

Some Remarks on Women's Social Life in Roman and Late Antique Egypt: Religious and Social Celebrations

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is twofold: first to elucidate the role of women in the participation and organization of various religious and social celebrations in the society of Greco-Roman Egypt, with regard to their legal and economic status, and second to discuss how the interaction between different cultures and social traditions could affect women's everyday life. My focus is on the papyrus documents dating from the time of August onwards which are more pertinent to the study of women's social life, such as private letters, invitations and various lists and accounts.

Keywords

Women, Roman Egypt, Celebrations

Women in the ancient world were often restricted to the domestic space and excluded from many aspects of the public sphere.¹ Despite their legal and social disabilities, they conducted religious festivals and rituals, usually under male dominance, and sometimes men were even excluded from their cults (i.e. the celebration of Thesmophoria in ancient Greek religion, the cult of Bona Dea in Roman religion).² A wealth of documentary papyri from Roman times and late antiquity show that in Roman Egypt there were a large number of public festivals and private celebrations which played an important role in everyday life. F. Perpillou-Thomas (1993) and several scholars have dealt with the festivals in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt. However, the participation of women has not yet been fully enlightened.³

The social status and life of women was shaped to some extent by the particular socioeconomic and cultural factors of the multicultural society of Egypt. After the Roman conquest, in the province

¹ For women's position in the ancient world see for example Blundell 1995; for classical Greece: Sealay 1990; for classical Athens: Gould 1980; for Hellenistic Egypt: Pomeroy 1984; for Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Egypt: Melaerts / Mooren 2002; for Roman society: Evans-Grubbs 2002; for late antiquity: Arjava 1996; Beaucamp 1993.

² For women's role in the classical Greek religion see Dillon 2002.

³ See for example Westermann 1932, 16-27; Vandoni 1964; Casarico 1984, 135-162; Τερζίδου 2013.

of Egypt there existed at least four strong legal and social traditions – Roman, Greek, Egyptian and Jewish – often merging and often contradicting one another. Their coexistence and interaction affected every aspect of life, including the social position of women and their everyday life. Private letters can offer noteworthy insights into the religious and social life of women and their participation in public and private ceremonies. Regardless of their ethnicity and social milieu, women had the right to attend religious festivals and celebrate together with their family and friends. For example, in P.Tebt. II 412 from the second century A.D. Artemidora and her brother Damas will travel to the metropolis for the celebration of New Year, ll. 3-4: καλῶς ποιήσεις (l. ποιήσεις) ἄνελθε εἰς τὴν μητρόπολιν τοῦ νέου ἔτους | ἐπὶ καίγῳ (l. καὶ ἐγῶ) ἀνέρχομε (l. ἀνέρχομαι) εἰς τὴν πόλιν. Attending a religious or social celebration was an excellent opportunity to visit one's family and spend some time with them.

In their letters, women very often express their joy about the expected arrival of a family member along with their interest in making the necessary preparations for their beloved ones by sending them garments and other items required for a festival. For example, in P.Oxy. XIV 1679 from the third century A.D. Appia writes to her mother announcing the dispatch of some clothes.⁴ She also adds that a certain Agathos will bring her some things for the festival (ll. 13-15, cf. BL XI 151): Ἄγαθος δὲ τῆ ἐνά|τῃ τάχα πρὸς σὲ γείνεται ἐνέγ|και σοί τινα πρὸς τὴν ἑορτήν. In a similar way, in P.Hamb. II 192 also from the third century A.D., Demetria sends sister Apia oil and an upper garment for an upcoming celebration, ll. 23-25: πέμψω δέ σοι καὶ | τὸ ἀλικεῖον πρὸς τὴν | ἑορτήν.⁵ A young girl's preparations to attend the New Year's celebrations is also described in SB XX 14226, a letter from the fourth century written by Therpe to her father. The writer expresses a series of complaints towards her father, because he has neglected to send her money and various goods, including some leg ornaments, for a feast (ll. 12-15: δήλωσον ἵνα λάβ[ω] τὰ περισκ[ε]λίδια ἵνα φορῆσω (l. φορήσω) αὐτὰ τῆ εἰωρτῆ ἐ[π]ιδῆ (l. ἑορτῆ ἐπειδῆ) τὰ ἐμὰ ἐκλάσθη).⁶ Therpe's requests and the pressure she puts on her father to send her ornaments indicate that she belonged to a wealthy family.

As stated above, both women and men looked forward to religious feasts, as this gave them a good reason to travel and visit their relatives and friends. In SB XII 10840 (= PSI VII 831), in a letter from a Christian circle of the fourth century A.D., Euthalios and Mikke inform their mother that they are planning to visit her during Lent and Easter.⁷ Mikke advises her brother not to travel to their mother before the festival, but to be there by the end of the fast. It appears that all three of them are members of a community of worshippers who regulate their activity by observance of the church's liturgical calendar. During the first centuries of the Roman empire, the growing spread of Christianity with its

⁴ Bagnall / Crihiore 2006, 352.

⁵ Bagnall / Crihiore 2006, 330.

⁶ Bagnall / Crihiore 2006, 237.

⁷ Bagnall / Crihiore 2006, 385, Mathieson 2014, 53-55. For Easter celebration cf. P.Harr. I 107.

various cults and feasts gave women the opportunity to participate in religious communities and liturgical practices and attend various ceremonies where they could celebrate and express their religious feelings. However, in the third century, the anti-Christian tendencies of the imperial government result in the obligation of everybody, both male and female, to participate in pagan worship in the presence of commissioners to certify their compliance. Those who did comply were given certificates, some of which have been found in Egypt. P.Mich. III 158 gives evidence of the persecution instituted by the imperial order of emperor Decius (246 A.D.). Aurelia Bellias and her daughter from the village of Theadelphia, who were both of Egyptian status, sacrificed to the gods, ll. 5-13, cf. BL X 123: ἀὶ θύ|ουσε (l. θύ|ουσαι) τοῖς θεοῖς διετε|λέσαμεν καὶ νῦν ἐπὶ | παρόντων ὑμῶν | κατὰ τὰ προστεταγμένα | ἔσπισα (l. ἔσπεισα) καὶ ἔθυσσα καὶ | ἐγευσάμην τῶν εἰε|ρων (l. ἱερείων) καὶ ἀξιῶ ὑμᾶς | ὑποσημειώσατε (l. ὑποσημειώσασθαι) ἡμῖν. J. Rowlandson points out that Decius' order aimed to promote «loyalty and unity in the Roman empire» and not to constrain the spread of Christianity.⁸

In addition to the religious feasts, important life events were also celebrated in the Greco-Roman society, such as birthdays, marriages and coming of age, to which women were also invited. In Hellenistic times, royal birthdays were celebrated with festivities, while Romans celebrated the imperial family's birthdays every month on the days called Augustan.⁹ In Roman Egypt, a whole series of anniversaries of the imperial house were celebrated with local Graeco-Egyptian ceremonies. The birthday celebration appears to be a custom with Greek and Roman influence, since Egyptians also organized festivals for the birthday of their gods. In P.Oxy. I 112 from the third or fourth century A.D. a letter-invitation to a feast is sent from Petosiris to Serenia requesting her to be present at a public festival on the occasion of a god's birthday, probably Sarapis, ll. 3-4: πᾶν ποιήσον, κυρία, ἐξελεῖ[ν τῆ] | κ τοῖς γενεθλείοις (l. γενεθλίοις) τοῦ θεο[ῦ]. Serenia appears to be a wealthy Egyptian landowner living in the city.¹⁰ In addition, in a letter from the first century A.D., PSI XII 1242, a couple invites Antonia Tekosis to attend their son's birthday party (ll. 1-4): ἡμεῖς περὶ τὰς πανηγύρεις | τῶν γενεθλίων τοῦ Διονυσίου καταγεινόμεθα, καὶ ἐλπίζομεν αὐτὰ ἥδιστα ἄξειν. Another child's birthday party is also attested in P.Oxy. XIV 1676, a letter from the fourth century A.D. (cf. BL XI 151) written by Flavius Herculanus. The writer expresses his affection towards the recipient Aplonarion and his sadness, because she could not attend his child's birthday celebration held at his house (ll. 10-15): ἀλλὰ λείαν (l. λίαν) ἐλυπήθην ὅτι | οὐ παρεγένου ἰς (l. εἰς) τὰ γενέσια | τοῦ παιδίου μου καὶ σὺ \καί/ ὁ ἀ|νήρ σ[ο]υ, εἶχες \γὰρ/ ἐπὶ πολλὰς | ἡμέρας εὐφ[ρ]ανθῆναι σὺν αὐτῷ. A point of interest is that the sender signs as patronus and Aplonarion may be his emancipated slave. Their relationship appears to

⁸ See Rowlandson 1998, 52.

⁹ See also Lindsay 1963, 162-163.

¹⁰ See also Rowlandson 1998, 46.

be fairly close, since she is regarded as a member of the family, and thus invited, together with her husband, to the writer's celebration. The letter gives evidence of women's participation in the social events of Roman Egypt, even if they were of a lower social status such as Aplonarion who may be an emancipated slave. Furthermore, P.Oxy. XLIX 3501, an invitation from the third century A.D. (cf. BL VIII 271), records a rare case of a wife's invitation to the examination of a son (ll. 1-4): καλεῖσαι (l. σε) Σύρος ἐ[ίς] | τὴν ἐπίκρισιν [τοῦ] | υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ – σὺ καὶ | ἡ γυνὴ σου.¹¹ Wives are not usually mentioned in such invitations.¹² The *epikrasis* was a kind of status examination which took place around the time of a boy's thirteenth birthday and marked his assumption of adult fiscal status.¹³

The children of upper classes had a very different childhood to that of the children of poor circles. They did not need to work to earn their living and as a result their early years were spent in a leisurely manner mostly playing, studying and attending social events. Furthermore, their families would celebrate important life-events or other special occasions, as can be seen in the many papyrus invitations. The birthday of a child, either male or female, was a good reason for the parents to organize a private celebration.¹⁴ In P.Fay. 114, a letter from 100 A.D. in correspondence between Sabinus and Gemellus, we hear about Gemellus' daughter's birthday (ll. 17-20, cf. BL III 54; IV 29): καὶ | τὴν εἰκθὺν (l. ἰχθὺν) πέμισις (l. πέμψεις) | τῆι κδ εἰ (l. ἦ) κε εἰς τὰ | γενέσια Γεμέλλης. The family of Egyptian veteran Gemellus offers a vivid example of the interaction between native and Roman culture, as they appear to have adopted the Greco-Roman custom of the birthday celebration. The importance given to the first birthday of a young child is also implied in a wet-nursing contract from the second century Arsinoe.¹⁵ It is stated that the wet-nurse Thaeasis will receive some gold jewelry, which should be kept and given as a gift to the little girl on her first birthday. Furthermore, P.Oxy. XXXVI 2791 preserves the invitation to a dinner for a girl's first birthday: πρωτογενέσιον,¹⁶ while in a list of wine donations, P.Iand. VIII 153, from the fourth century A.D., preparations of the celebration of a wife's and a daughter's birthday are being made (ll. 3-4): ἐν γε]νεθλίαις τῆς [γυναϊκὸς - - -] | [. . . ἐν γε]νεθλίαις θυγ(ατρὸς) αὐτο[ῦ - - -].

Birthdays may be the most common family events celebrated, however public and private feasts could also be organized in honor of various life-crisis rites of both boys and girls. P.Oxy. LXVI 4542

¹¹ See also Bassiouni 1991, 76.

¹² Cf. for example P.Oxy. XXXVI 2792; P.Oxy. LXVI 4541.

¹³ After his examination, youth was liable to pay the full rate of capitation-tax, if it could not be proved that both his parents came from privileged tax groups. The ἐπίκρισις (*epikrasis*) was an institution which already existed in the Ptolemaic times and aimed at the examination of privileged status and entitlement to a lower rate of poll-tax. Besides its fiscal purpose, the examination of privileged status could also assign to educational opportunities for boys (cf. gymnasium).

¹⁴ The birth of a child was also a good reason for organizing a private celebration. Cf. also the feast after the forty days of confinement (τετρακοστά) in P.Fay. 113.

¹⁵ C.Pap.Gr. I 30 (= P.Ross.Georg. II 18).

¹⁶ Rowlandson 1998, 232.

from the third century A.D. preserves the invitation to a festival-rite of passages for girls only called *θεραπευτήρια* / *therapeuteria* (ll. 1-4): ἐρωτᾶ σε Σεουήρος | δειπνήσαι ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ αὐτοῦ εἰς θερα|πευτήρια θυγατρὸς. This term can be found in two further documents also dating to the third century: a private invitation P.Oxy. LXVI 4543 and a private letter P.Oxy.Hels. 50. D. Montserrat suggests that it could be a kind of temple ritual, preliminary to marriage rather than a feast related to the cure of a disease.¹⁷ S. Huebner points out that *therapeuteria* could be the recovery of a girl from circumcision.¹⁸ In her recent monograph, A. Nifosi offers a new interpretation of the term and remarks that it may be a temporary service of unmarried girls for Isis, which included a vow intended to guarantee their chastity.¹⁹ It is interesting that the girls who celebrate the *therapeuteria* in the papyri are unmarried, since their fathers appear to be the hosts of the dinner. If we accept that it was a type of temple ritual for adolescent girls, the influence of Greek and Egyptian practices,²⁰ which still existed during Roman times, could be considerable. In addition, another celebration related to the age of majority or the future marriage of a young child, either male or female, is attested in two private invitations to a ceremony called *mallokeurion*.²¹ P.Oxy. XII 1484 (2nd-3rd cent. A.D.) is the invitation to the celebration of two sons' *μαλλοκούρια* / *mallokeurion* (ll. 1-7, cf. BL VIII 247): ἐρωτᾶ σε Ἀπολλώνιος δειπνήσαι εἰς | [κ]λείνην (l. κλίνην) τοῦ κυρίου | Σαράπιδος ὑπὲρ μαλλοκουρίων τῶν | [υἱῶν μου] ἐν τῷ Θ[ο][ηρίῳ. - - -], while in SB XIV 11944 (2nd cent. A.D.) the invitation concerns a young daughter's celebration of *mallokeurion* (ll. 1-5, cf. BL IX 27): Ἐρωτᾶ σε Ἀ[- - -] | δειπνήσαι εἰς μελλοκούρια τῆς θυγατρὸς ἑαυτοῦ | ἐν οἰκίᾳ [- - -] | ἀπὸ [ὥρας - - -]. This ritual was accepted by both Greeks and Egyptians, since it was related to the Egyptian practice of cutting of the side lock worn by children and the Greek act of offering hair at puberty.²²

Marriage was one of the most important life events in Greco-Roman society and was celebrated with friends and relatives in luxurious ceremonies depending on the socio-economic status of the hosts. In most of the relevant invitations recorded on papyri, the host of the dinner is a father who invites a friend to the celebration of his child's wedding.²³ However, papyrus documents reflect the primary role of women, mainly from Greco-Roman milieu, in the planning conclusion of their children's marriage and the organization of the wedding ceremony. Marriage contracts provide a reasonable amount of evidence of the mother's role in the life of her children, especially that of a daughter. Several mothers, whether widows or not, appear to be present in their daughter's marriage

¹⁷ See Montserrat 1991, 46.

¹⁸ See Huebner 2009, 149-171.

¹⁹ See Nifosi 2019, 20-25.

²⁰ Adolescents tending shrines as a rite of passage appear both in Greek and Egyptian cults. Cf. for example *Arkteia* in Classical Athens, in honor of Artemis.

²¹ See Montserrat 1991, 45-47.

²² See also Nifosi 2019, 17-19.

²³ For example, in P.Fay. 132 (3rd cent. A.D.) Isidoros invites someone to dine with him to celebrate the marriage of his daughter. We can also find invitations to the dinner of a brother/sister's wedding. Cf. P.Oxy. XII 1487.

contracts providing them with a significant dowry.²⁴ In addition, dinner invitations and private letters also give evidence of the mother's involvement in the most material aspects of a marriage, such as the preparation and organization of the wedding ceremony and feast. In P.Oxy. XII 1579 from the third century Oxyrhynchus, Thermouthis invites guests to a dinner celebrating her daughter's wedding (ll. 1-5): καλεῖ σε Θερμοῦθις δεῖπνῆσαι εἰς γάμους τῆς | θυγατρὸς αὐτῆς ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ αὐτῆς αὐρίον [ἦτις] | ἐστὶν ἡ ἀπὸ ὄρας [],²⁵ while in P.Oxy. I 111 (3rd cent. A.D.) Herais, probably a widow, also sends an invitation to her children's wedding (ll. 1-4): ἐρωτᾷ σε | Ἡραῖς δεῖπνῆσαι | εἰς γάμους τέκνων αὐτῆς | ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ αὐρίον, ἦτις ἐστὶν | πέμπτη, ἀπὸ ὄρας θ. The wedding preparations conducted by a mother (or stepmother) are highlighted in a private letter from the second century A.D. In P.Oxy. XLVI 3313 Apollonius and Sarapias express their pleasure at the news of the wedding of Dionysias' son (or stepson). She wrote to them about the wedding and ordered some roses for the preparation of the ceremony. It appears that both senders and recipients are people of wealth and high social status.²⁶ Women of the social elite considered marriage to be an important family event and despite any familial disagreement believed that every situation should be managed with good manners. In P.Flor. II 332 (114-119 A.D.) Eudaimonis, the mother of *strategos* Apollonius, writes to her son about a lawsuit against both of them initiated by her brother Diskas. In spite of the tension among Eudaimonis and Diskas, the writer does not ignore her social status and elegant manners, highlighting to Apollonios at the end of her letter their obligation to send a gift for his cousin's wedding (ll. 22-26).

Moreover, special dinners were given at temples and other public buildings, such as gymnasia. In P.Oxy. LXXV 5057 another Herais, also from Oxyrhynchus, invites guests to the wedding of her son.²⁷ The dinner takes place at one of the Thoria of the city where the gods Isis and Sarapis were honoured (ll. 1-6): [ἐρωτᾷ] σε Ἡραῖς | [δειπνῆσαι] εἰς γάμους | [τοῦ υἱοῦ] αὐτῆς ἐν τῷ | [μεγάλῳ] Θοηρίῳ (l. Θοηρείῳ) αὐρίον ἦ[τις] ἐστὶν | [κς ἀπὸ ὄρας θ. Papyrus documents also testify another aspect of women's social life in Roman Egypt: the organization of religious festivals or dinners for the worship of a god. Invitations in the «*kline* of Sarapis» have received considerable attention from scholars and the interpretations of *kline* vary from a kind of dining-club (see Milne)²⁸ to a religious festival related to specific days in honor of Isis (see Koenen).²⁹ H. C. Youtie has suggested that it was a banquet, of either religious or social character, where a god's image was also displayed.³⁰ If we assume that these banquets were religious or social celebrations of private character, women as heads

²⁴ See for example PSI X 1117 from the second century A.D.

²⁵ See also Rowlandson 1998, 250d.

²⁶ Lewis 1983, 80.

²⁷ Cf. P.Oxy. XXXIII 2678.

²⁸ See Milne 1925, 6-9.

²⁹ See Koenen 1967, 121-126.

³⁰ Youtie 1948, 9-29.

of their house could also organize them. For example, in P.Col.Youtie I 52 Herais invites someone to dinner at Sarapion in the *kline* of Sarapis (ll. 1-6): ἐρωτᾶ σε Ἡραὶς δεῖπνῆσαι ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ | τοῦ Σαραπείου εἰς | κλείνην (l. κλίνην) τοῦ κυρίου | Σαράπιδος αὔριον ἥτις ἐστὶν ἰα ἀπὸ ὥρας | θ. She might be an unmarried or widowed woman, and thus head of her household. Women and especially those who had considerable economic power could manage their own house and it is of great interest that they very often appear as house-owners in census declaration documents. In two more papyri from the second or third century A.D. (P.Oxy. LXXV 5056; P.Oxy. LXVI 4539) two women, Alexandra and Tayris, invite a guest to a dinner on the occasion of an offering at the temple of Isis. In addition, in P.Fouad.76 from the second century A.D. Sarapous organizes a dinner at her house in honor of Isis (ll. 1-6): ἐρωτᾶ σε Σαραποῦς | δεῖπνῆσαι εἰς ἱέρω|μα τῆς κυρίας Ἰσιδος | ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ, αὔριον, | ἥτις ἐστὶν κθ, ἀπὸ | ὥρας θ. In P.Oxy. LXIII 4375 from the second part of the fourth century, Nonna, a rich landowner orders, from an assistant, a quantity of wine for her household use. A part of it was ordered in respect of a journey of the governor (the *praeses* of *Augustamnica*), while two *keramia* of wine were needed by her in connection with a religious celebration (*πανήγυρις*), which may be related to Easter. In addition, P.Corn. 9 offers a glimpse into the intimate village life of Egypt in the second century A.D. Artemisia, a rich woman from Philadelphia, engages three castanet dancers to perform in her house in a six-day private festival. The terms of the contract are very generous, which indicates the welfare of the woman. Wealthy villagers could hire performers from the metropolis,³¹ but we should take into consideration that in the total village population men, and in particular women, of such great economic and social influence were few.

In conclusion, the life and social position of women in Roman Egypt has evolved and improved throughout the centuries, as a result of the interaction between different cultures which brought new customs and practices, giving women the opportunity to participate in various public and private celebrations. Their participation in the economy of Roman Egypt, specifically the ownership of land, constituted, in some cases, a means to acquire a better position in the household and the society. Women's activities which took them out of the house were not exclusively economic, but also social and religious. They not only attend religious ceremonies – a phenomenon familiar in the ancient world – but also take care of the organization of various events and even become hosts in religious or social dinners held at the Egyptian temples. The sharing of meals was a common ritual that strengthened social bonds, while visits to a metropolis for the celebration of religious and social occasions could cultivate familial unity and solidarity. Finally, most of the women who appear in the papyrus documents discussed are from the upper strata and have some economic power. However, for the humble masses all these festivals offered an excellent opportunity for employment as dancers,

³¹ For the organizations of such dancers and performers see also Westermann 1932, 23; 26.

performers and prostitutes. *Ostraka* from Elephantine and other places prove that several prostitutes travelled from place to place to work at festivals and other celebrations, such as, for example, a girl named Aphrodite in SB IV 7399 who obtained permission to provide her services for only one day, during a festival in honor of Isis and Osiris (ll. 1-6, cf. BL XII 148): Βασσίῳν τελώνης ἑταιρικοῦ (l. ἑταιρικοῦ) | Ἀφροδίτῃ· ἐπιτρέ(πω) σοι ἑταίρειν | πρὸς μόνην τὴν ἐνεστῶσαν ἡμέραν, ἥτις ἐστὶν ἰδ τοῦ ἐνεστῶτος | ἠ (ἔτους) Ἀντωνεῖνου Καίσαρος τοῦ κυρίου, | Ἀθὺρ ἰδ.³²

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³² Cf. O. Wilck. II 1157.

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