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“IF SHE SPENDS ANOTHER MONTH WITH ME LIKE THIS, I
WILL THROW MYSELF INTO THE SEA” (PPETAUS 29, 8-10)

WOMEN AND FAMILY CONFLICT IN GRECO-ROMANO EGYPT

Abstract

The study of the ancient family has gained the interest of scholars, as it contributes to a better understanding of the ancient world and the history of the family. In recent decades, sociologists and historians have focused their attention on theories emphasizing the conflicting interests of different family members and domestic violence in antiquity. The most plentiful documentation of family disputes in the Greco-Roman world is provided by numerous papyri from Egypt. This paper aims to discuss the role of women both in the initiation and the settlement of a family dispute in the light of papyrus documents (mainly letters and petitions) from Greco-Roman Egypt. It would be of great interest to investigate the ways in which fundamental social customs and economic conditions of Roman Egypt produced everyday conflicts within the household. In addition, particular attention will be paid to how interfamilial tensions, especially between the women of the household, could affect the family's role as an economic and social unit.

Keywords

Family, dispute, resolution, women, violence, letters, petitions

Family studies have become an increasingly active field of study in recent decades, providing valuable opportunities for interdisciplinary research¹. Sociologists and anthropologists have been engaged in the discussion about changes in the family and its influence on contemporary society through the centuries. The study of the ancient family has gained the interest of scholars, as it contributes to a better understanding of the ancient world and the history of the family. In recent decades, sociologists and historians have focused their attention on theories emphasizing the conflicting interests of different family members and domestic violence in antiquity². In particular, the family in the

¹ See for example L.K. BERKNER, *The stem family and the development cycle of the peasant household: an eighteenth-century Austrian example*, «American Historical Review» 77 (1972), pp. 398-418; V.L. BENGTON-R.E.L. ROBERTS, *Intergenerational solidarity in aging families: an example of formal theory construction*, «Journal of Marriage and Family» 53 (1991), pp. 856-870; V.L. BENGTON, *Beyond the nuclear family: the increasing importance of multigenerational bonds*, «Journal of Marriage and Family» 63 (2001), pp. 1-17.

² See, for example, the recent volume of M.C. PIMENTEL-N. SIMOES RODRIGUES (eds.), *Violence in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion, 19, Leuven-Paris 2018.

Greco-Roman world has been one of the liveliest areas of historical research³, since a great number of literary and non-literary sources belonging to the imperial times have offered scholars grounds for their research. The most plentiful documentation of family disputes in the Greco-Roman world is provided by numerous papyrus documents from Egypt, mainly private letters, petitions and court proceedings⁴. Women are traditionally to be considered victims of domestic violence due to their lower status and *infirmitas sexus*⁵, while they also seemed to be the ones who contributed to dispute resolution within the household in order to protect the family⁶. However, the source material also gives evidence of women acting as the initiators of a conflict, mainly against younger members. This paper aims to discuss the role of women both in the initiation and the settlement of a family dispute in the light of papyrus documents from Greco-Roman Egypt. It would be of great interest to investigate the ways in which fundamental social customs and economic conditions of Roman Egypt produced everyday conflicts within the household. In addition, particular attention will be paid to how interfamilial tensions, especially between the women of the household, could affect the family's role as an economic and social unit.

In ancient societies men were usually the heads of the family and the primary role of women was reproduction. Papyri indicate that women in Roman Egypt were largely involved in both the administration of the household and the control over property⁷. This should not surprise us if we consider male mo-

³ See for example K.R. BRADLEY, *Discovering the Roman family: studies in Roman social history*, New York 1991; S. DIXON, *The Roman family*, Baltimore 1992; G. MICHELE, *The Roman family in the Empire: Rome, Italy and Beyond*, Oxford 2005.

⁴ On family conflict in Roman Egypt, see S.R. HUEBNER, *The Family in Roman Egypt. A Comparative Approach to Intergenerational Solidarity and Conflict*, Cambridge 2013; S. WAEBENS-K. VANDORPE-N. VANEERDEWEGH (eds), *Seeking Justice in and out of Court: Dispute Resolution in Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt*, *Studia Hellenistica*, 62, Leuven 2022.

⁵ See S. DIXON, *Infirmitas sexus. Womanly weakness in Roman law*, «Tijdschrift voor Rechts-geschiedenis = Revue d'Histoire du Droit» 52 (1984), pp. 343-371.

⁶ Cf. S. BANO (ed.), *Gender and Justice in Family Law Disputes: Women, Mediation, and Religious Arbitration*, Chicago 2017. See also D.W. HOBSON, *The Impact of Law on Village Life in Roman Egypt*, in B. HALPERN-D.W. HOBSON (eds.), *Law, Politics and Society in the Ancient Mediterranean World*, Sheffield 1993, pp. 193-219, esp. pp. 199-200; B. KELLY, *Petitions, Litigation, and Social Control in Roman Egypt*, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Documents*, Oxford 2011, pp. 7-18, 246-247. On methods of ending disputes privately in late Antique and Byzantine Egypt, see T. GAGOS-P. VAN MINNEN, *Settling a Dispute. Toward a Legal Anthropology of Late Antique Egypt*, Ann Arbor 1994, pp. 30-31 and 121-127 with a list of documents recording settlement of a dispute. Demotic texts also testify to the involvement of the family in the regulation of conflicts. For further discussion, see C. HUE-ARCÉ, *Violence against Women in Graeco-Roman Egypt: the Contribution of Demotic Documents*, in U. MATIĆ-B. JENSEN (eds), *Archaeologies of Gender and Violence*, Oxford 2017, pp. 133-150, esp. pp. 146-147.

⁷ HUEBNER, *The Family in Roman Egypt* cit., p. 20.

bility due to work and other duties which resulted in women being alone at home for significant periods of time. The traditional gender division of labor in a multiple family household usually kept the young couple apart for most of the day. Men worked outside in the fields, while the women stayed at home most often under the supervision of the wife of the head of the household⁸. Virilocal marriage patterns, with married couples residing with or near the husband's parents tended to cause generational conflicts within families⁹. Thus, life in a multiple family household could provoke various everyday conflicts and disharmony between the women who lived there, while their cooperation in the household tasks did not necessarily lead to solidarity¹⁰. However, in such cases papyrological evidence is not abundant, since everyday conflicts were not always recorded in letters or petitions.

If we take into consideration the age difference between husbands and wives which resulted in many women losing their spouses early, widows were expected to seek their children's, mainly the son's, support. In the letter SB III 6264 (2nd cent. CE), Kopres' widow mother writes to her son blaming her daughter-in-law for their disagreement. The woman notes that her daughter-in-law is inflaming her son by accusing his mother of unjust treatment, cf. ll. 4-8: ἡ δὲ | γυν[ή] σε κάει | λαλο[ῦσα] πάσαν | ὥρ[αν], ὅτι σοι | οὐδὲν δίδω («your wife inflames you when she says every hour that I do not give you anything»)¹¹. S. Huebner aptly points out that this should not surprise us «since a woman's most vital old-age security was her son(s)»¹². The aforementioned mother-in-law warned her son that his wife was striving to influence and alienate him from her. Her language is rather emotional, intending to touch Kopres' feelings by highlighting that she is the only one who loves him, cf. ll. 23-24: οὐδί[ς] (l. οὐδεὶς) σε δύνατε (l. δύναται) φιλήσε (l. φιλήσαι), ἐκίνη (l. ἐκείνη) γὰρ ἰς (l. εἰς) τὸ σύνφο(ρον) αὐτῆς ξύει | [σε(?) . .] . . . μαι γὰρ σου τὰ στριφω («Nobody can love you, for she shapes you according to her advantage»)¹³.

In addition, in PLips I 29 (295 CE) Aurelia Eustorgis leaves as her legal heir her adult daughter and makes clear in her will that Tameis, her daughter-

⁸ HUEBNER, *The Family in Roman Egypt* cit., p. 143.

⁹ Sabine Huebner has pointed out that the percentage of married women living with a parent-in-law recorded in the Roman Egyptian census returns is not high. See HUEBNER, *The Family in Roman Egypt* cit., pp. 144-150. However, the influence of a parent-in-law on the married couple's life is indicated by papyrus letters as will be shown later.

¹⁰ J. DICKERSON-PUTMAN-J.K. BROWN, *Women's age hierarchies: An introductory overview*, «Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology» 121 (1994), pp. 119-125.

¹¹ Translation by R.S. BAGNALL-R. CRIBIORE (with contributions by E. AHTARIDIS), *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt: 300 BC - AD 800*, Ann Arbor 2006, p. 282.

¹² See HUEBNER, *The Family in Roman Egypt* cit., p. 146.

¹³ Translation by BAGNALL-CRIBIORE, *Women's Letters* cit., p. 282.

in-law, has no claim to her estate and will receive nothing from it¹⁴. It is likely that her son Sarmates has recently died intestate and his mother succeeded him. She justifies her decision in l.12: α]ὐτάρκης γὰρ καὶ ὑπ' αὐ[τ]ῆς ἔπαθον («For I, too, though independent, have suffered at her hands»)¹⁵. The pronoun αὐτῆς refers to Tameis indicating that the suffering happened during the latter's marriage with Eustorgis' son. Unfortunately, no other details are included in the document. It appears that the two women lived together and their relationship was characterized by tension and rivalry. In her will, Eustorgis used in rhetorical way her bad relationship with Tameis because she did not wish her daughter-in-law to meddle anymore with any of her son's property, cf. ll. 9-11: μήτε τὴν γενομένην σύμβιον τοῦ ἀπογενομένου μου υἱοῦ Σαρμάτου | Α[ὐ]ρ[η]λίαν Ταμεῖν {μῆ} ἐπ[ι]βῆναι τῇ ἡμετέρᾳ οἰ[κ]ίᾳ | [οὔ]ση ἐπ' ἀμφοδου Φρο[υ]ρίου Λιβός, μηδὲ παρακ[ύ]π[τ]ειν ὄντινι οὖν πράγμα[τι] δια[φ]έρον[τ]ί μοι ἢ καὶ αὐτῷ τῷ ἀπογενομένῳ | [κηδεμ]ονείας (l. μου υἱῷ κηδεμονίας) τοῦ σώματος αὐ[τ]οῦ ἔνεκεν («and so that Aurelia Tamaeis, the former wife of my deceased son, Sarmates, may not enter our house, which is in the west Fort district, not meddle with any property that belongs to me or to him, my son, on the grounds of the care of his corpse»)¹⁶.

Everyday tensions within the household very often originated from the fact that the male head and/or his wife attempted to impose their views and thoughts on the younger couple and got involved in conjugal matters¹⁷. The papyri prove that mothers caused everyday tensions with their sons-in-law by intervening in the couple's life and relationship. A third-century CE letter reveals such a conflict between a woman and her son-in-law about the breastfeeding of her grandchild. In PLond III 951 V, the writer blames her son-in-law for forcing her daughter to breastfeed their baby, cf. ll. 2-5: ἤκουσ[α] ὄ[τ]ι θηλάζειν αὐτὴν | ἀναγκάζεις. εἰ θέλ[ει, τ]ὸ βρέφος ἐχέτω | τροφόν, ἐγὼ γὰρ οὐκ ἐπιτ[ρέ]πω τῇ θυγατρὶ μου | θηλάζειν («I hear that you are compelling her to nurse. If she wants, let the infant have a nurse, for I do not permit my daughter to nurse»)¹⁸. The use of the verb allow (ἐπιτρέπω) implies the woman's power over the family. Judging by the lack of mention of her husband's greetings, it could be supposed that she was a widow, and thus the head of the household. At the end of

¹⁴ On papyrus wills, see for example O. MONTEVECCHI, *Ricerche di sociologia nei documenti dell'Egitto greco-romano: I. - I testamenti*, «Aegyptus» 15 (1935), pp. 67-121. Cf. also E. CHAMPLIN, *Final Judgments. Duty and Emotion in Roman Wills, 200 B.C.-A.D. 250*, Berkeley 1991.

¹⁵ Translation by J. ROWLANDSON, *Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt. A Sourcebook*, Cambridge 1998, nr. 145.

¹⁶ Translation by ROWLANDSON, *Women and Society* cit., nr. 145.

¹⁷ HUEBNER, *The Family in Roman Egypt* cit., p. 141.

¹⁸ Translation by BAGNALL-CRIBIORE, *Women's Letters* cit., p. 265. On this letter, see also the discussion of M. THOMA, *Γυναίκες επιστολογράφοι στους αρχαίους ελληνικούς παπύρους*, Athens 2020, pp. 90-91.

the letter, she also expresses her request that the recipient and her daughter visit her as promised, cf. *πᾶν δὲ ποιήσον μετὰ τὰς Καλάνδας ἤκετ[α]ι* (l. ἤκετε) ὥς | ἐγράψατε («Do all you can to come for the Calends, as you wrote»)¹⁹.

A clearer involvement of a mother in her daughter's marriage and the husband's abandonment is described in the petition PCairPreis 3 (362 CE). Aurelius Serenos complained that his mother-in-law took away his wife Tamounis during his business trip, on the pretext that the woman «was possessed by a devil». She then married Tamounis to another man, ll. 10-15: ἡ δὲ μήτηρ τῆς ἐγγεγραμμῆς (l. ἐγγεγραμμῆς) | συνέπεξέν (l. συνέπηξέν) με ὡς τῆς γυναικός μου πῖραν (l. πείραν) λαβοῦ|σαν (l. λαβούσης) | δέμονος (l. δαίμονος). Ἐμοῦ οὖν ἀποδημησας (l. ἀποδημήσαντος) εἰς τὸ ἴδιον | ἔργον, ὅπως εὐρῶ ἐξυπερετήσαι (l. ἐξυπρητηῆσαι) τὸν βίον, ἐτέρῳ | ἀνδρὶ ἐξέδωκεν τὴν αὐτὴν σύμβιον ὀνόματι Πεεῦτι | ἀπὸ κόμης Ἀχιλλεὺς (l. Ἀχιλλέως) τοῦ αὐτοῦ Ἑρμοπολείτου (l. Ἑρμοπολίτου) («But the mother of the above-written fooled me that my wife was possessed by a daimon. Therefore, when I was away from home on personal business, as I was looking for an opportunity to make my life longer, she (the mother) gave her to another man of name Paeuti from the village Achilleus of the same Hermopolite (nome) without (her consent?)»)²⁰. The petitioner implies that the divorce is invalid, because it was imposed by the mother, probably without the consent of the daughter. His main arguments are that he fulfilled the laws of marriage²¹ and lived three years with his wife²². The reason for the separation is not clear. It could be related, to some extent, to the valuable bridal gifts given to the bride by Serenos, which the mother-in-law and her daughter may have wished to take with them. Unfortunately, as the document breaks before the object of the petition is stated, we do not know if Serenos demanded the bridal gifts given to her or whether he also desired to bring back his wife to their household. In POxy II 282 (37 CE) Tryphon complained, because his wife left their house, also taking with her some of his belongings²³. The use of the verb ἀπηνέ<γ>κάντο («carried off») in its plural

¹⁹ Translation by BAGNALL-CRIBIORE, *Women's Letters* cit., p. 265.

²⁰ See the translation by J. URBANIK in J. KEENAN-J.G. MANNING-U.FIRANKO (eds.), *Law and Legal Practice in Egypt from Alexander to the Arab Conquest. A Selection of Papyrological Sources in Translation, with Introduction and Commentary*, Cambridge 2014, p. 172.

²¹ The failure of the husband to provide his wife with everything she needed was considered as against the law (*iniuria*) and the social norms of marriage. On this topic, see, for example, J. MODRZEJEWSKI, *La notion d'injustice dans les papyrus grecs*, «Iura» 10 (1959), pp. 67-85, esp. pp. 78-79.

²² Serenos also mentions that Tamounis had received some bridal gifts at the time of their wedding.

²³ See also J.E.G. WHITEHORNE, *Tryphon's Second Marriage*, in *Atti del XVII Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia*, vol. III, Napoli 1984, pp. 1267-1274. On marital disputes initiated by the wife, see M. THOMA, *Dispute Resolution between Husband and Wife in Roman Egypt*:

form may indicate that someone, most probably her mother, offered assistance to Demetrous in abandoning her husband²⁴. Tryphon submitted a petition to the *strategus* claiming the return of his property. His basic argument is the fulfillment of his marital duties, supplying to Demetrous everything she needed during their joint life. The continuing conflict between Tryphon and Demetrous constitutes the subject of two more petitions submitted by Tryphon to the *strategus* after his divorce. These petitions highlight the role of Tryphon's mother-in-law in the couple's relationship, since he and his new wife Saraeus accused Demetrous and her mother of assault²⁵. The aforementioned examples testify to the frequent involvement of a mother in her daughter's marriage and the couple's relationship, mainly with regard to economic matters.

Everyday tensions between mothers and daughters, mainly when living in the same house, were not usually recorded in papyri. However, papyrus letters demonstrate that disputes could also arise between them²⁶. A fundamental reason for conflict was geographical distance which could bring emotional and psychological alienation. In PMich III 221 (297 CE), Ploutogenia complained to her mother Heliodora because she has not sent her any letter since her arrival at Alexandria. She is so disappointed by her mother's indifference that she even writes to her: «you do not treat me like your daughter, but like your enemy» (ll. 6-8: *πάλι οὖν οὐκ ἔχεις* (l. *ἔχεις*) *με ὡς θυγατέρα* (l. *θυγατέρα*) *σου <ἀλλά> ὡς ἐχθράν | σου*)²⁷. Heliodora may have also been disheartened by her daughter's behavior towards her husband Paniskos who asked her to join him in Kop-tos but she never went there, as implied by Paniskos' letters²⁸. The letter SB XVI 12326 (late 3rd cent. CE), probably addressed by Heliodora to her mother Isidora, is found in the archive of Paniskos and may also give evidence of the intergenerational conflict among the women of Ploutogenia's family due to the geographical distance and alienation between them, cf. ll. 1-3: *εὐ|τόνω[ς] πικρένομέ* (l. *πικραίνομαί*) *σοι ὅτι οὐτέ* (l. *οὐδὲ*) *φάσις* (l. *φάσεις*) [*λαβεῖν*] | *διὰ γραμμάτων σου κατηξίωσάς με [ἀφ' ὅτε] | ἐξήλθα ἀπὸ σοῦ* («I am strongly

Legal Mechanisms and Familial Strategies, in S. WAEBENS-K. VANDORPE (eds.), *Seeking Justice in and out of Court: Dispute Resolution in Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt*, *Studia Hellenistica*, 62, Leuven 2023, pp. 221-240.

²⁴ See the comments of the editor of the papyrus.

²⁵ SB X 10239 (= POxy II 315 descr); SB X 10244 (= POxy II 324 descr). In these petitions, Tryphon complains that his former wife has assaulted both his present wife Saraeus and him.

²⁶ HUEBNER, *Family in Roman Egypt* cit., pp. 142-143. On the relationship between mother and daughter, see also DIXON, *The Roman Family* cit., p. 221.

²⁷ Translation by BAGNALL-CRIBIORE, *Women's Letters* cit., p. 294. See also the comments of ROWLANDSON, *Women and Society* cit., p. 115; THOMA, *Γυναίκες επιστολογράφοι* cit., pp. 143, 173-174, 557-558.

²⁸ Cf. PMich III 214, 215, 216, 217. The archive of Paniskos will also be discussed later.

embittered toward you because you did not even deem me worthy of receiving news through a letter of yours»²⁹.

In ll. 3-5 of the aforementioned letter Heliodora, Ploutogenia’s mother, complained to her mother Isidora about her daughter’s misbehavior: ἀφ’ ὅτε | ἐξῆλθα ἀπὸ σοῦ πολλὰ ἐντέτριπτα[αἱ μοι ὑπὸ] | τῆς θυγατρὸς μου («From the time when I went away from you, many troubles have been inflicted upon me by my daughter»)³⁰. As mentioned in the letter, Ploutogenia even stole Heliodora’s valuable jewelry. It appears that the writer was in need of her absent mother’s support³¹. Heliodora’s anxiety is also highlighted by her final request: «Do everything to send my brother to me»³² (ll. 12-13: πᾶν δὲ προ[ίησ]ογ[τ]ὸν ἀδελφόν | μου πρὸς με πέμψαι).

Another major cause of disagreement within the family was the inheritance of and the division of property. Dishonesty between family members and unequal distribution of funds and rights to individuals could very often create severe tensions³³. The study of papyrus documents proves that women, due to their legal disabilities, had particular difficulties in asserting their rights to commonly inherited property as against male heirs. However, there are a few cases in which women are recorded as assailants in family disputes over property, even against their children³⁴. In POxy VI 898 (123 CE), Didymus complains of having been defrauded by his mother-guardian. Matrina deprived her son Diogenes of his rightful property, while she had not even paid his maintenance allowance for three months in order to prevent him from prosecuting her³⁵. In a similar way, in PLond II 198 (175-176 CE) a young man sued his mother for recovery of his patrimony. His mother, who remarried, had acted as his guardian after his father’s death and when the boy reached maturity, she refused to cede to him the rightful ownership of his father’s estate. One can assume that a minor heir lived with the fear that his mother might abuse his father’s property, alone or with her new husband, before he/she was able to assume the

²⁹ Translation by BAGNALL-CRIBIORE, *Women’s Letters* cit., p. 285.

³⁰ Translation by BAGNALL-CRIBIORE, *Women’s Letters* cit., p. 285.

³¹ See F.T. GIGNAC, *Two Papyri from the Michigan Collection*, «BASP» 16 (1979), pp. 193-197, esp. pp. 195-196, BAGNALL - CRIBIORE, *Women’s Letters* cit., p. 285; THOMA, *Γυναίκες επιστολογράφοι* cit., pp. 144, 174, 561-563.

³² Translation by BAGNALL-CRIBIORE, *Women’s Letters* cit., p. 285.

³³ HUEBNER, *The Family in Roman Egypt* cit., p. 142.

³⁴ For further discussion, see M. THOMA, *The Law of Succession in Roman Egypt: Siblings and non-siblings disputes over Inheritance*, in A. NODAR-S. TORALLAS TOVAR (eds.), *Proceedings of the 28th Congress of Papyrology Barcelona 1-6 August 2016*, Scripta Orientalia, 3, Barcelona, 2019, 475-483, esp. p. 480. On women’s involvement in family disputes over inheritance in Ptolemaic petitions, see E. SCHEERLINCK, *Inheritance Disputes and Violence in Women’s Petitions from Ptolemaic Egypt*, «PapLup» 20-21 (2011-2012), pp. 165-176.

³⁵ However, Diogenes had already taken steps to have another guardian appointed for him, also asking the strategus’ help.

inheritance. As a result, late Roman law granted the mothers the right to administer their children's inheritance on the condition that they would not enter a new marriage³⁶.

In some cases, mothers even used violence against their children, as described in the petition PRyl II 116 (194 CE). Saprion was violently attacked by his mother and the husband of his aunt after a discussion concerning his paternal inheritance³⁷, ll. 12-16: ἐπὶ λθέ μοι μετὰ Σερίνου τοῦ καὶ | Τιβερείνου γυμνασιαρχίσαντος ἀνδρὸς | τῆς ἀδελφῆς, καὶ οὐ μόνον ἐξύβρισαν ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν ἐσθῆτά μου περιέσχισαν βου|λόμενοι ἀποστερέσαι τῶν ἐμῶν («(...) attacked me with the help of Serenos, also known as Tiberinos, the former gymnasiarch. This man is the husband of her sister. They not only did violence on me, but they also tore my clothes, since they wanted to take my property»)³⁸. Petitions show that acts of violence committed against persons within the same family were unfortunately daily occurrences in Egypt. Parca³⁹ has discussed violence attested by and against women in Roman Egypt, and it is an interesting point that in an important number of documents women appeared as attackers either alone or with others. An illustrative example is the petition PAmh II 141 (= ChrMitt 126) from the fourth century, in which the widow Aurelia Thasis complained that her brother: «attacked me with his wife Ria» (cf. ll. 7-8: ἐπὶ λ|[θέν] μοι μετὰ τῆς [συ]μβίου αὐτοῦ Ῥίας) presenting herself as a weak and widowed woman who needed protection.

In PLond II 177, Egyptian Versenouphis requested assistance from the prefect Gaius Vitrasius Pollio to recover property left to him and his brothers by their father, which had been seized by their elder married sister. Their father left a will bequeathing the usufruct of some household assets to his wife during her lifetime, which would be divided between them after her death. However, the elder daughter, with her husband's assistance, took control of these assets, even though she had already received her dowry and her claims had no legal grounds according to Egyptian practice⁴⁰. It is characteristic that the sister in

³⁶ Cf. *Cod. Theod.* 3.17.4; A. ARJAVA, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity*, Oxford 1996, pp. 91-92. See also T.J. CHIUSI, *Zur Vormundschaft der Mutter*, «ZRG» 111 (1994), pp. 155-196, esp. pp. 192-193; J. GARDNER, *Women in Roman Law and Society*, London 1986, pp. 150-151.

³⁷ A.Z. BRYEN, *Violence in Roman Egypt: a study in legal interpretation*, Philadelphia 2013, nr. 244.

³⁸ Translation by BRYEN, *Violence in Roman Egypt* cit., p. 244.

³⁹ M. PARCA, *Violence by and against Women in Documentary Papyri*, in H. MELAERTS-L. MOOREN (eds.), *Le rôle et le statut de la femme en Égypte Hellenistique, Romaine et Byzantine: Actes du colloque international: Bruxelles-Leuven 27-29 Novembre 1997*, *Studia Hellenistica*, 37, Leuven-Paris-Sterling-Virginia 2002, pp. 283-296.

⁴⁰ M. THOMA, *The Law of Succession in Roman Egypt: Siblings and non-siblings disputes over Inheritance*, in NODAR-TORALLAS TOVAR (eds.), *Proceedings of the 28th Congress of Papyrology*, cit., pp. 475-483, esp. 477-478.

the story also needed the support of her husband in treating her brothers with injustice.

Remarriage was another source of family disharmony and disputes over property, since it led to a range of step and half-relations. Step-parents could be considered as a threat to the material interests of the children. In PCairIsid 62 (297-298 CE), a petition presented to Aurelius Leontius by the daughters of Kopres, Thaesion and Kyrillous, we hear about their conflict with their stepmother, after their father's death. She tried to appropriate the girls' inheritance, claiming that her husband owed her a mina in gold and a half interest in a slave girl as security for her dowry. The family tension is also highlighted by the phrase «the wretched woman» (cf. l. 12: ἡ πανκάκιστος γυνή) used by the petitioners against their stepmother⁴¹.

On the other hand, papyri indicate that women were the main mediators of relations between generations in the family. Papyrus letters recording the attempts of women to resolve family problems offer us such evidence. An illustrative example is PMich VIII 514, in which Isidora writes to her daughter Sarapias who is in Karanis with her family and Isidora's husband. It appears that Sarapias's father has caused some family disagreement between Sarapias and her husband. As a result, Isidora is planning to visit her daughter in order to restore the marital concordia disrupted by her husband and Sarapias' father, see ll. 21-22: ἤν (l. ἐάν) ἀναβῶ κυβερνήσω αὐτ[ὸ]ν πάλιν («if I come up, I will steer him again»)⁴². Sarapias should have complained to her mother about her father's behavior and the problems caused to her marriage, and Isidora replied reassuring her daughter that she would try to resolve the dispute. Unfortunately, we cannot be sure about Isidora's arrival in Karanis, but her letter indicates her willingness to play a role as mediator in the aforementioned dispute⁴³. After the final salutations, Isidora adds as a postscript a comment ad-

⁴¹ Everyday tensions between children and their step-parents are also recorded by inscriptions. For example, an evil stepmother is also portrayed in a Latin inscription, cf. CIL XII 810 = CAG-13-05, p. 458: «D(is) M(anibus) | L(uci) Hostili Ter(etina) / Silvani | ann(or)um XXIII m(ensium) II d(ierum) | XV mater fil(io) piissimo | misera et in luctu | aeternali benefici[o] novercae».

⁴² Translation by BAGNALL-CRIBIORE, *Women's Letters* cit., p. 269.

⁴³ Disputes between married daughters and their fathers were not uncommon in Roman Egypt. The well-known POxy II 237 preserves the petition of Dionysia from the second century Oxyrhynchus against her father Chairemon who tried to separate her from her husband against her will. Their conflict had its origin in financial disputes and was related to her mother's inheritance. From the rich literature on the dispute between Dionysia and her father, see, for example, C. KREUZSALER-J. URBANIK, *Humanity and Inhumanity of Law: The Case of Dionysia*, «JJP» 38 (2008), pp. 119-155; KEENAN-MANNING-FIRANKO, *Law and Legal Practice* cit., pp. 69-71 (2.6.2), and more recently J. PLATSCHKEK, *Nochmals zur Petition der Dionysia (P. Oxy. II 237)*, «JJP» 45 (2015), pp. 145-163. Cf. the letter PWürzb 21, in which Antonia advises her father to stop trying to persuade her to leave her husband although her words indicate that she had an unhappy mar-

dressed to Onnophris, her daughter's husband, ll. 35-37: μὴ ἀναγκάσης μέ σε μέμψα[σ]θαί σοι (l. σε) Ὀννώφρειν (l. Ὀννώφριν) ἐπὶ . . . ἀηδία | αὐτῆς («Do not force me to reproach you, Onnophris, for her unpleasantness»)⁴⁴. In her letter, Isidora sounds very dynamic since she is trying to influence both men of the family, her husband and her son-in-law.

In the letter PPetaus 29 (2nd cent. CE), Didymarion, an elderly widow, wrote to Paniskos, the brother of her son-in-law, expressing her worries about her daughter. The girl may have described to Didymarion her problems with her mother-in-law who probably lived with the couple. Feeling unable to help her daughter, Didymarion pleaded that Paniskos might act as the father of the family and settle the dispute between both women. Didymarion feared that the mother-in-law made her daughter's life such a misery that the girl «wrote to her saying, "If she spends another month with me like this, I'll throw myself into the sea."»⁴⁵, cf. ll. 7-10: ἔ[γ]ραψέ | μοι γὰρ λέγουσα ὅτι ἐὰν ἔτι μῆνα οὕτω ποι|ση (l. ποιήση) ἐχόνομά μου βάλλω ἐματ[ῆ]ν (l. ἐμαυτήν) ἰς (l. εἰς) θάλασ|σαν. Paniskos and his family, including Didymarion's daughter, live in Alexandria, as also mentioned at the verso of the letter (cf. verso, ll. 1-2: ἀπόδος [εἰ]ς Ἀλεξάν vac. ? δριαν (l. Ἀλεξάνδρειαν) Πανίσκω ἰππῆ (l. ἰππεῖ) ἀπὸ Διδυμαρίου). If we take into consideration that the letter was found in the Arsinoite nome, it is likely that Didymarion did not actually manage to intervene as mediator in the dispute. Unfortunately, we ignore what happened to Didymarion's daughter at Alexandria. In both stories discussed, the mediation of the mother and her influence on a male member of the family could contribute to the dispute resolution, even if she was away. If unable to be present at family troubles, she could use her letters to settle the quarrel or request assistance.

Evidence of a mother seeking a solution to her husband and son's disagreement is also offered by POxy VIII 1148, an oracle question to Serapis. Phantias's father tried to convince him to make a contract, but he hesitated in complying with his father's suggestion. The mother visited the sanctuary of the god Sarapis to pose the question whether Phantias and his wife should agree with his father or oppose his will which would probably lead to family conflict.⁴⁶

Not only mothers but also sisters and other close relatives could attempt a couple's reconciliation. In the everyday correspondence of Paniskos with his

riage. For the relationship between fathers and daughters in Roman society, see J.P. HALLETT, *Fathers and Daughters in Roman Society: Women and the Elite Family*, Princeton 1984.

⁴⁴ Translation by the editor of the papyrus.

⁴⁵ Translation by BAGNALL-CRIBIORE, *Women's Letters* cit., p. 276. Cf. the title of the paper. The girl was in Alexandria to judge from her threat to throw herself into the sea.

⁴⁶ HUEBNER, *Family in Roman Egypt* cit., p. 67.

wife Ploutogenia, we read about her sister’s involvement in the couple’s relationship. In his first three letters to Ploutogenia, Paniskos repeatedly asks her to join him in Koptos with their daughter, also bringing his military gear⁴⁷. In the fourth letter (PMich III 217) he accuses her of going to her own house although he had asked her not to do so⁴⁸, adding that she has not written to him, despite the three letters sent by him. Then he remarks: «If you do not wish to come up to me, no one compels you. These letters I have written to you because your sister compels me here to write»⁴⁹ (cf. ll. 9-13: εἰ μὲν | [ο]ὐ θέλεις ἀναβῆναι πρὸς ἐμέ, οὐδεὶς | [σε ἀν]αγκάζει[ι]. ταύτας τὰς ἐπιστολάς | [ἔγραψ]ά σοι ἐπεὶ ἡ ἀδ[ε]λφή σ[ο]υ ἀναγκ[ά]ζει με] ἐνθάδε γράψαι). He tries to stress his disinterest by claiming that he keeps sending her letters only because her sister is forcing him to. It appears that the sister was trying to act as a mediator between the couple and encourage Paniskos to keep writing to Ploutogenia even if she did not answer any of his letters. Ploutogenia is depicted as dynamic and impetuous in the corpus of letters contained in Paniskos’ archive⁵⁰. In POxy LIX 3994 Calocaerus, a suspicious and disappointed husband, writes to his sister Euphrosyne asking her to find out what his wife was doing, since she would not write to him and she was in possession of all the property which he owned. He highlights his displeasure and the marital discordia by remarking in his letter: «Not that I care about her, but all that I possess is under her control»⁵¹ (cf. ll. 8-9: οὐκ ἐπὶ (l. ἐπεὶ) μέλει μοι περὶ αὐτῆς, ἀλλὰ εἴ τι ἔχω παρ’ αὐτῆ ἐστίν). The letter implies that Euphrosyne could act as a mediator in the couple’s problems and dispute. In both letters discussed, we cannot discern the reasons for the marital tension, but it appears that it was the wife who did not care about the continuation of the marriage. The geographical distance between the spouses due to male mobility, in combination with any kind of disharmony in their marital life, could sometimes lead to severe conflicts, alienation and eventually separation.

In conclusion, the family may provide economic and emotional support to people at all levels of society, however it can also be a locus of conflict and a means of oppression, in particular of the younger generation. Private letters, petitions and other types of documents from Greco-Roman Egypt illuminate

⁴⁷See PMich III 214, 216, 218. On PMich III 214, see *supra*. See also CH. KOTSIFOU, *Emotions and Papyri Insights into the Theatre of Human Experience in Antiquity*, in A. CHANIOTIS (ed.), *Unveiling Emotions Sources and Methods for the Study of Emotions in the Greek World*, Stuttgart 2012, pp. 39-90, esp. pp. 40-41.

⁴⁸PMich III 217. A point of interest is that he remarks that his mother behaved in the same way, cf. ll. 7-8: ἀλλὰ οἶδα ὅτι ἡ μήτηρ μου ταῦτα ποιεῖ.

⁴⁹Translation by the editor of the papyrus.

⁵⁰On Paniskos’ archive, see J. SCHWARTZ, *Autour du dossier de Paniskos (P. Mich. 214-221)*, «Aegyptus» 48 (1968), pp. 110-115.

⁵¹Translation by the editor of the papyrus.

the role of women as initiators of a conflict and as the ones who lead in the rupture of family relationships, due to personal rivalries, economic interests or geographical distance and alienation. A point of interest is that in petitions submitted by a deserted husband a mother-in-law had a primary role in the couple's separation. In addition, the discussion of petitions which cope with family disputes over inheritance proved that women were not only victims but could also initiate conflicts against the younger members of the family, mainly sons and brothers, by violating their legal rights. A common source of conflict appears to be the relationship between mothers-in-law and incoming daughters-in-law, which was characterized by jealousy and rivalry. Papyrus letters, such as PPetaus 29, demonstrate that a daughter-in-law could be subjected to psychological abuse and her life in the patriarchal household could be an everyday struggle⁵². Although authority battles between women of the same household were attested in papyri, one should also take into consideration that severe interfamilial tensions between them would not so often have found their expression in written correspondence, since the parties used to live together.

On the other hand, women were also the ones who contributed, at least partially, to the private settlement of a family dispute. Traditionally men and women both make a contribution to family solidarity, but through different ways: men more often give financial help, women more often give moral and emotional support. Between mothers and daughters there was a general community of interests and sometimes they could create emotional alliances to encounter everyday tensions, even against the father or the husband. Despite their legal disabilities, women in Greco-Roman Egypt had an active role inside the household, could control everyday relationships and the social dynamics of the family, and influence the decisions and the attitude of the male members. A family rupture could really harm the family's role as a socio-economic unit, since it affected the personality and the life of the younger generation. The weakening of family bonds in combination with conflicting economic interests

⁵² Women, mainly young, were victims of domestic conflict and/or violence in antiquity. On domestic violence against women in Roman society, see for example M. CARUCCI, (2018), *Domestic Violence in Roman Imperial Society: Giving Abused Women a Voice*, in M.C. PIMENTEL-N.S. RODRIGUES (eds.), *Violence in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion 19, Leuven 2018, pp. 57-74. On domestic violence against women in papyri, see for example THOMA, *Dispute Resolution between Husband and Wife in Roman Egypt* cit., pp. 225-234; A. PPATHOMAS-A. KOROLI, *Sex and Abuse in Unhappy Marriages in Late Antique Oxyrhynchus: The Case of two Women's Narratives Preserved on Papyrus*, in A. SERAFIM-G. KAZANTZIDIS-K. DEMETRIOU (eds.), *Sex and the Ancient City: Sex and Sexual Practices in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, Trends in Classics Supplementary Volumes, 126, Berlin-Boston 2022, pp. 471-486. For a discussion on the scarce evidence of domestic violence against women in Demotic texts, see HUE-ARCÉ, *Violence against women* cit., pp. 134-139, 143, 146.

could lead to the violation of property rights or even the intrusion into the patrimony of persons outside the family, such as a stepparent or a sister's husband. Finally, the cases discussed indicated that women's acquisition of greater economic and legal independence during imperial times and late antiquity provided them with the capacity to make decisions regarding their own life and relationships.

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