

Christian Manuscripts from Egypt to the Times of Constantine¹

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Our study of Christian book production before Christianity was officially recognised by Constantine includes the third and early fourth centuries, because in our opinion only a handful of papyri can be attributed to the second century, the theme of this conference. Luxury books like the *codices Vaticanus, Alexandrinus* or *Sinaiticus* clearly belong to the period of the victorious church (after AD 324). Our interest is in the preceding period.

The present study is an extension of our project on New Testament manuscripts published in the *Leuven Ephemerides* in 2012.² There we opposed the early datings of several papyri proposed by some New Testament scholars, who intruded upon the field of palaeography. We presented a survey of the New Testament papyri there, studied from a palaeographer's point of view. On the whole, our datings are not so different from those in Nestle-Aland, but they have the advantage of being studied from a single point of view, and being compared to all contemporary papyrus texts, not only to Biblical texts. For the present occasion, we have added Old Testament papyri and church fathers.

Our presentation is the result of a collaboration between a papyrologist, mainly a documentary papyrologist with an interest in book production (LDAB) and a Greek palaeographer, also interested in literary papyri. Because our starting points are different, there were several occasions where agreement was not self-evident.

Since the NT papyri were dealt with in our 2012 article, our main task was checking the dates of the papyri outside the NT. This is now possible for over 90% of the published texts, thanks to photographs in the editions and online. We ended up with a database of 190 texts, where a date before AD 325 is probable. Identification of the types of handwriting often allows a more precise dating than

1 Willy Clarysse wrote sections 1 and 3, and Pasquale Orsini section 2, but the authors share responsibility for the work as a whole.

2 ORSINI/CLARYSSE, Manuscripts.

that found in Rahlfs, Nestle-Aland or in the Leuven Database of Ancient Books (LDAB)³. We have never dated closer than 50 years, i.e. two generations. This ongoing work has been mainly the task of Orsini and will result in a list of early Christian manuscripts, which will be incorporated into the LDAB and which we hope to publish in BETL later on.⁴

We have excluded:

- texts dated to the fourth century in general by the editors and later scholars. The overwhelming majority of these are post-Constantinian, but we may have missed a few items here belonging to the early fourth century, when no photographs were available online or in the printed editions.
- Jewish texts, e.g. Old Testament texts with tetragrammaton, such as P. Oxy. 77 5101 (TM 140 272; Psalms; AD 50–150); we also consider P. Oxy. 65 4443 (TM 61923; Esther; AD 50–150) as Jewish.
- Coptic texts: again, most may be post-Constantinian.⁵

The only fixed points for our datings derive from the archival context and from contents of the texts. Two early groups of books predominate in our material: the Bodmer and the Chester Beatty codices. They were both bought in Middle Egypt in the 1950s, and it has even been suggested that they constitute the remnants of a single collection.⁶ But in our opinion these libraries were a diverse set, with some older and some newer books, and so the library context is only of limited help in this case.

In the main, therefore, datings of biblical manuscripts are based on palaeography. For the criteria, we refer to our previous article.⁷ The palaeographic categories (stylistic class, style, canon), although certainly “anachronistic” (ancient scribes wrote without knowing these principles), are useful from a heuristic point of view.

3 RAHLFS-FRÄNKEL, *Verzeichnis der griechischen Handschriften des Alten Testaments*, 2004; Nestle-Aland: <http://ntvmr.uni-muenster.de/liste>; LDAB : <http://www.trismegistos.org/ldab>.

4 The work is not yet finished as we are still looking for photographs of several papyri. The final publication may change some of our figures, but not the general picture.

5 BAGNALL, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, 256: “The widespread use of Coptic, for both sacred literature and letters, can be identified within a decade or so of Constantine’s acquisition of Egypt after the defeat of Licinius in 324.”

6 For a clear survey of the fourth century Christian libraries (with a list of all books in appendix), see now FOURNET, *Anatomie*. For palaeographic aspects of the Bodmer papyri see ORSINI, *Papiri Bodmer*.

7 Cf. ORSINI/CLARYSSE, *Manuscripts*, 447–449.

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The results of our previous investigation of ancient manuscripts of the New Testament can be summarized as follows⁸:

A. The graphic outline is articulated in six areas: 1. “Severe style”, including the transitional phase leading to the upright and sloping pointed majuscule; 2. Round chancery script, which leads to the “Alexandrian stylistic class”; 3. Canonized majuscules (for the manuscripts studied here, only the biblical majuscule and “round majuscule” enter into this category); 4. Semi-formal majuscules (influenced by the round majuscule and generic round scripts); 5. “Alexandrian chancery script of Subatianus Aquila”; 6. Cursive and informal documentary writings.

B. There are no first century New Testament papyri and only very few can be attributed to the second century (three papyri, probably all written in the second half of the century⁹ or somewhere between the late second and early third centuries (four manuscripts).¹⁰ These conclusions remain valid despite a few minor additions and corrections to our *corpus*.

Our survey of the different scripts documented in our *corpus* of manuscripts, now including Old Testament texts and other Christian texts (*apocrypha*, theology, liturgy, magic, Shepherd of Hermas) is presented in the following table.

	OT Mss	NT Mss	Others	Total
Alexandrian stylistic class	25	20	11	56
Severe style	5	16	16	37
– upright	2	0	0	
– sloping	3	16	16	
Documentary and cursive script	12	7	13	32
Transition from Severe style to pointed majuscule	5	5	7	17
– sloping	3	4	4	
– upright	2	1	3	
Formal round	5	2	6	13
Biblical majuscule	4	6	1	11
“Round majuscule” ¹¹	3	1	4	8

8 Cf. ORSINI/CLARYSSE, *Manuscripts*, 460–461, 466.

9 \mathfrak{P}^{52} , \mathfrak{P}^{90} , \mathfrak{P}^{104} .

10 \mathfrak{P}^{30} , $\mathfrak{P}^{64+67+4}$, 0171, 0212.

11 Also known as “Roman uncial” (see G. CAVALLO, *Il calamo e il papiro*, 151–161) and classified in the first group of the “formal round” (cf. TURNER/PARSONS, *Greek Manuscripts*, 21).

	OT Mss	NT Mss	Others	Total
Chancery scripts	2	6	0	8
– Chancery script of Subatianus Aquila	1	3	0	
Informal bookhands	5	0	3	8
Mixed style	2	0	0	2

Table 1. Script types in pre-Constantinian Christian books

The scripts most frequently used in all these types of texts are: Alexandrian stylistic class (56 manuscripts), Severe style (37 manuscripts) especially sloping to the right, documentary and cursive scripts (32 manuscripts); less common are the scripts of the transition from Severe style to pointed majuscule (17 manuscripts: 11 sloping and 6 upright), the formal round scripts (13 manuscripts), biblical majuscule (11 manuscripts). The Alexandrian stylistic class is used a lot for the Old and New Testament (25 and 20 manuscripts), less in other texts (11 manuscripts); on the other hand, the Severe style is found far more rarely in the Old Testament than in the New Testament (5 vs. 16 manuscripts) and other texts (16 manuscripts); documentary and cursive scripts are less frequent in the New Testament (7 manuscripts), than in the Old Testament (12 manuscripts) and other Christian texts (13 manuscripts).

Until the early fourth century the biblical majuscule is poorly attested in the Old and New Testament (4 and 6 manuscripts): it becomes the canonized script for Bible manuscripts only in the first half of the fourth century.

From the palaeographical point of view, there are elements of continuity and discontinuity in the production of biblical manuscripts: continuity in the use of the Alexandrian stylistic class; discontinuity in the increased use of the Severe style and in the reduced use of documentary and cursive scripts. The other Christian manuscripts sometimes follow the graphic trends of the Old Testament (for the documentary and cursive scripts), sometimes those of the New Testament (for the Severe style), and sometimes they make autonomous choices (limited use of the Alexandrian stylistic class and biblical majuscule).

The canonized scripts are only two (biblical majuscule and round majuscule), with a few manuscripts; all other scripts are “stylistic class”, “style”, documentary and informal bookhands. At this stage of the Christian book production a high quality standard had not yet been defined. The early Christian book occupies an intermediate position between formalized and informal scripts, for private use, for individual or collective use of the books. Its graphic universe meets the needs of functionality, readability, and use, but it is not yet organized into a hierarchy of graphic forms.

3 The earliest christian manuscripts

DATE	TM NUMBER	PUBL.	CONTENTS	NOTES
100-150	63460	PSI 1200 BIS	THEOL., ESCHATOLOGICAL	ROLL
100-199	61926	PSBA 1957	OT PSALMS	
125-175	61782	P. OXY. 4404	NT MATTHEW	
	61624	P. RYL. 457	NT JOHN	
140-199	61930	P. ANT. 1 7	OT PSALMS	
150-199	61625	P. OXY. 3523	NT JOHN	
	59982	P. IAND. 1 4	SHEPHERD OF HERMAS	
150-225	59983	P. OXY. 3528	SHEPHERD OF HERMAS	
150-250	61924	P. YALE 1 1	OT GENESIS	
	61932	P. MONTS. ROCA 41	OT CHRONICLES	
	61951	P. BEATTY 6 7	OT ISAIAS	
	62329	P. LOND. LIT. 211	OT DANIEL	ROLL OR SHEET
	59984	P. MICH. 2.2 130	SHEPHERD OF HERMAS	ROLL
	62838	P. OXY. 1 1	APOCR. GOSPEL THOMAS	
	63527	BELL/SKEAT	APOCR. GOSPEL	
	62820	P. FREIB. 1 4	THEOL. HOMILY (?)	CODEX OR SHEET?
	63857	P. MICH. 18 763	THEOL. HOMILY (?)	ROLL
170-250	61934	P. BEATTY VI	OT NUMERI + DEUTERONOMIUM	
175-225	66870	P. SCHOYEN 2 26	OT LEVITICUS	
	66869	P. SCHOYEN 1 23	OT JOSUAH	
	61931	PSI 921 VO.	OT PSALMS	ROLL, DOCUMENTARY HAND
	61783	P. MONTS. ROCA 48	NT MATTHEW + LUKE	
	61828	PSI 1 2	NT MATTHEW + LUKE	PARCHMENT

DATE	TM NUMBER	PUBL.	CONTENTS	NOTES
	61860	P. OXY. 13 1598	NT PAUL, THESS.	
	61928	PSI CONGR. 20 1	OT PSALM 1	SHEET, AMULET?
	69384	P. OXY. 4706	SHEPHERD OF HERMAS	ROLL
175–256	61914	P. DURA 10	NT TATIANUS, DIATESSARON	ROLL, SYRIA

Table 2. List of manuscripts for which a second century date is not excluded

The 28 manuscripts listed in Table 2 may belong to the second century AD from a palaeographical point of view. Note, however, that only seven of them are exclusively attributed to that century, the other 23 can be either second or third century, and for most of them an early third century date is a priori more likely.¹² The only text that we date to the first half of the second century is PSI 11 1200 *bis* (TM 63460), a fragmentary theological treatise containing two *nomina sacra*. It is written on a roll (not on a codex as is usual for Christian texts) and deals with eschatological problems.

Eleven of the 28 texts contain fragments of the Old Testament, seven belong to the New Testament, including the fragment of Tatianus' Diatessaron from Dura Europos (TM 61914). Most conspicuous at this early date are the four manuscripts of the Shepherd of Hermas (TM 59982, 59983, 59984, 69384), a Christian treatise that was popular in early Christian Egypt and sometimes even incorporated into the New Testament,¹³ e.g. in the *codex Sinaiticus*, which also contains the Letter of Barnabas. This letter is also found in a papyrus from the III/IV cent. (TM 59353). The work was written in Rome shortly after AD 150 and the earliest copy in Egypt (P. Iand. 1 4 = TM 59982) is dated hardly a generation later. Except for Hermas, the NT texts are mainly gospels (Matthew, Luke and John, not Mark; but also three apocryphal gospels). One third century fragment, TM 61700 (P⁶⁹), was tentatively attributed to the Gospel of Marcion.¹⁴ The presence of three theological treatises or homilies is somewhat unexpected.

Old Testament and New Testament texts are more or less equally represented. The fluctuations in the second and third centuries are not significant because the number of texts is too low.

¹² Cf. BAGNALL, Books, 10–24.

¹³ For the unexpected frequency of the Pastor of Hermas among the earliest Christian books, see already BAGNALL, Books, 41–43. The most recent edition of the papyrological fragments is that by T. WAYMENT, *Apocrypha*, 81–169.

¹⁴ Cf. CLIVAZ, *Angel and Sweat*. This identification is doubted by BEDUHN, *First New Testament*, 41f and KLINGHARDT, *Evangelium*, 1039ff.

In the Old Testament, the Psalms are by far the most popular genre: the two second century texts are both psalms (TM 61926 and 61930). For II/III the relation is 2/9 (one third Psalms), for the third century it is 7/23 (*idem*), for III/IV it is 2/13 (one sixth Psalms), for IV it is 3/17 (*idem*). The preponderance of Psalms diminishes in the later period.

In the New Testament, the second century texts are three gospel fragments (Matthew and twice John),¹⁵ for the second and third century fragments, we find Paul's letters to the Thessalonians (TM 61860) and two gospel books combining Matthew and Luke (TM 61783 and 61828) in a single volume. In the third century, John's gospel is the most popular, with eleven manuscripts, followed by Matthew and Luke with four each. The only example of Mark is in a manuscript containing also John and Luke, so probably a gospel book (TM 61826; Chester Beatty 1 1). Paul is now represented in six manuscripts, the Letter of James by three, the Apocalypse by two and the Acts of the Apostles by a single one. Clearly the gospels are the most popular Christian books (36 vs. 28 for all other works together). Mark, however, is only rarely found (this remains so in the fourth, fifth and even sixth centuries, and also in the oldest Coptic Bible texts).¹⁶

Paul is only represented from the third century onwards, and so are the Catholic Letters and the Apocalypse. Interest in Acts remains low all over.

Theological works, e.g. homilies, treatises, and letters, are rather frequent and early (23 instances). Most treatises or letters are anonymous but one is dated to the second century (TM 63460) and two to the second/third centuries (TM 62820 and 63857). The *Cestoi* of Iulius Africanus (TM 61406) are nearly contemporary with the author (the papyrus was reused in AD 276), and so is the letter of the patriarch Theonas against the Manicheans (TM 62826). A fragment of Irenaeus (TM 61317) dates to the first half of the third century, hardly two generations after it was written; Irenaeus turns up again a century later in Edfu (TM 61318). Also for Origen, we have some nearly contemporary fragments (TM 62337; 64007; 62335). This gives the impression that theological work was fairly soon taken account of by Christians in the chora.

Over the whole period, six manuscripts are probably used in a school context, all dating after AD 250. Here psalm texts predominate (TM 61597, 62310, 61276). Thus TM 61597 is a codex of waxed tables, containing the *comparatio* of Menander and Philistion, mathematical exercises, acrostichic jambic verses (*Menandri sententiae*) and Psalm 146, which is a praise of God (κύριος) as creator and master of the world. We even know the name of the schoolboy, Papnouthin, an Egyptian name meaning "The one of (the) god". The name Papnouthis is popular in

15 TM 61624 (P⁵²), 61625 (P⁹⁰) and 61782 (P¹⁰⁴).

16 Data taken from the LDAB for all languages, including Latin and Syriac.

Christian times, but there are several earlier examples. TM 61276 is a codex of wooden tablets. It starts with a grammatical exercise (nominative, genitive, dative), followed by a paraphrase of book I of the Iliad, then follow Psalm 46 in Akhmimic Coptic, fraction tables, and more grammar in Greek. The Gospel of John is found alongside a mathematical exercise (TM 61614). One fragment comes from a codex with Paul's Letter to the Romans (TM 61598, but we date this one to the second half of fourth century), but the gospels are conspicuously absent in the schools.

As already noticed by Bagnall, Gnostic and Manichean works are rare in the early period, and the manuscripts do not support Bauer's thesis that Egyptian Christianity was in origin heterodox.¹⁷

Magical texts naming Christ or using Christian symbols or *nomina sacra* are rare for the period under discussion: an amulet for a woman (TM 64257), a sheet with Psalm 1 (TM 61928) and the *pater noster* (TM 64206). We count three prayers, which may belong to a liturgical context (TM 64264; 63986; 64184, with musical notation) and one unexpectedly early anaphora (TM 64255), the date of which is still under discussion. All are written in documentary hands. In the fourth century, Christian elements in magical texts become far more common.

What is completely missing in this early period are hagiographical works, with the exception of the Apology of Phileas. The genre of hagiography comes to the fore only at a much later period, with just a few fifth century fragments.¹⁸ Martyrs were not central to early Christians in Egypt.

Our work is not yet finished: we are still missing photographs of some important early manuscripts; we have only looked at the earliest examples so far, but perhaps one should go on further in time to see what changes in Christian books once Christianity becomes the official religion of the Roman Empire.

17 Cf. BAGNALL, *Books*, 10; TM 64286 is dated to the later third cent.; TM 64443 (P. Kellis Lit. II 97) to the fourth century (according to archaeological data).

18 Cf. CLARYSSE, *Coptic Martyr Cult*; MINNEN, *Saving History*.