“Cleopatra, riding at anchor behind the combatants, could not endure the long and anxious waiting until a decision could be reached, but true to her nature as a woman and an Egyptian, she was tortured by the agony of the long suspense (...) and so she suddenly turned to flight herself”.¹ The historian Cassius Dio, led by Octavian’s vicious anti-Cleopatra propaganda, disapproves of Cleopatra’s actions in the battle of Actium which eventually led to the downfall of the queen and her beloved Marcus Antony. Cassius Dio put her weakness down to her nature as a woman, considering Cleopatra an Egyptian woman, though she was member of a Greco-Macedonian dynasty. The quote suggests the disdain of the ruling class for Egyptian women. We will confront this disdain with the information found in the Greek and Egyptian papyri.

The central question of this paper is the impact of Roman rule on women in Egypt. We will focus on the legal position of women (mainly the aspect of guardianship will be considered) and on their social mobility. The nature of the impact of Roman rule differs depending on the status of the inhabitants.

(1) Until AD 212 Roman citizens formed a minority in Roman Egypt.² These were higher officials, legionaries, to a lesser degree negotiatores and travelers. The city of Alexandria attracted Roman scholars like Strabo. There were also individual grants of citizenship to prominent families, often Alexandrians, whereas Egyptian soldiers of the auxiliary troops received Roman citizenship only after a military service of 25 years.³ Roman women in Egypt were, like their colleagues in Italy, subject to the Augustan legislation that stimulated marriage and production of children, as shown by the Gnomon of the Idios Logos,

¹ Dio Cassius 50.33, translation by Cary and Foster 1961.
³ Rowlandson 2004, 153.
a set of rules from emperor Augustus, but revised afterwards and extant on papyrus.  

(2) The citizens of Alexandria and of the other Greek cities (Naukratis, Ptolemais and after its foundation in AD 130, Antinoopolis) were the *cives peregrini* or *astoi* and constituted, after the Roman citizens, the upper class of the population in Egypt. They lived according to their own city bylaw, but there may have been a cross-fertilization between Alexandrian and Roman law vis-à-vis women.  

(3) The Ptolemaic rulers made a distinction between Greeks and native Egyptians and between Greek laws of the countryside and Egyptian law, a distinction that was, however, difficult to maintain in the later Ptolemaic period, due to mixed marriages and due to the creation of social mobility that brought several Egyptian people into the classes of the Greeks. For the Roman administration the culturally mixed population of Greco-Egyptian inhabitants of the countryside or *chora* were all considered ‘Egyptians’, *peregrini Aegyptii* or *Aigyptioi*.  

In our discussion of the impact of Roman rule on the women of Egypt, we will focus on the largest group, the Greco-Egyptian women of the countryside (*chora*), called ‘Egyptian’ women by the Romans.  

1. The Legal Position of Egyptian Women  

Egyptian women had, according to Pharaonic traditions, a strong legal position. They could engage in business transactions without a guardian, they inherited from their father (even real estate), they had to give their consent to marriage, and during their marriage they retained full rights to their property. Greek women in the classical period had hardly any legal independence and were under the control and protection of a guardian or *kyrios*: their father when they were young, their husband after marriage, or another relative when they had become a widow.

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4 BGU V; for the translations of §39, 46, 53, below, see Rowlandson 1998, no. 131.  
7 Seidl 1973, 131; Lewis 1983, 18–19 and 31–32.  