

WOMEN AS PROPERTY OWNERS IN ROMAN EGYPT*

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It has long been acknowledged¹ that women in Roman Egypt seem to have owned a fair amount of private property, but this potentially significant fact has, until very recently,² hardly transcended the realm of passing observation.³ Although numerous scholars have examined and discussed the ethnic composition of the Egyptian population during the

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1980 meeting of the American Philological Association in New Orleans. Preliminary work on this subject was carried out during a very enjoyable year spent at the Institute for Advanced Study in 1978/9. My interest in discovering and defining the limits of female property ownership in Roman Egypt emerged from numerous entertaining and profitable conversations with Professor J. F. Gilliam, to whom I dedicate this modest effort with affection and gratitude. I should also like to express my appreciation to the two referees who read this article for *TAPA*, whose constructive criticisms I have tried to take account of in what I present here.

Papyrological abbreviations used here are those found in *Checklist of Editions of Greek Papyri and Ostraca, BASP Supplement 1* (1978).

¹ See, e.g., A. C. Johnson, *Roman Egypt to the Reign of Diocletian* (Baltimore 1936) 28, 31, 227f., 682 note 5.

² Since I delivered the first version of this paper, S. Pomeroy has published "Women in Roman Egypt: A Preliminary Study Based on Papyri," *Reflections of Women in Antiquity*, ed. H. Foley (London 1981) 303–22.

³ See, e.g., C. Préaux, "Le Statut de la femme à l'époque hellénistique, principalement en Egypte," *Recueils de la société Jean Bodin 11: La femme* (1959) 174, and the references cited therein. Préaux's focus is, however, more juridical than sociological, and her study does not therefore encompass the concerns of the present paper.

A hopeful indication of a growing awareness of the ownership of property by women in Egypt is perhaps suggested by a comparison between two treatments of one document, the first published thirty years ago and the second in 1978: in a discussion of *P. Flor.* I 71, a large fourth-century land register from the Hermopolite nome, A. H. M. Jones, "Census Records of the Later Roman Empire," *JRS* 43 (1953) 58–63 makes only one allusion to the fact that there were numerous female landowners on the list, when he refers (58) to the quantity of land which "he or she" held. Elsewhere throughout his article landowners are always referred to as "the man who . . ." On the contrary, in a recent republication of this register together with *P. Giss. Inv. 4* (= *Zwei Landlisten aus dem Hermopolites*, ed. P. J. Sijpesteijn and K. A. Worp [Amsterdam 1978]), the sex of the landowners is noted, pp. 23f. (334 men and 57 women).

Greco-Roman period in order to determine the extent to which the country may have been Hellenized or Romanized,⁴ there has been remarkably little interest in the question of how extensively it may have been "feminized."⁵ The truth is that since women were able to derive property from their families through dowry and inheritance,⁶ but were not liable to the poll tax nor to the same range of liturgical functions as men,⁷ their capacity to acquire property would seem to have been in theory at least as great as that of men, while their potential liabilities may well have been considerably fewer.⁸

As far as I know, no one has ever explored the implications of this situation by making a detailed study of the economic activities of women within a particular community, although the papyri provide us with an abundance of relevant evidence for this kind of an investigation. The present paper represents an initial attempt to rectify this omission, by a consideration of the economic position of women property owners in the small village of Socnopaïou Nesos, a village at the western border of the Fayum oasis which existed from about 250 B.C. to A.D. 250. As source material for this investigation we have about 950 published Greek papyri of the Roman period⁹ emanating from or relating to this site, of

⁴ On this subject see D. H. Samuel, "Greeks and Romans at Socnopaïou Nesos," *Proceedings of the XVI Congress of Papyrology = American Studies in Papyrology* 23 (Chico, Calif. 1981) 389–403, esp. the references cited at p. 390, note 5.

⁵ The basic literature on the subject of women in Greco-Roman Egypt is cited by Pomeroy (above, note 2) 318, note 2.

⁶ See R. Taubenschlag, *The Law of Greco-Roman Egypt in the Light of the Papyri*, 332 BC–640 AD (New York 1944) 150f.

⁷ On the exemption of women from liturgical service see N. Lewis, "Exemptions from Liturgy in Roman Egypt," *Actes du X^e Congrès International de Papyrologie, Varsovie-Cracovie, 3–9 Septembre 1961* (Warsaw 1964), 70 and note 5. See also BGU II 648.92–94, P. Tebt. 327 and P. Oxy. VI 899.

⁸ Thus Johnson (above, note 1) 28 remarks that "there was a tendency for private property to pass into the hands of women, who could not be appointed for liturgies nor be assigned land for forced cultivation." On this point see Pomeroy (above, note 2) 313 and note 20.

⁹ The Ptolemaic papyri from Socnopaïou Nesos are too few in number to be taken into account for the purposes of this paper; Pomeroy (above, note 2) 304ff. attempts to establish a change in government policy affecting women and their capacity to own property from the Ptolemaic to the Roman era, but her argument is (by her own admission) largely *ex silentio* and does not seem to me to be substantiated by the small amount of evidence we do have from the Ptolemaic period. The fact that land is not included in the provisions of dowries before the Roman period (as pointed out by Pomeroy at 304) is not significant in light of the fact that women are given land in wills at least as early as 238 B.C. (see below, note 32). The phenomenon Pomeroy is concerned with (i.e. increased ownership of private land by women in the Roman period) would have been true of men as well, as Johnson points out ([above, note 1] 27). However, the focus of the present paper is on the Roman period, and it is not within the scope of this investigation to make any comparisons between the Ptolemaic and Roman eras, particularly in the absence of sufficient relevant evidence.

which a total of 271 documents provide us with some kind of information about ownership of property within the village.¹⁰ From an analysis of these texts we can obtain a fairly clear picture of the role of women in the economic life of the village.¹¹

In this paper I shall first discuss the results obtained from an examination of the documents from Socnopaïou Nesos, and I shall then place these specific results from one small village into the larger context of Egypt as a whole by considering the patterns of property transmission which are embodied in the provisions of wills from the Roman period. In this way I hope to be able to clarify the role of women property owners in the economy of Roman Egypt.

Socnopaïou Nesos was in many ways not a very typical Fayum village. Since it was the center of an important cult of the crocodile god Souchos, there was a large priestly class in the village, among whom the women members figured prominently. Because the village was situated at the extreme western edge of the cultivated area of the Fayum and at the end of the irrigation system, agricultural conditions were poor, which almost certainly explains why it appears to have been of so little interest to the Greeks and Romans.¹² In fact our evidence indicates that the village had no privately-owned agricultural land at all,¹³ although some residents owned a certain amount of land in other villages.¹⁴ Since the village was at the edge of Lake Moeris and on the border of the desert, there was a customs house located there which regulated commercial traffic passing in and out of the nome, and the village seems to have provided transportation services for goods passing through this customs house.¹⁵

¹⁰ It is indeed a sobering experience for a classicist, who feels tempted to reconstruct a society from what might seem like the vast quantity of documentary evidence represented by 950 Greek papyri, to contemplate the enormous amount of material available for similar analysis to scholars of later periods; see, for example, David Herlihy, "Land, Family and Women in Continental Europe, 701-1200," *Traditio* 18 (1962) 89-120.

¹¹ My use of the term "economic role" of women refers throughout to their functioning in the world beyond their immediate households. Cf. D. M. Schaps, *Economic Rights of Women in Ancient Greece* (Edinburgh 1979) esp. p. 2.

¹² See Samuel (above, note 4) 400f.

¹³ In *P. Gen.* 16 = *W. Chr.* 354 (A.D. 207), a group of public farmers from Socnopaïou Nesos, in petitioning against an injustice they have suffered at the hands of some violent usurpers of their communal land, specifically state that their village has no land other than the public land along the shore (*αἰγίαλος*)

... ἔνεκ[α τοῦ] μὴ ἔχιν τὴν κώμην μήτε ἰδιωτικὴν μήτε βασιλικήν
μηδὲ ἄλλην εἰδέαν. . . . (16f.)

¹⁴ On this point, see D. W. Hobson (Samuel), "The Village of Apias in the Arsinoite Nome," *Aegyptus* 62 (1982) 80-123.

¹⁵ The importance of transportation services provided by residents of Socnopaïou Nesos is reflected in the large number of documents from the village which relate to ownership of camels; see below, note 22.

Because of its particular location, therefore, the economy of Socnopaïou Nesos had a distinctive character among Fayum villages, in that it seems to have been based on commerce rather than agriculture. For this reason property ownership is not manifested in the usual form of possession of agricultural land, as it would be for other villages, but rather in terms of possession of houses, camels, slaves, and capital.¹⁶ Thus when we set out to examine the extent to which women appeared as property owners in Socnopaïou Nesos, we are actually looking at the extent to which they owned houses, camels, slaves, or money, whereas, for example, in the case of Karanis we are able to evaluate women's property by calculating their land holdings as these are reflected in the land tax payments recorded in the village tax rolls (see below, p. 315).

When one charts the extent to which women figure among these various categories of property, one finds that they appear most frequently as owners of houses or parts of houses. There are several types of document which record house ownership, and in each of these women are strongly represented. Among the 32 documents recording sales of houses¹⁷ there are 35 women principals as compared with 36 men. Among twelve documents recording registration of property,¹⁸ there are eight women property owners and 17 men.¹⁹ Of twelve extant census declarations from Socnopaïou Nesos²⁰ only one (*P. Rein.* I 46) is that of a woman householder, but the women listed as members of the declarants' households in the other census returns own an impressive amount of property. A particularly noteworthy example is that found in *P. Grenf.* II 55, where the declarant is a 25-year-old man who has a 13-year-old wife who owns $2\frac{1}{4}$ houses, and another 12-year-old girl living in the same household (presumably therefore a relative) owns $2\frac{1}{2}$ houses. Yet the male head of this household lives in a house which he states he has inherited from his mother, and he apparently owns no other properties.

From these disparate pieces of evidence, spread as they are over a time period of some two hundred years, it is hard to arrive at an estimate of the percentage of houses owned by women in this village; however, if one correlates the figures for home ownership, where almost as many women appear as men, with the figures for property registrations, where about one-third of the registrants are women, one can, I think,

¹⁶ Pomeroy (above, note 2) does not deal with these forms of property ownership and appears to regard land ownership as the only significant index of the economic status of women in Roman Egypt.

¹⁷ For a list of these thirty-two documents, see Samuel (above, note 4) 392, note 9.

¹⁸ For a list of property registrations from Socnopaïou Nesos, see Samuel (above, note 4) 393, note 10.

¹⁹ These totals reflect the total number of people, without regard for the number of individuals involved in each document, or the distinction between buyer and seller.

²⁰ Socnopaïou Nesos census declarations are listed at Samuel (above, note 4) 393, note 11.

suppose that at least one-third of the village real estate may have been owned by women. A comparable figure is yielded by looking at the names of owners of contiguous properties found in the thirty property sales from Socnopaïou Nesos which contain such information: 41 names are male and 16 are female.

This figure of one-third, as a bare minimum and encompassing a long chronological span, can be corroborated by the evidence provided by nearby Karanis, a much larger and more flourishing village. The Karanis tax rolls from the years A.D. 171–74, published in *P. Mich.* IV, list people who paid taxes on private land in those three years; although the texts were published without commentary, and therefore any interpretation of the data provided by them is necessarily somewhat hazardous, it is worth noting that almost two-fifths of the names which appear among those paying taxes for privately-owned land are names of women. This statistic is useful for two reasons: first, since the Karanis tax rolls constitute a comprehensive list from a restricted time period, they provide a more accurate estimate of proportions of women property owners than any of the data from Socnopaïou Nesos, given that the latter embrace such a large time period. Second, the number of women land owners listed in the Karanis rolls points to the fact that Socnopaïou Nesos, with its apparently idiosyncratic economic conditions, was not atypical in containing a high number of female property owners, and further that women's property was not limited to village house ownership, but that women owned agricultural land to at least as great a degree as houses.²¹

Women's names occur often in connection with other forms of property as well: among 60 identified camel owners in Socnopaïou Nesos, twelve are women, which is a figure of one-fifth of the total.²² Out of seventeen attested slave owners, eleven are women, which represents almost two-thirds of the total in that category.²³ Thus the evidence for

²¹ Cf. O. Montevecchi, "Ricerche di sociologia nei documenti dell'Egitto greco-romano. III. I contratti di compra-vendita," *Aegyptus* 21 (1941) 144: in all contracts for sales of houses collected and discussed here, there are 195 men and 133 women. Thus 40% of contracting parties in house sales are women, a figure entirely consistent with the evidence presented in this paper.

²² There are three kinds of documents which provide information about ownership of camels: sales of camels, receipts for payments of the camel tax, and registrations of camels. A complete list of these three kinds of documents from Socnopaïou Nesos is given at Samuel (above, note 4) 394, note 15. The following documents from that list involve female camel owners: *BGU* I 87, *BGU* I 88, *BGU* II 416, *P. Amh.* II 102, *P. Lond.* II 333 (p. 199), *P. Grenf.* II 45a, *SB* VI 8977, *P. Lond.* II 304 (p. 72), *BGU* III 869, *BGU* I 266, *P. Monac. gr. inv.* 26.

²³ A complete list of Socnopaïou Nesos slave owners is given at Samuel (above, note 4) 394, note 14. The following documents from that list attest female slave owners: *BGU* III 805, *SPP* XXII 36, *BGU* III 855, *P. Lond.* II 311 (p. 219), *SPP* XXII 40, *P. Lond.* II 325a

ownership of houses, camels, and slaves all points to the fact that women in Socnopaïou Nesos owned a sizable amount of property, probably at least a third of the total.

The question is, what is the significance of this phenomenon? Given that men's liabilities to taxation and liturgy were greater than women's, we might suspect that men put their possessions into their wives' names in order to reduce the size of their own estates, a practice which is common in our own society today. Indeed, it may be an implicit assumption of this sort on the part of scholars which has deflected interest in the subject of women property owners, since it has perhaps been taken for granted that the economic role of women in the life of the villages could not have been of any real importance. For this reason it is critical to determine whether the role of women is merely a mask for the economic activities of the men in their households, or whether women really did function in their own capacities and in their own financial interests.

The evidence of the papyri I have examined indicates that women's possessions were indeed their own, and that the basis of their economic position was their right to share in the property of their families through dowry or inheritance. This is suggested in the first instance by two aspects of the statistics derived from the Socnopaïou Nesos documents. First of all, among sales of houses, women appear more frequently as sellers (19 times) than as buyers (11 times), whereas men appear more frequently as buyers (17 times) than as sellers (13 times). I think this disparity indicates that women operate more conservatively on the property market than men; they may sell property which they have inherited,²⁴ but they are less likely than men to invest in new properties.²⁵

A further indication of a more restricted level of economic activity on the part of women than among men is that women occur much less frequently in documents involving capital than in those involving real estate. Among loan contracts we find 24 women (9 as lenders, 15 as borrowers), as contrasted with 103 men (34 lenders, 69 borrowers).²⁶

(p. 106), *BGU* II 467, *P. Grenf.* II 59, *BGU* II 630, *SPP* XX 30. There is in addition a female slave owner in *P. Berol. inv.* 6988 (ed. Sijpesteijn/Poethke) of A.D. 139.

²⁴ As, e.g., *SB* V 8950, *P. Ryl.* II 162, *SB* X 10571, where the properties involved are specifically stated to have been inherited from a mother or father, or *P. Ryl.* II 160a, *BGU* I 184, *BGU* XI 2095, where a group of siblings sells a jointly-owned property, therefore presumably one inherited from a parent.

²⁵ Although see, e.g., *BGU* III 854 and *BGU* I 350 where the woman buyer also owns an adjoining property.

²⁶ The following is a list of loans and loan repayments from Socnopaïou Nesos from the Roman period. Documents involving women lenders are indicated +, women borrowers are indicated *. It should be noted that the large figures for men derive from documents where a number of men borrow or lend collectively, as, e.g., *P. Lond.* II 336 (p. 221) where five priests from Socnopaïou Nesos take a loan together. The fact that women rarely act collectively whereas men do quite often is another indication that women are

Furthermore, almost half of the documents in which women borrow money have the loan secured against a real estate holding, whereas this form of security is rarely offered by male borrowers.²⁷ This might indicate on the one hand that men were regarded as better credit risks than women, but on the other hand it also points to the extent to which women's economic role is directly linked to their ownership of real estate, which is the property they derive from their families through dowry or inheritance.

If men tended to transfer their holdings to the names of their wives or other female dependents, we might expect to find much higher percentages of women property owners, particularly among those buying houses and lending money, than we do. As it is, the numbers which we do find are large enough to point to the fact that women really did own a significant amount of property, but not large enough to cause us to suspect any falsification of the identity of the real owner.²⁸

Additional confirmation of the legitimacy and vitality of female property ownership is supplied by an examination of the marital status of the various women property owners at Socnopaiou Nesos; the identity of the *κύριος* through whom a woman acts when she buys or sells property provides an indication of her marital status, since a married woman will normally have her husband act for her in legal transactions, whereas a young woman not yet married may have her father or a brother, and a widow will have her son or another male relative. If women's financial position were connected with marital status, then we should expect to find that women's economic activities varied in relation to their marital status. This does not seem to be the case. If we look, for example, at the

primarily dealing with their own inheritances, whereas men are perhaps involved in more impersonal business dealings. *SB* I 5244, *BGU* I 189, *SB* I 5243, *SB* I 5245, *BGU* III 911*, *P. Lond.* II 277 (p. 217)*, *P. Ryl.* II 326 descr., *PSI* IX 1051*, *P. Ryl.* II 160c+*, *BGU* III 713, *SB* I 5110, *BGU* XI 2044*, *SB* XII 10804*, *P. Amh.* II 110, *SB* V 8952*, *BGU* XIII 2330, *BGU* XIII 2331, *P. Ryl.* II 327 descr., *SPP* XXII 46+, *P. Amh.* II 112, *P. Amh.* II 111, *P. Monac. gr. inv.* 32+*, *P. Stras.* IV 293+, *SPP* XXII 83, *P. Ryl.* II 174a, *SPP* XXII 78, *P. Vindob. Worp* 10+, *SPP* XXII 36*, *P. Lond.* II 308 (p. 218), *BGU* II 445+*, *P. Lond.* II 311 (p. 219)+*, *CPR* I 15, *P. Stras.* V 383+*, *BGU* I 290, *BGU* XI 2043/*SPP* XXII 45*, *P. Amh.* II 113*, *CPR* VI 3+*, *CPR* I 16, *CPR* I 14, *P. Lond.* II 322 (p. 209), *P. Lond.* II 336 (p. 221), *SB* VI 9369+, *P. Flor.* I 42, *SPP* XXII 69*, *SPP* XXII 76, *BGU* III 853, *P. Ryl.* II 334 descr., *SPP* XXII 41, *SB* I 7, *P. Ryl.* II 337 descr.

²⁷ Loans secured against property where the borrower is a woman: *P. Ryl.* II 160c, *SB* V 8952, *SPP* XXII 36, *BGU* II 445, *P. Lond.* II 311 (p. 219), *BGU* XI 2043. Those where a man is the borrower are *P. Vindob. Worp* 20, *P. Lond.* II 277 (p. 217), *SPP* XXII 41.

²⁸ On this point see Christine Doudna, *New York Times Magazine* Section (November 30, 1980) 55; in discussing the question of whether women in the modern corporate world use their sexuality to advance themselves professionally, she quotes Susan Meyer, executive director of Working Women's Institute, who comments that if you look at the small number of women executives, you have to conclude that "either it's not working or she's not doing it."

eleven property sales in which women are the sole buyers (that is, not acting jointly with either male siblings or husbands), we find a range of ages and statuses: in *SB* I 5117 the woman is probably not married, in *SB* I 5108, *P. Ryl.* II 160b, *P. Ryl.* II 160c, *P. Vindob. Tandem* 24, *P. Vindob. Tandem* 26, *BGU* III 854 the buyer is most probably a widow, whereas in *BGU* I 350, *P. Ryl.* II 162, *P. Lond.* II 334 (p. 211), *P. Amh.* II 97 she is a married woman; in *BGU* I 854 and *BGU* I 350 the woman also owns an adjoining property. This shows quite clearly that women were capable of independent economic activity regardless of marital status.²⁹

The conclusion which emerges from my analysis of this one particular village, namely that women appear to have owned, in their own right, a considerable amount of the real estate in Roman Egypt, is clarified by the information on inheritance practices which is provided by wills.³⁰ We have a large number of wills from Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Egypt—about 170 in all at this point—and an examination of the provisions in these serves to clarify the extent to which women benefited from their rights of inheritance.³¹ For the present purpose I will limit

²⁹ I do not share Pomeroy's view, (above, note 2) 315f., that a woman's economic independence is seriously compromised by her necessity to transact business through a *κύριος*. I take as the significant index of independence the clear identification of the woman herself as the owner of the property. On this point see Préaux (above, note 3) 141ff., esp. 143: "Si l'on fait abstraction de la présence du *κύριος*, on peut dire que la femme grecque, comme la femme égyptienne, a une capacité juridique très étendue." A good discussion of the economic authority of the *κύριος* is given by Schaps (above, note 11) ch. 4.

³⁰ Although it is true that women derived some immovable property from dowries as well as from wills, dowry documents do not afford a ground for comparison between the property acquired by men and that acquired by women in a single division, and thus they cannot be used to assess the relative economic positions of men and women with respect to family property. In any case, it seems clear from the evidence that women received far less immovable property from dowries than from wills: see O. Montevecchi, "Ricerche di sociologia nei documenti dell'Egitto greco-romano. II. I contratti di matrimonio e gli atti di divorzio." *Aegyptus* 16 (1936) 3–83, esp. 49f. Among 57 contracts of marriage of the Roman period listed on pp. 4–6, only nine contain a gift of real property as part of the dowry.

³¹ The *locus classicus* on the subject of wills in Greco-Roman Egypt remains O. Montevecchi, "Ricerche di sociologia nei documenti dell'Egitto greco-romano. I. I testamenti," *Aegyptus* 15 (1935) 67–121. For the present purposes the technical distinctions between a will and a *donatio mortis causa* will not be taken into account, and I use the general term "will" to include the *donationes mortis causa*. For the basic literature on the latter, see, in addition to Montevecchi, H. Kreller, *Erbrechtliche Untersuchungen auf Grund der graeco-ägyptischen Papyrusurkunden* (Leipzig and Berlin 1919) 215–23, R. Taubenschlag (above, note 6) 204–7, E. M. Husselman, "Donationes Mortis Causa from Tebtunis," *TAPA* 88 (1957) 135–54.

The following is a list of wills and *donationes mortis causa* (abbreviated here as *dmc*) published since the appearance of Montevecchi's article. Those where the testator is a woman are marked +. *SB* X 10282 (176–70 B.C.), *PSI Omaggio* 5 (I B.C.–A.D. I), *P. Alex. inv.* 352 (Roman), *P. Vindob. Tandem* 27 (*dmc*, I), *P. Fouad* I 33 (*dmc*, I)+, *P. Mich.* V

my discussion to those papyri which date from the Roman period, since this is the period encompassed by the documents from Socnopaiou Nesos which formed my point of departure. However, I must point out that wills of all periods contain ample evidence of the fact that women could and did inherit movable and immovable property of all sorts from the early Ptolemaic period through the Byzantine era.³² Although legal terminology and details of distribution may vary from one era to another, it is perfectly clear that the female capacity to own property was not confined to the Roman period, nor was it really more characteristic of one ethnic group than of another, since we find property (including land) owned by Greek, Roman, and Egyptian women alike.

When one first looks at the wills of the Roman period, one notes in the first instance that among the extant wills, 63 are those of men and 33 those of women; thus the proportion of women transmitting property among the extant documents, which is about one-third of the total, is in itself roughly comparable to the proportion of female property owners we were able to identify at Socnopaiou Nesos, and only somewhat smaller than the proportion of female landowners in the Karanis tax rolls.

Among the 63 documents where the testator is male, the variations are numerous, but there seem to be two common methods of property distribution, one in which the property is divided equally among all the children, whether they are male or female (as, e.g., *P. Oxy.* III 651, *P. Oxy.* VII 1034, *P. Hamb.* I 73, *SB* I 4322, *CPR* VI 1), and another where the eldest son gets a double portion and the rest is divided among the remaining siblings (as in, e.g., *BGU* I 86 = *MChr* 306, *P. Mich.*

321 (division of property, A.D. 42), *P. Mich.* VII 437 (II), *SB* VIII 9642 # 6 (*dmc*, II), *P. Wisc.* I 13 (II)+, *P. Mich.* IX 549 (A.D. 117/18)+, *SB* VIII 9642 #1 (*dmc*, A.D. 104)+, *P. Mil. Vogl.* IV 209 (A.D. 108), *SB* VIII 9642 #4 (*dmc*, Hadrian), *SB* VIII 9642 #2 (*dmc*, A.D. 123), *SB* X 10572 (*dmc*, A.D. 126), *SB* VIII 9642 #3 (*dmc*, A.D. 125), *SB* X 10756 (A.D. 133)+, *P. Oxy.* XXXVIII 2857 (A.D. 134), *SB* VI 9377 (*dmc*, A.D. 138), *SB* VIII 9642 #5 (*dmc*, Antoninus), *P. Mich.* VIII 439 (A.D. 147), *P. Stras.* IV 546 (ca. A.D. 155), *P. Mert.* III 105 (*dmc*, A.D. 164)+, *SB* V 7816 (A.D. 166/7)+, *P. Lund.* VI 6 (A.D. 190/1)+, *P. Mich.* VII 453 (III), *P. Oxy.* XXVII 2474 (III), *P. Stras.* IV 277 (III), *P. Lugd. Bat.* XIII 14 (III), *P. Coll. Youtie* I 64 (A.D. 211), *P. Oxy.* XXII 2348 (A.D. 224), *P. Princ.* II 38 (A.D. 264)+, *SB* V 8265 (IV), *P. Athen.* 31 (V/VI), *P. Oxy.* XX 2283 (A.D. 586), *P. Michael.* 53 (VI), *P. Ness.* 115 (VI), *P. Ness.* 116 (VI), *P. Ness.* 117 (VI/VII).

³² The following are wills of the Ptolemaic period in which property (including land, where specified) was left to women: *P. Petr.* III 1, col. ii (238 B.C.; plots of land are left to two different women), *P. Petr.* III 7 (238/7 B.C.), *P. Petr.* III 6a.16–47 (237 B.C.), *P. Petr.* III 2 (237 B.C.), *P. Petr.* III 13a.1–19 (235 B.C.), *P. Petr.* III 13a.20–28 (235 B.C.), *P. Petr.* I 17.2 + *P. Petr.* III 17b (236/5 B.C.), *P. Petr.* I 18.1, left col. (235/4 B.C.), *P. Petr.* I 19.15–31 (226/5 B.C.), *P. Petr.* III 19c + d (225 B.C.), *BGU* III 993 (*dmc*, 127 B.C.), *P. Cair.* 10388 = *APF* I p. 62 (123 B.C.; 12 arouras of land). In most of these wills the testator simply leaves all of his property (τὰ ὑπάρχοντά μοι πάντα) to his wife.

V 321, *P. Oxy.* VI 907 = *MChr* 307).³³ The practice of giving sons a larger share of the estate than daughters is not limited to male testators; among wills of women we find examples of the same procedure (e.g., *SB* VIII 9642 #3, *SB* X 10756, *P. Oxy.* IV 837 descr., *P. Oxy.* I 104).

The wife is not usually bequeathed any of her husband's real property,³⁴ but provisions are often made for her use of the property and for her maintenance by the heirs so long as she remains alive and unmarried (e.g., *BGU* I 86 = *MChr* 306, *P. Oxy.* III 494 = *MChr* 305, *CPR* VI 1, *P. Oxy.* I 105 = *MChr* 303). Since wills provide information only about the possessions of the testator himself, we cannot know what property the wife may have had in her own name in each of these instances, but it seems likely that the husband did not ordinarily bequeath much property to his wife because she had her own property given in dowry or received through inheritance from her family. A husband's primary responsibility would have been for the maintenance of his wife during her lifetime, and this he provided in the terms of his will.

Although there are many variations among the individual papyri, there seem to be two basic principles governing the distribution of property in wills, and both of these have implications for the amount of property which passes into the hands of women. The first principle is that every member of the immediate family should be provided for as his or her circumstances require.³⁵ For this reason a wife does not need to be provided for if she has an estate of her own, whereas a widowed daughter with dependent children might need a generous provision (as is the case, one suspects, in *P. Vindob. Tandem* 27). Although there is certainly a tendency to give real estate to male children and household furnishings to females, this is by no means always the case. Of the 63 wills of men, there are only five (*SB* VIII 9642 #5, *SB* X 10572, *SB* VI 9377, *P. Oxy.* VI 907 = *MChr* 317, *P. Mich.* V 321) where the female child gets a portion which is inferior to that of the male child, and there are at least nine where the female child (as in *P. Oxy.* VI 1034, *P. Vindob. Tandem* 27, *BGU* III 896, *P. Oxy.* I 105 = *MChr* 303, *P. Berol.* 7124) or in a few cases the wife (*P. Oxy.* III 493 = *MChr* 307, *P. Oxy.* III 489, *P. Gron.* 10, *P. Oxy.* XXXVIII 2857) gets the bulk of the estate. In the remaining documents (where the text is sufficiently preserved to provide such information) either the children are male, or the gender of the children is unspecified in the will.

³³ On this point see Montevecchi (above, note 31) 102ff.

³⁴ Although there are a few instances where the wife is the primary heir (see below, note 35).

³⁵ An interesting example (though perhaps it is to the contrary) is found in the will of one Aurelia Serenilla, *P. Princ.* II 38, where her two sons are specifically disinherited, and the estate is left to the testator's mother.

In sum, then, though it might have been a general practice that, all other things being equal, the eldest son got the largest portion of the estate, and that if every family consisted of two sons and a daughter, you might find that women would inherit much less property than men, the fact is that not every family had male children,³⁶ and the second general principle which seems to have governed distribution of property was that the property should remain within the immediate family if possible. So if there were no male children in a family, the females inherited the property, and this must have happened in a considerable number of cases. Furthermore, since women retained control over their own property and disposed of it themselves, as can be seen from the fact that over one-third of the wills of the Roman period are those of women, their identities as property owners remained intact through the transmission of their own properties.

The application of these two general principles, that every member of the family be appropriately provided for, and that property be retained within the immediate family, would have resulted in women coming into possession of a significant amount of property in Roman Egypt. However, since they were given property—and particularly real estate—only secondarily in many cases (that is, all other things being equal, the male child was somewhat more likely to inherit real estate than the female), their capacity to inherit landed property was, in actual practice, not entirely equal to that of men. This may be why we find that women seem to have owned only a third of the real estate in a village like Socnopaïou Nesos. So when we reconsider our statistics from this one small village in the light of the broader spectrum of evidence provided by wills from the whole country, we obtain confirmation for the hypothesis that the economic role of women in Roman Egypt was indeed genuine, as far as it went, but that it derived quite directly from the female right to share in the property of her own family by dowry and inheritance, and probably did not extend much beyond that.

³⁶ On this point see E. A. Wrigley, "Fertility Strategy for the Individual and the Group," in *Historical Studies of Changing Fertility*, ed. C. Tilly (Princeton 1978) 137ff., where it is convincingly demonstrated (Table 3-1) that in a society with a more or less stationary population (which is generally the case with preindustrialized societies like Roman Egypt), about 20% of families will have no heir at all, 20% will have at least one female but no male heir, and 60% will have at least one male heir.