

The Letters of Thermouthas, Daughter of Apuleius:
The Case of an Extended Family in Roman Philadelphia

In early second century CE Egypt, a man named Valerius traveled down to Philadelphia from a place north of the Fayum with a letter in his possession. This letter, entrusted in Valerius' care, was sent by a certain Thermouthas to her mother Valerias. Her mother lived in Philadelphia, a village in the Arsinoite nome, while Thermouthas lived north of the nome. This private letter is part of a small Greek archive that consists of six letters, four of which were sent by Thermouthas. The archive is split into two periods: 1) Thermouthas' pregnancy and 2) the birth of her child and her relocation to Philadelphia after her husband's mysterious disappearance. Of interest are two letters sent by Thermouthas, *SB 5 7572* and *P. Mich. 3.202*, both from the University of Michigan's collection. These letters offer a vivid and rich insight into many aspects of the Roman family and household: familial love, the nature of extended families beyond the nuclear family, gender roles within the household, contact between family members despite distance and marriage, and the symbolic value of the family.

Thermouthas' letters in this small archive from the Fayum illuminate her relationship with her immediate family before and after the birth of her child. These letters likewise chronicle Thermouthas' move back to Philadelphia and her attempts at obtaining a wet-nurse for her child. We learn that she does not re-enter her father's household, but instead appears to have her own with her sister (and a few other women, see *BGU 3 822* and *BGU 1 261*). Gender roles within the household are also visible through Thermouthas' behavior, which was considered typical for (and expected of) Roman mothers. She concerns herself with the upkeep of her household by setting her slave to certain tasks and she tries bringing a wet-nurse for her child into her home,

but she likewise deviates from these gendered roles when she lives and operates without a male guardian.

Most importantly, this archive shows that the Roman family was complex.

With this family, communication and love did not cease after marriage and distance did not harden hearts. One can see how relationships between individuals and their natal families could continue to flourish even after they left their homes. In sum, these letters paint a vivid portrait of a loving family who maintained their bonds of affection despite distance. This affection was shown through correspondence, gift-giving, visits, and affectionate words. Likewise, those living in this family's household, as well as Thermouthas', did not fit the model of the nuclear family. Thermouthas' grandmother was yet living, giving us a look at a three-generation household, and Thermouthas herself lived with a slave and a few others later in her life. We have here evidence of two extended families and we see that the nuclear family was not the exclusive family type, neither in Rome nor Egypt. Finally, Thermouthas' second letter suggests that the family was something that was coveted (as evidenced by her quip to the wet-nurse that she will find a family if she were to accept the position). I do not purport to deny the presence of familial strife within ancient families; not every family would have been close and in perfect harmony, but ancient families could also have maintained close ties with one another and built their relationships around love, respect, and care.

This paper also takes into account new scholarship on Thermouthas' archive and analyzes Thermouthas' relationships with the men and women around her, be they family or friends, to form a conclusion about Thermouthas' relationship with her natal family and her views on the importance of one's *familia*.