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Nikolaos Gonis

DIONYSIUS, BISHOP OF OXYRHYNCHUS, AND HIS DATE*

DIONYSIUS, BISHOP OF THE ‘CATHOLIC CHURCH’ of Oxyrhynchus, is known from *P. Oxy.* xxii 2344, a petition he submitted to the strategus Flavius Paeanius concerning matters that had no relation with his church.¹ The Oxyrhynchus papyrus bears no date, but was assigned to c. 336 on account of a number of occurrences of Paeanius alias known as Macrobius in the capacity of *logistes* at around that date. Paeanius’ tenure of the two offices had caused considerable difficulty, finally resolved with the publication of *P. Oxy.* lx 4089 and 4091, which attest him as strategus of Oxyrhynchus in October/November 351 and some time in 352 respectively. In the light of the new evidence, Revel Coles, the editor of these two papyri, noted: ‘we should redate xxii 2344 to c. 351–352 in place of the

* My thanks to Amin BENAISSE, Arietta PAPACONSTANTINOU and Ewa WIPSZYCKA for reading a draft of this note.

¹ This same Dionysius may well be the father of Apollonius, son of bishop Dionysius, mentioned as a ship-owner in *P. Harris* i 94.12–13, an Oxyrhynchite document of the mid-to late fourth century (see my ‘Ship-Owners and Skippers in Fourth-Century Oxyrhynchus’, *ZPE* 143 (2003), p. 165). Another(?) bishop Dionysius appears in *P. Mich.* xviii 767.1, assigned to the fourth century. The editor tentatively identified the text as ‘an original document from the Arian controversy?’, and the bishop with Dionysius of Milan; this is ingenious but purely conjectural (Dionysius could well have been an Egyptian bishop).

edition's *c.* 336 (with consequent effects for the study of the early Church, since a Christian bishop features in 2344). The pertinence of this statement is readily confirmed by a look at our *fasti* of Egyptian bishops: there is good evidence that the bishop of Oxyrhynchus in 336 was Pelagius, which sits oddly with the earlier dating of *P. Oxy.* 2344. There have been various attempts to overcome this obstacle,² but the controversy may now be laid to rest. However, a new problem immediately arises: other evidence seems to suggest that the bishop of Oxyrhynchus around 351–352 was a certain Theodorus.

According to Athanasius' *Festal Letter 19* (PG xxvi 1430), Theodorus succeeded Pelagius in 347. Theodorus had an eventful career. The *Libellus Precum* (94.99–101) shows him an opportunist who would transfer his loyalties as he saw fit: he switched to the Arian faction during Athanasius' exile (357–361), was defrocked for some time, but later managed to return to his bishopric with the help of the Arians. When Athanasius was restored to the patriarchate of Alexandria, Theodorus had no difficulty to present himself as an orthodox, which allowed him to retain his seat. Literary sources refer to two other bishops at Oxyrhynchus in those troubled years: Heraclidas, who led a part of the Oxyrhynchites at the time of Theodorus' Arian gamble, and Apollonius, a Melitian, who sided with the Arians (357?–359).³ But these same sources are silent on Dionysius.⁴

On present evidence, there seems to be no obvious way out of the difficulty; Theodorus appears to have been bishop of Oxyrhynchus from 347 until the late 350s.⁵ There may have been more twists and turns in his ca-

² See Arietta PAPACONSTANTINOU, 'Sur les évêques byzantins d'Oxyrhynchos', *ZPE* 111 (1996), pp. 171–173, at p. 172.

³ See S. TIMM, *Das christlich-koptische Ägypten in arabischer Zeit*, Teil 1, Wiesbaden 1984, pp. 285, 297 n. 7, and PAPACONSTANTINOU, *loc. cit.*, p. 171, for references. Apollonius signs as the 'bishop of Oxyrhynchus' among the Arian bishops in the council of Seleucia in 359.

⁴ This paragraph largely draws from PAPACONSTANTINOU, *loc. cit.*, pp. 171–173.

⁵ For our purposes, not much can be made of *P. Oxy.* xxxiv 2729.7–8, which mentions 'the ship of our bishop Theodorus'. This text, a private letter, carries no date, but monetary considerations may point to a date around the mid-350s, i.e., within the known limits of Theodorus' tenure of the episcopal see. J.-M. CARRIÉ, 'Papyrologica numismatica (1)', *Aegyptus* 64 (1984), p. 219, has argued for '*c.* 352'; R. S. BAGNALL, *Egypt in Late Antiquity*, Princeton 1993, p. 37 n. 156, suggests '*c.* 352–359'.

reer than the literary sources allow us to know; for example, he might have lost his seat to Dionysius some time in the early 350s, only to regain it shortly thereafter; or it might be that Dionysius was a rival bishop not recognised at Alexandria.⁶ Whatever the case, there is one further problem that makes matters worse: we do not know the limits of Paeanius' term of office. All we can tell is that he served as strategus in 351–2, and that he was out of office by 357; it is also within the bounds of possibility that he held office more than once.⁷

The foregoing discussion has revealed one further example of the not-so-rare difficulty to reconcile literary with documentary sources. Prudence suggests that we should side with the documentary evidence, even when, as in this case, it is so patchy and elusive.

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⁶ It may be worth mentioning that *P. Mich.* xviii 767 (see above, n. 1) seems to refer to disputed episcopal authority.

⁷ Our *fasti* of the Oxyrhynchite strategi (and *exactores*) at that time are very lacunose; see J. WHITEHORNE, *Strategi and Royal Scribes of Roman Egypt*² = *Pap. Flor.* xxxvii, Firenze 2006, p. 112.