

Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt,
300 BC–AD 800



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LOCATION OF OBJECT

Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Papyrussammlung, P. 7146.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BL 1.69 (about the hand and date, and on lines 14, 20, and 27); 3.14 (on lines 20ff.). Unpublished corrections by G.M. Parássoglou also included.

13. DIDYME AND THE SISTERS ~

These two letters have given rise to considerable speculation about the milieu in which they were produced. Particularly important has been the question whether “sisters” and “brothers” in these texts are to be taken as normal kinship terms (even if not meant literally in the biological sense) or as references to common membership in Christian communities, particularly of a monastic sort. That they come from a Christian milieu is clear enough, and the plural forms in the opening are not paralleled elsewhere in family letters. See Emmet 1984 and Elm 1994: 236–44 for discussion, the latter coming down in favor of a monastic source: “While caution is advisable, the evidence favours a community of women and men who are not relatives and are united by other than business interests alone: at the very least by their shared Christianity, but perhaps by ascetic principles as well. . . . For the present this somewhat vague conclusion has to suffice, but the two papyri have presented us with a potential model of ascetic life for women, aspects of which might reappear in literary sources.”

P.Oxy. 14.1774

Didyme and the sisters to Atienatia
Early fourth century AD

LOCATION WRITTEN Unknown

LOCATION OF ADDRESSEE Unknown

LOCATION FOUND Oxyrhynchos

Greek



To my lady sister Atienatia, Didyme and the sisters (send) greetings in the Lord. First of all it is necessary to greet you, praying that you are well. Write to us, my lady, concerning your health and whatever orders you need, with full liberty. Let us know if you received your orders. There is a balance with us from the money of your orders, I believe, of 1,300 denarii. Canopic cakes received for you from them will be dispatched. Greet my blessed lady sister Asous and her mother and . . .

(ADDRESS): To my lady sister Atienatia, Didyme with the sisters.



THIS LETTER IS COMPLETE except at the bottom. The hand is slow, with mostly detached letters but a few ligatures. The individual letters are well formed and not without style.

The language of the letter is straightforward and simple. Phonetic spellings are numerous but unremarkable. The use of “in the Lord” with *k(uri)o* abbreviated in the manner of Christian texts shows that the author is a Christian.

This letter is one of two from Didyme and the sisters, the other being SB 8.9746, which is written to another woman (Sophias). The mention of “the sisters” in both texts has led to considerable debate about the possibility that Didyme was the head of a group of female Christian ascetics (see Elm 1994: 236–37, 241–44, with bibliography; Wipsyzcka 2002a). In the present text, the only persons mentioned are female, but this is not the case in SB 9746. These women have been described as engaged in business, but the activities at stake—getting and sending produce, foods, and clothing—do not differ materially from those of ordinary family letters.

NOTE

denarii: The usage of this Roman currency term is a sign of the fourth-century date; the sum is equal to 5,200 drachmas.

LOCATION OF OBJECT

Berkeley, Bade Museum, Pacific School of Religion, inv. P. 4.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ghedini 1923: no. 17; Naldini 1998, no. 37.

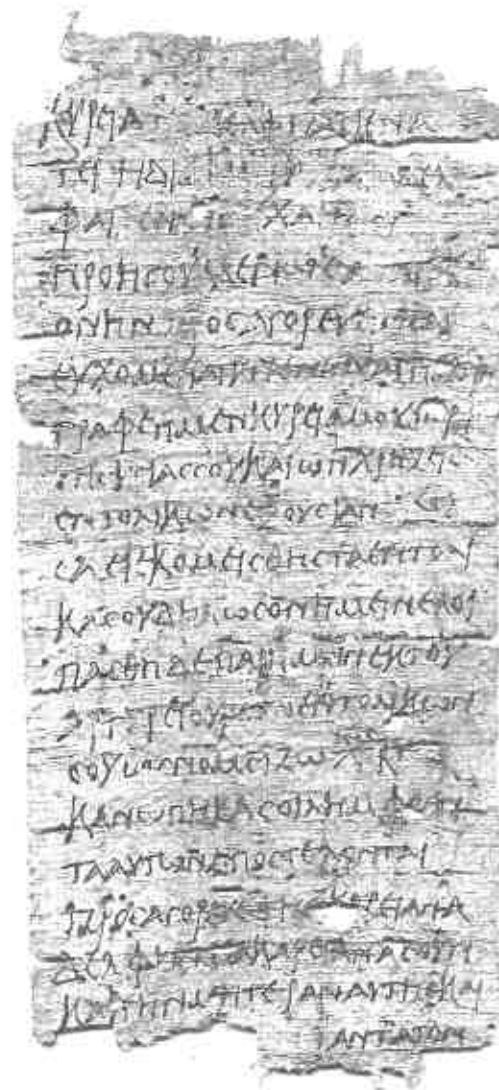


Fig. 14. P.Oxy. 14.1774. Didyme and the sisters to Atienatia. (Berkeley, Bade Museum, Pacific School of Religion, inv. P. 4. Photograph courtesy of the Bade Museum, Pacific School of Religion.)

SB 8.9746 = SB 3.7243

Didyme and the sisters to Sophias
Fourth century AD

LOCATION WRITTEN Unknown
LOCATION OF ADDRESSEE Unknown
LOCATION FOUND Unknown

Greek



[To] my beloved [lady] sister, [Didyme and] the sisters, greetings in the Lord. First of all we think it necessary to salute you. We received from brother Piperas (or the brother of Piperas) the provisions for the voyage . . . her until she comes home to us. But they are being made. We also received from other people for her 7 double knidia and a coarse sack of sour grapes. If we find (someone) we will also send you through this person both the sack and the knidia we have found. We have not yet received the rest. And be eager (to tell us) what you want so that we may send it through acquaintances. I wish you to know about the cloth that you sent to Loukilos that I sent you 2 pairs of sandals of the same value, which were bought directly from the weavers for 4 talents (?) but that you did not mention to me in writing, and through the sailor Sipharos son of Plou. . . (?) for the bride of Pansophios (? or daughter-in-law of Pansophion) a large ostrich egg and a small basket containing Syrian palm dates, but you did not write about them. Salute the most beloved Didyme and the dearest Favorinus. The implements of the most beloved Didyme were found in the sack of the wool of Severus. The lady and the other lady Valeriane salute you and those of the circle of Philosophos, Loukila and Pansophion. Salute the excellent Bikeutia (and ask whether) she received from Aionios the head cover and the 2 canopic cakes. And salute everyone, Italia, Theodora. Farewell in the Lord, may the Lord preserve you for us.

(ADDRESS ON BACK): To the lady sister Sophias, Didyme and the sisters.



THE HAND IS VERY similar to that of *P.Oxy. 14.1774*, written by the same person. This letter is written throughout in one hand with fluency and regularity. The characters are relatively small, but legibility is excellent because of the absence of ligatures: some characters merely touch. The address is written in much larger letters with some attempts at style.

Besides some mistakes due to phonetic spelling and a few other orthographic errors, the text is rather correct. The sentences are short and simple, without connective particles, but there are a few relative clauses.

The sender is the same Didyme who wrote *P.Oxy. 14.1774*. The addressee, however, is different, and none of the people mentioned is common to both letters. The letter mostly concerns the sending and receiving of supplies of various kinds (note the large ostrich egg) and the provisions for the trip of some woman. It is clear that letters went back and forth from sender and addressee.

NOTES

lady sister: The editor restored the name of Sophias in the lacuna in line 1, but restoring [*kuria m*]ou provides a more normal formula.

2 sandals: This presumably refers as usual to 2 pairs of sandals. The price points to a fourth-century date.

LOCATION OF OBJECT

Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Papyrussammlung, P. 13897.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Text, translation, and commentary in Naldini 1998, no. 36. See most recently Gonis 1997a: 143–44, for important corrections (see *BL 11.209–10*). Discussion in Elm 1994: 236–37, 241–44 and Wipszycka 2002a.