

## The Power of the Pen: Cultural Aspects of Women's Literacy in 4th Century CE Egypt

Four years ago William Harris opened the flood gates on the study of ancient literacy. Sheridan's own papyrological research into the form and content of documents has examined the question of the value of documentary evidence from an illiterate society, specifically documents from Egypt, written in Greek, the language of an earlier conqueror, under Roman rule. Herbert Youtie published the archives of (and considered the social implications of) a village scribe who was agrammatos, i.e., who couldn't write (Greek, that is; not necessarily illiterate in Egyptian). Youtie maintained that such a society had a "casual indifference" to literacy.

When women are mentioned in documents it is generally simply in passing. In seven centuries of Roman Egypt, only 115 women are attested as literate; most were, presumably, illiterate. Ancients mocked the idea of literate women, because they realized that literacy carried power. (Menander, the Greek new comedy writer, has a character say that teaching literacy to a woman is like feeding venom to a snake.) But a study of documents by or concerning a group of women from Hermopolis between 250 CE and 350 CE who are described as "knowers of letters" may be instructive.

Attested for the period c. 300-350, Aurelia Charite, daughter of Amazonios, is particularly interesting, because we have an archive of her tax payments, 42 documents, six written in her own hand. Hers is the only signature of a woman known to exist from Roman Egypt. Charite's mother Demetria, daughter of Polydeukes, was literate also and Charite had the *ius trium liberorum* (certain legal rights that came from having borne three children, two of which we know of, the others perhaps being daughters) and outlived her husband by 30 years. Unfortunately there are no personal letters in the archive. Charite was very rich. Of the 42 documents, 21 record the taxes paid to support the army and eight were leases of property that she leased out to tenants. She also loaned out money. Three documents deal with about 422 acres of farmland she owned, but that may be only part of her holdings. Land lists from 348-349 show her holding 376 acres, which still put her in the top 6% of wealth. Of this archive, 6 documents are autographs (written by Charite herself), 24 were documents coming in to her, two were written by Charite to her mother and one, a receipt for payment, identifies her as "a knower of letters, acting without a guardian". Another, regarding a loan, is not in her hand but mentions her again as "a knower of letters". Her handwriting is neat but not elegant, that of a literate, not semi-literate person - no hesitation in her strokes, cursive writing, abbreviations used. In fact, her hand is similar to her mother's. But why was Charite (and Demetria) literate? They were rich and had free time - but most in their class (*bouletic*) were not literate. And why advertise her literacy so?

Other literate women in the papyri include Tinouti and Artemidora, daughters of Hermes, shown involved, with two of their brothers, in a division of property agreement in 250 CE. Both of their husbands were members of the council (*boule*), and were still alive. Aurelia Artemidora, daughter of Polydeukes and wife of Aurelius Koprius, is represented in an agreement over a house, and Koprilla, daughter of Nikon, was 51 at the time of the document in which she is described as "a knower of letters". (Koprilla's husband was dead and we don't know what social class they belonged to.) Aurelia Isidora, daughter of Hermias, still has her husband, a councillor, in 289 when she is described as "a knower of letters". What these women have in common beside their stated literacy is that they are rich (the *bouletic* class) and lived in Hermopolis within a 70 year time span and all but

one of them about whom we know their status are specifically attested as acting without a guardian. (Koprilla's guardian is her brother and we don't know about Demetria.) What is the statement about their literacy intended to tell others?

Aurelia Thaisous (263-266) is from Oxyrhynchus and we don't know her class or whether her husband is alive, but she claims certain rights because she had the *ius trium liberorum* and could write - and therefore claims the right to act without a guardian. Youtie says that her literacy was not a factor because there were many illiterate women without guardians, but Thaisous is probably saying she is particularly capable of exercising her right to be without guardian because of her literacy, i.e., she would not as readily be cheated.

There are many reasons, economic rather than social, for men and women, to advertise their literacy. Charite (rich, old, widowed) is saying that as "a knower of letters" she will know what written documents are saying and therefore should not be trifled with or scammed. Guardians were appointed (for women or children) from family, business associates or professional scribes. Since most women were illiterate, they would be at the mercy of others, especially if their guardians were also illiterate, as might well be. Only women required guardians or exemptions therefrom. No men are mentioned as "knowers of letters", so the presumption seems to have been that men could write.

What was the significance of so many women "knowers of letters" in Hermopolis within a 70 year span? Was it a hotbed of feminism? It was a smallish town, so probably all these women knew one another. If one had been gypped, she might have told her female friends and they became literate as a means of protecting themselves. The proclamation was thus a warning off of cheats. Other possibilities? Charite has recently been discovered to have been a Christian. Adelpios, her husband, had clearly been Christian, since that name was used only by Christians. Christianity promoted literacy, to read sacred texts, and thus social respect was accorded those who could read. If female Christians learned to read for sacred purposes, they might have expanded into economic realms as a power base.

Almost all the written documents from Roman Egypt are financial or economic. Egyptian women had more power than elsewhere in the Roman empire (e.g., they could own land). There may well have been many women able to write but not needing to advertise the fact. So female literacy may have been wider than the evidence shows.