

Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, San Antonio (Texas)

21 November 2016

Archaeology of Religion Group, panel: *Dating Early Christian Papyri: Old and New Methods*

### **Introduction**

Welcome to the session *Dating Early Christian Papyri: Old and New Methods*, organized by the Archaeology of Roman Religion Group. I am Roberta Mazza, member of the abovementioned group, chair and organizer of the panel. Before leaving the floor to our speakers, I would like to spend few words on the reasons and aims for organizing the session.

It has been some years that papyri, in particular Christian papyri, have been at the centre of growing interest, not only from the academic community but the wider audience too. The importance of papyri for the history of early Christianity has been evident since the first discoveries over a century ago: indeed papyri from Egypt are so far among the most ancient traces early Christians left behind. It is through papyri that diverse Christianities have been discovered and the slow development of orthodoxy and the Church in late antiquity can be now more closely followed. Papyri have also added information on the relationships between Judaism, Christianity and other religions, and have shed light on important aspects of Christian life from monasticism to letter writing, book making and circulation, and so forth so on. The possibility of first hand analysis of Christian artefacts has opened up new hypotheses and even sub-fields in our subjects – the vitality of the interaction between papyrology and Biblical studies comes clear when we see how many sessions deal directly or indirectly with papyri browsing the *SBL* Annual Meeting program (I counted around 18 this year).

Nonetheless this scientific enterprise has had and still has its own problems. The study and publication of new Christian texts has always been characterized by high levels of conscious or unconscious wishes and hopes (to avoid the term ideological biases), again from both academics and the public. The wish of finding the most ancient fragment of a New Testament book has been especially common, and there has been competition between various scholars and institutions, a competition recently revamped by the formation of new private collections, and above all by the use (or better abuse) of papyri in public discourses by apologists, academics and other subjects, with the media having a big role in all this. Also high has been the hope to

find new apocryphal texts, the search for which has again known a revamp in recent years with problematic outcomes.

But let us come to our session. As explained in the call for paper, I was interested in getting together multidisciplinary papers on the various methodologies nowadays available to students of early Christian papyri in order to date manuscripts. My aim was that of making the status of the question and to set the terms of a more profitable conversation between disciplines belonging on the one hand to the Humanities, and on the other to Science.

I invited Malcolm Choat, associate professor at Macquarie University and papyrologist, to talk about palaeography and papyrological standard methodologies. Brent Nongbri, also at Macquarie and soon visiting professor at Aarhus University, couldn't be out of this panel. His 2007 article "The Use and Abuse of P52: Papyrological Pitfalls in the Dating of the Fourth Gospel" called into question the dating of early Christian papyri and the methods applied so far by papyrologists, and too often misused by New Testament scholars. His work has pushed all of us to reconsider what has been made so far: I asked him to intervene with a paper that extends his research and critical analysis to radiocarbon dating (let's see if he will be as devastating with science as he has been with palaeography). Finally, James Yardley (Director for the Columbia Nano Initiative Research Center) and his multidisciplinary team (represented today also by David Ratzan and Sarah Goler) submitted a longer paper on their micro-Raman spectroscopy project on a sample of papyri, including the very much-debated Jesus's Wife and Gospel of John fragments. The development of non-invasive technologies for the analysis of ancient inks represents a positive addition to the methods currently available to study manuscripts well beyond dating: it will allow us to analyse this archaeological corpus in a more refined way, integrating more closely science and the humanities.

To sum up: I hope this session will represent an occasion for re-thinking how we address questions related to the dating of Christian papyri, in the light also, but not exclusively of new scientific technologies. I leave important questions, such as how to improve communication of research results and methods in this increasing multidisciplinary environment, to the final discussion.

**Program:**

Roberta Mazza

*Introduction* (5-10 min.)

Malcolm Choat

*Speed-Dating Papyri: Familiarity, Instinct, and Guesswork* (20 min.)

Brent Nongbri

*Palaeography and Radiocarbon Analysis in the Dating of Early Christian Manuscripts: Problems and Prospects* (20 min.)

James T. Yardley, Sarah Goler and David Ratzan

*Dating Ancient Egyptian Papyri through Raman Spectroscopy: Concept and Application to Fragments of The Gospel of Jesus's Wife and the Gospel of John* (40 min.)

*Discussion* (30 min.)