

Callgirls in the quarries*

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Abstract

Some examples from unpublished *ostraka* from the quarry at Umm Balad (Kaine Latomia) of private letters concerning women and higher class prostitution.

Keywords

quarries, women's letters, prostitution

Prostitution in the Roman world has long been a subject of interest, and has been studied on the basis of both written and archaeological sources. In later years a new set of sources to a new kind of prostitution has been added, namely the *ostraka* from the Eastern Desert of Egypt. In her important paper “Les femmes tournantes” Hélène Cuvigny has described how it functioned in the small *praesidia* along the desert roads, where a limited number of soldiers would hire a girl to share for a month.¹ The girl, no doubt a slave-girl, was hired from the owner by a representative of the garrison who would be responsible, as ἐπίτροπος, for her safety, and no doubt also for the accounting, i.e. how much each man would contribute and on what basis. On this latter point we know nothing. That is to say, did the individual soldiers contribute a lump sum, or did they pay according to their individual use of the girl? But the rest of the procedure is reasonably well documented. This documentation is found in the *ostraka* from Didymoi and Krokodilo, and there is further information in the as yet unpublished texts from Dios and Xeron Pelagos.

At Mons Claudianus it is quite different. In the many thousand ostraca from there, there is just one private account mentioning the sum of 1 drachma and 1 obol εἰς βινῆσαι.² This would seem quite expensive compared, if one can compare, with the basic 2 asses that we know from Pompeii, and also

* A Danish version of this paper has been published in *AIGIS* [<http://aigis.igl.ku.dk/aigis/2019,2/ABJ-Call-girl.pdf>]. Here you will find photographs of the *ostraka*.

¹ ZPE 172, 2010, 159-166.

² O.Claud. inv. no. 4110.

compared to the wages of a stonemason which were 47 drachmas a month. As far as I know there are no other detail-prices in our *ostraka*.

One may speculate about the apparent absence of prostitution from the quarries. Perhaps it is just due to the hazards of archaeology, or perhaps the stonemasons were too tired in the evening.

But then there is the quarry of Domitiane later known as Kaine Latomia, now Umm Balad. A discussion of some aspects of these *ostraka* may be found in the *Proceedings of the 28th Congress*, and the texts should be published in the foreseeable future.³ There are many private letters from Domitiane, and in my file I have grouped some of them under the heading “Concerning Women”. They are written either by or to women, and first of all they have in common that I am not quite certain what is going on. Who were these women, and what were they doing in the desert? They are not common prostitutes as we know them from the *praesidia* along the roads further south. They clearly have a will of their own and sometimes they are addressed as «sister» by the men, which to me would exclude that they were of servile status. In some cases there is question of a «man» who must have been a husband or a pimp or both at the same time. In one case there is a «mother», who must have been a procuress. Even the circulating girls of the road-*praesidia* sometimes write or have letters written for them, so this is not what makes these letters special. Some of these women must have been sex-workers, but it is difficult to tell on which basis they worked. Sometimes there is question of money, but just as often of sentiment, even love. Expressions of love are not totally absent from letters written in a context where we also find circulating prostitutes, like some of the letters of Julia or Tiberia found at Krokodilo, but there we know the girls and their family-relations.⁴ Here, most of the women, and the men too for that matter, are otherwise unknown, and we do not know where they were, which is a common complaint at Domitiane/Kaine Latomia. It may be a false impression, but Mons Porphyrites, which was fairly close to Domitiane/Kaine Latomia, might be the base of these women. I shall give some examples from the clearer cases. They are all from the end of the first or the middle of the second century after Christ. All are written in reasonably good handwriting, but with a rather confused syntax, which, to me, indicates that the letters were dictated. Anyone who has ever tried to write a letter for an illiterate person, will know what I mean.

Here is the first example:

inv. no. 742

Ταῶρ Κασίῳ τῶι ἀδελφῶι καὶ κρο
χαίρειν·

³ Bülow-Jacobsen 2019. The publication will be by Hélène Cuvigny, who is working on the more official texts, and myself for the private letters. We have chosen the signature O.KaLa for these *ostraka*.

⁴ E.g. O.Krok. II 202.

γινώσκειν σε θέλω {ι} ὅτι εἴαν
πέμψης μοῦ τῇ μητρὶ φάσιν ὅτι
5 “πέμψον αὐτὴν ἔξω”, καὶ ἴπη μοι
μικρὸν ὅλως ἀμμάς μου “ὑπεγε”, ε . ως
ἐκπορεύωμαι παρά σε {ν} χωρεὶς ὑ-
δάτους καὶ ὑποδήματος. σοὶ δὲ οὐ-
κ ἐλοιπήθης περὶ μου ἀλλὰ ἀπέλυσας
10 μαι ὥρας ἕκτης. διὰ τεί τὸ πρῶτον οὐ-
κ ἐποίηεις; ἀλλὰ ἄρτι κ[ο]ράσιν ἔχεις

downwards in left margin:

. . . . ὦσαι ὁ θεὸς ἰδομ
πέμψον τῇ μητρὶ
μου τὰ δέκα
15 κολούρεια

1. r. κυρίῳ | 3&4. r. ὅτι | 5. r. εἴπη | 6. r. ὅλως; ὑπαγε εὐθέως | 7. r. ἐκπορεύομαι; χωρὶς | 8. r. ὕδατος; σύ | 9. r. ἐλυπήθης περὶ | 10. r. με; τί; πρῶτον | 15. r. κολλύρια

«Taor to Cassius, her brother and master, greetings. I want you to know that if you send a message to my mother saying “send her out”, and my mother says the small word to me “go”, I set out to you at once without water and shoes. But you did not worry about me and sent me away at the sixth hour. Why did you not do it at first? But now you have a girl. [...] the god [...] Send my mother the ten *kollyria*».

The situation here is fairly clear: Cassius must be at Domitiane and Tahor probably at Porphyrites. She gives the impression of being wildly in love with Cassius and also of being furious because she has been scorned.⁵ It is not quite clear how and when this has happened, but perhaps they have been together once and he has somehow indicated that he did not want to see her again. Or did she come a second time only to be sent away? If he sent her away at the sixth hour, i.e. around noon, she may have had trouble reaching Porphyrites before nightfall. If she set out from Domitiane towards Porphyrites, taking the shortest way across the mountains, this would be a journey of some 15-16 km – I suppose that would be a walk of some 3-4 hours.

⁵ This fiction, as I am sure it is, must also be the reason why the letter was sent by the girl, not by the «mother». See also Cuvigny 2018, 214 n. 2, for more examples of the use of family terms in the world of prostitution.

Money is not mentioned, since that would have been the «mother's» department, but there must have been a proposal that made it worthwhile to send the girl. The letter makes it clear that Tahor considered herself as something different from the κοράσιον.

In the next example it becomes quite clear that money was involved and we even get to know how much:

inv. no. 85

Θινοσίρι(ς) Πτολεμέω τῷ κυρίῳ
χαίρειν.

ἔπεμσάς μοι διὰ Νικάνορος (δραχμὰς) ἡ καὶ
οὐκ ἔλαβον παρ' αὐτοῦ ἕως ἐξ{ς}έλθω

5 καὶ {μετα} μεταμε ὅτι ἀπάνθρωπος

εἶ. διὰ τοῦτο οὐκ ἤθελον ἐξελθεῖν. ἐξελ{λ}ή-
λυθα τὸ ἄλλο ἄπαξ καὶ οὐκ ἤθελες

δοῦναί μοι στατήραν ἕναν εἶνα μίνω ἔτι μί(α)ν

ἡμέραν, καὶ οὐκ ἤθελες δοῦναί μοι ὅτι οὐ φιλεῖς

10 με. εἰ γὰρ με ἐφίλεις δέδωκες ἄν μοι • διὰ τοῦ-

το οὐκ ἤθελον ἐξ{ξ}ελθεῖν ὅτι δύο μοι

ἔπεμσας. ἐὰν δὲ θέλης με ἐλθεῖν, πέμσον μοι

τὸν ἄλλον στατήραν διὰ τὸν ἄνδρα μου.

ἐὰν δὲ θέλης εἶνα ἔλθω, δὸς τὸν ἄλ-

15 λον. εἰ γὰρ εἶχον, ἔδωκα (αὐ)τῷ εἶνα

ἔλθω πρὸς σε, ἄδελφε.

space of one line

ἐρρῶσθαί σε θέλω,

ἄδελφαι.

1. κ' ὕ | 3. r. ἔπεμσας; § | 5. r. μεταμε(λεῖ) (?) | 8. r. στατήρα ἕνα ἵνα μείνω | 10. r. δέδωκας ἄν μοι | 11. r. δύο | 12. r. ἔπεμσας; πέμσον | 13. r. στατήρα | 14. & 15. r. ἵνα | 15. r. ἔδωκα ἄν αὐτῷ | 18. r. ἄδελφε

«Thinosiris to Ptolemaios, her master, greetings. Through Nikanor you sent me 8 drachmas, and I did not take them from him until I leave(?) I am sorry you are so ungenerous. That is why I did not want to come. I came once, another time, and you would not give me one stater in order that I stay one more day, and you would not give me it because you do not love me. If you had loved me,

you would have given me (it). That is why I would not come, because you sent me two (staters). If you want me to come, send me one more stater because of my husband. If you want me to come, send me the other one. If I had it, I would give it to him, so that I can come to you, brother. I wish you good health, brother».

Here again, Ptolemaios must be at Domitiane and Thinosiris probably at Porphyrites. It is clear that they have met before for a similar arrangement, and Ptolemaios has shown himself «ungenerous» by not paying an extra stater for another day. So apparently, girls like Thinosiris could be rented on a daily basis for four drachmas, equal to one stater. It is funny that she then deploys the heavy female artillery, claiming that he does not love her. She even hints that it is only because of her «man», obviously her procurer, and that if she had the money she would pay herself, just for the privilege of being with Ptolemaios. In other words, she pretends to be in love with him – well, perhaps she was, and she is blaming the money question on her procurer. Pour Ptolemaios must have been a little surprised, and no doubt thought that paying the price was enough. Since he has asked her again, he must clearly have been satisfied with her services.

Incidentally, the price of 4 drachmas a day would make 120 drachmas a month, if the woman worked every day, which presumably she did not.⁶ This would be twice as much as the 60 drachmas a month that a girl could earn for her owner in the *praesidia* along the roads.

And then there is an example of a letter from the procurer to a woman, who must have belonged in his «stable». Again, I imagine that he was at Porphyrites while she was in Domitiane and temporarily on her own.

inv. no. 820

Σορνάτις Διδύμη τῇ ἀδελφῇ χαίρειν.
ἀκούσας πάντα <τὰ> πράγματά σου νεναυσί-
ακα. ἦ οὕτως πλουσία <εἶ> ἵνα ζημίας δι-
3a τοὺς ἄρτους ἔλαβα
δοῖς καὶ τὸ πείσμά σου ποιῆς; οὐ
5 μέφομαί σε. πορνὴ εἶ. καλῶς
οὖν ποιήσεις, καθὰ ὡς ἡ-
 μεῖν ἦκει φάσις ὅτι ἡ πο-
 ρέα ἔρχεται εἰς τρίτην,

⁶ There are several examples of this price, see e.g. O.Krok. II 182 and 221.

10 ἔρχου ὧδε ἵνα καὶ ἐπί
 σοι ὁμολογήσῃ καὶ συ
 δοῖ {σοι} αὐτό, καὶ γνῶ-
 θι τί σοι λέγει Πέτη-
 σεις περὶ τοῦ χαλ-
 κοῦ. ἔρρωσο.

3a. r. ἄρτους || 7-8. r. πορεία || 10. r. ὁμολογήση; σοι || 12-13. r. Πέτησις

«Sornatius to Didyme, his sister, greetings. Hearing about all your affairs has made me sick. Are you so rich that you can work at a loss(?) and do as you want? I do not blame you. (But?) you are a whore. According to rumour that comes to us the caravan is coming after tomorrow, so come here, so that he can approve you as well, and he can give it (i.e. the money) to you, and find out what Petesis says to you about the money. Farewell. (Inserted where there was room) I received the loaves».

I suppose that Sornatius has heard rumours that Didyme is carrying on an unprofitable affair. I guess that she may have been in love and out of control. Note first that he addresses her as «sister», as in the other letters I have chosen here. Perhaps he was somehow her husband, unless she really was his sister. After reproaching her for doing as she wants, there is the curious «I do not blame you, you are a whore». Sornatius seems to have forgotten a word here and we do not understand the relationship between the two halves of the phrase. Does he mean that he does not blame her, since you can't expect better from a whore? Or that he does not blame her for being a whore? Or is it «but» that is missing? If so, the sense might be: «I do not blame you, but <by acting like this> you are a whore». The word used is πορνή, which is rare in the papyri – in fact, I have found only two instances.⁷ I suppose that the crude word is employed for a reason. The common slave-prostitute in this environment is normally known as κοράσιον or sometimes παιδίσκη, and πορνή perhaps signifies a free woman who, more or less by choice, takes on all comers, contrary to the women who are rented out, often by their husbands, for relationships of longer duration. Could it be that Didyme was rented out in such a way, but had got involved with someone else? In the *ostraka* from Didymoi there is a contract where a husband rents out his wife, but on condition that she must only lie with the contractor.⁸ I.e. that he must not sublet her as a prostitute.

At any rate, Sornatius recalls Didyme, presumably to Porphyrites, and perhaps in order to be reviewed by a new client, but the meaning is not clear.

⁷ BGU IV 1024 (report of proceedings) and P.Oxy. III 528 (private letter) where the woman is using the word of herself.

⁸ O.Did. 406.

Finally I have chosen one text, where there does not seem to be any prostitution involved, but I wonder ...

inv. no. 304

Κυραθοῦς τῷ ἀδελφῷ Δημάτι
χαίρειν. γινώσκιν σε θέλω ὅτι
δεινὸν θέλω ἐξελθεῖν παρά
σε ἀλλὰ ἀσθενῶ. ἀφ' ὅτι ἐξέλθον
5 παρά σου ἀσθενῶ. ἰδ(ο)ύ, μὴ λάβε{ν}
[κ]ομιᾶτον δεῦ{ν}ρο{υ} ὅτι ἐγὼ οὐ
δύναμαι. ἐκεῖ γὰρ πρὶν
τοῦ ἐμὲ γράφειν σε σακρον
οὔτε καλὰ φιλεῖς καὶ μνη-
10 μονεύεις τῆς φιλίας
ἔρρωσο

2. r. γινώσκειν | 3. r. δεινὸν θέλω ἐξελθεῖν | 4. r. ἀσθενῶ ἀφ' οὗ ἐξήλθον | 5. r. ἀσθενῶ | 6. r. ἐγὼ | 8. r. γράφειν

«Kyra thous to her brother Demas, greetings. I want you to know that I very much want to come to you, but I am ill. Since I left you, I am ill. Don't take leave now, since I cannot (come). Back then, before I wrote ... that you love ... and remember (our) love. Farewell».

On the face of it, this is a couple where the man is working at Domitiane while the woman resides in Porphyrites. He has proposed to take leave so that they can be together. Did they intend to spend a naughty week-end at Domitiane?⁹ The woman says that she is ill, and I suppose that she specifies that she has been ill since they were last together, not to blame the man for this, but to explain succinctly that she does not just have her period. In any case, even if money is not mentioned, we may still be looking at a proposal for a longer term relationship. Kyra thous is known from another letter, where somebody who addresses her as «sister» congratulates her on her marriage.¹⁰ In that same letter there is also a question of two staters, although it is not clear who owes them to whom, or why, but the sum looks suspiciously like the price for a couple of days, and we may still wonder whether Didyme wasn't after all part of this higher class of prostitutes.

⁹ The obvious place, i.e. the seaside resort of Hurghada some 50 km away, did not exist yet.

¹⁰ O.KaLa. inv. no. 252.

And now to the numerous things we do not know. Who were the clients, the men who paid the women? Their names do not particularly make us believe that they were soldiers, so they must have been stonemasons or technicians employed in the quarrying. These people had their wives down in Qena,¹¹ and would occasionally have wanted female company. They were reasonably well paid – 47 drachmas a month for the stonemasons, so a short-term lease for a couple of days at 8 drachmas would have been expensive, but not impossible. The women seem to have been at Porphyrites, the much bigger quarry, not so far away, or possibly somewhere else in the vicinity.

How much could the women keep for themselves out of the 4 drachmas per day? We have no idea, but we must in any case assume that they were always subject to a procurer or procuress, who no doubt took the better part of the money. Speculating a little, we may assume that they did so, because they had arranged for the transportation and payment of the road tax and whatever other expenses were incurred, like perhaps the tax on prostitutes, although we know nothing about this in the desert. The *quintana* that seems to have been paid for the κοράσια in the *praesidia* in the desert of Berenike, is mentioned nowhere in the quarrying area. In the desert of Berenike there was also a sum to be paid for passengers entering the desert. According to the Koptos-tarif a soldier's wife costs 20 drachmas, while a girl for company, i.e. a prostitute, cost one hundred drachmas.¹² Even if this concerns a neighbouring district, we are perhaps allowed to use it as a source, and I think that there may have been quite a few women entering the desert as wives, but becoming prostitutes of some kind once they were there. A certain number of women from Eastern Europe or Asia might recognise the arrangement at the present time.

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¹¹ Cuvigny 1998, 87-94.

¹² I.Portes 67.