

# Digging into lives: Christians and Christianity in the Greek papyri from Egypt



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Greek papyri recovered from the sands of Egypt represent a precious source of data for early Christianity. Egypt is the land of the earliest Greek translation of books from the Hebrew Bible. The Greek Old Testament or Septuagint was undertaken within the Jewish community of Alexandria from near the middle of the 3rd to the 2nd century BC. Alexandria became the first centre of Christianity in Egypt. Then, the Christian doctrine spread to the villages of the Egyptian *chora*. Christian papyri mirror this historical context. The earliest Christian papyri are biblical and literary. Besides these, documentary texts offer unique insights into the everyday life and society of Christians in Egypt. Private letters, in particular, reveal the activities and worries of laymen and women, monks and church officials. Papyrological evidence also enlightens the relationship of Christianity with local religious practices. After an overview of the contribution of papyri to our knowledge of early Christianity, this article will focus on documentary specimens dealing with health issues in the form of requests for healing prayers and amulets written on papyrus. Health was, in fact, a common cause for concern and a central aspect of the daily reality of Christian communities.

**Contribution:** This article contributes to shedding light on the role of papyrological evidence in reconstructing the everyday lives of people in Egypt. Christian documentary papyri are particularly illuminating on the day-to-day life of early Christian communities. Their study expands our socio-cultural understanding of aspects – such as healing – that, although important, are poorly known from the literary tradition.

**Keywords:** Christian papyri; documentary papyri; Graeco-Roman Egypt; *nomina sacra*; microhistory; private letters; papyrus amulets; ancient medicine.

## Introduction Christian papyri

This article aims to elucidate the value of papyrological evidence to provide a direct view of the everyday reality of Christian communities in Egypt. Greek papyri are a privileged source material. They contribute to deepening our understanding of much of the history of Graeco-Roman Egypt, including the circumstances in which the Christian doctrine spread.<sup>1</sup> The first part of this article will introduce the subject of Christian papyri, their context, characteristics and textual typologies. Then, the focus will be restricted to a more specific topic, which is recurrent in Christian papyrus texts: health issues and requests for divine healing through prayers and amulets written on papyrus. The topic of healing is significant, because it allows us to illustrate a common cause for concern in the day-to-day life of Christians. Furthermore, it gives insights into the relationship between Christianity and local religious traditions through the lens of papyrological sources.

The unparalleled level of papyrological documentation discovered in its' desert gives Egypt a special status within the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> Egypt also represents a *unicum* by being the only province in which Graeco-Roman, Judeo-Christian and local traditions not only interact, but enrich each other.

Christianity started spreading in Egypt from Alexandria in the 1st century AD (see Huebner 2019:8–10).<sup>3</sup> From there, it spread through the countryside and the villages of the Egyptian *chora* (see *infra*).

1. Bagnall (2020) offers a critical resource to explore how to use papyri as evidence for historical research.

2. See the discussion in Huebner (2019:5–7).

3. An important study to explore Egyptian Christianisation and the process that led some of the religious traditions present in Egypt to become Christian is Frankfurter (2018).

The city of Alexandria carries a profound religious and cultural heritage. The largest Diaspora Jewish community of the Graeco-Roman age flourished there. The Hellenised Alexandrian community was the milieu where the translation of the Hebrew Bible into *koinê* Greek – the Septuagint – was developed and completed from about the mid-3rd to the 2nd century BC. Some of the oldest extant manuscripts of the Septuagint come from Egypt. The early Christian church claimed the Septuagint as its sacred text. The *koinê* of the Greek version of the Scriptures was written in the same idiom that the Christians of Egypt used in written communication as it is witnessed by the papyri. A noticeable exemplar of a Septuagint papyrus is P.Ryl. III 458,<sup>4</sup> which is allegedly the oldest Greek copy of Deuteronomy (Dt 23–28; Howard 1971:125–131). It preserves eight fragments of a papyrus roll recovered from two pieces of a mummy *cartonnage*. These fragments were probably found in the Fayûm, where there were several Jewish settlements in the Ptolemaic period (see Ernst 1988:190). The manuscript has been assigned paleographically to the 1st half or mid-2nd century BC. It might, thus, predate (or be contemporary to) 4QLXXDeut, a Greek papyrus from Cave 4 at Qumran also preserving portions of *Deuteronomy* and dated to the mid-2nd century BC.<sup>5</sup>

Early Christianity in Egypt was deeply influenced by Judaism. Sometimes it may be challenging even to distinguish Hellenised Jews and Christians in the sources and to ascribe manuscripts on papyrus to one or the other tradition.<sup>6</sup> The occurrence of monotheistic formulae, such as the ἐν θεῷ/ἐν κυρίῳ [in the God/in the Lord] phraseology in the epistolary language, might suggest a Christian context. Nevertheless, these expressions ‘are not in and of themselves a sufficient indicator of Christianity’, as Choat (2006:103) observes.<sup>7</sup> There are more striking scribal indicators of a Christian milieu, *viz.* the use of a range of symbols and acrostics; the presence of the so-called *nomina sacra*.

Between the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century AD, it became a common Christian practice to affix the sign of the cross at the start (or at the start and the end) of a document. The purpose was to express the religious sentiment and shared beliefs of the writer and recipient. Other recurring elements include different forms of Christograms like the staurogram – a visual reference to Jesus’ crucifixion –<sup>8</sup> and the groups of letters ΧΜΓ and ϑθ (= 99). The latter is the isopsephistic representation of ἄμην,

4. The editions of the papyri are cited according to the abbreviations established in the *Checklist of Greek, Latin, Demotic and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets* (Oates et al. 2023). The documentary papyri dealt with in the current contribution are searchable in the papyrological database *Papyri.info* (Sosin 2010). All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

5. For this and other Greek biblical texts from the Judean Desert, compare Tov (2001:1–11; 2008:339–364).

6. For this aspect, compare Roberts (1979:32, 49 and 57–58), Choat (2006:45–46), Bagnall (2009:24), Martínez (2009:592). The papyrus documents relating to Jews and Judaism in Egypt have been collected in the *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* (vol. I [1957] – V [2022]) (see also Clarysse 2020:303–325).

7. For a discussion of this topic, see Choat (2006:101–113).

8. On the staurogram, see Hurtado (2006a:135–154; 2006b:207–226).

whereas the former might be an acrostic for Χριστὸν Μαρία γεννᾷ [Mary generates Christ], according to the prevailing interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

The *nomina sacra* are a prominent and fascinating feature of Christian textual culture.<sup>10</sup> In Greek and Latin palaeography, the expression *nomina sacra* applies to a limited number of sacred names, such as κύριος, θεός, Ἰησοῦς, Χριστός, which are abbreviated with a horizontal stroke over them. These abbreviations are obtained more often by ‘contraction’ (by having one or more middle letters omitted [e.g. ΙΣ]) than by ‘suspension’ (by omitting letters from the end of a word [e.g. IH]). The earliest examples are found in Christian literary papyri datable to the late 2nd century and in documentary papyri from the late 3rd century (but see *infra*).<sup>11</sup> The Greek abbreviation system might have offered – to some extent – a scribal background to this practice. Yet, the use of the *nomina sacra* was not a space-saving method, but an act of reverence: ‘they are a unique device that in the minimum space provides a summary outline of theology’ (Roberts 1979:47). As to their religious meaning, the closest analogies can be found in the Jewish tradition, particularly in the treatment of the Tetragrammaton. Nevertheless, as to the pattern of words, ‘the *nomina sacra* cannot be explained as imitative of or even adapted from either Greek or Jewish scribal practice’ (Roberts 1979:47). This set of conventions likely ‘originated among early Christian circles’ as a distinctively ‘Christian scribal innovation’ (Hurtado 2006a:111).

## Christian papyri between literature and documents

The earliest Christian texts surviving on papyrus have a literary content and contribute to the philological history of the tradition of Christian theological literature. They comprise manuscripts of the Old and New Testament, liturgical materials, significant remains of apocryphal books, and fragmentary works of Patristic literature.<sup>12</sup> Besides this conspicuous number of literary texts, a wealth of documentary papyri has also come to light. Non-literary papyri preserve both public and private documents. They display a variety of textual contents that include official records, edicts and decrees, petitions and contracts as well as private letters. This heterogeneous array of documents integrates and expands the information gleaned from the other written sources. The study of the documentary evidence helps reconstruct aspects that are poorly known from – or even remain unspoken in – the literary tradition. Among these aspects, one can mention the organisation and economy of Egyptian churches, the

9. The number 99 is the result of the sum of the numbers indicated by the single letters of the word ἄμην: α (1) + μ (40) + η (8) + ν (50). For the interpretation of these groups of letters, compare Choat (2006:113–114).

10. On the possible origins, functions and historical significance of the *nomina sacra*, see Roberts (1979:26–48) as well as Hurtado (1998:655–673; 2006a:95–134) and Choat (2006:119–125).

11. Compare Huebner (2019:13, 22, and 27–28).

12. The following are selected references useful to offer an overview of the textual typologies that Christian literary papyri preserve: Roberts (1979:1–25), Hurtado (2006a:209–229), and Martínez (2009:591–601). On New Testament manuscripts, see Kraus and Nicklas (eds. 2006). On biblical fragments, see Unkel (2022). For an introduction to liturgical papyri, see Mihálykó (2019).

socio-cultural picture and everyday history of early Christian communities – the interaction of Christianity with local religious practices.

Two factors – space and time – illuminate the relevance, but also the limits of papyrological material. Without the testimony of the papyri, we would look at the history of the Egyptian church almost exclusively from the Alexandrian perspective, which is dominant in the literary texts that have come down to us via the medieval manuscript tradition (see Wipszycka 1998:68). No papyri have been preserved on the site of the Egyptian capital.<sup>13</sup> The vast majority of the surviving evidence comes from the towns and villages of Middle and Upper Egypt. Hence, it has a provincial origin. By allowing us to glimpse the situation outside Alexandria, this geographical distribution from the countryside (*chora*) throws some light where the literary sources leave us in the dark. The importance of the geographical factor comes with a major limit: the temporal uncertainty of Christian documents on papyrus. Unless they bear a date, the dating of papyrological specimens mostly relies on the analysis of their paleography. The paleographic dating of early Christian manuscripts is a difficult and controversial subject. As Martinez (2009) points out:

Whereas on the literary side we have several papyri whose scripts editors and other scholars have dated with a degree of confidence to the second century, there are no documentary Christian texts indisputably assignable to that early period. In fact, even for the first part of the third century, the volume of identifiably Christian non-literary papyri is meagre and at times controversial. (p. 601)

Therefore, despite the unquestionable role of the papyri in assessing the Christian presence in the Egyptian *chora* from the late 3rd and 4th centuries onwards, the hopes of recovering substantial traces of an earlier documentary past have been disappointed. The relative silence of the papyri is, however, consistent with the scarcity of written testimonies of Egyptian Christianity prior to the episcopate of Demetrios (AD 189–232).<sup>14</sup> Demetrios was responsible not only for the reorganisation of the ecclesiastical structure at Alexandria, but also for the construction of a network of bishops outside Alexandria; thus, contributing to the Christianisation of the hinterland (see Huebner 2019:11 and 62–63).

The oldest extant autograph on papyrus that has been considered surely written by a Christian goes back to that period. P.Bas. II 43 is a private letter sent by a certain Arrianos to his brother, Paulos, and concerns day-to-day family matters. The two brothers hold political offices and belong to

13.This is due to environmental reasons. The humidity of Lower Egypt and the Delta region is not conducive to the preservation of the papyri, unless in exceptional archaeological contexts. Papyri written in Alexandria had a chance to survive only if they travelled in antiquity to dry climate areas of the Egyptian hinterland, where they have remained until their discovery. This illustrates the concept of the ‘accidental wandering’ of papyrus evidence (see Turner 1968:43–50).

14.Compare Harnack (1908:158): ‘the most serious gap in our knowledge of primitive church history is our almost total ignorance of the history of Christianity in Alexandria and Egypt ... until about the year 180’. For a discussion of the lack of papyrological evidence before Demetrios, see Bagnall (2009:2–10 and 23–25). Bagnall (2009:25) suggests that ‘a realistic assessment of the probable size and character of the Christian communities in Egypt in the second century of our era’ is a possible explanation for this lack.

the local elite. This letter is exceptional for several reasons.<sup>15</sup> Both prosopographical and paleographic analyses assign the papyrus to AD 230–239. Hence, it predates any other certainly dated Christian document by a few decades. Its provenance from the village of Theadelphia, in the northeast of the Fayûm, represents an outstanding proof of the presence of Christian groups in the Egyptian *chora* at a relatively early date. Huebner (2019:24) suggests that the mobility of the local upper class ‘fostered the spread of Christianity to the Egyptian hinterland in the early third century’. ‘Individuals from the lower social strata undoubtedly joined these early Christian communities’ but, ‘due to the fact that they did not leave written traces, we are not able to catch them in our evidence’ (2019:28). The use of the *nomen sacrum* ἐν κ(υ)ρ(ι)ῳ (for ἐν κ(υ)ρ(ι)ῳ, [in the Lord]) in the concluding greeting formula of the letter confirms that Arrianos is a Christian (see ll. 20–21, σε εὐχομαι ὀλοκληρῆ! [οὖν]τα ἐν κ(υ)ρ(ι)ῳ, [I pray that you fare well in the Lord]). Therefore, this papyrus contains the earliest extant attestation of a *nomen sacrum* in a documentary text.

As this specimen demonstrates, letters on papyrus are particularly informative about the everyday dimension of life in Antiquity. Letter writing was a prominent means of interaction in the Graeco-Roman world. Christian letters align with this practice and depict the daily issues, thoughts and concerns of common people. Their immediacy and realism contribute to elucidate the living conditions of the early Christian society and to set the New Testament world into a concrete context (see Arzt-Grabner 2023; Huebner 2019; Kreinecker, Kloppenborg & Arzt-Grabner 2023).

By reading and studying their communication in writing, we have the opportunity to ‘dig’ into the lives of the individuals: to reconstruct their ‘microhistory’ – the historical reality of their everyday life. The past starts speaking to us; the voices of ordinary existences are extraordinarily heard.

## Healing through prayers in papyrus letters

Health is a delicate aspect of everyday life and medical issues are often found in written communication between individuals. Private correspondence on papyrus highlights the connection between illness, healing and God in the Christian communities of Egypt. Thus, it contributes to our understanding of the topic of healing from a Christian perspective.

Praying for healing and healing through faith are components deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. This tradition goes back to the healing ministry of Jesus as depicted in the New Testament, but continues well beyond the Apostolic period.<sup>16</sup> Miraculous healings in the name of God have been a recurring feature in the lives of saints since the beginning of hagiographic literature. An example is one of the oldest and

15.P.Bas. II 43 has been thoroughly discussed by Huebner (2019:19–28; 2020:182–188), which is the most recent edition of the text (see also Bagnall 2009:8).

16.On this topic, see Kee (1986).

most influential Christian biographies to have survived, the *Vita Antonii* authored by Athanasios of Alexandria in the 4th century. Among the earliest Desert Fathers, Anthony spent a rigorously ascetic life between the Egyptian countryside and the remote Red Sea Mountains in the Eastern Desert. The extreme austerity and seclusion of his eremitic model exercised a profound impact on the establishment of the ideals of Christian monasticism. When not represented enduring supernatural temptations and fighting against demons, Athanasios often portrays the saint being sought out by ailing suppliants to intercede with the Lord about their bodily illnesses.

Letters on papyrus from 4th-century Egypt mirror the same socio-cultural context and belief structure and offer a documentary counterpart to these literary narratives. Real humans, struggling with various physical conditions, address the 'holy men' who lived in the Egyptian *chora*. Papnouthios, John of Hermopolis and Nephros are the names of some of the 4th-century monastic intercessors recorded in Greek and Coptic papyri.<sup>17</sup> Those who appealed to them are the same people who appealed to St. Anthony in Athanasios' *Vita*. The same is also the connection between prayer as a means of intercession and (purported) healing as its outcome. Unlike Anthony the Great, the holy men of the papyri are known only from non-literary sources. We may presume that their contemporaries held them in high regard on account of their spirituality. Papyri provide glimpses into the effect and meaning of healing through prayers from the petitioners' perspective. These individuals implore the holy figures with heartfelt appeals in epistolary form. Their texts share strong expectations of healing even though the supplicants are not in physical proximity to whom they are entreating. These people's words still have the power to impress the modern reader. We visualise their distress and hear their *cri de coeur*.

In one of the letters, addressed to Nephros (P.Neph. 1), the head of the Hathor Monastery located in the Herakleopolite nome, Paulos and his wife Tapiam appeal to the monk to restore and preserve their health. Tapiam is stricken with illness and unable to leave her bed. She has firm faith in the intercessor's prayers. Their healing efficacy has already been tested when Tapiam's children were sick and recovered:

I, Tapiam, have been ill and am still confined to my bed. We entreat you, therefore, to pray for us to be made healthy and whole. Indeed, our children were ill earlier and through your prayers they got well. We believe that your Lord, because you are righteous, will listen to you. (ll. 11–16, [transl. Vivian 2004:257])

Three out of the eight letters (P.Lond. VI 1926, 1928 and 1929), belonging to the archive of Papnouthios, regard health difficulties. There is no evidence to identify Papnouthios with a figure already known to history. However, the correspondence sent to him makes clear that he was an

anchorite 'connected with a monastic settlement', 'a man of standing and high reputation for sanctity',<sup>18</sup> able to exercise a special gift of healing.

In P.Lond. VI 1928, Herakleides beseeches the holy man, because an unnamed illness (*vóσoc*) is oppressing him:

You always find time to pray for us, and through your prayers we ask for help from the Most High. But now I entreat you even more to do [this] both in my name and with regard to the illness that has attacked me and is such a burden to [me]. (ll. 3–5, [transl. Vivian 2004:249])

The letter ends with a strong statement of belief in the healing power of Papnouthios' intercession:

I tell you, I am now the one who is afflicted, where neither from a brother nor from anyone else can help come to help me – except I do have hope through our Lord Christ through your prayers. (ll. 13–15, [transl. Vivian 2004:249])

In P.Lond. VI 1929, Athanasios asks for holy prayers for himself and several members of his household. They are all 'living in the midst of these sicknesses' (l. 15 *διὰ γων* [*lege* *διὰ γωντες*] δὲ ἐν ταύταις τ[α]ῖς νόσοις), 'in very weak health' (l. 14 *ἀνωτ[α]τα*) and in need of divine help<sup>19</sup>:

May Almighty God and his Christ grant that your Piety long remain among us and remember us in your prayers, for if your Holiness continues to do so, we will everywhere be in good health. Therefore, I entreat you to remember us even more frequently. For the prayers that you offer are accepted for the sake of your holy love, and [*we will be well*] to the extent that you request it in [*your*] holy prayers. I shall do you the justice [*of believing*] that [*you*] everywhere [*make*] mention of us, for indeed I know that [*you love*] us. My concern is especially for [*Didymē*] and for my [*mother*], for Didymē [*is ill*] and my mother is ill ... As a result, my [*greatest*] struggle [*is*] that suffering [*these things*] as I do ... in addition to [*being*] extremely exhausted. Yet I put my faith in the Saviour of all. (ll. 3–15, [transl. Vivian 2004:250])

A woman named Valeria is the writer and sender of the most emblematic specimen in Papnouthios' collection (P.Lond. VI 1926).<sup>20</sup> Valeria's suffering and hope to be healed through prayers are the primary subject of her letter. Her passionate and heartfelt tone gives the text a personal, distinctly feminine touch and makes it of particular interest. In the opening salutation (ll. 1–4), Valeria defines the holy man as 'the most valued and Christ-bearing' (*τιμωτάτος και* *χριστοφόρος* [*lege* *χριστοφόρος*])<sup>21</sup> and sends him 'greetings in

18. As stated by the *editor princeps* of these letters, Bell (1924:103; see pp. 101–103 for a discussion of Papnouthios' archive and pp. 103–120 for the edition of the texts). On this archive, see Vivian (2004:142–151) with references to further bibliography. Another letter (SB I 2266 = P.Heid. I 6) is addressed to a holy man named Papnouthios: commentators agree in identifying him with the same holy individual who received the archive. For a discussion, see Choat (2000:157–162).

19. Bell (1924:115–118) suggests the possibility that the writer of this letter is Saint Athanasios, bishop of Alexandria, but Athanasios was a common name at that time and no decisive indication in the text supports Bell's assumption. Therefore, it is just an intriguing hypothesis.

20. On this papyrus, see Bell (1924:108–110), Barrett-Lennard (1987:245–250), Vivian (2004:241 and 247–248), Bagnall & Criboire (2006:205–206), Martinez (2009:609–610), Choat (2017:29–33).

21. The epithet *χριστοφόρος* is applied to Papnouthios also in SB I 2266, 2–3. *χριστοφόρος* is an alternative spelling. The interchange of *ι* and *η* in words based on the root *χριστ-* is often found in documentary papyri (see Shandruk 2010:205–219).

17. On these 'holy men' and the papyrological material related to them, see Vivian (2004:235–269) with references. On the figure of the 'holy man' in Christian Egypt, see Frankfurter (2018:69–103).

Christ' (ἐν Χριστῷ χέρειν [*lege* χείρειν]). The use of these expressions underscores Parnouthios' role as a mediator with Jesus. In the following lines, Valeria introduces the matter and the purpose of her request:

I beg and entreat you, most honoured father, that you request for me [*help*] from Christ and that I may receive healing. I believe that, in this way, through your prayers I may obtain healing, for revelations are manifested through ascetics and religious. (ll. 5–11)

Then, Valeria points out her most grievous and debilitating symptom: 'I am beset with a severe disease consisting of terrible shortness of breath' (ll. 11–12 *μεγαλω* [l. *μεγάλη*] γὰρ νόσφ περίκιμε [l. *περίκειμαι*] δυσπνήας [l. *δυσπνοίας*] δινής [l. *δεινής*]). Whereas Herakleides and Athanasios refer to their state of sickness with generic terms such as νόσος (and its related forms), Valeria goes into greater detail. Her word choice adds substance to her writing and emphasises the serious nature of her affliction. The adjective *μεγάλη* intensifies the concept of sickness. The pathological term *δύσπνοια* ('dyspnoea' in modern medical terminology) denotes a mechanical difficulty in breathing.<sup>22</sup> The shortness of breath is described as *δεινός*. In medical literature, *δεινός* indicates the severity of a disease and is often expressive of pain in different parts of the body. Similarly, in another 4th-century Christian letter, P. Oxy. VIII 1161, the female writer, who is also sick, uses twice the adverb *δεινῶς* in conjunction with *ἔχω* – meaning literally 'to be/feel terribly', hence 'very ill' – to stress the seriousness of her condition (ll. 8 and 11). She is, in fact, almost unable to rise from her bed (ll. 8–10 *πά|νυ μη δυναμένη ἀναστῆ|ναι ἐκ τῆς κοίτης μου*).

Valeria insists again on her request and makes an even more passionate statement of belief in the ascetic's capacity to reach God through his prayers:

Thus, I have believed and do believe that if you pray on my behalf, I shall receive healing. I entreat God, I entreat you also, remember me in your holy prayer. (ll. 13–17)

Here, the emphatic reiteration of the verb *πιστεύω* – previously employed also in l. 8 – in the perfect and present tenses (l. 13 *πεπίστευκα καὶ πιστεύω*) is suggestive of Valeria's faith in Parnouthios and underlines her confidence in a positive outcome of her request. Valeria's faith makes her petition in epistolary form as effective as face-to-face contact. The holy man's prayers make healing at a distance as possible as healing in person. Valeria feels it and her words make it clear: 'even if in the body [*ἐν σώματι*] I have not come to your feet, yet in spirit [*ἐν πνεύματι*] I have come to your feet' (ll. 17–19).

## Amulets about healing

The topic of divine healing gives us the opportunity to observe how papyrological evidence also expands our knowledge of the relationship of Christianity with pre-existing religious expressions in Egypt. Papyri reveal that the indigenous traditions linked to magic survive, coexist and interact with Christian beliefs. In particular, papyri containing

22. See, for example, Pseudo-Galen *Def. med.* 262 (XIX 420, 6–7 Kühn) ἡ δύσπνοια βλάβη τις ἀναπνοῆς ἔστιν = Gal. *De diff. resp.* I 1 (VII 753, 1–2 Kühn).

magical spells – the so-called *φυλακτῆρια* [amulets] – incorporate a mixture of local and Christian elements. Amulets on papyrus thus witness hybrid aspects in religious customs. The picture emerging from such texts allows gaining a more nuanced perspective on Christian culture in Roman and Late Antique Egypt. There is a combination of old and new, continuity and change. In papyrus amulets and incantations, the Christian God may be invoked alongside Jewish and Graeco-Egyptian deities. The same text can include esoteric words (*vores magicae*) or signs (*χαρακτῆρες*) as well as crosses, Christograms and *nomina sacra*. Christian amulets perpetuate a customary tradition, thus at the same time, they reshape and readapt it.<sup>23</sup>

Amulets are part of the Egyptian and Graeco-Roman conceptual heritage. They were a common element of people's existence in both Egyptian and Graeco-Roman socio-cultural milieus. Amulets could be worn by the person to be affected or deposited and displayed in their proximity. Their primary purpose was to invoke divine power to solve life's difficulties, among which sickness. As De Bruyn (2017) explains:

Amulets with Christian elements preserve customary Graeco-Egyptian forms of invocation and adjuration, juxtapose these forms with Christian ones, modulate them into Christian ones, or replace them entirely with Christian texts that are nevertheless similar in function. (p. 3)

Ecclesiastical authorities vigorously condemned the recourse to amulets and incantations. Nevertheless, the popularity of these practices (at least) in some sections of Christian society has guaranteed their continued use in the hope of obtaining divine healing.

Amulets incorporate Christian elements in different ways. Sometimes, the incantation is simply framed with holy signs, crosses and other Christian markers. Other times, Christian prayers are adapted for apotropaic purposes. In some amulets, the text contains a biblical passage or several quotations from the Scriptures juxtaposed one with another. This biblical material, such as the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6: 9–13) or Psalms 90 LXX, was believed to serve a protective, curative or beneficial function.<sup>24</sup>

Among the many apotropaic sickness amulets, a remarkable, albeit very fragmentary, specimen is P.Coll. Youtie II 91 (V–VI AD)<sup>25</sup>:

You who healed every illness and every infirmity, Jesus Christ, heal the man or woman who wears [*this amulet*] ... and soul and body and spirit. (ll. 3–5, [*transl. Daniel & Maltomini 1990:84*])

The Christian origin of this amulet is assured by the presence of the *nomina sacra* *Χέ* (for *Χ(ριστ)έ*, l. 4) and *πνα* (for *πν(εῦμ)[α]*, l. 5), both abbreviated by contraction with

23. For a checklist of Greek and Latin amulets and formularies from Egypt containing Christian elements, see De Bruyn & Dijkstra (2011:163–216). On Christian amulets, see also De Bruyn (2017) and Bonati (2019:21–24).

24. For a comprehensive analysis of Greek amulets containing New Testament citations, see Jones (2016).

25. For comments on this papyrus and references, see Horsley (1981:102–103) and Daniel & Maltomini (1990:83–85).

a superscript line. The trichotomic formula in this order (l. 5 καὶ ψυχὴν καὶ σῶμα καὶ πνεῦμα)[α] is typical of Egyptian liturgies. The three words also appear in the letter preserved by P.Oxy. VIII 1161 previously mentioned. Here, the sick woman wishes that God helps her 'in the body, soul, and spirit' (ll. 6–7 τῷ σώματι, τῇ ψυχῇ, τῷ [[πνεύματι]ι] | πνεύματι).

## Conclusion

This article has illustrated and discussed the importance of papyri in reconstructing ancient Christians' day-to-day dimension: to 'dig' into their lives. The study of this body of evidence results in a staggering amount of textual and documentary information. The data extracted from the papyri has the potential to 'unveil' a more sophisticated understanding of ancient reality, which integrates the knowledge gained from literary writings.

Private letters, amulets and other documents on papyrus are invaluable pieces in the mosaic of the (micro)history of early Christians in Egypt. As direct sources, these texts are incomparable testimonies to the social phenomena and multiple aspects of everyday life. Healing is an emblematic example of one of these aspects. This topic is often dealt with in papyrus documents and is indicative of what ancient people were worrying about.

The time capsule of the Egyptian sands has eternalised this perishable material and the long-dead humans who wrote on it. Through papyrological evidence, the memory of individuals such as the dyspnoeic Valeria and countless others survives. Their written words have been given the privilege of accidental immortality. These words are the individuals' voices and still resonate through the centuries.

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## Author's contributions

I.B. is the sole author of this research article.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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## Data availability

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