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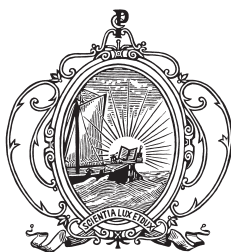
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DUST, DEMONS AND POTS

Studies in Honour of Colin A. Hope

edited by

ASHTEN R. WARFE, JAMES C.R. GILL, CALEB R. HAMILTON,
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PEETERS

LEUVEN – PARIS – BRISTOL, CT

2020

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EARLIEST CHRISTIANITY IN THE GREAT OASIS¹

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The Western Desert oases in Egypt, from Kharga and Dakhleh, up to Farafra, Bahariya and Siwa, occupy a fascinating liminal position within Egypt; in antiquity as today they are part of the administrative unit of Egypt, even if onomastics and the cultural record do not always reflect this. Over the last 20 years, aided both by excavations (especially those led by the honorand of the present volume) and renewed thinking about their place within the Egypt of antiquity, we have learnt progressively more about them, in particular about religion in the oases. In this contribution, I focus on the earliest evidence for Christianity in the Great Oasis.

The rise of Christianity in this area should be seen against the backdrop of a rich and varied indigenous and Graeco-Roman cultic world, with thriving cults in many centres in the oases, including a considerable number of Graeco-Roman temples.² It is against this background that we must position the spread of Christianity into the area. The manner and pace at which Christianity spread through the *chora* in the time before the mid-third century is of course to some extent a matter of conjecture – for a survey see Choat (2012). There is no evidence in the narrative literary sources for Christianity in the oasis, or Christian literary papyri found there, before the fourth century. If some of the clergy who the mid-third century persecutions forced into exile went to the oasis,³ we will probably never know. The first recorded Bishop in the oasis, Perikles, was ordained under Peter, Bishop of Alexandria 300–311 CE, as noted in a History of the Episcopate of Alexandria preserved in Ethiopic.⁴

¹ It is a pleasure to offer this short contribution in honour of Colin Hope, whose work at Kelis has produced so much new evidence for religion in Late Antique Egypt, and who has always been generous with his time and advice. Although this is a volume in honour of Hope, I wish to take the opportunity to also acknowledge the many important contributions of Gillian Bowen to the topic of the present article. For abbreviations of papyrus volumes cited herein, see <http://www.papyri.info/docs/checklist>. This contribution arises from work on the Macquarie University project 'Papyri from the Rise of Christianity in Egypt', and I wish to acknowledge in particular Edwin Judge and Rachel Yuen-Collingridge for their work on the documents discussed here.

² The initial survey by the Dakhleh Oasis Project found 20 temples, nearly all of Roman date (Kaper 1997, 7–40; 1998, 147–50; see also the list of sites in Churcher and Mills 1999, 260–3; also Bagnall et al. 2016, 105–18).

³ See Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 7:11.14.

⁴ The text is being prepared for publication by Alessandro Bausi and Alberto Camplani, see Bausi and Camplani (2013); for the editio minor see Bausi and Camplani (2016). For the establishment of a Bishop there under Peter I, see Bausi and Camplani (2016, 277) and Wipszycka (2015, 65 map 3).

There is substantial archaeological evidence for a Christian community at Kellis by the first half of the fourth century (Bowen 2002; 2003), and indications of the same elsewhere in the oasis (Bagnall et al. 2016, 120–48). Here, I wish to look at the ‘pre-history’ of these fourth-century oasisite Christian communities and reflect on the evidence for the spread of Christianity to the oases.

A number of papyri have been suggested to provide evidence for a Christian presence in the oasis before Constantine, but they are insecurely associated either with the oasis, or with Christianity. There are no Christian literary papyri from the oasis before the fourth century.⁵ Among the documents, *P.Bas.* I.16, a letter dated to the first half of the third century from Arrian to Paul featuring distinctive scribal and formulaic markers of Christian identity, is listed as being from the oasis in a treatment of pre-Constantinian papyrological evidence for Christianity by van Haelst (1970, 498). There seem no obvious grounds for this assignment, and I am tempted to think this was a simple mistake on van Haelst’s part.⁶ Based on other papyri from the same purchase, the Fayum might be considered more likely as a find spot.

P.Bas. I.16 is assuredly from a Christian milieu, but not from the oasis. Certainly from the oasis, but less probably reflective of Christianity, is a codex constructed from nine wooden tablets, now in the Bodleian library.⁷ The codex, which dates to c. 246–249 CE, contains a list of the wells in Hibis, compiled by Aurelius Geminus, warden of a ward (*amphodarchos amphodou*) of Hibis, in the north of the Kharga Oasis (see *SB* 14.11938 1b.5). While interesting in terms of water management in the oasis, the tablet comes into our reckoning because of the heading *eirēnē*, ‘peace’, found at the top of the text.

Already in his edition Parsons (1971, 179) noted there was no parallel for such a heading among the documentary papyri. While allowing that this was a normal – but otherwise unknown – Greek practice, he also raised the possibility that it was a Hebraism, which would indicate (in Parsons’ opinion) that ‘the amphodarch’ was either a Jew or a Christian. In his survey of the oases, Guy Wagner argued that, rather than a Jew, Geminus should be regarded as a first

⁵ The remains of a papyrus codex in Greek that included a Manichaean Psalm and a text with affinities to the Acts of John (*P.Kell.* VI.97) was dated to the late third or early fourth century (with the most recent editors suggesting the early fourth), but this palaeographical judgement does not guarantee either a pre-Constantinian date for its production, or that it was not written elsewhere and brought to the oasis later. The ‘Prayer of the Emanations’ (*P.Kell.* VI.98: Gardner 2011) may also belong in the first half of the fourth century, but the centre of gravity for the Manichaean community in the second half of this century naturally pulls most such texts in that direction rather than towards the early part of the fourth century.

⁶ It was subsequently reported by Judge and Pickering (1977, 48, 51). A forthcoming re-edition by Sabine Huebner has now shown conclusively that this papyrus comes from the Fayum.

⁷ Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, Bodl. Gr. Inscr. 3018 [= *SB* 14.11938]. Another wooden codex (Bodl. Gr. Inscr. 3019), containing a set of school texts in both Greek and Coptic, also purchased by Sayce in Luxor in 1906 (or 1908?), shares some physical similarities with Bodl. Gr. Inscr. 3018, but cannot be certain to be also from the oasis (Crum 1934; Parsons 1970).

known Christian in the oasis, noting that he was in office from 244–249 CE.⁸ Ghica (2012, 191) also regards it as a sign of Christian belief in his survey of Christianity in the oases. Leaving aside the fact that the text reads simply *eirene*, not *en eirene*, as Wagner (1987, 357; see also Ghica 2012, 191) quotes, his noting of the dates of the reign of Philip the Arab indicates that he thought this made it more likely Geminus was a Christian. The belief that Philip was himself a Christian is of course well known: Eusebius records the tradition, anonymous as so often, in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* (6:34). But he says little to make one think that it was anything except a later intuition which arose from the fact that the regime of Philip had been, as Dionysius of Alexandria reports, ‘more kindly disposed towards us (i.e. the Christians)’ (Eusebius 6:41.9) in contrast to those which followed.

Parsons thought immediately of Jewish and Christian usages of *shalom* and *eirene*; and one’s mind naturally turns in this direction, especially given such a heading seems unique in the papyri.⁹ But if this was a signal of Christianity, what would it be doing heading such a document, addressed not to Geminus’ local superiors, but to the *katholikos* and procurator, powerful provincial-level officials? Even if Philip had been a Christian, nothing indicates that his administration would have looked favourably on a declaration of Christianity (if that is how they would have interpreted *eirene*) at the top of a public document; indeed, despite the tradition about Philip, one might even think Geminus foolhardy for making it. One might think it simply a name (long popular in the Hellenophone world, even if picked up enthusiastically by Christians): but still, what would this signal here? The name of the secretary who would transcribe this onto papyrus for the commissioners? Or a greeting to them, which was not expected to be put on the papyrus copy? If a scribe named Eirene seems improbable (not to mention that the name of the scribe would be unusual in such a position), and such a syntactically isolated single-word greeting is unknown in Christian epistolography,¹⁰ we might expand in that direction by imagining the word as a shorthand instruction to the scribe to include the protocol expected by the commissioners, which might echo contemporary imperial titulature, which could well have included *eirene*, given the ‘peacefulness’ by which Philip’s reign was often characterised. If that cannot be proven any more than a Christian explanation, it still seems that this is a very insecure peg upon

⁸ Wagner (1987, 357); see also Bowen (2010, 23 n.38; 2014, 297 n.46).

⁹ Ghica (2012, 191–2) also cites a graffito which reads *eirēnē*, near a figure holding a crux ansata, from the cemetery of Bagawat near Hibis. While the cemetery was founded as early as the third century, it is of course not certain that this graffito dates to this period.

¹⁰ One might mention, though not strictly relevant here, the speculation of Llewelyn (1995), and further in Llewelyn and Kearsley (1994, 172), who suggested that the letters ΣΔ at the end of *P.Oxy.* XXXVI.2785 might be resolved as an isopsephism for *eirēnika*.

which to hang the tag of first oasisite Christian. A little more circumspection might be preferable in this regard.

Having encountered uncertainty in both these documents, either in provenience or context, let us move to a document which is both certainly Christian, and certainly from the oasis: *P.Grenf.* 2.73, the famous letter of Psenosiris (Naldini 1998, 433 no. 21), now re-edited as *P.Nekr.* 28.

This is one of the best-known early Christian letters on papyrus, featuring Christian officials ('elders', *presbyteroi*), scribal practice (*nomina sacra*), and Christian phraseology (the 'in the Lord' formula). From palaeography, the letter appears to be from the late third or early fourth century. It was republished by Deissmann (1902) soon after the first edition as 'an original document from the Diolectianic Persecutions', and while this proposed persecution context has generally held the field since, with various modifications, many aspects of the letter remain in dispute.¹¹ Here, I want to ask what the letter tells us about Christianity in the oasis in the late third and early fourth century.

The letter certainly comes from the Kharga Oasis: it was acquired with part of the archive of a group of *nekrotaphoi* from Kysis, modern Douch, in the south of the oasis.¹² This archive comprises nearly 50 papyri now in various European collections, dating from 237 to 314 CE;¹³ they are largely contracts, mandates, and loan documents, which seemingly belonged to an extended family of gravediggers (Bingen 1964, 157; Dunand 1985, 118–19; Bagnall 2017, 3–7),¹⁴ based in the cemetery north of the village, where the archive was probably found.¹⁵ The only other letter in the archive, *P.Grenf.* 2.77 (260–275 CE, = *P.Nekr.* 18; see also the fragmentary *P.Nekr.* 29), also relates the dispatch of a body (of the sender's brother, Phibion) via the *nekrotaphoi*.

The key section of the letter comes at lines 6–18:

I want you to know, brother, that the gravediggers have brought here to Toeto the *politike* (or: Politike), who has been sent to the

¹¹ For recent bibliography, see Llewelyn and Nobbs (1997) and Łukaszewicz (1998); see now the commentary by Bagnall (2017, 85–8).

¹² On Kysis, see Wagner (1987, 176–9), Dunand et al. (1992; 2005) and Reddé (2004). Greek texts excavated at the site in are published in *O.Douch* I–V; the Coptic ostraca are being prepared for publication by Victor Ghica and Gérard Roquet.

¹³ The archive is now fully edited in Bagnall (2017) = *P.Nekr.* On the archive see also Bingen (1964), Dunand (1985), Derda (1991, 29–31), Bagnall (1997), and the Trismegistos Archives entry, TM ARCH ID 147, www.trismegistos.org/archive/147. On the collection history of the archive, see also Bagnall (2017, 1–3), *P.Grenf.* II, 104, *P.Bodl.*, viii–ix, and Sayce (1894, 300–1).

¹⁴ They are called both *nekrotaphoi/-ai* and *exōpultai*, 'those who dwell outside the gates'. On the latter term see Gascou (1997); for a full discussion, see Bagnall (2017, 7–9).

¹⁵ For the cemeteries see Dunand and Lichtenberg (1992), Dunand et al. (1992; 2005) and Dunand et al. (1998). For a local oral tradition which may recall the discovery of the archive, see Dunand (1985, 117) and Wagner (1987, 355 n.5).

oasis by the prefecture, and I have handed her over to the good and faithful from among the gravediggers themselves to look after, until her son Nilus comes. And when he comes, with God, he will be a witness to you concerning what they have done to her.

More than a century after the publication of the letter, it is still disputed whether *politike*, who has been sent to the oasis, is dead or alive; if that is her name or a word for prostitute;¹⁶ if she has been ‘sent by the prefecture’ into exile during the persecution, or if this phrase should be understood differently. Given the involvement of the *nekrotaphoi*, it is hard to believe that *politike* is not dead, and indeed, it is difficult to escape the impression that she had been deceased for the whole of her journey (though Bagnall 2017, 87 assumes she was ‘sent’ while alive). This would suggest that she was not sent to the oasis as a punishment, but that ‘sent by the prefecture’ refers either to the ‘prefects’ of the gravediggers guild,¹⁷ or encodes some other, perhaps more favourable, role played by the administration (Wipszycka 2001, 1318–21). I cannot answer all the questions surrounding the text here (indeed, the answer to some seems elusive), and will confine my remarks to elements germane to our theme.

These are that Psenosiris, a Christian priest (*presbyteros*), writes from Toeto, on the west bank of the Nile between Lycopolis and Panopolis (modern Tahta, c. 30 km north of Sohag and c. 50 km south of Assiut), to his fellow *presbyteros* Apollo. Given the ultimate destination of the letter, Apollo presumably dwelt in the oasis; the ‘brothers with Apollo’ who Psenosiris greets signal a Christian community at Apollo’s location, presumably in the modern Kharga Oasis; and probably at Kysis, where the *nekrotaphoi* who brought the body to Toeto were based.

Were the gravediggers themselves Christian? Psenosiris says there are those who are ‘good and faithful’ among them (*hoi kaloi kai pistoi ex autōn tōn nekrotaphōn*, 12–14), which has suggested to many that at least some of them were (e.g. Deissmann 1902, 19–20; Wagner 1987, 356; Łukaszewicz 1998, 91–2), though Psenosiris may simply be remarking on their trustworthiness.¹⁸ Evidence for Christianity in tombs at Kysis that are roughly contemporary with the archive is inconclusive (Dunand, 1985, 125), though there are seemingly Christian burials from elsewhere on the site from the later fourth century, in the so-called ‘necropolis of the columbarium’ (‘necropole du pigeonier’) (Dunand et al. 1998, esp. 99, 131–2; Dunand 2006, 167–71), as well as fourth-century

¹⁶ Łukaszewicz (1998, 90) also raises the possibility that it designates the woman being transported to the oasis as a citizen of Alexandria.

¹⁷ For a *hegemōn* as the head of the guild of gravediggers, see Daniel (1979, 41–2, 45–6).

¹⁸ See *P.Kell.* I. Gr 65.24–5: ‘send the price to me through a trustworthy person (*pistos anthropos*)’; other examples of such usage are not uncommon, e.g. *P.Phil.* 35.29–30, *P.Yale* I.80.14. Llewelyn and Nobbs (1997, 626–8) note that the use of *kalos* for Christians is not common. See also Wipszycka (2001, 1321).

Christian burials from other sites in Kharga, such as Bagawat, near Hibis. That this is an oblique reference to Christian *nekrotaphoi* remains possible, though it is I think not required.

The paleography of the letter allows a date within the span of the archive, the second half of the third and beginning of the fourth century. Commentators have been drawn to the early fourth by the possible persecution context, but if such is not the case, the letter might better be located in the late third century (as it is by Bagnall 2017, 85). Even if the *nekrotaphoi* themselves were not Christian, Apollo certainly was, and the presence of a Christian priest strongly implies a Christian community. We would thus have a Christian community in the Kharga Oasis in the second half of the third century. Such a timeframe provides a context for the evidence for a Christian presence in the Dakhleh Oasis to the east by the early fourth century.

This is most clearly visible architecturally. A basilica-style church in the southeast of Kellis has been dated by the excavators on numismatic grounds to the reign of Constantine (Bowen 2002). A smaller church in the same region, small enough to have been a house church, has been dated to the beginning of the fourth century (Bowen 2003). If a Christian community existed in Kharga in the second half of the third century, that there was also one in Kellis at the opening years of the fourth should cause little surprise. There are also churches which certainly or probably date to the fourth century in Dakhleh at Amheida (Trimithis) (Aravecchia et al. 2015; see also Bagnall et al. 2016, 119–48), Ain el-Gedida (Aravecchia 2012) and Deir Abu Metta (Bowen 2009); while most of these sites remain under investigation, the sense of a vibrant extensive Christian presence in the fourth-century oasis is not hard to gain.

Yet this Christian presence is not well reflected in contemporary papyri. There are no letters featuring Christian formulaic or scribal elements from Kellis in the early fourth century. Most of those featuring monotheistic vocabulary or more definite ‘Christian’ phraseology (e.g. ‘in the Lord’, ‘in God’¹⁹) which Klaas Worp dated to early in or the first half of the fourth century in *P.Kell.* I can be shown to be associated with the residents of House 3 in the third quarter of the century.²⁰ Only in one case, the letter of Philammon to his sister Tekose (Tekosh, Tekysis), *P.Kell.* I.65, is it plausible that the letter comes from the early fourth

¹⁹ On this Christian formulaic language, which was also used by Manichaeans, see Choat (2006, 103–4) and Blumell (2012, 55–7).

²⁰ See e.g. *P.Kell.* I.67, clearly to be associated with this circle (Gardner 2007). In many cases, such as the letters of Pamour (*P.Kell.* I.71) and Pekysis (*P.Kell.* I.72), which are clearly contemporary with Coptic letters by these men in the third quarter of the fourth century, the ‘Christian’ elements are to be interpreted as Manichaean. While Worp (1995, 167) dated the Greek Manichaean letter *P.Kell.* I.63 to the ‘First part of 4th century’, as the major Manichaean assemblage (largely in Coptic) seems to come from the third quarter of that century, it is tempting to believe this letter belongs there too, even if its addressees Pausanius and Pisistratos (the sender’s name is lost or was never present) do not seem to feature among the other Manichaean letters.

century. Worp (1995, 174) connects this Philammon with the man of this name who features in *P.Kell.* I.49, a loan of oil from 304 CE. Philammon, who twice (*P.Kell.* I.65, ll. 11, 14) refers to ‘God’ in the singular, might thus be an early fourth-century Christian, with Tekose the Takysis who features in a document from the 320s.²¹ Yet even here we must be cautious, as a Philammon is active in the third quarter of the third century, when there was also a Tagosh, who was a sister of Pamour and Pegosh (see e.g. *P.Kell.* VII, Copt. 115), and the letter might date to that generation. Officials (priests, readers) of the ‘Universal Church’ (*katholikē ekklēsia*) are mentioned in documents,²² but the earliest is ‘[Aurelios Harpo]krates, priest of the Universal Church’ (*presbyteros katholikēs ekklēsias*), who witnesses an agreement in 337 CE (*P.Kell.* I.58).

There is thus little secure evidence among the papyri found by excavation at Kellis for Christianity in the early fourth century. It has been customary to cite a trading contract from Kellis made by an Aurelios Timotheos son of Horos, in which the monotheistic formula *sun theō* (‘with God’) is used, as the earliest papyrological evidence for Christianity in Kellis.²³ The well-attested classical name Timotheos declined in use in Roman Egypt, and returned to favour strongly in the fourth century, which suggests Christianity was behind its reemergence (Depauw and Clarysse 2013, 416–17).²⁴ Timotheos son of Horos might thus have been given his name because of Horos’ beliefs. However, as there are at least 11 instances of the name up to III/IV, it remained a name used outside the Christian community in the Roman period, and thus cannot form an absolute guide to Christian adherence (Worp 2015, 194, 197, 199). Onomastics also cannot be an absolutely determinative factor in any individual case, but is more useful for charting trends.²⁵ *Sun theō* is well known in non-Christian contexts, and not much significance may be attached to its use here (Choat 2006, 28; Blumell 2012, 65–6).

If the case that Timotheos son of Horos was a Christian is perhaps less conclusive than has been stated, Bowen (2004, 173–4) adduces additional onomastic evidence for the Christianisation of Kellis, by finding names commonly borne by Christians in fourth-century Kellis texts, and extrapolating back from

²¹ See *P.Kell.* I.65, commentary (Worp 1995, 174); see also the family tree at *P.Kell.* I, p. 51. Worp (1995, 51, 174) takes Takose for Philammon’s biological sister, but she might of course not have been; such familial language has a range of registers, only one of which was biological; see Gardner (2008, esp. 134).

²² *P.Kell.* I.24 (352 CE), I.32 (364 CE), I.58 (337 CE); see also *P.Kell.* IV.96.620, 880 (376–379 CE?).

²³ *SB* 16.12530 [= *PUG* II App. I]; see *PUG* I.20 for an earlier edition. For the text as evidence for Christianity, see e.g. Wagner (1987, 357), Bowen (2004, 173) and Mullen (2004, 276–7).

²⁴ There are many Ptolemaic instances, but only five in documents securely dated to the first three centuries CE (ignoring those dated III/IV, which could come from the fourth century).

²⁵ As first done for Roman Egypt by Bagnall (1982) and in subsequent contributions; see also Choat (2006, 51–6) and Blumell (2012, 237–79).

the dates of these documents to when they were born and given their name by presumably Christian parents.²⁶ This methodology is quite defensible, even if one might debate how conclusive some names are for profession of Christianity: Hebrew names such as Jacob, Elias, Johannes, and Maria,²⁷ and the Egyptian theophoric names Papnouthis and Psenouthes are certainly indicative of Christian influence (there is no evidence for a Jewish community in the village), while Greek theophoric names such as Timotheos less certainly demonstrate the Christianity of their bearers;²⁸ one name cited by Bowen (2004, 173), Psen(n)ouphis, is however not a Christian name.²⁹ One might also raise the possibility that the parents of these men did not all themselves live in Kellis, so would not have formed part of a Christian community there even if they were believers.

While little can be certain here, Bowen's analysis shows that a thin trail of onomastic evidence may be constructed which leads back into the late third century. It is nevertheless notable that in those ostraca from Kellis published in *O.Kell.* which Worp dates before the fourth century, there are no names that demonstrably suggest contact with a Christian milieu; indeed, Christian names are rare among the inscribed Greek ceramic assemblage from Kellis.³⁰ Two ostraca with Christian names are dated at the earliest 318/9 and 325/6 CE,³¹ but the indications they record could refer to indiction cycles later in the fourth century. If *O.Kell.* 62 is rightly dated III/IV and it may be allowed that the date is early in that range, then Tithoes' father, Joseph, may have been a third century Christian at Kellis (and with parents who probably shared his faith even

²⁶ For the necessary conjectures made on the age of individuals and length of generations, see Bowen (2004, 173).

²⁷ See especially Elias in *P.Kell.* I.60, dated by Worp (1995, 161) to III/IV.

²⁸ See above (nn. 23–4): for a presumably non-Christian Late Antique Timotheos, see e.g. *P.Oxy.* XX.2275 (Oxyrhynchus, late third to mid-fourth century), a letter from Theonas to Timotheos praying 'to the gods' (*tois theois*) for his health. I am unsure (in the case of Timotheos) which letters Bowen (2004, 173) means when she says 'The use of these names [sc. Timotheos and Papnouthios] by Christians in the village is verified in personal letters'; but there is a monk (*monachos*) Timotheos attested in *P.Kell.* IV.96:1079–80.

²⁹ It is not built, like Papnoute etc., on *noute/ntr*, but rather means 'The son of the good one' (i.e. *P3-šr-n-nfr*); it is in fact remarkably poorly attested outside of fourth century Kellis, see Trismegistos NAM ID 18036 (www.trismegistos.org/name/18036). This affects, for example, Bowen's (2004, 173) analysis of *P.Kell.* I.24 (352 CE), where Psenouphis alias Besas, who does not seem to have a patronymic, should not be counted as Christian, and the various Timotheoi uncertainly so (though Psenouthes should be). That this document is submitted by a 'priest of the Universal Church' (*presbyteros katholikēs ekklēsiās*), and features other clergy shows the Christian milieu which provides the general context for those who sign it; but that the two clergy are called Pamimis and Pakour[. . .]s demonstrates – as Bowen notes – that many Christians were not given 'Christian names'. See also Bowen (2004, 173), where a patronymic Psennouphis in *P.Kell.* I.23 is used to suggest a date of his birth c. 293 CE.

³⁰ In addition to those cited in the text and following note, see Petros (*O.Kell.* 102 [undated]; 114 [IV²]; 115 [undated]; 117 [undated]; 121 [IV?]); Timotheos occurs in *O.Kell.* 79 [undated], 103 [undated], and 117 [undated], but see above on this name.

³¹ See Johannes (*O.Kell.* 74 [318/9 CE or later]); see also Timotheos (*O.Kell.* 93 [325/6 CE or later]).

earlier). But the dating is not secure enough to be sure, and we must be wary in any case of ascribing too much weight to names for determining the religious identity of individuals.

The fact that the onomastic evidence is so tenuous, and that it shows a rise in popularity in names inspired by Christianity only in the fourth century, underlines the fact that the earliest secure evidence for Christianity in Kellis, and in the Dakhleh Oasis in general, is the churches in Kellis themselves. It serves as a reminder that while the documentary papyrus record preserves precious evidence for the spread of Christianity throughout Egypt, providing a wealth of personal details, telling lexical items, and dated texts, it is sometimes the archaeology of the built environment which provides a clearer indication of the spread of the new faith beyond Alexandria, and out into the desert.

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