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A CERTAIN BISHOP AND A CERTAIN DIOCESE IN EGYPT AT THE TURN
OF THE FOURTH AND FIFTH CENTURIES: THE TESTIMONY OF THE
CANONS OF ATHANASIUS

THE CANONS OF ATHANASIUS was one of the first literary texts I read on the history of Christianity in late Egyptian antiquity, as I was taking my first steps on a new scholarly path. Instead of researching the economy of Egypt on the basis of papyrus documents, as I had done before, I decided to explore the hierarchical Church of Egypt. I knew that this was an extremely interesting subject that had hitherto been under-researched, and consequently I promised myself the prospect of discoveries and fascinating reading material; and I would not be disappointed.

I was most fortunate in the initial phase of my new specialisation as I found myself one day sitting in the basement of the Cabinet d'Égyptologie library in the Collège de France in Paris, right beside the shelves with books on Coptic culture and literature. Having browsed through volume after volume, I came across the *Canons of Athanasius*, which I had previously had no knowledge of. I remember well the excitement I felt at the thought that I had just discovered a hidden pearl. Of course, Coptologists were aware of the existence of such a work, and its title was to be found in the relevant bibliographies. Nonetheless, it had remained outside the scope of interest of Church historians. I was amazed to find out that such a rich source had not

piqued the interest of scholars some sixty years after its publication, particularly as it depicted in minute detail aspects of early Church history, coupled with a detailed picture of its people and institutions.

The text itself would prove to be the focal point of a monograph which I wrote and published in 1972, which explored the revenues and expenditures of churches in Egypt.¹ Appropriately, the *Canons* emerged from the shadows in later years, which can be accredited not only to my efforts in this field, but also to those of Annick Martin, who in her extensive book on Athanasius and the Church of Egypt of his time, published in 1996, repeatedly made recourse to this work.² Others have also followed this now furrowed path, but we remain far from a complete understanding of this wonderful text, and this extends to a knowledge of the text's uses. The history of Christianity continues to provide us with sources that have been either neglected or overlooked.

1. THE MANUSCRIPT, AUTHORSHIP, TIME OF WRITING, LITERARY GENRE

The Canons of Athanasius was certainly written in Greek, but the Greek text has not survived even in fragmentary form. A complete Arabic translation remains extant. Its author, Michael, Bishop of Tinnis (ordained by the patriarch Christodulos, 1047–1077) based his translation not on the original Greek text (in his day no translations from Greek were made), but on the Coptic text written in the Bohairic dialect. Although this Bohairic source of the Arabic translation has not survived to our times, extensive fragments of the Coptic translation in the Sahidic dialect have been preserved. These fragments were used by Walter E. Crum and Wilhelm Riedel in their publication of the *Canons*, with Riedel having edited the Arabic text.³ Later, other

¹ *Les ressources et les activités économiques des églises du IV^e au VIII^e siècle*, Brussels 1972.

² A. MARTIN, *Athanase d'Alexandrie (328–373)*, Rome 1996. (For convenience, I recommend using the thematic index s.v. 'Canons d'Athanase', p. 914), as well as the article by the same author: 'L'image de l'évêque à travers les Canons d'Athanase: devoir et réalités', [in:] E. REBILLARD & C. SOTINEL (eds.), *L'évêque dans la cité du IV^e au V^e siècle. Image et autorité*, Rome 1998, pp. 58–70.

³ W. RIEDEL & W. E. CRUM (eds.), *The Canons of Athanasius of Alexandria. Text and Translation*, London 1904. The Arabic text published by Riedel was translated into German, whilst

individual pages of the Sahidic translation were identified. The palaeographic features of these fragments allow us to conclude that they date to the sixth or seventh century AD. There are differences between the Coptic text in the Sahidic dialect and the Arabic translation, which must have followed the Coptic Bohairic text. Although, for understandable reasons, we must give preference to the Sahidic version over that of the Bohairic/Arabic (the Bohairic dialect began to serve literary purposes only in the eighth – ninth century AD), the content that we find in the Arabic text must be treated with care. It is unlikely that the Bohairic text would have been based on the Greek version, as usually the translators, compilers, and copyists of texts in this dialect (it is difficult, in fact, to determine which word best describes the nature of their work) adapted Sahidic texts. Arising from this tangled mosaic of manuscript tradition, one conclusion can be drawn: there were various Coptic recensions circulating at the same time, which proves the popularity of the *Canons*.

Athanasius is mentioned as the author of the *Canons* in the Arabic translation both at the beginning and in the colophon found at the end of the manuscript. However, even without more in-depth research, this attribution should be rejected⁴, as there is no single mention of this work on the list of the Greek works of Athanasius, whose authentic output is known and has been well preserved; it would be difficult to explain why there was no mention of the *Canons* made anywhere. Infrequent stylistic similarities between

the English version of the Arabic text was translated from German by Crum, who also published and translated the Coptic text. For more on canons, see: R.-G. COQUIN, 'The Canons of Pseudo-Athanasius', *CE*, vol. 2, s.v., and A. SUCIU, 'Notes on the Canons of Pseudo-Athanasius' available at <http://alinsuciu.com/2011/07/02> (accessed on 15 November 2019).

⁴ Riedel and Crum, publishers of the *Canons*, treated the Athanasian attribution as a possible yet flawed hypothesis (RIEDEL & CRUM, *Canons* [cit. n. 3] pp. xiv–xxii). At the beginning of the twentieth century scepticism pertaining to these matters was a rare virtue. Even Crum, a great authority on Coptic literature, on many occasions accepted the attributions referenced in the Coptic tradition. René-Georges Coquin, who had systematically researched normative Coptic texts, energetically rejected Athanasius' authorship (in the article quoted in footnote 2), however, he has not really substantiated his objections. His point of view was shared by many historians of the Egyptian Church, among others Annick Martin (see article quoted in footnote 3). However, the arguments tentatively proposed by Riedel and Crum have lost their impetus in view of newly published source texts.

the *Canons* and the *Paschal Letters* by Athanasius are not a sufficient reason for attributing the *Canons* to this author. I will later return to other arguments which mistakenly favoured attribution of the *Canons* to this Father of the Church (see p. 108).

It is not surprising, however, that Athanasius was regarded as the author of works he did not write. The list of Athanasian *spuria* is long, and false attributions were numerous and frequent. We do not know when the attribution of the *Canons* to Athanasius occurred, since as early as at the turn of the seventh and eighth centuries this text was accredited to Athanasius. This is confirmed by the presence of the *Canons of Apa Athanasius* in the library catalogue of the St Elijah Monastery.⁵

If we reject Athanasius's authorship, we also reject the dates of Athanasius's life as determinants of the text's chronology. We must therefore address when the *Canons* may have been written. An important point of reference for the dating of the text is the absence of Christmas on the list of the most important holidays listed in Canon 16. Christmas began to be celebrated late: the first such occurrence took place in 432 AD⁶, and the *Canons* must have been written prior to that date. It is more difficult to place the *post quem* date. I shall come back to this problem later.

The bishop who wrote this text managed to create an original work in the form of a freely flowing homiletic discourse. The author resisted the temptation to use the model of the *Apostolic Tradition*, dominating in the ecclesiastical Egyptian tradition of his time⁷. It was not his intention to

⁵ Text preserved on a limestone slab, typical writing material for Thebes, published by R.-G. COQUIN, 'Le catalogue de la bibliothèque du couvent de Saint-Élie "du Rocher"', *BIFAO* 75 (1975), pp. 207–239 (*O. IFAO* 13315, recto 9).

⁶ H. LECLERCQ, 'Nativité de Jésus', *DACL* 12, col. 422; J. NAUMOWICZ, *Prawdziwe początki Bożego Narodzenia* [The True Beginnings of Christmas], Warsaw 2014, p. 229. The basis for establishing the date of Christmas is the sermon of Paul, Bishop of Emesa, who arrived at Alexandria to negotiate conditions of the concord between Cyril, the patriarch of Alexandria and John the patriarch of Antioch who clashed at the First Council of Ephesus and in the years that followed. The choice of the subject of Paul's speech proved to be a focal point of the diplomatic efforts: the dogma of Mary – the Bearer of God (*Theotokos*) – was one of Cyril's most important claims.

⁷ For more on ecclesiastical collections built upon a common original pseudo-epigraphic text known under the title *Apostolic Tradition*, attributed (probably wrongly) to Hippolytus

write a normative work; this is evidenced by the fact that the original text of the *Canons* was not divided into paragraphs. The currently known division of the text was only introduced by Bishop Michael of Tinnis when preparing the Arabic translation, as we learn from the final colophon of his text. Michael's interventions arose from a desire to give the work the characteristics of the genre and to facilitate its use in the practice of church life, and not only for pious reading.

The origins of the *Canons* were based on the author's own pastoral experience supported by references to the Bible, with a clear preference for the Old Testament, which is quoted at every opportunity. The style of the *Canons* is elevated, which did not prevent the author from writing segments in a very matter-of-fact manner.⁸ Nothing can be said of the city, or even the region of Egypt, which our bishop administered over. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Crum and Riedel, when they published the texts of the *Canons*, were not yet aware of the important cultural activities of the *chora* cities, choosing instead to locate the entire literary output of Egypt in Alexandria.

2. WHAT DO THE CANONS TELL US ABOUT THE CHURCH?

In accordance with the author's intentions, the *Canons* were addressed primarily to the clergy. With emphasis strengthened by references to the Bible, he presented his model of a good clergyman: honest, zealous in his work for the Church, sincerely concerned with the lot of the poor and the unfortu-

of Rome, see P. F. BRADSHAW, M. E. JOHNSON & L. E. PHILLIPS (eds.), *The Apostolic Tradition. A Commentary*, Minneapolis 2002.

⁸ I will not refrain from quoting at least one passage of this kind: 'The husbandmen of the Church shall be more holy than other husbandman, like men of God. Their hired-labourers shall be given their hire by one measure, nor shall their beasts of burden be separated from the beasts of burden of the hired-labourers. They shall not leave a beast untended, so that it stray and go about in strange pastures. The hired-labourers shall perform the work of their husbandmen diligently and with their whole heart, as children. They shall not ill-treat their beasts of burden nor cry out upon them with hard words which go forth from their mouths; but the fear of God shall be in their hearts in all that they do' (Canon 21; RIEDEL & CRUM, *Canons* [cit. n. 3], pp. 28–29).

nate, and at the same time a good father to his own family, with children brought up properly, a wife unadorned and not dressed in a provocative manner. In equal measure, he threatened both sinful as well as negligent clergy who did not sufficiently respect the altar, the sacrament of the Eucharist, and those objects which were in contact with consecrated bread and wine. He floridly expounded on the notion of *tremendum* that clergymen should feel during all acts of worship. Appropriate means of expression were provided to him by the Old Testament, which was more suited to this purpose with its numerous stories of punishing the ungodly than the New Testament.

The author writes with special emphasis about presbyters.⁹ The *Canons* open with a very significant text: “These are the laws of the presbyters. “Let those that minister aright be held worthy of double honour and especially those that labour in the word and teaching” [cf. 1 Tim 5:17]; because they were not appointed by the bishops for profit; wherefore they must needs be honored with all godly honor”, and this is followed by a comparison with Moses.¹⁰ From Canon 10 we learn that in the eyes of God presbyters are equal to bishops as they are responsible for their ‘region’ in the same way as the bishops are responsible for the city and the regions under their auspices. This is a very important declaration, meaning that we are dealing with such a stage of development of Egyptian Christian communities in which a network of autonomous non-episcopal churches called *katholikai* existed, which were run by the presbyters.¹¹

⁹ The term ‘priest’ refers to all members of the clergy. When the author talks about presbyters, he uses the term *presbyteros* in the Coptic version (a term borrowed from Greek), *qis-sis* or *qass* in Arabic. Clergymen in the Coptic text are referred to as *klerikos* (pl. *klerikoi*), a term borrowed directly from Greek; in the Arabic text the term *kāhin* is used.

¹⁰ RIEDEL & CRUM, *Canons* (cit. n. 3), p. 3.

¹¹ On this category of churches which approximate parishes, see E. WIPSYCKA, ‘*Katholiké et les autres épithètes qualifiant le nom ekklesia: contribution à l’étude de l’ordre hiérarchique des églises dans l’Égypte byzantine*’, [in:] *eadem, Études sur le christianisme dans l’Égypte de l’antiquité tardive*, Rome 1996, pp. 156–175. *Katholikai* (plural form of *katholike*) were present only in villages, we do not come across them in towns or cities (except for Alexandria), as the bishops did not want to restrict their power on the territories adjacent to their sees. In villages, where *katholikai* were indispensable for providing pastoral service, they constituted churches functioning in a systematic every-day manner. Of course all churches and all the clergy were

The *Canons* obliged presbyters to attend assemblies of all clergy taking place three times a year ('All priests that are in the villages of the district of the city' – Canon 68).¹² Presbyters were to write down the bishop's recommendations, and all the resulting documents were to be kept in every town and village. That the Church collected written records of its actions and dealings is proved by the numerous texts preserved on papyri and ostraca. It is hard to fathom, therefore, how researchers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries could have claimed that most of the clergy had been illiterate.

If the priest is a farmer and has finished harvesting wheat and barley in his field, he should leave some of the ears of corn to the poor (Canon 69). So commanded the Book of Deuteronomy (24:19), and various moralising texts followed suit.¹³ Let us note that this canon implies that presbyters in the diocese of our author could have been recruited from among small landowners, who themselves were working in the fields. This is not a trivial piece of information; it tells us a lot about the penetration of Church institutions into the lower social strata. It also indicates that these same small landowners possessed enough religious culture to be able to hold an office which assumed a knowledge of the Bible and the prayers accompanying various liturgical acts.

Of course, rich people who love the poor are also good candidates for presbyters (Canon 70). After recalling the dictate to leave some of the grapevines in the vineyard for the poor, the author states:

So shall blessing come upon the whole vine and thy wine-press shall be filled with wine and it shall not spoil nor become sour neither shall any stink of all that thou drawest from thy wine-press; for the blessing of God resteth upon it and it shall not spoil. For all they that are evil toward the poor and give not place to live unto the needy but with evil eye covet their possessions, of these shall the corn be eaten of worms, because that they have

subject to bishops. In this respect, Egypt was no different to other regions of the Christian world. However, the village *katholikai* system is a phenomenon unique to Egypt; it was a solution to the pastoral needs of what was a densely populated and rapidly Christianising country. *Katholikai* flourished as early as the second quarter of the fourth century.

¹² RIEDEL & CRUM, *Canons* (cit. n. 3), p. 43.

¹³ A similar demand to leave some grapevines in the vineyard for the poor is commanded in paragraph 70, which talks about affluent presbyters.

not given unto the poor and hungry; of these shall the wine be turned to vinegar, because the ordinance of God is not with them, as (it was with) him whose land was fertile and who had gathered his corn into his barns (Canon 70).¹⁴

This text echoes a view often cultivated in late antique homiletics, justifying philanthropic activity with a specific feature of divine action called ‘miraculous economy’.¹⁵ Scholars applied this term to the widely-held view in Byzantine times that material help is in fact provided directly by God to those who respect His commandments, especially the dictate pertaining to the giving of alms. The more one offers to others, the more one will receive from God. It is not important in this concept whether the person asking for alms deserves it; it is important that alms are given in the name of God. The basis of this view of alms can be found in the verse from the Gospel of Luke: ‘Give to everyone who begs from you’ (6:30). The conviction of the reality of the ‘miraculous economy’ means that a good bishop, by distributing funds belonging to the Church, does not risk a collapse of its finances, and laypeople gain from God’s multiplication of property and protection against natural disasters.

‘And as for the priests’ trades, they shall not follow any trade wherein there is theft’ (Canon 49):¹⁶ so they should not engage in trade (this is a trivial motif in moralistic discourse, not only in Christian literature: it has a pagan provenance), or partake of tax collection. However, papyrus documents reveal that clergymen traded and collected taxes. They also managed the estates of landowners, although our author strongly protests against this, outraged by the subordination of priests to the laity (Canon 24: ‘But no man shall suffer that any of the priests should do him service or minister unto him’).¹⁷ Acting as wardens of other people’s estates led to trading, which in the eyes of the Church moralists was inappropriate: one had to deal with the

¹⁴ RIEDEL & CRUM, *Canons* (cit. n. 3), p. 46.

¹⁵ The term was introduced into modern scholarship by V. DÉROCHE, *Études sur Léontios de Néapolis*, Uppsala 1995, pp. 238–248; see also D. CANER, ‘Towards a miraculous economy. Christian gifts and material “blessings” in late antiquity’, *J ECS* 14 (2006), pp. 329–377.

¹⁶ RIEDEL & CRUM, *Canons* (cit. n. 3), p. 36.

¹⁷ RIEDEL & CRUM, *Canons* (cit. n. 3), p. 29.

sale of agricultural produce as well as with the purchase of tools and the items and raw materials needed for the estate.

The author of the *Canons* is convinced that the clergy should live on what the Church provides them with (Canon 20). Yet we can find enough evidence in the *Canons* confirming that clergy members had their own income. This contrast between the principles (the clergy was to act within Church and the Church was to provide for them and their families) and the reality (clergy members retained their land and workshops; Church provisions constituted only a fraction of their income) was characteristic for all moralistic treaties on the clergy's conduct. The authors of the *de sacerdotio* treaties, who were moralists, insisted on this cherished fiction with admirable consistence; and therefore, based on their discourse, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Church historians acknowledged that the clergy had been in fact materially dependent exclusively on the Church.¹⁸ Thanks to papyrus documentation, it has been possible to refute this erroneous belief.¹⁹

The dissonance between reality and ideology in moralising treaties, such as the *Canons of Athanasius*, is obvious; this same fact did not disturb the authors of such treaties, and not only in those early times.

The main theme of the *Canons'* admonitions is a concern for the poor, a duty of care on the part of the entire clergy, which extended above all to the bishop. This is of course a standard homiletical theme, however, the author managed to go beyond stereotypical phrases:

A bishop under whose authority are the divine vessels, when the whole people cry unto him for bread and he heedeth them not, what of holiness hath such an one? When the people of Egypt cried unto Pharaoh in hunger, then opened he all the storehouses and sold unto them; and thus they died not by reason of the scarcity, because he had obeyed Joseph, the prophet of God. And Joseph shall be for thee a counselor more than (for?) Pharaoh. [...]

¹⁸ Even S. HÜBNER, *Der Klerus in der Gesellschaft des spätantiken Kleinasien*, Stuttgart 2004, pp. 213–228 (the geographic scope of this study is broader than the title would suggest) – the only author to have systematically researched the material situation of the clergy – adheres to the traditional judgement. On the sources of income of the clergy, see A. H. M. JONES, *The Later Roman Empire (284–602)*, Oxford 1964, pp. 904–909.

¹⁹ I elaborated on this subject in my book: WIPSZYCKA, *Les ressources* (cit. n. 1), Chapter 6: 'Les occupations laïques du clergé'.

A bishop that loveth the poor, the same is rich and the city with its district shall honor him and in his days shall the church not lack aught. A bishop that loveth the poor, in his city are there no poor; for the church of the city is rich. (Canon 14)²⁰

When reading literary sources of Egyptian provenance (including the *Canons of Athanasius*), we get the impression that bishops were the sole organiser of philanthropic activity in the Church, in which they were aided by the clergymen from their immediate circle. This does not surprise us since that is our expectation; this indeed was the case in the earliest times, certainly in the third century, when communities were small. The bishops, serving as intermediaries between the wealthier members of the community and the poor, were able to take care of all those in need.

One should ask, however, whether the bishop retained this position in the following centuries, in larger church communities; in a Christianised world, when daily contact between the bishop and his clergy and the faithful was limited due to substantial changes in the Church structure through the development of the *katholikai* network. The question we have to ask ourselves is: did these new churches take over, at least in part, the burden of philanthropic activity? The answer I can formulate based on a reading of both the literary and documentary texts is surprising: it seems that the *katholikai* were not involved. There is no mention of philanthropic activity at the village level in these texts. Unfortunately, the silence of the sources remains the basic argument here; yet this is no weak argument: the number of sources on the history of the Church is extensive and it would be difficult to explain their silence if the *katholikai* clergy had been involved in the organising of philanthropic activities. The reason for this is simple: a lack of adequate financial resources. *Katholikai* were to provide for the basic needs of the parish: bread and wine for the Eucharistic Sacrifice, sustenance of the clergy, and oil for the lamps which were to burn at all times. The remainder of the funds, as Canon 65 describes, was to be handed over to the bishop.²¹

²⁰ RIEDEL & CRUM, *Canons* (cit. n. 3), pp. 25–26.

²¹ I provided sources on the philanthropic activity of the Church in the book *The Alexandrian Church. People and Institutions* [= *JJurP Sup* 25], Warsaw 2015, Chapter 12: ‘The bishop’s philanthropic activity’.

Alongside the bishop, the steward was the principle actor of ecclesiastical charity, or more precisely the stewards, as apart from the 'great steward' we can also distinguish the 'small stewards' who operated in churches other than episcopal ones. I draw attention to them for the reason that historians have wrongly asserted that the institution of church stewards was only established as a result of the decision of the Chalcedonian Council.²² Yet there is evidence that stewards were present in Egypt as early as the second half of the fourth century.²³ The author of the *Canons* with considerable accuracy depicts the relationship between a steward and a bishop, outlining what the steward may have offered to those in need on his own initiative, without an order from the bishop. Although the bishop is the decision-maker, he cannot act without a steward (Canon 61). When access to the treasury vault is required, they need to go there together. It is an interesting notion, although it must have been impractical, and hence it must be treated as one of the ideal rules which could not have been followed. Nonetheless, the idea of the two people being responsible for the financial affairs of the church acting in harmony is important.

The author knows that belonging to the clergy may be a source of dishonest enrichment;²⁴ instead of going into detail on how this may come about, he refers to Old Testament examples in which God destroys dishonest priests.

A great deal of the discourse is devoted to the financial aspects of the Church's activities. It was obvious for the author that the Church owned land for sowing cereals and vineyards, animals needed for tillage as well as grain stores. The land is cultivated by peasants who should be 'more holy' than other peasants, and who should treat their animals and hirelings well (Canon 21). Unfortunately, we know nothing about their status; it is best not to rush to the conclusion that they were dependent on the church; they just

²² This idea can be found not only in manuals of Church history for the students of seminaries and faculties of theology but also in academic syntheses, see JONES, *The Later Roman Empire* (cit. n. 8), p. 911, J. GAUDEMET, *L'Église dans l'Empire romain (IV^e–V^e siècles)*, Paris 1989², pp. 307–308.

²³ For the sources, see WIPSZYCKA, *Les ressources* (cit. n. 1), see index; *eadem*, *CE*, vol. 6, s.v. 'Oikonomos'.

²⁴ 'Truly on account of this shameful gain many do become bishops, and many presbyters also and deacons likewise' (Canon 5; RIEDEL & CRUM, *Canons* [cit. n. 3], p. 10).

as well could have been tenants on either emphyteutic terms²⁵ or short-term contracts.²⁶

The discourse of the *Canons* seems to indicate that the clergy were provided for primarily from offerings brought to the masses by the faithful. The text devotes a lot of space to establishing the principles for the division of these offerings. Unlike in numerous ecclesiastical texts, especially in the acts of Western Synods, the author does not specify the quota attributable to clergy members but talks in detail about common meals of the clergy in the church grounds after a mass. It was well regarded if the bishop attended these meals in order to assess the comportment of his people (Canon 66). During the meal, those eating shall remain silent or talk about holy things. The common meal leftovers were to be divided so that the clergy members could take them home. In Canons 49–50, the author pedantically determines the treatment of priests who are late for mass or who leave the church during mass (the mass was usually long, and one could imagine situations when priests who were not celebrating the mass chose to leave so as to tend to other matters only to return for the meal). Archaeologists have provided evidence of rooms in church complexes (even small ones) that could have served as places to eat.²⁷ As was meet, the food was to be distributed by the youngest member of the clergy. To understand the economic value of common meals, one would need to determine – and we are not able to do so – how much food was put into bowls and onto plates, and what was consumed. Bread and wine (offered by the faithful) were certainly laid out on the table, but these would not have been the only products: poor people ate

²⁵ Emphyteusis was a type of tenancy (of perpetual nature) which gave the tenant rights and obligations very similar to those of a landowner. Disposal of emphyteutic tenancy was hereditary and transferable. Emphyteusis was a tool convenient for the Church, which by law could not sell land aside from exceptional circumstances – even the land inconveniently situated or not very profitable (we need to remember that the Church could not always choose plots presented by pious donors). Offering such ‘inconvenient’ plots into perpetual lease was therefore a good solution.

²⁶ Chapter 22 (‘The Church’) in JONES, *The Later Roman Empire* (cit. n. 8), pp. 873–937, remains the best study on Church economy, despite the passage of time. I also elaborated on the subject in various places in *Alexandrian Church* (cit. n. 21).

²⁷ See WIPSYCKA, *Alexandrian Church* (cit. n.21), pp. 386–398, for an analysis of a few churches in Cyrenaica.

bread with vegetables, greens and sauces made of fish. I doubt whether the leftovers brought home by the clergy would have been sufficient to support their families; clergy had to eat not only on the days when mass was celebrated.

Doubtless, the common meals of the clergy were a widespread custom, especially on festal occasions.²⁸ However, nowhere outside of the *Canons* is this custom presented as a system of income distribution intended for the clergy. This makes me think that we are dealing with an original idea on the part of the author, one that had probably been introduced in his diocese. It had deep symbolic meaning: it recalled the meals which Jesus had participated in and strengthened the sense of community of the clergy, thereby constituting one of the determinants of their identity. The *Canons* are silent about what the clergy received from the Church outside the common meals system.

3. WHAT THE CANONS DO NOT REVEAL

If we exclude the system of common meals, then the information on the activities of the clergy included in the *Canons* seems to correspond to the model of the functioning of the Church that we know from the various literary texts. In order to move beyond this set of well-known facts, we must look at the *Canons* from a different perspective: we need to ask not what they tell us, but what remains unsaid.

The most striking omission is the absence of the patriarch as a reference point, a source of moral and dogmatic teachings; and an office regulating matters not only at the level of the Alexandrian curia, but also in the diocese-

²⁸ They are mentioned in the *Canons of Pseudo-Basil* (see W. RIEDEL, *Die Kirchenrechtsquellen des Patriarchats Alexandrien*, Leipzig 1900, Canon 96, pp. 272–273). They feature also in the *Life of Rabbula*, the bishop of Edessa from 412 to 435, who writes ‘The many dishes of silver that had been cast with care for the service of the ten tables of the clergy he at once seized, and they were sold and give their proceeds he distributed appropriately for the use of the needy, and he gently persuaded them to employ clay vessels’ (see R. R. PHENIX JR. & C. B. HORN [ed.], *The Rabbula Corpus: Comprising the ‘Life of Rabbula’, His Correspondence, a Homily Delivered in Constantinople, Canons and Hymns; with Texts in Syriac and Latin, English Translation, Notes, and Introduction* [= *Writings from the Greco-Roman World* 17], Atlanta 2017, pp. 30–31).

ses of the *chora*.²⁹ On the one and only occasion when the ‘true Archbishop’ is mentioned, the author adds that he is referring to Peter the Apostle and not the Alexandrian patriarch (Canon 10). The patriarch’s interventions in matters taking place in the Egyptian *chora* dioceses are well attested by the sources dating to the end of the fourth century; they were extensive, the bishops asked for the consent of Alexandria even in trivial matters. The strict subordination of the bishops of Egypt to the hierarchs in Alexandria was the result of a process that had begun as early as the time of episcopacy of Demetrius (189–232), when the process of creating a monarchical episcopate began in Egypt (in the rest of the eastern part of the empire this process had begun much earlier). Demetrius ordained the first ten bishops for the cities of what we might call his *exousia* – a Greek term used at a later period. (Did it already include Cyrenaica? Libya? I doubt this is the case as it seems that the Christian municipalities of this region surrendered to Alexandria in the second half of the third century). The initiative to create bishoprics, which did not result from the internal development of Egypt’s Christian communities, but came from Alexandria, laid the foundations for the Alexandrian monopoly in the sphere of the ordination of bishops. The system was ready at the beginning of the fourth century, before the Great Persecution. At that time, there was already the basic framework of a diocesan network; the number of new bishoprics founded later was small. The new bishops were not only ordained personally by the Alexandrian patriarch, but the ceremony also took place in his town; and so, far away from the clergy and the people of the cities for whom they were ordained. Moreover, we know from numerous sources that in the fifth century the bishop of Alexandria did not feel bound by the process of choosing a bishop at the local level and could ordain any candidate of his choice, introducing bishops who were strangers to the dioceses. We have no knowledge of when such a practice came into existence; it need not have been in force from the time of the establishment of the diocesan network. I suspect that this would have taken place under Athanasius, who, during a time of strong internal conflict, dealt quite freely with existing customs pertaining to the management of Church

²⁹ I summarise the discourse from WIPSYCKA, *Alexandrian Church* (cit. n. 21), mainly Chapter 10: ‘The patriarch of Alexandria and his bishops’.

matters. When his standpoint vanquished that of his opponents, the patriarch's power and prestige increased, and he no longer had to take the opinion of the dioceses into consideration.

The other significant pillar of Alexandrian domination was the blocking of the creation of metropoleis, a process which in the eastern part of the Empire began in the second half of the second century. Between roughly a hundred bishops (as was already the case at the time of Athanasius) and the Alexandrian hierarch, there were no intermediate levels. All this took place in a specifically shaped country: a narrow valley stretching for around nine hundred kilometres from the tip of the Delta to Syene (Aswan).

The absence of metropoleis meant that consultations on doctrinal and organisational matters, as well as all disciplinary processes, took place in Alexandria since the patriarch tended not to travel. Synods did not have administrative and doctrinal functions in the Alexandrian patriarchate. They certainly did exist but constituted a forum for passing on instructions rather than making ongoing decisions and raising ecclesiastical issues. No source refers to a decision taken by a synod as a justification for the proceedings on any matter.

The Alexandrian clergy created an ideology which legitimised the position and ambitions of their bishops which were unusual in the Christian world. The effectiveness of this ideology was profound and lasting, and we can find its legacy in the actions of the Alexandrian Church and in the statements of Church representatives up to the times of Arab Middle Ages. Its framework had already existed during the time of Peter I (300–311). The elaborate form of justification for the primacy of Alexandria, which we see in the sources from the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth century, refers to the bloodshed of the martyrs (primarily of Mark the Evangelist and Peter) and emphasises the absolute devotion to orthodoxy.

Only once was the system of Alexandrian domination called into question: as a result of the actions of Melitius, the Bishop of Lykopolis (Asyut). Following Maximinus Daia's persecution, Melitius was able to gather a group of bishops and clergy members around him and found his own Church. However, Melitius did not try to replace his Alexandrian colleague, which is quite significant in itself. The system was challenged again after the deposition of Dioscorus during the Council of Chalcedon, when his successor, Proterius,

ordained during his predecessor's lifetime, found support among a group of bishops who would unsuccessfully take steps to prevent the emerging split in the Church, seeking help from the emperor and the pope.

To the majority of researchers, the Alexandrian patriarch appears to have been a man who was enmeshed in the politics and intrigues of the day and who intervened in the affairs of other churches. It is quite certain, however, that most of his time and effort was devoted to overseeing the pastoral activity of bishops who asked his opinion on many particular matters; who were probably afraid to risk taking their own decisions when it came to substantial matters. We know this primarily from the preserved fragments of correspondence. Letters were the primary means for overseeing the activities of bishops; not an easy task given the conditions for sending correspondence at the time. The difficulties arising from such deliveries are worth considering. Although professional messengers were in operation, letters of high importance were delivered by members of the Alexandrian clergy, probably carrying correspondence for several bishops along the way.³⁰ These church envoys were no couriers: aside from gossip, they also delivered detailed instructions. At their destinations, they listened to complaints and collected various dispatches, probably together with bribes that were to persuade them to deliver the letters in such a fashion that the petition would find its way to the patriarch. Travelling between the dioceses, they learned about the outstanding members of the clergy and their connections to the elite families and local officials. There had to have been those who would whisper the names of potential bishops into the patriarch's ear. The conveyors of annual paschal letters played an important role, its members served (likely; we have no knowledge on this subject) in the nearby nomes.³¹

It seems unlikely that the patriarchs would have set up a mechanism for supervising the actions of envoys circulating between dioceses (the patriarch would probably have relied on informers). In particular, there was no system

³⁰ Information on this subject is compiled in WIPSYCKA, *Alexandrian Church* (cit. n. 21), pp. 253–254.

³¹ On the subject of paschal letters, see Atanasio d'Alessandria, *Le lettere festali*; Anonimo, *Indice delle lettere festali*, A. CAMPLANI (ed.), Milan 2003; see also WIPSYCKA, *Alexandrian Church* (cit. n. 21), pp. 251, 275–276.

that would have curbed the practice of simony – it was systemic in nature. It is difficult to determine the actual extent of this practice. Preserved complaints condemning this plague are not sufficient to determine the frequency of this phenomenon. What is more important is the awareness that simony was somehow inscribed in the model of a centrally governed church. The distance calculated in kilometres and days of travel between the decision-making centre and the controlling centre increased the risk of misconduct, in comparison to churches organised around *metropoleis*.

A consequence of the silence of the *Canons* about the patriarch is their silence on the subject of the ordinations of bishops. These were a significant matter not only for the clergy but for the entire Church, but it was the patriarch who decided about the appointments of new shepherds. The ardour elicited in dioceses by efforts to put together a list of candidates (procedures envisaged that the clergy and the people could be asked their opinion on this matter) must have been rather abhorrent to the kind of bishop that we consider our author to have been. And so perhaps he chose not to write about it. It is more difficult to explain why the author of the *Canons* does not mention the patriarch. I suspect that he may not have approved of the Alexandrian church system. Possibly the phrase ‘true archbishop’ used by him in reference to Peter the Apostle carried a negative assessment of those Alexandrian patriarchs known to the author.

Amazingly, our author writes very little about heretics. The word itself can only be found in a heavily corrupted passage of the Coptic version³² (it is not present in the Arabic version). It would seem that it says that one should not accept an invitation from heretics or from Jews. The author mentions Melitius as a person who had separated from the Church, although Paul the Apostle said that the Church was one; those who claim that Melitius ‘hath a church’ should be excommunicated (Canon 25). There is also a recommendation that psalmists should not sing Melitius’s ‘writings’ (Canon 12), whereas lectors should only read ‘the Catholic word’.³³ There is no mention of Arius and his followers. It would seem that our bishop did

³² See Fragment B XV, RIEDEL & CRUM, *Canons* (cit. n. 3), pp. 114 (Coptic) and 140 (English).

³³ Canon 11. This may refer to the apocryphals. The author talks about forbidden texts, that they are not inspired by God but ‘by the world’.

not deal with heretics on a daily basis; he knew they existed, but he did not need to instruct his clergy on how to deal with them.

All of this points to the presence of a dogmatic peace in Egypt during the time when the *Canons* were being conceived. This is an important statement which allows us to dismiss the hypothesis that Athanasius was the author of the *Canons*. The Arians presented a serious threat even in the final years of Athanasius' life, whereas the Melitians, although they had lost their position in the Christian community, were still considered serious enemies of the Church, which claimed to be Catholic. Had Athanasius been the author of the *Canons*, his personal aversion to the Melitians would have been voiced through harsh condemnation in his treatise. I think that the absence of heretics allows us to date the *Canons* to the early fifth century, that is, either the last years of Theophilus' episcopacy (died in 412) or the beginning of the tenure of Cyril. The Arians were still present in Egypt at that time, but apart from Alexandria (where various heretical groups were certainly present) they might have no longer been either substantial in number or influential in terms of their reach. New conflicts would arise at a later stage.

Pagans also seem to have remained outside the sphere of the author of the *Canons*. Canon 11 deals with preventing pagans from entering 'the church'; the author does not specify whether he means access to churches during mass (maybe this was an obvious implication). It is hard for me to believe that there was a general ban on non-Christians entering the churches. Christians were forbidden from attending the theatre or frequenting 'places of the heathen', i.e. pagan cult places (Canon 26). During family celebrations, such as the marriage of sub-deacons, Christians also were required not to be merry, clap their hands or sing like pagans (Coptic Canon 43).

During the lifetime of the author of the *Canons*, pagans constituted a small percentage of the inhabitants of Egypt, scattered about in different regions. Perhaps in the author's diocese there were no more influential pagan groups. The texts of Egyptian provenance seldom refer to the Church's efforts to convert pagans, both when pagans were large in numbers and during the time when their numbers were decreasing. I have often wondered whether the Egyptian church hierarchy was passive when it came to Christianisation, and whether the growth in the numbers of Christian followers was simply the result of social processes. What we know of the con-

version of pagans, which was not always a peaceful process, is derived from literary texts written by monks. These testimonies are few and far between and they require critical approach.³⁴ I must also point out that archaeologists and religion historians are sceptical about the idea that pagan temples in Egypt were often destroyed by monks.³⁵ Although there are few sources to refer to, I would suggest that there was usually a compromise existing between Christian and pagan communities, and only cogent triggers could have disrupted it.

Another concept that is completely absent from the discourse in the *Canons* is the state, aside from the mention of taxes (in Coptic Canon 10, which states that taxes should be paid, as the Gospel says, and the Arabic Canon 22, prohibiting the clergy from taking part in the process of tax collection) and prisons, which should be visited by the bishop (Canon 15 of the Arabic version; however, there is no mention of the officials who locked people up in them). The intercession that the Church should provide for the poor was intended to protect them from the 'rich', who are not elucidated upon in greater detail in the text. Regardless of how we date the *Canons*, they were created at a time when the bishops constituted a part of the establishment: they negotiated various matters important to the community with the authorities (above all, they tried to obtain tax reductions when natural disasters occurred; they also looked to put a stop to the actions of dishonest officials by endeavouring to have them removed). I am not sure how to explain why the author of the *Canons* did not feel the need to write about the relations of bishop and his collaborators with municipal and provincial officials.

³⁴ See E. WIPSYCKA, *The Second Gift of the Nile. Monks and Monasteries in Late Antique Egypt* [= *JfurP Sup* 33], Warsaw 2018, pp. 252–256.

³⁵ Data has recently been compiled by J. DIJKSTRA, 'The fate of the temples in late antique Egypt', [in:] L. LAVAN & M. MULRYAN (eds.), *The Archaeology of Late Antique Paganism* [= *LAA* 7], Leiden 2011, pp. 286–436. I also recommend the article by Stephen Emmel, which looks critically at Shenoute and his dealings with the pagans: S. EM-MEL, 'Shenoute for historians: The Pneuait incident (A monastic leader and anti-pagan violence in late antique southern Egypt)', [in:] D. BRAKKE, S. J. DAVIS & S. EMMEL (eds.), *From Gnostics to Monastics: Studies in Coptic and Early Christianity in Honor of Bentley Layton* [= *OLA* 263], Leuven 2017, pp. 369–407.

I note with interest and perplexity the lack of information about preparation for baptism in the description of the clergy's activities. The term 'catechumen' is mentioned only once in Canon 25, referring as it does to 'wizards or conjurers or soothsayers' entering the church, who should be placed together alongside the catechumens: 'In short, let not the doorkeepers forget them and leave them unheeded. And if they enter ignorantly, then shall the deacons that attend unto this matter set them apart.'³⁶ I do not know whether any suppositions should be drawn from this phrase as to the existence of the catechumenal institution in the real world. Perhaps the author meant the parts of the church that were traditionally allocated to penitents.

I shall repeat that the failure to mention those actions of the clergy that pertained to the preparation for baptism surprises me greatly. I do not think that at the beginning of the fifth century new-born babies and small infants were the only souls to be baptised and that the catechumenate had become obsolete. It is even more surprising that the catechumenate is not mentioned in any of the Egyptian sources at all.

The author of the *Canons* is sparing when writing about the male members of monastic communities. He orders the faithful to include both 'male virgins and female virgins' in the division of property belonging to fathers and mothers (Canon 102). Male monks are also mentioned in Canon 92: they should not drink wine or go to martyria or to places where merriment takes place. This is a very symptomatic statement: these places of martyr worship had a bad reputation. Younger clergy members were not allowed to enter monasteries for women unless they were seen as being zealous ascetics; asceticism would shield them from corrupting any soul. The task of visiting women's monasteries should only be assigned to elderly priests who are not widowed (Canon 48).

The author of the *Canons* pays a great deal of attention to women practicing asceticism both at home and in female monastic communities. The *Canons* are one of the best sources on domestic asceticism. In accordance with the principle repeated in moralistic literature on many occasions:

³⁶ RIEDEL & CRUM, *Canons* (cit. n. 3), p. 30.

In every house of Christians it is needful that there be a virgin, for the salvation of the whole house is this one virgin. And when wrath cometh upon the whole city, it shall not come upon the house wherein a virgin is. Wherefore shall all inmates of great houses desire that this fair name may remain to them, as it is said, 'The virgins shall be brought unto the king', Christ' (Psalm 45 [44]: 14–15).³⁷

This statement is followed by a long discussion on how to select a daughter for the role of a virgin; how she should be treated by the family and how she should behave (she should fast every day until evening time, not drink wine, 'lest the lamp of her virginity be extinguished', dress modestly, go to church always in the company of family members, during large festivities hide in a convent). However, before she can be granted the status of 'church virgin' she would have to wait until her thirtieth birthday (Canon 98). A wealthy woman who has no virgin daughter will do a good deed by assigning one of her servants to this role (Canon 104).

In Canon 92, where the author emphatically orders nuns to stay in their monastery for the purposes of prayer on the days commemorating the martyrs, we find an extremely interesting picture of nuns walking in pairs to church with the prioress leading the way. In the world known to the bishop, there were no separate places of cult worship in women's monasteries, and this would indicate that the female communities which he dealt with were small.

Long dissertations on female asceticism and the marginal treatment of male monks do not mean that female asceticism was any more common phenomenon in the circles known to the author of the *Canons*. Our bishop was concerned about what happened to female ascetics in the monasteries and in the home, being convinced that they were fragile groups, unable to cope with problems, requiring both daily supervision and direction on the part of the clergy. This accords with Athanasius' line of thought, as outlined in his treatises on virginity.³⁸

³⁷ RIEDEL & CRUM, *Canons* (cit. n. 3), p. 62.

³⁸ First letter to virgins: S. Athanase, *Lettres festales et pastorales en copte*, L. Th. LEFORT (ed.) [= CSCO 150, 151/Copt. 19–21], Louvain 1955; second letter to virgins, also known under the title *Letter to the Virgins who Went to Jerusalem to Pray and have Returned* (only in Syriac): J. LEBON, 'Athanasiana Syriaca II: Une lettre attribuée à Saint Athanase d'Alexandrie', *Muséon* 41 (1928) pp. 170–188; treatise on virginity (in Syriac): J. LEBON, 'Athanasiana Syriaca

Was scandalous behaviour more common among ascetic women than among male monks? We are not able to determine that at this juncture. At any rate, it was a prevalent opinion in the Church. The tradition ordering Church leaders to take special care (let us read: *control*) of women who had no husbands (widows, virgins) dates back to the early Christians.³⁹ With the establishment of women's monasteries, this became an even greater imperative.

From the perspective of the author of the *Canons*, male monastic communities did not require daily supervision; this corresponds to our knowledge of their functioning from the entirety of what is a rich monastic dossier.⁴⁰ This is an important statement from the perspective of research on the relationship between the hierarchical Church and monastic communities. Contrary to the writings of many contemporary Christian historians, and especially those of David Brakke,⁴¹ these relationships did not enter into open conflict arising from divergent outlooks: on the one hand – an institution seeking to subordinate all religious life, on the other hand – charismatic groups which look to wrest themselves free of this institution's control. Not all monastic groups set themselves against the Church, whereas not all bishops wanted or were able to intervene in the daily life of the monastic communities. In any case, the author of the *Canons* was far from willing to place himself in the middle.

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On the whole, the balance of data that are to be found in the *Canons* and those that are not, despite the fact that they are present in other literary sources of the period, is quite astonishing. At first glance, the balancing of

I: Un *Logos peri parthenias* attribuée à Saint Athanase d'Alexandrie', *Muséon* 40 (1927), pp. 209–218; Armenian version: R. CASEY, 'Der dem Athanasius zugeschriebene Traktat περί παρθενίας', *SPAW* 33 (1935), pp. 1026–1034. For an English translation of these texts, see D. BRAKKE, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism*, Oxford 1995, pp. 274–313. On the authenticity of these Athanasian works, see D. BRAKKE, 'The Authenticity of the ascetic Athanasiana', *Orientalia* 63 (1994) pp. 17–56.

³⁹ See 1 Tim 5:3–16.

⁴⁰ See WIPSYCKA, *Second Gift* (cit. n. 34).

⁴¹ See in particular BRAKKE, *Athanasius* (cit. n. 38).

the present and the absent seems quite banal in the light of the tenets of historical craft, yet this methodology is not usually applied. Too often scholars are content to paraphrase texts with their own words. In our case, we may say that reversing such a perspective has been revealingly worth the effort.

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A CERTAIN BISHOP AND A CERTAIN DIOCESE IN EGYPT AT THE TURN OF THE FOURTH AND FIFTH CENTURIES: THE TESTIMONY OF THE CANONS OF ATHANASIUS

Abstract

The *Canons of Athanasius*, a homiletic work written at the beginning of the fifth century in one of the cities of the Egyptian chora, provide us with many important and detailed pieces of information about the Church hierarchy. Information gleaned from this text can be found in studies devoted to the history of Christianity of the fourth and fifth centuries, but rarely are they the subject of reflection as an autonomous subject. To date, no one has endeavoured to determine how the author of the *Canons* sought to establish the parameters of his work: why he included certain things in this work, and why left other aspects out despite them being within the boundaries of the subject which he had wished to write upon. This article looks to explore two thematic areas: firstly, what we learn about the hierarchical Church from the *Canons*, and secondly, what we know about the hierarchical Church from period sources other than the *Canons*. This article presents new arguments which exclude the authorship of Athanasius and date the creation of the *Canons* to the first three decades of the fifth century.

Keywords: *Canons of Athanasius*, hierarchical Church, Alexandrian patriarch, churches of the Egyptian *chora*, pagans, female asceticism

PEWIEN BISKUP I JEGO DIECEZJA W EGIPCIE NA PRZEŁOMIE IV I V W. ŚWIADECTWO KANONÓW ATANAZEGO

Abstrakt

Kanony Atanazego, dzieło homiletyczne, którego autor tworzył na początku V wieku w którymś z miast egipskiej *chora*, dostarczają nam wielu ważnych i szczegółowych informacji o kościelnej hierarchii. Informacje pochodzące z tego tekstu są obecne w studiach poświęconych historii chrześcijaństwa IV–V wieku, ale niezwykle rzadko bywają przedmiotem refleksji jako przedmiot autonomiczny. Nikt dotychczas nie spróbował ustalić w jaki sposób autor zakreślił swój temat, a co za tym idzie – co i dlaczego zamieścił w swym dziele, a co pozostało poza jego dyskursem choć mieściło się w granicach tematu. Celem artykułu jest pokazanie obu tych zakresów

tematycznych: zarówno tego, czego dowiadujemy się o kościele hierarchicznym jak i tego, co wiemy z innych niż *Kanony* źródeł epoki. Autorka znalazła nowe argumenty wykluczające autorstwo Atanazego, była też w stanie datować powstanie dzieła na pierwsze trzy dziesięciolecia V wieku.

Słowa kluczowe: *Kanony Atanazego*, Kościół hierarchiczny, patriarcha aleksandryjski, kościoły egipskiej *chora*, poganie, ascetyzm kobiecy

