

Family relations in Early Roman Tebtunis

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Abstract

This paper explores two families and the ties that bind them in early Roman Tebtunis. Both families belonged to the village elite of Tebtunis, but seemingly to different ends of it. The reason that nonetheless both families saw fit to marry their children to one another could reflect a marriage strategy on both ends, which in turn could be interpreted as a reaction to the coming of Roman rule to Egypt.



The village Tebtunis, in the South West of Egypt's Fayum depression, is a rich source for archaeological and papyrological material. Ever since the English archaeologists Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt first started the exploration of this site in 1899/1900, Tebtunis has been on the archaeological and papyrological map of Egypt (see Gallazzi, 1989 for an overview of all activity on this site). On the papyrological side, the village has yielded an enormous amount of documents, and continues to do so as excavations continue.

One of the more famous groups of papyri from Tebtunis is the so-called *grapheion* archive. This group consists of several hundreds of texts that belonged to the *grapheion*, or record office, of the village during the early Roman period (Pestman, 1995). Most of the papyri are currently part of the papyrus collection of the University of Michigan (<http://www.lib.umich.edu/pap>), but texts from this group have also made it into other collections. The bulk of the archive was published in *P.Mich.* II and V.

The *grapheion* archive consists of long ledgers in which the village notary of Tebtunis kept track of all contracts he drew up. Some of these ledgers are very elaborate and give a summary of the various contracts, others are more concise and give only the type of contract, the names of the contracting parties, and the fee paid to the notary. In addition there are also copies of actual contracts (in various states of completion), and long accounts in which the notary keeps track of his expenses like the cost of papyrus and that of night scribes when the volume of contracts was very high.

The *grapheion* archive has proven a wonderful source for social and economic history in Egypt in the early first century AD (Toepel, 1973). Keith Hopkins further used the material for an assessment of the literacy rates in Tebtunis (Hopkins, 1988), by comparing which individuals could sign the contracts themselves (and therefore were literate at least to some extent), and those who could not sign and had to use somebody else. Deborah Hobson used the archive to discuss the economic role of women in Tebtunis (Hobson, 1984), and Jane Rowlandson the land tenure patterns (Rowlandson, 1999).

The *grapheion* archive also allows us to gain insight in particular families, not only in their economic transactions, but also in their composition and relations with other families. It appears that there are several families in Tebtunis who are economically very active and therefore show up in the documents fairly frequently. Most of these families belong to the elite of Tebtunis, because they have the property to make economic transactions with. We can establish that the elite of Tebtunis in this period consisted of native Egyptians (the priests of the important temple of Soknebtunis in the village), people of Greek descent (descendants of the soldier-settlers, *katoikoi*, of Ptolemaic Egypt), and a group of mixed Greek-Egyptian descent.

In this paper I will discuss two families in Tebtunis, whose economic activities are illustrated in relative detail by various documents from the *grapheion* archive. Both families were interrelated through marriage. Although both families belonged to the village elite of Tebtunis in this period, I do think that they belonged to different ends of it. Nonetheless, they both saw fit to have their children married to one another. I hope to show that the reason why this happened was a reaction from the part of the village elites to the coming of Roman rule. This research is part of a larger project on the village elite of early Roman Tebtunis.

The first family is that of the descendants of Lusimachos (for a family tree, see *P.Mich.* V, p. 17). The family was probably from the mixed Egyptian-Greek side of society. This is suggested by the fact that the youngest son has the very Egyptian name Haruotes, and that the oldest son, Galates, was married to a woman with an Egyptian name (Taorses). Haruotes, it appears, also wrote one of his several marriage contracts in Egyptian Demotic (*P.Mich.* V 340 Recto, 22-27: "according to two other contracts ... of which one is an Egyptian alimentary contract, while the other is Greek"), and since his wife was coming from a wholly Greek stock (see below) this was probably not her doing.

Lusimachos had six children, five boys and one girl. The second oldest son, Didumos the elder, we know, performed the functions of village scribe, the most important local office, in 41/42 AD (*P.Mich.* V 267). Possibly, the father Lusimachos himself was village scribe too (*P.Tebt.* II 346 and 410), a pattern that is known from elsewhere. If this holds true, we would have in this family a family of notables who divided the office of village scribe (and possibly other offices) among themselves.

There are some indications that in the early first century this family ran into some financial trouble. Part of this trouble arose after the father Lusimachos had died. The surviving children (and for the deceased brother his children) had mortgaged the paternal inheritance (a substantial 82 arouras, about 16 times more than needed to sustain a family) but were unable to repay the loan. Shortly before 36 AD the borrowers had taken possession of the land (*SB* V 7568). Another sign of trouble in this family can be seen in the numerous agreements between the youngest brother Haruotes and his father-in-law, who keeps giving him extra financial sources to take care of his wife (*P.Mich.* V 340 Recto I-II; *P.Mich.* V 341).

The second family is that of the descendant of Herakleides the younger (for a family tree, see *P.Mich.* V, p. 17). This family was probably from the real Greek side of society, descending from the soldier-settlers who received a plot of land in the early Ptolemaic period. This is suggested by the names of especially the female members of this family (Arsinoe, Herakleia), which go back directly to the Greek-Macedonian rulers of

Ptolemaic Egypt (Bagnall 1997:11-12). As such this family probably belonged to the higher end of the village elite.

Herakleides the younger had eight children, six boys and two girls. One of the girls, Arsinoe, was married to one of the boys from the family introduced above, Lusimachos. One of the girl's cousins, Herakleia, was married to another boy from the family introduced above, Haruotes. Thus there are two established and clear links between both families.

It appears that this second family was doing much better than the first. The father had acquired more land (107 arouras plus a vineyard), and in this family the mother also had acquired property in the form a fair number of slaves (*P.Mich.* V 326). Both the paternal and the maternal inheritance fell to the children after their death in equal shares. The parents apparently had taken precautions not to have his inheritance be divided too much, by having one of their two daughters, Arsinoe, release her claim on the inheritance in return for full possession of her dowry (*P.Mich.* V 350; 37 AD). The other daughter married a cousin, thus keeping her share of the inheritance within the larger family. After the death of both parents the children decided, like the children in the first family, not to divide the inheritance, but in 48 AD they divided everything up (*P. Mich.* V 326). Although this needs more research, it is my feeling that such divisions of property only take place when the financial outlook of the family was judged to be good.

The interesting part remains why the successful family (the descendants of Herakleides the younger) links itself through marriage with what appears to be an unsuccessful family (the descendants of Lusimachos). That Herakleides the younger was aware of the fact that this was not economically profitable for his side of the family, is suggested by the daughter releasing her claim on the inheritance (*P.Mich.* V 350). Thus he made sure that the children of that marriage would not inherit more than the dowry of their mother. That being married to the children of Lusimachos really involved an investment of money from the side of the Herakleides family is also clear from the other marriage between both families. Here we can establish that the Herakleides family (in this case Herakleides' brother Didumos) keeps investing land and money in the marriage of his daughter with Haruotes to enable him to financially take care of his wife (*P.Mich.* V 340 Recto I-II).

The fact that the Herakleides family apparently was willing to pay a price (but not too much) to maintain the marriages with the Lusimachos family to me suggests that the Herakleides family expected to gain from the unions. On the basis of what we can establish about the Lusimachos family, it is unlikely that this gain was financial. The only other potentially interesting asset of the Lusimachos family is, as far as I can see, that they, at this time, still have access to the office of village scribe. It could be that through linking themselves through marriage, the Herakleides family sought to ally themselves with the family with the connections.

As such, the alliance between the two families then could be seen as a sign of the times. In the Ptolemaic period families would stress their 'Greekness' to acquire prestige within society. This is not to say that they necessarily were of Greek descent, but that they represented themselves as Greek (speaking Greek; frequenting the gymnasium; etc.); this could also be done by Egyptian families. In the early Roman period, representing oneself as Greek was no longer a firm basis for social prestige within a village, because the Romans did not recognize this. For them all inhabitants of the Egyptian countryside were 'Egyptians', as opposed to Roman citizens and citizens of the so-called Greek cities (*poleis*: Alexandria, Naukratis, Ptolemais) (Bagnall, 1997). Social prestige had to be sought through different means in the Roman period and one of the ways to acquire social prestige was to ally oneself with the Roman authorities by taking up a public office. It may well be that in the Herakleides family discussed above we have a family that is adapting to new circumstances by allying itself to the family who provides the most important public office, that of village scribe, instead of taking up this office themselves. A further stage in this development can perhaps be seen in Philadelphia, where possibly the old Greek elite has actually taken over part of the village offices and can be seen to actively perform those offices (Hanson, 1989). The gains of the Lusimachos family from these unions may have been financial, in that they secured at least some financial prospects for the children of these marriages.

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