

XII

Christians on the Move in Late Antique Oxyrhynchus

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+With the help of God and the Saints we arrived in Alexandria, very much storm-tossed, and we found Belisarius the *magistranus*, who had been sent with answers from our common master, and we waited in order to depart (with him) to our God-protected master, and we hope when we arrive again in Babylon we shall write again to my master. For we have already written to you all the things which were set in motion in the great army at Constantinople. May the Lord of glory grant that I may also salute in person the feet of my master.

(Back)+

To my own good master in all respects most glorious Theodorus . . .
(P.Oxy. LVI 3872).¹

In the above sixth- or seventh-century letter, some details concerning a trip to Alexandria are recounted. Though the letter is short, it nevertheless sheds light on a number of issues surrounding ancient travel—namely, who was travelling and to where, how travel was made, and why. The letter was sent from Alexandria to Oxyrhynchus, where it was later

found and where the senders had left to make their trip on behalf of their master. It reveals that the group likely travelled not by land to Alexandria but rather by ship down the Nile and that they even experienced some turmoil on the voyage because of a storm. During the trip they had stopped in Babylon (of Egypt), the approximate midway point between Oxyrhynchus and Alexandria, and they intended to stop there again on their return voyage. The letter indicates that the purpose of the trip was business, generally speaking, and that the group was travelling to Alexandria to obtain some information for their master Theodorus. Lastly, the letter reveals that the people making the trip were Christians and that this was a Christian letter.² This letter may not seem very Christian because it does not deal with any specifically Christian issues and provides only a rather mundane travelogue; note, however, that it employs distinctively Christian phrases, includes a thanks to “the Saints,” and contains multiple Christian symbols.

Papyri letters like this one are somewhat neglected in scholarship, in part because they are often quite laconic and sometimes contain a considerable amount of information that is known only to the sender and the addressee. Nevertheless, they can be profitably employed with regard to a number of important issues surrounding ancient travel (Bradbury 2004: 73). On this front, these letters are extremely helpful in two ways. First, most extant papyri letters were sent by ordinary people—those innumerable masses from antiquity about whom so little is directly known—which makes the insights they disclose especially valuable for social history. As Edwin Judge (1982) has pointed out, the “papyri offer us the most direct access we have to the experience of ordinary people in antiquity, including even the illiterate, provided their affairs were of enough consequence to be worth registering in writing at all” (7). Consequently, papyri letters can offer profound insights into a number of issues surrounding travel for the ordinary person.

Second, such papyri represent a very different type of evidence for travel, especially for Christians in late antiquity. Given that most studies on Christian travel in late antiquity rely mainly on literary sources such as ecclesiastical histories, hagiographies, and travelogues, they tend to give the impression that religious factors such as evangelism, pilgrimage, or the performing of some religious duty served as primary reasons for Christians to travel.³ In this regard, papyri letters present a different picture, for religious motivations for travel rarely appear in them. With few exceptions, the letters reveal that it was often the mundane obligations

and activities of everyday life that prompted a Christian to travel. These letters thus serve as an important counterbalance to the dominant picture of Christian travel in late antiquity—a picture that sometimes assumes that religiously motivated travel was the norm.

The ancient city of Oxyrhynchus is an ideal location for investigating travel by means of Christian letters preserved on papyrus. We have better documentation for Oxyrhynchus than for any other provincial city in the Roman and Byzantine empires, which helps situate and contextualize many of the letters; also, that city produced more Christian letters than any other in Egypt (see the table at the end of this chapter for an extensive list, including dates). Fredrick Kenyon, the doyen of British papyrology in the first half of the twentieth century, argued with respect to the Oxyrhynchus papyri that it was sometimes “worthwhile to keep them isolated from the masses of Papyri which have accrued from other sources, and to study them as a group by themselves” (1922: 129). Kenyon’s reasoning was that because the Oxyrhynchus papyri form an extremely large cache of provenanced texts, the data they yield may be especially representative of larger society. Consequently, what these letters reveal about Christian travel at Oxyrhynchus may be fairly indicative of larger Egypt, and perhaps other areas of the Mediterranean world for which evidence of this type is completely lacking in late antiquity.

Oxyrhynchus, Papyri, and Christian Letters

Oxyrhynchus was on the western edge of the Nile Valley some 400 kilometres south of Alexandria in Middle Egypt. Strategically situated, the city was easily accessible by both land and water. The eastern edge of the city bordered the Tomis River, a branch of the Nile that poured into Lake Moeris in the Fayum, and the city was connected via land by the military road on the west bank of the Nile (Turner 1952: 79). Though of little prominence in Pharaonic and Ptolemaic times, by the third century CE the city had become a thriving metropolis and by the fifth century had become a major Christian centre, serving as the capital of the province of Arcadia. Despite the prominence that the city was to attain in the later empire, almost nothing of it remains. When Bernard P. Grenfell and Arthur S. Hunt began excavations in 1896–97, they were immediately struck by the lack of archaeological remains (80). The site had been used by nearby villages as a quarry for bricks and limestone for several hundred years; and as a result, most of its buildings had almost completely vanished, leaving only traces of their foundations. Were it not for the incredible wealth of

papyri that Oxyrhynchus has yielded, almost nothing would have been known about this thriving metropolis of late antiquity (Bagnall 1993: 6-7).

On the morning of 11 January 1897, when Grenfell and Hunt dug into a low mound of earth containing an ancient rubbish heap, they stumbled upon the largest papyri find ever encountered from antiquity. Between the initial season of excavation in 1896–97 and the final season in 1906–7, Grenfell and Hunt unearthed more than 500,000 individual scraps of papyri from the various rubbish heaps surrounding the city (Turner 1968: 26–31; Parsons 2007: 12–30).⁴ The papyri include fragments from both known and unknown classical authors, some of the earliest examples of Christian literature, and an extremely wide array of documentary texts detailing the everyday workings of the city and its inhabitants (W. Johnson 2004: 231–48; Krüger 1990: 227–354). Among the texts from Oxyrhynchus are almost two hundred Christian letters dating from the third to early seventh century CE. Most of these letters were written in Greek, some in Latin or Coptic.⁵

These letters have received little attention in scholarship compared to what has been given to the New Testament and non-canonical fragments from Oxyrhynchus; yet they have much to offer the study of ancient Christianity. A survey of these letters reveals that they were sent by a wide variety of Christians, distinguished less by a particular brand of Christianity than by economic, political, and social status. Letters were sent by both large and small landowners; by servants, entrepreneurs, artisans, and adolescents; and, in the post-Constantine era, by officials and administrators. While most of these letters were sent by men, it is noteworthy that a number of them were sent (and received) by women. And some were sent by those who wielded ecclesiastical authority, such as bishops, elders, priests, monks, and nuns.

Given the wide variety of Christians sending letters, it is not surprising that the letters themselves broach diverse subjects. Many deal with agricultural production, since this played an important role in the economy of Oxyrhynchus; a number of others contain instructions concerning the shipment of goods. Some letters are highly informative in purpose, simply apprising the addressee of some matter; others rebuke the addressee for neglecting some task or for failing to write.

But what is perhaps most remarkable with all these “Christian” letters is how little they actually treat specifically Christian issues. Were it not for the presence of a distinctly Christian symbol, such as a cross or staurogram, the use of a *nomen sacrum* (“sacred name”) at the start or end of the

letter, or some other distinctly Christian marker of identity, it would be impossible to assign Christian provenance to many of the letters, given that there is nothing explicitly Christian about their content. Even those letters sent by church officials rarely broach ecclesiastical issues. Though scholars often characterize Egyptian Christianity as dominated by ecclesiastical debate and schism (i.e., Arianism, Nicea, Melitianism, Chalcedon, Monophysitism), such issues are never addressed directly in any of these letters.⁶ Rather, with very few exceptions, the letters are filled with mundane issues and quotidian concerns, and because of this they reveal a great deal about why Christians travelled in late antiquity.

Mapping Christians

A survey of the almost two hundred Christian letters reveals that Christians from Oxyrhynchus were well connected to other parts of their *nome* or district. They often traversed this area, they sometimes made trips to other Egyptian centres — especially Alexandria — and they occasionally travelled beyond Egypt's borders.⁷ However, these letters also show that such travel was rarely undertaken for strictly religious purposes and that travel was most often related directly to occupation. Thus, if a Christian worked as a merchant, artisan, scribe, or soldier or was performing a liturgy, the letters often depict such persons as travelling from place to place in direct connection with work.

The relationship between travel and vocation and the frequency with which Christians made trips within the immediate *nome* is no better demonstrated than in the many surviving letters relating to agricultural production and cultivation. The dominant industry at Oxyrhynchus — and in the rest of the Nile Valley — was the production of crops, especially grains. From the time of Augustus until the last Byzantine garrison set sail from Alexandria in 642 CE, Egypt was the breadbasket for the Roman and Byzantine empires. Every summer, huge shipments of grain left the ports of Alexandria bound for Rome and later Constantinople to feed the vast populations of these two cities;⁸ every spring, large shipments of grain made their way into Alexandria from the metropoleis of Egypt.⁹ Given the enormity of this industry at Oxyrhynchus, it comes as no surprise that Christians were involved at various levels of production and that they often travelled throughout its *nome*.¹⁰

Whatever our notions that grain production was a fairly sedentary business, the letters reveal that travel was often involved. Workers often moved from farm to farm for work. Absentee landlords sometimes travelled to

various estates, especially at harvest time, to oversee operations. Furthermore, a number of individuals worked solely in the transport business, by land and by river, to ensure that the required grain from the surrounding villages made it to Oxyrhynchus and then down to Alexandria. Likewise, Christians in administrative positions — such as scribes or notaries — travelled extensively throughout the Oxyrhynchite *nome* to register grain-producing lands, measure their various sizes and yields, and help oversee the transportation of grain from the estates and farms back to the metropolis.

The first task to be accomplished annually at the beginning of every agricultural year — and one of the most important — was the measuring of the rise of the Nile. Nilometers, as they were called, were set up at key locations along the river to register how much the river had risen so that the expected intake of grain for that particular year could be calculated in advance (Pliny the Elder, *NH*. 5.58). This required a number of couriers or land agents, who travelled often to and from the Nile during its rising to communicate measurements to officials (Lewis 1983: 109–10). A sixth-century Christian letter sent from the village of Takona to Oxyrhynchus renders the rise of the inundation over a three-day period — attributing it to “the power of Christ” — and also reveals that the Christian land agents who had made the measurements had had to make a roughly 30 kilometre round trip to do so (from their village to the Nile and back again) (P.Oxy. XVI 1830). The letter does not indicate whether they made the trip every day or only once, staying at the river for three days measuring its rise; but given the relatively short distance, it is conceivable that they made the trip every day for three consecutive days.

Another task preliminary to cultivation was the measurement and registration of lands. Lands were registered as public or private but also as either “inundated” or “uninundated,” “artificially irrigated,” or “unwatered.”¹¹ These distinctions were mainly for tax purposes, as different types of lands were levied at different rates. Scribes and other officials travelled extensively to assess and register all productive lands. In one sixth-century letter, certain Christian scribes are specifically instructed to “go out” and measure the “uninundated and unsown” lands so that they could be registered (P.Oxy XVI 1842). Likewise, in many other letters of the sixth century — a time when large estates flourished — other Christian estate and land agents travelled well beyond the *nome* to faraway holdings in the Fayum, some 100 kilometres north of Oxyrhynchus, in order to properly register and document them (P.Oxy. LVI 3870; P.Oxy. LVI 3871).

The letters reveal that travel volume was especially high at tax time, which conveniently coincided with the spring harvest. Large shipments of

grain were at that time being moved about, and tax collectors as well as landlords relentlessly traversed the countryside collecting dues. This was also the time when those evading or unable to pay their taxes or rents most often took to their heels and fled to other regions to escape their debts (Philo, *Spec.* 3.30; Lewis 1983: 163–65). In one letter, a Christian tax official writes to a lesser administrator to “send the administrators to the fields to collect the dues, exhorting them to have many *solidi* ready for me. For as the Lord lives, if I do not find that they have shown much zeal in collecting, I will punish them well” (P.Oxy. XVI 1840). In another letter, similarly harsh, the Christian sender informs the addressee that “Ammon the Boy arrived in these parts bringing twenty-five artabas of wheat by the measure of the lord Pamuthius... Say to Apollos the boy, ‘send me the remainder of the barley,’ since, God who is master of all things knows, if it turns out that I come, I will exact four times the amount from him” (P.Oxy. LIX 4007). Not surprisingly, some letters ask for a temporary reprieve from taxes and rents until the sufficient amount due can be procured (PSI VII 835). Apparently this was sometimes granted, as other letters depict tax officials returning to gather taxes that are in arrears (P.Oxy. XVI 1855).

The shipment of grain from estates and farms to Oxyrhynchus and then to Alexandria in the summer required considerable travel by a number of individuals. However, this task was considerably easier in Egypt than elsewhere because of its topography: almost every major city in Middle and Upper Egypt was located in the Nile Valley and therefore no more than 20 kilometres from the Nile waterway. As soon as the grain from the farms and estates had been collected and transported to the granaries at Oxyrhynchus, it was loaded onto ships bound for Alexandria. A fragmentary letter from a Christian sailor informs a scribe named Abonas that the sailor is just now procuring a number of boats so that he can transport the grain immediately (P.Oxy. XVI 1929).¹² In another letter, a Christian sailor — or possibly some other shipping officer — entreats the official in charge of the transport of grain at Oxyrhynchus to have the ship loaded faster than usual and to be cleared for departure so that it can return to Heracleopolis for some grain that was not loaded previously (P.Wash. Univ. I 8).

The letters indicate that Christians travelled extensively in connection with agricultural production, redistribution, and taxation. But they also show that travel was often associated with a number of other occupations. Christians serving as local guards or soldiers were regularly instructed by letter to move to certain villages to put down unrest and establish order (P.Oxy. VIII 1106). Likewise, those engaged in business pursuits travelled

extensively looking to sell their wares. For example, in one letter a certain Christian entrepreneur named Boethus informs his associate that he is travelling from Oxyrhynchus to Panga “in order that, if god wills, there may perhaps be something to sell” (P.Oxy. XII 1494.2–4; late third or early fourth century). In a similar letter, dated about a century later, another Christian entrepreneur, Appamon, informs his patron Dorotheos that he has travelled to Alexandria for the purpose of selling sacks (P.Oxy LVI 3864.5–11, 20–25). In P.Oxy. LXI 4127, a certain Ptolemaeus writes to his “beloved brother Thonis” to inform him that it is no longer necessary to make the trip to sell some linen yarn because the buyer is no longer interested.

A number of other letters suggest that Christians, either out of their own goodwill or working on their own or for a patron, often travelled for the purpose of transporting items from place to place. Consequently, a number of letters are simply requests that the addressee bring certain items to the sender. In P.Oxy. XVI 1849, a certain Victor asks his friend Theodorus if he will bring him some fresh asparagus because the vegetables where he is are all rotten. In another letter, the same Victor informs Theodorus that he has sent him his page so that he can procure some wine:

+Since I have sent [you] the devoted George on my service, will your genuine brilliance please go into the store-chamber and from the Megarian [vat] of Rhodian [wine] fill one ceramion and securely seal it with gypsum and send it to me by the same devoted young man. But above all send it to me at once!+ (P.Oxy. XVI 1851)¹³

These two letters depict rather trivial transports; other letters reveal that major shipments were sometimes conducted between Oxyrhynchus and surrounding villages. In P.Oxy. XVI 1862, a certain Rheme writes his friend in Oxyrhynchus to inform him that he has received the shipment that he sent, consisting of large amounts of grain, wine, honey, and oil and also twelve sheep and six pigs.

Closely associated with the travel required to transport items was the travel required to transport the letter itself. Most of the extant letters are private and not official, so it would appear that they were usually carried by family members, friends, acquaintances, or whoever was willing to conduct the letter or was passing by.¹⁴ Given the number of letters from Oxyrhynchus, the roads around the city must have been busy with people bearing communications.¹⁵ But since little is usually said in any given letter about the person, or persons, bearing it, in most cases it is difficult to ascertain whether this was their only reason for travel.¹⁶

The letters indicate that many Christians travelled for work, but they also show that Christians in Oxyrhynchus often travelled for a number of other non-religious purposes. They made trips for social reasons, to attend dinners or banquets, or simply to visit friends and family (P.Vind.Sijp. 26; P.Oxy. X 1300). Likewise, they travelled to maintain long-distance relationships. One love letter suggests that travel for personal purposes was sometimes undertaken; in it, the Christian sender vividly expresses his burning desire to see the face of his sweetheart in Heracleopolis, some 70 kilometres north of Oxyrhynchus (P.Wash Univ II 108).

Christians also travelled for legal reasons, to present themselves at court. It seems that such persons often appeared before the local court at Oxyrhynchus; with some suits, however, travel to Alexandria was required. One letter, almost certainly sent from Alexandria to Oxyrhynchus at the start of Diocletian's persecution of the Christians in 302 CE, reveals that a certain Copres had to travel to Alexandria to appear in court on account of a dispute over some land:

Copres to his sister Sarapias, very many greetings. Before all else I pray for your good health before the Lord God. I want you to know that on the eleventh we arrived and it became known to us that those presenting themselves were being compelled to sacrifice and I made a power-of-attorney for my brother and we have accomplished nothing, but we instructed an attorney on the twelfth, so that on the fourteenth the matter concerning the land could proceed. If we do not accomplish anything, I'll write to you. I have sent nothing to you since I found the same Theodoros going out. I will send them to you by another shortly. Write to us concerning the health of all of you and how Maximina has been and Asena. If it is possible let him [her?] go with your mother [Verso] so that his [her?] leokoma be healed. For I have seen others healed. Farewell, I pray for you. I greet all our [friends] by name. Give to my sister, from Copres 99 [amen]. (P.Oxy. XXXI 2601)¹⁷

The letters I have discussed thus far represent the majority of our evidence, which pertains to non-religious reasons for travel. Still, a few letters reveal that travel was closely connected to one's identity as a Christian and that explicitly religious factors sometimes played a role. None of the extant Christian letters from Oxyrhynchus are even remotely akin to any of Paul's letters, or even to the other Christian letters that we are most used to reading. Letters from Oxyrhynchus that do deal with specifically Christian issues are far shorter, are almost exclusively addressed to individuals and not to communities, and do not treat complex theological issues.

The Christian letters from Oxyrhynchus that shed some light on specifically Christian reasons for travel are letters of recommendation. As their

name implies, these letters were carried by travellers to vouch for their good character so that, upon arriving in a new place, they might be able to integrate more easily or obtain some temporary hospitality. In late antiquity, letters of recommendation — “letters of peace,” as they came to be known after the council of Chalcedon in 451 CE — were issued by ecclesiastical leaders or other notable figures who were well known and whose recommendations could be trusted.¹⁸ The custom of rendering hospitality to a stranger bearing such a letter apparently became so widespread that that the Emperor Julian became envious of this Christian practice and tried to institute a pagan equivalent, albeit unsuccessfully.¹⁹

Nine such letters of peace, ranging in date from the third to fifth century, are among the Christian letters from Oxyrhynchus.²⁰ One fourth-century letter of peace reveals that two Christians made a trip from Heracleopolis to Oxyrhynchus for the specific purpose of seeking further spiritual edification:

Rejoice in the Lord, beloved father Sotas, we elders of Heracleopolis give you many greetings. Receive in peace our sister Taion who comes to you, and receive for edification Anos, who is being instructed in Genesis. Through them we and our companions greet you and the brethren with you. Farewell, we pray for your health in the Lord, beloved father 204. (P.Oxy. XXXVI 2785)²¹

In a similar letter, likely sent by the same Sotas just mentioned, the author commends five brethren to a new community. Unfortunately, the letter does not disclose just where this new community was located:

Greetings in the Lord, beloved brother Paul. I, Sotas, salute you. Receive as is fitting our brothers Heron, Horion, Philadelphus, Pekysis and Naärouos, who are catechumens of the ones gathered, and Leon who is being instructed in the beginning of the gospel. Through these ones I and those who are with me salute you and those who are with you. Farewell, I pray for you in the Lord beloved brother. (PSI IX 1041)²²

Because letters of recommendation were also employed for strictly secular purposes, in none of the remaining seven letters of this sort is it readily apparent that spiritual edification or some other religious purpose was the primary reason for travel, though this cannot be totally ruled out (Grey 2004). In PSI I 96, which effectively serves as a letter of recommendation but which was not carried by the actual person being recommended, a military official is commended to a village that he will soon be

visiting. Likewise, in P.Princ. II 105 a certain Flavius instructs a man by the name of Phoebammon in the village of Coba to show hospitality to two men who are passing through on their way to Oxyrhynchus.

A few other letters reveal that Christians travelled to fulfill certain religious obligations or duties. Christians sometimes made trips to Oxyrhynchus from the surrounding villages to celebrate Christian festivals (P.Princ. II 96). Other letters reveal that Christians would travel to attend to the sick and to pray over them.²³ Christians can be seen transporting goods for specifically Christian purposes. In one letter, a man named Athanasius is instructed to transport some stones by ship from a quarry near the village of Tampemu to another location (Oxyrhynchus?) so that they can be used in the construction of a church (P.Oxy. LIX 4003). To highlight the importance of this task, the letter concludes with a repeated plea to Athanasius to transport the stones promptly and with all soberness since their common salvation hinges upon that task's successful completion. In another letter dating to the late fourth or early fifth century (SB XVIII 13110), an individual is instructed to bear certain items from Oxyrhynchus "to the village Petne," some 25 kilometres northwest of Oxyrhynchus, "for the use of the holy church of Phoibammon." Unfortunately, the letter is fragmentary and is broken off where it lists the items for transport. This summons us to ask whether they were mundane items used for the maintenance of the church building or items such as scriptures or other liturgical materials for use in the church's worship services.

Concerning the transport of scriptural books, P.Oxy. LXIII 4365, dating to the beginning of the fourth century, is very interesting. This extremely short letter, written on the back of a piece cut from a petition, details the exchange of scriptural books between two anonymous women.²⁴ It reads: "To my dearest lady sister, greetings in the Lord. Lend the Ezra, since I lent you the little Genesis. Farewell in God from us."²⁵ The letter is so laconic that it is impossible to accurately determine just how much travel was involved in the transport of these books. However, it is unaddressed, suggesting that it was not carried over a great distance by someone unfamiliar with the addressee. This, combined with the likelihood that book lending was unlikely to take place over long distances, suggests that these books were transported locally.

Lastly, the letters reveal that Christian letter carriers, be they lay or professional, occasionally conducted ecclesiastical documents to other parts of Egypt and beyond. In PSI IV 311 (early fourth century), a church official from Oxyrhynchus instructs a letter carrier to bear some correspondence to

the famous bishop of Syrian Laodicea, Theodotus.²⁶ Though the letter does not survive, a draft of the instructions, which was usually attached to the letter, has survived and provides a glimpse of the difficulty associated with travelling long distances to transport a letter to the correct addressee:

I wish to send a letter to Antioch... Deliver [it] so that it comes into the hands of him whom I wish, to this end, that it be delivered to the bishop of Laodicea, which is two stations before Antioch... [Revision:] Go to the bishop of Antioch and place this letter in his own hands... in order that he may deliver it into the hands of Theodotus the Bishop of Laodicea. For indeed he has the address. But since there are two Laodiceas, one in Phrygia and one in Syria, he will dispatch it to Laodicea of Coelsyria, two stations before Antioch. Theodotus is the Bishop there. Deliver it now to... incomparable brother.²⁷

While it is remarkable that someone might travel from Oxyrhynchus to Laodicea, almost 1000 kilometres away, to deliver a letter, other evidence from Oxyrhynchus suggests that on rare occasions, this actually might be done.²⁸

Conclusion

As this examination has attempted to show, the extant Christian letters from Oxyrhynchus contribute much to the study of Christian travel in late antiquity. On this front, their most apparent contribution is their rather pedestrian character, which provides an unparalleled vista on Christian travel. These letters suggest that most Christians in Oxyrhynchus travelled mainly for secular purposes rather than for explicitly religious ones and that a strong correlation often existed between one's occupation or vocation and reasons for travel. Thus, a Christian who worked as a merchant, artisan, guard, land agent, or official travelled most often as a direct consequence of work. These letters also suggest that for many persons, travel was most often within relatively close proximity to one's place of residence; longer trips to distant cities or districts were less frequent.²⁹

Given that this examination has restricted itself to "Christian" letters, it is somewhat surprising that what are usually thought of as primary reasons for Christian travel—namely evangelism, pilgrimage, or the performing of some religious duty—hardly figure at all in the letters. In none of the letters does evangelism or pilgrimage appear as a reason for travel, despite these being dominant in the hagiographical literature of this period. Furthermore, only in a small number of the letters do ecclesiasti-

cal duties or obligations serve as a catalyst for travel. This peculiarity is almost certainly a result of the nature of the source material we possess regarding ancient Christianity. Most of our sources are literary and serve some edifying purpose; otherwise, they would not have been passed down through the ages and been copied and recopied. These letters on papyrus, on the other hand, survived not because some Christian copyist thought they would benefit posterity (most of them were found in trash heaps) but because they accidentally survived the vicissitudes of time.

The papyri present an unfamiliar picture of Christian travel, in that they show that Christians most often travelled for specifically non-Christian reasons that had more to do with mundane and quotidian concerns. This does not necessarily mean that the Christians who sent and received these letters were only marginal Christians or did not have great concern for church affairs. Remember that these papyri provide only glimpses into the lives of the people who sent and received them; it is conceivable, therefore, that the same Christians who appear in these letters could also have travelled to evangelize or go on pilgrimage and may or may not have had opinions on Nicea or Chalcedon. The point here is that these letters help us contextualize Christian travel in late antiquity by showing that what are commonly thought of as the most ubiquitous reasons for Christian travel—evangelism, pilgrimage, as so on—were rather unique and did not represent the travel norm, even if they are represented as typical in Christian literary texts.

While the geographical scope of this investigation has been restricted to letters from Oxyrhynchus, the picture presented by these letters has wider implications for travel by Christians and others in antiquity. As Martin Goodman has noted: “It is important to be aware of the probability that many of the apparently unique elements of life in Roman Egypt in fact may have been shared by other provincials in the empire, and that Egyptian society differed primarily in that it left behind a detailed record in the sand” (1997: 275). For the purposes of this investigation, this suggests that the picture of Christian travel that emerges from the Oxyrhynchus letters is indicative of larger Christianity and that most Christians in other parts of the empire in late antiquity also travelled most often for specifically non-religious purposes. Accordingly, these letters seem unique and somewhat unusual only because we lack similar Christian evidence from other quarters of the Mediterranean world.³⁰

Christian Letters from Oxyrhynchus³¹

<i>Letter</i>	<i>Sender and addressee</i>	<i>Date</i>
P.Alex. 29	Sotas to Maximus	Late 3rd Cent.
P.Vind.Sijp. 26	Asclepius to Hieracammon	Late 3rd Cent.
PSI IV 299	Titianus to his Sister	Late 3rd Cent.
PSI III 208	Sotas to Peter	Late 3rd /Early 4th Cent.
PSI IX 1041	Sotas to Paul	Late 3rd /Early 4th Cent.
P.Oxy. XII 1492	Sotas to Demetrianus	Late 3rd /Early 4th Cent.
P.Oxy. XII 1493	Thonis to Heracles	Late 3rd /Early 4th Cent.
P.Oxy. XII 1494	Letter from Boethus	Late 3rd /Early 4th Cent.
P.Oxy. XII 1592	A Woman to her Spiritual Father	Late 3rd /Early 4th Cent.
P.Oxy. XX 2276	Letter of Aurelius Artemidorus	Late 3rd /Early 4th Cent.
P.Congr. XV 20	Kollouthos to Ammonius	Late 3rd /Early 4th Cent.
P.Iand. II 11	Fragmentary Letter to a Brother	Late 3rd /Early 4th Cent.
PSI IV 311	Instructions to a Letter Carrier	Early 4th Cent.
P.Oxy. XX2601	Copres to his Sister Sarapias	Early 4th Cent.
P.Oxy. LXI 4127	Ptolemaeus to Thonius	Early 4th Cent.
P.Oxy. XIV 1774	Didyme and the Sisters to Atienatea	Early 4th Cent. P.Oxy.
LXIII 4365	Letter concerning Scriptural Books	Early 4th Cent.
P.Iand. II 14	Psoitos to his Mother	4th Cent.
P.Lond. VI 1927	Dorotheus to Papnutius	4th Cent.
PSI VIII 972 (=SB XII 10841)	Antoninus to Gonatas	4th Cent.
P.Oxy. VI 939	Demetrius to Flavianus	4th Cent.
P.Oxy. VIII 1161	Letter of a Sick Woman	4th Cent.
P.Oxy. VIII 1162	Leon to the Elders and Deacons	4th Cent.
P.Oxy. XII 1495	Nilus to Apollonius	4th Cent.
P.Oxy. XXXI 2603	Paul to Serapion	4th Cent.
P.Oxy. XXXI 2609	Letter to a Sister	4th Cent.
P.Oxy. XXXIV 2729	Dioscurides to Aquileus	4th Cent.
P.Oxy. XXXVI 2785	Letter to Sotas	4th Cent.
P.Oxy. XLVIII 3421	Ammonius to Serapion	4th Cent.
P.Oxy. LVI 3857	Letter of Recommendation for Germania	4th Cent.
P.Oxy. LVI 3858	Barys to Diogenes	4th Cent.
P.Oxy. LIX 3998	Thonis to Syras and Callinicus	4th Cent.
P.Ross.Georg. V 6 (=P.Iand. II 13)	Letter to Philoxenos	4th Cent.
SB XII 10800	Besarion to Dionysius	4th Cent.
SB XXII 15359 (=P.Oxy. I 182 desc.)	Thonis to Thecla	4th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVII 2156	Amyntas to Seras	Late 4th/Early 5th Cent.
P.Laur. II 42	Request for Help	4th/5th Cent.
P.Oxy. XXXIV 2731	Maximus to Zenobia	4th/5th Cent.
P.Oxy. LVI 3862	Philoxenus to his Parents and Uncle	4th/5th Cent.

P.Oxy. LIX 4003	Didymus to Athanasius	4th/5th Cent.
SB XVIII 13110	Letter Concerning Church	4th/5th Cent.
P.Lugd. Bat. XIX 21 (=P.Batav. 21)	Letter to Nonna	5th Cent.
PSI I 96	Letter of Recommendation	5th Cent.
PSI IV 301	Letter to Athanasia	5th Cent.
PSI XIV 1425	Fragmentary Letter	5th Cent.
P.Oxy. VI 940	Letter to Joseph	5th Cent.
P.Oxy. X 1300	Peter to Maria	5th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1870	Ptolemaeus to Aphungius	5th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1931	Letter to Anuthius	5th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1941	Letter to a Tenant	5th Cent.
P.Oxy. XLIII 3149	Heras to Apa Theon	5th Cent.
P.Oxy. LVI 3863	To Philoxenus the Priest	5th Cent.
P.Haun. II 25	Appammon to Dorotheus	5th Cent.
P.Oxy. LVI 3864	Appammon to Dorotheus	5th Cent.
SB XII 10939	Pamouthios to Bishop Timotheos	5th Cent.
SB XXIV 16275	Ammonios to Horion and Aphous	5th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1831	Letter from Apa Nakios	Late 5th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1871	To Pamouthius	Late 5th Cent.
P.Oxy. LVI 3865	Samuel to Martyrius	Late 5th Cent.
P.Col. X 292	Letter to Charisios	Late 5th/Early 6th Cent.
P.Iand. II 16	Fragmentary Letter	Late 5th/Early 6th Cent.
P.Oxy. VIII 1107	Letter of Eudaemon	Late 5th/Early 6th Cent.
P.Oxy. X 1350	To Apa Domna	Late 5th/Early 6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1832	Letter concerning Theft	Late 5th/Early 6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1872	Constantine to a Friend	Late 5th/Early 6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVIII 2193	Theon to Pascentius	Late 5th/Early 6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVIII 2194	Theon to Pascentius	Late 5th/Early 6th Cent.
PSI III 237	Fragmentary Letter	Late 5th/Early 6th Cent.
PSI VII 843	John to Eudaimon	Late 5th/Early 6th Cent.
P.Wash.Univ. I 40	Letter from John	Late 5th/Early 6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1835	Phoebammon and Philip to Maiarmakis	Late 5th/Early 6th Cent.
SB V 7635	Argyrius to Hierakion	Late 5th/Early 6th Cent.
P.Oxy. VII 1071	Letter to Askalas	Early 6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1837	Letter concerning an Abduction	Early 6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1929	Letter to Abonas	1st Half of 6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1932	Letter to Apollinarius	1st Half of 6th Cent.
P.Hamb. III 228	Letter to Marturius the Elder	6th Cent.
P.Hamb. III 229	Letter to Marturius the Elder	6th Cent.
P.Herm. 50	Fragmentary Letter about a Loan	6th Cent.
P.Mert. II 96	Letter to Jacob	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. I 155	Theophilus to John	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. I 156	Theodorus to Secretaries and Overseers	6th Cent.

P.Oxy. I 157	Letter Concerning a Dispute	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. VI 941	Letter to John	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. VII 1072	Philoxenus to Apa Martyrius	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. VIII 1106	Kommon to Paul	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. VIII 1165	Letter of Victor	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1830	Letter to Calus	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1838	Sarapammon to Theodore	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1839	Phoebammon to Philoxenus	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1840	Letter of Collection	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1841	Menas to John and Joseph	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1842	Letter about Land Measurement	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1930	Letter to the Comarchs of Lenon	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1933	Fragmentary Letter	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1934	Letter Containing a Receipt for Corn	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1935	Diogenes to Theodorus	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1938	Letter of Receipt	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1942	Fragmentary Letter of a Praeses	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XXXIV 2732	Business Letter	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XLIII 3150	Letter about Leaving a Monastery	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. LVI 3866	Samuel to John	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. LVI 3867	Elias to Andronicus	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. LVIII 3932	Paul to Mary	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. LIX 4005	Letter to Theodosius	6th Cent.
P.Princ. II 105	Flavianus to Phoebammon	6th Cent.
P. Wash. I 8	Letting concerning Shipment of Grain	6th Cent.
P.Wash.Univ. I 42	Letter to Flavius Tomelius	6th Cent.
P.Wash.Univ. II 108	Love Letter	6th Cent.
P.Wisc. II 67	Anup and Abraamius to John	6th Cent.
PSI I 71	Sion to Leontius	6th Cent.
SB XVI 12485	Letter of Apa Hor	6th Cent.
SB XX 14987	Leontios to Theon	6th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1829	Letter to Flavius Strategius and his Wife	Late 6th Cent.
PSI VII 835	Chaeremon to Philoxenus	Late 6th Cent.
P.Giss. I 57	Apphoutos to Phoibammon	6th/7th Cent.
P.Iand. II 17	Dorotheus to Thalasiaus	6th/7th Cent.
P.Iand. II 19	Fragmentary Letter	6th/7th Cent.
P.Iand. II 20	John to Serenus	6th/7th Cent.
P.Iand. II 23	Fragmentary Letter	6th/7th Cent.
P.Iand. II 24	Fragmentary Letter	6th/7th Cent.
P.Iand. II 25	Fragmentary Letter to Paul	6th/7th Cent.
P.Iand. III 38 V	Letter of Julius	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. I 128 V	Letter of John, Theodorus and Theodorus	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. I 158	Victor to Cosmas	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. VIII 1164	Theodosius to Peter	6th/7th Cent.

P.Oxy. XVI 1844	Victor to George	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1845	Victor to George	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1846	Victor to George	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1847	Victor to George	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1848	Victor to George	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1849	Victor to Theodorus	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1850	Victor to Theodorus	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1851	Victor to Theodorus	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1852	Victor to Theodorus	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1853	Victor to George	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1854	Victor to George	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1855	Victor to George	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1856	Christopher to George	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1857	Menas to Theodorus	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1858	Menas to Theodorus	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1859	Menas to a Landlord's Agent	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1860	Menas to George	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1861	Nilus to Sarmate	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1865	John to Marturius	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1866	Letter of Macarius	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1868	Letter to a Comes	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1869	Theodorus to Phoibammon	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1874	Letter of Condolence	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1875	Business Letter	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1936	Philip and Menas to George	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1937	Victor to George	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1939	Letter of Justus	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1940	Fragmentary Letter	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. LVI 3869	John to Anup	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. LVI 3870	Justus to George	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. LVI 3871	George to Theodorus	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. LVI 3873	Letter of Request	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. LIX 4006	Christopher to Theodorus	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. LIX 4007	Julius to Cyriacus	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. LIX 4008	Letter to John	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. LXVII 4629	Letter to a Mother	6th/7th Cent.
P.Strasb. V 400	Letter of Diogenes	6th/7th Cent.
SB X 10521	Fragmentary Letter to a Bishop	6th/7th Cent.
SB XVIII 13598	Fragmentary Letter	6th/7th Cent.
P.Oxy. LVI 3872	Letter to Theodorus	Late 6th/Early 7th Cent.
P.Laur. II 47	George to George	Early 7th Cent.
P.Iand. II 22	Serenos Isaiah to his Master	Early 7th Cent.
P.Oxy. VI 943	Victor to George	Early 7th Cent.
P.Strasb. VII 680	Fragmentary Letter	Early 7th Cent.

P.Oxy. XVI 1843	Letter of Receipt	6 Nov. 623
P.Oxy. XVI 1862	Rheme to Marinus	ca. 624
P.Oxy. XVI 1863	Rheme to Marinus	25 July 624
P.Oxy. XVI 1864	Thomas to Marinus	ca. A.D. 623–624
P.Iand. II 18	Business Letter	7th Cent.
P.Laur. V 204	Letter of Isaac	7th Cent.
P.Lond. V 1791	Fragmentary Letter	7th Cent.
P.Oxy. 3.IB/88 B(1)	Marou to Gablelia	7th Cent.
P.Oxy. 3.IB/88 B(2)	Letter to Gableria	7th Cent.
P.Oxy. XVI 1867	Memphis to Pamamios	7th Cent.
P.Ross.Georg. III 22	Fragmentary Business Letter	7th Cent.
P.YaleCopt. 13	Fragmentary Letter	7th Cent.

Notes

- 1 This translation is based on that by M.G. Sirivianou in the *editio princeps*. Abbreviations for papyri follow those outlined at: <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/texts/clist.html>.
- 2 I use the phrase “Christian letter” here and elsewhere in this paper simply to identify those letters where it can be demonstrably shown that Christians sent them, regardless of whether there is any exclusively Christian content in the letter.
- 3 For recent scholarly works that perpetuate the view that religious motivations were most normative for Christian travellers, see, for instance, Dietz 2005; Caner 2002; and Frank 2000.
- 4 To date only a fraction of the papyri have been published in the multivolume *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (1898–; seventy volumes to date). Further work by Italian teams between 1910–14 and 1927–34 resulted in the publication of *Papiri greci e latini* (1912–66; fifteen volumes).
- 5 For a chronological list of these letters, see the table. In most cases the extant letters are quite brief, averaging less than a hundred words. Richards 2004: 163–64 notes that the average ancient letter was only about 87 words long, while letters by Cicero and Seneca respectively averaged 295 and 995 words and those by Paul average 2,495 words.
- 6 The work of Wilfred Griggs 1990 is indicative of such scholarship.
- 7 For the approximate size of the Oxyrhynchite *nome* in the Roman period, see Rowlandson 1996: 8–13.
- 8 Approximately six million *artabas*, or about 135,000 tonnes, of grain was shipped out of Egypt annually bound for Rome (Lewis 1983: 165). Egypt provided the city of Rome with about one-third of its annual grain supply. See Josephus, *War* 2.386; Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.59; Rickman 1980: 61, 67–71. Grain continued to be sent to the new capital city of Constantinople (Hardy 1931: 19–20).
- 9 Grain was harvested in the months of Pharmouthi and Pachon (April and May), just before the annual rise and inundation of the Nile. Immediately after harvest it was shipped down the Nile to Alexandria (Lewis 1983: 115–16).

- 10 The approximate area of cultivated land in the Oxyrhynchite pagarchy in the fourth century, notwithstanding periodic shifts in size, was about 780 km² or 283,140 *arouras*² (Bagnall 1993: 335); cf. Bagnall and Worp 1980: 263–64.
- 11 P.Oxy. VIII 1113 (3rd century), the registry specifically points out that the piece of land is unwatered. P.Oxy. XLII 3046 (3rd century), the piece of land is described as uninundated and artificially irrigated. P.Oxy. XLII 3047 (3rd century) also points out that the piece of land is uninundated and artificially irrigated.
- 12 According to Just. *Edict.* 13.24, the tax grain from the Thebaid was to be loaded on the river boats no later than August 9. Since Oxyrhynchus was north of the Thebaid, its shipments conceivably could be made later. P.Oxy. XVI 1871 is an example of another letter where a boat is being requested “immediately” so that grain can be shipped off. Cf. P.Oxy. VII 1071.
- 13 Translation mine.
- 14 P.Oxy. XXXIV 2731.1–5, “To my lady mother Zenobia, Maximus, greetings in the Lord God. Now at last I have the opportunity which I have prayed for of finding someone who is visiting you”; P.Oxy. LVIII 3932.1, “I received your maternal kindness’ letter through the most admirable guard Anelius”; P.Oxy. XVI 1929.1, “I received your letter concerning the boat of Kalos through Theon”; P.Oxy. LIX 4006.1–3, “This I write as a third letter . . . [I sent] one by the stable lad who brought the jubes, and a second likewise with Appa Cyrus the soldier.” Cf. P.Oxy. VI 939; P.Haun. II 25; P.Batav. 21 (= P.Lugd. Bat. XIX 21); P.Oxy. XVI 1848; P.Oxy. XVI 1843; P.Oxy. LVI 3867. See J. Winter 1933: 82–83.
- 15 In the Roman Empire the *cursus publicus* functioned as the effective postal service for imperial administrators, in which messengers and couriers on horseback conveyed messages and letters swiftly between two posts. While it was an efficient system, it was used almost exclusively for official government and military purposes. See J.L. White 1986: 214–15.
- 16 In only one letter, P.Oxy. I 155, does it seem that the bearers of the letter, a certain “Abraham and Nicetes,” may have been full-time letter carriers.
- 17 Translation is my own. PSI IV 301 (5th Century CE) is another letter where people appear to be going to Alexandria to appear in court.
- 18 Council of Chalcedon, Canon 11. The Christian practice of epistolary recommendation can be found already in the epistles of Paul in Rom 16:1–2, where Paul introduces and recommends Phoebe, a deaconess from the church of Cenchrea. Likewise, in 2 Cor 3:1–3, Paul appeals to the Corinthians that they are his “letters of recommendation.” See Chan-Hie Kim 1972; Teeter 1997: 954–60.
- 19 Sozomen 5.16.3; Gregory of Nazianzus *Or IV, Contra Julianum* 1.111.
- 20 PSI IX 1041; P.Alex. 29; PSI III 208; PSI IX 1041; P.Oxy. VIII 1162; P.Oxy. XXXI 2603; P.Oxy. XXXVI 2785; P.Oxy. LVI 3857; P.Oxy. XLIII 3149.
- 21 My translation of this letter is based on the reading given by Kent Treu 1973: 629–36, and not that of the *editio princeps*.
- 22 Translation mine.
- 23 P.Oxy. VI 939; P.Oxy. VIII 1161; P.Oxy. XXXI 2609; cf. Jas 5:14–15. The hagiographical literature from Egypt during this period is replete with stories of Christians often making trips to hermits and other ecclesiastical figures to seek

- their healing powers (Athanasius, *Life of Antony*; Rufinus, *History of the Monks in Egypt*; Palladius, *Lausiaca History*).
- 24 John Rea, the editor of this letter, noted that the handwriting on the petition is “rather similar” to the handwriting of the letter. The petition was made by a certain Aurelia Soteira, and this may well be the same person who penned this letter. See also Epp 2005: 28–29.
- 25 The “little genesis” referred to in this letter does not refer to the actual size of the document but rather to the book of Jubilees. Epiphanius, *Pan.* 39.6.1, specifically refers to the book of Jubilees as “little genesis.” See Hagedorn 1997: 147–48; Franklin 1998: 95–96.
- 26 See Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 7.32.23 for the episcopacy of Theodotus. Interestingly, Eusebius stresses that Theodotus was known for being a renowned healer, of both body and soul, and that many sought his aid.
- 27 Translation is from Winter 1933: 170–71.
- 28 In SB XII 10772 (late 3rd century), a non-Christian letter provenanced from Oxyrhynchus and sent from a certain Sarapammon to his relatives in Antioch, he informs them that he has sent them two talents of Gold “via Sotas the Christian.” For detailed analysis of this letter and the Sotas in questions, see Luijendijk 2008: 136–44. P.Oxy. IX 1205 (ca. 291 CE), a document concerning the manumission of a Jewish woman and her children by the synagogue at Oxyrhynchus, shows that the Jews of Oxyrhynchus had close ties with prominent Jews in Syria–Palestine.
- 29 To give a modern analogy, it would seem that people tend to do most of their travelling—to work, to school, or to shop—within a roughly 25 km radius of their place of residence.
- 30 Hurtado 2006: 26 makes a similar argument about the Christian literary evidence from Egypt and that the types of texts found are indicative of larger Christianity.
- 31 Many of the letters contained in this table were located using the *Heidelberger Gesamtverzeichnis der griechischen Papyrusurkunden Ägyptens*, <http://www.rzuser.uni-heidelberg.de/~gv0/gvz.html>, the *Duke Databank of Documentary Papyri*, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cache/perscoll_DDBDP.html, and the Brussels Coptic Database, <http://dev.ulb.ac.be/philo/bad/coptic/baseuk.php?page=accueiluk.php>.