This paper does not deal with visible objects donated to monasteries or churches; what women bestowed onto a holy place in Upper Egypt in the later eighth century CE were not objects ever to be perceived by our eyes. These female donors have names, but they are by no means élite women, they may even have offered donations to the monastery in moments of deepest destitution.

Written records make it possible to track down those women of the eighth century and their donations to the very day on which the donations were made. The objects of these donations were children; the written records define the deeds as δωρεατικά (donations), but the term may well obscure the reality behind the contracts. As in many cases, Egypt has left a very special corpus of evidence, which illustrates the lives of people through many periods. The dry climate of the country has allowed organic material to survive; sheets of papyrus carrying public or private texts have been excavated in Egypt since the nineteenth century. Among the hundreds of thousands of contracts, letters, laundry lists etc. – whatever you can imagine as written records – which came to light during the excavations, there were twenty-six contracts in which parents, couples, single men, and also single women, donated their children to a monastery on the western bank of the river Nile near Thebes, the modern city of Luxor. These legal documents provide vivid accounts of women’s involvement in local religious life.

This paper intends to make this very valuable corpus of evidence for women’s involvement in religious life in late antique Egypt known to a wider audience; until now it has not generated much interest outside Coptology. Focusing on the female donors of children may provide a new opportunity to understand the procedure and purpose of child donation in general.

Most of the donors whom we encounter in these contracts come from a little town called Jême and its environs; Jême had developed inside the ruins of the Pharaonic mortuary temple of the Middle Kingdom Pharaoh Ramesses III (Fig. 1). Within the temple precincts, there flourished a lively community, in particular between 600 and 800 CE. A church was built into the pharaonic temple itself; inhabitants of Jême were farmers, businessmen, clerics, and practitioners of other professions we would expect in a town which had no wider significance, but which served as a local centre among smaller villages and monasteries. The special relationship between Jême and the surrounding holy places is easily traceable in the written papers which were found in the debris of the town itself and of the

1 These texts were first published by W. E. CRUM/G. STEINDORFF, Koptische Rechtsurkunden des achten Jahrhunderts aus Djeme (Theben), I, Texte und Indices, Leipzig 1912 (=KRU 78–103); a German translation was provided by W. C. TILL, Die koptischen Rechtsurkunden aus Theben (Sitzungsberichte der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, phil.-hist. Klasse, 244.3), Vienna 1964, pp. 149–188.
monasteries. Women play an impressive role in this written evidence.  

Most important among the holy places in this area – there were about a dozen at least – was the monastery of St Phoibammon. Its massive structure had been built on top of the temple of queen Hatshepsut in the sixth century, where it flourished until the later eighth century. Nothing of the monastery remains. Between 1903 and 1908 its ruins were removed by the excavators who were more interested in the Middle Kingdom temple of Hatshepsut than in the late antique Christian building. But the papyri were kept; most of the archive, to which these papers belong, is housed today in the British Library.

Twenty-six donations of children to the monastery and one self-donation of a man survive; they are all written in Coptic and show the recurrent pattern which was used for transactions of this kind at the time.

In the same format in which a palm-tree or a field was donated to the monastery, these donation contracts first name the contracting parties, on the one side the saint, St Phoibammon himself, or his monastery, both represented by the abbot or other clerics, and on the other side the donors.

The aim of the contract is to make the child irrevocably and definitely a σαυον, Coptic for slave, of the monastery. One should note that this term designates free servants as well as slaves. KRU 86 may serve as one example of such a contract; it was set up between Tachel, daughter of Sophia, who acts together with her sister Elisabeth, on the one side, and the holy monastery of Apa Phoibammon, on the other side; the date is 29 August 766 CE.

Remains of the town of Jême within the temple precincts as standing today

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2 For more information on all aspects of women’s lives in this town see T.G. Wilfong’s well written documentation on: The Women of Jême, Lives in a Coptic Town in Late Antique Egypt, Ann Arbor 2002.

3 For the monastery and his history see W. Godlewski, Le monastère de St. Phoibammon, Deir el-Bahari, V, Varssaw 1986.

In the name of the Holy, life giving and homousios Trinity, God Father, Son and Holy Spirit, written on Thot 1 of the 5th Indiction. I, Tachel, daughter of Sophia, from Apé, a quarter of the city of Ermon, assisted by my sister Elisabeth — we will provide the scribe, who will sign for us, and ask for reliable witnesses, to bear witness to this contract of donation.

I write to the holy monastery of Apa Phoibammon at the mountain of Jême, which is governed by our Father, the áρχων κύριος (ruling governor) Psalmo, the Dioiketes of the holy monastery and all the Kastron (= the village of Jême). Since the laws of the merciful God encourage all people to perform good deeds, so that they may achieve the forgiveness of their sins — for nobody is without sin, if not God himself, the innocent… No authority, whoever may govern, will hinder anybody to do with his/her belongings, what he/she likes.

Since, in that time in which we were, a male child was born to me, Tachel, woman and free-woman (eleuthera), in his seventh month, I promised him as a servant to the holy monastery of Phoibammon in the mountain of Jême, so that, if God would keep him from death, I should give him to the holy monastery. Afterward, when God caused that the little boy, whom I named Athanasios at the holy baptism, grow and get bigger, my lost reason cast me into a great sin. Concerning this little boy, I plotted that I should not (have to) give him to the holy place. When God saw the lawless thing I did, he cast the little boy into a great sickness, which became so great that it was reckoned by everyone who saw him that he had died. When I remembered the sin and the reckless thing that I had done, I once again called upon the holy one in his monastery: “If you will call upon God and he bestows on this boy a cure, I will put him into the monastery forever, according to my first agreement”. Then the merciful God showed his mercy to the boy and granted him the recovery. I took him in my hands to the holy place, since he was possessed by a demon, and all who saw him, were astonished about him.5

As a surety for the holy place they asked me for this contract of donation which concerns my beloved son Athanasios; I proceeded to this contract being alive, sober minded and sound of mind, free from any physical illness; but according to my will and my decision, without any cunning, fear, force or deception, I declare that I surrender my son Athanasios from now till all coming eternal times after me to the holy monastery which I have mentioned already. Whoever will dare to appear against this boy will encounter the condemnation for my sacrifice at the judge’s seat, and I will dispute with him.

As a surety for the holy place, I have written out this contract of donation. It is firm and valid, wherever it will be presented.

I, Papas, the deacon; I, Georgios, son of Philotheos; I, Chael, son of John, men from Apé, we are witnesses. I Sanagape, have written for them.

This contract has nearly all the ingredients typical also for the other contracts, in particular a vivid story about motives which induced the donors to surrender the child to the monastery. What is not mentioned here are the tasks the child was expected to carry out in the monastery. In KRU 79, in which a woman called Kallisthene donates her son Merkurios to the monastery, we read the following: I have donated my beloved son Merkurios to this holy place of St Apa Phoibammon at the mountain of Jême, so that he should be a slave, employed for the sweeping and besprinkling and for all tasks which are necessary, and that the holy monastery should be his master for ever, master over the work of his hands and the salary which he gains with his physical work, whether he is inside or outside the monastery, according to the order of the head of the monastery.

The background of these contracts has been discussed more intensively within the last decades,

5 Tr. Wilfong, The Women of Jême (cit. n. 2).
after a long period of complete silence. Arguments focused on the questions of how seriously one should take the embedded stories, and what the real purpose of these donations was. The main question is still open: in which way did the donors benefit from the donation? While the benefit for the monastery seems to be well defined and evident, the question of the benefit for the donors is obscure, in particular in the cases where women were the donors (see further below). The ambiguity of the wording of these contracts has generated different answers to the latter question, but all scholars have entertained the idea that there is something behind these contracts, which for one reason or another had to be concealed.

Let us look briefly at the possible cultural prerequisites of such donations. The more general question for these cultural prerequisites was asked by Heinz-Josef Thissen, who (after others) referred this eighth-century phenomenon to certain forms of self-dedication, which were practised in the temples of the Ptolemaic period. People who dedicated themselves to a god were called *hierodouloi* (holy slaves).

Most of the evidence comes from the second century BCE. There are quite a number of Demotic texts (many still unpublished) in which a person declares himself the slave of a god, enters the god’s service and engages to pay annually a fixed sum, either forever or for a period of 99 years. In return, the slave expects protection by the patron deity against demons, phantoms and ghosts. One of these declarations reads as follows:

In the year 33, on Mecheir 23, under King Ptolemy and Queen Cleopatra (21 March 137 BCE): *It has said the slave Tanebtynis, daughter of Sokmenis and Esoris, before my Master Sobek, the Master of Tebtynis, the Great God: I am your slave together with my children and grandchildren. I will not be free ever in your temple for ever. You will guard me, you will protect me against any evil demon. I will pay you a certain sum every month from this day for 99 years; I will give the money to your priests.*

This contract is being made between the God and the individual who dedicates herself and her children, as was the contract made between the Saint and the mother of the child. In the Demotic contracts, no father’s name is mentioned for the children who enter the service together with the woman.

The woman of the Ptolemaic period promises to pay a certain sum to the temple as long as she lives, in the same way as the donors of children promise that these children will work for or pay to the monastery as long as they live. Thissen concludes: „verstehen lassen sich die (koptischen) Kinderschenkungsurkunden auf dem Hintergrund ägyptischer Tradition;“ and „ich möchte die besprochenen Urkunden als späte Nachfahren, als Survival der hellenistisch-römischen Hierodulie auffassen.“

Some scholars have argued against this interpretation by pointing at the wide time gap between the Ptolemaic and Byzantine practices, and the different concepts of the dedications. But

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10 Thissen, Koptische Kinderschenkungsurkunden (cit. n. 8), p. 128.
Hierodouloi were present in the temples in Egypt after the Ptolemaic period. There is no doubt that these hierodouloi were an important factor for the well-functioning and even for the economics of temples also in the Roman period. It may also be worthwhile to consider that there were always children in the monasteries of Pachomios. How did they get there, if not by donation or abandonment? Most likely, these children were given to the monastery in an act of oblatio. The oblatio puerorum is a well-known phenomenon in Western monasticism. Children were given to the monasteries to become monks; this institution was often a welcome relief for those who could not afford to raise the children themselves.

The striking phenomenon of the child donations from Egypt is the fact that the children were obviously not expected to become monks; some contracts state explicitly that the child could also quit the service in the monastery, in which case he had to pay a certain sum every month to the holy place as long as he lived. In this respect, the status of the donated children is closer to what we see in the Ptolemaic self-dedications than what we see in the oblationes.

But until now, no written evidence for this kind of self-dedication in the pagan Roman period has been identified, nor has there been found any other evidence for child donations to monasteries with the clear indication that they were not expected to become monks, earlier than the eighth century. The historical situation of the monasteries in the eighth century may have produced this new kind of legal handling of the donations, which was not felt necessary in earlier times or in other places (see further below).

Since the boys were not expected to become monks, what then was the aim of these donations, and in what way did the monastery and the parents benefit from such a donation?

The monastery certainly expected to benefit from these persons by giving them tasks in the organisation of the holy place, tasks which were quite important for the running of the monastery. The format of the contracts makes us believe that the children, while staying there, carried out all kinds of well-defined services; in most cases they were employed to tend the lamps at the altar, to look after the basins of holy water – which were obviously used for the healing processes which were offered in the monastery –, and in sweeping the floors of the church, all activities which were well visible to those who came to the holy place seeking to be healed or just to visit the church. It was obviously the healing station and the altar of the saint which made the monastery a place worth visiting. Such visitors must have made an important contribution to the monastery’s upkeep.

After 705 CE, monks, too, had to pay the poll tax, which led to a dramatic decline in the numbers of monks. The children could have

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12 W. Otto, Beiträge zur Hierodulie im hellenistischen Ägypten (Abhandlungen der Bayrischen Akademie der Wissenschaften N.F., Heft 29), Munich 1950, pp. 31–32; but see Richter, What’s in a Story? (cit. n. 4), p. 248.
14 KRU 99, 13ff.: If they (in this case two brothers were donated) want to live in the monastery, they are expected to serve there as the head of the monastery orders them; but if they want to live outside the monastery, they should give the common taxes (δημόσιον) to the monastery. The term δημόσιον is discussed by Papaconstantinou, Notes (cit. n. 4), pp. 102–105.
15 The reference to a child donation to the monastery of Apa Thomas in P. Vat. Copt. Doresse 7, as postulated by G. Schenke, Kinderschenkungen an das Kloster des Apa Thoma(s)?, in: Journal of Juristic Papyrology, 37, 2007, pp. 177–183, seems to be not certain enough; that the monastery of Apa Thomas is mentioned here was clearly recognized by Schenke, but the other supplements are uncertain.
16 In some cases, the tasks expected from the children are described in a less definite way, like that he should be subordinated to the holy place, serving by day and by night and obeying all orders which will be given to him (KRU 87, 14–17).
filled a gap in the organisation of the holy place, which was running into more and more difficulties. We have to keep in mind that the monastery of St Phoibammon would finally be abandoned in the late eighth century.

While the benefit for the monastery is obvious, it is less obvious what the benefit for the donors was. In a recent article Sebastian Richter\(^\text{17}\) has argued that the donated children may have been disturbed children, whom the parents could not handle and therefore finally gave to the monastery in desperation. I find this difficult to believe. Admittedly, it would have been a safe way to install such children as monks into the environment of a monastery, where they would have been maintained until the end of their lives.

However, the phrasing of some of the contracts seems to point in a different direction. All scholars who have worked on this corpus of texts have observed that the contracts contain references both to the divine as well as to the worldly law. In some contracts\(^\text{18}\) the divine law is introduced by pointing to Hannah’s sacrifice of Samuel (1. Samuel 1, 11–24), where the childless woman prays for a child, and when it is given to her, she leaves it in the temple of God, as she had promised. The meaning for the eighth-century contracts is obvious: If Hannah did the right thing by giving her child to the temple, how can the same act be wrong now? The worldly law is represented by the phrase: everybody can do with his/her property what he/she wants.\(^\text{19}\) The references to both laws protect the donors against those who attack them over their decision to surrender the child. Furthermore, the narrative can be seen as such a means of defence, as it supports the decision of the donor by making everybody believe that the parents or single parent could not have acted differently, for they would have been punished by God, if they did not redeem their promise. Laws and the narratives (whether fictitious, real or perceived as real)\(^\text{20}\) defend and protect the donors in their decision. The modern reader of the contracts may get the impression that the act of donation was not altogether a legally clean one. This observation may lead to the conclusion that these children were actually sold to the monastery to be slaves. The ambiguous term σαυόν could be understood this way (see above with n. 4). The Greek terms used for the status of the boys are likewise ambiguous: the child is given to the holy place in an act of ἄγαπη or προσφορά = almsgiving (KRU 79; 82; 84); on the other hand the act of donation ends in the ὑποταγή = subordination of the child under the monastery (KRU 93), the act itself is described as an act of ἀποτάσει = ceding, surrendering (KRU 86).

Since Christianity had become the leading religion in the Roman Empire, the phenomenon of slavery, once so important for the functioning of the society of that Empire, had been declining, but was still present. Slavery had become a less visible feature in everyday life after the fourth century (at least apparently in Egypt), but the church remained one of the most active “employers”.\(^\text{21}\) On the other hand, the possession of slaves was stigmatized in Christian circles. The monk Victor of Apollonos Polis, who releases his slave Menas in 589 CE, declares to do so because he wants to achieve mercy in front of the Judge’s throne at the Last Judgement.\(^\text{22}\)

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18 KRU 85; 89; see Papaconstantinou, Θεία οἰκονομία (cit. n. 7), pp. 522–525.
19 KRU 79; 81; 86; these are three of the contracts written for women donors; the fourth (KRU 95) is not complete in the beginning and may have had that sentence as well. Not all the other contracts do have that statement, even when they are complete.
20 See Richter, What’s in a Story? (cit. n. 4).
The Codex Theodosianus does allow the sale of children (3.3.1), and the interpretatio explains that the child non poterit in perpetua servitute durare. Who has fulfilled all his duties servitio suo satisfecerit can leave as a free person. This corresponds quite well to what we have in the contracts, but the Codex does not say anything about a lifelong dependence on the former owner, which is what we see in the contracts.

Here a further gap opens between the worldly and the divine laws. Tachel cedes her son Athanasios from now till all coming eternal times after me to the holy monastery (see above KRU 86) and thus follows the example of Hannah (divine law), but the child is not to become a monk, but a labourer in the monastery (ὑποταγή, worldly law).

Let us now turn to the four donations which were made by women. They are:

KRU 79 (between 765 and 785 CE); Kallisthene, daughter of (void) from Neihbabe in the district of Primide, donates her son Merkurios to the monastery of St Phoibammon.

KRU 81 (26.5.771); Staurou, daughter of Peschate from the hamlet of Matoi in the district of Psoi, living in the monastery of Apa Sergios in the Kastron Apé, donates her son Andrew to the monastery of St Phoibammon.

KRU 86 (29.8.766); Tachel, daughter of Sophia, together with her sister Elisabeth, donates her son Athanasios to the monastery of St Phoibammon (see above).

KRU 95 (after 747/748); Maria, daughter of Daniel, from Tout, donates her son Komes to the monastery of St Phoibammon.

When we look at particulars of these four contracts, they seem to be completely in line with the other contracts, which were set up by couples or single men. But it is striking that none of the four women mentions the name of the father of the child. This is the more astonishing in a society where people were usually identified by their names and their fathers’ names. The children in these contracts are identified only by the name which the women had given them at baptism.

All four women are obviously single mothers, whether widowed or unmarried.

Tachel may be a widow – she calls herself ἐλευθέρα, which can be understood as free woman of a respectable social status (not a slave), or widow. Also Kallisthene, who only mentions the sinful soul of an unnamed husband, may be a widow; most interesting is the case of Staurou, daughter of the deceased Peschate, who confesses to be living in the monastery of Apa Sergios, and thus relates to her motherhood: When the good God had ordered that a son was born to me, I called him Andreas (KRU 81); Staurou may never have been married.

All these women talk about their sins, but so do the couples who bestow their children to the monastery. Also in line with the other contracts is the statement in three of the four contracts that describe the child as the property of the women. Here and there the phrase returns: No authority can hinder anybody to do with his or her property whatever he or she likes. That is the worldly law.

Single women and widows were minorities who faced particular problems throughout antiquity. Often their only means of support were their children or, in late antiquity, the services provided by monasteries and churches. A woman in that condition who donates her child must have expected a reasonable recompense for doing so. The case of Kallisthene (KRU 79) is striking.

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22 P. Köln 3, 157; see the detailed commentary by D. Hagedorn to P. Köln 157.
24 As it is the case with two of these four women; note that Tachel gives only the name of her mother; in Kallisthene’s contract the space for the father’s name is void.
25 For this term see W. Till, eleutheros = unbescholten, in: Le Muséon, 64, 1951, pp. 251–259.
26 Most likely also in KRU 95, where the beginning is broken off, see n. 18.
This is the only contract in which the age of the donated child is precisely mentioned (KRU 79 31–34): when he (my son Merkurios) had become of age (ἦλικία), he wanted and agreed to go to the monastery of Apa Phoibammon for the good of his soul; we thought: that is a lonely place, which needs this kind of vow. We decided to do the good deed. A young man of age could decide by himself to become a monk, or to work for the monastery out of his free will. Having the mother involved must mean that the woman had a certain advantage.

I would argue that these contracts are sales contracts disguised as donations. In a society that was rapidly changing, it may have been appropriate to handle certain procedures not openly. Part of the rapid change was the introduction of the new religion brought to the country by Arabs about a hundred years before. In certain circles and regions, people may have felt strongly about certain principles that were considered truly “Christian”, without wanting to relinquish the older traditions. Insisting on the divine law disguised the real facts behind the contracts which were set up by the worldly law. It is worthwhile noting here that all the important jurists of early Islam condemned the sale of children.  

The women (and the couples) who “donated” their children to the monastery of St Phoibammon may have also expected that their “donations” would establish a lifelong relation to the monastery, a relation which may have added noticeably to the social prestige of the donor. The monastery of St Phoibammon was certainly an important place of reference for the region (we would say today “the main employer in the region”).

The donation to the monastery, possibly well imbedded into a long tradition in Egypt, is thus an act of public self-assertion also for women, not merely an act of desperation which would leave nothing to the female donor (apart from any money that was not mentioned).

The monastery of St Phoibammon was abandoned towards the end of the eighth century. Not too long before this happened, the clerics running the monastery tried to recruit workers to carry out the most important activities to keep the holy place, which had a reputation as a healing centre, functioning; therefore emphasis was laid on the tending of the lamps, administering the baths and keeping the church clean. Since they did not find enough men at the time who wanted to become monks, they tried a different approach. They could have encouraged parents and single women to “donate” their children. That those donors hoped only for recompense by the divine power (as referred to by the divine law), is improbable; they must also have received a recompense in a worldly category, money, but this was well disguised in the contracts.

Illustration credits: Fig. 1: C. Römer.

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See I. Schneider, Kinderverkauf und Schuldknechtschaft. Untersuchungen zur frühen Phase des islamischen Rechts (Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes, 52.1), Stuttgart 1999, p. 334; unfortunately, Schneider’s comments on the donations at Jême are very superficial, p. 327.

Papaconstantinou, Θεία οἰκονομία (cit. n. 7), p. 511, sees the monasteries acting rather repressively on the individuals to surrender their children: “the monastery’s authorities used the cult of the saints to its advantage, as a counterbalance to economic difficulties encountered under Early Islamic rule.”