A Nun’s Dispute with Her Mother in *P.Lond.* V 1731

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*P.Lond.* V 1731, dated to 20th September AD 585 in Syene, is a document attesting the conclusion of a monetary dispute between two women, Aurelia Tsone, denoted with the term μοναχή (l. 4): Αὐρηλία Τσόνη θυγάτηρ Μηνᾶ ἐκ μητρὸς Ταπίας μοναχή ὀρμωμένη ἀπὸ Σύνης (and also in ll. 39, 50), and her mother, Aurelia Tapia.

The origin of the conflict between daughter and mother is a sum of money. In the text of this document, Tsone relates that she had previously claimed four gold *solidi* from her mother (ll. 12–14): καὶ μετὰ τὸ προβεβηκέναι με τῇ ἑννόμῳ ἥλικῃ ἐπεξηλθὼν οἱ ἐνάγουσα ἑνεκα τῶν αὐτῶν τεσσάρων νομισμάτων. The basis for this claim, she explains, is that when her parents divorced, her father Menas gave her mother, Tapia, this money to pay for her maintenance through childhood (ll. 14–15): λέγουσα ταύτά σοι δοθήσαι περὶ τῆς ἐκ παιδίας ἀναγκαίας μου τροφῆς. Eventually, however, the daughter returned to live in the household of Menas, who took care of her instead (ll. 15–16): διὰ τὸ οὖν τραφήσαι μὲ ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρός μου. At her father’s death, Tsone accordingly claimed the money given for maintenance back from her mother.

The document records that Aurelia Tsone won the dispute, and that it was decided that she should receive the money from her mother. We do not know how long the dispute lasted, but the papyrus informs us that there were many claims and counter-claims (ll. 18–19): καὶ πολλῶν λεχάντων καὶ ἀντιλεχάντων, from the moment Tsone reached legal age (ll. 13–14).

This is the only document we have specifically concerning this disagreement. However, since this papyrus belongs to the Patermouthis Archive, other papyri in the same collection contribute to our reconstruction of the story.

There are two chief points of interest in the affair: first, the situation during and after the parents’ divorce; second, the fact that Tsone, their only child, is apparently a nun.

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3 This straightforward interpretation of monaché has been assumed by most scholars, including most notably Bell, *op.cit.* (above, n. 2) 168; P. Barison, “Ricerche sui monasteri dell’Egitto bizantino ed arabo secondo i documenti dei papiro greci,” *Aegyptus* 18 (1938) 147; Farber, *op.cit.* (above, n. 2) 133; J. Rowlandson (ed.), *Women and Society in Greek and Roman*
The origin of the dispute lies in the divorce of Tsone’s parents, and in her mother’s subsequent remarriage (l. 16): καὶ ἐτέρῳ ἀνδρὶ.

The pair divorced when Tsone was very young (ll. 9–11): διαβολὴν καὶ σατανικὴν ἐνέργειαν ἀπεχωρίσθης ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ. The divorce was by mutual consent, since we find the expression “through the workings of the devil and Satan you were divorced from him,” a phrase typically employed in connection with such arrangements. It is also used in other Egyptian divorce deeds from the fourth century onwards, and is apparently a general formula by which both parties to the divorce are relieved of guilt.

Upon divorce by mutual agreement a woman recovered her dowry, and might also obtain other sums of money from her husband. If she remarried, however, she was supposed to put aside these amounts for the children born to the first marriage.

In Tapia and Menas’ divorce decree, which has not been preserved, there was probably some kind of reference to the refund of the dowry to Tapia, together with the sum established for the maintenance of their presumably only child. In our document Tsone declares that Menas had given four gold coins to Tapia when they divorced (ll. 11–12): καὶ τὸν πατέρας Μηνᾶ χρυσὸν νομισμάτα τέσσερα. This quantity, probably stipulated in the divorce decree, was given to Tapia for the maintenance of Tsone. For this reason Tapia’s claim that this was part of her dowry was rejected at trial (ll. 17–18): ἀμφιβάλεις λέγουσα εἶναι τὰ αὐτὰ τέσσερα νομίσματα ὑπέρ ἀπολύσεως μου καὶ προικὸς.

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6 Cf. 5.17.8.

7 CTh. 3.8.2 = Cf. 5.9.3; Beaucamp, op.cit. (above, n. 4) I 229–232.

8 Ibid., II 139–140 contains the list of divorce deeds from the third through the sixth centuries.

9 Cf. P.Panop. 28 = SB XII 11221 (329); Chrest. Mitt. 300 = P.Lips. I 41 (Herm., 4th); PSI I 49 (Antin., 4th); PSI IX 1075 (Oxy., 458); W.C. Till, "Eine koptische Alimentenforderung," BSAC 4 (1938) 71–78.
We can suppose that during the divorce the couple decided custody of the girl lay with the mother, and it is for this reason that the father delivered the money to Tapia for her maintenance. Apparently, however, Tapia soon remarried, and returned the girl to her father almost immediately.

Generally when a couple divorced by mutual agreement, the only legal disadvantage suffered by the woman was an interdiction on remarriage for a period of one year. We can assume, then, that Tsone remained with her mother for at least a year, although probably not much longer than that: while we do not know the precise span, Tapia seems to have remarried quickly following her divorce from Menas.

When Tsone rejoined Menas’ household, he did not claim the maintenance money allocated to her, probably because he had the means to maintain the girl himself. According to law it was Menas who had to claim the four coins, and it is on these grounds that Tsone claims this money after her father’s death and refers to him as *makarios* (l. 9): ὁ μακάριος μου πατὴρ Μηνᾶς. Other documents in the Patermouthis Archive reveal further aspects of Tapia’s life. Apparently she divorced Menas in order to marry a rich man, who belonged to an important family of Syene. Through *P.Lond.* V 1849 + *P.Münch.* I 6, dated to AD 583, we know that this wealthy second husband was named Iakobos, and that the couple had two children, Ioannes and Kako, the latter of whom married Patermouthis. We do not know when Tapia and Iakobos were married. Probably, as mentioned above, it was not long after the divorce from Menas.

By the time of the dispute with Tsone (AD 585) Tapia had, however, become a widow, Iakobos having died in AD 583. The above-mentioned *P.Lond.* V 1849 + *P.Münch.* I 6, dated to the same year, indicates that Tapia was also during this period involved in dispute with her other two children, this time concerning the division of Iakobos’ property.

The progress of Tapia’s dispute with Ioannes and Kako was in many ways parallel to the contest with Tsone. Having originally made extensive claims upon her deceased husband’s property, she subsequently agreed that the property was to be divided into three parts between herself and the two children. Nevertheless, her son was to accuse her of defaulting upon the agreement, giving rise to another dispute. The quarrel was finally resolved nine years later in favour of Ioannes – who also received, over and above his disputed property, another four gold coins (*P.Münch.* I 14).

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10 The custody of children after divorce was adjudicated, without prejudice to either the father or the mother, as a private decision between the couple Cf. *P.Flor.* I 93 = *P.Lond.* V 1713 (Antin., 569); *P.Lond.* V 1712 (Antin., 569); *P.Cair.Masp.* II 67154 (Antin., 527–565); *P.Cair.Masp.* II 67155 (Antin., 6th).

11 *Cf.* 5.17.9; cf. Beaucamp, *op.cit.* (above, n. 4) I 227.

12 Nov. 22, c. 32 (Justinian, AD 536).


14 Farber, *op.cit.* (above, n. 2) 114–117.

15 Iakobos was one of the three sons of Dios, a prosperous Nile boatman at Syene, and the only one to have joined his father in the family shipping business, *P.Münch.* I 11 (AD 574).

16 The first time Pathermouthis and Kako appear as a married couple is in *P.Lond.* V 1724, dated between AD 578 and 582.

17 Tapia was not a party to the διάλυσις in the first family quarrel of AD 574, *P.Münch.* I 1. But she was certainly married to Iakobos; between 4 and 8 years later, their daughter Kako was already married to Patermouthis (*P.Lond.* V 1724).
In addition, through *P. Münch.* I 9 (AD 585) we know that when Tsone was awarded her victory Tapia was not in Syene, but in Antinoopolis with her brother. Possibly she had been living there for two years; *P. Lond.* V 1860 + *P. Münch.* I 7, which record the attempts of her children to allocate the paternal property, is dated to AD 583 in this city.

It is impossible to know exactly how long Tapia stayed in Antinoopolis, or if she remained there the rest of her life. We can presume that when Tsone wrote this document she submitted it to Patermouthis, Tapia’s son-in-law, because Tapia herself was away in Antinoopolis, and it is for this reason that the papyrus remained part of the family archive. Alternatively, Tapia’s children and heirs may have preserved the document to forestall further claims by Tsone or her family upon the estate.

In fact, Aurelia Tsone appears in only this document in the Patermouthis Archive. The three times she occurs in the papyrus, she is referred to using the term μοναχή (ll. 4, 39, 50). Translated literally, the word means “alone,” or “single.” In the document we also find the phrase “acting on her own behalf, without a husband as guardian” (l. 8), a formula clearly indicating that Tsone is acting alone and independently. The force of μοναχή here, however, is probably more specific than the generic sense “single,” for when the formula is found in another document in the same archive, in *P. Lond.* V 1855 + *P. Münch.* I 15, l. 3 (AD 493), the woman in question is not described with the term μοναχή.

In particular, from the fourth century onwards, the word is employed in the papyri as a monastic title, in both the masculine and feminine genders, and by the late sixth century the use of the word with the meaning “monk” or “nun” is well established. It is likely, then, that the word here, found always in conjunction with the name, is being used to indicate that Tsone was a nun.

It is difficult to be more precise based on linguistic evidence alone: when used as a monastic title μοναχή in the papyri does not refer to any particular kind of asceticism or monasticism. Rather, it is employed generically, and it is not immediately obvious what kind of life-style it refers to in the case of Tsone. In those papyri chiefly concerned with private or personal matters, μοναχή appears to describe women who did not live in a monastic community, instead residing in private dwellings – apparently alone, but maintaining social relationships with the community around them. Other women, mentioned in documents oriented more towards the public sphere such as lists of accounts, seem to belong to...
monastic communities. In addition, terms such as *Ama* are occasionally encountered, indicating a woman's connection to and relationship with a monastery.

The papyrus in question, however, makes no mention of any monastic affiliation or title on Tsone's part, which it surely would have done had she been associated with an ascetic community. In *P.Lond. V 1724* (AD 578–582), another personal document in the same archive, there appears a μονάζων called Ioannes,24 said to belong to the monastery of Pampa in Syene.25 Such a reference to one's monastic ties would have been near-mandatory in Tsone's case: Roman law26 established that any nun who lived in a monastery and was engaged in a legal dispute could not leave the institution, but had to appoint a representative to act on her behalf in court. Had Tsone belonged to a monastery, some designated person would presumably have been appointed from or by it to act in her stead.

If Tsone was a nun, then, she must have been an urban ascetic; that is to say, since she did not live in a monastic community, she must have lived alone in her own house, probably from the death of her father onwards. Such life-style is an early form of asceticism attested in our literary sources and in the papyri.27 In the Coptic *Gnomai of Nicæa*,28 dated to the early fifth century, the term μοναχὴ is used to designate a female urban ascetic; and in *P.Oxy. XLIV 3203* (AD 400), the two women described as μοναχαὶ ἀποτακτικαὶ probably led an urban ascetic life.29 Together they owned a house, engaged in commercial transactions, and maintained social roles and relationships within their urban context; and it is to this early-established pattern of female urban asceticism that Tsone appears to conform.

Such a life-style was most likely funded by a substantial inheritance upon the death of Menas, the dispute with Tapia being essentially a side issue. Given the familial rancour that dispute against one's own mother would necessarily arouse and Tapia's skill in bothersome and protracted delaying tactics, Tsone shows herself willing to expend considerable effort and emotional strain to gain a victory that must have appeared often in doubt: revenge, perhaps, for her mother's unwillingness to care for her in childhood?

The limited evidence afforded by the papyri does not allow one to draw firm conclusions on such matters. If the information they yield about Aurelia Tsone is sparse, however, the few facts the papyri do reveal are illuminating. Tsone was apparently a nun, capable of acting freely and independently on her own behalf – and this freedom was likely a function of her urban and ascetic lifestyle, whereby she lived an independent existence in her own house. If this is true, it means that this ascetic model of life, well established in earlier epochs, persisted and was socially accepted well into the sixth century.

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24 Ioannes is described using the term μονάζων in *P.Lond. V 1729* (584).
26 Nov. 123, c. 27 (Justinian, AD 546).
27 S. Elm, ‘Virgins of God’: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity (Oxford 1994); Wipszycka, op.cit. (above, n. 4).