Charite’s Christianity

In editing the dossier of Aurelia Charite, Klaas Worp commented that there were no documents in the archive that provide any information about Charite’s religion.1 Citing A. Moscardi’s article in Aegyptus 50 (1970) at 95-96, he noted that Christians and pagans lived side-by-side in Hermopolis in the early fourth century. Worp’s agnosticism was challenged by Johannes Kramer in an article on the meaning of κοιμητήριον, a term which occurs in P. Charite 40, evidently a letter addressed to Charite by a female correspondent who says εἰρόν αὐτῇ ἐν τῷ κοιμητήριῳ αὐτὰ εἶδολας (read εἶδολα), if that represents the correct phrasing.2 Kramer showed convincingly that κοιμητήριον occurred only in Christian contexts—is indeed a term of Christian theology, in a sense—and thus must reflect a Christian milieu in which the writer and recipient of this letter operated.3

There remains a lingering doubt, however, already expressed by Worp, that the Charite of P. Charite 40 is the woman whose papers Worp collected, for the letter provides no information other than the name itself to link it to the archive. One would therefore like other evidence for Aurelia Charite’s own religious affiliation or circumstances. I believe that a strong argument can be offered that the name of her husband, Adolphios, is distinctively Christian. Beginning with the papyri, we find that the name is not common. I find only the following examples other than Charite’s husband and his homonymous father:4

1P. Charite, p. 9. I am indebted to Jean Gascou for a photograph of P. Stras. 770 (inv. gr. 1310), on the basis of which its reading is discussed below, note 4, and to Alan Cameron for discussion of a couple of points.
2Worp did not accent αἰσθητή, uncertain whether it was correct or an error for αὐθή, cf. note ad loc. On κοιμητήριον itself he commented only “addendum lexicis papyrologiciis,“ true at that time (P. Nephe. 12.20 and 36.2 have since been added) but hardly exhausting the interest of the word.
4Also omit instances the inclusion of which among this dossier is uncertain (cf. Worp’s discussion in CPR XVIIA, pp. 8-9). To be rejected outright are the following supposed examples:
   P. Bad. IV 84.40: αἰσθητή resolved ‘Αἴσθητ(ή)ου, without basis.
   P. Bad. IV 93.46: αἰσθητή restored as ‘Αἴσθητ(ή)ου, without basis.
   P. Vindob. Bosw. 17: αἰσθητή restored as ‘Αἴσθητ(ή)ου, without basis (corrected by Sijpesteijn, cf. BL 7.95).
   P. Ross. Georg. V 53 ii.12: αἰσθητή, resolved by the editor in the apparatus as ‘Αἴσθητ(ή)ου, is resolved in the index (p. 227; whence Foraboschi, Onomasticon) as
P. Corn. 34 verso: Provenance unknown, on reverse of a III (handwriting) account, date unknown: name in a list, purpose unknown

P. Stras. VII 798: Hermopolis, ca 300 (vaguely based on onomastics and offices mentioned). Adolphos alias Dioskourides mentioned in list of names

P. Giss. Univ. III 30: Provenance unknown, IV (III/IV ed. on basis of handwriting but must be IV from large amounts of currency mentioned. Uncertain reading, mentioned in letter.


There are no examples securely dated before the fourth century, and indeed none that on the evidence is clearly to be put before the middle of that century. That pattern is at least suggestive of a name coming newly into the onomastic repertory in the mid to late third century. Brotherly (and sisterly) love is of course not a new idea with Christianity, but adjectives and nouns expressing abstract virtues are popular among Christians in late antiquity, and the evidence above is at least consistent with a hypothesis Ἄδελφιος, without basis.


P. Stras. VII 770 verso 11: The editors read Πετών Ἄδελφιον. The supposed patronymic ends with a phi followed closely by a vertical stroke starting somewhat above line level and descending to about the middle of the round part of the phi. The editors took this to be an iota, hence their resolution. This is not impossible, but when Πεσωμιος is abbreviated in verso 4, the raised iota is followed by a long horizontal stroke (unless this means Πεσωμιος?), and the stroke in question in line 11 is slightly bowed and thickened at its ends. I think, therefore, that it could be taken to be an abbreviation stroke.

In all cases, then, one could resolve or restore ἄδελφος or ἄδελφῳ without difficulty. A couple of other cases need to be mentioned:

SB III 7244, 14: Every letter dotted! Reading too uncertain to consider.

P. Ant. I 44 (4th-5th cent.), a difficult case in which lines 9-10 were read by the editor τῷ ἄδελφῳ [...]. ἄδελφῳ, translated "my young brother" on the basis of the notion that ἄδελφῳ was a correction of ἄδελφῳ. In the reedition by Naldini, Il cristianesimo in Egitto no. 92, we find τῷ ἄδελφῳ φιλα ἄδελφῳ. The text has no other word divisions, and this one shows incorrect syllabication. It seems to me at least possible that Naldini's reading is wrong, and that the name Ἄδελφιος is to be read in line 10.

5See the reedition in Naldini, Cristianesimo no. 22. He sees the handwriting as third-century in character, but acknowledges the monetary reasons for a fourth-century date.
that Adelphios is a Christian name. But is there any positive evidence for this view?

If we turn to the literary sources, there is indeed. A search of the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae turns up citations to the following authors in the numbers indicated:

- Athanasius: 5
- Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum: 20
- Epiphanius: 1
- Georgius Monachus, chronographer: 5
- Gregory of Nazianzus: 1
- Gregory of Nyssa: 1
- John of Damascus: 1
- Libanius: 1
- Palladius: 1
- Photius: 3
- Porphyry of Tyre: 1
- Socrates: 1
- Theodoretus: 1

This list certainly is striking; all except Porphyry and Libanius are Christian writers. In Porphyry, the reference (Vita Plotini 16) is to a Christian Gnostic teacher (PLRE I 13 s.v. Adelphius 1). In Libanius, Adelphios is the addressee of a letter, a high-ranking official who may be identical to a man known to have been a Christian. The other people referred to include no one not probably or certainly a Christian; there are several bishops of the name in the conciliar acts. We thus find no instances before the third quarter of the third century, and no clearly non-Christian persons. A search of the classical Latin literature on the PHI disk shows no instances of the name.

Epigraphy is also revealing, mainly in its silence. The PHI classical epigraphy files are silent. No instances are to be found in the index to the Bulletin épigraphique for 1938-1977, and none in the indexes to the SEG for 1976-1990. The name is lacking in the first volume of the Lexicon of Greek Personal Names, from the index of names to the Prosopographia Ptolemaica, and from all volumes of non-Christian inscriptions that I have consulted. In Pape-Benseler the only instance is the same Gnostic mentioned above. Solin’s volumes on Greek names at Rome include only the Gnostic, a Christian gravestone, and Valerius Faltonius Adelphius v.c. et inl. cos. 451 (PLRE II 8 s.v. Adelphius 3). The name is lacking in PIR but well represented in PLRE, where all holders are either demonstrably or pos-

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6 Libanius’ correspondent is PLRE I s.v. Adelphius 3, perhaps = Adelphius 2.
sibly Christian. The name appears in a Christian epitaph from Edessa of the third century as the name of one of the children of the deceased woman.

In short, the evidence yields no examples before the middle of the third century, and no persons who are clearly pagan, alongside some demonstrably Christian. It seems to me therefore reasonable at least to adopt the working hypothesis that Adelphios was a name put into currency by Christians in the middle of the third century, which enjoyed some popularity in the fourth and fifth centuries before becoming uncommon, and which was largely used by the wealthier classes, as the papyri suggest.

Charite's husband Adelphios began his public career, as far as we can tell, somewhere in the first decade of the fourth century. He was strategos in 314, later gymnasiararch and perhaps logistes. He is not attested after 322, and Charite outlived him by at least a quarter-century. Although he is likely to have been somewhat older than she, we would probably be near the mark in supposing that he was born somewhere around 280-285. This would push his own father's birth back at least to about 260, and probably somewhat earlier. This chronology is consonant with what we see elsewhere of the introduction of the name and suggests that this wealthy family of Hermopolis was already Christian before the Decian persecution. They did not, by any means, limit themselves to Christian names, even in the fourth century, but to those sensitive to nomenclature the use of Adelphios must have been a sufficiently clear signal.

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7There are no examples in Pauly-Wissowa other than those in PLRE. The one figure in PLRE about whom some doubts have been raised is Clodius Celsius signo Adelphius (PLRE I 192), but these doubts are based solely on very dubious interpretation of the conclusion of the Vergilian Cento of his wife Faltonia Betitia Proba, who was a Christian.

8Feissel, Recueil des inscriptions chrétienes de Macédoine 28-29 no. 6.