

**God's Grace Inscribed  
on the Human Heart**

**Essays in Honour of**

**James R. Harrison**

**Edited by Peter G. Bolt and Sehyun Kim**

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*God's Grace Inscribed on the Human Heart*  
*Essays in Honour of James R. Harrison*  
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Edited by Peter G. Bolt and Sehyun Kim  
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SCD Press  
PO Box 1882  
Macquarie Centre NSW 2113  
Australia  
scdpress@scd.edu.au

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# Christian Women in Oxyrhynchus and Environs (2nd – 6th Century C.E.)

Peter Lampe

## Abstract

Papyri bring to light the life of Christian women from the second to sixth centuries CE in the Nile Delta. They reveal two female ecclesiastical officeholders, some women eager to read, independent and unmarried female 'nuns' ('apotactic' religious women), and widows receiving charity from the church. Others suffered from the traumatic effects of their childhood or marriage, or turned to a Christian form of magic to alleviate sufferings they endured in their lives.



James Harrison, wonderful colleague and magnificent scholar, has greatly enriched our knowledge about Early Christianity by masterfully handling all genres of ancient sources available to classical historians and exegetes of ancient texts. This little papyrological piece comes as modest token of my appreciation.

The following papyri take us on a visit to Christian women in the late Roman/early Byzantine Nile delta, who often speak for themselves. In some cases, we get surprisingly close to them, being invited to peek into their houses, seeing their hardships, fights, traumata, and illnesses, yet also sharing their enjoyments, for example, when looking over their shoulders and reading books with them. We also witness the self-determination and independence of several women. The methodological problem when looking at the colourful life reflected in the papyri is, of course, the conundrum of how to proceed from anecdotic evidence to wider-ranging insights. If we are lucky, using induction, we might discover traces of individual lives that share common denomina-

tors. However, when working with ancient sources, particularly papyri, we never know how representative of a whole population the samples of documents we hold in our hands are.

Six topics will be touched upon:

- Female Officeholders
- Women Eager to Read
- Independent Women – Apotactic ‘Nuns’
- Widows Receiving Charity
- Marriages: From Abuse to Affection
- Magic and Paganism.

## Officeholders

In the Egyptian papyri and mummy tablets, hardly any women are documented as ecclesiastical officeholders (contrary to literary sources; see n. 4 and 8, below). The two we encounter are of Egyptian provenance, but we cannot specify their hometown.

1. A female Christian ‘teacher’ is evidenced twice in SB 14.11532,<sup>1</sup> a fragmentary private letter of unknown Egyptian origin dating to the first quarter of the fourth century.<sup>2</sup> It was sent from one Christian household to another: from Phoibammon and his household to the teacher Philoxenos and his people in Alexandria(?). The fragment does not convey why the female teacher (‘Lady teacher’ *Κυρία ἡ διδάσκαλος*) and the addressee Philoxenos are called teachers, nor does it clarify how she relates to the two households. Maybe she got a copy of the letter, being greeted by the sender (see the accusative), which would explain her second mentioning on the margin. The function (title?) *διδάσκαλος* is indiscriminately used for both genders. Therefore, it is unlikely that this female teacher ‘only’ taught women (Titus 2:3–5) or children (like second-century Grapte in Herm. *Vis.* 2.4.3). It is possible that these two teachers taught entire congregations as in 1 Corinthians

1 Tibiletti, *Le lettere*, 32.

2 For the date, see Broux and Clarysse, ‘Name’, 347–62, here 352.

12 and 14 as well as 11:5.<sup>3</sup>

The unanswerable question arises whether the rare female ‘teacher’ taught an unorthodox congregation, maybe a Montanist one.<sup>4</sup>

The beginning is lost -----

to you a new (letter?) in Alexandri[a...]

ναι σοι καινη ἐν Ἀλεξανδρεί[α - ca.16 -]

my K(yrio)s brother Jul[i]anus (acc.) [...]

ἀδελφὸν κ(ύριό)ν μου Ἰουλ[ι]ανὸν πι [- ca.16 -]

and if you<sup>5</sup> wish [...]

καὶ ἐὰν θέλετε μ[...]ον ομου[- ca.16 -]

what good we can. The [...]

μεν ὁ δυνάμεθα καλόν· τὸν [- ca.16 -]

Lady/Kyria the teacher (acc.). The K[yrrios?...] (acc.)

Κυρίαν τὴν διδάσκαλον· τὸν κ [- ca.16 -]

(a male person; masc. acc.) who also wrote a letter to me [...]

τὸν γράψαντά μοι καὶ ἐπιστολὴν [- ca.16 -]

3 1 Cor. 12:29 (διδάσκαλος); in 11:5 and 14:31 ('all') both genders, prophetesses and prophets, enable 'learning' (μανθάνω); 12:8; 14:1,3f,6,26 ('each one' implying both genders). Was the Christian community, in which the papyrus' female teacher lived, familiar with 1 Cor.? The ending of the papyrus letter alludes to 2 Cor. 13:13 after all.

4 For a further interpretation of the papyrus, see Eisen, *Amtsträgerinnen*, 87–93. Holding that this woman taught in the “catholic” church, Eisen (92 in the German version) helpfully points out the parallel of Theodora and Synkletike, the teaching Egyptian “Wüstenmütter” (“desert mothers”), in the *Apophthegma Patrum* 5 and 12 (5th cent., with a nucleus probably dating from about 400 CE; see also PsAthanasios, *Vita Synkl.*, esp. 22; 56 and 103). Female Christian teachers, non-ordained non-clerics teaching the catechumens, seem to have been a wider spread phenomenon in Egypt, if the *Canones Hippolyti* (Egypt, 4th cent.), esp. 12; 17–19, can be read as inclusive language. The *Canones Hippolyti* never state that women should not teach in the church. The balanced ratio of 3 women/3 men (50%) in our papyrus is typical of Christian papyri and uncharacteristic of literary texts (Naldini, *Cristianesimo*, 45f).

5 You = Philoxenos and his people, line 1 and 9.

the Kyr(ia) Xenike, the Kyr(ia) Arsinoe (acc.), and [...]

κυρ(ίαν) Ξενικήν, κυρ(ίαν) Ἀρσινόην καὶ π [- ca.16 - ᾶ-]

of (tru)th(?) the august,<sup>6</sup> free K(yrios?) [...]

ληθείας τὸν σέβας [...] ἐλεύθερον κ [- ca.16 -]

Philoxenos and your people (acc.). M[y?] K(yrio)s [...]

Φιλόξενον καὶ τοὺς σοὺς. ὁ κ(ύριος) μ [- ca.16 -]

The good Phoibammon and the entire ho(usehold gree)t

ὁ καλὸς Φοιβάμμων καὶ πᾶσα ἡ ο[ικία προσαγορεύου-]

you (pl.). The grace of our K(yrio)s Je(sus) [Ch(ristos) be with all of

you; cf. 2 Cor. 13:13].

σιν ὑμᾶς. ἡ χάρις τοῦ κ(υρίου) ἡμῶν Ἰη(σοῦ) [Χρ(ιστοῦ) μετὰ  
πάντων ὑμῶν].

On the left margin:

Kyria, the teacher (acc.)

[Κυρ]ίαν τὴν διδάσκ(αλον)

Verso:

[Deliver to the] tea(cher) Philoxenos, best of all people.

[ἀπόδος τῷ] παναρίστῳ Φιλοξένῳ διδ(ασκάλῳ)

.τ....ολο( )

vac. ?

[-ca.?- πρ]άγματος

A well-known antipode to this text is proudly presented by the Gospel of Thomas, where a blatantly misogynic bias in favour of men, the 'living spirits' 'worthy of the Life' and to 'enter the Kingdom', is displayed. The Egyptian Nag Ham. Codex II 99.18–26 (late third cent.?) reads:

Simon Peter said to them: 'Let Mary go away from us, for women are not worthy of the Life.' Jesus said: 'Behold, I shall impel her to make her male, so that she herself may become

6 σέβας = reverential awe or the object of it. A neuter noun, here in an attributive position.

a living spirit, being like you males. For any woman who makes herself male shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>7</sup>

2. A second female ecclesiastical officeholder is evidenced by a Christian label (“tablet”)⁸ on an Egyptian mummy in the Louvre Museum, dating from the second/third century. The label reads ‘(Mummy of) Artemidora (genitive), of Mikkalos (father), of the mother/μητ(ρὸς) Paniskiaine, a female ecclesiastical elder/πρεσβ(υτέρας). She fell asleep in the Lord/ ἐκοιμήθη ἐν κυρίῳ.’⁹ Did πρεσβύτερα indicate age, as Barratte and Boyaval (see n.8, above) suspected? No, as elsewhere,<sup>10</sup> instead of using unspecific categories such as ‘old’ or ‘young’, it was easy

- 7 In the *Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas* 10.15, the transgender shift is not misogynic but rather a solution for a female honour/shame problem (nakedness in public); it disappears as soon as Perpetua becomes a man like other fighters in the arena: In a vision anticipating her fight in the amphitheater, Perpetua realises that her ‘clothes were stripped off, and (suddenly) I became a man’ (ἐξεδύθη καὶ ἐγενήθην ἄρρην/*expoliata sum, et facta sum masculus*). Of course, one can also interpret the metamorphosis as gaining strength and courage before the martyrdom; then clichés of male ‘advantages’, regarding physis and virtue, would be in the background. The two interpretations do not exclude one another. For gender transformations in early Christian writings, see further Mader, ‘Frühchristliche Theologinnen’, 240–54, esp. 247 and 251 (with further lit.); Petersen, ‘Maria Magdalena’, 117–40.
- 8 Thus not a proper papyrus. Published in Barratte and Boyaval, ‘Catalogue’, 264 no. 1115; see also Horsley, *New Documents*, 240, referring to no. 6, as well as Eisen (see note 4, above) 125–128. On the basis also of epigraphical evidence, Eisen (128) holds that in Greece, Asia Minor and Egypt “catholic” Christian presbyteresses lead congregations until the 4th century on a wider scale, when first attempts (Synod of Laodicea Can.11; Epiphanius) surfaced to abolish or downgrade this office. Yet, still in the 5th century, the—possibly Egyptian—*Testamentum Domini* 1.35 and 2.19 knows Christian presbyteresses, but by now ranks them under the higher clerics (i.e., bishops, male presbyters, male deacons; above subdeacons, readers and diaconesses), no longer leading congregations.
- 9 Horsley, *New Documents*, 240, assumes that Artemidora herself was a *presbytera*, not just the mother. This is the most probable solution. In papyri, the parents are most often named before the profession (see below, e.g. P.Lond. 5.1711.5f; 5.1712; P. Oxy. 44.3203.1).
- 10 There is a plethora of examples, just four: ‘Julia Saturnina, 45 years of age, wonderful wife, excellent physician’ (*ILS* 7802), ‘Hapate, short-hand writer of Greek, she lived for 25 years’ (*ILS* 7760), ‘Luria Privata, actress in mimes, lived 19 years’ (*ILS* 5215; 19 is not even a rounded number), ‘Sarapion ... age of 55’ (SB 14.1193).

for families and their morticians to indicate the exact age.<sup>11</sup> In view of the immediately following *ἐκοιμήθη ἐν κυρίῳ* it is more likely that *πρεσβύτερα* designates 'a female elder in the Church'.<sup>12</sup>

## Women Eager to Read

According to the short letter P.Oxy. 63.4365 (fourth cent.), written on the back of a cut-down petition, two sisters are exchanging religious books:

To my dearest lady sister in the Lord, greeting. Lend the Ezra, because I lent you the Little Genesis (i.e. the Book of Jubilees).<sup>13</sup> Farewell in God.<sup>14</sup>

τῇ κυρίᾳ μου φιλάτῃ ἀδελ-  
φῇ ἐν κυρίῳ χαίρειν.  
χρῆσον τὸν Ἔσδραν,  
ἐπεὶ ἔχρησά σοι τὴν  
λεπτὴν Γένεσιν.  
ἔρρωσο ἡμεῖν ἐν θεῷ.

The short note shows both affection between the two sisters and fervour for learning. It also illustrates that reading of Biblical books (canonical or not), also by women, was not necessarily guided by clergy but private. The next papyrus shows this as well.

Female learning also seems to be reflected in P.Lips. 1.43 (fourth cent.), possibly from Hermopolis Magna. A Christian 'ever-virgin', Thaésis, a single female living a religious life without immediate family duties,

11 The same applies if anyone wanted to read *πρεσβ* as *πρεσβ(ῦτις)* (Titus 2:3). Some, albeit late, evidence of *πρεσβῦτις*, however, even denotes an ecclesiastical office; see in Tabbernee, *Montanist*, 69f.

12 Thus Horsley, *New Documents*, 240.

13 *Little Genesis is Jubilees*: 'Ὡς δὲ ἐν τοῖς Ἰωβηλαίοις εὐρίσκειται, τῇ καὶ λεπτῇ Γενέσει καλουμένη (Eriphanius, *Pan.* 2.76.16).

14 The *ἡμεῖν* may be a *dativus commodi*: 'be strong in God for us', that is, 'It is in our interest that you thrive in God'.

appears to like books. She is accused of having stolen several books from an estate:

Pharmouthi 18 in the entrance of the catholic

Φαρμουῖθι ἡ ἐν τῷ πυλῶνι τῆς κ[αθ]ολι-  
church, which is under Plousianos, the most respected  
κῆς ἐκκλησίας τῆς ὑπὸ Πλουσιανὸν ἐπιδιμῶ-  
bishop. When arbitration was held

τατον (1. ἐπιτιμώτατον) ἐπίσκοπον. διέτης (1. διαίτης) γενομένης  
μετα-

between Thaesis, the ever-virgin, and the

ξὺ Θαήσιος ἀειπαρθ[ένο]υ καὶ τῶν κλη-  
heirs of Besarion, the arbitrament

ρο[ν]όμων Βησαρίωνος [τὸ διαιτ]ητικὸ[ν π]ροσ-  
was delivered by the same bishop Plousianos

εδόθη ὑπὸ τοῦ α(ὐτοῦ) ἐπισκόπου Πλουσιανοῦ  
after he had arbitrated in the presence of Dioskorides, son of Hymnion,  
διετήσαντος (1. διαιτήσαντος) παρ[όντων] Διοσκα[ο]ρ[ίδου] Ὑμνίω-  
a town councillor, and E[...], alias

νος βουλ(ευτοῦ) καὶ Ε[ . . . . . τοῦ] καὶ  
Herakleios, son of Eith[...., and of..(a name)]

[Ἡ]ρακλείου Εἰθ[ . . . καὶ . . .].ου  
[...(a name)], a deacon (genitive), so that/saying that: Either the heirs

[ (a name) ]του διακό[ν]ου ὥστε ἢ τοὺς κληρο[νό]μους  
of Besarion are to produce witnesses who

[Βησ]αρίωνος π[α]ρνευγεῖν μάρτυρας τ[οῦ]ς  
expose/disgrace Thaesis regarding the removal

ἐλλέγοντας Θαῆσιν περὶ ἀφαιρέσε[ω]ς  
of Christian books as being done by her,

βιβλίων χρε[ιστ]ια\νι\κῶν ὡς [γ]ενομένης ὑ[π'] ἀυ-  
and she is to bring these back,

τῆς καὶ ταῦτ[α] αὐτὴν εἰσενεγεῖν  
or she is to swear an oath about not having done

ἢ αὐτὴν ὄρκο[ν] διδ[ό]ναι περὶ τοῦ μηδ[ε]μίαν  
any removal to her advantage (medium), and in this way all

ἀφαίρησιν (1. ἀφαιρέσιν) πεποιῆσθαι καὶ [ο]ὔτω πάντα  
the things left at the house are to (be divided) into two

τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς οἰκείας καταλιφθέντα (l. καταλειφθέντα) εἰς δύο  
 parts, and Thaeisis, on the one hand, is to have for herself one part,  
 μέρη καὶ τ[ῆ]ν μὲν Θαῆσιν ἔν μέρος  
 the heirs, on the other, the other  
 ἕξασθαι, τοὺς δὲ κληρονόμους τὸ ἕτερον  
 part. And this is to happen by the thirtieth  
 μ[έ]ρος, τοῦτο δὲ γενέσθαι εἴσω τριακάδος  
 of the same Pharmouthi.  
 τοῦ αὐτοῦ Φαρμουῦθι.

Several items are of interest. (1) Thaeisis is characterised by the epithet ‘ever-virgin’ (ἀειπαρθένος), instead of a patronymic. In 163/4 C.E., in Oxyrhynchus, the patronymic also was dropped from the name of a pagan ‘sacred virgin’ (ιερά παρθένος) (P.Merton 2.73); she had left her natural family serving at a temple for Athena, Isis, and other gods, being charged with the task of organising processions. In Christian circles, ‘ever-virgin’ (ἀειπαρθένος) also was the epithet of Mary, e.g. in an amulet invoking her (P. Bon. 1.9, probably also fourth cent.; for later times, see SB 1.4665: 656 C.E.). (2) As an unmarried woman, devoted to a religious life,<sup>15</sup> Thaeisis is interested in reading Christian books. Did she even steal some? This is the conflict described: A man named Besarion died and left an entire household to his heirs, among them Thaeisis, because she inherited one part of the estate while two or more other heirs inherited the other.<sup>16</sup>

Before all heirs can divide up the goods of the estate, Thaeisis, however, seemed to have been eager to have a look at several of Besarion’s

15 Thaeisis was not a ‘nun’ in the sense of ‘member of a convent’ with communal property, rules and certain hierarchies and dependencies. Thaeisis used her right to inherit material property, and no official of a convent was involved in the arbitration. She appears to have lived independently in the city.

16 The more adequate translation of κληρονόμοι in the papyrus would be ‘co-heirs’. Otherwise, the scenario of dividing the estate between Thaeisis and the group of κληρονόμοι who voiced allegations against her would make no sense. There is no hint of any distinctions between bequest (for Thaeisis) and inheritance (for the κληρονόμοι). The text does not necessarily say that Thaeisis gets half of the estate, while the others get the other half, as Rowlandson (ed.), *Women and Society*, 78, assumes.

Christian books. In any case, the other heirs accused her of having taken these books. The most likely scenario is that these books were missing in Besarion's house; otherwise, the allegation would have had no basis. However, if Thaesis had taken the books home, the question would have been whether she deliberately had intended to withhold them from the inheritance that was about to be divided—this would be stealing—or whether she simply wanted to look at them before they got distributed among the heirs. Did she have selfish intentions? (3) The local bishop settled the conflict, arbitrating in the vestibule of his 'catholic'<sup>17</sup> church while three respectable witnesses were present. The parent of the first one was a city councillor, thus a *decurio*; the father of a third one a deacon.<sup>18</sup> The papyrus documents the growing role of church officials as arbitrators, appearing to be the oldest source evidencing an *episcopalis audientia*.<sup>19</sup> (4) The bishop wisely decided: (a) The accusing heirs need to procure witnesses who saw Thaesis take the books or have the books in her possession—and then she has to return them. No punishment is envisioned. Not even a search of her home is planned. (b) The alternative is that Thaesis swears that she did not take the books for her advantage (the middle voice ἀφαίρησιν πεποιῆσθαι in l. 16 is crucial),<sup>20</sup> which would be stealing. (c) A third alternative—in case Thaesis refused to swear—was not verbalised by the four arbitrating authorities. Apparently, it was implied that such a refusal equalled a confession. The bishop's arbitrament—especially the mildness in the first ruling: no punishment and no search are planned—seems to show the esteem and respect for this 'ever-virgin', with the churches of that time increasingly valuing women who lived a religious, unmarried life.

17 In the fifth century, the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* 5 brags that Oxyrhynchus virtually had no heretics and pagans. Monks had moved into the former pagan temples and public buildings.

18 The name preceding διάκονος seems to have a masculine ending. Otherwise, διάκονος is generic, encompassing both genders. Cf. e.g. Rom. 16:1 and the deaconess P.Oxy. 1162.3 (fourth cent. c.E.).

19 For this institution and its history, see, e.g., Loening, *Geschichte*, 260f, 289f.

20 In the ACJ, πεποιῆσθαι could be passive too. However, the question of Thaesis' intent, which appears to be crucial in the case—more crucial than previously seen—would be swept under the rug by a passive translation.

## Other Independent Women—Apotactic ‘Nuns’

In the fifth century, the hagiographic *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (5.1–30) hyperbolically praised allegedly ‘20,000 virgins’ (δισμυρίας δὲ παρθένους 5.27) in Oxyrhynchus. Their hospitality (φιλοξενία) and agape were supposed to be overwhelming. They were nuns living in convents—contrary to Thaesis (see n.15, above), contrary also to two apotactic nuns (μοναχαὶ ἀποτακτικαί) in P.Oxy. 44.3203, who owned real estate in Oxyrhynchus as personal property and rented out parts of it. The letter from July 400 c.e. is addressed to both of them; they are sisters:

‘To Aureliae Theodora and Tayris whose father is Silvanus, of the illustrious and most illustrious city of the Oxyrhynchites’ (Ἀυρηλίας Θεωδώρα[α καὶ] Ταῦριν (l. Ταύρι) ἐκ πατρὸς Σιλβανοῦ [ἀ]πὸ τῆς λαμπρᾶς καὶ λαμπροτάτης [Ὀ]ξύρυχιτῶν πόλεως μοναχαῖς ἀποτακτικαῖς). The sender, a Jew,<sup>21</sup> is called Aurelius, Jose son of Judas, of the same city (παρὰ Αὐρηλίου Ἰωσή Ἰούδα Ἰουδαίως (l. Ἰουδαίου) ἀπὸ τῆς αὐτῆς πόλεως). In their property in the Calvary Camp quarter of Oxyrhynchus he leases one ground floor room, i.e., a dining hall (ἐξέδραν / τὸ συμπόσιον), and a cellar in the basement with all appurtenances (ἐπίπεδον τόπον ἓνα ἐξέτραν (l. ἐξέδραν) κα[ι] [τ]ῆ[ν] ἐν τῷ καταγείῳ καμάραν μία[ν] [σὺν] χρηστηρίοις ἅσιν) for an annual price of 12 million denarii, which was a considerable income to support the sisters.<sup>22</sup> Did he plan to offer festivities in this ground floor hall, open a restaurant? The cellar and its equipment would have been useful for such a project. He seems well-to-do but appears to be analphabetic or less versed in legal matters than the writer, dictating the letter to a cer-

21 For an extensive list of Oxyrhynchus papyri with this epithet, see Blumell and Wayment (ed.), *Christian Oxyrhynchus*, 457. For a Jewish quarter in Oxyrhynchus in the 1st and 2nd centuries c.e., see P.Oxy. 2.335.8: ἐν Ὀξ(υρύγγων) πόλ(ει) ἐπ’ ἀμφόδ(ου) Ἰουδαϊκ(ῆς); 1.100.9: Ἰουδαϊκῆς λοιπῶν ψειλῶν (l. ψιλῶν) τόπων. Both papyri document real estate sales.

22 In *Diocletian’s Edict on Maximum Prices*, price ceilings were set for about 1200 items. 120 Mio denarii communes could have bought 819,000 litres of ordinary wine (0.546 l / 8 denarii, ll.1.10; numbering following Lauffer), or 80 first-class male lions from Africa (XXXIV.1), or 80 pounds of purple-dyed silk (royal purple from rock snails; XXIV.1). Even with inflation continuing to rise, 12 Mio denarii were a considerable annual income for the sisters.

tain Aurelius Elias, who signs at the end (ἔγραψα ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ/γράμματα μὴ εἰδ[ότος/“I wrote the piece of writing for him because he does not know”). As sisters, the nuns apparently had inherited the house, making good money from their personal property. Yet, their lifestyle was apotactic (μοναχαὶ ἀποτακτικαί), meaning they were anchorites,<sup>23</sup> living in seclusion either outside the city or rather in the city,<sup>24</sup> e.g., in their own town house, which appears to have been a spacious *insula*. In any case, they did not live in a community of a convent where property was communal and self-determination restricted.

Regarding religious women like the ones discussed, we have been used to focus on asceticism or chastity, triggered by terms such as *virgo* and παρθένος, which, however, say less about sex life, or the absence of it, than social role, with these terms simply denoting unmarried females.

The two sisters as μοναχαὶ ἀποτακτικαί and Thaesis as ἀειπαρθένος illustrate that their unmarried lifestyle was a socially accepted model that gave women a chance to live a self-determined and self-paced life without the dependency on men; in the case of Thaesis, even the patronymic was dropped.<sup>25</sup> They also were independent from monasterial authorities. The term μοναχή/‘nun’,<sup>26</sup> of course, literally means ‘unique, solitary’. The apotactic lifestyle allowed for individuality and independence to handle one’s own economic affairs by oneself and to own personal property,<sup>27</sup> as is well illustrated in the two papyri discussed. This lifestyle model was open to rather well-to-do women, who had some economic means at their disposal. However, it also was open to women *working* for their own income, as the following example may show.

23 See ἀποτακτήρ in P.Oxy. 10.1311, fifth cent. c.E. This hermit also lived from personal money he made on his own by selling olive oil.

24 Like Thaesis probably. See note 15, above.

25 The freedom provided by this model seems to have been mirrored in the rather wide range of terms denoting the model: μοναχαὶ ἀποτακτικαί or (ἀει) παρθένος and with patronymic or without. There wasn’t any fixed terminology yet. Correspondingly, there seemed to have been a certain freedom to shape this lifestyle model individually. For Thaesis being independent from a convent, see above n.15.

26 This meaning of the term emerges in the papyri in the fourth cent. c.E. See Judge, ‘Fourth-Century Monasticism’, 613–20.

27 Cf. further Elm, ‘Virgins of God’, 235–38.

How traumatising family life could be so that a woman decided to become a self-determined nun is shown in P.Lond. 5.1731.1–20 (C.E. 585; from Syene). The papyrus, a legal paper, was dictated by a nun (*μοναχή*) in this town, Aurelia Tsone, who talks in the first person. It is addressed to her mother and represents an official receipt for money received and complaint against the mother about Tsone’s bad childhood. The text is wordy, the grammar wanting, and the author tries too hard to fabricate ‘fancy’ subordinate clauses (e.g. lengthy but clumsy participle and infinitive constructions), betraying a lack of education but a will to cover up this flaw. Tsone dictated the legal document to a man named Marcus (last line: δι’ ἐμοῦ Μάρκου Ἐπα Δίου ἐγράφη), but this does not automatically suggest analphabetism. Possibly this Marcus, more versed than she in legal matters, helped her to set up the document, creating many formulations on his own after Tsone had told him the entire story. Then the verdict about poor grammar and style does not strike Tsone but Marcus.

At the outset, Aurelia Tsone emphasises that she, as a nun, handles business affairs by herself without a husband as her guardian and *kyrios* (line 8: ἄνευ κυρίου αὐτῆ (l. αὐτῆς) ἀνδρὸς χρηματίζουσα). She complains that her parents got divorced—these were the workings of Satan (*κατὰ διαβουλικὴν* (l. διαβολικὴν) καὶ σατανικὴν ἐνέργειαν)<sup>28</sup>—while she was still young (ἔτι νέας οὔσης). For his child, the father gave his ex-wife four coins of gold. ‘After my reaching the legal age, I proceeded against you (the mother), accusing you over the same four coins, and saying that these had been given to you for the necessary maintenance of me from childhood’ (δοθῆναι περὶ τῆς ἐκ παιδιώθην (l. παιδιόθεν) ἀναγκαίας μου τροφῆς). However, the mother did not raise the child; the father did: ‘I was maintained by my father, after I had been thrown out by you and you joined with another man’ (διὰ τὸ οὖν τραφῆναι με ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρός μου ἐκβληθεισαν (l. ἔκβλητον) δὲ ὑπὸ σοῦ γενομένης καὶ <σε> κολλᾶσθαι ἐτέρῳ ἀνδρὶ). The mother, however, at that time resisted returning the coins, pretending that they were for the daugh-

28 Blaming an evil demon for failure of marriages and divorce was not unique: cf. e.g. P.Lond. 5.1712 (569 c.e., Antinoopolis).

ter's 'dowry' (προίξ). 'After many claims, counter-claims and opinions, it was later decided that I should receive the same four coins', the transfer of which the nun acknowledges by sending this document. Several witnesses sign the sad story.

Rowlandson (79; see n.16, above) subsumes the document under 'monasticism'. However, Tsone hardly was a nun living in a convent. None of the witnesses signing the document at the end are monastic authorities.<sup>29</sup> On the contrary, three belong to the clergy of local churches in town—a presbyter of Syene (πρεσβ[ύτερος] Συήνης), an archdeacon of St. Mary's church in Syene (ἀρχιδιάκο[νος] τῆς ἁγίας Μαρίας Συήνης), and a deacon of the Ecclesia of Syene (διάκο[νος] ἐκκλη[ησίας] Συήνης). The other five witnesses belong to the military stationed in town: a centurio (κεντυρ[ίων] ἀριθμ[οῦ] Συήνης),<sup>30</sup> an *actuarius* (ἀκτουαρις ἀριθμοῦ Συήνης), that is, an official of the troops at Syene, most probably charged with the distribution of provision and money to the military, and three soldiers (στρα[τιώτης] ἀριθμοῦ Συήνης). These five witnesses confirm that the military at that time was the most important stabilising societal force, with its members acting as esteemed and trustworthy witnesses even in everyday matters of civil law.

After all, it is highly probable that Tsone—like Thaesis and the two sisters Theodora and Tayris—also was one of the city-dwelling, independent μοναχαί. At least in 585 C.E., she had financial means, four gold coins. The most common gold coin at that time was the stable early-Byzantine *solidus*. Tsone could have bought a herd of twelve donkeys for four *solidi*; one generation later, a casual labourer at Alexandria in the early seventh century had to work ninety-two days for this kind of money, a construction worker at Jerusalem in the sixth century eighty days. Four *solidi* also could have bought fish for 560 days, half a

29 If not female conventual authorities, the Oxyrhynchus bishop could have signed as witness, with him being the authority overseeing convents and monasteries (see, e.g., SB 4.7449 below: the bishop is expected to discipline a monk).

30 ἀριθμός in the sixth century (CIG 5187, BGU 673) has the meaning of 'unit of troops' = numerus.

pound per day.<sup>31</sup> Not a huge fortune but a convenient extra income.

It is unknown what else was bequeathed to her by her father whom she kept in high esteem (ὁ μακάριός μου πατήρ Μηνᾶς line 9) and who apparently was not poor, nor do we know what else she possessed. If she was not working for her own income, it is at least possible that, in all these three cases of independent nuns, a parent, specifically a father,<sup>32</sup> had been in the background from whom they inherited some wealth.<sup>33</sup>

## Widows Receiving Charity

Another kind of ‘independent’ women were Christian widows without family. A number of them became dependent on the ecclesiastical aid organisation. The churches had become increasingly efficient in distributing relief via specialised officers, as the reused papyrus P.Wisc. 2.64 from Oxyrhynchus, from January 480 C.E., illustrates. ‘The holy church’ (through a presbyter<sup>34</sup> or another authority) orders<sup>35</sup> a certain Petros, steward (οἰ[κονόμω]) of the local church of St Kosmas, to hand over one cloak, and only one, to the widow Sophia (Σοφία χήρα)—one of the coats Petros had ‘for good use’ (ἀφ’ [ῶν] ἔχεις ἱματίων εἰς καλήν χρείαν). Apparently, this Petros administered a collection of donated second-hand coats. As the order strictly limits the support to only one coat, one wonders whether some of the widows had become

31 Cf. Mango, *Byzantium*, 40.

32 Thaesis: Besarion, her father?—The sisters: their father Silvanus.—Tsone: her *makarios* father Menas who raised her after the mother deserted her.

33 Thaesis: a significant portion of an estate.—The sisters: probably the large town house.—Tsone: probably more than just the four gold coins.

34 Thus P.Oxy. 16.1951 (485 C.E.): ἡ ἀγία ἐκκλησία δ[ι]’ ἐμοῦ Γρηγορίου πρεσ[βυτέρου].

35 For other instructions given by the church, see, e.g., P.Oxy. 6.993 (late Dec. 478/early Jan. 479 or late Dec. 493/early Jan. 494 C.E.): wine for a plasterer on the occasion of the Tubi feast—which is more than emergency relief; 16.1951: on the occasion of the same feast, ‘the holy church through me, the presbyter Gregorios’, gives an order to a wine manager to hand out wine to a craftsman specialised in beds and dinner couches. The same in 16.1950 (487 C.E.): wine on the occasion of the same feast. Like temples organised public feedings on the occasion of festivals, the church, on the occasion of the Τῦβι feast, made analogous donations beyond emergency relief. Τῦβι was the month of January in which Epiphany was celebrated.

known for begging for more than they needed. Widows like Sophia in January 480 were freezing; the church—not a family—supported her.

Wine also was donated to widows according to P. Oxy. 16.1954 (late fifth cent. C.E., Oxyrhynchus). Wine, consumed in moderation, was a basic food, healthier than bacteria-loaded water. Here it was handed out to a group of widows of the church of St Michael's in Oxyrhynchus. 'To Victor wineseller: Give to the widows of Michael only one double-jar of wine'<sup>36</sup>—only one.

### **Marriages: From Abuse to Affection**

Trauma of family life—the background of Tsone's life as an independent religious woman—is vividly illustrated by another case in P.Oxy. 6.903 (fourth cent.), a case of a toxic marriage between two well-to-do partners, each having their own possessions and property. On this reused papyrus from Oxyrhynchus a Christian wife, with an irregular uncial hand, notes all the abuses her husband committed in his household against her and other household members. It is a strong indictment against him, with even his mother and God called upon as witnesses. The wife apparently plans to sue her husband, with this document functioning as preparation (not unlike an affidavit).

The common denominator of all abuses the wife lists is that the man is paranoid about the household members stealing his possessions. He seems obsessed with greed and mistrust, which leads to verbal and physical violence, even sadistic violence. (1) He hides his keys from the wife, but not from his slaves whom he seems to trust more than his wife, she complains. He insults his wife. (2) This leads to a mediation by his own brothers and the bishop. A marriage deed is drawn up, and he swears to stop this behaviour. (3) However, he again hides the keys

36 Nothing is mentioned about the Epiphany feast, contrary to the examples of the previous note where wine was handed out for merriment on the occasion of the celebration of Epiphany, not just as food aid.

from her. (4) After she went out to church ‘on a Sabbath’,<sup>37</sup> he did not let her back in the house, questioning her, ‘Why did you go to the church?’ We do not know whether he himself is still pagan, or whether he suspects her of carrying away some of his possessions or of complaining about him to clergy (see n.37, above). He abuses her verbally, apparently steaming with wrath (‘terms of abuse to my face, and through his nose’). (5) Owning and managing land property and possessions in her own right, including slaves, she owes the State 100 *artabae* of corn. Taking away and locking up her books containing her bookkeeping, the husband claims that *he* paid for these dues, and not his wife, and that his wife should repay him, although he never paid anything for these 100 *artabae*. She refuses, and he asks his slaves to find allies who can lock up his wife for not paying the alleged debt she has with him. (6) The husband’s assistant Choous also owes the State but cannot pay the dues. Choous therefore is incarcerated. A certain Euthalamus pays for his bail, which, however, turns out to be ‘insufficient’. Therefore, the wife comes up with additional money to complete the bail. The husband hates this, apparently suspecting his wife of having stolen the bail money from him; Choous was *his* assistant, after all, not hers. Therefore, when meeting his wife again in Antinoopolis—they both go their own ways—he threatens her with taking away all ornaments that she carries. (7) He repeatedly pesters his wife with the request to ‘throw out’ his slave Anilla, whom he suspects of stealing. Although the husband owns this slave, the wife seems to have de facto

37 Saturday church services were not uncommon in the fourth/fifth centuries, in addition to Sunday worship. Cf. Sokrates, *H.E.* 5.22, and above all The coptic *Vita of Apa Aphou* (24–26), bishop of Oxyrhynchus around 400 c.e.: On the Sabbath/Saturday evenings, in church, this Oxyrhynchus bishop and ‘the people’ celebrated ‘their services and their prayers and their psalms. He presided over them in the holy liturgy. And he used to lead them until the sixth hour of the Lord’s Day’ (24; ed. Blumell–Wayment, *Christian Oxyrhynchus* [see n.21, above], 652). Before the liturgical night starting Saturday evenings, he spent his Saturdays ‘among those in need or *badly treated*; he used to meet their needs and continued to bear their petitions until the ninth hour’ when worship began (25f; ed. Blumell–Wayment, *Christian Oxyrhynchus*, 654). As this Oxyrhynchus bishop from around 400 c.e. was used also to receive people on Saturdays who were ‘badly treated’ it is possible that the abused wife, a few decades earlier, went to see clergy to complain about her husband and get advice.

authority over her in the household, which would explain why the wife is requested to send Anilla away. The wife herself marvels about the husband's behaviour: He 'wanted to get me involved, and on this pretext to take away whatever I possess myself' (to make up for what the slave Anilla allegedly stole; by throwing out Anilla, the wife would agree that Anilla is a thief. This seems to have been the husband's wicked reasoning, although the papyrus does not spell it out). (8) The worst is still to come: He locks up his slaves, her slaves, her foster daughters, his agent, and the agent's son in his cellars for seven days. He insults and tortures his slaves and her slave Zoe, beating them almost to death to find out what the wife had stolen from him. However, even under pressure they replied: 'Nothing.' He strips her foster daughters naked and hurts them with fire, pressuring them to give him all they have that belongs to the wife. However, they reply: 'She has nothing with us.' The scene shows a sadistically violent psychopath with a tendency toward sexual perversion who, in his delusion of being surrounded by thieves, found a pretext to rage in his pathology for seven days. (9) Finally, the husband threatens to take a mistress. (10) The wife not only quotes her mother-in-law as witness but also God, who 'knows this'.

P. Oxy. 6.903 (fourth cent., Oxyrhynchus):

Concerning all the violent insults uttered by him against me.

περὶ πάντων ὧν εἶπεν κατ' ἐμοῦ ὑβρεων.

He locked up his own slaves and

ἐνέκλεισεν τοὺς ἐ[α]υτοῦ δούλους καὶ τοὺς

mine together with my foster daughters and the agent and his (the agent's)

ἐμοῦ ἅμα των (1. ταῖς) τροφιμ[ω]ν (1. τροφίμ[αι]ς) μου καὶ τὸν  
προνοητὴν καὶ τὸν

son for seven whole days in his cellars.

υἰὸν αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ ὄλας ἐ[πτ]ὰ ἡμέρας εἰς τὰ κατάγαια αὐτοῦ,

Having insulted his slaves and my slave Zoe,

τοὺς μὲν δούλους αὐτ[οῦ] καὶ τὴν ἐμὴν δούλην Ζωὴν ὑβρίσας

(and almost) having killed them with blows, he also applied fire to my  
foster

ἀποκτίνας (I. ἀποκτείνας) αὐτοὺς τῶν π[λ]ηγῶν, καὶ πῦρ  
 προσήνεγ'κεν ταῖς τρο-  
 daughters, after having stripped them totally naked, which the laws do  
 not do (= permit). And  
 φίμαις μου γυμνώσας αὐ[τὰ]ς παντελῶς ἃ οὐ πο\ιο\ύσι οἱ νόμοι, καὶ  
 when he said to the same foster daughters, 'Give up all that is hers',  
 they also spoke,  
 λέγων τοῖς (I. ταῖς) αὐτοῖς (I. αὐταῖς) τροφίμοις (I. τροφίμ[αι]ς)  
 ὅτι δότε πάντα τὰ αὐτῆς, καὶ εἶπαν  
 'She has nothing with us'; but to the slaves when they were being  
 beaten he said:  
 ὅτι οὐδὲν ἔχει παρ' ἡμῶν, τοῖς δὲ δούλοις λέγων μαστιγ'γομενοὶ  
 (I. μαστιγουμένοις) ὅτι  
 'What did she take from my house?' They then under torture said:  
 'Nothing  
 τί ἤρκεν ἐκ τῆς οἰκίας μου; βασανιζόμενοι οὖν εἶπαν ὅτι οὐδὲν  
 of yours has she taken, but all your property is safe.'  
 τῶν σῶν ἤρκεν ἀλλὰ σῶά ἐστιν πάντα τὰ σά.  
 Zoilus then went to see him because he also had locked up his foster  
 son,  
 ἀπήνητησεν δὲ αὐτῷ Ζω[ίλ]ος ὅτι καὶ τὸν τρόφιμον αὐτοῦ ἐνέ-  
 and he said to him, 'Did you come because of your foster son or  
 because of the  
 κλισεν (I. ἐνέκλεισεν), καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ ὅτ[ι] διὰ τὸν τρόφιμόν σου  
 ἤλθας ἢ διὰ τὴν  
 such-like (woman) to talk about her?'  
 τοίαν ἤλθας λαλῆσαι ἐπάνω αὐτῆς;  
 And he swore in the presence of the bishops and of his own brothers,  
 καὶ ὤμοσεν ἐπὶ παρουσίᾳ τῶν ἐπισκόπων καὶ τῶν ἀδελφῶν αὐτοῦ  
 'From now on I will certainly not hide all my keys from her, and I  
 hold it together,  
 ὅτι ἀπεντεῦθεν οὐ μὴ κρύψω αὐτῇ (I. αὐτήν) πάσας μου τὰς κλεῖς  
 καὶ ἐπέχω  
 —and he trusted his slaves and did not trust me (this bitter  
 interjection is squeezed between the lines) —

—καὶ τοῖς δούλοις αὐτοῦ ἐπίστευσεν κάμοι (1. καὶ ἐμοὶ) οὐκ  
ἐπίστευσεν —  
and I do (will) not insult her from now on.’ And a marriage deed was  
made, and after  
οὔτε ὑβρίζω αὐτὴν ἀπεντεῦθεν. καὶ γαμικὸν γέγονεν, καὶ μετὰ  
these articles of agreement and the oaths, he again hid the keys from  
me—  
τὰς συνθήκας ταύτας καὶ τοὺς ὄρκους ἔκρυψεν πάλιν ἐμὲ τὰς κλεῖς  
from me! And when I had gone out to the church on a Sabbath he  
had  
εἰς ἐμέ. καὶ ἀπελθοῦσα [εἰ]ς τὸ κυριακὸν ἐν σαμβάθῳ (1. σαββάτῳ)  
καὶ ἐποίησεν  
his outside doors shut on me, saying, ‘Why did you go out  
τὰς ἔξω θύρας αὐτοῦ ἐνκλισθῆναι (1. ἐγκλεισθῆναι) ἐπάνω μου  
λέγων ὅτι διὰ τί ἀπῆλ-  
to the church?’ and saying many licentious things/vulgar abuses to my  
face,  
θας εἰς τὸ κυριακόν; καὶ πολλὰ ἀσελγήματα λέγων εἰς πρόσωπόν  
and through his nose. And about 100 artabae of corn due to the State  
on  
μου καὶ διὰ τῆς ῥίνος αὐτοῦ[υ], καὶ περὶ σίτου (ἀρτάβας) ρ τοῦ  
δημοσίου τοῦ  
my account: Although he had given/paid nothing, not a single artaba,  
he then locked up  
ὀνόματός μου μηδὲν δεδωκώς μηδὲ ἀρτάβ[ην] μίαν. ἐνέκλεισεν δὲ  
the books, after he had gotten hold of them, (saying) ‘Pay the price of  
the hundred artaba’  
τοὺς τόμους κρατήσας αὐτ[ο]ῦς ὅτι δότε τὴν τιμὴν τῶν [ἀρταβῶν]  
ρ, μηδὲν  
although he had paid nothing, as I stated before. And he said to his  
slaves, ‘Provide  
δεδω[κώς] ὡς προεῖπον. καὶ εἶπεν τοῖς δούλοις αὐτοῦ ὅτι δότε  
συμμά-  
allies so that they also lock up her.’ And Choous, his assistant, was  
taken  
χοὺς ἴνα καὶ αὐτὴν ἐνκλείσωσι. καὶ ἐκρατήθη Χωοῦς ὁ βοηθὸς αὐτοῦ

into prison, and Euthalamus gave security for him, and it was not satisfactory.

εἰς τὸ δημόσιον καὶ παρέσχεν αὐτῷ Εὐθάλαμος ἐνέχυρον καὶ οὐκ ἠρκέσθη.

So I also took a little other (amount) and gave it for the said Choous.

However, I met

ἦρκα καὶ γὰρ ἄλλο μικρὸν καὶ παρέσχον τῷ αὐτῷ Χωοῦτι. ἀπαντησας  
(I. ἀπήντησα) δὲ

him at Antinoopolis having what is for my bath (probably a bag with its contents), with which (incongruent numerus) I have (part of my)

αὐτῷ εἰς Ἀντινόου ἔχουσα τὸ πρὸς βαλανίον (I. βαλανεῖόν) μου μεθ' ὧν ἔχω κοσμηρι-

little ornaments, and he told me, 'If you have anything with you I

(will) take them (sic) because of what you have given to

δίῳ, καὶ εἶπέν μοι ὅτι εἴ τι ἔχεις μετ' ἐσοῦ αἴρω αὐτὰ δι' ὃ δέδωκας  
(I. δέδωκας) τῷ

my assistant Choous as security because of his dues to the State.'

βοηθῶ μου Χωοῦτι ἐνέχυρον διὰ τὰ δημόσια αὐτοῦ. μαρτυρήσαι  
(I. μαρτυρήσει) δὲ

To all this his mother will bear witness. And about his slave Anilla

περὶ τούτων πάντων ἢ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ. καὶ περὶ Ἀνίλλας τῆς δούλης

he kept vexing my soul both in Antinoopolis and here:

αὐτοῦ ἔμεινεν θλίβων τὴν ψυχὴν μου καὶ ἐν τῇ Ἀντινόου καὶ ἐνταῦθα

'Throw out this slave because she herself knows how much she procured for herself, probably

ὅτι ἐκβαλε τὴν δούλην ταύτην ἐπειδὴ αὐτὴ οἶδεν ὅσα κέκτηται, ἴσως

wanting to involve me and on this pretext, if I have anything, to take (it) away. And I

θέλων μοι (I. με) καταπλέξαι \και/ ταύτη τῇ προφάσει ἄραι εἴ τι ἔχω· καὶ γὰρ οὐκ

refused to throw her out. And he kept saying, 'After a month

ἠνεσχόμην ἐκβαλεῖν αὐτήν. καὶ ἔμεινεν λέγων ὅτι μετὰ μηνῶν  
(I. μῆνα)

I take a mistress for myself.' God, however, knows this.

λαμβάνω πολιτικὴν ἑμαυτῶ. ταῦτα δὲ οἶδεν ὁ θεός].

The misery of this wife was not unparalleled. In Pap. Oxy. 1.129 (sixth cent., Oxyrhynchus), a Christian father, named John,<sup>38</sup> under whose *patria potestas*<sup>39</sup> his daughter Euphemia still lives, even after her marriage, is upset about the son-in-law's unspeakable<sup>40</sup> 'lawless deeds,'<sup>41</sup> which threaten the 'security' (ἀσφάλεια) of his daughter and do not let her 'lead a peaceful and quiet life' (εἰρηνικὸν καὶ ἡσύχιον βίον διάξει). In this document, written by a municipal official concerned with justice, and signed by the father, the alarmed father takes formal action and dissolves the marriage. It is an official deed of divorce, a *repudium* (διαλύσεως ῥεπούδιον, συναφίας (l. συναφείας) ῥεπούδιον).<sup>42</sup> The father says that the unacceptable behaviour of the husband 'came to his ears' (εἰς ἀκοὰς ἐμὰς ἦλθεν). It stands to reason that the daughter herself instructed him about what was going on in her home and that she supported his action that protected her interests.<sup>43</sup> The official document shows that the early Byzantine society held up certain standards for the treatment of married women.

A similar case, this time not involving a father but a matron mother and her daughter in a village near Oxyrhynchus, both strong-willed women, can be found in the Oxyrhynchus papyrus SB 4.7449 (second half of the fifth cent. C.E.) showing female self-determination. A monk (μονάζων), cousin of this daughter (her guardian?), tries to push her into an arranged marriage with another relative. However, the daughter resists the bullying monk and the suitor (θυγάτηρ ἐκείνω οὐ βούλεται συνάπτεσθαι), and the mother sides with her, supporting her.

38 The document ends with a drawn cross.

39 πατήρ Εὐφημίας τῆς ἐμῆς ὑπέξουσίου θυγατρός.

40 οὐ δέον ἐστὶν ταῦτα ἐγ (l. ἐν) γράμμασιν ἐντεθῆναι.

41 ἔκθεσμα πράγματά τινα.

42 The son-in-law is a γαμβρός, that is, connected by marriage, and not just by engagement, as is suggested in the Duke Databank of Documentary Papyrus (<https://papyri.info/ddbdp/p.oxy;1;129>).

43 A contrary case is P.Oxy. 2.237 (coll.VI.4–VIII.7), where a father tries to dissolve his daughter's marriage against her will (Oxyrhynchus, 186 c.E., pagan).

Thereupon the monk starts mobbing the mother, even ruining her clothes. Taking action, the mother approaches the Oxyrhynchus bishop asking him to stop the monk. Clergy again is called in for mediation. Unfortunately, no other papyrus tells us the rest of the story.

P.Oxy. 50.3581 again shows a reckless husband, again mediation by *presbyteroi*, again contractual sanctions (two ounces of gold in case the reckless behaviour continues), and finally divorce. Again, it is the woman who takes initiative by writing down the problems, here in a petition to an officer in charge of the peace in Oxyrhynchus (fourth/fifth cent. C.E.), trying to open a trial in court and receive the said two ounces of gold from him as well as compensation for the damages he left behind; she also suggests criminal charges and punishment. Earlier she already sent a deed of divorce to him via the city's *tabularius* 'in accordance with imperial law' (κατὰ τὸν βασιλικὸν νόμον).

The case is a rare example of a woman unilaterally dissolving the marriage, with most known divorce cases of this time period being based on mutual consent.<sup>44</sup> As an orphan<sup>45</sup> without support from a parent and as survivor of marital terror—the long list of reckless behaviours and crimes is appalling<sup>46</sup>—the woman impresses, as she keeps resisting and fighting, willing to bring her difficult private life

44 See, e.g., P.Lond. 5.1712 (blaming a demon for the marriage failure made it easier for the divorcing partners, an oarsman and his wife Kyra, also to agree on many additional things connected with the divorce, e.g., that the unborn child was to be raised by the father if he paid for the childbirth; they even claim to be 'reconciled with one another'); further Rowlandson, *Women and Society*, 209. A unilateral *repudium* issued by a Christian woman of the 2nd cent. is found in Justin, *Apol.* 2.2.6.

45 καταφρονήσας τῆς ὀρφανίας μου.

46 Abduction; repeated rape; in response to the *repudium*, 'punishing' rape—possibly even gang rape with 'lawless men'—during several days while she was involuntarily locked up in his house (συνπαραλαβὼν μεθ' ἑαυτοῦ πλήθος ἀνδρῶν ἀτάκτων ἀφήρπασέν με καὶ κατέκλεισεν ἐπὶ τῆς οἰκείας αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ <οὐκ(?)> ὀλίγας ἡμέρας), she emerged pregnant from this torture; stealing; repeatedly leaving her in precarious financial situations; almost killing her (ὑβρεῖς καὶ ζημίας ὑπέστην ἄχρις οὗ συγχωρήσωσίν) (1. συγχωρήσωσίν) μοι τὸ ζῆν); threats to stir up malice (φθόνος) against her; infidelity; verbal abuse. Especially after her divorce letter the criminal side of his behaviour intensified, which probably is to be interpreted as revenge for the unilaterality of the divorce.

with all its personal details into open court.<sup>47</sup>

To end this section on a more peaceful note, P. Lond. 5.1711/P.Cair.Masp. 3.67310 (= the draft of the first papyrus; 566–573 C.E., Antinoopolis) is a marriage contract written up by a husband, Horouonchis, a soldier of the troops stationed in Antinoopolis and gatekeeper (*ostiarius*) of the city.<sup>48</sup> He and his bride Scholastikia aim for a marriage ‘of mutual love’ (φιλλάλληλος), with him—in polite early Byzantine manner—respectfully addressing her as Your Nobility and Your Propriety (τῆ σῆ εὐ[γενείᾳ], τῆ σῆ κοσμιότητι).

The contract lists positive behaviours the couple intends to display in their marital life and allows glimpses at the expectations women of elevated social status faced when defining their role. The values displayed—besides procreation and ‘holy’ virginity<sup>49</sup> of the bride—are ‘support’ of the wife by the husband (διαθρέψαι σε), including clothing for her ‘in likeness to all those of my class and in proportion to the wealth available to me, as far as my modest means will allow’<sup>50</sup> and a gift of six gold coins, imperial *solidi*,<sup>51</sup> for her to have as personal property. He vows to respect her (‘no contempt in any way’),<sup>52</sup> not to divorce her (except for adultery),<sup>53</sup> not to invite people into their home

47 Since the document is a petition for money, it may well be that some of the details were exaggerated, as Rowlandson, *Women and Society*, 209, suspects. However, the woman also petitions for a trial in court and therefore could not afford to make things up in this official document.

48 [στρατ]ι[ώτ]η[ς ἀριθμοῦ Ἀντι(νόου) καὶ ὀστιάριος ἀπὸ τ[ῆ]ς αὐτῆς πόλεως.

49 Τὴν σὴν σεμνήν...παρθένειαν. The groom happily established it after having discovered it: εὐρών διηγόρευσα (l. διηγόρευσα).

50 ἐγδιδύσκειν καθ’ ὁμοιότητα πάντων [τῶν σ]υνμετριῶν μο(υ) καὶ τὸν προσόντα μοι πόρον κατὰ τὸν δυνατὸν τρόπον [τῆς ἐμῆς μετ]ριότητος.

51 For their buying power, see above; e.g., fish for 2 years and 2 months (840 days), half a pound per day.

52 ἐν μηδένι καταφρονῆσαι σο(υ).

53 Matt. 5:32. However, at least three male free and trustworthy witnesses are needed to establish such ‘physical misbehaviour’ (σωματικῆς ἀταξίας).

for drinking parties if she does not like it,<sup>54</sup> and never to leave her marriage bed or to commit other ‘indiscipline or licentiousness’<sup>55</sup>—provided(!) the wife is ‘obedient’ to him (ὕπακουσής) and shows for him ‘all goodwill and sincere loving affection (πάσαν εὖνοιαν καὶ εἰλικρινῆ στοργήν) in all fine and useful deeds and words.’<sup>56</sup> She is expected to be ‘subject to me (ὕποταττομέ[νης] μοι)<sup>57</sup> in all ways just as it befits all women of nobility to display toward their well-to-do and most beloved husbands’<sup>58</sup> and to avoid ‘outrage/insult’ (ὕβρις), ‘fickleness’ (ἀψικωρία), or ‘disdain’ (καταφρόνησις), to be a ‘full-time housekeeper and husband-loving’ (φίλανδρος), ‘in keeping with the good and prudent character/devotion/goodwill (ἀγαθῆ καὶ σώφρονι προαιρέσει) that will be displayed to you by me.’<sup>59</sup> As a military man, he appears rather self-confident.

However, if either one in the marriage does not keep his or her part of the deal, he or she will be sanctioned with a payment of eighteen solidi to the other.

- 54 This is a sort of add-on to the text—apparently upon the wife’s request, after she had read his draft as basis for discussion. She also does not like to waste her time with ‘inconsequential/inconsequent/inconsistent’ (ἀνακόλουθος) visitors. And the husband has to write down again that he will not take other women beside her—although he had already vowed to stay faithful to her. These are interesting glimpses at her fears and concerns. These also include the husband being driven by ‘fear, deceit, physical violence, fraud, and compulsion’, which he in the add-ons vows to avoid (μὴ φόβω, μὴ δόλω, μὴ βία καὶ ἀπάτη, μήτε ἀνάγκη συνελαινώμενος).
- 55 μηδαμῶς ἀποστήναί με τῆς σῆς [κοίτης μη]δ’ ἐτέρας δραμεῖν ἀταξίας ἢ ἀσελείας (I. ἀσελείας).
- 56 ὕπακουσής μοι καὶ φυλαττούσης μοι πᾶσαν εὖνοιαν καὶ εἰλικρινῆ στοργήν ἐν πᾶσι καλοῖς καὶ ὀφελίμοις (I. ὀφελίμοις) ἔργοι[ς] τε καὶ λόγοι[ς].
- 57 Cf. Clement of Alexandria (c. 200): Women ‘are destined for pregnancy and housekeeping’, although they are equal to men regarding the soul, virtues, self-control, and ability to become perfect Christians as well as martyrs (*Stromata* 4.8.58.2–60.1).
- 58 ὕποταττομέ[νης] μοι τρόποις ἅπασιν ἅτε δὴ ἀνήκει ἀπάσαι[ς] εὐγενεστάταις γυναιξίν] ἐνδείκνυσθα[ι] εἰ[ς] το[ῦ]ς ἐ[αυτῶν] εὐμοίρους καὶ φιλαιτάτους ἀνδ[ρας].
- 59 ἀκόλouth[ως] τῆ παρ’ ἐμ[οῦ] δε[ι]χθησομένη σοι ἀγαθῆ καὶ σώφρονι προαιρέσει.

## Magic and Paganism

Christianity did not uproot paganism entirely, as numerous papyri document. Christian amulets were popular, such as an amulet invoking the ‘ever-virgin’ and ‘holy god-bearing’ Mary (P.Bon. 1.9; unknown origin, probably fourth cent.) or Christian love charms (e.g. SB 14.11534; third/fourth cent., unknown Egyptian origin, Christian names).<sup>60</sup>

Palladius (*Historia Lausiaca* 17.6–9; c. 420 C.E.) in his Egyptian desert narrates that a love-crazed man ordered a love-charm from a magician to make a Christian married freeborn woman fall in love with him—or at least to make the husband throw her out, so that he could take advantage of her misery. The magician allegedly achieved the latter, at least partially—and here the legend starts: The magician created the illusion that the wife changed into an animal, and when the husband came home he saw her lying on his bed naked<sup>61</sup>—but as a mare. It got worse, for three days she didn’t eat bread—nor hay, with the husband fearing she would die. So, he took her to hermits who lived with St Makarios in the desert. Luckily the Christian holy man could release her from the equine spell. However, he admonished the wife to attend communion regularly, explaining, ‘These things happened to you because for five weeks you had not attended the myster-

60 For more material, see De Bruyn and Dijkstra, ‘Greek Amulets and Formularies’, 163–216; Jones, *New Testament Texts*. Often these amulets contain Psalm verses, the Lord’s Prayer, or the incipits of the Gospels (see, e.g., PSI 6.719). However, not all texts categorised as amulets today were magic. P. Oxy. 76.5073 (c. 300 C.E., containing Mark 1:1), e.g., often was identified as an amulet because it has no fold marks and the citation from Isaiah in Mark 1:1, ‘I send my angel before your face’, taken out of Mark’s context, sounds like a comforting assurance for the readers and therefore could qualify as magically protective text. However, missing fold marks and a therefore possibly rolled-up papyrus do not automatically imply that it was worn around the neck. More importantly, the first line introducing Mark 1:1, ‘Know well the beginning of the Gospel and see’, sounds more like a teacher’s homework assignment (in catechesis?) to read the beginning of Mark’s book thoroughly or even memorise it. Was the paper a memory aid in the pocket (or on the wall) of a catechumen? See further Naldini, *Il Cristianesimo in Egitto*, 155; De Troyer and Arzt-Grabner, ‘Ancient Jewish and Christian Amulets’, 5–46.

61 Later in the story: Καὶ εὐλογήσας ὕδωρ καὶ ἀπὸ κορυφῆς ἐπιχέας αὐτῆ γυμνῆ ἐπηύξατο while she still looked like a horse for those who were not as holy as Makarios who only saw a naked lady (17.9.3).

ies.' Thus—and this is the point of the story—in popular Christian opinion, regular communion and worship had apotropaic power immunising against spells.

P.Oxy. 8.1151 (fifth cent.?, Oxyrhynchus) was folded, with a cord tied around it. It most probably was worn around the neck as a Christian amulet against pagan magic that had caused recurring 'fevers and every kind of chill' in a woman named Joannia. As is expected in an amulet, in her prayer to God Joannia talks about herself in the third person. (1) The papyrus starts with a *spell* addressed directly to the wicked spirit as an exorcism. 'Flee, hateful spirit! Christ pursues (διώκει) you, the Son of God and the Holy Spirit have overtaken you' (προέλαβέν σε).

(2) Only after the spell, *prayers* follow, first to God ('deliver from all evil your servant Joannia') and then to Christ, containing Biblical and liturgical reminiscences. The healing of John 5:2–9 is alluded to ('O God of the pool at the Sheep Gate'), and the quotation of the incipit of the Gospel of John (1:1,3; not v.2) recalls the divine creative power through the Word (δι' αὐτοῦ). Christ accordingly is characterised as 'healing every sickness and every infirmity'. She prays, 'O Lord Christ, Son and Word of the living God, heal and watch over your servant Joannia too' (ἴασαι καὶ ἐπίσκεψαι καὶ τὴν δοῦλῃν σου). The 'too' is of interest. The Biblical reminiscences commit God/Christ to their own Biblical words (in the sense of: What you did there, please, also do it to me).

(3) To further support her prayer, Joannia calls attention to *interceding prayers* (εὐχ[αῖ]ς) of Mary, the archangels, and all saints, particularly John, the 'glorious apostle, evangelist and theologian', who is listed first among the saints mentioned by name. John's Gospel seems to be Joannia's favourite Biblical book, as the two references to John 1 and 5 already indicated.<sup>62</sup>

(4) However, Joannia not only relies on prayers, that is, on the

62 Interceding or vicarious prayers also on P.Lond. 6.1926 (unknown Egyptian origin, mid-fourth cent.): A sick lady, Valeria, implores an anchorite to pray for healing from her breathlessness, as she believes that 'ascetics and devotees' pray more effectively. To keep the man busy she also asks for prayers for her two daughters and her husband, who, together with the entire household, sends greetings. She in turn vows to pray for 'the honoured father'.

healing power of the Creator God (John 1:3). She also appears to rely on magical energy inherent in some *matter* carried on her feverish body. The material presence of written-down holy Biblical and liturgical words, of four crosses drawn on the papyrus, of a spell penned in ink and of written invocations of the Trinity—this material presence around the neck suggests that she also hoped for a healing effect of magically charged matter—which is a signature feature of amulets. It stands to reason that she attributed healing energy to the Biblical text bits themselves: for her, written down in ink on the papyrus, they probably infused healing power to the object around the neck. Today's science knows that placebos generate real positive effects.<sup>63</sup> To criticize this woman for mixing Christian and magical practices would be hasty. In part, Christian contact relicts of martyrs' bones replaced the amulets in late antiquity<sup>64</sup> without, however, replacing them entirely.

(5) The last sentence also has a magical touch, showing that apotropaic power was attributed to the divine name itself, because it 'frightens' adversary spirits: 'O Lord God, in my interest (middle voice) I (finally Joannia talks in the first person) have invoked your name that is awesome, super glorious and causes fear to the enemies. Amen' (τὸ ὄνομά σου ἐπικαλεσά[μ]ην τὸ θαυμαστὸν καὶ ὑπερένδοξον καὶ φοβερὸν τοῖς ὑπεναντίοις. ἀμήν. †).

P.Oxy. 6.924 (fourth cent.) presents a prayer—again in the third person—of a woman named Aría to ward off all kinds of fever chills from her. The prayer expresses confidence: 'This you graciously will do completely according to your will (ταῦτα εὐ[μενῶ]ς πράξεις ὄλως κατὰ τὸ θέλημά σου) and according to her faith (πίστιν), because she is a servant of the living God.' Thus, the text commits God to God's graciousness and kindness, but it also commits Aría herself to faithfulness to God (as a kind of bargaining chip?). At the end 'Abraxas', a holy name of the Basilidians, can be read, which frequently occurs in Christian magic papyri but also in ecclesiastical writings referencing ideas consid-

63 See e.g. Kaptchuk and Miller, 'Placebo Effects', 1–9.

64 See, e.g., Lampe, 'Traces'.

ered ‘gnostic.’<sup>65</sup> The papyrus therefore was probably carried on the body to protect against illness. Was it a charm of a Basilidian woman?<sup>66</sup>

At the end, it may be appropriate to commemorate two courageous and steadfast Alexandrian women who, on the eve of the so-called Decian ‘persecution’ (249/250 C.E.), resisted the pressure to become contaminated with pagan cult and lost their lives: *Quinta*, who was forced to worship at a pagan temple, and the *πρεσβύτις Apollonia*, a *παρθένος* (possibly an apotactic nun like the *παρθένος* Thais above), who was pushed to say ‘impieties’ (τὰ τῆς ἀσεβείας κηρύγματα).<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

Although some women we encountered were eager to read and exchange books, only one female Christian *διδάσκαλος* surfaces in the Egyptian papyri (more appear to be evidenced in literary sources). The one *πρεσβύτερα* in the papyri and mummy tablets, most likely leading a congregation, was paralleled by other presbyteresses in the literary sources. They were not necessarily Montanists. However, they were contrasted by people holding that women needed to become male to be complete and equal to men. Yet, even when women, in their femininity, were considered equal, within their marriages they nonetheless faced the expectation to be housekeepers and subordinated to their husbands.

However, several women lived independently from men as unmarried females, protected by a religious aura: they lived as autactic religious women, *μοναχαί*/solitaires without children and husbands,

65 E.g. Hippol. *Haer.* 7.26.6 (‘the great Archon of these [the Basilidians] is Abrasax’); Epiph. *Pan.* 1.264.1 (Abrasax is a ‘holy name’ according to the Basilidians, because its numeric value is 365, the number of heavens in the Basilidian system).

66 Thus Grenfell and Hunt (ed.), *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri VI*, 289f (nr. 924).

67 Letter of Dionysios of Alexandria, quoted in Eusebius *H.E.* 6.41.1–7. Another female martyr of the Diocletian persecution in Alexandria may have been a Thekla (see the Coptic legendary *Martyrdom of Paese and Thekla* (9th-cent. manuscript; ed. Reymond–Barns). *πρεσβύτις* means “aged” and not “elder”, pace Eisen 123 (see note 4, above), where the equation *πρεσβύτις* = *πρεσβυτερίδας* is erroneous.

dropping their patronymic, and showing no interest in joining a convent. Those we met were probably city-dwelling and had their own belongings, making their own money, for example by renting out some of their real estate property. The *μοναχαι ἀποτακτικαι* represented a socially accepted model, even respected by clergy, that gave females who wanted to remain single a chance to live a self-determined and self-paced life without dependency on men. The apotactic lifestyle allowed for individuality and freedom to handle one's own, legal, and economic affairs by oneself.

The model was open to more or less well-to-do women who had their own means of financial support. Nuns in convents, on the other hand, even when poor, could count on support by the communal possessions of the convent, trading this support for dependencies on authorities and conventual rules. The difference between conventual nuns and autotactic religious women may need further large-scale exploration of sources. The apotactic model also was open, of course, for women *working* for their income. Future research may evidence them more clearly.

In one case, a traumatic childhood in a broken family led a woman to become an autotactic *μοναχή*. Difficult family situations abounded—from grave, even criminal, abuse by husbands to infidelity to an abandoning mother to divorce. Several times marriage contracts and contractual sanctions attempted to reign in reckless husbands or women asked for clerical mediation in conflicts. The abused women took things into their own hands by writing down the problems and looking for solutions. Those who silently suffered are not reflected in the papyri.

We read an authentic *repudium*, drawn up by a father of a wife who still lived under his *patria potestas*. But we also witnessed the *repudium* drawn up by a brave and self-determined wife against the husband's will, a rare case of unilateral divorce whereas most divorces were consensual. This woman makes an impression, as she kept resisting and fighting, willing to bring the details of her difficult private life into open court. Two other strong-willed and self-determined women, daughter and mother, resisted an arranged marriage the daughter detested, fighting bullying male relatives.

On a positive note, married women could have their own possessions, manage their own landed property, own slaves, and raise foster children besides their own offspring. The early Byzantine society and its officials held up certain standards for the treatment of wives, and the example of a marriage contract—to which the bride had contributed—voiced positive marriage values—resolutions such as mutual affection and mutual emotional support and benevolence as well as mutual responsibilities, including material support and care by the husband, not just female subordination and housekeeping.

When marriage ended by death life could become dire. Widows without supporting families became dependent on the charity system of the churches. We met a widow freezing in January who received a coat from a church charity manager. Others received portions of wine, a basic food, from their church.

We stood at the beds of fever-chilled women who used amulets to ward off evil spirits causing illness. Regular attendance at communion also was believed to have apotropaic effects. Other women, however, withstood the temptation to use magic practices or become contaminated by pagan cult. In this resistance the bravest even lost their lives as martyrs.

Thus, a diversity of female lives was mirrored in the sources. However, we gained only few insights into women's belief systems. Yes, a woman we met went to church even on Saturdays, and, as we saw, women were expected to attend communion regularly. A woman could be praised as 'most pious and law-loving'.<sup>68</sup> Women studied Jewish/Christian books beyond the borderlines of our known canon(s), they trusted clergy when asking them to mediate in personal conflict situations,<sup>69</sup> they prayed and some relied on magically charged amulets, but we have no testimonies similar, for example, to the logia of the Montanist prophetesses.<sup>70</sup> What did the mentioned female Christian

68 IGA 5.48, March 409, a woman's Christian tombstone in Alexandria.

69 Future research may want to investigate how often *men* were inclined to ask clergy to mediate in conflicts.

70 For these and their deep involvement with Biblical traditions, see especially Mader, *Montanistische Orakel*.

διδάσκαλος teach?

The apotropaic use of amulets and of Biblical texts such as John 1 demonstrated a need for protection and thus the insecurity of the lives and times. Above all, the personal human aspects were in the foreground, timeless suffering, hopes, angers, and affections.

Peter Lampe  
University of Heidelberg

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