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DIOSCORUS OF OXYRHYNCHUS AND HIS CORRESPONDENCE
(P. OXY. LV 3820)

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(P. Oxy. LV 3820)*

Year by year the publication of the Oxyrhynchus papyri by the Egypt Exploration Society includes documents of great historical value as well as the run-of-the-mill leases, tax receipts and personal letters. One of the last, however, (P.Oxy. LV 3820) from a certain Dioscorus to his mother, and brother (?) Sarmates may throw an unexpected light on events in Egypt early in the reign of Constantius ii (337-361).¹ As the Editor suggests, «we may guess with probability that he (Dioscorus) wrote from Alexandria»,² and it may also be that he is the same individual who describes himself as “overseer (ἐπόπτης) of the Oxyrhynchite nome” in a letter written about the same time to another official, named Heras (P.Oxy. 3821).³

The English translation of 3820 made by the Editor is reproduced below:

“To my lady mother and lord brother Sarmates, Dioscorus, greetings.,,

“Finding an opportunity in the departure of my lord brother Paeanius I made haste to greet your affectionate selves, then to inform you in connection with the affair of my brother Eulogius that it was settled and we are already on our way to you. Moreover, I presented the imperial receipt — the one concerning the property — to my lord Philagrius and records of the proceedings were compiled. Also, after the departure of my lord brother Serenus I had been passed on to the department of the magister (*priuatae*) and after two days, when Eusebius arrived — for he had gone off to take the *dux* (back?) to Taposiris — we were brought into court and the eunuch sent to him and (he) let me go and had a second set of proceedings made and let them go completely Hermias and Didym and their friends to be sent I arrive with you. If you hear, do not believe (it?).”

“I pray for your health for many years.” (Transl. J.R. Rea).

It will be seen that the letter mentions a number of well-known people. Philagrius can hardly be other than Flavius Philagrius, prefect of Egypt twice, in 335-7 and 338-40 (or 341?)⁴ The *dux* whom Eusebius was escorting to Taposiris may have been the military commander, *dux Aegypti*, Flavius Valacius who had ordered an inspection of the forts in the Oxyrhynchite nome in July-August 340 (P.Oxy. LV 3793-3794). Eusebius himself may have been the *magister priuatae Aegypti* to whose department Dioscorus' case had been handed over,⁵ while “the eunuch” who eventually released or absolved Dioscorus and his friends could be Arsacius who as imperial *cubi-*

* I would like to acknowledge the encouragement I have received from Dr. J.R. Rea in writing this note.

¹ *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, LV, Nos. 3777-3821, ed. J.R. Rea. Published for the British Academy by the Egypt Exploration Society, London 1988.

² *P.Oxy.* 3820. Introduction, p. 221.

³ *P.Oxy.* 3820, n. to l. 2.

⁴ For discussion see, *P.Oxy.* 3820, n. to l. 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, following the Editor's discussion of lines 11-17.

cularius (chamberlain) was acting as general assistant to Philagrius.⁶ According to Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria (328-373), both men had been sent to Alexandria by the emperor Constantius to instal his Arian rival, Bishop Gregory of Cappadocia in his place, which they did on 22nd March 339 (*Historia Arianorum* 10).

The case involving Dioscorus had nothing to do with these events. The papyrus indicates a complicated suit over property that required an imperial receipt which Dioscorus submitted to the prefect on behalf of his colleague, Eulogius. Further proceedings took place in the court of the *magister priuatae*, which seem to have had a satisfactory outcome.

Unfortunately, the Editor's introduction to the papyrus contains serious errors concerning the religious situation at the time resulting from the actions of Philagrius and Arsacius. Philagrius may indeed have been entrusted by the emperor to replace Athanasius by Gregory, but Gregory cannot be described as "an Arian patriarch", for the title "patriarch" does not come into ecclesiastical usage before the Second Council of Ephesus in 449.⁷ Nor could Athanasius be described as a "monophysite". The great man would have turned in his grave at such an accusation! While the Creed of Nicaea (325) of which Athanasius was a lifelong ardent supporter left a loophole for a future monophysite understanding of Christ, by describing him as "of one substance with the Father" without an equal acknowledgment of His manhood,⁸ Athanasius never deviated from his belief in the true humanity of Christ. He had difficulty in defining the rôle of the human soul in Christ, but he recognised its existence. Nor does the Dux Valacius "persecute monophysites". The passage from Athanasius' *Hist. Arianorum* 12.3 quoted by the Editor refers to the persecution of pro-Athanasian monks by Valacius and Gregory (πόσοι τε ἄλλοι μονάζοντες ἐμαστίζοντο καθεζομένου Γρηγορίου μετὰ Βαλακίου τοῦ λεγομένου δουκός ...), along with bishops and nuns. There is nothing about "monophysites". At best, it looks as though the Editor has sought to transport events that took place in 339-340 to the end of the fifth century and the period of Athanasius ii, Patriarch of Alexandria 490-497, who was an anti-Chalcedonian and could at a stretch be termed "monophysite".⁹

If for events in the mid-4th century the introduction is misleading, it draws attention to a minor character, who may subsequently have had a notable ecclesiastical career. Dioscorus alludes to three individuals as "my lord brother"; in this instance, probably "colleague" rather than blood-brother.¹⁰ Of these, Paeanius could be a *logistes*, an official in charge of accounts, Serenus another official but whose precise status is unknown, and Eulogius. Eulogius could also be simply a friend in some official position, on whose behalf Dioscorus is acting, or he could be Flavius Eulogius the official (*logistes*) to whom villagers addressed a petition at Oxyrhynchus in 341 (*P.Oxy.* 3774).¹¹

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ This title was an updating of the special metropolitan rank that had been granted at the Council of Nicaea to the bishops of Rome, Alexandria and Antioch who had wide territorial authority (Canon 6). In 381, Constantinople joined this ecclesiastical leadership. In the years between the First and Second Councils of Ephesus, 431-449, Bishop Juvenal of Jerusalem aspired to make Jerusalem into a "patriarchal see". At Ephesus ii he gained his objective. Two years later at Chalcedon his position was regulated, and along with the bishops of Rome, Antioch, Alexandria and Constantinople he was accorded "patriarchal status". See E. Honigman, "Juvenal of Jerusalem", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 5, 1950, 211-279 and L. Duchesne, *The Early History of the Church*, Vol. iii (Engl. transl. C. Jenkins, London 1926), 318-20.

⁸ For the text of the Creed, see J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, London 1950, pp. 215-216.

⁹ See Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement*, Cambridge 1979, p. 193 and 198.

¹⁰ *P.Oxy.* 3820, n. to line 1.

¹¹ The editorial reconstruction at the end of l. 3 of this papyrus (Ὁξυρνηγίτου) is, unfortunately, not sure, though it seems reasonable. This would make Eulogius curator of the Oxyrhynchite nome in 341.

On the other hand, given the evidently close administrative and even ecclesiastical connections between Oxyrhynchus and Alexandria,¹² there may have been an interesting continuation of Eulogius' career.

The Lausiaca History of Palladius, written in 419-420, contains a lengthy account of a certain monk from Alexandria in the reign of Constantius ii named Eulogius and his dealing with a cripple.¹³ Eulogius had taken pity on a cripple whom he saw in the market-place (of Alexandria) but the cripple proved ungrateful, reviling and tormenting Eulogius for years. Eventually, Eulogius took his case to Antony, the famous monastic leader.¹⁴ The latter rebuked them both and brought about their reconciliation, though both died soon afterwards. Eulogius, however, is described as an "advocate" (*scholasticus*) of Alexandria, a man of education who "renounced the clamours" (i.e. the courts) for a monastic life.¹⁵ This must have taken place some time before 350 when Antony, though in his nineties was still forceful in speech and thought. It may not be our Eulogius, but the chronology seems to fit, and *P.Oxy.* 3820 may therefore relate to an earlier incident in Eulogius' secular life.

The characters, if one accepts 3821 as written by the same Dioscorus who wrote 3820, seem to be Christian.¹⁶ They would thus provide a further example for the transfer by many educated Egyptians of their religious allegiance from paganism to Christianity in the first half of the fourth century.¹⁷ Indeed, this short and tantalisingly allusive personal letter may throw light on the more mundane and legal administrative activities of individuals that were playing important rôles in the great religious drama unfolding in Egypt in the first half of the reign of Constantius ii.

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¹² For the last, it is interesting that Oxyrhynchus should be the destination of Bishop Peter on his flight from Alexandria in 303 at the outset of the persecution. See C. Schmidt, "Fragmente einer Schrift des Märtyrerbischofs Petrus von Alexandria", *Texte und Untersuchungen*, Neue Folge Vb, 1901. This interpretation of the papyrus is, however, doubted by T. Vivian, *St. Peter of Alexandria, Bishop and Martyr*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1988, p. 18, n. 48.

¹³ Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* (ed. and transl. W.K. Lowther Clark, 1918) Ch. 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.3-14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶ The invocation of "the divine providence" to preserve the addressee at the end of the letter seems almost certainly to be Christian. See editorial note to l. 12 of *P.Oxy.* 3821.

¹⁷ For pagan observance more or less as a matter of course in c. 300 at the law courts, see *P.Oxy.* 2601.