

Thought, Culture, and
Historiography in Christian Egypt,
AD 284-641

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II. Documents

Epistolary Christianity: A Survey of the Earliest Christian Letters from Egypt¹

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In this paper I would like to consider the evidence for early Christianity in Egypt through a survey of the earliest extant Christian letters preserved on papyrus and parchment. My purpose for restricting this investigation to these sources is twofold: (1) while letters represent just one facet of the available evidence, they provide a unique vantage point from which to view and assess early Christianity in Egypt and (2) on the whole are often overlooked and underutilized.² Therefore, it seems both timely and appropriate to reconsider what this early epistolary evidence has to offer.

Despite a few sensational claims for the discovery of first- or second-century Christian letters among the papyri,³ it is not until the third century when demonstrably Christian letters first appear.⁴ Consequently, this

¹ For journal abbreviations and abbreviations of other standard works I have followed P. H. Alexander et al. (eds.), *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies* (Peabody 1999). For editions of papyri I have followed the abbreviations given in J. F. Oates et al. (eds.), *Checklist of Editions of Greek and Latin Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets* (5th ed.; *BASP* Suppl. 9, 2001). The online version is available at <http://papyri.info/docs/checklist>.

² This is especially the case when one considers the attention these early Christian letters are given when compared to the voluminous attention given New Testament papyri from roughly the same period.

³ O. Montevecchi, “THN ΕΠΙΣΤΟΛΗΝ ΚΕΧΙΑΣΜΕΝΗΝ: *P. Oxy.* XLII 3057”, *Aeg* 80 (2000), pp. 187–94; I. Ramelli, “Una delle più antiche lettere cristiane extracanoniche”, *Aeg* 80 (2000), pp. 169–85; idem, “A New Reading of one of the Earliest Christian Letters Outside of the New Testament and the Dangers of Early Communities in Egypt”, *Nova Tellus* 1 (2010), pp. 125–59. Both O. Montevecchi and I. Ramelli argue that *P. Oxy.* XLII 3057, a late first- or early second-century letter that apparently shares some verbal reminiscences with certain early Christian texts like 1 Clement, is best interpreted as an early Christian letter. On the whole, the evidence marshaled by Montevecchi and Ramelli in favor of Christian authorship is not persuasive and smacks of special pleading. For a critical evaluation of their arguments see L. H. Blumell, “Is *P. Oxy.* XLII 3057 the Earliest Christian Letter?”, in T. J. Kraus and T. Nicklas (eds.), *Early Christian Manuscripts: Examples of Applied Method and Approach*, Leiden 2010, pp. 97–113; G. Synder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life Before Constantine*, Macon 2003, pp. 268–270 cites a number of second-century letters but none of them are demonstrably Christian and their “Christian” characteristics are based upon rather tenuous assumptions and identifications.

⁴ Likewise, in documentary texts in general it is not until the third century when Christians first begin to appear. The earliest extant documentary papyrus mentioning a

investigation will limit itself to these third-century letters. Given this self-imposed temporal parameter, which is admittedly a little artificial given the means by which these letters are assigned dates, some methodological explanations and caveats are in order. Since personal letters are rarely dated (i.e. contain an actual date in the letter itself), they are most often dated paleographically with the result that many are assigned dates that span a full century, or sometimes even two centuries, due to the fact that it is not always easy to pinpoint chronologically a paleographic feature or trend.⁵ Accordingly, I have restricted my investigation to letters that are securely dated to the third century. On a related methodological note, a few words should be said here about the method used in this survey to identify a “Christian” letter.⁶ In general, I have based my identification on secure Christian markers like *nomina sacra*, which are the primary indicators in most early Christian letters, as well as the use of securely

“Chrestian” *sic* (i.e. Christian) is *SB XVI 12497*, a list of nominations to liturgies from the Arsinoite that dates to the first half of the third century AD. In *col. III.49–50* it mentions a potential nominee: “Antonius Dioscorus, son of Horigenes, from Alexandria... Dioscorus is a Chrestian...” The next reference to a Christian in the papyri can be found in *P. Oxy. XLII 3035*, a summons dated Feb. 28, AD 256 that was sent from the city of Oxyrhynchus to the nearby village of Mermertha. In ll. 3–5 it reads as follows: “Immediately send up Petosorapis son of Horus, a Chresianos (i.e. Christian).” The next reference also comes from Oxyrhynchus and can be found in *P. Oxy. XLIII 3119* that dates ca. AD 259/60. On the date of this text see L. H. Blumell, “The Date of *P. Oxy. XLIII 3119*, the Deputy-Prefect Lucius Mussius Aemilianus, and the Persecution of Christians by Valerian and Gallienus”, *ZPE* 186 (2013), pp. 111–13. See also E. G. Whitehorn, “P. Oxy. XLIII 3119: A Document of Valerian’s Persecution?”, *ZPE* 24 (1977), pp. 187–96. On evidence for Christians in documentary papyri see D. G. Martinez, “The Papyri and Early Christianity”, in R. S. Bagnall (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Papyrology*, Oxford 2009, pp. 601–607.

It should be noted that there are extant Christian literary fragments that date to the second century. For a responsible dating and assessment of early Christian New Testament fragments see P. Orsini and W. Clarysse, “Early New Testament Manuscripts and their Dates: A Critique of Theological Paleography”, *ETL* 88/4 (2012), pp. 443–474; see also R. S. Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt*, Princeton 2009; L. W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, Grand Rapids 2006.

⁵ H. I. Bell, “Evidences of Christianity in Egypt During the Roman Period”, *HTR* 37 (1944), p. 195 noted the following with respect to dating letters: “Cursive hands can be dated with more confidence than those of the literary papyri; but private letters, written so often by non-professional hands and sometimes in an inexpert and clumsy script, are not the easiest of documents to date ...” See also R. S. Bagnall, *Reading Papyri, Writing Ancient History*, London 1995, pp. 25–26.

⁶ This is a broad topic with many different opinions. For recent methodologies see L. H. Blumell, *Lettered Christians: Christians, Letters, and Late Antique Oxyrhynchus*, Leiden 2012, pp. 27–88; A. M. Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord: Early Christians and the Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, Cambridge 2008, pp. 25–78; M. Choat, *Belief and Cult in Fourth-Century Papyri*, Turnhout 2006.

Christian titles or language. While this has limited the number of letters under consideration, it has the advantage of ensuring that the letters treated in this survey were actually sent by Christians and that the observations derived from them are indicative of Christianity in third-century Egypt.⁷

P.Bas. 16⁸

The first letter I would like to discuss is *P.Bas. 16* because there is good reason to believe that it is currently the earliest extant Christian letter.⁹ This letter was written on the back of a document that subsequently had been reused to accommodate the present letter.¹⁰ The papyrus has four vertical folds, which has resulted in some damage to the text, but the letter is mostly intact aside from the left margin where the beginning of each line is missing three or four letters. While the letter is without provenance, for a time it was thought to come from the Great Oasis.¹¹ Ulrich Wilcken, who helped edit this letter, dated it to the first half of the third century and noted that it shared parallels with texts in the Heroninus correspondence in *P.Flor. II*.¹² Since Wilcken's initial paleographic assessment of the letter back in 1917, subsequent commentators on this letter have endorsed this date.¹³ Though this letter

⁷ For example, I am not including *P. Harr. I 107* in this investigation, because while it was thought for a time to be the earliest Christian letter, more recently this identification has been challenged. See I. Gardner, A. Nobbs, and M. Choat, "P.Harr. 107: Is This Another Greek Manichaean Letter?", *ZPE* 131 (2000), pp. 118–124.

⁸ Besides the *editio princeps*, editions of this letter are published in G. Ghedini, *Lettere cristiane: Dai papiri greci del III e IV secolo*, Milano 1923, pp. 58–64 (no. 3); C. Wessely, *Les plus anciens monuments du christianisme écrits sur papyrus*, Paris 1924, 2.380–83; and M. Naldini, *Il cristianesimo in Egitto: Lettere private nei papiri dei secoli II–IV*, Firenze 1968, pp. 73–75 (no. 4). See also E. A. Judge and S. R. Pickering, "Papyrus Documentation of Church and Community in Egypt to the Mid-Fourth Century", *JAC* 20 (1977), pp. 50–51.

⁹ This text was first edited by E. Rabel with the help of U. Wilcken. In this edition of the papyrus Wilcken made the following remark that still holds true (*P.Bas.* p. 65): "Dieser Brief ist also einer der ältesten christlichen Briefe auf Papyrus, wenn nicht der älteste."

¹⁰ On the back of the letter there are three lines of discernable text. The final of these lines reads: (ἔτους) ζ// Xo(ιὰχ) κη ("year 6 Choiak 28"). Choiak 28 roughly corresponds with Dec. 24. On this date see also n. 13.

¹¹ Judge and Pickering, "Papyrus Documentation", 48.

¹² *P.Bas.* p. 65, "Darüber äussert sich Wilcken folgendermassen: 'Für die Datierung ins III. Jahrhundert — und zwar eher ins frühere oder mittlere — spricht ausser der Schrift des Rekto auch das Verso, dass mich an die Heroninos Korrespondenz (*P. Flor. II*) erinnert.'"

¹³ Ghedini, *Lettere cristiane*, p. 58; Naldini, *Il cristianesimo in Egitto*, p. 73; Judge and Pickering, "Papyrus Documentation", p. 48. The reference to a "year 6" in the document on the back of the letter (see n. 10), and keeping in mind an early third-century date for the letter, suggests that the document on the back was written in one of

may well date to the early part of the third century, in my opinion, a date more toward the middle of the third century seems a little more probable based on paleographic comparanda.¹⁴ The letter can readily be identified as Christian because in the closing valediction the writer employs a *nomen sacrum*: ll. 19–21, ἐρρῶσθαί σε εὐχομαι ὀλοκλή[ρω]ς ἐν κ(υρί)ῳ (“Farewell, I pray for your health in the Lord”).

The letter was sent from a man named Arrian to an individual named Paul who was identified as his “incomparable brother Paul” (l. 1, ἀσύγκριτε ἄδελφε Παῦλε). The use of the adjective ἀσύγκριτος, though rare, is attested and there is no indication that this title of address was exclusively Christian.¹⁵ While the name of the addressee, Paul, is not that well-attested in documents from Egypt before the fourth century, this name sees a rather dramatic increase in attestations in the fourth and subsequent centuries that must surely be indicative of the rise and spread of Christianity, at which time names of notable saints became exceptionally popular.¹⁶ On this point a passing note made by the third-century archbishop of Egypt, Dionysius of Alexandria (bp. ca. AD 248–262), is certainly relevant. He remarked that many of the faithful in his day gave their children names of the apostles out of respect and admiration and specifically noted that Paul was one name that the faithful were especially fond of.¹⁷ If these remarks apply to the present letter, then

the following years: AD 226 (year 6 of Alexander Severus); AD 242 (year 6 of Gordian III); AD 248 (year six of Philip); AD 258 (year six of Valerian and Gallienus).

¹⁴ Though Wilcken was certainly correct to note that this letter shared paleographic parallels with letters from the earlier part of the third century, given the overall graphic trends in the letter I believe there are closer parallels in texts dated more toward the middle of the third century: e.g. *P. Oxy.* LXXIV 4995 (Jan. 6, AD 254).

¹⁵ *P. Flor.* II 140.10–11 (A.D. 264): κύριέ μου ἀσύγκριτε Ἀλύπι (“my incomparable lord Alypis”); *P. Harr.* I 109.13–14 (III/IV): αὐτὸν Ἀντᾶν Ἀμμώνιον τὸν ἀσύγκριτον προσαγορεύω (“I especially salute the incomparable Antas Ammonius himself”); *CPR* XXV 3.7–8 (IV): κύριε ἄδελφε ἀσύγκριτε (“my incomparable lord brother”); *PSI* IV 311.28 (ca. AD 330): ἄδελφε ἀσύγκριτε (“O incomparable brother”); *PSI* VII 783.9–10 (ca. AD 357): ἐρρῶσθ(αι) πολλοῖς χρόνοις εὐχομαι πάτερ ἀσύγκριτε (“Farewell, I pray that you often incomparable father”). Cf. *P. Oxy.* X 1298.1 (ca. AD 330); *P. Abinn.* 30.6 (mid IV); *SB* XXIV 16204.21 (IV/V). The first Christian use of ἀσύγκριτος as an epistolary epithet can be found in Ignatius of Antioch, *Sym.* 13.2: Δάφνον τὸν ἀσύγκριτον (“[I salute] incomparable Daphnus”).

¹⁶ R. S. Bagnall, “Religious Conversion and Onomastic Change in Early Byzantine Egypt”, *BASP* 19 (1982), pp. 105–124; G. H. R. Horsley, “Name Change as an Indication of Religious Conversion in Antiquity”, *Numen* 34 (1987), pp. 1–17; Blumell, *Lettered Christians*, pp. 237–275; M. Depauw and W. Clarysse, “How Christian was Fourth Century Egypt? Onomastic Perspectives on Conversion”, *VC* 67 (2013), pp. 407–435.

¹⁷ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 7.25.14: “I [Dionysius] hold that there have been many persons of the same name as John the apostle, for out of love for him, admiring and emulating

it is possible that the addressee, Paul, could be regarded as a second-generation Christian.

Turning to the body of the letter, its contours are a little difficult to follow given that there are a few lacunae combined with the fact that it contains a certain degree of implicit information—i.e. information previously shared between the sender and addressee that is not made explicit in the letter but is simply assumed. While the tone of the letter is a little tense at times as Arrian reminds Paul that he wants to avoid “trouble” (ll. 7–8, ἐνοχλέω), the letter need not be read in terms of the persecution of Christians, as some have previously done.¹⁸ Rather, it appears that the tension that is present in certain parts of the letter has to do with the fact that Arrian is either threatened with appointment to the gymnasiarchy or is perhaps already holding this office and is having trouble finding a successor so that he can free himself from this obligation (ll. 6–8).¹⁹ The reference to the βουλή, or “council,” in l. 9 that follows, though used in reference for an associate of Arrian’s, implies that at the very least Arrian moved in the circle of the *bouletic* class—wealthy local elites who helped conduct civic affairs—and one would expect such for a gymnasiarch or a candidate for the gymnasiarchy. Thus, the letter seemingly serves as evidence for a well-to-do Christian family at the start or middle of the third century who were a part of the governing class in some Egyptian metropolis. While the trouble Arrian was experiencing as a result of the gymnasiarchy is present in the letter, it also does not seem overwhelming as the letter quickly shifts to a request for some fish sauce (l. 11, γαρέλαιον) and concludes with a number of greetings sent to the extended family of Paul (ll. 13–19).

P.Bas. 16²⁰

Greetings, my incomparable lord brother Paul, I, Arrian, salute you. I pray that the best things in life may be yours. Since . . . [name] is coming to you I thought it necessary to salute you together with our lord father. And now may I remind you about the gymnasiarchy, lest we have trouble here, for Heracleides is not able to . . . for he has been nominated to the council . . . but also send the fish sauce to me—the kind that you reckon to be good. Our lady has given birth and is in good health, she salutes you (pl.) together with your wives and your sweetest children . . .

him, and desirous of being loved by the Lord even as he was many assumed the same name; even as the children of the faithful are often called after Paul and also after Peter.”

¹⁸ Ghedini, *Lettere cristiane*, p. 58; Naldini, *Il cristianesimo in Egitto*, p. 73.

¹⁹ Judge and Pickering, “Papyrus Documentation”, p. 51.

²⁰ Translations for all letters are my own unless otherwise noted.

brethren and all ours. Salute our brother Diogenes also called Xoides. All those with us salute you. Farewell, I pray for your health in the Lord.

P. Vind. Sijp. 26²¹

Chronologically, the next letter of Christian provenance appears to be *P. Vind. Sijp. 26*, which likely dates to ca. AD 270–74.²² This letter was written on the front and back of a rectangular papyrus that is well preserved. Though there are six vertical fold lines on the papyrus, they have caused relatively little damage to the text. The letter is preserved in its entirety, and given a reference to the Oxyrhynchite nome in l. 15 (ἐν τῷ Ὁξύρυγγεῖτι) the provenance of the letter can be readily established. This letter was sent by a man named Asclepius, who identifies himself as the “assistant of the collector” (l. 2, βοηθὸς ἐπείκτου), to another individual named Hieracammon who is described in the address on the back of the letter as the “marshal of the *strategus* in Cynopolis” (l. 15, ἡγουμένω τοῦ στρατηγοῦ) ἐν Κυνώ). Thus, both the sender and the addressee worked in the lower echelons of nome administration in the Oxyrhynchite and the Cynopolite.²³

The sole Christian marker in this letter, which is otherwise preoccupied with a request and delivery instructions for some wine, occurs in the valediction at the end of the letter. Here Asclepius concludes the letter as follows: ll. 21–24, ἐρρῶσθαί σε, κύριε ἄδελφε ἐν θεῷ πόλλοις χρόνοις εὔχομαι (“I pray, lord brother, for your health for many years in God”). The prepositional phrase ἐν θεῷ (“in God”), though subtle, should be taken as a distinct Christian marker even without the use of a *nomen sacrum* for θεός. Beginning in the third century a distinct epistolary shift in greetings and valedictions may be noted with the emergence of phrases like ἐν θεῷ (“in God”), ἐν κυρίῳ (“in the Lord”), and ἐν κυρίῳ θεῷ (“in the Lord God”). As one surveys the usage of the phrase ἐν θεῷ (or alternatively ἐν κυρίῳ) it becomes clear that it can be traced back to certain letters in the New Testament. With the specific case of ἐν θεῷ, it first appears in 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2 Thessalonians 1:1, and Jude 1, after which it can be seen in greetings and valedictions of certain letters of

²¹ Besides the *editio princeps*, editions of this letter are also published in M. Naldini, *Il cristianesimo in Egitto*, pp. 107–109 (no. 13); Blumell, *Lettered Christians*, pp. 126–127; and L. H. Blumell and Thomas A. Wayment, *Christian Oxyrhynchus: Texts, Documents, and Sources*, Waco 2015, pp. 461–463.

²² This date has been proposed based on parallels given for the prices of wine mentioned in the letter in ll. 15–18; see H.-J. Drexhage, *Preise, Mieten/Pachten, Kosten und Löhne im römischen Ägypten*, St. Katharinen 1991, p. 65.

²³ For a discussion of these offices see Blumell and Wayment, *Christian Oxyrhynchus*, pp. 461–63.

Ignatius of Antioch.²⁴ Over time it develops into a standard epistolary formula in Christian letters. Therefore, even when this phrase is employed without a *nomen sacrum*, as it is here, it establishes that the writer was a Christian. In fact, there is hardly an example where the uncontracted phrase ἐν θεῷ (or ἐν κυρίῳ/ἐν κυρίῳ θεῷ) appears in a greeting/valediction of a letter in a decidedly non-Christian context.²⁵

In this letter Asclepius begins by reminding Hieracammon of a previous visit and proceeds to talk about a third-party wine seller named Silvanus who wanted payment to be made through Hieracammon. Accordingly, Asclepius informs Hieracammon of the amount of wine he desires and of the previously agreed upon prices. Asclepius also informs Hieracammon that the one bearing the letter will transport the wine back to him and concludes by asking for a return letter as soon as possible. While this letter is, on the whole, rather mundane it is significant because it reveals that in the pre-Constantinian period at least some Christians had come to occupy the lower levels of nome administration.

P.Vind.Sijp. 26

To my lord brother Hieracammon, Asclepius, assistant of the collector, (sends) greetings. Remember brother when I was in Cynopolis, having dined with you, and when I was about to return I spoke with you about Silvanus the attendant who had some cheap wine and who desired that payment is given through you my brother. I ask you to do these things, to give these things to the one bearing my letter so that he can bring them to me in the Oxyrhynchite. That is, 2 *diplokerama* (measures) for 60 *denarii* and 4 simple (measures) for 20 *denarii* each, which equals 80 *denarii*, and one *knidion* (measure) for 35 *denarii*, in total 175 *denarii*. But do not neglect, brother, to write me in order that I should know that you have done it as soon as possible. I pray, lord brother, for your health for many years in God. (Verso) To my Lord brother Hieracammon, the marshal of the *strategus* in Cynopolis, from the assistant of the collector.

²⁴ *Eph.* 1.1, 21.2; *Magn.* 1.1; *Rom.* 1.1; *Pol.* 1.1.

²⁵ Furthermore, frequently when this uncontracted phrase does occur the letter can be established as Christian on other grounds: G. Ghedini, *Lettere cristiane*, p. 13; H. Koskenniemi, *Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des griechischen Briefes bis 400 n. Chr.*, Helsinki 1956, p. 162; G. Tibiletti, *Le lettere private nei papiri greci del III e IV secolo d.C.: Tra paganesimo e cristianesimo*, Milan 1979, pp. 29–30; M. Choat and A. M. Nobbs, “Monotheistic Formulae of Belief in Greek Letters on Papyrus from the Second to the Fourth Century”, *JGRChJ* 2 (2001–2005), p. 39; Choat, *Belief and Cult in Fourth-Century Papyri*, 103–104. The uncontracted phrase ἐν θεῷ appears in the initial greeting or valediction of the following letters: *P.Grenf.* I 53.2 (IV); *P.Kellis* I 71.3 (IV); *P.Wisc.* II 76.3; *SB* XII 10800.3; *P. Abinn.* 5.3 (mid IV); Cf. *P.Oxy.* LIX 3998.2 (IV): ἐν θεῷ κυρίῳ; *P.Kellis* I 63.4 (IV): ἐν θεῷ in which a Manichaean context seems likely.

SB VI 9557²⁶

This letter is one of the most interesting early Christian letters preserved on papyrus, but because of its fragmentary nature the exact purpose and significance of the letter is somewhat obscure. It was written on the recto of a large papyrus, with at least three columns of text, but because this papyrus was later trimmed down to accommodate biblical text on the other side, the first column is almost completely destroyed aside from a few very partial lines and the last column is missing the last part of each line.²⁷ When the letter was first published, it was dated on paleographic grounds by Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt to the period between AD 250 and 285;²⁸ but when Adolf von Harnack subsequently recognized that the references to “Papa Maximus” (col. III.5, Μάξιμον τὸν πάπα[ν]; col. III.9, Μαξίμω τῷ πάπ[α]) should be taken to refer to the Alexandrian patriarch who bore this name and whose episcopal tenure lasted from ca. AD 262–282, he demonstrated that the letter should be dated to this period.²⁹

The letter does not preserve the names of either the sender or the recipients and it seems that it was sent from Rome to certain parties in the Arsinoite who either worked for, or alongside, the sender.³⁰ When the letter becomes intelligible in column II it opens with the sender giving some instructions about dry goods. As it proceeds, instructions are given about some money that has been sent and the recipients are asked to

²⁶ This letter was first published as *P. Amh.* I 3(a) and was subsequently republished as *W. Chr.* 126. Editions of this letter can also be found in A. Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten. Das Neue Testament und die neuentdeckten Texte der hellenistisch-römischen Welt*, Tübingen 1908, pp. 137–43 (no. 16); Ghedini *Lettere cristiane*, pp. 65–77 (no. 4); C. Wessely, *Les plus anciens monuments du christianisme*, 1.135–139; H. Leclercq, “Lettres Chrétiennes”, *DACL* 8.3 (1929), pp. 2782–83; H. Musurillo, “Early Christian Economy: A Reconsideration of *P. Amherst 3(a)*(= *Wilcken, Chrest. 126*)”, *ChrEg* 31(1961), pp. 124–34; Naldini, *Il cristianesimo in Egitto*, pp. 79–85 (no. 6).

²⁷ The letter is surmounted by Hebrews 1:1 above col. II and the back of the papyrus contains LXX *Genesis* 1:1–5 in the version of Aquila. Both Hebrews 1:1 and LXX *Genesis* 1:1–5 are written in a different hand and are probably somewhat later, perhaps the late third or early fourth century.

²⁸ *P. Amh.* I, p. 28.

²⁹ A. von Harnack, “Zu den Amherst-Papyri”, in *Sitzungsberichte der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, Berlin 1900, pp. 987–992. Harnack’s identification has been widely accepted in subsequent scholarship.

³⁰ In col. II.21–22 the sender wrote to the recipients as though they were in the Arsinoite: παρ’ ὑμῖν ἐν τῷ Ἀρσινο[ε]ίτῃ (“there in the Arsinoite”). At the bottom of col. II in another hand, the letter is dated and a note is given that it was sent from Rome: col. II.25, [(ἔτους) ?]// Παῦνι η ἀπὸ Ῥώμης (“[Year ?] Pauni 8 from Rome”). Pauni 8 roughly corresponds with June 2. In col. III.21 there is another reference to Rome: ἐπὶ τὴν Ῥώμην.

purchase some linen in the Arsinoite and then go to Alexandria to deliver some money to another individual. At the start of column III the sender seemingly commends the recipients for buying the linen, which is a little odd given that the request was apparently just made a few lines earlier, so either something is missing in the text or it might be that the text contains some kind of summary of multiple letters.³¹ In any case, as the text proceeds in this column, mention is made of the Alexandrian patriarch “Papa Maximus.” In the first reference it seems that instructions are being given for the recipients to appear before Papa Maximus and an unnamed lector when they arrive in Alexandria.³² In the second reference it seems that the recipients are to give the money to either Papa Maximus or to another individual and obtain a receipt. Finally, they are instructed to sell the bread and linen in Alexandria at a profit and then give the money to a man named Theonas, who could well have been the same Theonas who succeeded Maximus as patriarch of Alexandria in ca. AD 282.³³ The letter then concludes with the sender exhorting the recipients to hasten with the work so that the money can be sent to Rome.

The letter is interesting for a number of reasons, not least of which is the patriarch’s apparent involvement in business dealings. Due to the state of the papyrus, it is unclear whether Maximus and Theonas acted solely as depositories or whether they were actively engaged on the business side of buying and selling goods in Alexandria. If the former, the implication could be that they were men who were trusted; if the latter, it should not be totally surprising to see bishops involved in business pursuits, since by the middle of the third century bishops were often drawn from among the wealthier classes of society (*curiales*) who had succeeded in various commercial activities prior to their ordination.³⁴ On this front, it is interesting to note Eusebius, who reports that in the middle of the third century a man named Kolon was bishop of Hermopolis.³⁵ In

³¹ H. I. Bell, *Cults and Creeds in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, Liverpool 1953, p. 85, n. 2; Musurillo, “Early Christian Economy”, p. 126.

³² Col. III.5–6: Μάξιμον τὸν πάπα[ν καὶ] τὸν ἀναγν[ώσ]την (“Papa Maximus and N.N. his lector”).

³³ On the episcopacy of Theonas see Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, 7.32.30–31.

³⁴ E. Wipszycka, *Les ressources et les activités économiques des églises en Égypte du 4^e au 8^e siècle*, Brussels 1972, pp. 155–60; R. S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, Princeton 1993, p. 292; C. Rapp, *Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition*, Berkeley 2005, pp. 199–207, 211–15.

³⁵ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.46.2 in which it is reported that Dionysius, the Alexandria patriarch (bp. ca. AD 248–262) sent a letter to Colon containing a treatise *On Repentance*: καὶ πρὸς Κόλωνα (τῆς Ἑρμουπολιτῶν δὲ παροικίας ἐπίσκοπος ἦν οὗτος) ἰδία τις περὶ μετανοίας αὐτοῦ φέρεται γραφή (“And to Colon (he was bishop of the community of the Hermopolitans) a personal letter of his is extant *On Repentance*”).

BGU XII 2133, an application for a lease from Hermopolis dated to the last half of the third century, mention is made of an individual named Kolon who is almost certainly the same Kolon referred to by Eusebius, given the rarity of this name.³⁶ The point, however, is that in this text Kolon is the father of a gymnasiarch, which clearly establishes that he was a man of some means and was a wealthy metropolitan. Another example that could be given here is Phileas, bishop of the Egyptian city of Thmuis from the late third to the early fourth century; Eusebius claims that before he was bishop he was a wealthy metropolitan resident who was a generous benefactor to his city and performed various civic liturgies.³⁷ Consequently, Cyprian of Carthage (bp. ca. AD 249–258), lamented that some bishops preferred commercial activities to their episcopal duties.³⁸ Lastly, assuming that everyone mentioned in this letter is Christian, the whole commercial enterprise that seems to be going on of buying and selling is reminiscent of Tertullian’s statement about Christians in his *Apology* in which he remarks that many Christians were actively engaged in business by constantly “buying and selling.”³⁹

SB VI 9557⁴⁰

(col. i remains unintelligible; col ii) ... to send the barley ... from the same (?) account, lest they consider what has been said ... from supplies (?) sent to him from Alexandria. With all his excuses, delays and

³⁶ The name Kolon (Κόλων) is very rare in the papyri and is only attested three other times outside of the present reference: *P. Oxy.* XXXVI 2757.1.1 (ca. AD 79; Oxyrhynchus); *SB* XXII 15221.2 (II/III; Karanis); *P. Herm. Landl.* 2.16.322 (ca. AD 346–48; Hermopolite).

³⁷ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 8.9.7–10.1. Likewise, the land registers from the Hermopolite nome from the fourth century show that some bishops owned large tracts of land from which they accrued much wealth. See W. van Gucht, “Some Egyptian Bishops and the Date of P. Landlisten,” in *Atti del XVIII congresso internazionale di papirologia*, Band 3, Neapel 1984, pp. 1135–40. Furthermore, some Egyptian bishops owned ships, a clear sign of wealth, and were engaged in various agricultural enterprises: *P. Col.* VII 160.3–4 (AD 345–54): εἰς πλοῖ(ον) Ἱερακαπό[λ]λωνος ἐπισκόπου (“for the boat of Hieracapollon the bishop”); *P. Col.* VII 161.2–3 (AD 345–51); *P. Harr.* I 94. 12–13 (IV): πλοῖ(ον) Ἀπολλωνίου υἱοῦ Διονυσίου ἐπισκόπου (“boat of Apollonius son of bishop Dionysius”).

³⁸ Cyprian, *De lapsis*, 6: “Many bishops, instead of giving encouragement and example to others, despising their divine charge became agents in secular business; after abandoning their thrones and deserting their people they toured the markets in other territories on the lookout for profitable deals. While brethren were starving in the Church, they desired to possess money in abundance; they seized landed estates by fraud and they increased their gains by loans at compound interest.” Translation is my own.

³⁹ Tertullian, *Apol.*, 42.1–3.

⁴⁰ The translation for *SB* VI 9557 is based in part on the translation given in Musurillo, “Early Christian Economy”, pp. 131–132.

procrastination, I can hardly believe that he did not plan this deliberately. Now if the accruing profit does not balance the account properly (?), I myself guarantee that I shall make up for it (?).

If you will, sell (?) some bread ... to Nilon (?) and father Apollonius at . . . They have written that the money would be delivered to you immediately. Bring this money to Alexandria, after purchasing linen (?) there in the Arsinoite nome. For I promised Primitinus that the money would be delivered to him at Alexandria ... (2 hand) from Rome, the eighth day of Payni.

(col. iii) You did right, brethren, in buying the linen. Some of you ... travelling with them to Bishop Maximus and ... his lector. And when you have sold the linen in Alexandria, deliver the money to Primitinus or to Bishop Maximus and get a receipt (?) from him. As for travelling expenses (?) ... after selling the bread and the linen, I beg you to give the money to Theonas, that I may collect it when I come to Alexandria towards my own expenses.

Be sure, brethren, to do this as soon as possible, so that Primitinus may not be held up at Alexandria ... on his way to Rome ... And I shall arrange all things harmoniously between you and Agathobulus.

Dossier of Sotas, Bishop or Oxyrhynchus⁴¹

The final group of third-century letters belong to a small dossier comprising five letters that may be dated, with some confidence, to the period ca. AD 282–300 and concerns an early bishop of Oxyrhynchus named Sotas: *P. Alex.* 29; *PSI* III 208; *PSI* IX 1041; *P. Oxy.* XXXVI 2785; and *P. Oxy.* XII 1492. The date of this dossier can be established owing to the fact that Sotas is referenced in another source. In a recently discovered Ethiopic manuscript that dates to the Aksumite period (IV–VII century) and contains fragments of some thirty-six different treatises, it includes a work that has come to be identified as the *History of the Alexandrian Patriarchate* (not to be confused with either the *Coptic History of the Church* or the *Arabic History of the Patriarchs*). This document is especially important because it renders accounts of various early Alexandrian patriarchs that were previously unknown. For the episcopates of Maximus (ca. AD 262–282), Theonas (ca. AD 282–300) and Peter I (ca. AD 300–311) the document is particularly insightful, since it reports that under these patriarchs a number of bishops were ordained in the *chora*. Remarkably, under the episcopate of Maximus it is reported that he ordained a man by the name of Sotas as Bishop of

⁴¹ On this dossier see Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord*, pp. 81–151; Blumell and Wayment, *Christian Oxyrhynchus*, pp. 463–487.

Oxyrhynchus.⁴² Turning to *P.Oxy.* XXXVI 2785, a “letter of recommendation” (or perhaps “letter of peace”), sent by the presbyters of Heracleopolis to Sotas in Oxyrhynchus, the letter begins by addressing Sotas as “beloved Papa” (l. 1, ἀγαπητὲ πάπα).⁴³ Keeping in mind that the presbyters of Heracleopolis are calling Sotas a “Papa” surely indicates some deference on their part and suggests that, in this case, “Papa” should be taken as “bishop” and not merely as “priest” or “presbyter” as some have previously supposed.⁴⁴ There are, therefore, compelling reasons not only to date this dossier of letters to the patriarchate of Maximus but also to view this dossier as episcopal correspondence.

To begin, of these five letters four may properly be understood as “letters of recommendation”—i.e. the letter was sent with an individual(s) who was travelling to another community and was being given an ecclesiastical endorsement of sorts by the local church authority. Of these four letters, three were sent by Sotas, *P.Alex.* 29, *PSI* III 208, and *PSI* IX 1041, while *P.Oxy.* XXXVI 2785 (as noted above) was sent to Sotas by the presbyters of Heracleopolis.⁴⁵ The three letters written by Sotas are remarkably similar in form and content and each letter begins with the very same opening formula: χαῖρε ἐν κ(υρί)ῳ ἀγαπητὲ ἄδελφε N.N., Σώτας σε προσαγορεύω (“Greetings in the Lord beloved brother N.N., I Sotas salute you”). Following this opening greeting Sotas then introduces the individual(s) being recommended. In *P. Alex.* 29 the recommended party is a man named Diphilus and Sotas asks that he be “received in peace” (ll. 7–8, προσδέξαι ἐν εἰρήνῃ). While the phrase “in peace” may appear rather nondescript, it likely signifies that Diphilus was a baptized Christian in good standing and was therefore eligible to partake of the

⁴² A. Bausi and A. Camplani, “New Ethiopic Documents for the History of Christian Egypt”, *ZAC* 17 (2013), p. 247.

⁴³ For this reading see K. Treu, “Christliche Empfehlungs-Schemabriefe auf Papyrus”, in *Zetesis. Album Amicorum Door Vrienden en Collega’s Aangeboden Aan Prof. Dr. E. de Strycker Ter Gelegenheid Van Zijn 65e Verjaardag*, Antwerpen 1973, pp. 634–635.

⁴⁴ *P. Oxy.* XXXVI p. 83; cf. T. Derda and E. Wipszycka, “L’emploi des titres abba, apa et papas dans l’Égypte byzantine”, *JJP* 24 (1994), pp. 23–27.

⁴⁵ While the name of the sender of *P.Alex.* 29 is partially lost owing to a lacuna at the beginning of l. 4, and the extant text reads]τας, there can be little doubt that the reconstruction should be [Σώ]τας. This letter contains identical phraseology to *PSI* II 208 and *PSI* IX 1041 at the start making it virtually certain that the said Sotas issued it: χαῖρε ἐν κ(υρί)ῳ, ἀγαπητὲ ἄδελφε N.N., Σώτας σε προσαγορεύω. While the handwriting of this letter is different from either *PSI* II 208 or *PSI* IX 104, since both of these letters were also written with different hands it can be assumed that Sotas simply used a scribe or secretary to write on his behalf. Thus, while the provenance of this letter is not actually known it seems probable that it originated in Oxyrhynchus.

Eucharist in the new Christian community where he was travelling.⁴⁶ In *PSI* III 208 the recommended party is a man named Heracles and here Sotas asks that he “be received according to custom” (ll. 5–6, παράδεξαι [κ]ατὰ τὸ ἔθος). The precise meaning of the phrase “according to custom” is difficult to ascertain and it is not certain whether it should be taken to have the same meaning as “in peace,” so that it should be assumed that Heracles was a baptized Christian; but at the very least this phrase suggests that Heracles ought to be received with the proper reception as was befitting his status (baptized or otherwise).⁴⁷ *PSI* IX 1041 is probably the most interesting of these three letters since six individuals are being recommended: Heron, Horion, Philadelphus, Pekysis, Naäroous, and Leon. Here, however, Sotas states that the first five are “catechumens of the ones gathered” (ll. 8–9, κατηχομένους τῶν συναγομένων) while Leon is a “catechumen in the beginning of the gospel” (ll. 10–11, κατηχούμενον ἐν ἀρχῇ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου). Thus, the letter affords a brief glimpse into the catechumenate in Oxyrhynchus at the end of the third century. The references to the catechumenate are significant because it appears to confirm Origen’s observation that there were, broadly speaking, two classes of catechumens: more advanced catechumens (i.e. “catechumens of the ones gathered”) and true beginners or novitiates (i.e. “catechumens in the beginning of the gospel”).⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Though it has been noted (*P.Oxy.* LVI 3857 p. 116) that in Christian letters of recommendation ἐν εἰρήνῃ functions “to remind the recipients that it is their duty to give proper hospitality to the recommended person”, the meaning of the phrase is likely more technical and refers specifically to the fact that the recommended party was a baptized Christian in good standing. Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord*, 123 has pointed out that the phrase ἐν εἰρήνῃ functions to alert the receiving party that they should welcome the guest with the kiss of peace, signifying full fellowship, and that they were eligible to partake of the Eucharist. For ἐν εἰρήνῃ signifying φίλημα εἰρήνης (“kiss of peace”) see M. P. Penn, *Kissing Christians: Ritual and Community in the Late Ancient Church* (Philadelphia 2005), p. 44.

⁴⁷ In Christian letters of recommendation the phrase κατὰ τὸ ἔθος occurs on two other occasions, in *SB* X 10255.7 (III/IV) and *SB* III 7269.7 (IV/V). Unlike ἐν εἰρήνῃ, however, there is no indication that the phrase had a technical meaning since it has no discernible history in Christian literary texts. It seems, then, that it simply meant that the recommended party ought to be received with the proper reception as befitting their status. It is worth pointing out that in *1 Clem.* 1.2 related phraseology is employed as the author of this letter praises the Corinthian Christians since they were in the “custom” (ἔθος) of bestowing hospitality on guests: καὶ τὸ μεγαλοπρεπὲς τῆς φιλοξενίας ὑμῶν ἔθος οὐκ ἐκίρυσεν; (“Who did not proclaim the magnificent custom of your hospitality?”).

⁴⁸ Origen, *Cels.*, 3.51: “But as far as they can, Christians previously examine the souls of those who want to hear them, and test them individually beforehand; when before entering the community the hearers seem to have devoted themselves sufficiently to the desire to live a good life, then they introduce them. They privately appoint one

PSI III 208 and *PSI* IX 1041 are also interesting because of the material upon which they are written; instead of papyrus both letters are written on parchment. To give some idea of the rarity with which letters were written on parchment, of the almost 900 published letters provenanced to Oxyrhynchus between the first century BC and seventh century AD these are the only two. Furthermore, of the roughly 7,500 letters currently published from Egypt, between the third century BC and seventh century AD, there are only two others written in Greek that are also written on parchment, making four in total.⁴⁹ Given these statistics, it is more than just coincidence that the same person would write two letters on parchment and strongly suggests something more is occurring.⁵⁰ It therefore seems that the material evidence provided by *PSI* III 208 and *PSI* IX 1041 suggests that the parchment on which these letters were written were leftover scraps from the production of manuscripts and that Sotas may well have been involved in the production of Christian texts at Oxyrhynchus. As AnneMarie Luijendijk has pointed out, “Behind a material detail—these two seemingly insignificant parchment scraps [*PSI* III 208 and *PSI* IX 1041]—I behold the contours of a Christian scriptorium at Oxyrhynchus.”⁵¹ Furthermore, it is interesting to note that at roughly the same time when these letters were written, fragments from

class consisting of recent beginners who are receiving elementary instruction and have not yet received the sign that they have been purified, and another class of those who, as far as they are able, make it their set purpose to desire nothing other than those things of which Christians approve. Among the latter class some are appointed to inquire into the lives and conduct of those who want to join the community order that they may prevent those who indulge in trickery from coming to their common gathering; those who do not do this they whole-heartedly receive, and make them better every day.” Translation taken from H. Chadwick (ed. and trans.), *Origen, Contra Celsum*, Cambridge 1965, p. 163. Similarly, Canon 14 of the Council of Nicaea presupposes two distinct groups of catechumens. See also L. H. Blumell, *Lettered Christians*, pp. 200–201; Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord*, pp. 115–119.

⁴⁹ *P.Iand.* II 12 (III/IV); *SB* III 7269 (V/VI). *P. Dura* 46 (Late III) is also written on parchment but its provenance is outside of Egypt. A search of Coptic letters on the BCD lists only one letter written on parchment, *O.Crum* VC 116. Additionally, in the Duke collection *P. Duk.* inv. 5 (b) is a fragment of a Coptic letter written on parchment. This letter was written over a washed-out text with part of Plato’s *Parmenides* in Greek (*P.Duk.* inv. 5(a)). See W. H. Willis, “A New Fragment of Plato’s *Parmenides* on Parchment”, *GRBS* 12 (1971), pp. 548–49.

⁵⁰ Parchment was more expensive than papyrus and tended to be used mostly in the production of higher quality rolls and codices; see C. Kotsifou, “Books and Book Production in the Monastic Communities of Byzantine Egypt”, in W. E. Klingshirm and L. Safran (eds.), *The Early Christian Book*, Washington, D.C. 2007, pp. 61–62.

⁵¹ Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord*, pp. 150–151; Blumell, *Lettered Christians*, pp. 178–181.

Christian parchment codices begin to appear in the remains from Oxyrhynchus.⁵²

Turning to *P. Oxy.* XXXVI 2785, the sole letter of recommendation written to Sotas, as noted previously it was sent by the presbyters of Heracleopolis, a metropolis some 70 km north of Oxyrhynchus. In this letter two individuals are recommended to Sotas, a woman named Taion and man named Anos.⁵³ Given the travelling pair one might wonder whether they were siblings or perhaps even spouses. With respect to Taion, the presbyters request that she “be received in peace” (ll. 6–7, παράδεξε ἐν εἰρήνῃ), suggesting that she was a baptized Christian. In the case of her travelling partner Anos, the letter states the following, “and receive for edification Anos, who is being instructed in Genesis” (ll. 7–10, καὶ Ἄνον κατηχούμενον ἐν τῇ Γενέσει, εἰς οἰκοδομὴν παράδεξε).⁵⁴ As evidenced from *PSI* IX 1041, Oxyrhynchus had an established catechesis so Anos could continue his instruction upon arrival. The reference in the letter to the fact that Anos was “being instructed in Genesis” probably suggests that he was in the initial stages of catechesis.⁵⁵

One final element that deserves brief treatment is the reference at the very end of this letter in line l. 15 to the number 204 (σδ). This unusual letter combination must surely be taken as an isopsephy (204 = σ [=200]

⁵² *P. Oxy.* XV 1828, Shepherd of Hermas (III); *P. Oxy.* VI 847, *John* 2:11–22 (III/IV); *P. Oxy.* XV 1783, Shepherd of Hermes (III/IV); *P. Oxy.* LXVI 4500, *Revelation* 11:15–18 (III/IV); *PSI* I 5, *James* 1:25–27 (IV); *P. Oxy.* VIII 1080, *Revelation* 3:19–4:3 (IV).

⁵³ On the reading of the name Anos see A. Martin, *Athanase d’Alexandrie et l’église d’Égypte au IV^e siècle*, Rome 1996, p. 706, n. 256; *BL* 11.164.

⁵⁴ While the typical meaning of οἰκοδομή is “edifice” or “building” it can also mean “edification”, as is the case here: see also Polycarp, *Ep.* 13.2: πᾶσαν οἰκοδομὴν τὴν εἰς τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν ἀνήκουσαν (“all things that tend to edification in our Lord”); *Apos. Con.* 8.16.3: πρὸς οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ λαοῦ σου (“for edification of your people”).

⁵⁵ The reference to κατηχούμενον ἐν τῇ Γενέσει should probably be taken to mean that Anos was in the first stages of catechesis much like Leon in *PSI* IX 1041.10–11 who was identified as a κατηχούμενον ἐν ἀρχῇ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου (“catechumen in the beginning of the gospel”). According to Egeria, catechetical instruction began with the book of Genesis: “. . . during the forty days he [the bishop] goes through the whole Bible, beginning with Genesis, and first relating the literal meaning of each passage, then interpreting its spiritual meaning. He also teaches them at this time all about the resurrection and the faith (*Itin. Egr.* 46.2).” Translation taken from J. Wilkinson (trans. and ed.), *Egeria’s Travels: Translated with Supporting Documents and Notes*, Oxford 1971, p. 162. Similarly, Augustine reports that catechesis should begin with the first verse of Genesis and conclude with the present times of the church and focus specifically on familiarizing the baptismal candidate with how the Old Testament points to Christ and his church and how the New Testament establishes the moral standards by which Christians are to regulate their lives (*Catech.*, 3.5; 4.8; 7.11; 8.12).

+ δ [= 4]).⁵⁶ While this particular isopsephy is otherwise unattested, so that the meaning is rather enigmatic, one fairly convincing proposal is that it signifies the Greek word εἰρηνικά (“peace”) since it also adds up to 204.⁵⁷ The use of an isopsephy at the end of this letter may have been a way for the senders’ to gain some kind of esoteric legitimization in the eyes of the receiving party, thus adding credibility to the recommendation.⁵⁸

The final letter in the Sotas dossier is *P.Oxy.* XII 1492 and is unlike the other four because it is not a letter of recommendation. In this letter Sotas writes to an individual named Demetrianus whom he calls his “holy son” (ll. 1, 21, ἱερός υἱός). The use of the adjective ἱερός (-ά, -όν) is a little unusual because the most common adjective used for “holy” as a title of address is ἅγιος (-α, -ον);⁵⁹ while “pious” might be a better translation of ἱερός, the use of this rare adjective might suggest something more.⁶⁰ Since there are some lacunae at the start of this letter, its initial purpose is a little unclear. However, about halfway through the letter Sotas asks Demetrianus whether he has decided “according to the ancient custom, to give the *aroura* to the place” (ll. 9–11, κατὰ τὸ παλ[αίων] ἔθος δοῦναι τὴν ἄρουραν τῷ τόπῳ). The reference to “ancient custom” implies that Sotas is invoking established church practice to buttress the request and the giving of the “*aroura* to the place” could well refer to some kind of land donation being made to the church.⁶¹ On this front, it is interesting

⁵⁶ An isopsephy, from the Greek ἰσόψηφος which has the meaning “equal number of votes” or “equal in numerical value”, is a kind of alphanumeric cryptogram where the letter combination has the same numerical value as the letter combination of another word or phrase that it is representing.

⁵⁷ S. R. Llewelyn, “ΣΔ, a Christian Isopsephism?”, *ZPE* 109 (1995), pp. 125–27; *NewDocs* 8 (1998), p. 172. Alternatively, it has been argued that σδ represents the registration number of the letter (Tibiletti, *Le lettere private nei papiri greci*, p. 191), but this proposal is very unlikely.

⁵⁸ K. Treu (“Christliche Empfehlungs-Schemabriefe auf Papyrus”, p. 634) has argued that isopsephisms commonly occurred in Christian letters of recommendation as a way of esoteric legitimization, in particular cases where the sender and addressee were unknown to each other in order to add credibility to the recommendation. See *P.Oxy.* XXXI 2601.34 (IV); *P.Oxy.* VIII 1162.15 (IV); *P.Oxy.* LVI 3857.3 (IV); *P.Oxy.* LVI 3862.1 (V).

⁵⁹ In epistolary address ἅγιος typically takes the superlative form ἀγιώτατος; see L. Dineen, *Titles of Address in Christian Greek Epistolography to AD 527*, Washington 1929, pp. 3–4.

⁶⁰ The use of the adjective ἱερός (-ά, -όν) is interesting since this epithet is hardly attested in the papyri: *P.Oxy.* XII 1592.7–8: τὸ ἱερόν σου [πρόσωπον (?)] (“your sacred countenance”); *P.Oxy.* LIV 3759.38: τῆς ἐπιούσης κυριακῆς ἱεράς (“the coming sacred Lord’s day”); *P.Herm.* 8.6 (late IV): τὸ ἱερόν πρόσωπον.

⁶¹ The phrase κατὰ τὸ παλαιὸν ἔθος occurs twice in early Christian literature, Justin, *Dial.*, 87.3 and Eusebius, *Praep. ev.*, 1.4.6. But in neither case is it a technical one to

to note that the word τόπος (“place”) often referred to a locale where Christians gathered or to an actual church.⁶² Perhaps, then, the letter could be attesting the donation of a wealthy church member’s property for the use of the church. It is worth noting that in *P.Oxy.* I 43V, a list of the watchmen and guards who were dispersed throughout the city of Oxyrhynchus ca. AD 295, it mentions two churches in Oxyrhynchus.⁶³

***P.Alex.* 29**

Greetings in the Lord, beloved brother Maximus, I, Sotas, salute you. Our brother Diphilus is coming to you, receive him in peace. Though

denote some specific ancient Christian custom or practice. Here the phrase may simply be a general one that Sotas uses to demonstrate that there is an established practice in the church for donating or consecrating one’s goods. See Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord*, p. 132, n. 27 who cites pertinent biblical passages for consecration; cf. L. M. White, *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture II*, Valley Forge 1997, p. 164, n. 63; B. Blue, “The Influence of Jewish Worship on Luke’s Presentation of the Early Church”, in I. H. Marshall and D. Peterson (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Luke-Acts*, Grand Rapids 1998, p. 487.

⁶² While various definitions are given for τόπος in the *TDNT* 8.187–208 that range from the generic “place”, “district”, “territory”, or “land”, it can also have the technical meaning of “sanctuary”, “temple”, and “church.” In the fourth through eighth centuries the term was used frequently for monasteries and churches. See Wipszycka, *Les ressources et les activités économiques des églises en Égypte*, p. 13; Naldini, *Il cristianesimo in Egitto* (2nd rev. ed.), pp. 425–26.

Reinforcing the interpretation that “the place” should probably be taken as “church” is the fact that in a number of letters of recommendation receiving churches/congregations are identified with the phrase κατά τόπον: *P. Oxy.* 1162.1–4: Λέων πρεσβύτερος τοῖς κατὰ τόπον συνῆμιουργοῖς πρεσβυ[έ]ροις καὶ διακόνοις ἀ[γ]απητοῖ[ς] ἀδελφοῖς (“Leon the presbyter to his fellow-servants in every locality, presbyters and deacons, beloved brothers”); *P. Oxy.* LVI 3857.2–3: τοῖς κατὰ τόπον ἀγαπητοῖς ἀδελφοῖς καὶ συνλειτουργοῖς (“To the beloved brothers and fellow ministers in every locality”); *SB* III 7269.1–2: Τύραννος τοῖς κατὰ τόπον [ἀ]γαπητ[ο]ῖς ἀδελφοῖς (“Tyranus to the beloved brothers in every locality”); *SB* XVI 12304.1–3: Ἡρακλίτης π(α)π(ᾶς) τοῖς κατὰ τόπον συλλειτουργ[οῖς] ἀγαπητοῖς ἀδελφοῖς (“Father Heraclitus to the fellow-servants in every locality, beloved brothers”); cf. *P. Oxy.* 2603.34–35; *P. Oxy.* LXXIII 4965.8–9. Furthermore, as pointed out by Luijendijk, (*Greetings in the Lord*, 133 n. 32) when Lactantius (esp. *Mort.* 48. 7–9) reproduces the “Edict of Milan” issued by Constantine and Licinius the Latin *loca* is used for “places” where Christians met (i.e. Churches); in Eusebius’s Greek translation of this rescript he translates *loca* with τόποι.

⁶³ *P. Oxy.* I 43V col. I.10–13: πρ(ὸς) τῇ βοριν[ῆ] ἐκκλησίᾳ, Ἀφροῦς Θεῶνος, οἰκῶν ἐν τῷ στάβλῳ τῆς Αἰωνίας (“North Church Street, [watchman] Aphous son of Theon who lives in the stable of Aionia”); col. III.19–21: καὶ πρ(ὸς) τῇ νοτινῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ, Ἀμόις Παράμμωνος, καταμένων ἀντικρὺς οἰκίας Ἐπιμάχου κηρωματικ(οῦ) (“South Church Street, [watchman] Amois son of Parammon who lodges opposite the house of Epimachus the wax-salve dealer”). On these references see Blumell and Wayment, *Christian Oxyrhynchus*, pp. 408–411.

him, I and those with me salute you and those with you. Farewell, I pray for you, beloved brother, in the Lord.

PSI III 208

Greetings in the Lord, beloved brother Peter, I, Sotas, salute you. Receive, according to custom, our brother Heracles through whom I and the ones with me salute you and all the brethren with you. Farewell, I pray for you in God.

PSI IX 1041

Greetings in the Lord, beloved brother Paul, I, Sotas, salute you. Receive as is fitting our brothers Heron and Horion and Philadelphus and Pekysis and Naäroous, who are catechumens of the ones gathered, and Leon who is a catechumen in the beginning of the gospel. Through these ones I and those who are with me salute you and those who are with you. Farewell, I pray for you in the Lord beloved brother.

P.Oxy. XXXVI 2785

Greetings in the Lord, beloved father Sotas, we, presbyters of Heracleopolis, give you many greetings. Receive in peace our sister Taion who comes to you, and receive for edification Anos, who is being instructed in Genesis. Through them we and our companions greet you and the brethren with you. Farewell, we pray for your health in the Lord, beloved father, 204 (=“Peace”).

P.Oxy. XII 1492

Greetings, holy son Demetrianus, I, Sotas, salute you. Our common . . . is clear and our common salvation . . . ; for these are the things included in divine providence. And so if you have decided, according to the ancient custom, to give the *aroura* to the place, make it separated so that they may use it. But however you should decide concerning the work, be of good cheer. Salute all those who are in your house. Farewell, I pray to God for you continually and on every occasion. (Verso) To my holy son Demetrianus from Sotas.

Conclusions

Based on the foregoing summary and analysis, it is evident that the earliest Christian letters from Egypt disclose a rather variegated picture of Christianity in the third century as they furnish glimpses of the clergy, laity, and catechumens, as well as various religious and non-religious matters and affairs. Starting with the clergy, these letters provide a few momentary glimpses of the daily activities of two bishops. The evidence afforded by *SB VI 9557* seems to suggest that “Papa Maximus” of Alexandria was also involved in commercial activities during his episcopal tenure, and this letter might also suggest that there may have even been some kind of commercial network of Christian merchants. Turning to the Sotas dossier from Oxyrhynchus, we see a bishop

providing letters of recommendation for members and catechumens alike, as well as receiving such letters, and also involved in the production of books (scriptures?) and what could be termed “fundraising” for the church.⁶⁴ On the other hand, in *P.Bas.* 16 and *P.Vind.Sijp.* 26, we see Christians working in administration, conducting business, exchanging goods, and sending familial niceties. Somewhat ironically, the most notable aspects of these two letters is their normality—Christians conducting the routine affairs of everyday life. Taken collectively these letters provide a picture of Christian life in third-century Egypt that contrasts somewhat with the picture provided by Christian literary and patristic sources. Whereas the latter are dominated by stories of persecution or episodes of religious wrangling and schism, the letters mention nothing about persecution, or even fear of persecution, nor say anything about religious wrangling and schism. Thus, they give a rather unique depiction of Christian life in Egypt at this time.

While I have highlighted the mundane and seemingly “ordinary” aspects of some of these letters, there are parts of these letters that are certainly noteworthy in a way that some might expect of letters sent by Christians. A couple letters refer to catechumens and these same letters refer to scriptures and “the gospel” (*PSI IX* 1041 and *P.Oxy.* XXXVI 2785). Likewise, various ecclesiastical titles appear in some of the letters like “lector,” “Presbyter,” or “Papa” (*SB VI* 9557 and *P.Oxy.* XXXVI 2785). Additionally, another letter may contain a reference to a church, or church property (*P.Oxy.* XII 1492), and there is an otherwise unattested Christian isopsephy (*P.Oxy.* XXXVI 2785).

Turning to the components in the letters that establish Christian authorship, it may be noted that in most of these letters it is the use of a *nomen sacrum*, either in the opening address or closing valediction, that establishes Christian authorship. Or, in a couple of cases, it is the use of a distinct Christian title or phrase that indicates the sender was a Christian. The use of *nomina sacra* probably suggest that the Christians who employed them had become familiar with them via literary manuscripts, where *nomina sacra* are already attested in the second century AD. Furthermore, their placement in the letters at the beginning or the end might also suggest there was an emerging Christian epistolary convention that was being drawn upon or followed. To elaborate, as the opening addresses and valedictions where these *nomina sacra* occur tend to parallel those found in certain letters of Paul or other early Christian letter writers (whether or not Paul or other letter writers employed *nomina*

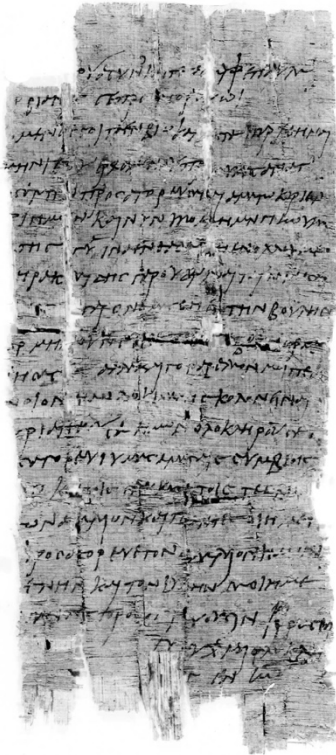
⁶⁴ Luijendijk, *Greetings in the Lord*, p. 125 calls *P. Oxy.* XII 1492 “an ancient fundraising letter.”

sacra), it seems reasonable to suppose that later Christians ultimately derived these unique epistolary forms of address and valediction from earlier letters.⁶⁵ However, this is not to suggest that these letters are completely different from non-Christian letters of the same period. While the use of *nomina sacra* or other variations in phraseology in the opening addresses and/or valedictions are indeed novel, for the most part, in terms of their overall format and structure, these letters are remarkably similar to other letters of the same period and in many respects may be noted more for their similarities than their differences.

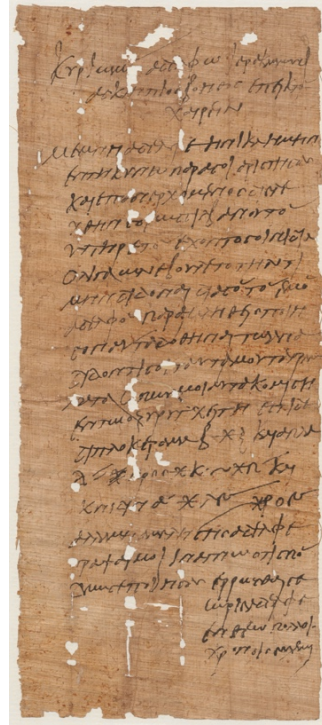
To conclude, in this brief survey I have attempted to illustrate and highlight the historical value of the earliest Christian letters from Egypt. Though they do not provide a comprehensive overview of early Christian life, they enhance our view as they provide individual glimpses at distinct moments in time. Even if they tend to elucidate the quotidian and mundane, they nonetheless contribute to our understanding, and therefore represent both insightful and meaningful pieces of evidence for Christianity in third-century AD Egypt.

⁶⁵ L. H. Blumell, “A Note on Dionysius of Alexandria’s Letter to Novatian in Light of Third-Century Papyri”, *ZAC* 14.2 (2010), pp. 356–361.

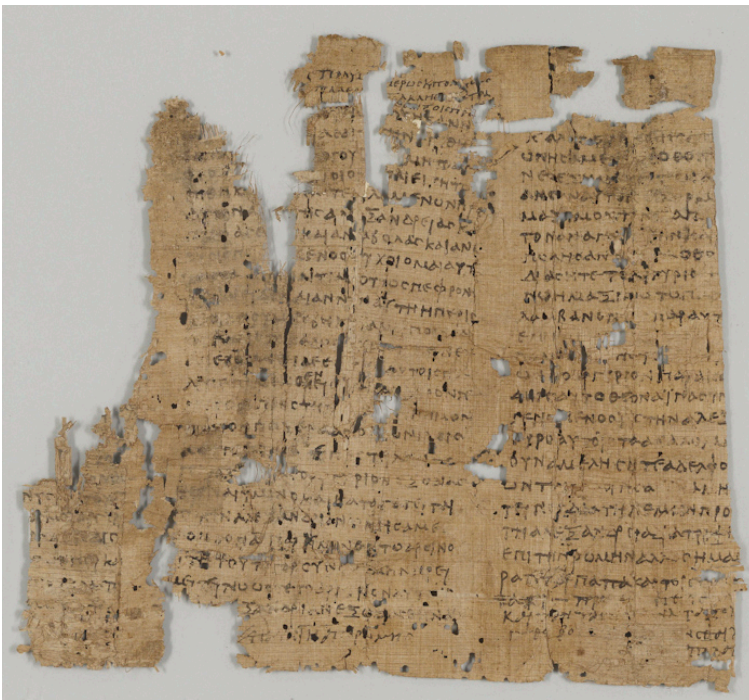
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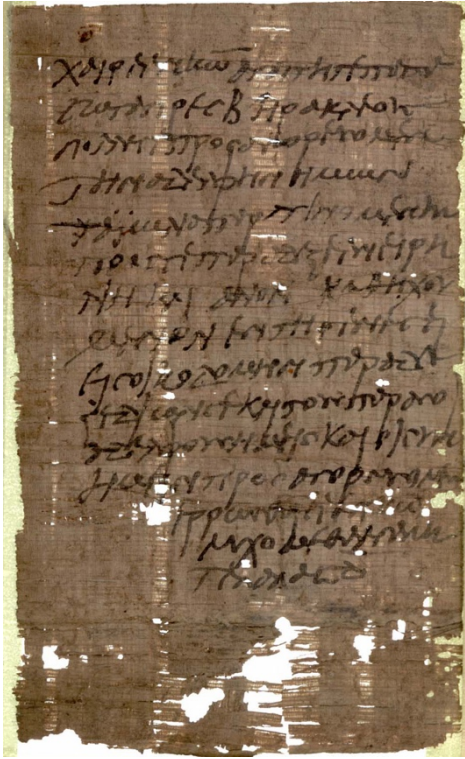
I. P.Bas. 16



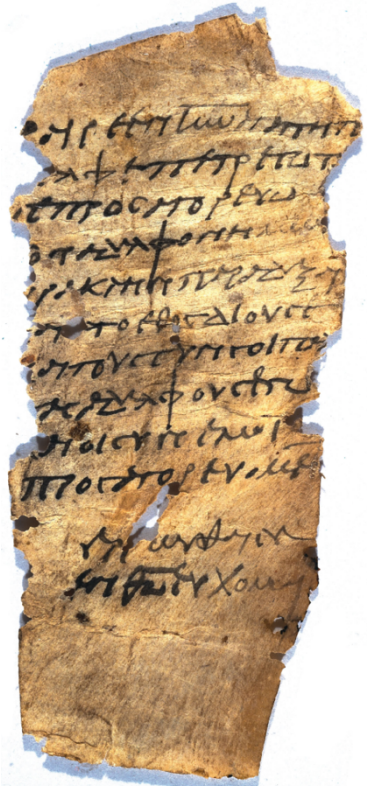
II. P.Vind.Sijp. 26



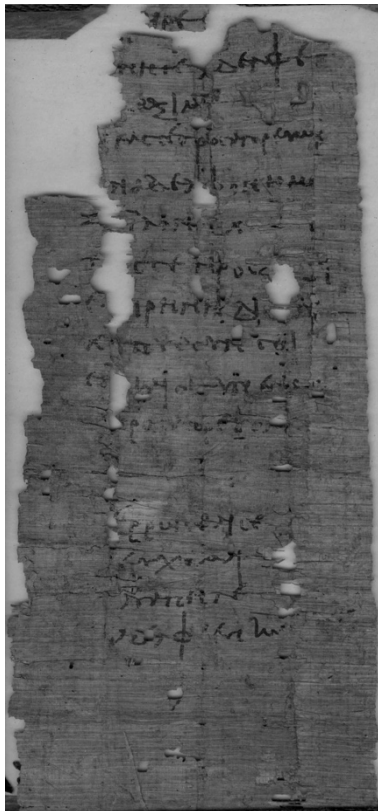
III. SB VI 9557



IV. P.Oxy. XXXVI 2785



V. PSI III 208



P.Alex. 29