NIKOLAOS GONIS

OXYRHYNCHUS, THE CHRIST-LOVING CITY?


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SB VI 8987 preserves a sale of a part of a house drawn up at Oxyrhynchus in 644/5, that is, shortly after the Islamic conquest of Egypt. It is the latest exactly dated Greek papyrus attesting the city. Oxyrhynchus is described in these terms (line 1):

εν τῇ λαμπρᾷ καὶ φιλ(τάτη) [Ο]ξ[υρ]χ[ι]τ«ν πΟλει

In this context, φιλ[τάτη] is odd, and perhaps nothing more than a mere stopgap. The adjective generally refers to people; as far as I am aware, it has not been found with a city elsewhere. In his study of the epithets of Oxyrhynchus, D. Hagedorn considers this as ‘das singuläre und vielleicht auch nicht ganz sichere Beispiel’ (ZPE 12 (1973) 290). All this prompted me to examine the original at the British Library, where it is kept as Papyrus 2018. As I was able to see, there can be no grounds for objecting to the editor’s reading of φιλ[], or to his calculation of the capacity of the lacuna. I would, however, propose a different restoration:

εν τῇ λαμπρᾷ καὶ φιλ(οξρητο) [Ο]ξ[υρ]χ[ι]τ«ν πΟλει

(The length of the break suggests that the word must have been contracted, as containing a nomen sacrum.) φιλοχριςτος does not apply to Oxyrhynchus in any other papyrus, but we find it with Alexandria in POxy LXIII 4394.10-11 (494—that part of the text) εν τῇ λαμπρο(τάτη) | καὶ φιλοχρ(ιςτο) Ἀλεξ(ανδρεία) τῇ πρός Αγι(ύπτο). Its association with Alexandria is in fact well attested.4 J. R. Rea observes that ‘in documentary papyri the adjective is mostly used of people’ (POxy 4394.10-11 n.), but also notes that it is found in connection with an unnamed city in PApoll 69.3 (late VII, cf. BL VIII 10); the city may, but need not, be Alexandria.5 It is possible that the Oxyrhynchites were influenced from the titulature of Alexandria; the verbal coincidence is remarkable. At any rate, the epithet fits in well with the picture of Oxyrhynchus as it emerges from other evidence. The account of the Historia Monachorum (5.42) about the overwhelming presence of churches and monasteries at Oxyrhynchus at the close of the fourth century is well-known.6 It may also be relevant that several medieval sources, Coptic, as well as Arabic, narrate the story of the Holy Family’s sojourn at Oxyrhynchus.7 Finally, it is worth drawing attention to a Coptic text of 1357 in which the city is called ὁμοίως τῆς Θεολατοῦ ἠπομένου τῆς Θεολάτου ’the God-loving city (of) Pemjê mutatis mutandis, could this be a reminiscence from a time when the city was called φιλοχριςτος?

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1 The papyrus belongs a well-known Graeco-Coptic archive; see A. A. Schiller, Actes X. Congr. Int. Pap. (1964) 193-200; id., Studien Oertel (1964) 107-19; id., JARCE 7 (1968) 79-118.
2 I am aware of only one document which may be later, viz. PWisc I 11, cf. K. A. Worp, ZPE 45 (1982) 224-6. There are a few other Oxyrhynchite documents dating from after the conquest, such as e.g. TVarie 8 (669), or PLeidInst 80 (VIII), but none of them refers to Oxyrhynchus. (P Lond IV 1383.5 (709) probably refers to the Oxyrhynchite pagarchy.)
5 The use of the epithet with cities other than Alexandria appears to be rare. Irmischer, loc. cit. 117-18 n.9 cites two instances of φιλοχριςτος found with non-Egyptian cities, both from later times; one, of 861/2, refers to Tiberias in Palestine, the other, of 911/2, to Attaleia in Pamphylia. Searches of the TLG_D and PHI7 CD-ROMs have yielded two further examples: I. Thrace 100r.b.3 (= IK Sestos 16) (3657) τῆς φιλοχρ(ιςτο) Πα(το)ντίνον πόλιν; John Chrysostomus, De incomprehensi bili dei natura (Contra Anomoeos: homiliae 1-5 [SC 28]) hom. 2.37-38 φιλοχριςτος ἦμιν ἄνωθεν ἢ πόλις ἐκτί (Antioch).