

PETER VAN MINNEN

DID ANCIENT WOMEN LEARN A TRADE OUTSIDE THE HOME?

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A NOTE ON SB XVIII 13305

In his useful monograph *Discovering the Roman Family: Studies in Roman Social History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) Keith R. Bradley discusses, among other things, the apprenticeship contracts from Roman Egypt. In a chapter entitled 'Child labor in the Roman world' (pp. 103-124) he reviews thirty such contracts from the first three centuries of Roman rule and makes the following observation (p. 108):

Within the documents three categories of apprentices can be distinguished: males who were freeborn, males who were slaves, and females who were slaves. Freeborn girls do not appear at all, and that is a detail of some significance, for it implies that daughters in artisanal families, like their counterparts in upper-class society at Rome, may not normally have been trained for work other than that of a traditional, domestic sort, but were instead prepared only for marriage and childbearing in the seclusive manner typical of women's life in antiquity as a whole.

A remarkably bold conclusion on the basis of just thirty apprenticeship contracts. In this article I will argue that Bradley overlooks important evidence that shows that in Roman Egypt some freeborn females did learn a trade outside the home and that his interpretation of the (supposed) lack of apprenticeship contracts for freeborn girls is wrong.

To begin with the latter: if no (or relatively few) freeborn females learned a trade outside the home, they may have learned one at home from their older relatives. The presence of freeborn craftswomen in our documentation presupposes that they learned their trade somewhere, either outside the home or at home. If they learned it at home, this by no means implies that their trade was of a traditional, domestic sort. Many freeborn men also learned a trade at home, but nobody yet has argued that they were 'domestics.' In antiquity, as in pretransitional societies generally, the majority of crafts happen to have been practised at home. The presence of freeborn craftswomen in our documentation also shows that some women at least were not prepared for marriage and childbearing only.

Why did no (or relatively few) freeborn females learn a trade outside the home? By the time they were old enough to be apprenticed to a master, they were also old enough to get married. According to the census documents from Roman Egypt,¹ freeborn girls started to get married in their early teens, whereas freeborn males waited with getting married until their late teens or early twenties. Parents of freeborn females of marriageable age preferred to keep them at home, to keep them from losing their virginity. With freeborn males and male and female slaves there were apparently no such worries on the part of their parents or owners.

Bradley uses thirty apprenticeship contracts to support his case. There are a few more such contracts. In the most recent list of Greek apprenticeship contracts from Egypt² there is in fact an apprenticeship contract for a freeborn female, P.Heid. IV 326 of A.D. 98. In that document a man and a woman entrust their daughter to another man and another woman. Although the document is incomplete and what remains of it does not contain a clause showing definitively that it is an apprenticeship contract, a year later the same man entrusts what seems to be his nephew to the same woman in another

¹ See R.S. Bagnall and B.W. Frier, *The Demography of Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 111-118.

² M. Bergamasco, 'Le didascalicali nella ricerca attuale,' *Aegyptus* 75 (1995), 95-167.

apprenticeship contract, P.Heid. IV 327 of A.D. 99, which refers to the previous document as an apprenticeship contract for his daughter (ll. 36-39).

To this document one might add a Coptic document from the eighth century, now KSB I 045.³ In that document a woman entrusts her daughter to another woman, Maria. When the document was first published,⁴ it was the only apprenticeship contract for a freeborn girl entrusted to a craftswoman, which led the editor to suggest the following:

Vielleicht wurde die 'Flechtere' in Heimarbeit betrieben und bei der Frau Maria handelt es sich dann nicht um eine Handwerkerin im eigentlichen Sinne, sondern um eine in dieser Art der Heimarbeit besonders erfahrene Frau.

As I already mentioned, most crafts were practiced as 'Heimarbeit.' Nobody has yet suggested that the craftsmen attested in our documentation were not craftsmen 'im eigentlichen Sinne,' because they happen to have worked at home. The same standard should be applied to the craftswomen who worked at home. Maria was a craftswoman.

When the Coptic document was first published, it was the only apprenticeship contract involving a craftswoman as teacher. In the mean time, a second example has been published, SB XVIII 13305. In that document of A.D. 271, a man entrusts a girl to a craftswoman, Aurelia Libouke. When the document was first published,⁵ the editor failed to notice its innovative character, at least as far as our Greek documentation is concerned. Although the upper part of the document is much damaged, he restored it with great confidence. His readings cannot always be substantiated with the help of the plate accompanying the *editio princeps*.⁶ What is especially worrying is the supplement in lines 8-9:

ἐξ[έ]δ[ε]τ[ο] Αὐρήλιος Ἰσίων
 Νειλάμμω[νο]ς τῶ[ν] ἀπὸ κώ-
 μης [Κα]ρ[ανί]δος Αὐρη[λί]α Λι-
 4 βουκ[ῆ] . . . αδιών[ος ἀπ' ἀμ]-
 φόδου Βιθυνῶν ἄλλων τόπων
 χωρὶς κυρ[ίου] χ]ρη(ματιζούση) τέκνων δι-
 8 καίω γερδιαίνη τὴν τοῦ αὐτοῦ
 Ἰσίωνος [παιδίσκη]ν [π]αρά
 Α[ὐ]ρηλί[α] Λιβουκῆ . . .

We do not need the awkward phrase *παρὰ Αὐρηλίᾳ Λιβουκῆ*. Moreover, in the rest of the text the girl is referred to as ἡ παῖς, not ἡ παιδίσκη. The editor translates ἡ παῖς as 'girl' or 'slave girl.' The latter is potentially misleading. In apprenticeship contracts for freeborn males the boy is sometimes referred to as ὁ παῖς.

I think that we can safely reject [παιδίσκη]ν [π]αρά in line 8 of SB XVIII 13305. Only the last two letters are certain. I suggest taking them as the last two letters of *θυγατέρα*. In that case we are dealing with a freeborn girl. When she is referred to as ἡ παῖς in the rest of the text it merely means 'the girl.' Because the traces preceding -ρα are far from clear, I am not certain which letters of the word *θυγατέρα*

³ M.R.M. Hasitzka, *Koptisches Sammelbuch* (Wien: Brüder Hollinek 1993), 35-36.

⁴ By F. Hintze, 'Ein koptischer Lehrvertrag,' *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 104 (1977), 93-96; the quotation in the text is from p. 94.

⁵ By O. Pearl, 'Apprenticeship contract,' *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 22 (1985), 255-259; the plate is on p. 259.

⁶ In ll. 26-27 the scribe wrote τέλχην, not τέχλην. In l. 40-41 the editor reads ἐπὶ πᾶν τοῦ χρόνου and translates 'for the whole time.' Apprentices indeed received some money 'for the whole time,' usually at the end of the apprenticeship period. The plate shows that the papyrus has ἐπὶ τέλει (for τέλει) τοῦ χρόνου, 'at the end of the period,' as expected, thus removing the odd hyphenation.

they represent (perhaps θυ]γα[τ]έρα?). Θυγατέρα alone is not long enough to fill the space following Ἰσίωνος. Perhaps we should add (e.g.) ἀδελφοῦ before θυγατέρα, thus making the girl a daughter, not of Ision, but of his (presumably deceased) brother. This is merely a suggestion; in P.Heid. IV 327 we have another case in which a man apprentices the offspring of a deceased relative, and there are relatively many other such cases. In line 9 of SB XVIII 13305 instead of Αὐρηλίᾳ Λιβουκῆ we should read the name of the girl, Α[ὐρ]ηλί[αν] so-and-so, which I cannot decipher. Αὐρήλιος / Αὐρηλία was used for persons of freeborn status only.

If my interpretation of SB XVIII 13305 is correct, we now have three apprenticeship contracts for freeborn females. This contrasts with the twenty-eight apprenticeship contracts for freeborn males.⁷ In two cases the freeborn girls are entrusted to a woman (SB XVIII 13305 and KSB I 045), in one case to a woman and her husband (P.Heid. IV 326). Thanks to these women the parents could be reasonably certain that their daughters would not lose their virginity while away from home to learn a trade.

Ancient women did sometimes learn a trade outside the home, but not as often as their male counterparts – not because they rarely learned a trade ‘im eigentlichen Sinne,’ but because they tended to learn one at home from their relatives. That was safer.

Peter van Minnen

Leuven

⁷ In addition there are five apprenticeship contracts each for male and female slaves. The status of one boy and one girl is uncertain (in apprenticeship contracts nos. 30 and 40 listed by Bergamasco).