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Not at a Loss for Words: The Economic Power of Literate Women in Late Antique Egypt*

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A literate woman was a rarity in the Graeco-Roman world. Only among the upper socio-economic classes could one expect to find any women who could read or write.[1] Ancient men, themselves mostly illiterate, were clearly unsettled by the idea of a literate woman. It is apparent, in a number of sarcastic quips preserved from antiquity, that men understood the power that literacy might bestow on a woman. A fragment of a comic play, for example, reads "The man who teaches a woman letters does not do well; he gives more poison to a frightening asp."[2] In Roman Egypt, schoolboys were taught to write by copying the phrase "Seeing a women being taught letters, he said 'What a sword she is sharpening.'"[3]

Graeco-Roman Egypt provides more information concerning women's literacy than the rest of the ancient world because of the large number of everyday documents, recorded on papyrus, which survived from it.[4] Nevertheless the papyri, plentiful as they are, are still an inadequate source of evidence for women's literacy because they are the products of a world to which women were not privy in large numbers. Women do not appear as frequently in the papyri as men, and when they do, it is very often in a

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[1]On women's literacy in general in the ancient world, see Cole and Harris 22–24 *et passim*.

[2]γυναῖχ' ὁ διδάσκων γράμματ' οὐ καλῶς ποεῖ / ἀσπίδι δὲ φοβερᾷ προσπορίζει φάρμακον. [Men.] 702 Kock.

[3]Ἰδὼν γυναῖκα διδασκομένην γράμματα εἶπεν· οἷον ξίφος ἀκονᾶται. *PBouriant.* 1.153 (fourth century C.E.).

[4]Literacy in Roman Egypt, of course, refers to the ability to read and write Greek. See Youtie 1975a.

secondary role; women who appear in the documents are often from a select group, the higher socio-economic classes.[5] Women, of course, sent and received letters, but this proves nothing about their literacy, since they could and did employ scribes and readers. Furthermore, since women rarely acted on their own in legal, official, or commercial situations (i.e., the transactions that prompted the creation of papyri), we have less opportunity to see whether they are literate.[6]

Socio-economic forces can also distort our notions of women's literacy. It appears, for example, that there is an increase in the ratio of illiterate women to illiterate men in the papyri during the first and second centuries C.E. Pomeroy argues that this situation is a by-product of the Roman tolerance of woman landholders: it is not that more women are illiterate than at earlier periods, but that more illiterate (normally) women are landholders and accordingly produce documents.[7] Although the papyri can therefore give false impressions, one cannot argue that there was widespread literacy among women, because that is certainly not the case. Still, one must keep in mind that the sources are not telling us all we need to know about this society that excluded women from much of the public sphere.[8]

Rates of female literacy in Egypt seem to have changed over time. In the Ptolemaic era, the education of girls was common, at least in literate Alexandria, where, of course, a number of female authors were well known, who could serve as role models. With the coming of the Romans, however, female literacy rates dropped off, only to increase again in the second and third centuries C.E. Certainly there are a number of factors at play here, including where a woman lived and what social class she belonged to,[9] not to mention other cultural changes in the Empire itself, but—since we are dealing with an imperfect body of data—what appear as changes in the literacy rates of women over time may just be distortions of the facts.

[5]Pomeroy 1988: 720.

[6]Under the *Lex Julia* of Augustus, women could act without a guardian after they had produced a certain number of children (three in the original law; later fewer children may have been required). One hundred and twenty-three legally independent women are known from Roman Egypt. They are listed in Sheridan.

[7]Pomeroy 1988: 718.

[8]As Bowman and Woolf so eloquently point out: "Power exercised *over* texts allows power to be exercised *through* texts" (1994b: 8).

[9]Pomeroy 1988: 717–19.

The actual number of literate women known to us from Graeco-Roman Egypt is extremely small. There is no evidence, direct or indirect, for a single literate woman in the countryside, and only a handful from the cities are known. A comprehensive statistical study of women's literacy would yield the same results that a quick impression does: the level of female literacy in Graeco-Roman Egypt was negligible.[10]

The literate women we do know about are statistical abnormalities; that is, they cannot be used in a general argument concerning female literacy rates, since they are such a deviation from the norm. Yet these are the only literate women in antiquity whose lives we can delve into in any depth, because we have actual contact with them through their documents. For this reason, these women from late antique Egypt should be of great interest to scholars of women in the ancient world; and it is that group of scholars to whom this paper is particularly addressed.[11] The women discussed here are not legendary literates like Sappho or Hypatia, but ordinary people whose unself-conscious documents tell us of their histories. From their papyri, we can learn what circumstances in their lives led them to literacy, and what significance literacy had in their lives. Most importantly, we can explore whether these ancient women understood, like their male counterparts, that the ability to read and write endows its holder with power.

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This paper will center on one particular literate woman, Aurelia Charite. An extensive papyrus dossier[12] provides us with a great deal of biographical information about her, much of which is relevant to her literacy. As Worp notes in the introduction to that dossier, Charite prospered in the middle Egyptian city of Hermopolis between 320 and 350 C.E. She is mentioned in forty-two documents, five of which are written wholly or partially by Charite herself, and

[10]That literacy rates were small but the percentages themselves were not very significant is true of Egypt in general. See Bowman 1991: 122 and 1994a: 111–12, passages in which he argues that the percentage of literates is not so important as the extent to which the society functioned in a literate mode without many literates.

[11]As I am hoping to reach a non-papyrological audience with this essay, I have provided a fairly extensive introduction to literacy and life in late antique Egypt, including information which, while well known to papyrologists, may not be as familiar to other classicists.

[12]Worp 1980. There is one further document ("Anhang B") concerning Charite in Worp 1991. The term "archive" is now reserved for papers which were gathered together in antiquity. This is not the case with either of the collections cited in this note.

two of which specifically mention her literacy. Hers is one of the few woman's signatures to survive from Graeco-Roman antiquity.

Hermopolis, like other nome capitals, was overlaid with a thick veneer of Hellenism. Its streets were lined with Greek-style buildings interspersed with those in an Egyptian style, and its governmental forms mimicked those of earlier Greek cities. The ruling class of the city, members of the *boule*, also bear many marks of Hellenization, not least of which are their names, many of which are Greek. Because we view this group through their documents in Greek, it is impossible to conclude anything about the actual ethnicity of individuals; many with Greek names may have been Egyptian in origin.

Whether or not it contained an ethnic mix, the bouleutic class was small and exclusive. The *boule* itself comprised approximately one hundred men;[13] the entire class was composed of those men and their female relatives and children. Since the group was heavily intermarried, the total number of bouleutic citizens probably numbered no more than five hundred.[14]

Members of the bouleutic class were the movers and shakers of the city and the entire nome. It was the councillors who held all the important governmental positions in the city. The influence of the bouleutic class was also based on its wealth, i.e., its landholding. Among the councillors would be a small number of the super-rich; the rest, we can assume, were comfortable enough to live on the income from their holdings.[15] Poorer city dwellers and residents of the rest of the nome regularly came into contact with members of the bouleutic class, since councillors were both tax-collectors and landlords; they also owned many of the businesses in the city.

Among groups of landholders it would not be unusual to find a woman. In Roman Egypt, there were no prohibitions against women holding land, and they regularly acquired it through inheritance or as part of their dowry. The overall percentage of landholders who were women is impossible to determine with the information available to us, but approximately thirty-three percent of land at

[13]Bowman 1971: 22.

[14]I have estimated elsewhere (Sheridan 129) that the maximum size of the female bouleutic population in a city would be one thousand, allowing ten female relatives per bouleutic man. But there probably were fewer, perhaps only a few hundred at any given time, since the women's family roles would overlap, i.e., one man's wife was another's daughter and still another's sister.

[15]Rowlandson 115–22, who notes, however, that a small number of members of this class lacked the financial resources needed to bear its burdens, such as liturgies.

Soknopaiou Nesos was owned by women; forty percent of landholders in a tax roll from Karanis were women,[16] and in a Hermopolite land list fourteen percent of the land was held by women.[17] Thus women had some access to power through wealth; their independent landholding would add to that of their husbands, augmenting the status of the family, and they themselves could act as landlords.[18] But it is rare to see a woman managing her own properties.[19]

Aurelia Charite was born into the affluent, landed upper class of Hermopolis at the end of the third century C.E. Her father, Amazonios, who lived from around 275 until the mid-310s C.E., was a councillor and gymnasiarch. Her mother Demetria, also known as Ammonia, was the daughter of Polydeukes, also a city councillor.[20] Demetria herself was literate.[21]

By the year 314 C.E., Charite had married Aurelios Adelphios, son of Adelphios.[22] Adelphios, also known as Dionysodoros, held the usual offices of a wealthy city dweller—councillor, prytanis (proedros), gymnasiarch, strategos, and logistes.[23] Charite and Adelphios had at least one child who can be identified in the papyri. Their son, Aurelios Asklepiades, was *praepositus pagi* of the fifteenth pagus of the Hermopolite Nome in 340 C.E.; he was also a magistrate and councillor at Hermopolis. Charite may have had other children, but they are not documented.[24] We can assume that when Charite disappears from the papyri, around 350 C.E., she has died. She outlived her husband by about thirty years.

The remainder of Charite's biography concerns her fiscal status and business dealings. Charite was quite wealthy. She belonged to an elite group of metropolitan landholders who not only owned urban properties but also had land in the countryside. Charite's mean property holding in the countryside was

[16]Hobson 315.

[17]Bagnall 1992: 138.

[18]Rowlandson 113–15 and 132–35 discusses two very wealthy Oxyrhynchite landholding women.

[19]Rowlandson 284.

[20]Worp 1980: 5–7.

[21]She writes on behalf of her daughter in *PCharite* 38.

[22]Adelphios also left a substantial group of papers, published in Worp 1991. That Adelphios was Charite's husband is virtually, but not absolutely, certain.

[23]Worp 1991: 8-10.

[24]Worp 1980: 9 points out that Charite is likely to have had a son named Amazonios after her father. Diokles, son of Adelphios, was at one time believed to be Charite's son, but that identification has now been called into question. The fact that Charite had the *ius liberorum*, however, does not necessarily mean that she had three or more children.

410 or more arouras.[25] The documents do not quantify the property she must have owned in the city of Hermopolis, where she lived.

Although we do not know her absolute wealth, we are able to compare Charite's landholdings with those of her neighbors in the so-called Hermopolite landlists of the mid-fourth century C.E., just before her death. In the landlists,[26] which record the country holdings of residents of the city, Charite is said to own 376 arouras, less than her personal average; but by this late point in her life she may have already distributed some property to her children or grandchildren. Even with 376 arouras, though, she is among the top six percent of landholders in the city, and well above the mean holding of only sixty-three arouras.[27]

The papers in Charite's dossier are those we would expect of a landholder. Twenty-one documents record the payment of taxes on her property. These are typical land taxes for the period, which collect items needed by the army, such as wine, fodder, and barley. Eight documents record Charite's leasing property to others. She let farm land, fodder land, and orchards. A number of her tenants appear repeatedly in the documents and must have had long-term business relationships with her.[28] According to a few documents she also lent money.

Six of Charite's forty-two documents are either written by her or mention her literacy. The number itself is not significant; of the forty-two documents in the dossier, twenty-four are addressed to Charite, eight are lists, one is a letter written by Demetria, Charite's mother, and two are of questionable content. There is only one other document in the dossier that could have been written by Charite (or at least mentioned her literacy) but was not composed by her.[29]

Of the just mentioned "literacy" documents, the only one that contains a definitive date is a receipt for a paid lease, dated 348 C.E. (*PCharite* 8). In the opening lines of the receipt, Charite is referred to as

[25] Worp 1980: 11.

[26] *PCharite* 9 = *PHerm. Landl.* I.252–56, II.466–69.

[27] Bowman 1985: 146. There was an extremely unequal division of landholding in the Hermopolite Nome. The landlists show that ten percent of the landholders held seventy-eight percent of the land (Bagnall 1992: 142).

[28] On Charite as landlord, see Kehoe 123 n. 6.

[29] *PCharite* 34, a money loan. Although literate, like most wealthy people Charite regularly used scribes (see Bagnall 1993: 247). This document is fragmentary, so it is possible that she wrote a subscription which is now lost; she signs *PCharite* 37 without first being introduced as literate in its opening (this signature is partially lost, but the restoration is appropriate, since the first four letters of her name, written in her hand, are visible).

Αὐρηλία Χαρίτη Ἀμαζονίου ἀπὸ
Ἑρμοῦ πόλεως τῆς λαμπροτάτης
εἰδυεῖα γράμματα χωρὶς κυρίου χρηματίζουσα
δικαίῳ τέκνων.

Aurelia Charite, daughter of Amazonios, from splendid Hermopolis, a knower of letters, acting without a guardian and with the *ius liberorum*.

The body of the receipt is written by a scribe, but Charite wrote the subscription:

Αὐρηλία Χαρίτη πεπλή-
ρωμαι ὡς πρόκειται.

I, Aurelia Charite, was paid in full as set forth above.

Charite is again described as a "knower of letters" (εἰδυεῖα γράμματα) in a money loan dated either 331/2 or 346/7 (*PCharite* 33).[30]

Three additional documents are written either wholly or partially in Charite's hand. These include a four-line order to pay for the value of green fodder written entirely by Charite (*PCharite* 27), a list of deliveries dated circa 322 (*PCharite* 36), and a small two-word fragment that includes her name (*PCharite* 41).[31] Charite also signed an acknowledgment of a receipt (*PCharite* 37).

Charite's claims to literacy appear genuine. Her hand is neat but not elegant, the hand of a literate, not a semi-literate, person. Charite's letters are written with definitive strokes, indicating that she wrote somewhat regularly and without hesitation.[32] She was practiced enough in writing to ligature some letter combinations, such as alpha-iota and epsilon-iota.[33] She uses abbreviations and symbols, which again displays her comfort with writing.[34]

[30]The word εἰδυεῖα is restored in a lacuna, based on the formula in *PCharite* 8.

[31]Worp (1980: 103) identified this fragment as probably coming from the hand of Charite; my examination of the photograph concurs with this identification.

[32]Bagnall 1993: 247.

[33]Both alpha-iota and epsilon-iota are ligatured in the word χαίρειν in *PCharite* 27.2; the epsilon-iota combination is ligatured in ...μονειων in *PCharite* 41.2.

[34]Αυ for Αὐρηλία in *PCharite* 8.24; ιδικ (*sic*) for ἰνδικτίωνος in *PCharite* 27.3; κν for κνίδιον/α in *PCharite* 36.1, 2, 3, 6, 7. *PCharite* 27.3 preserves the symbol for τάλαντα; the symbol for γίνεται must have preceded it but is lost in a lacuna.

Yet she was not the greatest speller, and her documents show some fairly typical misspellings: she regularly confused ει and ι, for example.[35]

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We can only conjecture why Charite, or any other literate woman, was taught to write. Charite's mother Demetria was literate and may well have been her daughter's teacher since their hands are strikingly similar.[36] The fact that the family was wealthy may have allowed them the luxury of educating their daughter. If economics alone affected literacy, however, we might expect to encounter many more rich, literate women in the papyri. But this is not the case.

We, of course, know that Charite was literate because she identifies herself as such. Why is Charite's ability to read and write specified? A look at other literate women gives us a clue. All the women, who, like Charite, are described as εἰδυεῖα γράμματα, are parties to contracts, documents which would require that the literacy of the parties be specified.[37] Six such women, in addition to Charite, are known to us. Their names, and facts about their personal circumstances, follow.

In a document dated 16 January 250 C.E. (*PVind. Bosw.* 6), the four children of Hermes, alias Maximus, are parties in a lease of land. Hermes, the father, was a councillor and gymnasiarch of Hermopolis. The agreement is entered into by his two sons, Maximus and Theon, and his two daughters, Tinoutis and Artemidora. Tinoutis and Artemidora are described in the text as being χωρὶς κυρίου χρηματιζούσαις κατὰ τὰ Ῥωμαίων ἔθη τέκνων δικαίῳ εἰδυίαις γράμματα, "without a guardian and possessing the *ius liberorum* according to the custom of the Romans, knowers of letters...." Both women have living husbands who are councillors of Hermopolis.

A text from 256 C.E. describes another literate woman (*PLips.* 3 = *MChr.* 172). Aurelia Artemidora, daughter of Polydeukes (a *bouleutes*), is described, in an agreement about a house, as both literate and having the *ius liberorum*. Artemidora, also from Hermopolis, acts on her own but is accompanied by her husband, Aurelios Kopreas.

[35]There are other errors in *PCharite* 8, 27, and 36.

[36]Worp 1980: 2.

[37]A woman's literacy could become the basis of a legal dispute. In *POxy.* XVII.2111 (c. 135 C.E.), a fragmentary judicial proceeding appears to include a case where a woman's claim of illiteracy is being contested.

A text dated to the reign of Claudius II (268–70 C.E.) mentions another "knower of letters," Koprilla, daughter of Nikon, aged fifty-one. The document (*StudPap.* XX.71) that includes her name is fragmentary, but clearly is financial in nature. Koprilla lived in Hermopolis.

Aurelia Eus, daughter of Pelaios, a Hermopolite councillor, is party to a deed of indemnity dated 26 August 272 C.E. (*PStras.* 280 = *MChr.* 94). Two men are the other parties to the contract; their relation to Eus is unknown. At the beginning of the document, Eus is represented as a "knower of letters," and she signs the contract at its conclusion. But the editor observes (note to line 23ff.) that Eus' signature shows that she is "pratiquement analphabète."

Aurelia Isidora, wife and daughter of councillors of Hermopolis, entered into a property division with her brothers in July 289 C.E. In the relevant document (*PStras.* 555), she is described as a "knower of letters, acting without a guardian according to the law of the *ius liberorum*...."

We know of the existence of these "knowers of letters" because they happen to be parties to contracts.[38] Interestingly, though, within this group there are a number of shared characteristics. First, all are of the bouleutic class, with the possible exception of Koprilla, whose documentation is too fragmentary to enable us to tell. This indicates that all had substantial family wealth. Second, all lived in Hermopolis. While it is true that Hermopolis is particularly well-represented in the extant papyri, this appears to be more than a coincidence. Third, these literate Hermopolite women all lived within three-quarters of a century of each other, and some of them were certainly contemporaries. Aurelia Isidora, for example, could assuredly have been a contemporary of Charite's

[38]Other literate women are known from the papyri. There are two Oxyrhynchite women, Tabesammon, daughter of Ammonios (in *POxy.* I.56, from 211 C.E.) and Aurelia Claudia, daughter of Sarapion (in *POxy.* XII.1463, from 215 C.E.) who sign their own documents; interestingly, Claudia's husband requires a scribe to sign the same document. But neither of these women is described in the documents as literate (and the descriptions are not lost, because the texts are complete); we have only their signatures to attest to their ability to write. There are also a few women who were possibly literate. *POxy.* IX.1199 (third century C.E.) is written in the first person by Aurelia Julia Harpocratiaena, daughter of Theon. Her literacy cannot be determined, though, because she is not described as literate, and the part of the document which would have mentioned a scribe who wrote the document, if one existed, is lost. An even more dubious case is that of Aurelia Tapsais, daughter of Ilaammon (*PSI* VIII.951, c. 388 C.E.). P.J. Sijpesteijn (in *PMich.* XV: 158ff.) restored her document to make her a "knower of letters," but the text could also be restored to read exactly the opposite.

grandmother. Finally, most of these women act without guardians. This is not documented for Koprilla or Eus, but they too may have been legally independent.

The coincidence of these women's social, economic, temporal, and geographical proximity brings us back to the question of why women might be literate. Given that practically all women were illiterate, there was no social stigma attached to a woman who used a scribe to sign her documents. Conversely, there is also no reason to think that any woman would have impressed members of Hermopolitan high society with her ability to read and write. Was there a reason for a woman to learn to read and write?

The papers of a contemporary Oxyrhynchite woman, Aurelia Thaïsous alias Lolliane, may provide some insight. In 263 C.E., Lolliane wrote a petition to the praefect requesting that she be granted exemption from guardianship according to the rights of the Lex Julia (*POxy.* XII.1467.2–21):

[...νόμοι]
[πά]λα[ι γε]γέ[ν]ηντ[ται], δ[ιαση]-
μότατε ἡγεμών, οἵτινες
ἐξουσίαν διδόασιν ταῖς γυναι-
ξὶν ταῖς τῶν τριῶν τέκνων
δικαίῳ κεκοσμημένα[ι]ς ἑαυ-
τῶν κυριεύειν καὶ χωρ[ὶς] κυ-
ρίον χρηματίζεις ἐν αἷς ποι-
οῦν[τ]αι οἰκονομίαις, πο[λλ]ῷ
δὲ πλέον ταῖς γρά[μ]ματα
ἐπισταμέναις. καὶ αὐτὴ τοί-
νυν τῷ μὲν κόσμῳ τῆς εὐ-
παιδείας εὐτυχήσασα,
ἐνγράμματος δὲ κα[ὶ ἐ]ς τὰ
μάλιστα γράφειν εὐκόπως
δυναμένη, ὑπὸ περισσῆς
ἀσφαλείας διὰ τούτων μου
τῶ[ν] βιβλειδίων προσφω⟨νῶ⟩
τῷ σῷ μεγέθι πρὸς τὸ δύνα-
σθαι ἀνεμποδίστως ἃς ἐν-
τεῦθεν ποιοῦμαι οἰκ[ον]ομία[ς]
διαπράσσεσθαι.

...Laws have been made long ago, most eminent praefect, which give authority to women who are honored with the right of three children to be independent and to act without a guardian in whatever business they transact, especially those women who know how to write. Therefore, since I am blessed with the honor of having children, literate to a high degree, able to write easily, fully assured I appeal to your highness with

> this application that I be able without hindrance to perform all business I henceforth will transact.

The original editors of this papyrus thought it interesting that literacy might be required for the grant of the *ius liberorum*,[39] but it has long been recognized that this privilege never did require literacy.[40] Lolliane, however, is not claiming that literacy is a legal necessity for a woman to act without a guardian. She is saying that, by being able to read and write, she is particularly capable of acting on her own behalf. As Lolliane knew, a woman who could read could genuinely protect her own interests and serve as her own guardian. This seems to have worked for Lolliane; she is known from another document (*POxy.* XII.1475), dated three years later, where she is conducting business on her own. Thus we have evidence that at least one ancient woman understood the practical economic advantages of literacy.

In evaluating the value of literacy for ancient women, we can separate social from economic consequences. Clearly, there was no social stigma attached to the illiterate woman, since she represented the norm.[41] Still, there were always economic consequences attached to illiteracy.[42] Those unable to read would have to depend on others to conduct their affairs. While Harris points out that we have little direct evidence for illiterates being cheated, common sense dictates that this must have happened regularly.[43]

Consider the economic position of a woman in late Roman Egypt. Until she was declared independent through the *ius liberorum*, she had to conduct her business through a guardian. As we have seen above, acquisition of the *ius liberorum* happened infrequently. This system of guardianship, an essential thread in the social fabric, was designed to protect women, who were viewed as incapable of looking after their own interests, as was often the case. While the intent was benevolent, the outcome was often the opposite.

[39]*POxy.* XII.196, edited by Grenfell and Hunt. Youtie 1971: 166–67 (= *Scriptiunculae Posteriores* II: 616–17, henceforward *SP*) also misunderstood Lolliane's message, but he changed his view in Youtie 1975b: 221 n. 62 (= *SP* I: 199 n. 62) where he recognizes the advantages that literacy gave a woman. See also Sijpesteijn 1965 and Pomeroy 1988: 721.

[40]Sijpesteijn, in *PMich.* XV: 158 ff., lists twenty-six women known to be illiterate among one hundred and ten women with the *ius liberorum*, indicating that at least twenty-five percent of such women were unable to read and write.

[41]See above, pp. 2–3.

[42]Youtie 1975b: 205; Harris 145; Hopkins 139.

[43]Harris 35 and n. 35. See Youtie 1975b: 206 for several examples.

We have a fine example of guardianship gone awry in a contemporaneous case from the Egyptian village of Karanis involving the orphaned daughters of Kopres, Thaësion/Taësis and Kyrillous. When their father died, the girls came under the guardianship of their maternal uncle, Ammonius. Legal problems surfaced immediately and continued for many years because, it appears, Ammonius failed to protect the girls' interests. First, the girls allege that their stepmother stole sheep from their flocks; Ammonius petitioned to settle this matter (*PCair. Isid.* 62). Then Chairemon, their paternal uncle, stole some of the girls' land. This matter went unresolved until Taësis reached her majority and pressed for its return. When a magistrate ordered Chairemon to return the property, he not only ignored the mandate but allegedly sent his wife and daughter to assault Taësis (*PCair. Isid.* 63). This is hardly a situation that could be described as "domestic cooperation" or "family solidarity."[44]

Thus an illiterate woman acting with a guardian was always in danger of being cheated, either by an outsider or by the guardian himself. Even an illiterate woman who, because of the *ius liberorum*, acted on her own behalf, faced the same perils. With or without a guardian, though, a literate woman could supervise her own affairs.

Let us return to Aurelia Charite. Her case is slightly different from those of the other women, in that we know she was an active literate, writing her own documents that would be seen by others. The preceding arguments suggest that her choice of exercising her literacy was probably not social. Perhaps it was economic. Charite was very rich, had a great deal to lose, and was a widow throughout practically all her adult life.[45] By making a declaration of her literacy, Charite the business woman was empowering herself against those who might attempt to defraud her. Her identification as a "knower of letters" and her personally written documents speak volumes to those who were collecting her taxes, leasing land from her, or borrowing money from her. The message is clear: "I know what you're writing, so don't think you can get away with anything."

[44]*Contra* Youtie 1975b: 220, describing guardianship: "Illiteracy similarly promoted domestic cooperation, what we should be inclined to call family solidarity."

[45]The datable texts that mention her literacy or are written in her hand, *PCharite* 8 (348 C.E.), 27 (325–340), 33 (331/2 or 346/7), and 36 (c. 322) all postdate the death of her husband (c. 322). Perhaps Charite only began to use her literacy after Adelphios' death. Little has been written on widows in Roman Egypt, but the independence of widows in Athens is noted in Hunter, especially 298–300, 301–2; that of widows in Ptolemaic Egypt is described in Pomeroy 1997: 220–24.

Did wealthy women learn to write to protect themselves? Did they choose to lay claim to independence and an ability to protect themselves rather than take the path of most women in professing their feminine weakness?[46] Unfortunately, we do not know the detailed personal economic circumstances of these other Hermopolitans—Tinoutis, Eus, Koprilla, Isidora, and the Artemidoras. The fact that they belonged to the bouleutic class, though, indicates that they had considerable property requiring supervision. Not all the women were widows like Charite; indeed, their husbands' names appear in several of the documents. Interestingly, the men mentioned in the same documents as the literate women say nothing of their literacy. They describe themselves only in terms of family relations, titles, and place of origin. Men of the bouleutic class were expected to read and write,[47] but the designation "knower of letters" is clearly gender-specific at this period.

Not only was the tag gender-specific, but also place- and, to a lesser extent, time-specific. All the women who use it come from Hermopolis during the period from 250 through 350 C.E. Some of these women were contemporaries, Tinoutis and Artemidora with Artemidora, daughter of Polydeukes; Koprilla and Eus; Isidora and Demetria, mother of Charite, were at least alive at the same time. It certainly goes too far to assume there was some sort of underground feminist movement among the upper-class women of Hermopolis. But it is possible that some of these women knew each other and in some way communicated to each other, and to the generations of women following them, that achieving literacy was in their own interest. We also must not dismiss the possibility that, within this highest socio-economic class, the social norms may have shifted and a literate woman may have gained additional respect for that accomplishment.

It is possible that there is still another link among these women. Charite, at least, appears to have been a Christian; her identification as such is based, first, on the occurrence of the Christian word for "cemetery" in her dossier,[48] and, secondly, on the name of her husband, Adelphios, which was exclusively used by Christians.[49] Unfortunately, the religion of the other Hermopolitan women has not been established; we do not even know if Charite's mother was

[46]Rowlandson 284.
[47]Bagnall 1993: 246.
[48]See Kramer.
[49]Bagnall 1995.

Christian.[50] If all these women were members of the upper-class Christian community, which could not have been very large at this time, it would be easier to believe that the women might have known each other and have come to a collective understanding of the importance of their literacy.

Ancient men certainly understood that literacy could give a woman power that she otherwise lacked; their uneasiness with the idea of a literate woman, recorded in snide remarks about scary snakes and sharpened swords, makes this clear. The literate women of the papyri show us that women, too, understood that they were better able to take care of themselves if they knew how to read and write.

One further, more general observation can be made from this study, one that I think cannot be repeated often enough. The written documentation of Graeco-Roman Egypt, which is mostly financial and legal, may not be giving us a clear picture of the level of literacy among the less educated, disenfranchised classes. If women like Charite are identified as literate only for some specific transaction, then there may have been more literate women, especially in the bouleutic class, who knew how to write but never needed to be party to a contract.[51] There may also have been many women (and men too) who knew how to read and write, but lacked the legal knowledge to compose the types of documents we see in the papyri, or lacked a reason ever to compose them. They could, however, write or read a letter or other type of personal document; we do not know, after all, who wrote the many unsigned documents of everyday life, such as household accounts and lists. The papyri will not introduce us to these people, except indirectly. But we should keep an open mind about their possible existence.

[50]It might be tempting to ascribe Charite's literacy to her religion. Since it appears that her mother taught her to write, though, we would have to know that Christianity inspired Demetria's literacy.

[51]See Harris 252–53 for the education of women among the upper classes at Rome.

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