated with the office of the lieutenant

47 Note that the two strips EPF22.70 and 71 belong together. The year is specified on strip 70.

commander of Jūyán. It has been shown above that this level of hierarchy is in line with the set of subordinate officials that is seen here, i.e., with bureau head, associate, writing assistant. All this makes it very probable that “bureau head Yáng” stood indeed for the same individual on all four strips as well as “Gōng” for the same “associate” on three of them. The likelihood that within a span of three years two individuals with the same name held or succeeded each other in the same position at an outlying company with a very limited bureau staff is almost nil.



Illustration 5 (from left to right): EPF22.68, .71A, .153B, and .462B.

Now, what does that mean for our purpose? Can we go ahead, as others have done, and compare the handwriting on the four strips to see whether it belonged to Yáng, Gōng, or somebody else? Not yet. A very important previous step must be to make sure that these are the original letters as they arrived at the company where they have been found. For, if these are mere copies that were to be archived or transmitted further down the hierarchy (like all but the last strip of the instruction of 61 BC quoted above), it would be useless to inspect the handwriting and try to identify Yáng's or Gong's hand, or that of any of the writing assistants. In this case, the hand would be that of a scribe at the company whose name would be recorded on another strip, if at all.

Fortunately, as far as can be seen from the contents of the strips all but one of them did not require further transmission down the echelons. Strips EPF22.70–71 represent an order by the warlord Dòu Róng 竇融 concerning the income structure of border officials. Strip EPF22.462 carries an order about the food to be supplied to functionaries on tours of duty. Both matters belonged to the responsibilities of companies.⁴⁸ Strip EPF22.153 together with 154 is an order to the companies and prefectures concerning sacrifices to be made. It explicitly states that the deputy prefects should be sent out to oversee the local sacrifices. Nothing is said about further transmission of this order. Only strip EFP22.68, that together with strip 67 represents a fragment of a chain letter concerning a general amnesty, contains the formula *xià dāngyòngzhě* 下當用者 “hand (this) down to those concerned” that is also seen on the instruction of 61 BC. This means that the whole document had to be copied and transmitted to the platoons under the jurisdiction of the company. Thus, we cannot be sure whether the manuscript we have was the original from the lieutenant commander or one of several transcripts made at the company. Only in the first case would it make sense to compare its handwriting with those other three documents. Therefore, it should be kept in mind that any result from comparing the hand on this particular strip with those of the other three does not carry the same force as an argument.

At first glance, the script on all four strips does look somehow alike. Scrutinizing it closely, however, reveals considerable differences. For example, the graph *shū* 書 is different on all four strips, on strip 71A it is even structurally different, lacking a horizontal stroke. On strip 153B the long horizontal stroke of

48 The feeding of functionaries from other districts that required compensations to be made between agencies is also reflected by a ledger written out at another company. On this matter, see Ukai 1997.

shū 書 (as well as of *zuǒ* 佐) shows a characteristic upward swing that can also be observed in the main text of that document (not shown in the illustration). Similarly, the main vertical stroke in the name *Yáng* 陽 on strip 71A swings left, a tendency that it shares with other graphs in that document, but not with those on the three other strips. The phonetic of *Yáng* (i.e., 易) is also structurally different on strips 68 and 462B on the one hand and 71A and 153B on the other. The same is true for the phonetic of *shǔ* 屬 (i.e., 蜀), while the signfic of *zuǒ* 佐 (i.e., 人) shows graphical differences (compare 68 and 71A with 153B and 462B). If these differences really betray different hands – as I think they do – it would be most natural to presume that it has been the lowest-ranking clerk who actually wrote out the document. If they are but variations of one and the same hand, one would have to conclude that it was either the bureau head *Yáng*, who is the only one named on all four documents, or another, anonymous individual who wrote these four documents.⁴⁹

4. Two types of further evidence, however, make it doubtful that bureau heads actually wrote (and signed) these kind of documents. The first evidence is the single case of a manuscript (EPF22.452) that ends with the line “Bureau head [blank], concurrent lieutenant clerk *Yán*” (*yuán* [blank], *jiān wèishǐ Yán* 掾 [blank], 兼尉史嚴). Here, for some unknown reason the bureau head is not named and a blank is left instead. If the bureau head had been responsible for the actual writing and if his being listed at the end of such a document was meant to be a signature, there would have been no reason not to sign while he was writing out the document. The whole manuscript is executed in a very rough, unprofessional hand and by means of a frayed brush. As it stands, it is more plausible to assume that the lieutenant clerk *Yán* did the writing and left out the bureau head’s name either because the position was not filled at the time, and hence no name could be given, or because the lieutenant clerk had to show the result of his labour to the bureau head who would enter his personal signature only after he found everything flawless. This is further corroborated by the fact that on this document the name of the company captain has also been left out.⁵⁰

49 On these points, see also Sumiya 1996: 221 and 223n8; Xíng Yìtián 1999: 562–563. Despite certain differences in their conclusion, both agree that those three or four strips were written by different hands. See Xíng Yìtián 1999: 584 for an illustration that shows further differences of the hands in the main text of the strips EPF22.68, 71, and 462.

50 This phenomenon that shows on a number of other strips will be dealt with in a forthcoming article.

5. The second kind of evidence for the assumption that it was not the bureau heads who actually copied and personally signed manuscripts is the fact that there are a number of documents in various different hands that show the same individual – a bureau head Tán 譚 – named at the end. This is the case on the verso side of strips EPF22.45, 48, 247, 250, 254, 301, 334, 379, 413, 430, 460, 508, 532, etc.. The dates on these manuscripts, as far as they have been preserved, range from AD 23 to 31. The place of origin of all the manuscripts is the company of Jiǎqú 甲渠 (or Jiǎgōu 甲溝 under Wáng Mǎng). Therefore, it may be reasonable to assume that all these “Bureau head Tán” instances represent the same individual.⁵¹ Yet, several different hands can be discerned (see ill. 6).⁵²



Illustration 6 (from left to right): EPF22.247B, .250B, .301B, .334B, .430B, and .460B.

- 51 In fact, there are already at least three articles that exclusively or predominantly deal with this individual whose family name was Xiàhóu 夏侯; see Luó Shìjié 1997 with further references.
- 52 Xíng Yítíán 1999: 561–561 and 580–582 persuasively distinguishes three to four different hands. It may be noted, however, that regardless of the hand, almost all “yuán Tán” strips exhibit a marked tendency to prolong the last stroke of the graph *nián* 年 and some other graphs. An exception is the strip EPF22.334B. Though such a style seems to have been more generally en vogue during that time, the regularity and vigour with which these prolongations are executed are still remarkable. One wonders whether they may be due to the individual predelection of someone – bureau head Tán? – who may have written the drafts for all those manuscripts that were then copied by different individuals or rather to a temporary prescription that all scribes had to adhere to.

This means that not in all cases – perhaps even in no case – did Tán actually write or sign the document. This was probably done instead by some lower-ranking clerk who, again for some unknown reason, did not leave a record of his name.⁵³ This assumption is corroborated by another manuscript (EPF22. 359) that is written in a hand akin to one of the above (F22.532), but that except for naming bureau head Tán also names lower-ranking clerks.

In sum, it can be misleading to call the names of subordinate officials, or “scribes”, appearing at the end of these documents “signatures”. Only the last name in those lists does probably represent the individual who personally wrote his name, alongside the main text of the document, as well as the other names – at least in most cases. Sometimes, the scribe does not even seem to have recorded his own name at all and the writing we see is that of a low-ranking scribe recording only the name of his supervisor.

On the other hand, these names were certainly not recorded for nothing. They are similar to signatures in that they signified responsibility. Thus, whether or not the individual who actually wrote a manuscript remained anonymous or not may be related to the nature of the manuscript at hand: Was it an “original” (*zhèngběn* 正本) that was used as mail or a “copy” (*fùběn* 副本) of the same text that was filed as archival evidence? Or was it a mere draft or even a writing practice for an advanced trainee? In the latter cases, it would not have been necessary to record the scribe’s identity because responsibility was not a concern. Unfortunately, the nature of documents is not always identifiable with a sufficient degree of certainty. As methods at our disposal we have a rather subjective judgement about the handwriting and a correlation of data concerning the original sender and address of an ancient document as well as – ideally – the identity of the archaeological site, where it was eventually excavated.⁵⁴ But un-

53 Xíng Yitián 1999: 563 suggests that the reason may have been that writing assistants were of a comparatively low rank. Another general possibility, I believe, would be that this has to do with the nature of the document concerned. In case of these “bureau head Tán” documents, however, it is difficult to positively prove their nature.

54 For multi-strip chain letters, is very tempting to postulate that those strips that are “signed” on the frontside are transcripts while those that are “signed” on the backside are “originals”. Theoretically, this would make sense, because one would expect the information in the transcribed protocols of transmission from the higher echelons to be completely accessible on the frontside. To expect the reader to turn the roll of strips each time he has finished reading through the text on one strip, is inconceivable, while it makes sense to identify the scribe responsible for copying the entire roll on the outside of the closed roll. However, looking at the actual examples, it seems that scribes only turned to the backside for placing

certain as these indications sometimes are, one has to make sure to use them as far as possible. Otherwise, misinterpretation could easily be the result.

Also, we can only guess at what kind of responsibility the scribes whose names were listed actually had. It seems unlikely that they were responsible for the subject matter of the document as such, for most documents identify superiors as senders. Some of the “scribes” – most likely the bureau heads – may have been responsible for writing drafts of reports that were issued from their office. Thus, if these drafts were not based upon any models or dictation by their superiors, these “scribes” were effectively responsible for the right choice of words. In the case of orders or letters from other offices that only had to be copied, drafts – if made at all – were of course limited to the brief record of transmission that was added at the end.

The other scribes could not have been made responsible for much more than the correct orthography and timely handling of the letter. We do not know whether there was a division of labour between scribes of different ranks for the drawing up of “originals” on the one hand and archival “copies” on the other, but if so this could explain instances where we have three or more differently ranked scribes listed.

But even with this hypothetical explanation, according to which we imagine the bureau heads making the drafts and supervising, for instance, the associates to write the letters that would be sent, and the writing assistants to make copies of these for the archive, it remains highly problematic to call the names of even the writing assistants “signatures”. For how do we explain those instances, where we have – in what appears to be the same script – more than one writing assistant’s name on the same document? Do we have to suppose that there existed some kind of agreement that simply the sequence of scribes indicated who actually wrote the document? Why then would the other be listed at all? Did he do the spell-checking after his colleague wrote out the necessary number of documents? We do not know. The most reasonable assumption, it seems, is to assume that everyone somehow involved in the production of an official document had to be listed and that to this group as a whole the principle of shared responsibility was applied. This responsibility was not expressed in terms of

their “signatures” if there was not enough space left on the frontside. In other words, this formal feature may have been decided upon rather arbitrarily.

individual signatures, but by one member of this group listing the names of all group members,⁵⁵ usually including his own.

What prevented those who wrote out the documents from listing names that did not belong to the group, so as to have a scapegoat if something went wrong or to harm a personal foe? What prevented them from leaving out names, especially their own, so as to evade responsibility? Two options are plausible that could also be used in combination: Firstly, mutual checking of the finished document by those involved. Secondly, to have the original and the archival copy drawn up by different scribes so as to enable later comparisons.

However, most local offices did not have such a large pool of scribes to choose from. It is quite possible that such a list of names at the end of a document was simply identical with the subordinate officials on the pay-roll of the respective office. In that case, it becomes even questionable whether those who were listed had actually been involved in the production of the document at all. After all, group responsibility does also mean that a supervisor – like a bureau head, for instance – is reprimanded if his subordinates make a mistake in his absence. And finally, mutual responsibility of a group the make-up of which was fixed, at least for some time, would also prevent the lower-ranking members of the group from trying to harm their superiors, simply because the eventual punishment would also afflict themselves.

What the “signatures” of the “scribes” did not accomplish is the final feature on our list of the general functions of (modern) signatures mentioned at the outset: lending authority, at least not beyond the walls of the “scribes” office. It was the duty of their superiors to do this by applying their official seal to the mail made ready for dispatch. For the “scribes” to use seals instead of just having their names listed by one of them would have been too impractical, given the sometimes large number of individuals involved.

Very probably, “scribes” did not even have official seals. As has been noted above, the government strictly controlled its functionaries’ using official seals by issuing these and demanding them back when the incumbent died or was removed from office. The lowest-ranking functionaries whom the central government installed were those on the prefectural level within the civil administration and, presumably, on the corresponding level of companies within the military administration. Subordinate officials (*shǔlì*) were employed by their superiors, i.e., for example by the prefects themselves. It would therefore be

55 Or perhaps, as in the case of bureau head Tán, only of the leader of the group as representing all others.

logical if these were made accountable to a considerable extent for the actions of their subordinates. The official seal of the superior was the sign of this accountability that covered all members of his office. Their names appearing at the end of documents did of course also express a certain amount of accountability and responsibility. But for this purpose it was not important that they wrote these names themselves.

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