

THE READERS OF CHRISTIAN BOOKS: FURTHER SPECULATIONS

When Guido Bastianini invited me to take part in this colloquium, I protested that I was without special expertise in the area of Christian literature or a current project in that domain that I could present. He defeated these objections by pointing out that my then newly-published *Early Christian Books in Egypt* (Princeton 2009) both contained many speculations about Christian books and their readers and also seemed to open the door to more such reflections; he suggested that this would be a good occasion for such additional thoughts. When I reread our correspondence, I realize that he was apparently thinking of my rash suggestion, in the concluding chapter on the codex (pp. 89-90), that there might be something to T.C. Skeat's idea that the Roman church played a central role in making the codex normative for Christian scripture books.

This idea would, as I remarked in the book, certainly run into heavy objections if one conventionally puts the decisive moment for the adoption of the codex in the first half of the second century. At that time, the church of Rome, according to most church historians today, had neither the influence nor the hierarchical structure to bring about a cultural change of lasting impact. But in the late second century, those objections might not stand up. A more institutionalized church, both in Rome and in Alexandria, might be said to emerge more or less at the same time as we start to get more securely datable evidence for a standardized use of the codex.

But I lack the detailed knowledge of church history to take on that thorny subject, and instead I shall return to another moment of speculation in the book, the one in which I suggest that the expanded civic elite of the early third century, particularly the members of the newly founded city councils of the nome metropoleis, might have provided a major part of the audience for ownership of Christian books (pp. 67-69). For that matter, the same group may (or so I proposed) have played a dominant role in the circles in which Coptic emerged as a coherent writing system – or, more precisely, a series of more or less coherent writing systems, still highly marked in this period by a proliferation of regional dialects.

A point that I did not emphasize in making that argument, but that deserves further reflection, will be my starting point. That is the dominant position of the metropoleis in the survival of our Biblical manuscripts, especially those of the New Testament. It has been pointed out by Eldon J. Epp that Oxyrhynchos alone accounts for 41 percent of all New Testament

papyri, and of 57 percent of the earliest ones, dating down to the turn of the third to fourth century¹.

Now this metropolitan dominance of the documentation is certainly not the result of chance. It comes in the first instance from the fact that our finds of papyri from the third century, especially after its first quarter, come heavily from the metropoleis, not from villages. Whether that is itself purely an archaeological phenomenon (and thus the result of processes of deposition, preservation, and excavation) or reflects more directly the increased urbanization of third-century Egypt and the growing dominance of the metropoleis, is not easy to say with any confidence. I suspect the latter, because the Fayyum villages have not yielded very many Christian papyri for the early third century, a period when they had not yet hit the complex crisis that led to the collapse of our papyrus documentation from them during the middle of the third century². The archaeological patterns of discovery may thus contribute to the metropolitan dominance, but they cannot be the full explanation.

This view may be strengthened by the fact that Oxyrhynchos's preponderant role in the early Christian papyri is far greater than its role in the documentary record. For example, of the 5,163 items in the Heidelberg Gesamtverzeichnis found in a search specifying a date range 201-300, only 933 come from the Oxyrhynchite, or barely more than a third of the rate at which the early New Testament papyri come from the same place. About twice as many papyri for the third century come from the Arsinoite nome, even if they are more unevenly distributed. So the metropolitan character of the Christian papyri cannot be explained as simply another reflection of the overall pattern of documentation (which is at least in part an archaeological artifact). Of course, it is a commonplace of the history of Christianity that it was largely an urban phenomenon in its earlier centuries. In any event, it is mainly in the cities that we need to look for the owners of Christian books.

When we think of plausible urban owners of these texts on papyrus, certain groups come to mind. The most obvious is the clergy, who had professional reasons to own Biblical texts. We know next to nothing of the economic and social origins of the Christian clergy of Egypt in the formative centuries. Sabine Huebner's study of clergy in Asia Minor has shown that a large proportion of them came from fairly humble social and economic

¹ E.J. Epp, *The Oxyrhynchus New Testament Papyri: 'Not without honor except in their hometown'?*, *JBibl.Lit.* 123 (2004), pp. 5-55; E.J. Epp, *New Testament Papyri and the Transmission of the New Testament*, in *Oxyrhynchus: A City and its Texts*, A.K. Bowman et alii (edd.), London 2007, pp. 315-331.

² J.G. Keenan, *Deserted Villages: From the Ancient to the Medieval Fayyūm*, *BASP* 40 (2003), pp. 119-139.

origins³. The same was probably true in Egypt, although the evidence is not strong⁴. There was, however, a general correlation between the original social and economic status of an individual and the rank in the clergy that this person was likely to hold. It is bishops and presbyteroi we find in the papyri as substantial landowners, even in the sixth century, not subdeacons and readers. The probability that bishops and presbyters had the means to acquire books was thus certainly higher than with deacons and the lower clergy, who neither came from wealthy backgrounds nor, even in the later, more institutionalized church, earned enough from their ecclesiastical employment to afford to buy books. Huebner has pointed out (p. 234) that apart from mosaics, which were affordable even for some deacons, charitable dedications, foundations, and donations – chapels or churches, most notably – were possible only for the higher clergy.

There is a third social group that I think deserves attention, less obvious than the civic elite and the upper clergy, but perhaps no less interesting and certainly less studied. This is the group that I shall call collectively the *boethoi*, or assistants; they were mostly, in fact, what today we would refer to as managers. They appear in a variety of guises in the papyri over a long period of time, and with a wide range of titles. In this group I include estate managers, business agents, tax collectors, especially those who did the actual work for which liturgists were responsible, and others of this kind. A certain number of such men have been identified and studied, but many more certainly await scrutiny. I can offer here only a few instances I have noted and sketch the main lines of the interest that I think they offer.

The earlier examples of such men known from the Roman period are village notables who owed their positions not to landholdings but to skilled work. Unlike the later instances, they do not seem to owe their positions to strong connections to the metropolitan population. One such is Nemesion son of Zoilos, the poll-tax collector of Philadelphia in the 40s and 50s of the first century, whose papers remain only partly published⁵. He was also a

³ S. Hübner, *Der Klerus in der Gesellschaft des spätantiken Kleinasien*, Stuttgart 2005, pp. 106-112.

⁴ G. Schmelz, *Kirchliche Amtsträger in spätantiken Ägypten*, Munich 2002, apparently does not devote a separate discussion to this matter (the book has no index), but cfr. pp. 203-254 on the secular sources of income for clergy. Schmelz points out that it is only the bishops who had no occupations, but only landed income.

⁵ In the introduction to P.Sijp. 26, A.E. Hanson gives a bibliography of her work on this archive; cfr. also H. Cuvigny, introduction to P.Graux II 9-11. Nemesion's hand can be seen in P.Sijp., pll. 66-68.

«businessman of diversified interests», as Ann Hanson has called him⁶. Because his papers came into papyrus collections entirely through the antiquities trade⁷, we do not have any archaeological context for them or know what house he lived in, nor can we identify any literary texts that belonged to Nemesion. But he did copy, in a blank space on the back of one of his tax registers, Claudius' letter to the Alexandrians (P.Lond. VI 1912), in a rapid cursive that is still somewhat more readable than his usual scrawled business hand.

Better known is Sokrates, the tax collector of Karanis. The personality of this man first started to come into focus with Herbert Youtie's paper *Callimachus in the Tax Rolls* at the XII International Congress of Papyrologists in 1968 – this was my first papyrological congress, and I remember this paper, like a few others at it, with particular affection – where he showed that the writer of one of the Karanis money-tax registers had enjoyed playing with words, providing rare Greek words as translations of Egyptian nicknames; one of these words, as Youtie pointed out, was known only from Callimachus⁸. The name of this individual, and the discovery that this and other texts belonged to the archive of the collector Sokrates, were first brought to light by S. Strassi twenty years ago⁹. Peter van Minnen, in a famous article, then demonstrated that this archive came from an identified and excavated house, labeled B17, at Karanis and connected it and Sokrates with the whole body of archaeological material found there¹⁰. Sokrates owned at least one (and perhaps more) grammatical papyri, Menander's *Epitrepontes*, and the *Acta Alexandrinorum*. Additional literary papyri were found in the house across the street, including a text of Callimachus. As van Minnen points out, although there is some evidence for Sokrates' entrepreneurial activities alongside his official duties, there is none for his having owned any land.

A third example is the pronotees responsible for writing the Kellis Agricultural Account Book (P.Kellis IV 96), to be dated to the 360s. As I noted in the introduction to that text, this person's hand is very similar to that of the first part of the Isocrates codex from Kellis (P.Kellis III 95), which was found

⁶ A.E. Hanson, *Village Officials at Philadelphia: A Model of Romanization in the Julio-Claudian Period*, in *Egitto e storia antica dall'ellenismo all'età araba. Bilancio di un confronto*, L. Criscuolo - G. Geraci (edd.), Bologna 1989, p. 432.

⁷ H.I. Bell gives a brief account of this process in P.Lond. VI, p. 2.

⁸ H.C. Youtie, *Callimachus in the Tax Rolls*, in *Proceedings of the Twelfth International Congress of Papyrology*, D.H. Samuel (ed.), Toronto 1970, pp. 545-551.

⁹ S. Strassi Zaccaria, *Prosopografia e incarichi amministrativi a Karanis nel II sec. d.C. Proposte interpretative*, ZPE 85 (1991), pp. 245-261.

¹⁰ P. van Minnen, *House-to-house enquiries: an interdisciplinary approach to Roman Karanis*, ZPE 100 (1994), pp. 237-244.

together with the account book. I concluded: «In my view it is very possible that they could represent the same writer operating with different objectives and different types of textual material» (P.Kellis IV, p. 21). Now the Isocrates codex, also written on wooden tablets, is not a professional book. As Worp and Rijksbaron said in their introduction (P.Kellis III, p. 28), it was likely to be «the copy of, e.g., a local schoolmaster teaching in ancient Kellis». We now know a good deal more about education in the Dakhla Oasis than in 1997¹¹, and this hypothesis seems increasingly likely. The critical point that I would stress here is the conjunction of the managerial and the educational in a single find – two codices of tablets found together in the same room and likely written at least in part by the same person. That is, not only was the pronotees, who never tells us his name, interested in literature, he was either a teacher himself or closely enough connected to one that he would help him copy a literary text. From the *chi-mu-gamma* heading on the account book, we may also be confident that he was Christian. Another Christian, a half-century earlier, seems to have kept the Diospolite tax account in Erlangen edited by Fritz Mitthof, on one leaf of which the opening line of the Lord's Prayer is written (P.Erl.Diosp. 1, 63, on p. 52, Tafel XII).

Although no literature comes directly into play, the main writer of P.Lond.Copt. I 1075, a long sixth-century tax account from Temseu Skordon in the Hermopolite Nome, also seems to me to belong to this group¹². He was a salaried boethos, whose name we again do not learn, collecting the *pakton*, which was part of the land tax, in cash, from this village and a nearby hamlet. Line after line he writes names, numbers of solidi and (mostly) carats, and amounts of talents. At the bottom of the page he gives totals. It is work of the same sort that Sokrates did, on a still grander scale, in the Karanis tax registers. For this work, which occupied 21 days during the period from Thoth to Pachon, he was paid 180,000 talents, or a little over 7 solidi. One imagines that he was responsible for some other villages as well and made rather a good living, even if he had some expenses for security. Our anonymous boethos kept this account in Greek, but he gives a number of names in Coptic and even switches between the languages in indicating occupational designations like smith. At one point, we see him punning between the languages, when "little Moni" appears alternately as Moni kou and Moniskos, the latter a name unknown in Greek and probably invented for the occasion. He reminds me of Sokrates.

¹¹ Most recently, R. Criore, P. Davoli, and D.M. Ratzan, *A Teacher's Dipinto from Trimithis (Dakhleh Oasis)*, JRA 21 (2008), pp. 170-191.

¹² This text will shortly be published by James Keenan, Leslie MacCoull, and me.

In delineating the inclusions and exclusions of texts from the list of school exercises in her work on education in Graeco-Roman Egypt, Raffaella Cribiore remarked: «It is generally assumed that scribes needed technical training in scribal schools to acquire professional ability in one or more scripts and to master the complex vocabulary and syntax of legal and bureaucratic writing. Nonetheless, the modalities and timing of a specialized scribal education are unclear: it is difficult to know for certain whether technical training started after the completion of a few years of regular schooling or during those years of general education»¹³.

The category "scribe" is, although commonly evoked liked this in papyrological scholarship, far from self-explanatory. Even if we rather arbitrarily leave out from it the scribes who copied books in a more or less professional manner¹⁴, and restrict ourselves to more documentary varieties of scribes, the term may suggest someone in whose work the writing was itself the principal task. But this is a pure assumption. In fact, most of the highly fluent writers of accounts and documents were probably not "scribes" in the narrow sense of writing things down for other people from dictation, but professionals who wrote a great deal in the course of their work, where the work was primary and the writing an instrument: precisely our *pronoetai*, *phrontistai*, and *boethoi*, along with those specialized in drawing up contracts. This is a point that van Minnen made, in noting that the writer of the Karanis register, far from being the "clerk" that Youtie described him as, was actually the collector.

From the examples I have cited, it seems permissible to draw the conclusion that at least some members of this class of professionals had in fact a good deal more than "a few years" of regular schooling. Surely these men had been given a literary education; probably they did not go as far as the rhetorical training needed for a public career in a Greek city, but they retained an interest in Greek literature, even in grammar, and their grasp of the tools of philological and literary education was sufficient for them to enjoy learned word-play. Dioskoros of Aphrodito, a member of a landowning family but also a notary, probably stands only one rung above these people in the hierarchy. If we think of them merely as clerks, drudges of the writing-bench, we underestimate their knowledge and interests¹⁵.

¹³ R. Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, Atlanta 1996, p. 28.

¹⁴ See, e.g., K. Haines-Eitzen, *Guardians of Letters. Literacy, Power, and the Transmitters of Early Christian Literature*, Oxford 2000.

¹⁵ They may also, of course, had training in drafting legal documents and in complex mathematical exercises. This is a point to which I hope to return elsewhere.

In this connection, I cite the remarks of Eric Turner about the London papyrus of Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens*, which was written in the backs of four rolls, on the rectos of which are accounts, «mixed up with short hypomnemata on Callimachus¹⁶ and on Dem[osthenes'] *Meidias*¹⁷» (E.G. Turner - P.J. Parsons, *Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World*, London 1987², p. 102). One of the hands, Turner says, «wrote a tiny cramped cursive hand, not far removed from a documentary hand. It is a text for working purposes, privately commissioned, made to the order of and under the eye of a scholar who needed to use the work of Aristotle in his own investigations»¹⁸. (This hand is reproduced in Turner and Parsons, op. cit., pl. 60). Again, there is obviously a certain amount of assumption embedded in what Turner says. The accounts on the rectos (P.Lond. I 131) were kept by one Didymos son of Aspasios for his employer, Epimachos son of Polydeukes, and concern the year 78/9¹⁹. The hand of Didymos in these accounts is rather more attractive than the hand to which Turner refers in the passage I have quoted, but it is still a rapid documentary hand with much abbreviation. The fact is that we do not know the identity of the scribes who copied the *Constitution of Athens*. Did the papyrus rolls with accounts wind up in the hands of Epimachos or of Didymos? Whose interests are reflected here?

More generally, literary texts written on the versos of documentary rolls seem a fertile area for looking for this managerial class. The assumptions in Turner's remarks are widely shared, I think: reused rolls would have borne texts ordered to be copied for the benefit of wealthy readers with literary and scholarly interests. But this view does not rest on much evidence, and one may wonder if rich landowners are actually the people most likely to have saved a few drachmas' worth of papyrus in this way²⁰. Is it not as likely that it is our managerial and agent class, which had a high level of comfort in writing in both rapid scripts and the more leisurely, but still "informal" scripts that are like typical letter-hands, that would have had access to rolls that were no longer necessary and reused them in this way? If we may entertain this possibility, then the potential evidence for the literary interests of the *pronoetai* and *boethoi* expands rather substantially.

¹⁶ P.Lond.Lit. 181.

¹⁷ P.Lond.Lit. 179.

¹⁸ E.G. Turner, *Greek Papyri. An Introduction*, Princeton 1968, p. 96.

¹⁹ On this papyrus and the estate of Epimachos, see D. Kehoe, *Management and Investment on Estates in Roman Egypt during the Early Empire*, Bonn 1992, pp. 59-66, and earlier A. Swiderek, *La propriété foncière privée dans l'Égypte de Vespasien et sa technique agricole d'après P. Lond. 131 Recto*, Wrocław 1960.

²⁰ On "scholars and reading communities" see W.A. Johnson, *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire. A Study of Elite Communities*, Oxford 2010, pp. 179-199.

The growing dominance of the Egyptian countryside by the cities in the third century and later times certainly had as a result an increase in the number and importance of the *boethos* class. As municipalization led to a higher level of civic responsibility for tax collection, for example, people like Papnouthis and Dorotheos (P.Oxy. XLVIII) served to link wealthy metropolitan landowners with liturgical duties to the villages where most of the taxes were collected. – Their archive, unfortunately, at least as published, lacks the long accounts that must once have existed and that might have provided the raw material for the copying of literary texts –. These urban landowners also needed such men to manage their estates, collect rents, execute leases, give receipts to tenants, and lend money to villagers. They are surely responsible for a disproportionately large share of the surviving documents. May it not be the case also that they owned a significant share of the literary texts, both Christian and non-Christian?

Is it possible to test this hypothesis? This will hardly be a simple matter. But we have far better tools for such an inquiry than we did a generation ago. As of spring, 2010, the list of archives in *Trismegistos* included 448 entries, admittedly using a latitudinarian definition of archive. In many cases, it is far from clear who actually maintained an archive. For example, did the papers today designated the archive of the descendants of Patron (which included literary texts) belong to a family member or to one of the estate managers who appear in them? I believe that in many cases a closer scrutiny will make it possible to discern the hand of a *phrontistes*, a *boethos*, a *pronoetes*.

On the other side of the ledger, the *Leuven Database of Ancient Books* now has more than 15,000 entries in various languages. Although the current interface is far from helpful in enabling research of the kind we would need, some of the items do appear in the archives database as well, and although a systematic cross-check would be tedious, I believe that it would enable the identification of more connections between documentary and literary texts. Similarly, a systematic study of the texts written on the backs of documentary rolls with the managerial class in mind seems to me very much worthwhile. All this is far beyond the scope of a conference paper, and perhaps beyond the capacities of any individual. But it seems to me the path toward a better understanding of our documentation for the society of Graeco-Roman Egypt and for the use of writing and literature in it.

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