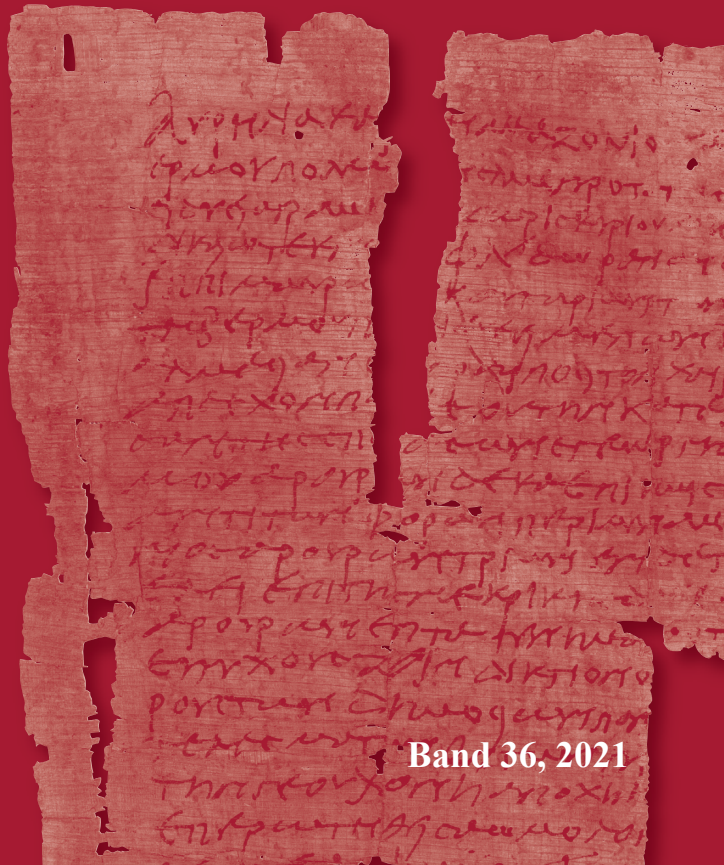


# TYCHE

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Papyrologie und Epigraphik



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MARIANNA THOMA  
AMPHILOCHIOS PAPATHOMAS

## The Use of Threat as a Rhetorical Strategy in Women's Papyrus Letters

Letters preserved on papyrus and ostraca from Graeco-Roman Egypt and the ancient Near East have attracted the interest of scholars from various disciplines, since they provide a sense of direct access to the lives and thoughts of people who lived in post-classical antiquity. Women's letters provide us with rich information about their everyday experiences, emotions and social attitudes. What is more, this valuable evidence is unfiltered by men: contrary to literary texts, in most of which we learn about women through male voices, in the papyrus letters women express themselves on their own behalf, even if they occasionally use scribes. In 2006, R. S. Bagnall and R. Cribiore published an important collection of women's letters recorded on papyri and ostraca dating from early Hellenistic to late antique Egypt. This collection, which appeared in an enlarged electronic version two years later,<sup>1</sup> constitutes a fundamental corpus for the study of women in the Graeco-Roman world. A new monograph about women letter-writers in antiquity, including an updated corpus of women's letters preserved on Greek papyri and ostraca (250 items so-far), has just been published by M. Thoma.<sup>2</sup>

Numerous common elements can be found in men's and women's letters. Both groups of letters share common topics, formulaic expressions, epistolary conventions, rhetorical appeals and strategies of communication towards their addressees. They discuss similar family, business and economic issues, ask for the delivery of similar items and send the same greetings and wishes to relatives and friends.<sup>3</sup> However, a comparative study of the two corpora also offers us a valuable glimpse into gender differentiated approaches in a number of areas, above all in the expression of thoughts and feelings.

The various means of persuasion and emotional expression in papyrus letters written by male and female authors has been the object of numerous studies.<sup>4</sup> An issue that has

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<sup>1</sup> R. S. Bagnall, R. Cribiore (with contributions by E. Ahtaridis), *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt: 300 BC – AD 800*, Ann Arbor 2006 (e-book 2008).

<sup>2</sup> M. Thoma, *Γυναίκες Επιστολογράφοι στους Αρχαίους Ελληνικούς Παπύρους*, Athens 2020. The book contains modern Greek translations and a detailed analysis of the letters.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Bagnall, Cribiore, *Women's Letters* (n. 1) 13.

<sup>4</sup> For the development of politeness strategies and the formulation of imperative requests in papyrus letters, see E. Dickey, *Emotional language and formulae of persuasion in Greek*

not yet been extensively analyzed in women's letters is the use of threats as a means of persuasion and/or expression of feelings. Evidence is unfortunately scarce, a fact that could be attributed to the inferior social position of women and their restricted legal rights in ancient society: Their social status may have discouraged them from expressing themselves in an aggressive tone, by threatening, blaming, and giving harsh orders to their addressees. The aims of the present paper are twofold: first to analyze the relevant evidence in women's letters as expression of their emotions and rhetorical strategies, and secondly to compare women's threats to those addressed by men and minors in their letters focusing on gender differentiation.

### I. Applying pressure: the threat of suicide

Women's threats in their letters are mostly expressed on an emotional level, with the intention of gaining their correspondent's attention or help. In some cases, when feeling helpless, they go so far as to threaten with self-harm or even suicide. This type of threat could be either a sincere expression of total despair or a way of sentimental persuasion or even manipulation of the will of the recipient of the letter. An interesting example is offered by P.Petaus 29 (2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE). Didymarion, an elderly widow,<sup>5</sup> wrote to Paniskos, the brother of her son-in-law, expressing her worries about her daughter's extreme mental state.<sup>6</sup> She feared that the daughter's mother-in-law made the girl's life so miserable that she planned to commit suicide by drowning herself in the sea.<sup>7</sup> One can assume that the girl had earlier described her situation to her mother, highlighting that living in the same house as her mother-in-law was so intolerable that she would prefer to die than to spend another month with her. The threat of suicide is used as a

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*papyrus letters*, in: E. Sanders, M. Johncock (eds.), *Emotion and Persuasion in Classical Antiquity*, Stuttgart 2016, 237–262 with further literature; A. Koroli, *To αίτημα στις ελληνικές ιδιωτικές επιστολές σε παπίρους και όστρακα: από την εποχή του Αυγούστου ως το τέλος της αρχαιότητας*, Athens 2016, 231–256; ead., *Imposing psychological pressure in papyrus request letters: A case study of six Byzantine letters written in an ecclesiastical context*, in: K. Bentein, M. Janse (eds.), *Varieties of Post-classical and Byzantine Greek*, Berlin 2020, 75–113. Cf. also K. Ridealgh, L. Unceta Gómez, *Potestas and the language of power: Conceptualising an approach to Power and Discernment politeness in ancient languages*, *Journal of Pragmatics* 170 (2020) 231–244. For politeness strategies in Greek papyrus letters from late antiquity, see also A. Papatomas, *Höflichkeit und Servilität in den griechischen Papyrusbriefen der ausgehenden Antike*, in: B. Palme (ed.), *Akten des 23. Internationalen Papyrologenkongresses. Wien, 22.–28. Juli*, Wien 2007, 497–512. For the use of language of power in ancient texts in general, see Ridealgh, Unceta Gómez, *Potestas* (op. cit.) 231–244. For the expression of feelings in papyrus letters, see W. Clarysse, *Emotions in Greek Private Papyrus Letters*, *AncSoc* 47 (2017) 63–86.

<sup>5</sup> On the status and role of widows in Roman society, see J.-U. Krause, *Witwen und Waisen im römischen Reich*, vol. I: *Verwitwung und Wiederverheiratung*, Stuttgart 1994; vol. II: *Wirtschaftliche und gesellschaftliche Stellung von Witwen*, Stuttgart 1994; vol. IV: *Witwen und Waisen im frühen Christentum*, Stuttgart 1995.

<sup>6</sup> See Bagnall, Criboire, *Women's Letters* (n. 1) 276; S. Huebner, *The Family in Roman Egypt: A Comparative Approach to Intergenerational Solidarity and Conflict*, Cambridge 2013, 147 and Thoma, *Γυναίκες Επιστολογράφοι* (n. 2) 37–38, 176, 205 and 403–405.

<sup>7</sup> The girl was probably in Alexandria to judge from her threat to throw herself into the sea.

means of persuasion by both women. First, the daughter's threat implying her frustration is used to emphasize her desperate need for help. The girl's threat is then used by Didymarion as a means of persuading Paniskos to intervene and de-escalate family tensions. Didymarion, who lived away from her daughter, felt unable to help her and pleaded that Paniskos might act as head of the family. The threat of suicide quoted in direct speech has a central position in Didymarion's letter to him (ll. 7–10): ἔ[γ]ραψέ | μοι γὰρ λέγουσα ὅτι ἐὰν ἔτι μῆνα οὕτω ποι[σ]η (l. -ήση) ἐχόνομά μου βάλλω ἐματι[ή]ν (l. ἐμαυτήν) | ἱς (l. εἰς) θάλασσαν, aiming at the immediate improvement of her daughter's life conditions.

A threat full of disappointment and anxiety is expressed in PSI III 177 (2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. CE) written by a certain Isidora to her husband Hermias.<sup>8</sup> The writer is afraid that her child is about to die and asks her husband to return home immediately to help. After describing the severity of the child's illness and her worries about his forthcoming death (ll. 4–6, cf. BL I 392: τὸ π[αι]δὶν νοσεῖ λεπτὸν γέγον[εν] οὐκ ἔ(?)]φαγε· ἡμέραι [l. ἡμέραι] δ' εἰσί), she threatens to hang herself if the child dies during her husband's absence (ll. 8–10; cf. BL VI 173: μάθε δὲ ὅτι, ἐὰν ἀ[ποθάνη] | σου μὴ ὄντος ὧδε φευγ[ε] μή | με εὐρήσῃ ἀπαγομέ[νην - -]). Her desperate threat of committing suicide reflects her emotional stress and should be considered as an ultimate attempt to persuade her husband to come back home. Even if she did not plan to carry out her threat, Isidora expresses her deep fear of confronting her child's life-threatening situation without her husband's support.

In both examples, the threat of suicide is related to a family issue and is used to emphasize the writer's psychological distress, also affecting the recipient on an emotional level. Such a threat could be very persuasive, since the addressee had to accept that if he did not act immediately, he would be to blame for showing indifference towards a desperate woman, determined to end her life. A question that still remains is whether we should take these threats literally or consider them as hyperbole in the context of rhetorical persuasion. It is most likely that the aforementioned letter-writers try to manipulate their addressees' will by exaggerating that they would commit suicide although they did not intend to kill themselves.

## II. Using emotional language: "I will die if I don't see you soon"

In many cases, female letter-writers choose to put emotional pressure on their recipients by using pathetic language in non-life threatening situations, for instance by telling the male recipients that they would die because they no longer communicated with them. In doing so, they try to make their beloved persons realize how much they care about them and how sad they feel because of their absence.

Two illustrative examples are encountered in the archive of the strategus Apollonios dating to the second century Hermopolite nome. In P.Giss. 17, a female servant named Teeus, who appears to be a very familiar person to the strategus Apollonios, writes a

<sup>8</sup> Bagnall, Cribiore, *Women's Letters* (n. 1) 280; Huebner, *Family in Roman Egypt* (n. 6) 69 and Thoma, *Γυναίκες Επιστολογράφοι* (n. 2) 114, 168, 216 and 463–464.

letter full of anguish about his illness. She politely requests Apollonios to send someone to collect her and probably other servants; in the same sentence she threatens that they will die, if they remain away from him (ll. 7–10; cf. BL IV 33): πα|ρακαλω σε, κύριε, εάν σοι δόξη, και πέμ|πειν ἐφ' ἡμᾶς, εἰ δὲ μή, ἀποθνήσκομεν | ὅτι οὐ βλέπομέν σε καθ' ἡμέραν.<sup>9</sup> In her study on the women of the archive of Apollonios, R. Cribiore remarked that the hand of the letter P.Giss. 17 is the least elegant in the archive and may belong to Teeus herself.<sup>10</sup> Teeus had probably learned to write in Apollonios' house and her deep desire to see her master motivated her to write the above letter without the help of a professional scribe. Her "threat" should be regarded as a genuine expression of her affection and anguish for Apollonios' safety.

The second example, P.Giss. 19 (= P.Giss.Apol. 8), also from the same archive, preserves the letter of Aline to her husband Apollonios.<sup>11</sup> She expresses, in a similar way, her love for Apollonios and her fear of him being in danger due to the outbreak of the Jewish War and his sudden departure. She does not take pleasure in food and drink and only her father's caring keeps her alive,<sup>12</sup> as he forced her to eat on New Year's day (ll. 12–14; cf. BL I 169 and BL V 34): ἄ[γ]ευστος ἐκοιμώμην, | [εἰ μὴ ὁ π]ατήρ μου εἰσελθὼν ἐβιάσατό | [με. An indirect threat full of love and anguish, albeit exaggerated, can be detected between the lines such as: "If you don't come back safe soon, I will die". The language of the letter including rare words such as the term *φημιζόμενα*, and literary references (i.e.: the poetic term *ἀνεγείρει* in l. 10) indicates that Aline may have used a professional scribe.<sup>13</sup> However, she appears to have an active role in the composition of the letter and her voice can be detected in the threat of death due to Apollonios' absence. Her words should not be considered as a real threat, but as a sincere expression of conjugal love aimed at persuading the recipient to return to Aline quickly.

### III. Threats in the business and commercial context

A common kind of real threat found in both men's and women's letters is that concerning business and economic matters. A threat of this type can be found mainly in cases when the recipient does not respect the terms of an agreement or acts in bad faith.<sup>14</sup> As a general rule, women in postclassical societies were in an inferior social

<sup>9</sup> Bagnall, Cribiore, *Women's Letters* (n. 1) 149; Thoma, *Γυναίκες Επιστολογράφοι* (n. 2) 68–69 and 349–350. See also Clarysse, *Emotions in Greek Private Papyrus Letters* (n. 4), esp. 67 and 77–78.

<sup>10</sup> R. Cribiore, *The Women in the Apollonios' Archive and their Use of Literacy*, in: H. Melaerts, L. Mooren (eds.), *Le rôle et le statut de la femme en Égypte Hellénistique, Romaine et Byzantine, Actes du colloque international: Bruxelles – Leuven, 27–29 Novembre 1997* (Studia Hellenistica 37), Leuven, Paris, Sterling, Virginia 2002, 149–166.

<sup>11</sup> Bagnall, Cribiore, *Women's Letters* (n. 1) 151–152; Thoma, *Γυναίκες Επιστολογράφοι* (n. 2) 115, 165 and 363–365.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the topos of abstinence of food, drink and sleep found in various private letters as a demonstration of the writers' sadness or grief. See Clarysse, *Emotions* (n. 4) 72 with examples.

<sup>13</sup> Cribiore, *Apollonios' Archive* (n. 10) 155–156.

<sup>14</sup> See for example P.Kell. I 70, which will also be discussed later.

position, feeling powerless to impose their will on their male correspondents. However, some female letter-writers, who were active in business, use threats directed at their employees, associates or commercial partners. A threat concerning business issues is addressed by a powerful landowner called Diogenis in P.Mil.Vogl. II 77 (2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE; Tebtonis). Just before arriving at her estate, Diogenis informs her steward Kronion about various business matters and gives him a series of commands in a firm tone.<sup>15</sup> In lines 8–10, she uses an indirect threat towards Kronion informing him that he should finish the building of some wall before her arrival: βλέ[πε δ]ὲ μὴ ἔλθω καὶ εὖρω [τὸν] τοῖχ[ο]ν | [ἀν]οικοδόμητον.<sup>16</sup> Although Diogenis does not mention what would happen if her addressee did not obey her commands, she seems to threaten him with serious consequences. She appears to be a woman of economic power who is trying to manage her property in an efficient way. The same firm tone can be found in P.Mil.Vogl. II 76 written by the same Diogenis to Kronion, however in this letter she expresses herself in a politer manner.<sup>17</sup> Both letters reveal the hierarchical relationship between the landowner Diogenis and her steward Kronion which justifies her severe tone and commands towards him.

An example of a threat addressed by a woman to one of her associates is that mentioned by P.Mich. VIII 507<sup>18</sup> (2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. CE). In this text, Artemis writes to a certain Sokrates to request from him a legal representative in order to be able to engage in a lawsuit. She requests his help in quite an abrupt way, reminding him of their common interests that are under threat; cf. ll. 11–14: μάθετε οὖν ὅτι ἐὰν | βλάβω καὶ ἡμῖς (l. ὑμεῖς) μέλλετε | βλάπτειν (l. βλάπτειν), ἐὰν δὲ κερτήσομεν (l. κερδήσομεν) | ὑμῶν ἐστὶν τὸ πρᾶγμα. In ll. 10–11, a purpose clause (ἵνα ἐν τάχῃ [l. -ει] ἔλθῃ), placed before the threat

<sup>15</sup> Bagnall and Criamore (*Women's Letters* [n. 1] 186) mention that the letter consists of a series of injunctions in the imperative with a few dependent clauses. See also Thoma, *Γυναίκες Επιστολογράφοι* (n. 2) 93, 191–192, 202 and 422–423.

<sup>16</sup> The use of the imperative βλέπε μή is a common formulaic expression introducing a threat or a warning in papyrus letters. See also P.Oxy. XIV 1773, 33–35 (3<sup>rd</sup> cent. CE) in which a daughter advises her mother not to hinder the men who had benefited her: βλέπε δαί (l. δὲ) μὴ ἄμαρ[τ]άνης κ[αὶ ἐνε]δρεύσης τοὺς ἀγ[θ]ρόπους εὐ[π]υσίαν (l. -οσίαν) μοι πνή[σαντας] (l. ποιή-). Cf. some examples of men's letters: P.Berl.Zill. 9, 13–14 (68 CE): βλέπε | οὖν, μὴ ἄλλως ποιήσης; P.Mil.Vogl. IV 217, 7–8 (124–125 CE): βλέπε μὴ ἄλλως | ποιήσης; P.Iand. VI 96 R, 10–11 (3<sup>rd</sup> cent. CE): βλέπετε δὲ μὴ π[ο]ιήσητε ἀηδῖαν πρὸς ἀλλήλους, εἶνα (l. ἵνα) μὴ καταχ[ωνιάσω]μεν; SB XXVI 16734, 31–32 (450 CE): βλέπε μὴ θελήσης ἐλθῖν (l. -εἶν), μὴ ἀκούση (l. ἀκούση) ὁ [κύριος] καὶ ἀηδίσῃ σε, μηδενὸς ἔργου ὄντος | ἐνός; P.Iand. II 20, 9 (6<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> cent. CE; cf. BL XI 97): βλέπε οὖν μὴ [ἄλλως ποιήσης. For the use of the imperatives ὄρα and σπούδασον as deontic modalities in private letters see Koroli, *To αίτημα* (n. 3) 109–110.

<sup>17</sup> For P.Mil.Vogl. II 76, see Bagnall, Criamore, *Women's Letters* (n. 1) 184–185 and Thoma, *Γυναίκες Επιστολογράφοι* (n. 2) 92–93, 202 and 420–422. For the relationship between Diogenis and Kronion and the loan granted by her (cf. P.Kron. 16), see also R. Takahashi, *The Kronion Family's Loans: An Egyptian Peasant Family Declining under Roman Rule?*, *AncSoc* 42 (2012) 71–88.

<sup>18</sup> Bagnall, Criamore, *Women's Letters* (n. 1) 319; Thoma, *Γυναίκες Επιστολογράφοι* (n. 2) 44–45, 182 and 470–471.



of the negative consequences that may occur if the recipient does not send a legal representative to the writer, strengthens Artemis' urgent request.

In P.Oxy. X 1295 (2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. CE), a widow called Tasoīs appears to care more about her business than her son.<sup>19</sup> The young boy was put to work assisting a certain Dionysius for a salary paid to his mother. Tasoīs blames Dionysius for attempting to alienate the boy from her influence (ll. 10–11; cf. BL XII 139: διὸ οὖν, μὴ ἀνάπειθε αὐτὸν τοῦ | ἐκτός μου εἶ[ναι]). Furthermore, she threatens first to remove her son from him (ll. 4–6: ἐὰν δὲ μέλλῃς οὕτω αὐτῷ ἐπιτιμᾶν, Πτολεμαί[ο]νν πέμψασα ἀποσπάσ[ω] αὐτόν), and secondly to use the boy as a pledge<sup>20</sup> (probably for a loan) in Alexandria (ll. 11–13: ἐπεὶ ἄρσασα αὐτόν | ἐνέχυρον θήσω εἰς Ἀλεξάνδριαν). Undoubtedly, there is a strong rhetorical dimension in Tasoīs' threats, aimed at illustrating to Dionysios the situation and what her next step might be if he continued to influence the boy against her, also harming her economic interests. However, since the practice of pledging or selling one's children is attested in Roman times, the writer appears to seriously consider the option of pawning her son in order to receive a loan. In spite of her role as a mother, Tasoīs comes across as a dynamic businesswoman who is more interested in financial gain and profit than her son's welfare.

A quite different threat, addressed by a woman to her correspondents regarding a business matter, appears in P.Neph. 18 (4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE; cf. BL IX 173). Taouak writes to Eudaimon and his wife Apia about a business matter which involves an aroura of land and six artabas of wheat. Despite the formally courteous opening and closure of the letter, its main body expresses discontentment with its recipients. She highlights that they owe her six artabas of wheat, which she desperately needs and cannot replace by buying it from the market, since the prices are high and “she is a woman”.<sup>21</sup> At the end of the letter, she remarks (ll. 24–27): ἐὰν ἀποστερήτέ (l. -ῆτε) με | δηλώσατέ μοι καὶ ὄψετε πρὸς | τὸν θεόν· ὁ γὰρ θησαυρὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῖς (l. ἡμεῖς). Since Taouak appears to belong to a monastic circle, she cannot punish her correspondents for deceiving her. Instead, she uses a threat in the name of God (“if you rob me, let me know and you will stand before God”) to persuade Eudaimon and Apia to provide her with the artabas of

<sup>19</sup> Bagnall, Cribiore, *Women's Letters* (n. 1) 361; Thoma, *Γυναίκες Επιστολογράφοι* (n. 2) 94–95 and 468–470.

<sup>20</sup> Papyrus documents from Roman times illustrate the practice of pledging children for economic reasons. For a discussion of this topic, see also V. Vuolanto, *Selling a Freeborn Child. Rhetoric and Social Realities in the Late Roman World*, *AncSoc* 33 (2003) 169–207, esp. 206–207.

<sup>21</sup> Her argument is not absolutely clear, since women were not prohibited from such transactions. Bagnall and Cribiore (*Women's Letters* [n. 1] 207–208) suggest that she was a nun and probably not allowed to engage in worldly business transactions. In our view, Taouak's account is an exaggerated form of the motif of the helpless woman; accordingly, what prevented her from replacing the missing wheat was her financial weakness because of her gender, along with the high prices of the grain market. The topos of the helpless and weak woman is very often attested in private letters and petitions addressed to the authorities. For a discussion of the letter, see most recently Thoma, *Γυναίκες Επιστολογράφοι* (n. 2) 50 and 594–596. See also S. Dixon, *Infirmitas Sexus. Womanly Weakness in Roman Law*, *Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis / Revue d'histoire du droit / The Legal History Review* 52 (1984) 343–371.

wheat and stop committing injustice against her.<sup>22</sup> Taouak's threat is used as a rhetorical device, also invoking the religious implications of Eudaimon and Apias' misbehavior: it would be God's power who would "punish" them as sinners and not her.<sup>23</sup>

The misbehavior of a business partner is a common reason which could lead a woman to level threats against him in her letters. In the letter P.Bad. II 35 (87 AD), a certain Johanna writes to a man called Epagathos about a loan transaction and several other economic issues.<sup>24</sup> It appears that Epagathos had earlier concluded a loan contract in his name, but with Johanna's money. A side agreement between them existed, acknowledging that Johanna was the lender of the principal. However, Epagathos claimed that he owned all the money, proving himself to be ungrateful to Johanna. For this reason the writer expresses her anger towards him in a letter full of reproaches, whereas in ll. 7–10 Johanna appears to somehow threatens Epagathos: *μη μ' ἀνανκόσης (l. -γκόσης) | οὖν, θέλο (l. -ω) ποιῆσαι καὶ ἐπὶ τόπων | {τόπων} διατρέψαι σε μηδὲ ἐπιστολ[ει]δίου (l. -ιδίου) μεκαπῆ ὁ τόκος· σῆμά ἐστιν | τοῦτο ἀγνομοσύνης (l. ἀγνω-)*. As Bagnall and Cribiore point out (p. 292), it is hard for the reader to follow the flow of thoughts expressed in Johanna's letter. The writer sounds very irritated by Epagathos' behavior and her unclear threat should be considered as a sign of her indignation against her addressee.

Threats with regard to business or economic issues are also attested in family letters addressed by female letter-writers to close relatives. An illustrative example is offered by P.Mert. I 32 (early 4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE). The writer, Allous, informs her husband Morion of her recent actions concerning the piece of land they were planning to buy and suggests that he hurry and pay the cash, since there were a few others interested buyers.<sup>25</sup> She also advises him to pay an installment to a woman called Libike through her servants. The urgent character of the transaction's completion, which requires Morion's immediate arrival at Allous' place, is highlighted by the writer's last lines: If Morion does not come back home to pay the money for the purchase of the land, he will regret it and complain later (ll. 9–10): [Ἐὰν] οὖν μὴ ἀνέλθῃς | μέλλῃς (l. -εις) μέμψασθαι. Allous'

<sup>22</sup> As Bagnall and Cribiore have suggested, the last phrase "for we are the God's treasure" could imply that Taouak is a member of a religious group with claims to sanctity and that the recipients of the letter should behave towards her in a correct way.

<sup>23</sup> E. A. Mathieson, *Christian Women in the Greek Papyri of Egypt to 400 CE* (Studia Antiqua Australiensia 6), Turnhout 2014, 40 suggests that the term ἀποστερέτε in l. 24 may be read as ἀποστελήτε. In this case, Taouak would mean: "if you send to me (the six artabas of wheat), tell me and you will see God". In a religious context, "seeing God" is used in the sense of being blessed by God's grace. See also pp. 80–81, where E. Mathieson points out that the "writer uses the blessing as an incentive for her correspondents to comply with her wishes". However, the plate in the papyrus edition by B. Kramer confirms the reading of her edition of the text, which makes Mathieson's suggestion less probable.

<sup>24</sup> See also Bagnall, Cribiore, *Women's Letters* (n. 1) 291–292; Thoma, *Γυναίκες Επιστολογράφοι* (n. 2) 99, 293–295.

<sup>25</sup> Bagnall, Cribiore, *Women's Letters* (n. 1) 293; Thoma, *Γυναίκες Επιστολογράφοι* (n. 2) 113, 154, 156 and 578–579.

threatening tone aims at putting pressure on Morion to return and complete the transaction as soon as possible. In this context, we could assume that Allous shows a greater interest in the transaction than her husband. As a result, she tries to force him to proceed with the purchase of land as soon as possible.

#### IV. Threats about practical needs

In most of the women's letters, the writers request their correspondents' support for everyday problems and practical needs. When women feel that their addressee is not reluctant to offer his assistance, they try to gain his attention through the expression of various threats. In SB VI 9121 (57 CE), the writer named Heraklous is involved in a dispute over a house. After the death of a certain Apeis, a woman called Serapous demanded that Heraklous produces documents concerning the ownership of the aforementioned house, probably belonging to the deceased.<sup>26</sup> Heraklous requests that a certain Pompeius, the recipient of the letter, assist her immediately, otherwise, she plans to leave the house. At the end of the document she uses a threatening tone (ll. 11–13): ἐὰν μὴ ἔλθῃς, ἐγὼ | καθίσασα οἶκον ἐλεύσομαι εἰς σε εἴν' (l. ἴν') | ἢ τηγ[ ± 25 ]. Unfortunately, the papyrus is broken and it is not clear what the writer meant and what the consequences of her arrival to Pompeius' house would be. Heraklous' ultimatum to Pompeius aims at persuading him to offer her immediate support.

In a similar manner, P.Wisc. II 74 (4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE; cf. BL XI 291) contains an urgent request of two sisters, Kyra and Aia, to their brother Aphynchius to come home because of their mother's death. The writers probably need him to help deal with family affairs, since they feel unable to do anything without his assistance (ll. 8–10: οἶδ' αὖ γὰρ καὶ σωὶ [l. σὺ] ὅτι οὐδὲν δυνάμεθα ποιῆσαι [±15] τὴν παρουσίαν | [σ]ου). In trying to persuade their brother, the sisters warn that if he does not come immediately, they will lose their house (ll. 5–8): μὴ θελήσῃς οὖν παραμῖναι (l. -μεῖναι) παρὰ σοι τοῦ σοι (l. σε) ἀπαντῆσαι πρὸς ὑμᾶς (l. ἡμᾶς) καὶ ἀπολέσωμεν τὴν | οἰκίαν ἡμῶν.<sup>27</sup>

Evidence of women in need threatening their correspondents can also be found in letters written in Coptic.<sup>28</sup> O.Mon.Epiph. 177 is a letter dating between sixth and eighth century CE in which a certain Thekla and a fellow prisoner write to two men, Pesenthius and Papnoute, complaining about their tortures and starvation in prison. The writers ask their recipients to send them food supplies immediately.<sup>29</sup> At the end of the letter, we

<sup>26</sup> Bagnall and Criore (*Women's Letters* [n. 1] 131) have pointed out that the documents mentioned might be the receipts of the payment of the sales tax which constituted one way of showing presumptive ownership. See also Thoma, *Γυναίκες Επιστολογράφοι* (n. 2) 110, 155–156 and 495–496.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. the translation by Bagnall and Criore (*Women's Letters* [n. 1] 387): “Do not wish then to remain at your place so that you do (not) meet us and we will ruin our household”. See also Thoma, *Γυναίκες Επιστολογράφοι* (n. 2) 30–32, 156, 194 and 618–620.

<sup>28</sup> For Coptic letters see A. Biedenkopf-Ziehner, *Untersuchungen zum koptischen Briefformular unter Berücksichtigung ägyptischer und griechischer Parallelen* (Koptische Studien 1), Würzburg 1983 and A. Biedenkopf-Ziehner, *Motive einiger Formeln und Topoi aus ägyptischen Briefen paganer und christlicher Zeit*, *Enchoria* 23 (1996) 8–31.

<sup>29</sup> Bagnall, Criore, *Women's Letters* (n. 1) 246.

come across a very strange threat, since Thekla and her fellow prisoner declare that as the Lord lives, if the men do not send them food and money, the letter-writers, escorted by six soldiers, will seize them and all their property. It is difficult to understand how this threat would be carried out since the writers are in prison. A plausible scenario is that the writers would come in contact with some soldiers and send them to punish Pesenthius and Papnoute for not helping them. In any case, their vexation towards the addressees is obvious.

A point of interest is that threats addressed by women letter-writers about practical needs of everyday life are related to urgent requests which could justify the writers' anguish and need to gain their recipients' immediate attention. Within this context, threats are used to emphasize the severity of each situation by highlighting the negative consequences (i.e.: eviction from a house, failure to deal with household matters and starvation in prison) which may occur unless the recipients take action.

#### V. The use of threat as a response to indifference

Both men and women letter-writers often complain that their addressees have not replied to their letters.<sup>30</sup> Papyri offer some examples in which women warn their male correspondents that they will stop writing to them, unless they communicate with them first. As papyrus letters are full of formulaic expressions and epistolary conventions,<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See G. Tibiletti, *Le lettere private nei papiri greci del III e IV secolo d.C. Tra paganesimo e cristianesimo* (Pubblicazioni della Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Scienze filologiche e letteratura 15), Milan 1979, 77–80; H. Koskenniemi, *Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des griechischen Briefes bis 400 n.Chr.* (Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae Ser. B 102.2), Helsinki 1956, 64–73 and Clarysse, *Emotions* (n. 4) 65–66 for a further discussion of letter-writers' feelings and complaints towards their addressees who have not communicated with them for a long period of time.

<sup>31</sup> See for example J. L. White, *The Form and Function of the Body of the Greek Letter: A Study of the Letter-Body in the Non-Literary Papyri and in Paul the Apostle, Second edition corrected* (Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 2), Missoula (MT) 1972. For formulaic epistolary expressions of the Ptolemaic period see R. Buzón, *Die Briefe der Ptolemäerzeit. Ihre Struktur und ihre Formeln*, PhD Thesis, Ruprecht-Karl-Universität Heidelberg 1984; for the Roman and late antique periods, see e.g. F. X. J. Exler, *The Form of the Ancient Greek Letter: A Study in Greek Epistolography*, PhD Thesis, Catholic University of America 1923; H. A. Steen, *Les clichés épistolaires dans les lettres sur papyrus grecques*, C&M 1 (1983) 119–176; Koskenniemi, *Studien* (n. 30), Helsinki 1956, 128–200; White, *Body of the Greek Letter* (op. cit.) 1–41; R. R. Luiselli, *Greek Letters on Papyrus, First to Eighth Centuries: A Survey*, in: E. M. Grob, A. Kaplony (eds.), *Documentary Letters from the Middle East: The Evidence in Greek, Coptic, South Arabian, Pehlevi, and Arabic (1<sup>st</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> c CE)* (Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques 62.3), Bern 2008, 677–737, esp. 692–707; J. L. Fournet, *Esquisse d'une anatomie de la lettre antique tardive d'après les papyrus*, in: R. Delmaire, J. J. Desmulliez, P.-L. Gatier (eds.), *Correspondances. Documents pour l'histoire de l'Antiquité tardive, Collection de la Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée 40* (Série littéraire et philosophique 13), Paris 2009, 23–66, esp. 37–46. In addition, some anthologies of letters include comprehensive introductory discussions on epistolary formulas and conventions, see e.g. Bagnall, Cribiore, *Women's Letters* (n. 1) 88–89; G. Ghedini, *Lettere cristiane dai papiri greci del III e IV secolo*, Milan 1923, 12–17; Tibiletti, *Le lettere private* (n. 30) 47–74; M. Naldini, *Il*

a threat of this type could be also considered as an epistolary convention. CPR XXV 1 (2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> cent. CE) offers a vivid example of such a threat.<sup>32</sup> A woman called Demetria complains to a doctor about his indifference and his neglect to reply to her, in spite of her letters. The author concludes that she is anticipating a letter from him, otherwise she does not plan to write him again, (ll. 13–14): ἐγὼ δὲ οὐκ ἀποστῆ . . . [σοι - - -] | ἔως μοι ἀπ[οστειλῆς - - - (?)]. The writer uses this type of threat as a kind of closing formula to remind the addressee of her expectation to receive his letter, while also expressing her emotional complaints to him. Although the text does not make clear what their relationship was, it appears to be a close one.

Furthermore, in P.Grenf. I 53 (4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE), a certain Artemis writes to her husband Theodoros that Allous, probably their daughter, sends him many threats, because he saluted everyone in his former letters except for her, (ll. 9–12; cf. BL III 70)<sup>33</sup>: Ἀλλοῦς πολλά σοι ἀπειλῆ (l. ἀπειλεῖ), ἐπὶ (l. ἐπεῖ) | γὰρ πολλακίς γράψας καὶ πάντας | ἀσπασάμενος αὐτὴν μόνην οὐκ ἠσπάσους. Allous could have meant: “if you don’t send me greetings and wishes, I will not salute you again”. Despite Allous’ “threats” to her father, Artemis mentions the girl’s greetings to Theodoros in the next line of her letter. Allous’ superficial threats are also reminiscent of a young boy’s threats and complaints towards his father in P.Oxy. I 119, a well-known letter from the second or early third century. In this text, little Theon is trying to “blackmail” his father to take him to Alexandria. He appears to be extremely upset because his father has already departed without him. Theon threatens that he would not write him a letter or greet him again (ll. 3–8; cf. BL I 316, II 93): ἢ (l. εἶ) οὐ θέλεις (l. -εις) ἀπενεκεῖν (l. -γκεῖν) με|τ’ ἐσοῦ εἰς Ἀλεξάνδριαν (l. -ειαν), οὐ μὴ γράψω σε (l. σοι) ἐπιστολὴν οὔτε λαλῶ σε (l. σοι) οὔτε υἱγένω (l. υἱαίνω) σε, | εἶτα. ἂν δὲ ἔλθῃς εἰς Ἀλεξάνδριαν (l. -ειαν) οὐ | μὴ λάβω χεῖραν (l. χεῖ-) παρὰ [σ]οῦ οὔτε πάλι (l. πάλιν) χαίρω | σε λυπόν (l. λοι-). Theon closes his letter by warning his father that he would even refuse to eat and drink, unless someone is sent to collect him (ll. 14–15): ἄμ (l. ἂν) μὴ πέμψῃς οὐ μὴ φά|γω, οὐ μὴ πείνω (l. πίνω).<sup>34</sup> Despite his young age, the boy’s letter is full of emotional pressure and improvised rhetorical strategies in order to convince his father to take him to Alexandria.<sup>35</sup>

## VI. Comparing women’s and men’s threats in papyrus letters

A comparative study of men’s and women’s letters, including threats to their addressees can showcase several similarities and differences in the way of expression, the social position and the attitudes of men and women. Emotional blackmail through

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*Cristianesimo in Egitto. Lettere private nei papiri dei secoli II–IV*, Fiesole <sup>2</sup>1998, 10–15, as well as M. Trapp, *Greek and Latin Letters. An Anthology with Translation* (Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics), Cambridge 2003, 34–38 for both literary and non-literary letters.

<sup>32</sup> See also Thoma, *Γυναίκες Επιστολογράφοι* (n. 2) 64 and 504–505.

<sup>33</sup> See also Bagnall, Cribiore, *Women’s Letters* (n. 1) 397; Thoma, *Γυναίκες Επιστολογράφοι* (n. 2) 88, 166 and 586–589.

<sup>34</sup> See also Huebner, *Family in Roman Egypt* (n. 6) 67.

<sup>35</sup> For the rhetorical strategies in Theon’s letter see also V. Vuolanto, *Experience, agency and the children in the past: the case of Roman childhood*, in: C. Laes, V. Vuolanto (eds.), *Children and everyday life in the Roman and late antique world*, New York 2017, 11–24, esp. 20.

the use of threats is also attested in men's letters, as for example in the case of SB IV 7354 (2<sup>nd</sup> cent. CE). A father called Sempronius writes to his son Gaius expressing his disappointment, because he had decided not to join the fleet. The writer threatens that if the young man does not change his mind, he will not consider him as his son anymore (ll. 8–9): *λοιπὸν οὖν βλέπε, μὴ πισθῆς (l. πεισθῆς), καὶ οὐκέτι ἔσσι (l. ἔσει) μου υἱός*. However, in the next lines of his letter, Sempronius praises his son for being better than his brothers, (ll. 9–11: *οἶδας, ὅτι πᾶν ῥά[διο]ν εἰς τ[οὺς ἀ]δελφούς σου διαφορὰ[v] | [ἔ]χεις καὶ ὑπεροχήν*). It is likely that Sempronius used the abovementioned threat as a way of putting emotional pressure on his son, but he did not mean to carry out his threat, since Gaius surpasses his brothers.

An unusual threat of corporal violence in a context of homosexuality is offered by P.Oxy. XLII 3070 dating to the first century CE. Apion and Epimas, the writers of the letter, threaten to thrash again a certain Epaphroditos, probably a slave or freedman, unless he allows them to sodomize him (ll. 6–8): *οὐκέτι οὐ μὴ | δειρομέν σε ἐὰν δώσης | ἡμῖν (l. ἡμῖν) τὸ πωγίσαι (l. πυγίσαι)*. The psychological pressure imposed on Epaphroditos by the two writers in the form of a threat should be considered non only as a way of forcing the recipient to give his consent to being sodomized, but also as a means of humiliating him for being of lower social status.<sup>36</sup>

Such threats, expressed at an emotional level and aiming at changing the addressee's decision, show how threats could be used for emotional blackmailing in private correspondence. However, the plurality of threats addressed by male correspondents are attested in business letters, in which the writers warn their employees or commercial partners that they will face serious consequences if they do not act properly. For example, in P.Oxy. XVI 1840 (6<sup>th</sup> cent. CE), the writer, probably a taxation official, asks the recipient, who appears to work for him, to bring him money and certain articles, since he is in great need of them.<sup>37</sup> After his first request, the writer adds a second one which is strengthened by a threat of punishment. The writer threatens to torture the *pronoetai* of the estates if he finds out that they have not shown much zeal in collecting the taxes (ll. 5–6): *ζῆ γὰρ [ὁ] κ[ύριος, ἐὰν] μὴ ε[ύρω] ὅτι σπουδὴν πολλὴν ἐποίησαι (l. ἐποίησαν) εἰς τὴν ἀπάτησιν, διαστρέφω αὐτοὺς πάνυ*.<sup>38</sup> His severe and threatening tone is reinforced by the use of the phrase “ζῆ γὰρ [ὁ] κ[ύριος” (as the Lord lives) in line 5 before his threat, which is indicative of the writer's intentions against the recipient. In another letter from the sixth century, P.Oxy. XVI 1839, a certain Phoibammon threatens his steward with punishment, if he fails to reconcile the woman-bearer of the letter

<sup>36</sup> For a thorough discussion of this special text attesting homosexual practices in the Graeco-Roman world and its linguistic strategies, see most recently A. Koroli, *Verbal Abuse in Ancient Greek Epistolography: The Case Study of an “Indecent Proposal”*, *Analecta Papyrologica* 30 (2018) 113–135.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. P.Tebt. II 424, 6–9 (cf. BL I 428): *ἴσθι δὲ ὅτι ὀφίλις (l. ὀφείλεις) φόρους καὶ ἀποφορὰς ἐπὶ ἐτῶν, ὡς ἐὰν<v> μὴ ἀποκαταστασίας [δ]ὴ πέμψης [ο]ἶδας σου τὸ[v] | κίνδυνον*.

<sup>38</sup> See also Koroli, *Αἴτημα* (n. 4) 184.

and a third person (ll. 2–3): ζῆ κύριος, ἐὰν ἔτι ἔλθῃ πρὸς ἐμὲ. [- -] | [καὶ μὴ συ]ν-ηλλάγησαν, οὐκ ἔχεις μου βαστάζει. His threat is similarly strengthened by the use of the phrase (ζῆ κύριος) already attested in the aforementioned P.Oxy. XVI 1840.<sup>39</sup>

In addition, in P.Kell. I 70 from the fourth century CE, the carpenter Timotheos threatens a certain Psempnoutes regarding the non-payment of a debt. If Psempnoutes is not willing to pay the money, Timotheos will send some soldiers to force him<sup>40</sup> (ll. 9–12): μάθε γὰρ | ὅτι ἐὰν μὴ θελήσης δοῦναι ἀπὸ τῶ, ποιῶ σε ἀπαιτηθῆναι ὑπὸ | στρατιωτῶν.<sup>41</sup>

In the ostrakon O.Did. 333 (1<sup>st</sup> cent. CE), a certain Cornelius, probably the legal tutor or owner of a prostitute called Ioulia, threatens the recipient of his letter Antonios that he will take the girl away from him, also making him pay for the days that Ioulia has not been working.<sup>42</sup> He juxtaposes his threat of removing Ioulia with his recent benevolence towards Antonios, in favor of whom he managed to send the girl by “begging the whole praesidium”.<sup>43</sup> It appears that Ioulia was sent to Antonios free of charge, because he greatly desired her, but the writer of the letter is now worried about her long absence and safety. Cornelius’ threat to remove Ioulia from Antonios reminds us of the widow Tasois who threatened to remove her son from Dionysios’ services. However, in the above ostrakon Cornelius appears to genuinely care about Ioulia’s safety more than for his economic interests originating in the sexual services she provided (ll. 10–12): κἄν πέντε | [μ]νᾶς σχῆς, ἀποσπάσω αὐτὴν | ἀπὸ σοῦ.

BGU IV 1044 (4<sup>th</sup> cent. CE) offers a rare example of threats addressed by a private person to local officials: In this letter, a certain Apphous threatens three *grammateis* and the *komarchs* of a village that if they do not permit his worker Phaesis to fulfil his liturgical duties the way Apphous wishes, he will cause them serious damage, ten times greater than the damage they would cause to him with their decision, see ll. 11–14 (cf. BL I 91): ἐὰν δὲ | μὴ βόλησθαι (l. βούλησθε) τοῦτο χάριν | ἐμοί (l. ἐμοῦ) ποιήσω ὑμᾶς ζῆμιᾶσθαι (l. -οῦσθαι) δέκα ἀντὶ τούτου.<sup>44</sup> More widespread are the threats of severe financial or even corporal punishment, which occur as a rhetorical strategy of imposing one’s will in the administrative correspondence between officials from the Hellenistic to the early Arabic period.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>39</sup> For further discussion see Koroli, *Αίτημα* (n. 4) 252–253.

<sup>40</sup> The editor of the text suggests that the soldiers summoned by Timotheos to help him to receive his money may provide a kind of police assistance in the Oasis; see also R. S. Bagnall, *Official and Private Violence in Roman Egypt*, BASP 26 (1989) 201–216. Cf. P.Fouad. I 79, 10–15: ἵνα | μὴ ἐγὼ ἀναγκασθῶ | ἔλθῶν ἐκεῖ μαχρσθῆ|ναί σοι ἢ ἀναγκάσης με | ἄλλους ἀζιῶσαι τοὺς | ἀπαιτήσοντάς σε.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. P.Oxy. XL VIII 3417, 17–22.

<sup>42</sup> See also Koroli, *Αίτημα* (n. 4) 178–184 for the use of threat in O.Did. 333 and in some parallel texts.

<sup>43</sup> See the translation offered by the editor of the papyrus.

<sup>44</sup> For a re-edition and a new interpretation of this letter, see A. Papathomas, *Der Privatbrief BGU IV 1044: eine neue Edition*, ZPE 212 (2019) 194–198.

<sup>45</sup> The use of threats in administrative letters of the Ptolemaic period has been studied recently by Armoni in Ch. Armoni, *Ämtliche Ermahnungsbriefe aus dem hellenistischen Ägypten*, in: S. Procházka, L. Reinfandt, S. Tost (eds.), *Official Epistolography and the Language(s) of*

The evidence of threats by men in their private, business and administrative letters is plentiful.<sup>46</sup> The above examples gave us a brief but valuable glimpse into the way they expressed their thoughts and feelings and demonstrate that the threat of economic punishment or even corporal violence is a common *topos* in their letters. On the other hand, women being in an inferior social position and mostly powerless to impose a punishment on their addressees,<sup>47</sup> prefer to highlight the possible negative consequences of their correspondents' behavior. Furthermore, women can also use in their letters a man's threat against them as a justification for seeking protection.<sup>48</sup>

### Epilogue

The papyrus letters discussed enable us to build a picture of women's use of threats in their letters. In spite of their legal and social restrictions in the society of Graeco-Roman Egypt, women letter-writers dare, from time to time, to express themselves in harsh terms by blaming or threatening their correspondents. Unfortunately, we cannot reach definite conclusions on the effectiveness of these threats, since the recipients' replies to the letters discussed in this paper have not been preserved. In all the cases examined above, the addressees of threats are men and only in one example does a woman turn against a couple. Contrary to men, women frequently threaten a family member, whose attention and help they are seeking. A practice mainly found in women's letters is the emotional pressure put on their male addressees, employing a threat of suicide or death caused by their despair at the beloved person's absence. A threat of this type aims to make the recipient of the letter feel responsible for any misfortune that may occur to them as representatives of the "weaker sex". Thus, it is used as a means of persuasion and manipulation of the will of the addressee, which

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*Power. Proceedings of the First International Conference of the Research Network Imperium & Officium. Comparative Studies in Ancient Bureaucracy and Officialdom. University of Vienna, 10–12 November 2010* (Papyrologica Vindobonensia 8), Wien, Budapest 2015, 133–138. A vivid example from early Arabic times is offered by PSI XV 1570, 11–12 (= PSI Omaggio 14) dating to the mid seventh century CE, an official letter between the Emir Zubayd and the pagarch Papas.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Koroli, *Αίτημα* (n. 4) 248–254 for a discussion of several men's papyrus letters characterized by a critical or threatening tone.

<sup>47</sup> An exception to this rule can be found in the Coptic letter O.Mon.Epiph. 177 discussed above. A similar case from the field of Arabic papyri is the much later letter P.Vind.Arab. II 10 (1200 CE). In this text, a pregnant woman threatens her husband directly with legal recourse for abandoning her.

<sup>48</sup> SB VI 9271, an ostrakon from the first or second century CE, offers a vivid example of a woman writer using her husband's threat against her as a reason to ask for protection from her brother. This document reveals a story of domestic violence between a man and his wife. In a letter full of agony, a woman named Paulina, who appears to be in a real-life danger, asks her brother Titus to come and save her from her husband, who has threatened to kill her (ll. 11–15; cf. BL VII 205, XIII 201): ὥστε οὖν ἐρωτῶ μνησθῆναι μου, καὶ ἐλθόντα ἐγδικησαί | με ἢ ἀπολῶσαί με παρ' αὐτοῦ | . . . ἄζω μὴ πῶς με φονεῖσθαι καθ' ὅς | ἐπαγγέλλεται μοι. In this case, the letter-writer is not the one who threatens her correspondent, but the one who uses the oral threat of a third person against her, in order to convince her correspondent to protect her. In the last lines of her letter, Paulina's voice sounds a little threatening, as she could mean: "if you don't come soon, he will kill me".



could contribute to the fulfilment of the woman's request. Furthermore, a point of interest is that several women involved in business matters are not afraid of threatening their associates, employees or commercial partners, in order to vindicate their economic rights. However, as stated above, women do not use threats of violence, which are common in men's letters, due to their inferior legal and social status in the ancient world. They differentiate their approach, attempting to persuade their recipients that if they do not behave correctly, they will have to face the consequences of their actions in their own conscience, by the local society or even by God himself. Although in several letters women's voices sound dynamic, in their threats we can discern their fears and lack of power towards the male recipients, whose support or cooperation they need to gain.

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