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On and beyond duty: Christian clergy at Oxyrhynchus (c. 250 – 400)*

This paper presents a case-study of Christian clergy in the middle-Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus in the transitional period from mid-third to late fourth century, based on literary and documentary (papyrological) sources. Whereas in literary texts members of the clergy, mainly bishops, usually appear in connection with heresiological disputes, documentary papyri frequently show them ‘beyond duty’, for example engaged in business or travel. The papyri widen our historical understanding by preserving data on lower-ranking religious specialists, such as presbyters, readers, nuns and monks, who would otherwise remain quite unknown. They also provide evidence for the extension of the Christian order into the agrarian hinterland of the city.

Egyptian, Greek and Roman cults had enjoyed a long history in the Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus.¹ In the mid-third century CE, Greek-speaking magistrates offered sacrifices in the Sebasteum or Hadrianeum, while linen-clad, bald-shaven Egyptian priests hung garlands around statues of Egyptian deities in the Thoëreum and the Serapeum. But that was about to change. Christian clergy appear in papyrus documents from Oxyrhynchus at latest from the third quarter of the third century onwards; a contract dated 8 December 339 contains the last mention of a pagan priest in a papyrus from Oxyrhynchus (PSI III 215). By that time, several of the former temples had been transformed into Christian churches.²

This paper examines the evidence for Christian religious practitioners in the mid-

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¹ See Whitehorne (1995).


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dle Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus in the transitional period from 250 through to the end of the fourth century mainly on the basis of papyrus documents.

Arguably the best-documented city in classical and late antiquity through the tens of thousands of papyrus fragments found in its ancient garbage-heaps, Oxyrhynchus forms an excellent place to conduct a case-study. The documents accidentally preserved on its rubbish-heaps give fascinating yet fragmentary glimpses of life in an important provincial city, providing both an everyday perspective and evidence from outside the major (and well-documented) centres in the empire such as Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Rome. The documentary papyri found at Oxyrhynchus constitute invaluable material as they allow us to meet the ancient Oxyrhynchites at their daily tasks in workplaces, homes, streets, temples and churches. What makes papyrus documents so valuable and relevant (yet also so complex) is that they show us different and complementary sides of the activities of individual religious practitioners than what we can glean from literary texts only. The nature of papyrological evidence even makes it easier to observe these ritual experts ‘beyond duty’, especially in activities relating to business and travel. Compared to the literary sources, they preserve many more clergy by name and profession than previously known. In addition to evidence for Christianity and Christian clergy in the city, multiple papyri provide glimpses of the spread of Christianity in the surrounding villages in the Egyptian countryside. Were it not for the papyri, we would think Christianity was better represented in the Delta than in the Nile valley. Moreover, the papyrological documentation stretches back to a significantly earlier time than the literary sources.

The paper also emphasises methodological insights. Ecclesiastical writers spill much ink on inner church conflicts and heresiological disputes in this period. But however large the tears such doctrinal disputes created in the intellectual and social fabric of community, they leave few, if any, traces in documentary papyri. Indeed, the genre of sources determines the boundaries of our historical

3 See the collection of Christian sources by Blumell and Wayment (2015).
4 This section is inspired by Robert Orsi’s description of lived religion (1997, 7). The sociologist Meredith McGuire (2008, 5) draws attention to the “complexities of individuals’ religious practices, experiences, and expressions”. See also Raja and Rüpke (2015).
5 The scholarly concept of ‘lived religion’ helps to contextualise the mundane papyral documents. Orsi (1997, 7) notes: “Religion is best approached […] by meeting men and women at this daily task, in all the spaces of their experience”.
6 In compiling his checklist of bishops in Late Roman and Byzantine Egypt (325 – c. 750 CE), Worp was struck by the geographical differences between the literary sources and the papyri, with the former concentrated in the Delta, and the latter in Middle and Upper Egypt (1994, 317.)
knowledge. In the documents we observe parts of the activities of clergy that are less apparent in our literary sources. But since papyri only document activities that require writing, aspects of the duties of clergy that do not involve writing (for instance, pastoral care), remain almost invisible in the papyrological record.\footnote{Schmelz (2002, 2).}

In only a few instances do the papyrus documents offer a glimpse of what rituals or religious practices these experts are actually performing. But this is not true only of papyri; ancient writers also provide little information on ritual practices. As Susan Guettel Cole has pointed out: “The details of ritual practice were not a concern to historians or even to poets; we know only the barest outline of the rituals actually performed. We can tell from the epigraphical record, however, that practice was shaped by discussion, details were decided by legislative procedures, and disputes were subjected to the scrutiny of experts appointed to oversee public ritual”.\footnote{Cole, (2008, 57).} The absence of descriptions of ritual in our ancient sources is thus shared among different genres and has both to do with the fact that ritual does not necessarily require writing and also with the nature of ritual.\footnote{See esp. Bell (2009).}

## 1. Compiling a catalogue of Christian clergy

No single document from Oxyrhynchus lists the entire staff of a church in the city at a given moment.\footnote{Later documents from Oxyrhynchus, such as \textit{POxy}. 11.1357 and 674617, contain lists of churches or their inventory (see Blumell and Wayment [2015]). Several scholars have compiled lists of bishops that include those from the city, e.g. Timm (1984); Fedalto (1988, vol. 2); Worp (1994); Papaconstantinou (1996b); Benaissa (2007); Blumell (2014).} The data I provide here have been assembled from both literary sources and papyrological documents for the period from the mid-third through to the end of the fourth century. In collecting this evidence, one faces problems with sources that make it at times difficult to decide whether a given individual is a member of the clergy.\footnote{On this problem, see Papaconstantinou (1996, 177).} A generous count yielded well over thirty different Christian clerics, including monastics, for Oxyrhynchus in this period. In several cases, however, the hagiographical character of the literary sources renders them unreliable for this type of historical research. So the longer list includes several figures of dubious historicity, such as a Miletius, Oxyrhynchite bishop during the Great Persecution, mentioned in the \textit{Acta Sancto-
rum,¹² and an anonymous Oxyrhynchite presbyter from the *Apophthegmata Patrum*.¹³ On a stricter count, I consider 29 persons in all as more or less historical, namely: at least eleven bishops,¹⁴ four presbyters, at least four nuns,¹⁵ perhaps five monks, four readers, and one deacon. Before I turn to the different groups of clergy in more detail, let me offer some general comments on this list of Oxyrhynchite clergy.

2. Bias in favour of bishops

The most striking observation from this compilation of Oxyrhynchite clergy is that throughout the period under scrutiny we encounter a preponderance of bishops but few presbyters, deacons, readers, and monastics. Although on the street these lower clergy far outnumbered bishops, they seldom appear in the sources, whether literary or documentary.¹⁶ Indeed, eleven of the 29 Oxyrhynchite clergy on the shortlist, are bishops,¹⁷ of whom ten are known by name:

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¹² For the text and translation, see Blumell and Wayment (2015, 615–23, no. 163). Under August 27, the *Acta Sanctorum*, a hagiographical collection, commemorates thirteen persons from Oxyrhynchus, among them three presbyters and a bishop called Miletius, who were martyred during the persecution under Diocletian and Maximianus. This text claims that a presbyter named Julianus handed over the martyrs’ relics, which were then venerated at Oxyrhynchus. Blumell and Wayment (ibid. 614) are inclined to accept this account: “leaving aside some of the miraculous aspects of the martyrdom [the text] otherwise presents a fairly plausible scenario”. But there are good reasons seriously to doubt its historicity: although papyrological finds feature over thirty martyr shrines at that city (e.g. *POxy.* 1.141, *POxy.* 11.1357, *POxy.* 67.4618, 4619, 4622, and Papaconstantinou (2001, 288: “31 ou 32 lieux de culte”), cf. Delehaye (1924, 535–536, also 83–99), there are no papyrological references to any of these thirteen martyrs. Delehaye concluded that several places claimed these martyrs and indeed that the group is not Egyptian at all (Delehaye 1923, 64–66, referring to the *Acts of Marcellus* and *Acts of Meletius*). He describes this section as “une Passion fabuleuse de S. Mélècee et ses compagnons” (ibid. 88). Schmidt (1901, 44f) too expresses doubts about the historicity of these acts.

¹³ For the text, see Blumell and Wayment (2015, 666–667, no. 171).

¹⁴ I say ‘at least’ because *POxy.* 6.903.15 (4th cent.) refers to an oath sworn in the presence of ‘the bishops’ in the plural, so we must add an unknown number of individuals (see Blumell and Wayment (2015, 446–450 no. 125).

¹⁵ If “Didyme and the sisters” (*POxy.* 14.1774 and SB 8.9746) are counted, then the number rises by at least three (namely Didyme and at least two sisters) to seven.

¹⁶ See Hübner (2005, 13), on the tendency in scholarship to focus on bishops. Her book extends the focus to the lower clergy. In 1993, Wipszycka pointed out that the minor orders of clergy were understudied and that the relevant evidence for Egypt had never been fully examined (1993, 181–182.) Her own work addresses this lack; cf. also Schmelz (2002).
Sotas (ordained by Maximus of Alexandria, who was in office 264 – 282)\textsuperscript{18}

Alypius (ordained by Theonas of Alexandria, who was in office 282 – ca. 300)\textsuperscript{19}

Pelagius (c. 325 – 347, Melitian/Arian?)\textsuperscript{20}

Theodorus (347 – 57, orthodox; 357 – 61, Arian; 371 – 83/4, orthodox)\textsuperscript{21}

Dionysius (early 350 – 5)

Apollonius (357 – 81, Melitian/Arian)\textsuperscript{23}

Heracleidas (c. 357 – 61, orthodox)\textsuperscript{24}

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\textsuperscript{17} On the special structure of the Egyptian church, with bishops directly under the Alexandrian patriarch without metropolites, see Wipszycka (1996, 158 – 161). This church structure gave Egyptian bishops a certain measure of freedom to conduct their own affairs. By the same token, as Wipszycka (1993, 160) notes, despite a large number of documents, we lack information about the pastoral and financial activities of the clergy. Church canons that provide that information for other regions are lacking for Egypt, because the Egyptian clergy only rarely came together for synods.

\textsuperscript{18} On a number of occasions, Blumell has incorrectly claimed that Sotas was ordained under Theonas of Alexandria (in office 282 – 300), see Blumell (2012a, 114), Blumell and Wayment (2015, 479, no. 133) and Blumell (2014, 84 n. 2). Alessandro Bausi writes: “according to the evidence we are studying, Sotas (Ṣotā in the Ethiopic text, § 18.4.5 in our numbering system) was ordained for Oxyrhynchus during the episcopate of Maximus” (pers. comm., June 6, 2016). Alberto Camplani has also made the same point to me, attaching an image of the manuscript with the transcription: ‘per Ἀκσερένκες, Ἑστα’ (pers. comm., October 9, 2012). I thank them both for their help in this matter.

\textsuperscript{19} Alessandro Bausi brought Alypius to my attention: “Theonas appointed Alypios (ʿAlepi̇s in Ethiopic, § 21.8.10) for Oxyrhynchus” (pers. comm. 1 June 6, 2016). I suspect that SB 14.11666 (\textit{PMed.} inv. 65; see Daris, 1978, 41 – 42) is a papyrological reference to this bishop. It is a letter addressed to a certain Alypius, requesting him to “undertake a visit with your son Antiochus to the church” (παράβαλε τῷ υἱῷ σου Ἀντίοχῳ εἰς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν).

\textsuperscript{20} Athanasius refers to an Oxyrhynchite bishop named Pelagius in 325 CE (Πελάγιος ἐν Ὀξυρύγχῳ). In 335, he participated in the Council of Tyre: Athanasius, \textit{Apologetia contra Arianos} 71.6.12 (ed. Opitz 2 p. 159). See also Papaconstantinou (1996); Timm (2007, 285); Worp (1994, 303); Luijendijk (2008, 102); Blumell and Wayment (2015, 514 – 515).


\textsuperscript{24} Mentioned in Marcellinus and Faustinus, \textit{Libellus precum}, 94 – 100, see below. Papaconstantinou (1996b, 172).
Why are these bishops so visible whereas the lower clergy remain almost invisible? For one thing, their work as bishops brought with it certain written interactions that left traces (such as letters of recommendation). On the other hand, these men, for all we know, came from more affluent milieus in which business activities demanded attention to correspondence. It is a common bias of the papyrological record (and for that matter of the entire historical record) that wealthier people appear more frequently in written sources, because the possession of property necessitates activities that involve writing. Nevertheless, the papyri do at least offer glimpses of those of lower status, including other ranks within the clergy.

Several Oxyrhynchite bishops appear exclusively in literary sources and not (or not yet) in the papyrological record, such as Pelagius, Hierakion, and Apphous, while others, such as Dionysius, appear only in the papyrological record. In many cases, bishops turn up in both literary and documentary sources (Sotas, Theodorus, Apollonius, and perhaps also Alypius and Dorotheus). The presence of Oxyrhynchite bishops in literary sources becomes more interesting when compared to lower clergy, who do not show up at all in the literary sources. Here the papyri contribute significantly to our historical understanding by

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25 On the episcopate of Dorotheus, see Blumell (2016). In addition to the Birmingham fragment (PBirmingham inv. 317), he cites the patristic evidence of the council attendance and possibly PLond.6.1927.

26 Historia Monachorum in Aegypto, mss. see again Blumell (2016), referring to Chitty (1962, 174). As Papaconstantinou notes, Festugière did not include the name of the Oxyrhynchite bishop in his edition. In his review of this edition (Chitty 1962), Chitty referred to Sinaiticus 432 and Bodleian Cromwell 18, fol. 26v. Papaconstantinou (1996b) concludes that this makes sense, because several papyri (from the 6th cent. on) attest to a church of Abba Hierakion, presumably founded by the bishop: PMert 3.124.4 (520); PSI 8.953.11 (568); POxy 18.2206.4 (6th cent.); POxy 24.2419.3 (6th cent.); PSI 7.791.8.13.20 (6th cent.); POxy 7.1053.23 (end 6th/early 7th cent.); PLond 5.1762.4 (6th or 7th cent.). See also Cain 2016, 130.


29 Unless Apphous is the recipient of PKöln 4.200, a letter from Theon, see below.

30 Besides bishops, three presbyters appear in the Acta Sanctorum (but, again, the episode does not belong to Oxyrhynchus) and one anonymous Oxyrhynchite presbyter is mentioned in the Apophthegmata Patrum.
widening the lens and preserving everyday data on non-elite or lower-ranking members of society.

3. Papas Sotas, the earliest known Bishop of Oxyrhynchus

Christians first appear in the documentary record for Oxyrhynchus in the mid-third century. The earliest known Christian cleric there is papas Sotas, bishop of the growing Christian congregation in the city during the third quarter of the third century. A dossier of six papyrus letters and a reference in a bishop-list preserved in Ethiopic translation show Sotas at work. He is thus the best-documented figure of all those discussed here, yet this is not so much an indication of historical importance compared to other bishops as of the vagaries of survival in the rubbish-dumps.

Nevertheless, Sotas is not a totally insignificant historical figure. He occupied the episcopal see in a major Egyptian city and his presence indicates that the Oxyrhynchite church at this time was large enough to have a bishop. Moreover, for this period, between the Decian and the Great Persecution, the so-called Little Peace, we have very little evidence of church leaders and their activities. The humble dossier on Sotas thus fills a gap. Furthermore, whereas what survives of the work of other bishops is heavily theological, we find Sotas engaged in everyday activities that his colleagues were no doubt also involved in but do not appear in literary sources.

A glance at the lists of Oxyrhynchite and Egyptian bishops shows the significance of the early date of Sotas, for otherwise the earliest known bishop of Oxyrhynchus is Pelagius in 325. Indeed, this latter is the earliest date entered by Klaas Worp in his recent checklist of Egyptian bishops because he knew of no

31 ‘Petosorapis, son of Horus, Christian’ seems to be the earliest reference to a member of the Christian clergy from Oxyrhynchus in a securely dated and provenanced text (POxy. 42.3035, 28 February 256). See Luijendijk (2008, 177–184).

32 PSI 9.1041, Sotas to Paul; PSI 3.208, Sotas to Peter; POxy. 36.2785, presbyters of Heracleopolis to papas Sotas; POxy. 12.1492, Sotas to Demetrianus; SB 12.10772, Sarapammon to his mother and Didyme. Possibly: PAlex. 29. A recently discovered Ethiopic manuscript that preserves a translation of a Greek list of bishops (the Historia Episcopatus Alexandriæ) mentions Sotas as one of the bishops ordained under the Alexandrian bishop Maximus (in office 264–282). See Bausi and Camplani (2013, esp. 247).
earlier evidence.\textsuperscript{33} The papyrological data for Sotasi in Oxyrhynchus thus fill an important lacuna, attesting to the activities of Christian officials roughly half a century earlier than had been suspected. The letters from and to Sotas show the Oxyrhynchite bishop engaged in networking with colleagues in other places, teaching, fund-raising for the church, and perhaps also in copying scripture. One letter places Sotas at Antioch, perhaps to participate in the synod about Paul of Samosata. If so, this reveals an involvement in doctrinal disputes. But Sotas is mentioned in this letter not in relation to the synod (which is not mentioned in the letter) but because the sender had asked him to bring back a substantial amount of money. Here we encounter the bishop involved in matters beyond his regular church duty.

The various letters of recommendation written to and sent by this provincial bishop give us a glimpse of a larger Christian network, not just among the big names of history, but also among those whose names, were it not for accidental preservation and discovery in an ancient garbage heap, would have been lost to us. The question is how to contextualise and interpret this network. Viewed against the broad changes of the religious landscape in this period, the emphasis on networking in Sotas’ dossier turns out to be significant in a larger perspective. Jan Bremmer has observed that, in contrast to Christian clergy, pagan priests lacked a trans-local network. In the long term, he argues, this contributed to the demise of their cults.\textsuperscript{34} According to Sozomen’s \textit{Church History}, the Emperor Julian appreciated the Christian custom of letters of recommendation that provided an international network of hospitality and sought to introduce it also among pagans.\textsuperscript{35} According to Brent Nongbri, however, Christian networking practices can be more fruitfully compared to civic networking, just as Roman officials kept up their connections through their correspondence, which of course included letters of recommendation. This fits also with Christian self-understanding, where titles for Christian officials (\textit{episkopos}, \textit{presbyteros}, and the self-designation as an \textit{ekklesia}, are terms derived from world of government.\textsuperscript{36} The papyri

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{33} Worp (2014, 283) reasoned: “This span of time has been suggested by the fact that there is little chance that a Greek papyrus from Egypt written before 325 CE would mention a Christian bishop (in general, there is not much information about bishops in the Egyptian χώρα before the Council of Nicaea)”. In view of the lack of material for the earlier period, Georg Schmelz began his examination of the papyrological evidence for Christian clergy in Egypt only with the fourth-century material (Schmelz 2002). He knew just one document datable to the years 225–275 and six of the period 275–325 (2, 15).
\item \textsuperscript{34} Bremmer (2008, 161); Bremmer (2012, 231).
\item \textsuperscript{35} \textit{Hist. eccl.} 5.16.3 (transl. Hartranft, Socrates, Sozomenos, 338).
\item \textsuperscript{36} Nongbri (2012). I thank Nongbri for his email on the topic dated to March 21, 2016.
\end{itemize}
indicate that Christians profitably adopted practices from civic administration rather than from the world of cult-officials. But papyri only preserve certain kinds of information, as the next case illustrates.

4. Clergy and a Church crisis

It is a truism that the genre of the surviving sources determines the boundaries of our historical knowledge. A crisis in the Oxyrhynchite church in the middle of the fourth century (ca. 357–361) forms a case in point. The situation can be reconstructed from a Latin petition, the Libellus precum, submitted around the year 383 to the emperors Valentinian, Theodosius and Arcadius by two Luciferian priests, Marcellinus and Faustinus.³⁷ Apparently, a group of Christians at Oxyrhynchus had withdrawn from communion in protest against their bishop Theodorus, who had been re-ordained by George, the Arian patriarch of Alexandria. It seems that eventually no less than three bishops were competing against one another: Theodorus, Heracleidas and Apollonius. According to the Libellus precum, Theodorus and his supporters (“a multitude of clerics”) went far beyond duty and actually demolished Heracleidas’ church building.³⁸ This conflict must have had considerable repercussions among the Christian population of Oxyrhynchus.

But so far no papyrological documentation so much as mentions this crisis.³⁹ Indeed, all we have is a purely incidental reference to bishop Theodorus’ boat. In contrast to the documentation from Sotas, this is not a document that Theodorus dictated (or wrote with his own hand); he is mentioned in passing as the ship’s owner (POxy. 34.2729).⁴⁰ Ships were expensive: Roger Bagnall concluded that boat owners belonged among “the municipal aristocracy, high-ranking imperial officials, and the upper clergy, the major holders of all forms of wealth and power in society”.⁴¹ So, if we have nothing on the crisis of church government,

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³⁸ Transl. Blumell and Wayment (2015, 627): “that infamous twice [ordained] bishop [Theodorus] [...] sent a multitude of clerics to the church of the blessed catholic bishop Heracleidas. Overthrowing it, he demolished the walls on all sides so that he destroyed the altar of God with axes. Nevertheless, the people of a different part of the upright and unblemished faith from the city still sustained the bishop [i.e. Heracleidas]”. See also Blumell (2012a, 151–153).
³⁹ See also Blumell (2012a, 283).
⁴⁰ See Blumell and Wayment (2015, 543–550, no. 146) and literature cited there.
⁴¹ Bagnall (1996, 36–37). Gonis 2003, 165 concludes that the ship owners in fourth-century Oxyrhynchus consisted mostly of “the municipal elite and the imperial officialdom” (rather
we do have a document that locates a bishop among the upper classes of society. It is a recurring theme in this research that clergy frequently appear in business documentation, which thus reveals different aspects of their work and sources of income. This is also what we shall see in the next section on presbyters.

5. Presbyters

If most evidence about the Oxyrhynchite clergy relates to bishops, what do the papyri reveal about the activities and duties of other members of the clergy? In the entire Oxyrhynchite documentation for this 150-year period, we find only four presbyters. Three of them are known by name: Leon, Heracles, and Ammon. I discuss them here individually since each document reveals a different aspect of the duties of presbyters. (So far no female presbyters are documented for Oxyrhynchus, but this of course does not necessarily mean that there were none. All we can say is that we do not see them in these sources.)

A fourth-century presbyter named Leon is known from a letter of recommendation (\textit{POxy}. 8.1162). It is noteworthy that not only bishops, such as Sotas, engaged in this form of Christian networking but also presbyters. Leon did not address particular individuals as Sotas did, but writes more generally to “the presbyters and deacons who share the local service, beloved brothers in the Lord”. Instead of the standard greeting in papyrus letters, \textit{χαρειν}, ‘greetings’ (lit.: [says] ‘hallo’), this letter reads \textit{χαραῳ χαρειν}, “greetings with joy”, an allusion to John 3:29. The biblical allusion reveals familiarity with scripture, as is fitting for a Christian presbyter. Yet a modern edition cannot express the joy that jumps from the page as the writer penned these two words in large letters, almost twice the size of the letters in the body of the text. This letter, with its exu-
berant penmanship, is a good example of the kind of document that reveals Christian clergy on duty.

A presbyter named Heracles is mentioned four times in a list of people (POxy. 63.4372, 341–399 CE). The document is significant for the social status of the presbyter, but does not reveal any activities, ritual or secular. Heracles supposedly owned a plot of land on which he paid taxes or received rent (the exact function of the document remains unclear). The papyrus lists a series of personal names, followed by a marker of identity, most often a profession, and then indicates amounts of grain. Some of the other professions mentioned are smith, vinedresser, tenant farmer, and overseer (φροντιστής). Age, provenance, alias, or a patronym are the personal identification markers given. This indicates that Heracles was recognised as a presbyter in his community. He appears among craftsmen and farmers, that is, among the middle and lower classes of society. In terms of the amounts mentioned in this list, Heracles falls roughly in the middle, delivering more than the vinedressers and less than the smith. Christian clergy commonly followed other callings, and for the great majority ritual duties were not their main sources of income. So, though he was a presbyter, Heracles’ main source of livelihood was some kind of labour, probably farming. But presbyter was considered the more honourable occupation.

A mid-fourth century account of cargo (PHarr. 1.94) features, besides Apollonius, son of Bishop Dionysius, a certain Ammon, presbyter. Just like Theodorus

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48 POxy. 63.4372.4, 27, 44, 52. The editor, John Rea, favoured a relatively early date for this papyrus, suggesting that its inventory number, that it may be part of the Archive of Papnouthis and Dorotheos (see POxy. 48.3398 [= Trismegistos TM 33711], dated between 330–385). The document is not listed by Blumell and Wayment (2015).

49 According to Rea, the amounts are either “taxes or rents in grain” but the document is too fragmentary to be certain (POxy. 63.4373, ad loc.).

50 POxy. 63.4372 i.19, iii.64.

51 For Egypt, see Schmelz (2002, 203–254); for Asia Minor, Hübner (2005, 103–112, 121–158, 213–228). Canon 19 of the Council of Elvira, Spain (held in 306), assumes that clergy conduct business. For examples of clerical abuse of secular jobs, see Dockter (2013, 106–111). In her epigraphic study of Asia Minor, Hübner found that many of the Christian clergy (below the level of bishop) continued to pursue their previous livelihoods so that their everyday lives stayed much the same after their ordination. She also noted that hagiographical texts take for granted that lower clergy keep their weekly jobs and serve in church on Sundays. “[...] bei ihrem Übertritt in den Klerus änderte sich ihr alltägliches Leben offenbar nur wenig” (2005, 111).


53 πλ(οιον) Ἄμμωνος πρεσβυτέρου ναυκληροκυβερ(νήτου) Λ(ίτρα) α, (οὐγκία) γ, γρ(ήματα) ιδ: PHarr. 1.94 (‘Account of freights’) = PMich. 20.181–182 no. 3. See also Gonis (2003, 164). It can be debated whether Ammon is a presbyter or just the elder of siblings; with Bagnall (1996, 36 n. 150), I take him to be a presbyter.
the bishop and Heracles the presbyter, Ammon combines his ecclesiastical duties with business activities. Here again, the ecclesiastical title is used for identification and as an honorific title. Besides being presbyter, Ammon is ναυκληροκυ-βερνήτης, ship’s captain.⁵⁴ If he also owned the ship, he may have been relatively well-off, albeit not as wealthy as bishop Theodorus, for he still worked on board himself.

The fourth presbyter, whose name is lost, served as “presbyter of the catholic [church]” in Paneuei, a village in the Western toparchy of the Oxyrhynchite nome while a certain Flavius Macrobius was senator, c.360 – 380.⁵⁵ The case is intriguing: Two brothers, Aurelius Orsentius and Aurelius Panaclius, accused the presbyter of stealing their property after they had either fled or been exiled.⁵⁶ Whereas in other cases in this period people begin to approach clergy to settle disputes,⁵⁷ in this case a complaint is filed against a presbyter. A plausible scenario is that the brothers had received pardon so that they could return from exile. As Daniel Washburn observes, from the 360s onward, emperors grant indulgentiae to show their magnanimity and create goodwill among the population around Lent and Easter.⁵⁸ The brothers may refer to this when they preface their sentence with the phrase: “because of your honourable and good administration”. If so, the brothers would have expected the restitution of their property

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⁵⁴ The term occurs in six papyri of fourth-century date, all but one of them from Hermopolis.
⁵⁵ *PWash*. 1.20; 2.7–8. See also Blumell and Wayment (2015, 450 – 452, no. 126) and literature mentioned there. According to Wipszycka (1996, 172–173), in this and other cases, the epithet ‘catholic’ indicates that the Christian congregation placed under the care of the bishop forms part of the universal church (see also p. 116 below).
⁵⁶ The situation is unclear. The meaning of the Greek term φυγή ranges from ‘flight in battle, [...] escape, avoidance’ to ‘banishment, exile’ (*LSJ* s.v.), so we cannot tell whether the brothers fled or were exiled. Blumell and Wayment (2015, 452 n.6) provide illustrations of the word’s semantic range in papyri. Washburn (2012, 3) notes: “when an ancient Greek source comments that individuals went into φυγή, in the absence of other information, we would have little way of knowing whether such persons went into a foreign land by their own decision or official decree. The ancient author’s underlying conviction seems to be that both those formally sentenced and those whom we would now call ‘refugees’ shared in the experience of exsilium or φυγή.” See also ibid. 29, on confusion in the papyri over legal particulars. Roman law distinguished between deportatio and relegatio, and defined the conditions under which these forms of punishment might involve confiscation of property (ibid. 17–18). As a punishment, “banishment [...] carried an elaborate mix of chastisement, humiliation, propaganda, and spectacle. But through it all, banishment was primarily a punishment that used relocation to cut social ties” (ibid. 35).
⁵⁷ Bishops: *POxy*. 6.903, and presbyters: *POxy*. 50.3581 (fifth cent.). On women’s interactions with clergy in both these texts, see Mathieson (2014, 150 – 152).
⁵⁸ Washburn (2012, 150).
on their return, as specified in the law.\textsuperscript{59} Since this document offers only the perspective of the plaintiffs, it remains unclear whether the presbyter was acting properly or not. Is this a case where the religious expert has abused his power, as the petition claims?\textsuperscript{60} Or had he merely confiscated their possessions on the church’s behalf after the brothers had left?\textsuperscript{61} Church canons and other texts document numerous cases of theft by clergy, especially alienation of church goods, such as liturgical vessels and other church property.\textsuperscript{62} On the other hand, the brothers may have entrusted their property to the presbyter during their enforced absence. An analogous case is known from a Coptic papyrus, in which a family entrusts its property to a presbyter while a family member was away.\textsuperscript{63} In this case, however, they took the precaution of documenting the transaction.

6. Deacon of the Church

One deacon appears in documentation relating to Oxyrhynchus for this period: “Apphous, deacon of the church”.\textsuperscript{64} The tax document in which he occurs men-

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{CTh} 9.43.1.3 (14 Sept. 321): “The pardon […] shall be as effective for restitution as the sentence was for correction. As the very name of deportation itself involves the forfeiture of everything, so shall the pardon permitting return involve the recovery of property and rank, in a word, everything that was forfeited” (transl. Pharr, Davidson, and Pharr [2001, 264], cf. Washburn [2012, 147; 203 n.13]). Elsewhere (p. 148) he comments that the very existence of this ruling “indicates that, in the early fourth century, massive confusion surrounded the topic”.

\textsuperscript{60} Cf. Bagnall (1996, 224): “The power acquired by the pastoral office has always been susceptible to abuse, and by the time two generations of official recognition had gone by, priests were undoubtedly well enough entrenched in villages to be significant factors in local matters”.

\textsuperscript{61} Washburn (2012, 41) notes that “over the course of the fourth and fifth centuries, the institutional church became incorporated into virtually every element of the process [of banishment]”.


\textsuperscript{63} \textit{BKU} III 400, on which see MacCoull (1989, 499).

\textsuperscript{64} The specification ‘of the church’ makes clear that Apphous is a Christian deacon and not a servant. The dearth of Oxyrhynchite deacons may not result from lack of evidence but have a biblical background, namely the limitation to seven in \textit{Acts} 6:1–6. The city of Rome in the mid-third-century was served by seven deacons (and many other clergy): Euseb. \textit{Hist. eccl.} 6.43.11 (\textit{Letter of bishop Cornelius}). The synod of Neocaesarea in 314 (canon 15) appealed to that passage in recommending that even large cities should have only seven deacons. See also Hübner (2005, 51 with n. 200).
tions him under the village of Mermertha (POxy. 55.3787, c.313–320). The same document also lists a reader (see p. 115 below). Papyrological evidence shows that “deacons were active and prominent figures in village affairs”. The village of Mermertha seems to have had one church at this time. This is the earliest documented case of a Christian cleric paying the urban capitation tax, an imperial tax, presumably on income from outside activities. Constantius II attempted to grant tax exemption for all clergy although this seems not to have been fully implemented.

If little is known about male deacons from Oxyrhynchus, there is even less information about female deacons. Indeed, some scholars have actually doubted that there were any deaconesses in Egypt. On the other hand, they occur frequently in the epigraphical evidence from Asia Minor, where, as Hübner notes, many had inscriptions set up in their own name. The difference in genre (papyrus documents versus epitaphs) explains the discrepancy in this respect.

65 On the date, see Bagnall (1991, 294–296): the date ante quem is provided by the abolition of the urban capitation tax in the year 320. It is unclear whether the village is Mermertha or Thos-bis: I interpret it as Mermertha, see Luijendijk (2008, 183–184 n. 121). This is the same village from which Petosorapis ‘the Christian’ hailed (POxy. 42.3035): see n. 31 above.
66 Judge (1977, 73).
67 Bagnall (1991, 294–296). Gilles Bransbourg has kindly sent me the following information (pers. comm. March 3, 2016): “The amount he settles – 2400 dr. – stands consistent with the full annual tax so he obviously does not enjoy any form of exemption from this tax. At that time, wheat costs about 3000 dr per artaba. So we are dealing with a relatively minor tax, worth about 1/10th of a solidus. Until Constantius II, no edict provides any form of tax exemption or privilege in relation to the main land tax. So it seems this capitatio was treated as the land tax on that respect, and not assimilated to the munera from which Italian clerics had been freed by Constantine as early as possibly 313 or 320 (CTh. 16.2.2). Another possibility is that Licinius was not as generous as Constantine, or (finally) that this tax never had the privilege of being exempted since it disappeared in c. 320, which is more or less the date of the first secure dating of cleric exemptions – and it would show clerics did not benefit from anything between 313 and 320.”
68 For the laws, see CTh 16.2.14.4 (256 CE), see also CJ 1.3.1 (343 CE) and CTh 16.2.19 (353 CE). See Elliott (1978).
69 Wipszycka (1993, 189–190) doubted the presence of deaconesses in Egypt. Ugo Zanetti (1990), on the other hand, has shown that they are indeed attested there, albeit sparsely and in rather late sources. For what it is worth, Karras asserts bluntly: “The evidence for ordained female deacons in the early Christian period […] is clear and unambiguous” (2004, 273).
70 Hübner (2005, 45–50; 111–112) found 32 epigraphic attestations of female deacons. Fourteen of these women bore the title διάκονος, nine others διακόνα. In eight inscriptions, the word is abbreviated. See also Eisen (1996, 154–192).
7. Readers

For this period, the Oxyrhynchus papyri yield four readers. The earliest is Aurelius Ammonius, son of Copreus, reader of the former church of the village Chysis (POxy. 33.2673, 304 CE). At the time the document was drawn up, his church no longer existed as a result of the imperial measures against Christians during the so-called Great Persecution. The document states that he is illiterate, which is of course common enough albeit somewhat unexpected for a reader. He may have pretended to be illiterate as a form of subtle resistance or have been truly illiterate but capable of memorising scriptural passages.

The second reader, Besarion, also worked in the countryside; he is listed as reader under the village of Tampetai, in the same tax document as the deacon Apphous from Mermertha (POxy. 55.3787, c.313 – 320). Just like Apphous and the presbyter Heracles, he held a day job besides his ecclesial position.

The third reader, Morus, hails from Oxyrhynchus City, but we cannot be sure whether he was a general ‘reader’ or a church lector. He appears in two documents of 323 CE, a contract and the related oath, with two other professionals, Timotheus, a copper smith, and Euporion, a dealer in fine linen. He does not sign his own name to the oath, in this case not because he was illiterate but because his eyes were in a poor state (POxy. 41.2993.11–12). The three agree to water a persea tree, which had “recently by order of higher authority been planted near [our dwellings] on the public avenue” (POxy. 41.2969.11–14). A note at the end states that these houses belonged to Morus (οἰκόπεδα Μώρου ἀναγνώστης του: 2993.13; 2969 frg.2, 1.23). Shelton suggests that this may indicate that he

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71 He probably also appears in a business document of 318 (POxy. 45.3257), see Luijendijk (2010, 587).
72 The document has generated much scholarly discussion, see Blumell and Wayment (2015, 411–421 no. 114).
74 The editor, J. C. Shelton, pointed out that an ἀναγνώστης “may be either a pagan who earns his living by reading or a Christian lector” (POxy. 41.2969 ad loc.). See also LSJ s.v. ἀναγνώστης: ‘reader, slave trained to read’ or ‘church lector’. Blumell and Wayment (2015, 417) consider a “Christian context […] unlikely” in this case. But non-Christian readers are exceedingly rare and when they do occur, their function is obscure (POxy. 44.3463.18, application for the ephebate, 58 CE). In the third and fourth centuries, Christian readers become more common and I therefore consider it most likely that Morus was a church lector.
75 Eye disease was “probably rampant in antiquity” (Retief, Stulting, and Gilliers 2008, 697).
76 The words ‘our dwellings’ are unfortunately missing on the papyrus, but, in view of the mention of Morus’ οἰκόπεδα at the end of each document, extremely plausible.
“had means to replace the tree if necessary”. Morus thus appears to have been a man of some standing, probably well situated in the middle class. This fits with his (former) ability to read.

The name of the fourth person, a “reader of the catholic church” is lost. We know only that in or after 377 he purchased part of a house from a woman called Serena, who, in turn, had bought it from a monk (whose name is also missing). As Ewa Wipszycka has shown, the epithet ‘catholic’ in Egyptian papyri can signify either (1) the universal church or a particular local congregation, (2) the self-presumed Orthodox Church versus a so-considered heretical sect, or (3) the most important church among several in a locality. Again, the papyrus shows glimpses of the social and economic status of the clergy – in this case, through the purchase of real estate – but not of their theological allegiances.

8. Monastics

The lack of female Christian leaders in Oxyrhynchite sources changes drastically by the end of the fourth century, when, according to the author of the *Historia monachorum*, the city housed twenty thousand nuns and ten thousand monks. These numbers are of course greatly exaggerated. *Didyme* and ‘the sisters’ have some claim to be the first known female monastics appearing in the Oxyrhynchite documentary record (*POxy*. 14.1774 and *SB* 8.9746, c. 340). Their business correspondence involves a large network. Four (other) nuns appear in papyri from Oxyrhynchus.

A property division lists a woman identified as ‘Annis monastic’ as the owner of a house on a public street (*PSI* 6.698, 25 January 392). This nun belongs to

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77 Shelton ap. *POxy*. 41.2969, 55, note to l. 23.
78 A comparable figure of roughly the same period is Leonides, a flax merchant and owner of a papyrus containing the beginning of the Epistle to the Romans, see Luijendijk (2010).
81 The entire population can hardly have reached such figures (on the hyperbolic character of the passage, see e.g. Cain 2016, 187–188). Among recent estimates, note Fichman (1971, 116 and 120): 30,000 and for the late Roman period 15,000 – 20,000 inhabitants; Rathbone (1990, 120 – 121): 20,000 – 25,000; Coles (2009, 8): more than 30,000.
83 On the legal background of monastics owning property, see Albarrán Martínez (2011, 136 – 137).
the propertied class and resides in a respectable neighborhood (one of her neighbours is a man of high military rank).

Two other female monastics, Aurelia Theodora and Aurelia Tauris, daughters of Silvanus, [...] apotactic nuns, also house-owners, appear in a lease contract (POxy. 44.3203, June – July 400). They rent out parts of their residence to a Jewish family, probably to provide for their own livelihood. Annis, Theodora and Tauris have all renounced marriage, but not their property. Moreover the biological sisters Theodora and Tauris have not renounced their (entire) family either. The same is true of the following case, the nun Athonis.

Along with several other members of the family, Athonis receives greetings from her brother Philoxenus in a letter he sent home (POxy. 56.3862.19, 4th/5th cent.). Although she is identified as a μοναχή (nun), it appears from the letter that she lives with her parents and another sibling. Literary texts specify that such domestic virgins must lead a modest lifestyle of fasting and studying scripture and also that family members not abuse them as servants. Thus although, if we may believe the literary sources, all these women attempted to stay out of public view, they appear in documents such as a lease and a family letter, or even doing business. In private correspondence and in official documents, family members and outsiders identified them as ascetics instead of (or in addition to) their patronymic, thereby recognising and respecting the choice these women had made.

The earliest mention of a male monastic in a papyrus from Oxyrhynchus is dated 373–374 CE (POxy. 46.3311). A certain apotaktikos named Ammonius, deceased at the time of writing, is mentioned in a petition about an inheritance dispute initiated by two illiterate women, Cyrilla and Martha. Ammonius had received an inheritance from his nephew Gemellus, the women’s cousin. According to the women’s petition, “Ammonius neither drew up a will nor designated heirs, and lived his life to the end as a monk [...]”. On Ammonius’ death, a certain Ammon seized his property and possessions even though he was neither his son nor did he have the right to own land. The sisters request the logistês to compel Ammon to transfer Gemellus’ property to them. Again, it is not in connection with religion that we hear of Ammonius, but because he owned property. And,

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84 Rémondon compares such nuns with the noble ladies from the east who corresponded with Jerome. He adds: “Il faut, pour vivre ainsi, en avoir les moyens” (1972, 260).
85 Riedel and Crum (1904, 62); Luijendijk 2015, 62–63.
86 See also Luijendijk (2015, 64).
87 This might even be the Gemellus of POxy. 48.3397 verso, whom I list here as a possible monk (see p. 120 below).
quite by the way, the document confirms that apotactic monks did not have to renounce their property.\textsuperscript{88}

The second monk, Philoxenus, appears in a list of payments written on a bovine scapula: “by Philoxenus, monk, 229 myriads of denarii”.\textsuperscript{89} He is probably named after a popular Oxyrhynchite saint, whose shrine and cult are widely attested in the city.\textsuperscript{90}

The third monk, an anonymous, is known from the real-estate transaction that also featured the reader of the Catholic Church (SB 14.12021, after 377, see p. 118 above).\textsuperscript{91} The contract states that the monk, with his brother, had been the previous owner of the house. Once again, therefore, a monk turns up in a property transaction. It is not stated when the monk sold his share. Did he derive his income from renting out the house, as did the apotactic sisters Theodora and Tauris? Or did he sell it on becoming a monk, donating the revenue to the poor?

A damaged word in an account on the verso of a letter from Papnuthis to Dorotheus (\textit{POxy.} 48.3397.9, 330 – 385 CE) may hide a fourth monk, Gemellus. The entry reads: π(ορά) Γέμελλος φυ\text{μι}αχος (δηναρίων) (μυριάδες) ρον, ‘from Gemellus, assistant, 150 myriads of denarii’. As the editor suggests, μυ\text{οναχού}, ‘monk’ is a possible reconstruction.\textsuperscript{92}

There is finally, at the very end of our period, a slightly more palpable figure, Theon, who is portrayed by the \textit{Historia Monachorum in Aegypto} as a tight-lipped holy man, trilingual in Greek, Latin and Coptic, who daily received visitors in search for healing at his small cell.\textsuperscript{93} Lincoln Blumell has argued that he is also attested by three bilingual Greek-Latin papyri.\textsuperscript{94} Two of this Theon’s letters

\textsuperscript{88} See Wipszycka (2009, 311 – 313). She concludes: “the documents show apotaktikoi that [sic] possess immovables, money, and participate in economic life in the sense that they make decisions concerning their material good, and they are not detached from their families” (p. 313).

\textsuperscript{89} \textit{SB} 20.15199.6: δι(ά) Φιλόξενος μονωχὸς (i.e. Φιλοξένου μοναχοῦ) (δηναρίων) (μυριάδες) σκθ (350 – 399 CE). See Gallazzi and Sijpesteijn (1992, 161 – 162); also Judge (1977); Choat (2007) and Choat (2002); Blumell and Wayment (2015, 452 – 453, no. 127).

\textsuperscript{90} On the cult, see Papaconstantinou (2001, 203 – 204). This text features two apparently different Philoxenoi, one the son of Horion, the other a monk. The popularity of the saint is also reflected in later onomastic practices. As Blumell (2012a, 266) notes, it becomes “the second most popular name in fifth and sixth century [Christian, \textit{AML}] letters”.

\textsuperscript{91} We know only his father’s name, Dionysius, and the first two letters of his mother’s name: (\textit{L.4:} μοι\text{ηνά\text{οντος}} ἀμφοτέρων Διονυσίου μητρός Δη [ - \text{ca.?-} ]). The document also mentions a reader (see n.79 above).

\textsuperscript{92} See also Choat (2002, 9).

\textsuperscript{93} Blumell and Wayment (2015, 589); Cain 2016, 151, 197, 240.

\textsuperscript{94} \textit{POxy.} 18.2193–94; \textit{PKöln} 4.200, cf. Blumell (2008); Blumell (2012b, 212–217); Blumell (2012a). See also Blumell and Wayment (2015, 585 – 596, nrs. 156 – 158). These letters were originally assigned to the 5th/6th cent.
are addressed to a certain Pascentius, the third to a man named Apphous. (It is possible that he is to be identified with Apphous, bishop of Oxyrhynchus at around the same time, but this cannot be proven.⁹⁵) In addition to being multilingual and composing his letters in Latin and Greek, as a true holy man Theon intercedes on behalf of an old woman and her son, appealing to Job 36:19 (POxy. 18.2193). In the other letter to Pascentius, he quotes Sirach 12:2 (POxy. 18.2194); in the letter to Apphous, Gen. 48:16a (PKöln 4.200). In addition, both letters to Pascentius open with a quotation in Latin from a martyr act, the Acta Apollonii.⁹⁶ Thus, of all the members of the Christian clergy reviewed here, Theon is the one who in his correspondence is most on duty as a holy man, quoting a range of scriptural texts, interceding for the poor and encouraging others (the letters, of course, are not a test of his alleged taciturnity).

9. On and beyond duty

This paper has presented glimpses of Christian officials ‘on duty’ in Oxyrhynchus: bishop Sotas and presbyter Leon each writing letters of recommendation, and Theon, the holy man, appealing to scripture to help the poor. This is as close as the papyrological evidence comes to pastoral work. Viewed against the both tedious and fascinating heresiological and christological debates of the period, most Christian clergy examined here appeared in contexts that have nothing or only very little to do with theology. Individuals appear in connection with a legal dispute and an accusation of theft, but there are no explicit traces of church conflicts or Christian diversity in the papyri, although these did rage at the time, even in Oxyrhynchus itself. As I have noted, even explicit references to the ‘catholic’ church are not necessarily indications of a perceived theological difference with another group. And Theodorus, the bishop who we know was involved in a major ecclesiastical crisis, is mentioned in a papyrus only in passing as owner of a boat: for what gets documented in papyri are not the minutiae of theological dispute but quotidian interactions. It is characteristic of papyrological evidence that it confronts us with everyday issues that for whatever reason require to be put into writing, just as it is the literary sources that are prone to preserve theological conflicts.

In the papyri we encountered clergy for the most part engaged in activities beyond their ecclesial duties. Bishops, presbyters, readers, deacons and monas-

⁹⁵ See also Blumell (2012b, 217).
⁹⁶ See Blumell (2012a); Blumell and Wayment (2015, 590).
tics appear in business documents, clearly identified with their clerical titles. As ship-captains and farmers, their daily lives differed little from those of their fellow workers. In this sense, the clerical position was an honorary one, beyond the regular duty of providing for their families. When we encounter in papyrus documents bishops or presbyters going beyond duty, it is when they are active in the mundane world ‘beyond’ the sacred. We know that Bishop Sotas travelled abroad, presumably on some work-related mission (although there is no mention whatever of this) only because he was asked to carry back home a significant sum of money. Others turn up serendipitously in tax-registers and business-documents.

No doubt these persons became bishops, priest or monastics for religious motives. In addition to and independent of their social background, members of the clerus gained financial and social benefits by entering the calling: it released them from certain taxes and expensive obligatory services (munera) and it commanded them respect in their community. Yet despite this blend of religious and social-economic motives none of these individuals, not even Bishop Sotas, drew attention explicitly to their clerical titles. We know of them almost entirely thanks to the value for the administration of such social or status identifiers.

Not all clerical ranks and positions mentioned in literary sources appear in papyri (at least not in our period). Compared to other sources, the evidence for Oxyrhynchus lacks references to deaconesses, acolytes, doorkeepers, exorcists and widows.97 The explanation for this absence is probably that their inferior social status meant they had less to do with the bureaucracy. Apart from several nuns, we know of no female clergy at Oxyrhynchus. This is especially striking by comparison with the epigraphic evidence for Asia Minor or Rome. Their non-appearance is thus surely due to the bias of our sources.98 The same bias means that we know nothing about Christian clergy in the chôra outside the city itself.

Presbyter Heracles receives rent or pays taxes in grain; another presbyter is accused of theft, presbyter Ammon is a ship’s captain, the nuns Theodora and Tauris rent out rooms. In engaging in worldly matters in addition to sacred ones, these Christian clerics resembled the magistrates that held Greek and Roman priesthoods – with the important difference that many Greek and Roman priests actually paid in one way or another for the honour accorded

97 There are five references to widows as a group in papyri from Oxyrhynchus from a later period. All record donations of wine.
98 See n.82 above.
them. Prior to 250, public officials at Oxyrhynchus regularly style themselves priests of Graeco-Roman deities because of the prestige traditionally associated with these offices. Over the period 250 and 350 CE, this practice becomes increasingly rare; by the mid fourth century, we find administrative documents routinely referring to members of the Christian clergy by their several titles. A sea change has occurred in less than one hundred years.

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On and beyond duty: Christian clergy at Oxyrhynchus (c. 250 – 400)


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