

# Introduction

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This study aims at investigating, through the examination of both archaeological and textual sources, the complex historical dynamics that led to the rise of Christianity in the ancient Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus (modern el-Bahnasa), focusing on the period between the second and the fourth centuries CE.<sup>1</sup>

This settlement indeed stands out as a unique case study essential for understanding the history of the Egyptian civilisation in the Greco-Roman and Byzantine periods. The wealth of material evidence unearthed among the ruins of this ancient city offers a unique perspective on the lives of its inhabitants, and the role played by religion during this phase. In this regard, our knowledge of the history of this ancient society cannot be easily paralleled to any other.

Despite the numerous studies conducted over the last century,<sup>2</sup> the attention given only to specific categories of evidence and languages has seriously affected our understanding of the complex religious panorama of this city. In light of the results of the archaeological investigations carried out at this site over the last decades and the study of unpublished materials preserved in various museum collections, this research aims at providing a new perspective on the religious history of Oxyrhynchus, evaluating both the phenomena of change and continuity distinctive of this transitional phase.

## Historical introduction

The archaeological site of Oxyrhynchus lies on the western bank of the Bahr Yusuf Canal, c. 195 km from the City of Cairo (Fig. 1). The ruins of this ancient settlement dot the landscape surrounding the modern village of el-Bahnasa, in the province of el-Minya. In the Greco-Roman period, Oxyrhynchus was the capital of the nineteenth *nomos* of Upper Egypt, a role previously retained in the New Kingdom by the ancient *Spr-Mrw*, the main centre of the cult of the Egyptian god Seth, who was worshipped here

<sup>1</sup> The present book is a revised version of my PhD dissertation submitted in October 2021 and defended at the University of Hamburg in May 2022.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Parsons (2007); Bowman et al. (2007); Luijendijk (2008).

with his *paredra* Nephthys and mother Thoeris. According to Alan H. Gardiner, *Spr-Mrw* detained an essential role from the Dynastic period,<sup>3</sup> reflected in the Ptolemaic list of *nomoi* of the Edfu Temple, which still indicated *Spr-Mrw* as the capital of the Oxyrhynchite *nomos* and city of the god Seth.<sup>4</sup> This deity was the object of a particular veneration under the domination of the Hyksos (1630–c. 1530 BCE) and during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties (c. 1292–1078 BCE).<sup>5</sup> It is in the Third Intermediate Period (c. 1076–723 BCE) that a systematic “demonisation” of this deity began.<sup>6</sup>

Under the Saite Dynasty (664–332 BCE) the capital of the *nomos*, following the administrative reorganisation of Egypt, was “moved” to a new location known as *Pr-Mdd*,<sup>7</sup> the ancient name of the city of Oxyrhynchus; soon after, Seth disappeared from the pantheon of the nineteenth *nomos* of Upper Egypt.<sup>8</sup>

The first mention of *Pr-Mdd* is preserved the *Piankhy's Triumphal Stela* (c. 725 BCE), where it is cited as one of the most important settlements of the district.<sup>9</sup> During the war between the Libyans and the Ethiopians, at the beginning of the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty (744–656 BCE), *Pr-Mdd* was conquered by the forces of the Libyan coalition of the Delta region, commanded by Tefnakht of Sais. In this phase, the city seems to have been the object of an intense urban re-planning, as is indicated by the recent archaeological discoveries of the Mission of the University of Barcelona. The meaning of the placename *Pr-Mdd* remains uncertain since it could literally be interpreted as both the “House of Reunion” or the “House of Rupture”. The term is perhaps associated with its geographical position, considering that the city was an important crossroads between the western desert and the Nile Valley. On the other hand, according to Jean Yoyotte, it could derive from the transformation of the name of one of the most important deities of the city Thoeris-*Mdjat*, a Nubian form of the cult of Thoeris, a goddess venerated as the protector of childbirth and fertility whose origins find their roots

<sup>3</sup> Gardiner (1947), 111.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Hermopolitan cosmogony, Seth was part with Osiris, Isis, and Nephthys of the third generation of deities descending from the god Atum, the sun, the primaeval deity of the Egyptian pantheon. From Pre-Dynastic times and throughout the Dynastic phase, this deity originally from Ombos (Nubt), in Upper Egypt, was a rival of Horus, son of Osiris and Isis. He was often represented as a fantastic animal or a red male hippopotamus and was believed to reign in the arid zones and the desert; he was also the patron deity of the routes that led to the oases.

<sup>5</sup> Cruz-Uribe (2009), 201–226.

<sup>6</sup> See Te Velde (1967) and (1968); Arp-Neumann (2021).

<sup>7</sup> It remains unclear if *Pr-Mdd* was a settlement built *ex-novo* in another area or rather might be considered as a refoundation located on the site of the ancient *Spr-Mrw*.

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that in *Pr-Mdd*, no reference to this god has been documented dating from the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty up until the Ptolemaic phase, despite the numerous references to Seth as the main deity of the nineteenth *nomos* of Upper Egypt preserved, for instance, in the Jumilhac Papyrus. Seth will later become popular in Oxyrhynchus as in all the Egyptian lands in the production of Greco-Egyptian magical texts; see the third and fourth chapters, sections 3.2.10.1. and 4.2.2.5.1.

<sup>9</sup> Grimal (1981), 16, 46–48.



**Fig. 1** Map showing the location of the site of Oxyrhynchus. Courtesy of the Mission of the University of Barcelona. <https://www.oxirinc.com>, (accessed on 27/09/2024).

in the pre-Dynastic period. Thoeris-*Mdjat* was worshipped here as the mother of De-dun and wife of Osiris, who soon became the principal deity of *Pr-Mdd*.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, from the Third Intermediate Period, the cult of Osiris, a deity venerated from the pre-Dynastic phase, reached great popularity, and local theologies suddenly included Osiris in their pantheon. This god was soon worshipped not only as the chief judge of the underworld and keeper of the necropolises, as in the previous centuries,

<sup>10</sup> Vernus and Yoyotte (2005), 271.

but also as the image of the supreme ruler with whom the pharaohs identified themselves.<sup>11</sup>

The status of *Pr-Mdd*, “The City of Osiris” is already evident in *The Nitocris Adoption Stela* (656 BCE), where its district is indicated as a key area for the regular provision of goods to Queen Nitocris, daughter of Pharaoh Psamtik I (664–610 BCE).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the presence of an important harbour on the Bahr Yusuf Canal turned *Pr-Mdd* into a vital distribution centre of goods that connected the southern areas with the Mediterranean and was the crossroads for the caravan routes that lead to the oases of the western desert. This commercial and strategic enclave generated a significant amount of economic and social growth that is testified, at archaeological level, in the construction under the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty (664–525 BCE), of monumental tombs belonging to the families of governor-priests in service in a temple called *Pr-Khf* devoted to the cult of Osiris; they formed the political and religious elite of the town.<sup>13</sup>

The conquest of Alexander the Great (332 BCE) marked a turning point in the city’s history with the arrival of immigrants from various areas of the Mediterranean and Near Eastern territories, among which many Greek settlers who have introduced the Hellenistic culture and transformed the urban city plan. The newcomers named the old *Pr-Mdd*, Oxyrhynchus “The City of the Sharp-Nosed Fish”, and the town experienced a new phase of prosperity due to its crucial position, which favoured the commercial exchange between the Delta region, the western Oasis, and the south of Egypt. The long coexistence between native and foreign inhabitants originated a multicultural society where old and new religious customs and beliefs became complexly intertwined. Most of these new inhabitants, especially the Greeks, soon embraced the ancient Egyptian religion adapted to their own beliefs. Thoeris, often associated with the Greek goddess Athena became the main deity of this city, frequently represented on tomb walls and votive objects in the shape of an Oxyrhynchus fish.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For an introduction on the cult of Osiris, see Coulon (2010), 1–2.

<sup>12</sup> Caminos (1964), 75, 88.

<sup>13</sup> For an introduction on these funerary monuments, see Padró et al. (2010b). Another tomb belonging to the clergy of this sanctuary has been recently discovered; see Pons Mellado (2021).

<sup>14</sup> The association between Thoeris and the Oxyrhynchus fish is suggested by a Greek inscription, possibly from Bahnasa, dating from the reign of Ptolemy Alexander Philometor (107–88 BCE); see Heinen (1991), 241–256. The large number of bronze figurines that represent this fish, which allegedly come from the area of Oxyrhynchus, as well as the fish necropolis in Zawiyet Barmacha, suggest that Thoeris in her theriomorphic form (the *Mormyrus Oxyrhynchus*) was venerated at least from the Saite Period. On the evidence of the cult of Thoeris in Oxyrhynchus, see Mascort and Pons Mellado (2019) and Van Neer and Gonzalez (2019). Bronze votive objects mainly dated from the Saite Period, which represent the Oxyrhynchus fish, are preserved in numerous museums.

As indicated by the Wilbour Papyrus, in the Greco-Roman period Thoeris was the object of a cult in association with Isis and Serapis,<sup>15</sup> which coexisted with other local forms of cult devoted to specific aspects of this Egyptian deity.

The importance of Oxyrhynchus was officially recognised by the Roman Empire in 272 CE when the phrase “illustrious and most illustrious city” became part of its official title. According to Eric G. Turner, the introduction of this epithet may be associated with the celebrations of the Capitoline Games held for the first time in the following year (273 CE).<sup>16</sup> The constant monumentalisation of the city undertaken throughout the Greco-Roman period continued in the Byzantine era, even when the city, which soon became known as *Pemdje*, ceased to be the capital of the nineteenth *nomos* of Upper Egypt and became the administrative centre of the vast province of Arcadia, formed between 386 and 400 CE.<sup>17</sup> In 642 CE, Oxyrhynchus was occupied by the Arab army during the Battle of Bahnasa, which decided the rapid conquest of Upper Egypt;<sup>18</sup> however, the city continued to maintain an important role until the Middle Ages.

### The archaeological investigations

The first modern report on the archaeological remains of this ancient city goes back to the beginning of the nineteenth century when Vivant Denon, following the Napoleonic expedition, visited el-Bahnasa, providing the first brief description of the archaeological landscape of this settlement.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, almost a century will pass before Flinders Petrie selected this area for an archaeological expedition. The survey conducted by this scholar in 1886, in a necropolis lying to the west of the modern village, was aimed only at evaluating the site’s potential in view of further archaeological investigations, and no report was published on this expedition. A few weeks after the beginning of the 1886 campaign, F. Petrie left the supervision of the investigations in the hands of two papyrologists, Bernard Pine Grenfell and Arthur Surridge Hunt.

The two British scholars began their explorations in the necropolises of the Greco-Roman town but abruptly concentrated their efforts on excavating several rubbish dumps surrounding the modern village, where they started to discovered hundreds of

<sup>15</sup> Gardiner (1952), 48.

<sup>16</sup> Turner (1952), 78.

<sup>17</sup> Keenan (1977).

<sup>18</sup> The Arabic epic, *The Conquest of Bahnasa*, written by Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Mu’izz, reports that a Muslim army conquered the city; see Fehérvari (2007), 7–8. It was probably on this occasion that the Christian building discovered in Sector 24 of the High Necropolis of Oxyrhynchus was significantly damaged; see Padró, Martínez García, and Piedrafita (2018).

<sup>19</sup> Denon (1802), 239.

papyri. By the end of this first campaign, they had collected thousands of papyri counting literary, para-literary and documentary texts mainly dated between the Roman and the Byzantine phases.<sup>20</sup> At the end of February 1902, they returned to Oxyrhynchus and mainly concentrated their investigations on two mounds, Kôm Abu Teir and Kôm Ali el-Gamman.<sup>21</sup> In the following campaigns carried out in December 1903<sup>22</sup> and 1904<sup>23</sup> they explored the surroundings of the ancient theatre of the city, which was later excavated by F. Petrie. However, it was only in 1905 that the investigations led to the finding of the most consistent number of papyrological testimonies known from Oxyrhynchus.<sup>24</sup> The last archaeological campaign, carried out between December 1906 and March 1907, was intended to “clear up” the mounds excavated in the previous seasons. Nevertheless, the number of recovered papyri did not reach the expectations of the previous years, and the site was abandoned soon after.<sup>25</sup>

As a result of these six archaeological campaigns, half a million papyrus texts were collected and later divided between the Cairo Egyptian Museum and the Sackler Library of Oxford. This institution preserves the largest corpus of the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* that still continue to be published under the supervision of the Egypt Exploration Society, which had originally financed the British excavations. Already at the time of B. Grenfell and Hunt’s investigations, numerous papyri were donated to various public and private institutions as gifts for their financial contribution to the investigations.<sup>26</sup>

The site was then the object of several surveys that began in 1910 under the supervision of Ermengildo Pistelli and Giulio Farina on behalf of the *Società italiana per la ricerca dei papiri greci e latini in Egitto* aimed at acquiring new papyrological testimonies.<sup>27</sup> Considering the primary goal of these expeditions that ended in 1914, it is not surprising that reports describing in detail the investigations conducted at this site are missing. Indeed, aside from the edition of numerous papyrus documents discovered during these excavations, E. Pistelli and G. Farina did not provide any clear information about the area of the findings and other archaeological materials discovered. Still, the archaeological campaigns conducted by the Italian scholars were also an occasion

<sup>20</sup> Grenfell (1897).

<sup>21</sup> Grenfell and Hunt (1903a). In particular, the Kôm Ali el-Gamman was only marginally explored since the tomb of a local saint was built on the top. *Kôm* (pl. *kiman*) is an Egyptian Arabic term equivalent to the Semitic *tell* and the Turkish/Persian *tepe*. The word *kôm*, literally “mound” or “small hill”, is an artificial topographical feature, a mound consisting of the stratified debris from the accumulated refuse of generations of people who once formed a settlement and dwelt on the same site.

<sup>22</sup> Grenfell and Hunt (1904a).

<sup>23</sup> Grenfell and Hunt (1905).

<sup>24</sup> Grenfell and Hunt (1906).

<sup>25</sup> Grenfell and Hunt (1907a).

<sup>26</sup> For an overview of the papyri now in American collections, see Johnson (2012).

<sup>27</sup> Bastianini and Casanova (2009), 46.



**Fig. 2** View of the ruins of a colonnade street in the early 1920s. Petrie (1925), pl. XXXV.

for a brief survey of the surrounding landscape that led to the finding of a monastery complex, which unfortunately never underwent systematic excavations.<sup>28</sup>

It is only in 1922 that F. Petrie returned to the site starting a new archaeological campaign which led, during the first weeks, to the investigation of the city's theatre located to the north of the village, around 300 meters from an honorific column illustrated in the early 1800s by V. Denon.<sup>29</sup> Despite the limited time available, F. Petrie was able to reconstruct part of the plan of the building and collected an impressive corpus of statues, architectural fragments and various objects. In addition, part of the route of a colonnade street connecting one of the city's gates to the theatre was uncovered, providing the first relevant information on the road network of this ancient city (Fig. 2). At the same time, several members of the mission were engaged in exploring a necropolis dating between the Greco-Roman and Byzantine phases. Many of the architectural models described by the British scholar, as will be examined later, find parallels among the funerary buildings discovered over the last thirty years by the Mission of the University of Barcelona.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> This information has been acquired through the study of E. Breccia's notes today housed in the "Archivio Breccia" of the University of Pisa. My gratitude goes to Dr. Flora Silvano for allowing me to access this material.

<sup>29</sup> Petrie (1925), 14–16.

<sup>30</sup> Petrie (1925), 16–19.

Further explorations were undertaken by Evaristo Breccia between 1927 and 1928; while his main interest was, as with his predecessors E. Pistelli and G. Farina, to discover more papyrological evidence on behalf of the *Società italiana per la ricerca dei papiri greci e latini in Egitto*, he made other important archaeological findings. Unfortunately, aside from a brief report dedicated to the excavations held in 1932,<sup>31</sup> and a few articles devoted to the study of some of the finest objects discovered,<sup>32</sup> his work remains for the most part unpublished. However, thanks to the study of the notes, pictures, and drawings collected by the Italian scholar during his work at el-Bahnasa, which are now preserved in the “Archivio Breccia” at the University of Pisa, it has been possible to gain a more precise idea of the areas investigated between the late 1920s and the early 1930s, and the archaeological materials that were found there.

In particular, most of the efforts of the campaigns conducted in the late 1920s were focused on digging the Kôm Ali el-Gamman mound,<sup>33</sup> located near the modern Muslim cemetery, which was already partly investigated by B. Grenfell and A. Hunt. In 1932, the excavations were moved to the area surrounding a *tetrapylon* that was later transformed into a monument in honour of Emperor Phocas (602–610 CE), where it seems that E. Breccia discovered one of the city squares.

Aside from the efforts concentrated on the collection of papyri and the discovery of several monuments surrounding the rubbish mounds, in the years between 1932 and 1934, E. Breccia partly undertook a survey which interested a Roman necropolis.<sup>34</sup> During the last campaign, held in 1934, he found near the modern Islamic cemetery, a church built on the ruins of a temple apparently located on one of the main routes of the Roman town that linked one of the city’s gates to the necropolises of the city.

However, E. Breccia’s interest for Oxyrhynchus suddenly declined, and the site was soon after abandoned:

Ritrovamenti di qualche importanza erano diventati ormai assai problematici e da attendere, se mai, da scoperte casuali.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Breccia (1931–1932).

<sup>32</sup> Breccia (1934).

<sup>33</sup> E. Breccia convinced the Egyptian authorities to move the funerary monument built on the top to another area with the promise to restore the building; after the translation, occurred in the early 1930s, he explored the entire mound.

<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, information concerning the building techniques and the funerary depositions found are practically absent; however, the examination of the funerary statues discovered provides new insights on the influence of the Greek and Roman traditions on the artistic taste of the local inhabitants.

<sup>35</sup> E. Breccia wrote this brief note on the margins of a folder containing the survey pictures from the excavation season 1934.

Most of the texts discovered by E. Pistelli, G. Farina and E. Breccia are now kept in the “Istituto Papirologico G. Vitelli” in Florence.

Further information on the archaeological remains of this city in the Byzantine period were provided by a survey conducted between 1985 and 1986 by a Kuwaiti Mission, supervised by Géza Fehérvari, on the northern area of the modern village of el-Bahnasa, which led to the identification of several of the earliest mosques of this city.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, evidence of the presence of various Christian buildings around the area of the modern settlement were collected during the excavations conducted on its western side (Sector F). Here the remains of what was probably a monastic complex, which included several rooms used for food processing, were found.

At the end of the 1980s, illegal excavators uncovered the remains of a Saite funerary monument (Tomb 1) located on the north-eastern side of el-Bahnasa. The following investigations carried out by the Egyptian authorities led to the identification of the area surrounding this building, today known as the High Necropolis, as a large cemetery dating between the Late Dynastic and the Byzantine periods. In light of the importance of this discovery, in 1982, the Egyptian Antiquity Service, under the supervision of Mahmoud Hamza, began the excavation of this area, discovering several Roman tombs which still stand out today as the finest exemplars found over the last decades.<sup>37</sup> The work of this Egyptian mission continued for over 10 years leading to the restoration of several Saite and Roman tombs.

In 1992 the first collaboration between the Egyptian Antiquity Service and Josep Padró on behalf of the University of Barcelona began; this resulted in the creation of a joint international mission that still continues to investigate this site. During the early 1990s, the excavations were mainly concentrated on the area of the High Necropolis where numerous funerary monuments mostly dating between the Greco-Roman and the Byzantine periods, as well as several Christian religious buildings were unearthed.<sup>38</sup> Equally significant are the research activities carried out in the suburban area of the city where, in the early 2000s, the investigation of the Osireion<sup>39</sup> and the so-called “Byzantine Fortress” began.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Fehérvari (2007). Particularly relevant are the results of the surveys conducted around the mosque of Hasan ibn Šālih, founded in the year 934 CE, that was built on the ruins of a church, as proven by a study conducted on the plan of the Islamic building, which has highlighted the wrong orientation of the *qibli* wall. Furthermore, several investigations conducted around the structure have led to the identification of architectural fragments, ceramic materials and coins dated from the early Byzantine phase. Probably on the ruins of another church, the Zayn el-‘Abdin mosque was built on the north-western side of the city. Again, thanks to the examination of the materials found during numerous surveys conducted around the perimeter of the building, it seems quite certain the superimposition of the mosque on a pre-existing religious structure.

<sup>37</sup> Padró et al. (1993).

<sup>38</sup> Subías Pascual (2008).

<sup>39</sup> Mascort (2018).

<sup>40</sup> Subías Pascual (2012) and (2020).



**Fig. 3** View of the archaeological site of Oxyrhynchus. The High Necropolis and the Basilica of St. Philoxenos (Sector 24). Courtesy of the Mission of the University of Barcelona. <https://www.oxirrinc.com/el-yacimiento/la-ciudad/>, (accessed on 27/09/2024).

A survey conducted in 2010 near the ruins of the city's walls led to the identification of a monastic complex that is planned to be the object of extensive investigations in the near future. Significant is also the finding in 2014 of a temple that was later transformed into a Christian building, identified in Sector 24 of the High Necropolis (Fig. 3).<sup>41</sup>

### The Oxyrhynchus Papyri

It comes as no surprise that given the vast number of papyrus texts discovered since the late nineteenth century, most of the scholarly attention was, and still is, concentrated on the publication of this documentation. Certainly, the most important collection is constituted by the papyri now in the Sackler Library of Oxford and edited in *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* series, which in 2023 has reached its eighty-seventh volume.<sup>42</sup> Significant is also the corpus of papyri, now in the collection of the Istituto Papirologico G. Vitelli published in the series *Papiri della Società Italiana*, which counts seventeen volumes, although not exclusively dedicated to the Oxyrhynchite papyrological documentation.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Padró, Martínez García, and Piedrafita (2018).

<sup>42</sup> Parsons and Gonis (2023).

<sup>43</sup> Maltomini, Russo, and Stroppa (2018).

Minor groups of papyri are today distributed among countless research institutions and edited in various series dedicated to large papyrological collections<sup>44</sup> or singularly published in specialised journals.<sup>45</sup>

Aside from the edition of single papyri, several monographs have been dedicated to the examination of the Oxyrhynchite corpus to offer a broader perspective on the history of this city. For instance, important is the topographical study published by Julian Krüger dedicated to Oxyrhynchus under the Roman Empire, which provides essential information on the city's urban plan.<sup>46</sup>

Among the most important and recent works must be cited a volume published by Peter J. Parsons that offers a fascinating insight into the life in Oxyrhynchus between the Roman and Byzantine phases.<sup>47</sup> In addition, several studies have been dedicated to the history of the Christian community of Oxyrhynchus, including a volume published by AnneMarie Luijendijk on its Christian community,<sup>48</sup> a study devoted by Lincoln Harris Blumell to the Christian epistolar documentation,<sup>49</sup> and a comprehensive collection edited by L. H. Blumell and Thomas A. Wayment of most of the Christian literary, para-literary, and documentary papyri published thus far.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, countless are the articles dedicated to the re-edition and discussion of single or groups of Oxyrhynchite papyri.

### **Methodological perspective and approach**

Considering the numerous studies devoted to the history of Oxyrhynchus, it will come naturally to ask why we should devote our attention to a city that has been at the centre of scholarly interests for over a century. Furthermore, what does this research bring that is new compared to previous studies.

To answer these questions, we should start by paying attention to the nature of the evidence analysed in most previous research. The great emphasis given to papyrus texts has inevitably overshadowed many other categories of sources (like magical and funerary artefacts), which have been systematically excluded from in-depth studies. Moreover, an integration between papyrological and archaeological evidence has never been undertaken, despite the outstanding importance of the archaeological investi-

<sup>44</sup> Among the most important corpora must be cited the Oxyrhynchite papyri that are part of the collections of the universities of Michigan (Ann Arbor), Washington, Princeton, and Sorbonne.

<sup>45</sup> In particular, a consistent number of texts has been published in the *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* and the series *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*.

<sup>46</sup> Krüger (1990).

<sup>47</sup> Parsons (2007).

<sup>48</sup> Luijendijk (2008).

<sup>49</sup> Blumell (2012).

<sup>50</sup> Blumell and Wayment (2015).

gations carried out over the last decades.<sup>51</sup> In fact, it is not rare to perceive, even in recent works, the clear underestimation of the potential of this archaeological site.<sup>52</sup> This is certainly not an irrelevant point since the adoption of an unilateral perspective, which leaves aside such essential evidence, seriously affects our understanding of the complexity of the religious panorama of this city.

Another aspect that has had and still continues to have an enormous impact on our comprehension of the Oxyrhynchite society is the predominant interest in Greek papyri, which has resulted in the absence of adequate publications of the numerous texts in other languages, such as Egyptian and Hebrew, at present in countless museum and research institution collections. As recently noted by Joachim Quack, this element has to all effects conditioned our perspective on the society of Oxyrhynchus in the Greek and Roman periods:<sup>53</sup>

Up to now almost exclusively Greek papyri from Oxyrhynchus have been published, and this is one factor which has contributed to the fact that the side of Egyptian religion and culture at Oxyrhynchus is seriously underestimated in current research.<sup>54</sup>

In this sense, we are undoubtedly far from having a clear understanding of the Oxyrhynchite multicultural and multilingual landscape.

In addition, several crucial aspects remain significantly understudied, particularly the role that rituals played in the Oxyrhynchite liturgical, magical, and funerary practices, their agencies, and the artefacts aside from papyri involved in the performance of these procedures. It is in light of all these critical aspects that the integration of textual and archaeological evidence comes to play a crucial role.

To provide one example, when we combine the study of the Egyptian liturgical texts recently collected by J. Quack to the ritual artefacts unearthed in the Osireion of Oxyrhynchus by the Mission of the University of Barcelona, we gain an entirely new perception of the role held by the Egyptian religion in Roman Oxyrhynchus.

For this reason, to offer a complete as possible perspective on the religious history of this city, this research aims to investigate the transitional phase from multiple perspectives considering a wide range of archaeological and textual evidence integrated into a detailed re-examination of the papyrological documentation.

The first chapter will offer a preliminary insight into the religious panorama of Oxyrhynchus through the study of a corpus of more than 600 documentary papyri, including administrative texts, financial transactions, epistolary documentation, and miscel-

<sup>51</sup> This phenomenon is mainly dependent on the absence of a dialogue between papyrology and archaeology, which is determined by the specific and separate interests of these two research fields.

<sup>52</sup> Luijendijk (2008), 10.

<sup>53</sup> See, for instance, Bowman (2007), 179.

<sup>54</sup> Quack (2016a), 278.

lanea (i. e. notes and drawings). The discussion will propose an overview of the organisation of religious institutions and their personnel (i. e., administrative, financial, and ritual activities), highlighting their role in contemporary society. Moreover, this part will also provide an outline of the religious landscape of the city (i. e., traditional and Christian places of cult), the role played by festivals and other forms of social gatherings, and a description of the cultic practices performed by the local inhabitants in both public and domestic contexts.

The second chapter is focused on the study of literary, ritual, and scholastic texts mainly produced or in some way associated with the Oxyrhynchite religious institutions (i. e. Egyptian, Jewish, and Christian settings), thus integrating the picture provided by documentary texts.

The third chapter will then explore the magical and divinatory practices performed at Oxyrhynchus in the course of this transitional phase through the study of the papyrus texts published so far. This section will evaluate the role of clients and practitioners in the transmission of this wide-ranging ritual knowledge and the phenomena of endurance and continuity perceptible at the rise of the Christian religion.<sup>55</sup>

The fourth chapter will evaluate a vast corpus of published and unpublished written artefacts other than papyri, many of which have been collected by the author through lengthy research in European and American museums and institutions. Other artefacts are the result of direct investigations personally undertaken by the writer at the site of Oxyrhynchus on behalf of the Mission of the University of Barcelona. This corpus comprehends liturgical, magical, and funerary artefacts written in various languages (i. e. Greek, Latin, and Egyptian) dating between the Roman and Late Antique periods. This overview is meant to widen our knowledge of the variety of objects involved in the performance of ritual practices.

In the fifth chapter, this study will examine the archaeological evidence unearthed in over a century of archaeological investigations in order to provide an idea of the appearance of traditional and Christian places of cult, the artefacts used in worshipping practices in religious and domestic contexts, and an insight into the funerary customs of the inhabitants of Oxyrhynchus until the beginning of Late Antiquity.

The final discussion will then offer a brief overview of the results of this study through the integration of the information gathered from the different categories of materials examined, which is meant to offer a perspective as complete as possible on how and when the transition to Christianity occurred in the Egyptian city of Oxyrhynchus.

<sup>55</sup> In the course of the preparation of this study, a monograph dedicated to magicians and clients in Late Antique Egypt has been published; unfortunately, I did not have the possibility to consider this work in my research; see Nowitzki (2021).