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María-Jesús Albarrán Martínez

**THE NUN ON THE RUN:
NEW PERSPECTIVES ON P. OXY. XLIII 3150***

THE PAPYRUS *P. OXY. XLIII 3150* is a Greek letter datable to the sixth century AD on palaeographical grounds. The text contains interesting elements of complex interpretation. The first editor, John Rea, interpreted it as a letter written by a nun addressed to the mother superior of a monastery that she had apparently left.¹ Nevertheless, as he pointed out, there was some uncertainty as to some elements of the text due to a number of implicit elements which could only be understood by the correspondents, as is typical in letters. He also pointed out that the gender of the writer was not clearly defined. The text was later revisited by

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¹J. REA, 'Byzantine letter', [in:] J. REA *et alii* (eds.), *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri XLIII*, London 1975, pp. 135–138.

Anthony Alcock who proposed that the background of the letter was a family dispute. He reconstructed the storyline – albeit in a somewhat fanciful way – as the writer’s family being against the monastery because he – or she – had been brought into it without the family’s consent. However, Alcock did not clear up other points, such as the gender of writer.²

It is my purpose to revise the text from a new perspective. I hope this interpretation will at least provide a reasonable explanation for some uncertainties which have not yet been resolved.

On the one hand, it is important to keep the structure of the letter in mind, as it is essential to understanding the story. The letter is structured in three parts which correspond to the initial greetings (ll. 1–7), a summary of past and present events (ll. 7–28), and finally a discussion of future events (ll. 29–39). Also, I propose to revise the text providing comparisons with legal texts.

On the other hand, I have reproduced the text from its edited version, but I would like to propose some adjustments. Because the letter follows a well-defined structure, I suggest reading ἐπειδ[ή] for ἐπεισ., at the end of line 7, adjusting the reading of the edited version. This term often appears in Greek epistolography at the beginning of the main subject of a letter, after the initial greetings.³ Also, following the structure of the text, I propose to complete the lacuna at the beginning of line 8 with a declarative verb, such as, for example, λέγω, πυνθάνομαι, or γιγνώσκω.

Regarding the translation of the edition, I propose to translate the verbal form ἤνεγκ[ό]ν in line 26 in the past tense rather than the future, and ποίησον, in line 36, as ‘prepare’ rather than ‘make up’, as I will explain below.

πρὸ μὲν πάντων
πολλὰ προσαγορεύω
τὴν σὴν μητρικὴν
4 διάθεσιν καὶ τάς

² A. ALCOCK, ‘P. Oxy. XLIII 3150 revisited’, *AfP* 50 (2004), pp. 187–188.

³ Cf., e.g., letters from the sixth century AD: P. Oxy. XVI 1842, 1844, 1849, 1861, 1864, 1868, 1869, and 1893.

- εὐλαβεστάτας μου
 ἀδελφὰς Θεοτίμαν
 καὶ Ταρίλλαν ἐπειδ[ή]
 8 [.....] ὅτι ὠλιγώ-
 ρησας δι' ἐμέ ὅτι
 ἐξῆλθον ἐκ τοῦ
 μοναστηρίου Ἄπα
 12 Σαρους. ὠλιγώρη-
 σα οὖν. πέμπουσίν
 με εἰς τὸ πραιτώ-
 ριον καθάπαξ
 16 πρὸς τὸν κόμι-
 τα καὶ καθ' ὥραν
 γράφω ἐπιστο-
 λήν ἐν τάξει νο-
 20 ταρίων διὰ τοῦτο
 ἀπέστην ἐκ τῶν
 οἴκει ἕως οὗ ἂν
 συντάσσωσίν
 24 με ὅτι οὐκέτι
 ἀναγκάζουσίν
 σε καὶ ἤνεγκ[ό]ν
 με πάλιν εἰς
 28 τὸν αὐτὸν τόπον.
 μὴ οὖν ὀλιγω-
 ρήσατε δι' ἐμέ
 ὅλως, ἀλλὰ
 32 μνημονεύσατέ
 με ἐν τῇ εὐχῇ
 ὑμῶν. δὸς οὖν
 τὸ μοζίκιον μου
 36 αὐτῷ. ποιήσον
 καὶ τὸ καταπέ-
 τασμα καὶ τὴν
 να. στολήν μου.

Before all things I give many greetings to your maternal kindness and to my most devout sisters, Theotima and Tarilla. Since [...] that you were discouraged because I left the monastery of Apa Sarous. So I was discouraged. They are sending me to the praetorium once and for all to the comes, and in this moment I write a letter in the office of the notaries. It is for this reason that I was outside my house, until they should come to an agreement with me that they will no longer use compulsion on you; and they brought me back again to the same place. So do not be discouraged on my account at all, but remember me in your prayers. Therefore give my belt to him. Prepare my veil and my robe.'

IDENTIFYING THE SENDER AND ADDRESSEE

The text of the letter starts off with the 'Before all things' formula and greetings, without any mention of the sender and addressee. It is not even clear if the sender was a woman. However, there are some clues that can be gleaned from the context. On lines 9–12 of the letter the sender states that he or she has left a monastery: ὅτι ἐξῆλθον ἐκ τοῦ μοναστηρίου Ἀπα Σαρουσ, 'because I left the monastery of Apa Sarous'.⁴ We can infer that the sender, having lived in a monastic centre, most probably belonged to a monastic community, that is, he or she was a monk or nun.

The gender of the author can be deduced from the fact that the person addressed was a female, an anonymous person named through the

⁴ The location of this monastery is unclear. There are no references to it in other literary or documentary sources. In the *editio princeps*, Rea proposed that it could have been located near Latopolis, based on the mention of the martyr Sarous in the Coptic Synaxarion (see *Le Synaxaire arabe Jacobite (mois de Hatour et de Kihak)*, ed. R. BASSET [= PO 3], Paris 1909, pp. 456–457); S. TIMM, *Das christlich-koptische Ägypten in arabischer Zeit I* [= *Beibefte zum TAVO*, Reihe B, 41/1], Wiesbaden 1984, p. 1398, proposed that, since the papyrus was found at Oxyrhynchos, the monastery may have been located nearby. This hypothesis was rejected by ALCOCK, 'P. Oxy. XLIII 3150 revisited' (cit. n. 2), p. 187, n. 1. Nevertheless, L. BLUMELL, *Lettered Christians. Christians, Letters, and Late Antique Oxyrhynchus*, Leiden – Boston 2012, p. 337, mentioned the monastery in a list of monasteries in the Oxyrhynchite. I believe that, considering that the papyrus came from Oxyrhynchos, it is possible that the monastery was located nearby.

expression ‘your maternal kindness’ (ll. 3–4: σὴν μητρικὴν διάθεσιν). Therefore, this person was a woman whom the sender considered to be his or her mother. This same expression as well as similar expressions was used in some Greek private letters from the fourth to the sixth centuries AD to express the highest regard towards the mother figure, and an equivalent expression was also used for the father figure.⁵

The expression *μητρικὴ διάθεσις*, ‘maternal kindness’, in this letter can be related to the equivalent expression *πατρικὴ διάθεσις*, ‘paternal kindness’, employed in some Greek monastic letters addressed to male superiors of monasteries during the same period, such as SB XXII 15482 (5th–6th c. AD) from Abu Sha’ar. This text is a private letter addressed from a man named Apollonios to *abba* Iohannes. The title *abba*⁶ used to refer to Iohannes (l. 2) and other titles such as *πατήρ* and adjectives such as *κύριος* and *τιμιώτατος*, which were frequently used in religious contexts, probably indicate that he was a high-standing religious figure. Therefore, the expression ‘paternal kindness’ in this papyrus was used with spiritual rather than biological meaning. One finds the same expression in *P. Cair. Masp.* I 67064 (ca. AD 538–547), a fragment of a letter

⁵ For the mother figure, see SB XIV 11881 (unknown provenance, 4th c. AD); *P. Oxy.* LVIII 3932 (Oxyrhynchos, 6th c. AD); *P. Lond.* V 1789 (unknown provenance, 6th c. AD); for the father figure, see *P. Berl. Zill.* 13 (unknown provenance, 6th c. AD). The sender was a member of a religious order and it is well-known that, in the monastic system, there was parent-child relationship with spiritual significance between the members of monasteries and the superiors. The male and female superiors of the monasteries were considered, from a spiritual point of view, to be the fathers or mothers of the general groups of monks and nuns, respectively; cf. Ewa WIPSZYCKA, *Moines et communautés monastiques en Égypte, IV^e–VIII^e siècles* [= *The JffurP Supplement Series 11*], Warsaw 2009, p. 327; María Jesús ALBARÁN MARTÍNEZ, *Ascetismo y monasterios femeninos en el Egipto tardoantiguo. Estudio de papiros y ostraca griegos y coptos* [= *Subsidia Monastica 23*], Barcelona 2011, pp. 217–227. The Greek terms *πατήρ* or *μήτηρ* are used in a large number of monastic texts indicating the authority of the superiors. The Greek term *μήτηρ*, with spiritual meaning, appears in some texts on papyri: *P. Neph.* I, 7, 8, and 10 (Alexandria, 4th c. AD), and *P. Iand.* VI 103 (Herakleopolite, 6th c. AD).

⁶ J. DUPONT, ‘Le nom d’abbé chez les solitaires d’Égypte’, *La vie spirituelle* 77 (1947), pp. 216–240; T. DERDA & Ewa WIPSZYCKA, ‘L’emploi des titres *abba*, *apa* et *papas* en l’Égypte byzantine’, *JffurP* 24 (1994), pp. 23–56; WIPSZYCKA, *Moines et communautés monastiques* (cit. n. 5), p. 327.

belonging to the archive of Dioskoros of Aphrodito, addressed to Apollo, the founder and superior of a monastery at Pharou, near Aphrodito. In this letter Apollo was named by the sender – who remains anonymous – using this expression (l. 12). It can also be compared to the term *μητρειωτ*, ‘fatherhood’, in Coptic monastic letters, as well as to the expression *τεκμητρειωτ ετογααβ*, ‘your holy fatherhood’, addressed to male superiors of monastic communities, in a spiritual sense.⁷

At the beginning of the letter, two women, Theotima and Tarilla, are also included in the greetings, right after the mother: *τὰς εὐλαβεστάτας μου ἀδελφὰς Θεοτίμαν καὶ Ταρίλλαν*, ‘to my most devout sisters Theotima and Tarilla’ (ll. 4–6). Alcock pointed out that the above-mentioned three women did not seem to be the biological mother and sisters of the sender, and that they could have belonged to a religious community or have been her aunt and cousins.⁸ The use of the epithet *εὐλαβεστάτας* could be the key to proving that they were spiritual not biological sisters. This epithet is frequently used in Greek papyri from the sixth to the eighth century AD to designate clerics and monks.⁹ Nevertheless, there are no surviving papyri in which it is used to designate women. The word is found, however, in literary sources or imperial law where it also applied to women, nuns in particular.¹⁰ Therefore, the two women, Theotima and Tarilla, were most probably nuns in the same monastery where the sender had lived.

The highest-ranking members of the monastic hierarchy, that is, superiors and their assistants, are usually mentioned in greetings in the open-

⁷ This expression is used in many Coptic monastic letters from the fourth to the eighth century AD to refer to fathers superior of monasteries: e.g. *O. Brit. Mus. Copt.* I Add. 23 (unknown provenance, 7th–8th c. AD); *O. Mon. Epiph.* 114, 268, 354, and 465 (Theban region, 7th c. AD).

⁸ ALCOCK, ‘*P. Oxy.* XLIII 3150 revisited’ (cit. n. 2), p. 187.

⁹ There are a large number of papyri that use *εὐλαβεστάτας* to designate monks in monasteries. In Oxyrhynchos in the sixth century AD, at the same location and time as *P. Oxy.* LXIII 3150, it is used in *P. Oxy.* XVI 1890 (AD 508), 1900 (AD 528), 1952 (AD 564); LXIII 4397 (AD 545); LXXII 4928 (AD 564) and 4929 (AD 564).

¹⁰ E.g. Gr. Nyss., *Ep.* 3: *ταῖς κοσμιωτάταις ἀληθῶς καὶ εὐλαβεστάταις ἀδελφαῖς*, ‘to the most discreet and pious sisters’; *Nov.* 59 (AD 537): *ταῖς εὐλαβεστάταις ἀσκητριαῖς ἢ κανονικαῖς*, ‘to the most pious female ascetics or nuns’.

ing formulae of monastic letters in Greek on papyri.¹¹ The opening lines of *P. Oxy.* XLIII 3150 follow the basic structure of monastic letters. According to the text, we can assume that the three women were probably the mother superior and her assistants. Only women were named in these greetings, without any mention of men. This fact indicates that the monastery was possibly not linked to a male monastic centre and that it was an independent nunnery. Generally, if female monastic communities were linked to double monasteries – that is, monasteries with a male and a female section¹² – leading female hierarchical figures were named in greetings after those addressed to the male authorities.¹³

However, the eponym of the monastery, Apa Sarous, is masculine. This eponym probably referred to a holy man¹⁴ – as there were also male monasteries which were named after women¹⁵ – or to the founder of the monastery, as was apparently the case in other female communities, according to literary sources and papyri.¹⁶

Another interesting feature of the text is the final sentence; it is typical of documents from a monastic context since the fourth century AD:¹⁷

¹¹ E.g. *P. Iand.* VI 100 (unknown provenance, 2nd half of 4th c. AD); *P. Neph.* I, 3, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 18 (Alexandria, 4th c. AD).

¹² J. PARGOIRE, 'Les monastères doubles chez les Byzantins', *Echos d'Orient* 9 (1906), pp. 21–25; D. F. STRAMARA JR., 'Double monasticism in the Greek East, fourth through eighth centuries', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6 (1998), pp. 269–312; ALBARRÁN MARTÍNEZ, *Ascetismo y monasterios femeninos* (cit. n. 5), pp. 175–185.

¹³ See *P. Neph.* I, 7, 8, and 10 (Alexandria, 4th c. AD); *P. Iand.* VI 100 (unknown provenance, 2nd half of 4th c. AD).

¹⁴ Rea in the *editio princeps* referred to a martyr called Sarous; see De Lacy O'LEARY, *The Saints of Egypt*, Amsterdam 1937, p. 69; H. DELEHAYE, 'Les martyrs d'Égypte', *Analecta Bollandiana* 40 (1922), p. 97.

¹⁵ E.g. the Monastery of Ama Sophia was a male monastic community; it is mentioned in several papyri: *P. Ryl. Copt.* 124 (Wadi Sarga, 7th c. AD), *P. Brux. Barwit* 31 (Bawit, 7th–8th c. AD), *BKU* III 465 (Bawit, 8th c. AD), *P. Bal.* 288 (Dayr al-Bala'izah, 8th c. AD); cf. ALBARRÁN MARTÍNEZ, *Ascetismo y monasterios femeninos* (cit. n. 5), pp. 193–194.

¹⁶ E.g. Pall., *H. Laus.* 29 and 30; *P. Cair. Masp.* II 67139, fols. III r^o, l. 22, IV r^o, l. 9, and VI r^o, l. 10; ALBARRÁN MARTÍNEZ, *Ascetismo y monasterios femeninos* (cit. n. 5), pp. 203–206.

¹⁷ *P. Lond.* VI 1926 (Herakleopolite, ca. AD 340–350); *P. Neph.* I (Alexandria, 4th c. AD).

μνημονεύσατέ με ἐν τῇ εὐχῇ ὑμῶν, ‘remember me in your prayers’ (ll. 32–34). Monks and nuns were able to intercede before God through prayers; that was one of their characteristics.¹⁸ A parallel sentence is found in a document from the archive of Christophoria, a female superior of a monastery in the Hermopolite nome, dated to the sixth–eighth century AD. In *P. Lond. Copt.* I 1104 there is a reference to the fact that the women in her community prayed daily for the good health of the *comes* Menas, a benefactor of her monastery: ΝΕCΝΗΓ ΤΗΡΟΥ ΩΛΗΛ ΖΑ ΠΕΤΝΟΥΧΑΙ ΜΗΗΝΕ, ‘all sisters pray for you to enjoy good health every day’ (ll. 12–13).

All of the expressions discussed above point to the fact that *P. Oxy.* XLIII 3150 was a letter addressed to a female superior of a female monastery and that, consequently, the sender of the letter was a woman who belonged to the community, that is, a nun.¹⁹

MAIN SUBJECT OF THE LETTER

The central subject of the document is the fact that the nun left the monastery, as we can read on lines 9–12: ὅτι ἐξῆλθον ἐκ τοῦ μοναστηρίου Ἄπα Σαρουσ, ‘Because I left the monastery of Apa Sarous’. It is well-known that different rules regulated all actions of monks and nuns living in monasteries, including the movement in and out of them.²⁰ The internal rules of monastic centres did not allow the monks to leave monasteries, except in exceptional circumstances, such as the death of their parents, and always under the condition that they should go accompanied by another monk or nun who would watch them and guarantee their return.²¹ This was also clearly laid down in the Ecclesiastical canons. In

¹⁸ ALBARRÁN MARTÍNEZ, *Ascetismo y monasterios femeninos* (cit. n. 5), pp. 87–90.

¹⁹ Cf. *ibidem*, p. 166.

²⁰ Another case of a monk abandoning his monastery is attested in the Phoibammon’s monastery in Dayr el-Bahri, cf. M. KRAUSE, ‘Die Testamente der Äbte des Phoibammon-Kloster in Theben’, *MDAIK* 25 (1969), pp. 62–65.

²¹ Pachomian Rule, *Praecepta* 55–56; cf. *Praecepta* 57 and 86.

the fourth canon of the Council of Chalcedon there was an order addressed to monks, according to which they were to embrace a quiet course of life and remain permanently in the places in which they were settled, never to leave them.²²

Roman law was also clear on this matter. Firstly, a law was enacted in AD 471 to prevent monks from leaving their monasteries temporarily.²³ Later, the emperor Justinian forbade it again in AD 531.²⁴ Shortly after that, in AD 539, female monastic life was specifically referred to in *Nov.* 133, 5, according to which control over entrance to and exit from female monasteries was ordered, and also exit from female monasteries was prohibited.²⁵

This legal background leads us to think that, by leaving without permission, the nun of *P. Oxy.* XLIII 3150 committed an infraction against the ecclesiastical canons, imperial law and, certainly, against the internal rules of her monastery. According to the letter, the nun apparently left her monastery and went home to her biological family, as can be deduced from lines 20–22: *διὰ τοῦτο ἀπέστην ἐκ τῶν οἴκει*, ‘It is for this reason I was outside my house’.

²² C. Chalc., *Can.* 4. Cf. *Apophthegmata Patrum*, alphabetical collection, Syncletica 6.

²³ C. 1, 3, 29: *Οἱ ἐν τοῖς μοναστηρίοις διατρίβοντες μὴ ἐχέτωσαν ἐξουσίαν ἐξιέναι τῶν μοναστηρίων*, ‘Those who live in monasteries are not permitted to depart therefrom’. English translations of Roman law in this article belong to F. H. Blume, housed in an electronic version at <<http://www.uwyo.edu/lawlib/blume-justinian/>>.

²⁴ C. 1, 3, 52, 9: *Ἐπειδὴ δὲ τινα διάταξιν εὔρομεν περὶ μοναχῶν διαλεγομένην καὶ βουλομένην αὐτοὺς μὴ καταλιμπάνειν τὰ οἰκεία μοναστήρια μηδὲ θορυβεῖν τὰς πόλεις, ἦν καὶ πρὸς νενομοθετῆσθαι καιρὸν τινες ὑποπτεύουσι, δεῖν ᾤθημεν ἀφορμὴν ἐντεῦθεν λαβόντες τελειότερόν τε εἰς τὸν ἅπαντα χρόνον καὶ τοῦτο ἐπ’ ἀνορθῶσαι*, ‘We have, however, found a constitution which treats of monks and prohibits them from leaving the monasteries and roam about in cities. Some persons, however, consider this constitution to have been made (only) for a certain time and taking that as an occasion, we believed it best to perfect the law on this point, revising it to apply for all time’.

²⁵ *Nov.* 133, 5: *Δεῖ γὰρ τοιαύτας τινὰς ἐπὶ ταῖς θύραις τετάχθαι, αἵπερ ὁμοίως τὰς εἰσόδους καὶ ἐξόδους τὰς εἰς τὸ μοναστήριον ἐποπτεύουσαι καὶ τὰς ἐξόδους κωλύσουσι καὶ ἀβάτους ἀνδράσι τὰς εἰσόδους πλὴν τῶν ἀποκρισιarίων καταστήσουσιν*, ‘For such doorkeepers shall be posted at the doors, who may observe the ingress to and egress from the monastery, prohibit egress from it and make ingress impossible except to the *apocrisaries*’.

It is also important to note that the nun was apparently forced to appear before the authorities: *πέμπουσίν με εἰς τὸ πραιτώριον καθάπαξ πρὸς τὸν κόμιτα*, ‘they are sending me to the *praetorium* once and for all to the *comes*’ (ll. 13–17).

The *praetorium* was the residence and workplace of the governor, but this term could also indicate in general a place to administer justice or decide legal proceedings.²⁶ In the sixth century AD it fell to regional governors and their local officials to uphold the law.²⁷ The post of the *comes* is not well understood today but it was a governor, so he held responsibility for judicial matters. It is possible that the *comes* delegated judicial responsibility to local officials.

The nun was sent to the *praetorium* against her will, but it is not clear who forced her, whether it was her family or the public authorities. If the nun appeared in the court, it is reasonable to assume that she was involved in judicial matters.

According to lines 17–20, the nun is required to write a letter: *καὶ καθ’ ὄραν γράφω ἐπιστολὴν ἐν τάξει νοταρίων*, ‘and in this moment I write a letter in the office of the notaries’.²⁸ This fact can be compared to *Nov.* 133, 6 (AD 539), where monks caught on the run in a secular place were taken to the court of justice, from where the superiors of their monasteries would be informed.²⁹ It is therefore possible to assume that the

²⁶ A. ŁUKASZEWICZ, *Les édifices publics dans les villes de l’Égypte romaine*, Warsaw 1986, pp. 49–51, 177–178. Greek papyri show *praetoria* in Antinoopolis (SB XVIII 13174 [3rd c. AD], Arsinoe (P. Oslo III 77 = SB V 8253 [2nd c. AD]; P. Flor. III 350, 2 [3rd c. AD]; P. Laur. I 19 [3rd c. AD]; P. Berl. Zill. 8 [7th c. AD]; SB I 5253 [7th c. AD]), Hermopolis (CPR IX 69 [6th–7th c. AD]; PSI V 477 [6th c. AD]), Panopolis (BGU I 288 [2nd c. AD]; PSI VII 742 [5th–6th c. AD]; P. Cair. Masp. III 67330, fol. 3, 14 [6th c. AD]), Oxyrhynchos (P. Oxy. III 471 [2nd c. AD]; XVI 1921 [7th c. AD]), and Koptos (P. Got. 7 [4th c. AD]).

²⁷ Germaine ROUILLARD, *L’administration civile de l’Égypte byzantine*, Paris 1928, pp. 149–151.

²⁸ A notary of the *comes* is mentioned in P. Cair. Masp. I 67058, fol. VII, l. 9 (Antaiopolite, 6th c. AD).

²⁹ *Nov.* 133, 6: Ὡστε εἰ φανείη τις τῶν εὐλαβεστάτων μοναχῶν εἰς τι τῶν καπηλείων ἀναστρεφόμενος, τοῦτον εὐθὺς παραδίδοσθαι τοῖς τῶν πόλεων ἐκδίκους ἢ ἐνταῦθα τῷ δικαστηρίῳ τῆς σῆς ὑπεροχῆς, σωφρονίζεσθαι τε διελεγχόμενον καὶ μνηύεσθαι τοῦτο τῷ ἡγουμένῳ, ὥστε αὐτὸν ἐξελαύνειν τοῦ μοναστηρίου τὸν ταῦτα πλημμελήσαντα, οἷα τὸν ἐν αἰσχύνῃ βίον τῆς ἀγγελικῆς ταύτης καταστάσεως ἀλλαξάμενον, ‘That if one of the pious monks appears

nun was found outside of her monastery and was taken to the *praetorium*, where a report was sent to the mother superior of her nunnery.

The letter is addressed to the mother superior since she was the highest administrative and spiritual authority in the nunnery, and consequently she took full responsibility for all events taking place in her establishment. In the above-mentioned *Nov.* 133, 1 of Justinian (AD 539), ultimate responsibility for granting permission for mobility to monks and nuns lay on the shoulders of the father superior, and therefore the mother superior for female monasteries.³⁰ The present text does not make it clear that the superior ever gave her permission to the nun, but she was apparently aware of the matter, as we can deduce from the opening statement in the letter in which the nun states that *ὅτι ὀλιγώρησας δι' ἐμὲ ὅτι ἐξῆλθον ἐκ τοῦ μοναστηρίου Ἄπα Σαρουσ. ὀλιγώρησα οὖν*, 'that you were discouraged³¹ because I left the monastery of Apa Sarous. So I was discouraged' (ll. 8–12).

It is very likely that, when the public authorities in the *praetorium* interrogated the nun about the matter, they wanted to know if the mother superior knew about it. We can assume that the public authorities could hold the mother superior responsible, due to the fact that the letter depicts her as being directly involved in the matter, as lines 22–26 show: *ἕως οὐδ' ἂν συντάσσωσίν με ὅτι οὐκέτι ἀναγκάζουσίν σε καί*, 'so that they

to live in some tavern, he shall immediately be delivered to the defender of the city, and here to the tribunal of Your Sublimity, and if he is convicted, he shall be chastised and reported to the abbot, so that he may expel the person who does this, changing an angelic status for a dishonourable life, from the monastery'.

³⁰ *Nov.* 133, 1: *Βουλόμεθα γὰρ τῆς νῦν σφοδροτέραν γενέσθαι τὴν παρατήρησιν, καὶ πρῶτον μὲν μὴ πολλὰς εἶναι τὰς εἰς τὸ μοναστήριον εἰσόδους, ἀλλὰ μίαν ἢ δύο τυχόν, ἐφεστάναι τε τῇ πυλίδι ἄνδρας γεγηρακότας καὶ σώφρονας καὶ μεμαρτυρημένους ἐξ ἀπάντων. οἵπερ οὔτε τοῖς εὐλαβεστάτοις μοναχοῖς συγχωρήσουσι χωρὶς τῆς τοῦ ἡγουμένου γνώμης ἐκφοιτᾶν ἐκ τοῦ μοναστηρίου*, 'We want a stricter rule to be followed than now; and in the first place we do not want the monastery to have any entrances but one, or perhaps two, and old and chaste men, approved by the testimony of all, shall stand at the door, who shall not permit the religious monks to leave the monastery without the consent of the abbot'.

³¹ The verb *ὀλιγωρέω* was translated 'to be troubled' by Rea in the *editio princeps*; for the meaning of this verb as 'to be discouraged' see the translation of SB XVIII 13762 by R. BAGNALL & Raffaella CRIBIORE, *Women's Letters from Ancient Egypt, 300 BC – AD 800*, Ann Arbor 2008, p. 235.

should come to an agreement with me that they will no longer use compulsion on you'. Nevertheless, it is likely that the imperial authorities ultimately determined that the mother superior was not to blame because, immediately after that, the nun states in lines 29–34: *μη οὐν ὀλιγωρήσατε δι' ἐμέ ὅλως, ἀλλὰ μνημονεύσατέ με ἐν τῇ εὐχῇ ὑμῶν*, 'So do not be discouraged on my account at all, but remember me in your prayers'. I believe that this sentence indicates that the nun was the only person responsible for her deed.

Also, imperial constitutions established by Justinian ordered monks who had left their monasteries to appear before the public authorities;³² these authorities, including bishops,³³ had responsibility for sending the monks back to their monasteries.³⁴ In *P. Oxy.* XLIII 3150 we find that the nun said in lines 26–28 *καὶ ἤνεγκ[ό]ν με πάλιν εἰς τὸν αὐτὸν τόπον*, 'and they brought me back again to the same place'. John Rea pointed out the possibility – or doubt – that the sentence could be translated 'they will (?) bring me back again to the same (holy?) place'. However, since *ἤνεγκον* stands in the aorist, one must translate it in the past tense; moreover, the

³² C. 1, 3, 52, 9–10 (AD 531): *βουλομένην αὐτοῦς μὴ καταλιμπάνειν τὰ οἰκεία μοναστήρια (...) Ὡς καὶ ὁ τοιοῦτό τι πράττων ἐπιδοθήσεται τῇ βουλῇ τῆς πόλεως ἐκείνης, ἐξ ἧς ἐστίν, ἢ τὸν ἐν δικαστηρίοις*, 'prohibits them from leaving the monasteries and roam about in cities (...) If he does so, he shall be delivered over to the curia of the city in which he was born, or of another city'; *Nov.* 5, 6 (AD 535): *Εἰ δὲ ἀπολιπὼν τὸ μοναστήριον εἰς τινα ἔλθοι στρατείαν ἢ ἕτερον βίου σχῆμα (...) αὐτὸς ἐν τοῖς ταξεώταις τοῦ λαμπροτάτου τῆς ἐπαρχίας ἄρχοντος τετάξεται, καὶ τοῦτον ἕξει τῆς μεταβολῆς τὸν καρπὸν, καὶ ὃ γε τὴν θείαν λειτουργίαν ὑπεριδὼν δικαστηρίου χθαμαλοῦ προσκαρτερεῖτω δουλεία*, 'But if he leaves the monastery and takes up imperial service or other manner of life, he himself shall be compelled to join the order of provincial officials of the honourable president of the province, and the result of the change shall be, that as he despised the divine service, he shall remain in the service of a worldly judge'; and *Nov.* 123, 42 (AD 546): *Ἐὰν μοναχὸς καταλείψῃ τὸ μοναστήριον καὶ εἰς κοσμικὸν βίον μετέλθῃ, τοῦτον τῆς στρατείας καὶ τῆς τιμῆς*, 'If a monk leaves a monastery and returns to a secular life, he shall first be shorn of every position of service and honour, if he has any, and shall be thrown into a monastery by the bishop of the place and the president of the province'. Cf. *Nov.* 133, 6 (AD 539), quoted above in n. 29.

³³ *Nov.* 123, 42 (AD 546), see previous note.

³⁴ Greg. M., *Epist.* VIII, 8 and 9, mentions that a bishop ordered the daughter of Tullianus, a Roman patrician, to return to her monastery, from where she had run away.

term *τόπος*, despite the fact that it can be used to refer to holy places such as monasteries,³⁵ is a general term which can also refer to any other place. Thus, even though this sentence unclear, it could be interpreted as if the nun was sent back to her home; this can be understood based on the previous lines (ll. 20–24), in which the nun pointed out that ‘I was outside my house until they should come to an agreement with me’. Therefore, it is possible that the nun had not yet gone back to the monastery.

OTHER FEATURES OF THE LETTER

There are other interesting features of this letter that provide additional details to the plot. The monastic habit was the external symbol of monastic life after its adoption by a given person.³⁶ Despite the fact that the nun was outside her monastery and she could come back to her home, she was compelled to continue following a monastic life by force of law. This implies that she was forced to take the habit again, a requirement that was both symbolic and practical.

³⁵ Mariachiara GIORDA, *Il regno di Dio in terra: le fondazioni monastiche egiziane tra V e VII secolo* [= *Temi e testi* 94], Rome 2011, pp. 21–29.

³⁶ On female monastic garments, see María Jesús ALBARRÁN MARTÍNEZ, ‘El hábito monástico femenino en Egipto (siglos IV–VI)’, *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia* 5 (2008), pp. 23–34; EADEM, *Ascetismo y monasterios femeninos* (cit. n. 5), pp. 91–103. On monastic garments in general, see R.-G. COQUIN, ‘À propos des vêtements des moines égyptiens’, *BSAC* 31 (1992), pp. 3–23; Maria MOSSAKOWSKA, ‘Maphorion dans l’habit monastique en Égypte’, [in:] *Aspects de l’artisanat du textile dans le monde méditerranéen (Égypte, Grèce, monde romain)* [= *CIAHA* 2], Paris 1996, pp. 27–37; A. DE VOGUE, ‘Aux origines de l’habit monastique (III^e–IX^e siècle)’, *StudMon* 43 (2001), pp. 7–20; Sofía TORALLAS TOVAR, ‘El hábito monástico en Egipto y su simbología’, *Ilu, Revista de Ciencias de las Religiones* 7 (2002), pp. 163–174; Maria MOSSAKOWSKA-GAUBERT, ‘Les origines des tuniques à manches courtes et sans manches utilisés para les moines égyptiens (IV^e – début du VII^e siècle)’, *AntTard* 12 (2004), pp. 153–167; Sofía TORALLAS TOVAR, ‘The terminology of monastic garments’, [in:] M. GRÜN-BART *et alii* (eds.), *Material Culture and Well-Being in Byzantium (400–1453)*, Vienna 2007, pp. 219–224; Anne BOUD’HORS, ‘Le «scapulaire» et la mélote: nouvelles attestations dans les textes coptes?’, [in:] Anne BOUD’HORS & Catherine LOUIS (eds.), *Études coptes XI: Treizième journée d’études (Marseille, 7–9 juin 2007)* [= *CBC* 17], Paris 2010, pp. 65–79.

This could explain the ending of the letter, in which the nun asked the mother superior to prepare her clothes: *ποιήσον καὶ τὸ καταπέτασμα καὶ τῆν στολήν μου*, ‘Prepare the veil and my dress’ (ll. 36–39), which seems to refer to monastic garments. It seems obvious that her habit would have to be prepared for her return to monastic life, since the woman was forced back to her vows.

It is well known from different sources that monks and nuns were identified by their garments, which were external symbols of monastic life.³⁷ Pachomian and Shenoutian monastic rules show that anyone who joined these two congregations had to strip off all the clothes he was wearing and put on the garments of a monk. He could wear these garments after a period of time to prove his vocation.³⁸ Imperial law insisted on keeping a probation period of three years for monks and nuns before they were definitively invested with the monastic habit,³⁹ punishing any lay people who wore it improperly.⁴⁰

³⁷ Cf. C. Gangr., *Can.* 13 (AD 345); C. 1, 4, 4 (AD 394); *Nov.* 123, 40, 43, and 44 (AD 546).

³⁸ Pachomian Rule, *Praecepta* 69; Shenoutian Rule, canon 9 (see B. LAYTON, ‘Rules, patterns, and the exercise of power in Shenoute’s monastery: The problem of world replacement and identity maintenance’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 15 [2007], pp. 59–60). Cf. *Arabic Synaxarium*, Phamenoith 15; Sarah; Thoth 20: Theopista.

³⁹ *Nov.* 5, 2 (AD 535): Θεσπίζομεν τοίνυν τοῖς θείοις ἀκολουθοῦντες κανόσι, τοὺς εἰς μονήρη βίον παραγγέλλοντας μὴ προχείρως εὐθὺς παρὰ τῶν εὐλαβεστάτων ἡγουμένων τῶν εὐαγῶν μοναστηρίων σχῆμα λαμβάνειν μοναχικόν, ἀλλ’ ἐπὶ τριετίαν ὄλην, εἴτε ἐλεύθεροι τυχόν εἴτε δοῦλοι καθεστήκοιεν, ‘We therefore ordain, following the sacred canons, that those who devote themselves to a monastic life, shall not inconsiderately and immediately receive the monastic attire from the reverend abbots of the venerable monasteries, but they shall remain, whether they are free or slaves, for a full term of three years’; cf. *Nov.* 123, 35 (AD 546): *Εἴ τις δὲ εἰς μοναχικὸν βίον ἐλθεῖν βουληθείη, κελεύομεν, ἵνα εἰ μὲν γνώριμὸς ἔστω ὅτι οὐδεμιᾷ τύχῃ ὑπόκειται, ὁ ἡγούμενος τοῦ μοναστηρίου ὅτε συνίδοι τὸ σχῆμα αὐτῷ παράσχοι, εἰ δὲ μὴ γνωρίζεται εἰ οἰαδήποτε ὑπόκειται τύχῃ, ἐντὸς τριῶν ἑνιαυτῶν μὴ λαμβάνειν αὐτὸν τὸ σχῆμα τὸ μοναχικόν, ἀλλ’ ἐντὸς τοῦ εἰρημένου χρόνου ἀποπειράσθω τῆς τούτου ἀναστροφῆς ὁ τοῦ μοναστηρίου ἡγούμενος*, ‘If any one, moreover, wants to take up a monastic life, and he is known not to be subject to any condition (which binds him to his station), the abbot of the monastery, if it seems good to him, shall furnish him with a (monastic) garb. But if it is not known whether he is subject to any condition, he shall not receive a monastic garb for three years, but the abbot of the monastery shall try him out during the aforesaid time’.

⁴⁰ *Nov.* 123, 44 (AD 546): *Πᾶσι δὲ καθάπαξ τοῖς ἐν κοσμικῷ ἀναστρεφόμενοις, καὶ μάλιστα*

The two garments mentioned in this papyrus correspond to the two fundamental parts of the female monastic habit: the dress and the veil.⁴¹ The word used for the dress is *στολή*, which can be compared with the equally general term *ἱμάτιον* used by Athanasius of Alexandria and Palladius for the female monastic dress.⁴²

The veil is referred to with the term *καταπέτασμα*. This word was used in Christian sources to refer to curtains, covering cloths, or church veils dividing the sanctuary from the nave (it is also used for veils in pagan temples),⁴³ following the New Testament tradition of the curtain torn in two.⁴⁴ However, in this papyrus the word appears in a sequence of clothes, so it seems to be a personal vestment, not a temple curtain or veil.

τοῖς τὰ σκηναῖα μετερχομένοις ἀνδράσι τε καὶ γυναιξί. καὶ μὴν καὶ ταῖς προῖσταμέναις ἀπαγορεύομεν κεχρησθαι σχήματι μοναχοῦ ἢ μοναστρίας ἢ ἀσκητρίας ἢ οἰωδῆποτε τρόπῳ τοῦτο μιμεῖσθαι, ἐπισταμένων πάντων τῶν τολμώντων ἢ χρήσασθαι τῷ τοιοῦτῳ σχήματι ἢ μιμήσασθαι ἢ ἐμπαῖξαι εἰς οἰανδῆποτε ἐκκλησιαστικὴν κατάστασιν, ὅτι καὶ σωματικὰς τιμωρίας ὑποστήσονται καὶ ἐξορία παραδοθήσονται, ‘We, moreover, forbid all persons who lead a secular life, and especially those who are on the stage, men and women, and prostitutes, to wear the garb of a monk, nun or female ascetic, or to imitate such garb in any way, knowing that if they use or imitate such garb or dare to make sport of any ecclesiastical condition, they will be punished corporally and sent into exile’. Cf. C. 1, 4, 4 (AD 394): *Mimae et quae ludibrio corporis sui quaestum faciunt publice habitu earum virginum, quae dicatae sunt, non utantur*, ‘Mimes and persons who make their living by the play of their bodies, shall not publicly use the dress of virgins consecrated to God’.

⁴¹ Cf. Pall., *H. Laus.* 33 and 59.

⁴² Ath., *Virg.* 11; Pall., *H. Laus.* 59; cf. *P. Wisc.* II 64. This word does not correspond to *λεβίτων*, which is generally used in literary texts; e.g. *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* 10, 9; Pall., *H. Laus.* 32; *Apobthegmata Patrum*, alphabetic collection, Abba Theodoros of Pherme 18 and 29; Abba John of Perse 2; Abba Chronios 5; Abba Phocas 1; systematical collection, V, 26; VI, 20. Also, the term *κολόβιον* is frequently used in papyri; see TORALLAS TOVAR, ‘El hábito monástico en Egipto’ (cit. n. 36), p. 166, n. 18. Both terms can be compared to Coptic term *σοολες*, ‘dress’. It is used in *P. Pisentius* 28, a letter from two dressmakers to bishop Pisentius of Koptos, to describe ecclesiastical or monastic garments.

⁴³ G. W. H. LAMPE, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford 1961, p. 714.

⁴⁴ Matt. 27:51; Mark 15:38, and Luke 23:45 (cf. Heb. 6:19; 9:3; 10:20). In Old Testament it refers to a curtain (Exod. 26:37) or temple veil (Exod. 26:33) without distinction. In papyrological texts it is only used in lists of church properties: *P. Grenf.* II III, 7 (Hibion, 5th–6th c. AD), *P. Leid. Inst.* 13 (unknown provenance, 6th–7th c. AD); *P. Ryl. Copt.* 238 (Hermopolite, 7th c. AD).

Covering the head and hair with a veil was an early practice among Christian women. According to the earliest sources, the veil was made of thick fabric.⁴⁵ In the Greek text of *Traditio Apostolica* 18 one finds the terms *πάλλιον* and *κάλυμμα*, both with the same meaning, namely a veil made of thick fabric to be worn by women. Athanasius of Alexandria and Palladius used the term *μαφόριον* to refer to a veil or cloak worn by nuns or monks.⁴⁶ It is described as a cloak that covers the neck and the back.⁴⁷ As Anthony Alcock has already suggested,⁴⁸ the *καταπέτασμα* was in fact a veil or cloak, and may be linked to the *μαφόριον* (contrary to the *editio princeps*' interpretation as 'curtain', which does not make sense in the context of this letter), hence, a garment covering the head.⁴⁹

P. Oxy. XLIII 3150 mentions another piece of clothing using the term *μοζίκιον* (l. 35), which can be interpreted as a belt. The monastic dress was tightened at the waist with a belt. John Rea, based on personal information by Anthony Alcock,⁵⁰ proposed that the Greek term is a Coptic loanword *μοχρ*, which also means 'girdle, belt'.⁵¹ On the one hand, in Greek texts the term used for a belt is *ζώνη*, which occurs, for example, in Palladius' *Lausiaca History* 32, 25 to describe the belt of the Pachomian monastic garment.⁵² On the other hand, in Coptic texts from the Pachomian corpus, the belt of the monastic habit was described with the term *μοχρ* or *μοχρ*.⁵³

⁴⁵ 1 Cor. 11:1-16.

⁴⁶ Ath., *Virg.* 11; Pall., *H. Laus.* 59.

⁴⁷ *Apophthegmata Patrum*, alphabetical collection, Abba Theodoros of Pherme 18 and 29; Abba Chronios 5; systematical collection, IV, 83; Ioh. Cassian., *Institutiones Coenobiorum* I, 6. See A. BAZZERO, 'ΜΑΦΟΡΤΗΣ', *Studi della Scuola di Papirologia* II (1917), pp. 95-102; Joëlle BEAUCAMP, 'Organization domestique et rôles sexuels: Les papyrus byzantins', *DOP* 47 (1993), pp. 185-194.

⁴⁸ ALCOCK, 'P. Oxy. XLIII 3150 revisited' (cit. n. 2), p. 188.

⁴⁹ MOSSAKOWSKA, 'Maphorion' (cit. n. 36), p. 37.

⁵⁰ ALCOCK, 'P. Oxy. XLIII 3150 revisited' (cit. n. 2), p. 188.

⁵¹ Cf. W. VYICHL, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue copte*, Leuven 1983, pp. 132-133.

⁵² Cf. Matt. 3:4; Mark 1:6; Rev. 1:13-15, 6.

⁵³ Karour, *Apocalypse* (ed. L.-Th. LEFORT, *Œuvres de S. Pacôme et de ses disciples* [= CSCO 159-160; *Scriptores Coptici* 23-24], Leuven 1964-1965, p. 102).

Some literary texts show that different parts of monastic attire had a spiritual meaning for monastic life.⁵⁴ Despite the fact that the texts that described the monastic habit directly referred to male garments, these descriptions are apparently also related to female monastic garments. According to the writings of Karour, the disciple of Pachomius of Tabennese, the tunic symbolized the prudence of monks.⁵⁵ The hood symbolized obedience and innocence, something that can be translated to the symbolism of the female veil. The belt symbolized courage or chastity,⁵⁶ being tightened to the waist in order to prevent any impurity.

Therefore, could the symbolism of the belt be related to the sentence written in the letter by the nun, ‘So, give my belt to him’? When the nun left the monastery and returned to secular life, she became contaminated by the impurity of worldly life. For this reason, would she be allowed to wear the belt again? It is not clear who the man referred to as the recipient of the belt was. Since the belt was apparently an important element, could it be that that man was a person in a position of authority? Might he have been a man known to the sender and the addressee, despite not being mentioned previously in the text? Would this imply that he was a cleric, such as a priest linked to the female monastery? The community could have been served by a priest for the liturgy;⁵⁷ could he have assisted mother superior?

⁵⁴ *Apophthegmata Patrum*, anonymus collection 55; Evagr. Pont., *Praktikos*, prologue 2–5; Karour, *Apocalypse* (ed. LEFORT, *Œuvres de S. Pacôme* [cit. n. 53], p. 102); see TORALLAS TOVAR, ‘El hábito monástico’ (cit. n. 36), pp. 171–174; ALBARRÁN MARTÍNEZ, *Ascetismo y monasterios femeninos* (cit. n. 5), pp. 101–102.

⁵⁵ Karour, *Apocalypse* (ed. LEFORT, *Œuvres de S. Pacôme* [cit. n. 53], p. 102).

⁵⁶ Cf. Isa. 22:21 (‘and I will clothe him with your robe, and strengthen him with your girdle’).

⁵⁷ Literary sources and Roman law show that female communities were served by priests in liturgical service: see Pall., *H. Laus*. 33; Shenoutian Rule, canon 5 (LAYTON, ‘Rules, patterns, and the exercise’ [cit. n. 38], pp. 58–59); *Nov.* 133, 5 (AD 539): *Καὶ οὐ μόνον ἐπερ ἀνδρῶν εἶη τὸ μοναστήριον ἀλλ’ εἰ καὶ γυναικῶν τυχόν, εἶναι δύο τινας ἢ τρεῖς ἀνδρας ἢ εὐνοῦχους. εἰ δυνατόν, ἢ τῶν γεγηρακότων τε καὶ ἐπὶ σωφροσύνη μεμαρτυρημένων. οἵπερ τὰ πράγματα αὐταῖς πράξουσι καὶ τὴν ἄρρητον αὐταῖς διαδώσουσι κοινωνίαν, ἢνίκα τούτου καιρός*, ‘Not only a monastery for men, but also one for women, shall have two or three men, eunuchs, if possible, or old men, approved for their chastity, who shall attend to the

Alternatively, ἀντῶ may refer to the messenger delivering the letter from the *praetorium* to the monastery of Apa Sarous. It could be that he was supposed to return with the nun's belt, so that she could wear it at her reinsertion. However, the text does not make this point clear, allowing us to consider other possibilities.

Finally, comparing this text to imperial law allows us to pinpoint the date of the letter more accurately. Rea dated it only generally to the sixth century AD, and Alcock did not propose any adjustment to the initial date. In my opinion, the legal background of this papyrus provides a dating element that cannot be disregarded. *Nov.* 5 (AD 535), 133 (AD 539), and 123 (AD 546) established by Justinian show the dispositions present in our document; so the date of document is around or later than these constitutions.

In conclusion, *P. Oxy.* XLIII 3150 is a letter written by a nun who left her monastery and apparently went back home to her family. The cause of this action or decision is unknown because it is not explained in the text. The letter itself was written at the office of imperial scribes, which implies that the woman was going to be forced back into her original status as a nun. In this article I have attempted to prove that there is a clear legal background that explains the course of the events. In the times of the emperor Justinian, imperial law – as much as ecclesiastical canons and monastic rules – was strict about the monks and nuns being bound to their communities. There was an extensive set of legal dispositions, which are reflected in this Oxyrhynchus papyrus.

The nun in our text was brought before the imperial authorities in order to explain and account for her actions, according to the law. Subsequently, on the one hand, she explained her current situation to the

business matters and administer the ineffable communion when it is time for that'; *Nov.* 123, 36 (AD 546): *Ταῖς δὲ γυναιξίν ὃν ἂν αὐταὶ ἐπιλέξωνται εἴτε πρεσβύτερον εἴτε διάκονον εἰς τὸ ποιεῖν αὐταῖς τὰς ἀποκρίσεις ἢ τὴν ἁγίαν αὐταῖς κοινωνίαν φέρειν ὁ ὀσιώτατος ἐπίσκοπος ὑφ' ὃν εἰσὼν ἀποκληροῦτω, εἰ ὀρθῆς πίστεως καὶ βίου καλοῦ τοῦτον εἶναι γνώη, 'If the women chose a man, whether a presbyter or deacon, to manage their business or to administer the holy communion, the reverend bishop to whom they are subject, shall designate such person (for such purpose), if he knows him to be of the right faith and of upright life'.*

mother superior of her monastery, being the highest authority of the convent, through this letter, written in the *officina* of imperial scribes. On the other hand, she could not abandon monastic life, despite the fact that she apparently managed to come to an agreement with the imperial authorities not to return to the monastery, at least temporarily. However, the writing of the letter itself corresponds to the legal dispositions that regulated the reinsertion of monks and nuns on the run.

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