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Family and Society in Roman Oxyrhynchus

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It has become obligatory for writing about the family in antiquity to begin with an attempt to complicate the notion of family, and by now the fact that the ancient household included more than what moderns usually mean by 'family' is a commonplace.[1] But defining the family is child's play compared to describing what society or social structure means. Time and space prohibit any disquisition on social theory here, and I limit myself to saying that I shall take the subject to encompass those structures, mechanisms, and organizations that articulate the population both by differentiating it and by connecting subunits to one another. Within that scope, however, some topics that might be thought to belong to the discussion of society[2] are left to other contributors to this colloquium. These are ethnicity (too complex a subject to be sideswiped), citizenship, and political office or status, by which I mean chiefly what we usually call the bouleutic class or order and its characteristic offices.[3] To those limitations are added boundaries of time and space, namely that I shall treat the period from Augustus to the middle of the fifth century, and only the city of Oxyrhynchus and not also its nome.

These limits still leave us with a large field. For distinguishing elements, we have legal status, gender, wealth, and occupation; in 'legal status' I include most importantly the distinction between free and slave, but also the delimitation of metropolitans, of members of the gymnasium, and of those eligible for the third-century grain distribution. The list of potential agents of structuring and connection are still more numerous. Besides the family, they include work units, religious bodies, social events and groups, organizations directed at shared purposes, cultural institutions, residence, patronage, and friendship.

Oxyrhynchus is by the standards of most ancient cities documented with an unimaginable detail, despite the general loss of the archaeological information we have for so many other places,

[1] See e.g. R. P. Saller, *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family* (Cambridge 1994) 74–101. The modern Western family is in fact the exception rather than the rule.

[2] As in I. F. Fikhman, *Oksirinkh: Gorod papyrusov* (Moscow 1976) chap. 5 (182–248). The only other treatise I know of that offers itself as a general study of the society of Oxyrhynchus is the little book of H. MacLennan, *Oxyrhynchus: An Economic and Social Study* (Princeton 1935), where (p. 9) the exemplary character of Oxyrhynchus is defended in the memorable words, 'Of Egypt proper, Oxyrhynchus was at least as typical as Peoria is typical of the American Middle-West.' MacLennan in fact offers nothing on the first four centuries that could be called a social study, racing through a few anecdotes on his way to feudalism and oppression.

[3] The status and offices of this order occupied the majority of the chapter on social relations in Fikhman, *Oksirinkh*: of 182–248, 211–48 dealt with this subject, most of the remainder (182–207) being devoted to slavery. The other subjects mentioned below are almost entirely omitted from Fikhman's treatment. With status went its proper dress, of which the ancients were acutely conscious; see 1 123.

especially outside Egypt.[1] It is above all rich in texts. But these do not inform us about everything. In particular, the important part played in the discoveries of Grenfell and Hunt by the rubbish dumps[2] has had the paradoxical effect that the texts with the best chance of survival have been those deliberately discarded. That tends to mean those created in large masses and actively managed in antiquity, i.e., official records.[3] It is striking that Oxyrhynchus has produced few of the family archives so important elsewhere; in the listings of Montevecchi, only about ten such archives from our period appear.[4] These are normally found in houses, not in dumps.

Even in official documents, the rate of survival is variable, or at least seems to be. Oxyrhynchus is, for example, responsible for only 15 per cent of published census returns.[5] But editorial choice may also be responsible in some cases; more census returns — many, to be sure, very fragmentary — sit unedited in the Oxyrhynchus folders than have appeared in print to date. Hardly any certificates for labour on the dikes survive from Oxyrhynchus, but here the explanation is presumably that the labour was performed, and the certificates kept, by villagers rather than metropolitans. More importantly for our subject, however, editorial choice has mostly left registers and lists still waiting their turn, while edicts, returns, contracts, and letters move to the head of the line. That matters for our subject because in most questions quantitative data are easier to come by if the ancient administration compiled them for their own purposes than if we have to extract them in the teeth of their lack of interest. Oxyrhynchus has in fact been notably poor in yielding the kind of texts that enable quantification of social matters, and ironically one of the few papyri to do so is a census register written somewhere else.[6]

The contribution of Oxyrhynchus to understanding ancient urban society, then, is at least for the present going to be largely qualitative. But we must be more specific still. The documentation we have exists largely because the ancients chose to record some things rather than others: official business, property rights, obligations to pay and rights to receive.[7] Letters are also numerous, for which we may be thankful despite the obscurity that so often envelops the matters they mention at just the point they escape from banality. But if we look back at the list of organizing structures, we can see immediately that some are not likely to benefit from the patterns of documentation, deposition, preservation, and editing that together form our current corpus of material. Religion, for example, may seem abundantly documented in mentions of temples, inventories of their property, and theophoric names, but the papyri are remarkably chary of information about the actual operations of temples, their cult observances, and above all what role religion and religious institutions played in the daily life of people who were not professional clergy.[8] We know a great deal about who served as gymnasiarch, and occasionally about the financial aspects of that service, but less about what went on inside the gymnasium. If there was an Oxyrhynchite group responsible for putting on concerts or lectures, we know nothing about it, and even popular entertainment is poorly documented.[9]

[1] What is known of the topography is collected in J. Krüger, *Oxyrhynchos in der Kaiserzeit: Studien zur Topographie und Literaturrezeption* (Frankfurt 1990).

[2] See e.g. E. G. Turner, 'Roman Oxyrhynchus', *JEA* 38 (1952) 80–1 (= Chap. 11 above, pp. 143–4).

[3] A similar situation prevails with Panopolis before the fourth century; see R. S. Bagnall, 'Public Administration and the Documentation of Roman Panopolis', in A. Egberts, B. P. Muhs, J. van der Vliet (eds.), *Perspectives on Panopolis* (P. Lugd. Bat. 31: Leiden 2002) 1–12.

[4] O. Montevecchi, *La papirologia* (Turin 1973) 247–62; in her supplement (Milan ²1988) 575–8.

[5] See R. S. Bagnall and B. W. Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge 1994) 8.

[6] R. S. Bagnall, B. W. Frier, and I. C. Rutherford, *The Census Register P. Oxy. 984: The Reverse of Pindar's Paeans* (Pap. Brux. 29: Brussels 1997).

[7] Even then, it is not obvious why Oxyrhynchus has produced hardly any *donationes mortis causa*, for example (see P. Coll. Youtie 11 83), a statement not altered by the unpublished texts.

[8] What evidence there is about religious associations is mainly early. See for example P. Oslo III 143, an account showing an association of *pastophoroi* spending their funds mainly on communal dining.

[9] On the theatre and its capacity see Krüger, *Oxyrhynchos in der Kaiserzeit* 125–30. For the circus, see above all the archive published in O. Ashm. Shelt. 83–

So much of our list starts to slip away out of our grasp. In that respect Oxyrhynchus is not particularly unusual. Those are all silences broken only episodically in our documentation. The more than 450 pages of San Nicolò's two volumes on *Vereine*[1] should not deceive us as to just how little we know about any kind of voluntary organization in Roman Egypt.[2] The occupational guilds were largely — at least as far as our evidence indicates — fiscal rather than social in character.[3] If, as one might reasonably suppose, neighbourhoods had a substantial role as articulators of the city's society, the fact escapes us almost entirely, for that activity generally needed no written contracts, no ledgers, no pompous official reports. We may count ourselves lucky when something as informative as the splendid report of needed repairs recently published by Revel Coles (LXIV 4441) gives us some sense of the detailed organization and use of space, even if our task still remains that of reconstructing the turtle from its shell.

The distinctive contribution of Oxyrhynchus and its papyri lies mainly not in these areas but in three interrelated domains that happen to be well documented in a qualitative fashion: family behaviour, women's lives, and slavery. It is therefore in these areas that I shall concentrate my remarks. Before doing so, however, it is worth sketching a few broad outlines of the larger society as we know it from the combination of Oxyrhynchite evidence with that from elsewhere in Egypt.[4] Of necessity this summary will be highly selective.

Family is, as I noted at the start, by no means a self-evident concept. There are perhaps three principal meanings the term can have in the context of Roman Oxyrhynchus. The first is the group of persons linked by kinship forming a household; the second adds to these the non-kin members of the household, principally slaves; the third is the broader kinship group of which the household is a part. For the first two of these we have a fairly good basis for describing the main demographic characteristics, thanks more to Arsinoite than to Oxyrhynchite census evidence.[5] About half of urban households, with half the total free persons, were conjugal families — parents with their children, essentially. A sixth of households were single persons, but these account for only 4 per cent of the individuals. Complex households, whether extended or multiple families, played a significant role, but a smaller one than in the villages, where they accounted for two-thirds of the individuals. The average urban family, in the narrowest sense, contained four persons, but when slaves and lodgers are included the mean household size rises to five and a half. About one household in five included one or more slaves, mainly domestic servants. The relatively high mortality exhibited by this population and the easy availability of divorce meant that in many households children lived with only one parent or with one parent and a stepparent. For the larger family, that including other relatives not co-resident in the household, the census data give us little information.

Stepping outside the door of the house, what evidence we have about residence and work patterns in the cities of the Nile valley suggests that

190, documenting payments of wine to performers in chariot races.

[1] M. San Nicolò, *Ägyptisches Vereinswesen zur Zeit der Ptolemäer und Römer* (Münch. Beitr. 2: Munich 1913–15; ²1972).

[2] San Nicolò's first volume enumerates four classes of organizations: cult, age-bound, agonistic, and occupational. Almost three-quarters of the space goes to the last of these, which in Roman Egypt were not voluntary; the agonistic includes athletes and Dionysiac artists, of little relevance to social structure; the age-bound consists mainly of precisely those gymnasial groups about which we know so little; and just 19 pages are devoted to cultic groups through the whole of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. More recent bibliography is listed in H.-A. Rupprecht, *Kleine Einführung in die Papyruskunde* (Darmstadt 1994) 183.

[3] C. Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict* (Baltimore and London 1997) 57–9, suggests a much more far-reaching role and influence for these *collegia* in Alexandria, particularly in forming political factions. It is hard to know if we should import this view of occupational associations into the other cities of Egypt despite the lack of evidence to support it, or rather should think that he has overvalued non-fiscal aspects in his description of the Alexandrian groups.

[4] For detail and references, see R. S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton 1993) and Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*.

[5] Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*.

neighbourhoods were diversified rather than specialized by occupation.[1] It must be admitted, however, that we do not really know how far residence and workplace coincided in these cities; the pork-butcher who is summoned back to his place of work from his home after hours when someone breaks in does not tell us where he lived, but it does not seem to have been very far.[2] The presence of fairly high apartment buildings (a 7-story house is mentioned in XXXIV **2719**) may also have contributed to a more anonymous and less cohesive urban texture than we might like to suppose.[3] Families show little sense of long-term identification with any particular structure, and there is little evidence for the use of the house for public or semi-public activities, except for dinner parties.[4] It is likely, as Alston has argued, that the more Romanized upper strata moved over time to a less purely private view of the role of the house,[5] and in any case many houses were shared by several households. A concern for the neighbours' reaction might lead a householder to want to lease it to a 'woman who intends to live in it' rather than a group of young men, in order to avoid *phthonos* (III **533**, with BL I 325). For the most part, however, the papyri give us a relatively weak sense of the neighbourhood's contribution to organizing households into any larger society.[6] At the same time, letters sometimes give the impression that individuals who were travelling away from home found themselves with no supporting structures when they encountered injury, illness, or some other crisis; this must surely point to the central role of the household, at least in the lives of those of the upper strata — a caveat I shall have to offer repeatedly.[7]

Given what we know about Roman society more generally, it is natural to turn from spatial collocation to look instead for signs of the operations of friendship and patronage, which linked individuals within larger families and connected families to one another. Evidence for explicit use of personal connections turns up occasionally in letters asking officials to use their influence on behalf of an individual.[8] Otherwise it is hard to identify in the vague phraseology of private letters. Patronal care of dependants is also found from time to time, but again it is usually difficult to specify relationships on the basis of the use of terms like 'father', 'son', and the like in letters. A case of rare precision occurs in a fourth-century report of public doctors (LXVI **4528**, AD 336) which specifies that their inspection of a wounded man had been requested in a petition by a former *prytanis* whose tenant farmer the man was. We cannot know what roles in the landlord's action were played respectively by any disability of the injured

[1] Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* 51, with a large contribution from XLVI **3300**. See Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity* 49, for an assertion that Alexandria did have occupationally distinctive zones with living quarters upstairs, although he sees ethnicity as a more common organizing principle for neighbourhoods.

[2] P. Laur. III 60.

[3] A woman suspects the neighbours of theft in X **1272**.

[4] R. Alston, 'Houses and Households in Roman Egypt', in R. Laurence and A. Wallace-Hadrill (eds.), *Domestic Space in the Roman World: Pompeii and Beyond* (JRA Suppl. 22: Portsmouth, RI and Oxford 1997) 36–7.

[5] Alston, 'Houses and Households in Roman Egypt' 38–9.

[6] For an enumeration of the streets and quarters of Oxyrhynchus, see Krüger, *Oxyrhynchos in der Kaiserzeit* 73–100, and S. Daris, *Dizionario dei nomi geografici dell'Egitto greco-romano*, Suppl. 3 (Pisa 2003) 98–103. For an example of petitioning against one's neighbours (because of risk of house collapse), see P. Fouad 30.

[7] See the letter of Judas (XLVI **3314**), helpless in Babylon after a riding accident. Poor people didn't have horse-riding accidents, of course. But it is perhaps more striking that a man of means would find it so hard to rely on a social network when only 200 km downriver from home. Note also PSI III 206, 'I ask about your health from the visiting Memphites'.

[8] As in II **292**, a letter to a *dioiketes*, written in the same hand as **291**, a letter to the same person from a *strategos*. Despite D. Hagedorn, 'Zum Amt des διοικητής im römischen Aegypten', *YCS* 28 (1985) 188–9 n. 62, it is hardly likely that the *dioiketes* in this and other early Roman texts is a private functionary; a very high proportion of documents concerning these *dioiketai* (correctly distinguished by Hagedorn from the later procurators) involve other officials, and this is not likely to be a matter of chance. See also P. Col. VIII 211.1 n. Similarly, IV **746** and IX **1219** involve commendation to the *basilikos grammateus*; the author of **746** may be the same as that of **292** and the fragmentary but similar IV **787** (not, however, in the same hand).

man, by the ex-magistrate's superior control of writing and documentary forms, and by the sense that a petition from him would be more likely to produce results than one from a tenant farmer, but all of these may have been involved in the patronal intervention.

Even subtler is the way in which one *archidikastes* refers to the senior *bouleutes* of Alexandria as his 'fellow-councillor' (*symbouleutes*) in a letter to the *strategos* of the Oxyrhynchite, ordering the latter to send up for examination a man so unfortunate or unwise as to be trying aggressively to collect a debt from the councillor's granddaughter Menodora in Oxyrhynchus after the death of her father, the councillor's son (P. Giss. I 34 = M. *Chr.* 75). The identification of the grandfather in this way is wholly gratuitous and thus probably intended to make sure the *strategos* (who was newly in office) gets the point that Menodora's opponents are to be cut no slack. And yet nothing explicit is said.

The well-known letter XIV 1676 (= Sel. Pap. I 151), from Flavius Herculanus to Aplonarion, in the address of which Herculanus is referred to as *patron* (whether by himself or in a docket by the recipient is not clear), brings a more affective dimension into patronal relationships ('the most sentimental [letter] that has yet appeared among published papyri', said the editors), but despite their supposition that Aplonarion was a freedwoman of Herculanus, it is anything but clear just what *patron* refers to here.

Epistolary imprecision is also a source of difficulty in describing friendship in a broader context than taking advantage of contacts. But it would be reasonable to expect it to play a significant role in this society, and we do find its character and demands evoked on occasion: 'It's in these things that the active benevolence (*spoudai*) of one's friends shows itself', says one writer (XLII 3086).[1] Friends might play critical roles like holding the original of a man's will and making sure that it was brought forth after his death (LXIII 4354), or arranging free lodging in another city for acquaintances who were travelling.[2]

In modern developed societies, the structure of work, especially in larger organizations, is a large part of the universe of social networks, but in antiquity we cannot assume that this was so. The difficulty of identifying the role played by associations linked to occupational specializations, both craft and retail, has already been mentioned. The evidence for these groups tends to concern their obligations to the state, including the tax on trades and the obligation to declare prices currently in force.[3] The lateral ties of sociability, mutual support, or factionalism often associated with occupational organizations are invisible to us, and we have little way of determining how misdirected our gaze may be. More promising perhaps are the vertical ties between employer and employee. We have little indication of large industrial enterprises in Oxyrhynchus, even in those industries which, like textiles, seem likely to have been substantial in scale. The complexity of modern companies is thus hardly to be looked for. Instead, there is fairly abundant evidence for the typical workshop structure, with the master and his small group of employees, especially apprentices.[4] Workshops were sometimes partnerships rather than individual enterprises,[5] but that hardly alters the situation. Oxyrhynchus has also now delivered an early example (LXIII 4353) of a work-contract involving an advance of wages, 'golden handcuffs' for an employee who would find it hard to leave his job.

Here and there are traces of something more complex, suggesting that workers could on occa-

[1] See also XLII 3057, on the need for *homonoia* and *philallelia* and the undesirability of gossip (cf. BL VIII 265 for references to controversy over the possible Christian character of this letter).

[2] SB XVI 12606; P. Ryl. IV 691 (asking the recipient to treat someone 'not like a *xenos* but like my son').

[3] Of the more recently published papyri, see particularly the numerous relevant texts in P. Oxy. LIV; also XLV 3192, 3262, 3265; XLIX 3492; LV 3791; LIX 3987.

[4] See J. Hengstl, *Private Arbeitsverhältnisse freier Personen in den hellenistischen Papyri bis Diokletian* (Diss. Freiburg i. Br. 1972) and M. V. Biscottini, 'L'archivio di Tryphon, tessitore di Oxyrhynchos', *Aegyptus* 46 (1966) 60–90, 186–292 (on the archive of Tryphon); the more recently published Oxyrhynchite apprenticeships include XXXVIII 2875, LV 3809, and LXVII 4596.

[5] E.g. P. Köln II 101, where one partner is the son of a former *kosmetes*.

sion act as a group in dealing with an employer. An interesting example is XIV 1668 (= Sel. Pap. I 150), a third-century letter referring to workshops, *ergasteria*, the workmen of which (*ergazomenoi*) have rejected an offer of a 50 per cent increase in their wages. Cryptic mentions of the difficulty of travel and of an amnesty issued by the prefect point to a time of civil disturbance, perhaps even to war or rebellion in the immediate past. A letter from the archive of Apollonios the *strategos* refers to a similar difficulty with workers' pay in Hermopolis ('our [workmen] travel around the whole city seeking higher pay', P. Brem. 63), showing that such an action is by no means unparalleled. Both papyri certainly come from times of significant disruption in normal life, and we cannot suppose that such actions were commonplace. Nonetheless, the very capacity of the workers to act in concert in this fashion suggests that horizontal ties in the workforce were stronger than our evidence usually lets us see.

At a much larger scale, the public world was structured by a set of status markers, some of which figure extensively in our documentation because they gave rise to specific privileges. We do not have very good information about the extent to which these statuses overlapped or formed concentric circles, although probably we may assume a large degree of such coincidence of membership. Probably the largest of the groups was those of metropolitan status, which people were keen to establish because of the lower poll-tax rate it entitled them to.[1] Perhaps the next circle inward, at least in its time, was that of those entitled to free grain distributions. The *siteresion* is, of course, one of the institutions most dramatically and unusually illustrated by the Oxyrhynchus papyri.[2] Most of the 3,000 places were reserved for approved metropolites, but higher classes like Alexandrians and Romans[3] also shared in it. A much smaller group was supported at public expense through the *gerousia*; the minimum age is not known for certain, but it seems to have been 55 or higher, by which time the population that underwent *epikrisis* at age 14 would have been cut by more than 60 percent through intervening death.[4]

Apparently a narrower circle than metropolites was the gymnasium membership, also abundantly documented.[5] Unlike the larger groups, this one actually was linked to an institution and a physical facility, which is generally and reasonably supposed to have been a centre for adult social life and not only part of the educational career.[6] Because most of the documents deal with the establishment of status rather than with what went on in the gymnasium, this social dimension largely escapes us. But here and there are traces of its role in the daily lives of the elite, like an invitation to dine in the gymnasium on the occasion of the crowning of someone's son (XVII 2147), one point at which progress through the cycle of civic offices intersects with the social world of the gymnasium. This connection also appears, however obscurely, in the letter of Justus to Apollonios (LV 3813) in which a petition by one magistrate against some of his fellow-magistrates about an uproar (*thorubos*) in the Oxyrhynchite gymnasium is said to have been submitted in Alexandria. The gymnasium was the site of a major bathing establishment as well, and no doubt much of the social life took place after the clothes had been checked at the door.[7]

The linkage between civic government and

[1] E.g. II 258, III 478, VII 1027, VIII 1109. See generally C. A. Nelson, *Status Declarations in Roman Egypt* (ASP XIX: Amsterdam 1979).

[2] The entirety of vol. XL is devoted to it.

[3] The extension of Roman citizenship to the entire population in the Antonine Constitution curiously did not eliminate 'Romans' as a separate category; see XL 2927 3 n. It is not clear if domicile at Rome is meant (as the editor suggests, p. 3).

[4] On the *gerousia*, see XLIII 3099 7 n.

[5] See Nelson, *Status Declarations in Roman Egypt* 33–5, for a general discussion of the relationship of the two groups. Quite a few applications have been published since his book; see especially XLVI 3276–84. The introductions to P. Ups. Frid 6 and P. Mich. XIV 676 are also useful.

[6] See generally W. Orth, 'Zum Gymnasium im römerzeitlichen Ägypten', *Althistorische Studien Hermann Bengtson dargebracht* (Historia Suppl. 40: Wiesbaden 1983) 223–32, based mainly on Hermopolite documents and concerned with the management of the gymnasium.

[7] P. Giss. I 50 shows that the clothes-checking concession was worth keeping in the family.

the gymnasium is manifest also in the civic festivals designated as *panegyris*, which Françoise Perpillou-Thomas showed were distinctively activities of the gymnasium and particularly of the ephebes, as well as being social and political occasions to which higher officials could be invited.[1] Perpillou-Thomas showed that documentation of the *panegyris* is, in fact, a distinctive contribution of Oxyrhynchus to our knowledge of the festival world of Roman Egypt.[2] The warm letter from an Antaiopolite to an Oxyrhynchite gymnasiarch who had formerly served as *strategos* in Antaiopolis (XIV **1664**) suggests a strong corporate feeling and bond among the gymnasial youth of that city as well as their link to older members of the same class.

There is a strong likelihood that the abundant social invitations preserved among the Oxyrhynchus papyri come from this same stratum of society. Certainly they mention *epikrisis* and crowning as the reasons (or pretexts) for social occasions (e.g. XXXVI **2792**, XLIV **3202**, XLIX **3501**), and other mentions of social events in letters evoke a moneyed milieu (above all in the well-known letter about a gigantic shipment of flowers for a wedding, XLVI **3313**). How far such habits penetrated into urban society below the level of the propertied elite is far harder to say, just as is the case with the whole sense of the home as a place for entertainment.[3] Nor do we have any sense of what structures, if any, may have taken the place in the social lives of the lower orders that the interlocking life of the gymnasium and civic magistracies played in those of the Greek elite.[4]

We return now to families and to the position of women. My view, in brief, is that the Oxyrhynchus papyri give us the qualitative description corresponding to the quantitative demographic realities we know from the census declarations, refracted through the complex cultural amalgam formed by the Romanization of the Graeco-Egyptian upper orders. By and large, this picture corresponds well to the description of the Roman family given by Richard Saller on the basis of confronting a demographic microsimulation with the literary and epigraphical record from the western empire.[5] Because Saller's microsimulation was heavily influenced by the demographic analysis of the Egyptian data,[6] such an agreement might not seem surprising. But Saller was arguing mainly from the literary sources, which are relentlessly devoted to the senatorial and equestrian orders in the West, and our papyri are often supposed to give us a glimpse of 'ordinary' people in the East.[7] Certainly the papyri almost entirely deal with people of much lower wealth than the western aristocracy, but few of the urban documents actually seem to deal with the lives of the very poor, and most of them, especially the letters, seem to come from that fifth of the city population that owned slaves.[8] It is entirely possible, then, that the general conformity of the pattern of life visible in the papyri to a rightly-understood Roman way of

[1] F. Perpillou-Thomas, 'La Panégyrie au gymnase d'Oxyrhynchos (II^{e}–IV^{e} s. après J.-C.)', *CE* 61 (1986) 303–12. On the Oxyrhynchite ephebic games, see also K. J. Rigsby, 'Sacred Ephebic Games at Oxyrhynchus', *CE* 52 (1977) 147–55.

[2] Another connection between *epikrisis* and the festivals may be seen in the fact that the *pompagogos*, evidently responsible for processions in festivals, is routinely one of the men appointed to be in charge of *epikrisis*; see XLIII **3102** 2 n. and earlier J. Bingen, 'Les Papyrus de la Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth xiv: Déclarations pour l'épicrisis', *CE* 31 (1956) 110–12.

[3] In XX **2275**, which speaks of entertainment, apparently at home, it is clear that we are dealing with wealthy people.

[4] The circus may have provided one link, with the elite providing entertainment for the populace. We know of a gymnasiarch personally involved in racing competition through his ownership of horses, for which he hires a charioteer (XLII **3135**).

[5] Saller, *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family*. For a general treatment of women's position in Roman society and particularly their legal situation, see J. F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (London 1986).

[6] He had a prepublication copy of the manuscript of Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt*.

[7] As still in A. Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity* (Oxford 1996) 69: 'Evidence from late Roman Egypt is concentrated on the lower levels of the society.'

[8] See Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* 5, for discussion of the documentary bias toward the propertied.

life reflects the increasing tendency of the upper strata to adopt Roman habits.

Given the limits of this paper, I shall confine myself to advancing and briefly defending five propositions which I believe help to explain what we find in the papyri. The first is that an upper-class woman's first marriage was in most cases the last major intervention in her life by one or both of her parents.[1] We know from the demographic data that virtually all women married at least once, mostly in their later teenage years. This is the last point in life at which the odds favour having the father alive, and by their early thirties most women would have had neither parent living.[2] The papyri preserve few traces of the process by which such marriages were formed, although the editor of LIX **3992** has suggested that it was written by a man to his prospective father-in-law. The fact that many marriage contracts of the Roman period involve the father of the bride as the giver of the dowry, and thus often a party to the agreement, is no doubt significant of the role of the birth family at this juncture.[3] In other cases the mother fills this role, no doubt because the father had died.[4] In one case both parents give their daughter away (XLIX **3491**), but this is a case where the couple have actually been living together for nine years, and presumably the property settlement is the sole reason for the present agreement. By contrast, we find individuals of the artisanal class marrying without parental involvement, as in the case of two embalmers marrying with two more embalmers as their witnesses (XLIX **3500**). And it is in that class that the use of loans from wives to husbands, with no involvement of the wife's father, is documented.[5]

The second thesis is that the partners in marriage had substantial expectations of one another, both practical and affective, and that the commonness of divorce in the documents reflects the frequency of failure predictable when expectations are considerable.[6] The juxtaposition already in P. Oxy. II of **281** and **282** provides a sense of the activity of both sexes in securing their rights against errant spouses, for one is a wife's complaint about a husband's desertion, the other a husband's complaint about his wife's desertion. And the remarkable spectacle of a couple, still evidently married and living together, testifying before the *logistes* on opposite sides of a dispute about an inheritance from the husband's mother to the wife, is striking evidence of the willingness of spouses to demand their rights from one another, well short of divorce.[7] And yet even within the restrained traditions of ancient letter-writing we find many witnesses to the emotional substance of these marriages and the desire of spouses for the company of one another.[8]

A third proposition is that in this class the independent position of women was significantly buttressed by the tendency of the spouses

[1] See generally Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity* 32–7.

[2] Saller, *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family* 49; slightly different choices of inputs into the microsimulation do not change the results significantly.

[3] E.g. III **496** and **497** (it is curious and perhaps telling that the editors describe **496** as 'a contract of marriage between Sarapion son of Eudaemon and Thais daughter of Sarapion' even though the two Sarapiones are the actual contracting parties). In a village marriage contract (VI **905**) the bride's father is also a party. See E. Kutzner, *Untersuchungen zur Stellung der Frau im römischen Oxyrhynchos* (Frankfurt 1989) 23–68, for a general treatment of women and marriage, from a purely legal viewpoint, including a list of 'marriage contracts'.

[4] II **265**, **372**, X **1273**.

[5] T. Gagos, L. Koenen, and B. E. McNellen, 'A First Century Archive from Oxyrhynchos or Oxyrhynchite Loan Contracts and Egyptian Marriage', in J. H. Johnson (ed.), *Life in a Multi-Cultural Society: Egypt from Cambyses to Constantine and Beyond* (SAOC 51: Chicago 1992) 181–205, esp. 198.

[6] I have already discussed this subject in R. S. Bagnall, 'Church, State and Divorce in Late Roman Egypt', *Florilegium Columbianum: Essays in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller* (New York 1987) 41–61. For recent general discussion of expectations in marriage, see J. Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family in Late Antiquity* (Oxford 1995) 34–65 and Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity* 127–33.

[7] LIV **3758** 39–77. Similarly, P. Fouad 35 is a very formal appointment by a woman of her husband to manage certain business affairs for her.

[8] E.g. XXXIV **2731**, XLII **3067**; PSI VIII 899; mourning in LIX **4004**. To be sure, the contrary can be found, as in LIX **3994**, where a man makes it clear he doesn't care anything about his wife except that she has his property.

to be separated by business travel a considerable amount of the time. We have no way of quantifying this assertion, and it could be objected that relying on the letters to support it is an exercise in circular reasoning. Nonetheless, it is striking how many letters we have showing spouses in different locations. Much of this traffic, witnessed to mainly by letters from men to their wives, is the product of male travel away from Oxyrhynchus, especially to Alexandria. Some also results from the prolonged absences of men on public duties such as serving as *strategos* of another nome.[1] But there are also many women's letters, probably in large measure written from country estates to men who were at the urban houses, and these point to a habit of leaving the women to manage the country estates when the men were conducting business in the city or elsewhere.[2] Evidence for women's travel elsewhere is less common, but there is enough to show that women were by no means immobile or homebound, even travelling to plead before the prefect during his *conventus* (P. Wash. Univ. II 106).[3] Men had no choice but to rely on someone else to manage their property when they were absent, and the view of marriage described earlier, coupled with the independence of women's property in Roman (as in Egyptian) law,[4] made it possible for wives to take on that role.[5]

The demographic realities of antiquity lead to my fourth proposition, that a capacity for independent action had a fair likelihood of being needed after the end of marriage as well, particularly for the large number of women who would be widowed. Despite nearly universal marriage for women, death and divorce meant that even at age 30, almost a fifth of women would not be currently married, and by their late forties, less than 40 percent of women would still be married.[6] For few of these women would the father still be alive, and those in their thirties would be unlikely to have an adult son. The chances of a living brother were better, but as we shall see, the extended family tended to be a source of trouble as well as of help. Many of those divorced would be living alone, as children tended to stay with their father.[7]

In light of the two preceding propositions, it is not surprising that we find women of the middle and upper classes managing property and businesses with considerable frequency and of sizable dimensions, everything from a wine-selling partnership or a mill to hundreds of arouras.[8]

[1] A classic instance is P. Coll. Youtie II 67, in which the wife deals with a major financial transaction (return of a dowry) while the husband is *strategos* in Hermopolis.

[2] See R. S. Bagnall and R. Cribiore, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC – AD 800* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2006). The risks of leaving one's property without competent local management were real; cf. e.g. P. Flor. III 319. Obviously an adult son would be optimal, as in P. Amh. II 136.

[3] E.g. XIV 1668, 1682, 1758; XLVI 3291; XLVIII 3420. This evidence seems to me to undermine fatally the emphasis placed by Evans Grubbs, *Law and Family in Late Antiquity* 323, on parallels with modern Mediterranean societies where male protection of the boundaries of the home is of paramount importance; upper-class women in antiquity are not well compared to modern peasants.

[4] Something not to be taken for granted; cf. M. B. Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers* (New York 1996) 83, on the legal subordination of married women in early colonial America, a result of the common law's very different approach.

[5] P. Coll. Youtie II 67, already referred to, provides a striking example of a woman acting on behalf of an absent husband, herself guaranteeing her actions should her husband not ratify them on his return.

[6] See Bagnall and Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt* 115; J.-U. Krause, *Witwen und Waisen im römischen Reich*, I: *Verwitwung und Wiederverheiratung* (HABES 16: Stuttgart 1994).

[7] The many leases of urban house property in which the lessee is a woman (e.g. PSI V 467), often of very small quarters (one or two rooms), probably reflect such situations.

[8] Representative examples of the ends of the spectrum are the widow of a wine merchant, against whom her late husband's surviving partner files a petition (XXII 2342; see P. van Minnen, 'Berenice, a Business Woman from Oxyrhynchus: Appearance and Reality', in A. M. F. W. Verhoogt and S. P. Vleeming (eds.), *The Two Faces of Graeco-Roman Egypt: Greek and Demotic and Greek-Demotic Texts and Studies Presented to P. W.*

Women are litigants (XLIII 3094, 3118);[1] women spend time in jail (XXXVI 2789, XLVI 3302, XLVIII 3409) and can need sureties for appearance (PSI XIII 1329); women harass men about debts (LIX 3981); women carry out census registration (VIII 1157); women collect rents (XXXIII 2680) and apparently brand livestock (P. Harr. II 223). Women even perpetrate violence, both public and private (LI 3620, 3644; LXI 4122; SB X 10239).[2] It is hardly surprising that the authorities thought they could get away with imposing compulsory cultivation on a woman (VI 899 = W. *Chr.* 361).[3]

But this is not to deny all reality to the female vulnerability of which petition-writers like to make much (e.g. I 71 ii).[4] A fifth point of note is that such weakness came to light most of all in dealing with other members of their extended family, such as uncles, aunts, nephews, and nieces. In text after text we read complaints about the behaviour of these relatives.[5] No doubt only the bad ones were memorialized in petitions, and we should not underestimate the importance of rhetorical strategies, but it was probably more galling that their meddling and greed made the lot of widows and orphans difficult; one expected the avarice or violence of strangers.[6] A similar pattern is observable in early colonial America.[7] Whether this pattern was the reason that women's independence in business dealings developed so extensively or the result of that independence is hard to say, but it is clear that whatever force the patriarchal family may once have had, women were not letting it dominate their dealings.[8] More broadly, although plenty of family solidarity can be found in the papyri,[9] so can family conflict, along with a clear sense that it was often advantageous to individuals not to be held responsible for anyone but themselves and that they were legally entitled to such freedom from liability for family members.[10]

The class to which these women belonged was the one that owned most of the slaves in Roman Egypt. And Oxyrhynchus has given us an enormous amount of information about slavery, too. It should, however, be borne in mind that it is largely from the census data that we know that almost all surviving male slaves were manumitted

Pestman (Pap. Lugd.-Bat. XXX: Leiden 1998) 59–70) and Claudia Isidora alias Apia, to whose estate another woman owed 975 artabas of wheat (XXXI 2566). A married woman is the lessee of a mill in P. Wash. Univ. I 19.

[1] Cf. B. Anagnostou-Cañas, 'La Femme devant la justice provinciale dans l'Égypte romaine', *RHD* 62 (1984) 337–60.

[2] Kutzner, *Untersuchungen zur Stellung der Frau im römischen Oxyrhynchos* 107: 'Es ist erstaunlich, daß so viele Quellen bezeugen, daß Frauen Gewalt ausübten'.

[3] Cf. now LVII 3906 11–12 n. for this woman's land. Women's public activity is minimized by Kutzner, *Untersuchungen zur Stellung der Frau im römischen Oxyrhynchos* 109–10, on the basis of too narrow a selection of evidence. He similarly (111–41) sees women as property owners but not economically active, with their work largely confined to home.

[4] The motif is of course hardly limited to the papyri; cf. Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity* 171.

[5] A few examples: XVII 2133, XXXIV 2713, XXXIV 2708 (victim is male), XLIX 3466. Of course other relatives could be problems also, cf. LXIII 4393, where a widow complains about her son's behaviour.

[6] Family were, of course, given preference over outsiders in the appointment of guardians, which no doubt increased the relative incidence of problems with family; cf., e.g. SB XII 10792, P. Mert. I 26 (perhaps unwelcome meddling?), and BGU IV 1070. The men charging Taphorsois an illegal 48 per cent interest on a mortgage in P. Mert. I 23 were apparently not relatives.

[7] Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers* 42, 138–56.

[8] J. Harries, *JRS* 87 (1997) 317, reviewing A. Arjava, *Women and Law in Late Antiquity*: 'But women also used the law for their own purposes. In petitions and other legal documents from Roman Egypt, women (or their male amanuenses) exploited the stereotypes created by (male) legislators to assert themselves against their (usually male) kinsfolk. More on this would have revealed a more feisty, manipulative, and disruptive dimension to the Late Antique female persona than was allowed for by emperors or the ecclesiastical managers of biddable ascetics.'

[9] SB VIII 9824 may reflect it: four siblings contribute equal shares to restoring the decrepit family house they have inherited, paying their father's debts, and mummifying him. Their absent sister is offered the chance to join the consortium on an equal basis when she returns.

[10] See particularly PSI VII 807. Vita Sackville-West put it nicely: 'One's resentment of family claims is at least as strong as the bond which secures one to them' (from *The Death of Noble Godavary* (London 1932) 5, quoted in D. Cannadine, *Aspects of Aristocracy* (New Haven and London 1994) 230).

by their early thirties, while many women remained slaves as late as the end of their childbearing years. Many of the Oxyrhynchite documents are, predictably, sales of slaves or registrations of slaves bought elsewhere, and some are manumissions.[1] Notices of runaways and authorizations to arrest them turn up also.[2] Valuable as these are, they add less to our knowledge of this institution than do the more unusual texts. These tend to give specific coloration to aspects of slavery we know more abstractly from the Roman legal texts. One is the ability of some slaves to live independently, as we see in a first-century petition complaining that 'certain persons feloniously broke into the flat where my slave Epicharis lives in a house belonging to a certain Nicanor in the Gooseherds' district and carried off some of Epicharis's goods'. Another burglary in the same flat at a later date carried off some linen goods, including a cushion and two tunics; it seems that Epicharis suspects neighbours in the house.[3] We do not know if these were goods being worked on by Epicharis or simply her household possessions, and it is not clear how the house was organized (the editor's 'flat' represents *oikos* in the Greek). But it is clear that she was not part of the household of her owner. Similar independence may be seen in the mention (XLIII **3146**) of a borrower's intention to repay a sizable loan[4] of imperial funds made in Oxyrhynchus by means of a slave dispatched to Alexandria. That owners placed a high level of trust in some slaves is clear from texts like the petition of Aurelia Sarapias (P. Turner 41), who is outraged by the flight of a slave inherited from her father, because she had thought that he could 'do nothing base because he was my paternal possession and our property had been entrusted to him by me', property some of which he has run off with.

It is perhaps less noteworthy when we find freedmen engaged in their independent commercial activities, but it is hard not to be struck by a loan of 144 drachmas made by a freedwoman of an Antinoite gymnasiarch to the wife of an Oxyrhynchite former *exegetes*, herself from Ptolemais (XLIV **3198**). The editor points out that the freedwoman, unlike the borrower, acts without a *kyrios*. It seems likely that the freedmen and freedwomen of very large *familiae* constituted a kind of social group of their own, of the sort we see operating in XXXVIII **2857**, where a freedman named Ti. Claudius Alexander names a freedwoman Claudia Theanous as primary heir, her son Ti. Claudius Ptolemaios as secondary heir, and his fellow-freedmen Ti. Claudii Theonas and Demetrius as legatees. One is reminded of the extraordinary document (XLIV **3197**) in which the sixty or more male slaves belonging to the estate of Ti. Iulius Theon I are divided up. As they were manumitted in due course, they may well have acted together in the manner of the Tiberii Claudii just mentioned.[5]

Finally, one of the most striking examples of dramatic information emerging from a private letter bears on the condition of imperial freedmen: 'You should know, then, that Herminus went off to Rome and became a freedman of Caesar in order to take up official appointments (*officia*)' (XLVI **3312**). The editor says, 'The straightforward background to assume is that Herminus was a *servus Caesaris* who had saved enough money to buy his freedom . . . The traces of infiltration from outside the ranks of the *servi Caesaris* are rare and doubtful'. Perhaps so, but it is hard to imagine that being manumitted would be expressed as ἀπελεύθερος ἐγένετ[ο] Καίσαρος. For one thing, the recipient of the letter would in that case not need to be told that it was of Caesar that Herminus was to become a freedman. Moreover, slaves of the emperor were already launched on an of-

[1] Including I 48–50, IV 722–3, IX 1205, XXXVIII 2843 (a draft of I 48).

[2] XII 1423, XIV 1643, XXXVIII 2838, LI 3616–3617.

[3] LVIII **3916**; this last point is made in a very likely restoration offered in the note to lines 26–30.

[4] 'The sum is not so enormous as it sounds', says the editor (10 n.). At this date (347), however, 1,500 myriads was the equivalent of something like a half pound of gold, no mean amount. For gold prices in the 340s, see LVI **3874**, esp. 32 n.

[5] See too the freedwoman (with a fellow freedman, *synexeleutheros*, as her *kyrios*) borrowing money from another freedwoman in PSI V 473, and the group in P. IFAO I 15.

ficial career, and one would presumably not need holding an office as a motivation to escape from slavery anyway. It is far more likely that the Greek should be taken at face value, indicating that a free person could move from being freeborn to becoming a freedman of the emperor and thus entering his service. Whether such a move was direct — that is, bypassed slavery altogether — or involved a nominal enslavement, is not clear. But there are some documents that suggest it was not necessary to lose one's patronymic (something slaves and freedmen otherwise do not possess) in the process.[1]

This is perhaps a fitting note on which to end. The Oxyrhynchus about which we are the best informed is that of the propertied classes of the second through fourth centuries, and the dominant theme emerging from a look at that stratum of society is its conformity, perhaps better its emerging conformity, to patterns observable in counterparts throughout the Roman Empire. The social world formed by the gymnasium, games, baths, and municipal magistracies is one familiar throughout the Greek East and, *mutatis mutandis*, the West. The distinctive characteristics of the lives of upper-class women make sense in the context of Roman law, ideology, and practice. The uses and nature of slavery similarly fit with little difficulty into an imperial perspective. There are, however, hints in the few early Roman family archives from the artisan class that this Roman pattern is not the only one we should find if we had a different pattern of documentation. We may reasonably turn to the villages of the Fayum for help of this sort, remaining grateful that Oxyrhynchus has given us such a portrait of its wealthier classes of a depth and nuance unobtainable anywhere else in the Roman world.

[1] See also the inconclusive discussion in *NewDocs* 3 (1978 [1983]) 7–8, no. 1. I do not see why it should be thought unimaginable for a freeborn man to act in this fashion. One case of a freeborn person turned imperial freedman may be identifiable in an inscription of Appia in Phrygia published by Thomas Drew-Bear in *ANRW* II 18.3 (Berlin 1990) 1967–77. The dedicant there describes himself as Tiberius Flavius Helios, freedman of Vespasianus Caesar, *eirenophylax* of the *eparcheia*, and son of Glykon son of Timaios, from Agroste(a). Slaves do not have patronymics, let alone grandfathers, and the most natural interpretation of this self-description is that Helios was born free and entered imperial service, acquiring the imperial *praenomen* and *nomen* in the process. His wife, whose companion dedication is published ibid., 1978, was Sextilia P.f. Hedone, thus a free-born citizen. Paul Weaver also calls to my attention *AE* 1979, 656, with C. Iulius Aug. l. Felix Accavonis f. In this case the dedication is put up by his son C. Iulius C. l. Felix, raising questions I cannot go into here. Weaver also notes *AE* 1980, 912, which might contain a freeborn brother of Felix (the father). I am grateful to Jane Gardner and Paul Weaver for discussion of this subject, without meaning to implicate them in my speculations.