

P.Oxy. VIII.1079 (P¹⁸): Closing on a ‘Curious’ Codex?*

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Codex was by far the most widely attested book form among early Christian literary papyri. Nevertheless, the papyrological record does include several notable exceptions, two of which contain parts of the book of Revelation (P¹⁸ and P⁹⁸). Recently, the former’s status as a roll has been disputed by Brent Nongbri, who suggested that, instead, P¹⁸ is more likely to be a miscellaneous codex. This article provides a fresh look at the extant evidence and critically reviews Nongbri’s case. In closing, brief reflections on the manuscript’s social setting are offered.

Keywords: P.Oxy. VIII.1079, P¹⁸, book format, Revelation, roll, codex

Housed in the British Library under the inventory number Pap. 2053 verso, P.Oxy. VIII.1079 (P¹⁸; LDAB 2786; TM 61636) was published by Arthur S. Hunt in 1911.¹ The fragment contains parts of Rev 1.4–7 on the side written against the fibres; in its current state, it measures 9.8 × 15.1 cm (B × H) (see [Figure 1](#)).²

Hunt depicted the hand of P.Oxy. VIII.1079 as ‘a clear, medium-sized cursive, upright and heavily formed’, tentatively assigning a date in the fourth century, without excluding the possibility of an earlier date.³ And the earlier date was also suggested by Pasquale Orsini and Willy Clarysse, who compare the ‘cursive and informal documentary’ hand of P.Oxy. VIII.1079 with that of PSI III.199 (203 CE; TM 20027); they date the manuscript broadly to 200–300 CE.⁴ Given that

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1 A. S. Hunt, ed., *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, vol. VIII (London: Egypt Exploration Fund: Graeco-Roman Branch 11, 1911) 13–14.

2 An image of P.Oxy. VIII.1079 is also available online at http://csntm.org/Manuscript/View/GA_P18 (accessed 15 March 2018).

3 Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* VIII, 13. This date is also adopted in NA²⁸.

4 P. Orsini and W. Clarysse, ‘Early New Testament Manuscripts and their Dates: A Critique of Theological Palaeography’, *ETL* 88 (2012) 443–74, at 459 and 469 (Table 1).

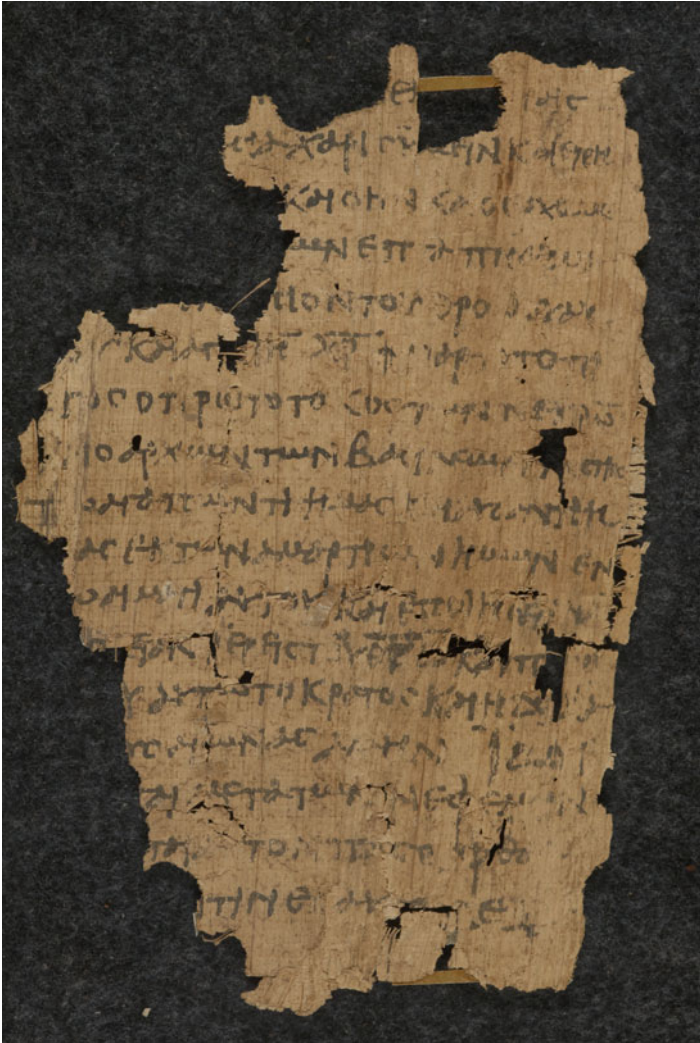


Figure 1. British Library Pap. 2053 verso. ©British Library Board.

Hunt does not adduce any specific comparanda in support of his dating and that the attested script does indeed seem to sit better in the third century, it seems that Orsini and Clarysse's broader, though overall slightly earlier, dating is to be preferred. As regards the scribal practice, P.Oxy. VIII.1079 betrays some minor traces of punctuation such as raised dots and vacant spaces; the scribe employed inorganic tremata, and effected one correction.⁵ Despite the informality of the hand,

⁵ Rev 1.6 (l. 12): του θ̄υ > τω θ̄ω.

the text was copied with care, showing no obvious errors or iotacisms. Although the manuscript's fragmentary state precludes definitive conclusions concerning its textual affinities, it appears to agree quite often with codices Alexandrinus and Ephraemi Rescriptus.⁶

Although the fragmentary state of the papyrus precludes certainty concerning the extent in which it originally preserved text of the Apocalypse, it is most likely that the entire book was included: the extant passage is continuous rather than a selection, and neither textual nor physical features of the page are suggestive of an excerpt, amulet or a writing exercise. Yet the reconstruction of the manuscript's initial dimensions, as well as of its original contents, largely depends on what sort of book one envisages. We now turn to this problem.

1. A Reused Roll or a Miscellaneous Codex?

Ever since Hunt's 1911 edition, P.Oxy. VIII.1079 was held to be a back side of a reused roll. This makes good sense, given that the side written along the fibres, published separately as P.Oxy. VIII.1075 (LDAB 3477; TM 62314), contains ending of a different work (Ex 40.26–32, followed by the subscription) written by a different hand (see Figure 2).⁷ Recently, however, this claim has been called into question by Brent Nongbri, who suggested that, rather than a 'curious Christian roll', perhaps we might be dealing with a 'curious Christian codex'.⁸ In what follows, I shall briefly review Nongbri's case and offer my own conclusions in turn.

First of all, Nongbri notes that the format of the original page and column broadly fit with patterns observable in other contemporary papyrus codices, compatible with Turner's Group 8 – after all, what the extant fragment preserves, on both sides, is a single column of text along with a margin.⁹ While, in general, Nongbri's observation is correct, it does not impress as an argument *against*

6 So already J. Schmid, *Studien zur Geschichte des griechischen Apokalypse-Textes*, Teil 1: *Der Apokalypse-Kommentar des Andreas von Kaisareia*, Band I: *Text*, Band II: *Einleitung*; Teil 2: *Die alten Stämme* (Münchener theologische Studien 4; Munich: Karl Zink, 1955–6) II.171. See also Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* VIII, 13.

7 For Hunt's edition of the Exodus text, see *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* VIII, 5–6. Hunt noted that the 'sloping uncial' hand of P.Oxy. VIII.1075 was unlikely to be 'later than the third century'.

8 B. Nongbri, 'Losing a Curious Christian Scroll but Gaining a Curious Christian Codex', *NovT* 55 (2013) 77–88.

9 Nongbri, 'Losing', 79–83. See S. D. Charlesworth, 'A Reused Roll or a "Curious Christian Codex"? Reconsidering British Library Papyrus 2053 (P.Oxy. 8.1075 + P.Oxy. 8.1079)', *Buried History: Journal of the Australian Institute of Archaeology* 53 (2017) 35–44, at 35–6, who has recently called Nongbri's calculations into question, noting that the hypothetical codex would not fit into 'Turner's Group 8 proper', though acknowledging that it would probably fit among the sub-group of aberrant cases within that group. In the end, this counter-argument does not have much force, given the flexibility of Turner's groupings in general (as noted below).

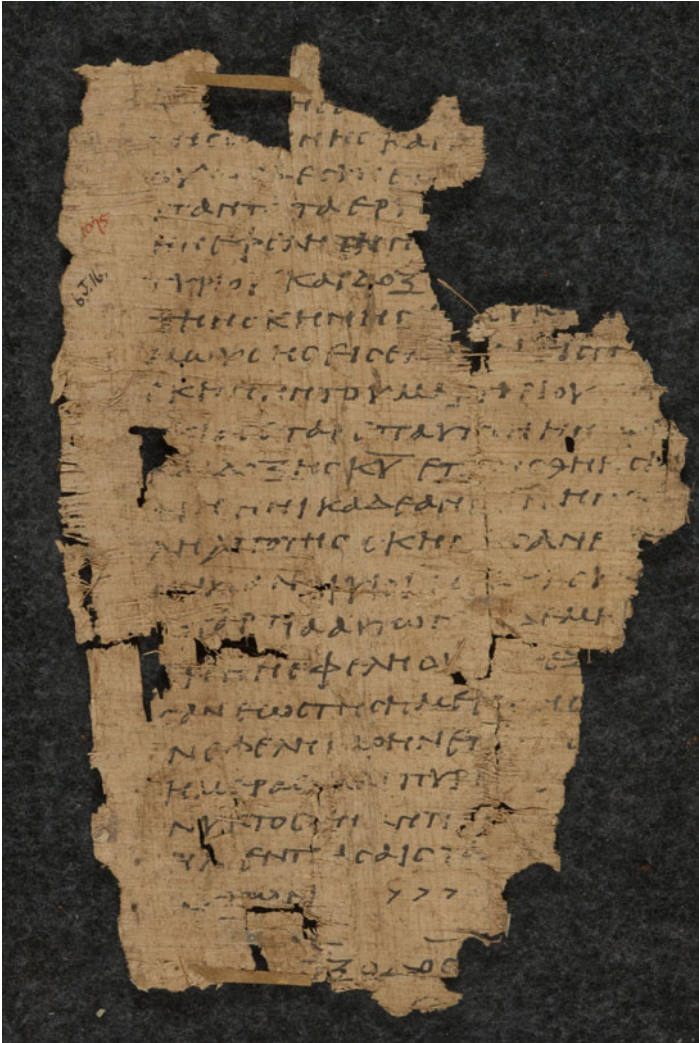


Figure 2. British Library Pap. 2053 recto. ©British Library Board.

the roll format. After all, single-column fragments of what once were more extensive rolls are not uncommon. Just from among the New Testament papyri, we might adduce P.IFAO II.31 (P⁹⁸; LDAB 2776; TM 61626) – another fragment of Revelation which Nongbri cites along with other examples of early Christian rolls.¹⁰ Compared to the de luxe literary rolls, the column of P.IFAO II.31 is also quite wide and could be compared with some of the attested codex

¹⁰ For a recent re-edition and textual analysis, see P. Malik, 'Another Look at P.IFAO II 31 (P⁹⁸): An Updated Transcription and Textual Analysis', *NovT* 58 (2016) 204–17.

formats as well.¹¹ As regards the page dimensions, Nongbri himself acknowledges that the height of the reconstructed page of P.Oxy. VIII.1079 is ‘common for both rolls and codices’.¹² And finally, the fact that the reconstructed page of an extant papyrus fragment fits with one of Turner’s groups is perhaps unsurprising, considering that the range of Turner’s groupings could cover just about any page dimensions.¹³

Secondly, Nongbri reminds us that ‘we now have good evidence (unavailable to Hunt in 1911) for the existence of Christian codices with an eclectic mix of contents copied by different scribes’, hence P.Oxy. VIII.1079 could potentially be regarded as yet another instance of this phenomenon.¹⁴ Here Nongbri adduces the Bodmer Miscellaneous Codex, where the opposite side of the final leaf of the *Apology of Phileas* (P.Bodmer xx; LDAB 220465; TM 220465) begins with Psalm 33 (P.Bodmer IX) written in a different hand.¹⁵ Again, it is not impossible that our papyrus is an instance of such a codicological arrangement, so that the book of Exodus and the Apocalypse may have been, for whatever reason, copied by different scribes within the same codex. It must be noted, however, that the Bodmer Composite codex would not seem to be the most fitting parallel in this particular case: it is a compilation of a wider array of comparatively shorter texts with a rather complex codicological make-up.¹⁶ In our case, however, we would appear to have two substantial works copied consecutively. Rough

11 For a thorough discussion of the column width in bookrolls, see W. A. Johnson, *Bookrolls and Scribes in Oxyrhynchus* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004) 100–19. In prose texts, the widths range from 4.5 to 10 cm, 4.5–7 cm being the normative range; the narrower columns were more common in the second century, whereas the wider ones occur more frequently in the third (p. 113). Hence, the difference between our fragment’s column width and the ‘common’ trends in the contemporary bookrolls is not so significant as it might seem.

12 Nongbri, ‘Losing’, 80 n. 11.

13 See the relevant tables in E. G. Turner, *The Typology of the Early Codex* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977) 14–22. The attested breadths range from 2.6 to 37 cm, and the height from 2.9 to 41 cm.

14 Nongbri, ‘Losing’, 79. Nongbri’s argument is cited with approval by J. Cate, ‘The Curious Case of \mathfrak{B}^{43} ’, *Book of Seven Seals: The Peculiarity of Revelation, its Manuscripts, Attestation, and Transmission* (ed. T. J. Kraus and M. Sommer; WUNT 1/363; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016) 33–49, at 42 n. 36, who states: ‘Normally, an opisthograph was made from a scroll which had become obsolete or discarded. It is hard to imagine a copy of Exodus being used in such a manner for a copy of the Apocalypse, even if a copy of Exodus scroll had suffered damage.’ In support of this, Cate adduces opisthographs from the Judean desert, none of which included reused biblical texts. The difficulty with this argument, of course, is that the early Christians need not have shared the same attitude concerning the reuse of scriptural manuscripts as the contemporary Jewish communities did. A fitting example are palimpsests found in the Cairo Geniza, some of which involved what were originally New Testament manuscripts. Similar reuse of Old Testament manuscripts, on the other hand, hardly ever took place.

15 Nongbri, ‘Losing’, 83–4.

16 For further details, see B. Nongbri, ‘The Construction of P.Bodmer VIII and the Bodmer “Composite” or “Miscellaneous” Codex’, *NovT* 58 (2016) 394–410; Turner, *Typology*, 79–81.

calculations suggest that some 65 pages (32.5 leaves) would be needed for the text of Revelation alone. Using Ralphs' edition as a rough guide, we would need a further 168 pages (84 leaves) for the preceding book of Exodus. Granting that miscellaneous papyrus codices of this size are not unheard of in the late third/early fourth century,¹⁷ the odd combination of books,¹⁸ coupled with some codicological difficulties that would have to have been involved,¹⁹ renders the miscellaneous codex, in my mind at least, a less attractive hypothesis.²⁰

And finally, Nongbri observes that, in reused rolls, the writing on the back is often upside down relative to the writing on the front.²¹ While it is difficult to falsify or substantiate this observation, given the lack of information provided in *editiones principes* (especially the early ones), papyrological experience nonetheless does seem to confirm that rotating the roll was the more usual

- 17 See e.g. Turner, *Typology*, 79–81, who instances the Coptic miscellaneous codex BL MS Or. 7954 (LDAB 107763), which contains Deuteronomy (145 pages), followed by Jonah (8 pages) and Acts (112 pages). The difficulty with this example, however, is that Turner dated it 'before AD 350' whereas the dating adopted in the manuscript's LDAB entry is in the range of 350–450 CE. The LDAB dating follows P. Orsini, 'La mauscola biblica copta', *Segno e Testa* 6 (2008) 121–50, at 133–4.
- 18 The Exodus–Revelation sequence seems difficult to account for on literary grounds, and hence is more likely to have been motivated by economic factors. But see E. J. Epp, 'The Oxyrhynchus New Testament Papyri: "Not without Honor Except in their Hometown?"', *Perspectives of New Testament Textual Criticism: Collected Essays, 1962–2004* (NovTSup 116; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005) 743–801, at 758–9 for a discussion of possible (if somewhat stretched) thematic links between the two adjacent texts. The possibility of intertextual links is also acknowledged by T. Nicklas, 'Christliche Apokalypsen in Ägypten vor Konstantin: Kanon, Autorität, kontextuelle Funktion', *Book of Seven Seals*, 96–117, at 101, who, however, ultimately rejects the notion that such factors played any role in the production/reuse of our papyrus.
- 19 In the case of single-quire construction (the most common kind of papyrus codex in this period), one would have to reckon with some sixty vacant pages in a pre-bound codex that would have to be filled up by the text of Revelation – a rather extraordinary scenario. Just as extraordinary, however, would be if the scribe appended scores of leaves (arranged in quires) to contain the entire Apocalypse whose copying was begun on the final few vacant pages of the Exodus codex.
- 20 In addition, Charlesworth, 'Reused Roll', 38–9, notes the unevenness of text blocks between the respective sides of our papyrus. In this vein, he states: 'Ordinarily, a scribe copying a codex, even a second scribe as here, would want to maintain the uniform appearance of the codex by producing a leaf with text blocks that were as complementary as possible' (p. 38). This, however, need not have been so in the case of an informally produced miscellany, which after all could have been produced in multiple settings and over a period of time. In the absence of firmer data, which could be provided only by the recovery of further portions of the manuscript – an unlikely scenario – it is impossible to press this argument too far.
- 21 Nongbri, 'Losing', 79, 84–8. Nongbri gives several instances of reused rolls among early Christian papyri (i.e. British Library Pap. 1532, PSI VIII.921, P.Lips. 1.97, P.IFAO II.31, P.Mich. inv. 44 and P.Oxy. LXIX.4705), noting that he was aware of only one early Christian manuscript deviating from this pattern – P.Oxy. IV.654, a fragment of the Gospel of Thomas.

procedure.²² Even so, reused rolls beginning the same way up occur fairly regularly, of which Hunt is likely to have been well aware. It would seem that, in the end, a reused roll that was not rotated 180° might well appear a little less curious than a kind of composite codex that Nongbri envisages – particularly in view of the informality of the production reflected in the Revelation portion.

In support of the ‘traditional view’, we might also recall a recent counter-argument proposed by Peter van Minnen.²³ He observes that, if P.Oxy. VIII.1079 was indeed a reused roll, ‘the text on the back of the roll would not have been written immediately following but long after the text on the front and one should be able to tell this from the writing on the back: the back of reused rolls is damaged from use, and writing on it is a struggle’.²⁴ If, on the other hand, we have a codex, Van Minnen posits that ‘the writing on the back should not show signs of struggle’.²⁵ With this in mind, he concludes that he has ‘no doubt that the editor was right’, and that P.Oxy. VIII.1079 is written on the back of a roll.²⁶ Incidentally, Van Minnen’s argument has been recently cited with approval by Juan Chapa,²⁷ who considers the front size of the roll to be of a Christian origin, as evidenced by the third-century date and the presence of a *nomen sacrum*.²⁸ Interestingly, Chapa there also draws attention to at least one further roll containing a Greek Old Testament passage (Gen 16.8–12) that is of possibly Christian origin, namely P.Oxy. IX.1166 (LDAB 3114; TM 61957).²⁹ If his analysis proves correct, we have a meaningful parallel to P.Oxy. VIII.1075, the front side of our roll.

22 From my survey of the P.Oxy. volumes, unfortunately only a minority of *editiones principes* have yielded relevant information. Among those that do, however, the upside-down pattern is, as one might expect, more prevalent.

23 P. van Minnen, ‘From Possidipus to Palladas: What Have Literary Papyri Done for Us?’, *JJurPap* 42 (2013) 243–61, at 245. Incidentally, Van Minnen’s article is also cited in the LDAB database, which classifies P.Oxy. VIII.1079 unequivocally as a roll. In addition, L. H. Blumell and T. A. Wayment, eds., *Christian Oxyrhynchus: Texts, Documents, and Sources* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2015) 91 and A. Mugridge, *Copying Early Christian Texts: A Study of Scribal Practice* (WUNT 1/362; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016) 279 also regard the manuscript as a roll, but curiously omit a reference to Nongbri’s article from the bibliography.

24 Van Minnen, ‘From Possidipus to Palladas’, 245.

25 Van Minnen, ‘From Possidipus to Palladas’, 245. Van Minnen’s assertion is reinforced by Charlesworth, ‘Reused Roll’, 40, who observes that ‘several vertical crevices are visible ... one of which runs down the length of P.Oxy. 8.1079. In addition, it is clear that the ink was applied after the crevices had formed.’

26 Van Minnen, ‘From Possidipus to Palladas’, 245.

27 J. Chapa, ‘The “Jewish” Septuagint Papyri from Oxyrhynchus’ (Paper presented at the ‘Papyri, Septuagint, Biblical Greek’ conference, Strasbourg, 29–30 September 2017) 14 n. 62. I am grateful to Juan Chapa for sharing a pre-publication version of this work with me (personal correspondence, 7 October 2017).

28 J. Chapa, ‘Septuagint Papyri’, 13–14.

29 J. Chapa, ‘Septuagint Papyri’, 12–13.

2. A Socio-Historical Postscript: The Social Setting(s) of a Reused Roll

In view of the foregoing remarks and in the absence of a more convincing case to the contrary, we should probably continue to count P.Oxy. VIII.1079 among the rare instances of the early Christian use of the roll format. Either way, however, we are clearly dealing with a book betraying signs of informal production, even if a more precise social setting might seem difficult (if not impossible) to reconstruct. On the one hand, C. H. Roberts famously remarked that ‘any texts written on the back of a roll or sheet discarded as waste declare themselves to be private copies, a view at times borne out by the manner of writing’.³⁰ This line of reasoning has also been adopted by Thomas J. Kraus, who submits that ‘the two awkward texts grouped together’ in P.Oxy. VIII.1079 suggest that ‘the fragment was definitely not used for public or liturgic use. It may have served the purpose of private reading or it just represents notes for certain purposes.’³¹ Even so, I fail to see why a church community cannot have employed a reused manuscript for the purposes of communal worship – whatever form that communal worship may have taken. After all, even Roberts himself acknowledges: ‘Not all texts written on improvised material need have been private. It may have been a paper shortage or just poverty that led one church to economize.’³² Indeed, in principle one cannot rule out the possibility that a reused roll – or even a miscellaneous codex, for that matter – may have been produced for and/or utilised in a church setting. We must not forget that our papyrus was most likely produced in the third century, when, no doubt, some churches at least would have been of quite modest means – hence, employing a reused copy in ‘public’ worship might have been a viable option. From the little that is known of the relevant socio-economic circumstances in third-century Egypt, it would seem that ‘private’ ownership of Christian books was in any case not a common occurrence.³³ The fundamental problem, perhaps, with the above-surveyed scenarios

30 C. H. Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt* (The Schweich Lectures 1977; London: Oxford University Press for The British Academy, 1979) 9. A similar line of reasoning is also adopted by Charlesworth, ‘Reused Roll’, 37–40 and Murgidge, *Copying Early Christian Texts*, 279. It needs to be said, however, that informality in writing need not indicate the private nature of the manuscript’s use (intended or otherwise). Particularly problematic in this respect is Charlesworth’s argument from scribal practice (p. 36–7): singular error, imperfectly executed correction, or ‘unusual’ *nomina sacra* may be observed in many of the highly formalised manuscripts, most notably so in Codex Sinaiticus (GA 01; LDAB 3478; TM 62315). For a detailed analysis, see D. Jongkind, *Scribal Habits of Codex Sinaiticus* (TS 3.5; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2007).

31 T. J. Kraus, “‘When Symbols and Figures Become Physical Objects’: Critical Notes about Some of the ‘Consistently Cited Witnesses’ to the Text of Revelation”, *Book of Seven Seals*, 51–69, at 59.

32 Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief*, 9.

33 For a perceptive discussion of the economics of book production, see R. S. Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) 50–69. As regards

is the very nature of the ‘public/private’ binary that is on occasion used in descriptions of (especially early Christian) literary papyri.³⁴ Discussion of such matters, however, must be reserved for another venue. For now, we should content ourselves with a conclusion that, whatever the social setting one might envisage, such historical guesswork is on firmer ground in presuming that P.Oxy. VIII.1079 was a reused early Christian bookroll.

‘private’ ownership of books, particularly perceptive is Bagnall’s comparison (p. 62) of income vis-à-vis ability to buy books between lower-level clergy such as readers on the one end of the spectrum and priests and bishops on the other. Note, however, that the figures used for those calculations come from the sixth century; thus, the ability to acquire books in the pre-Constantinian period would have been even more limited. As for the possible book-owning Christians in the early period, Bagnall tentatively suggests that they may have belonged to the ‘urban elite formed in the aftermath of the creation of the city councils of the metropolises of the nomes after 200’ (p. 67).

- 34 In this vein, see also G. Bazzana, “‘Write in a Book What You See and Send It to the Seven Assemblies’: Ancient Reading Practices and the Earliest Papyri of Revelation”, *Book of Seven Seals*, 11–31, at 17, who, though accepting Nongbri’s proposal, nonetheless rightly suggests that P.Oxy. VIII.1079 reflects a ‘heuristic inadequacy’ of the ‘public/private’ binary. Even so, his counter-proposal, namely that our manuscript ‘points towards a (small) circle of intellectuals who had some personal interest in Exodus and Revelation’, begs the question; indeed, it rests on the assumption that a church could not have used a manuscript produced so ‘economically’. As regards the ‘public/private’ binary, see the pertinent remark (made in the context of miniature codices) by M. Choat and R. Yuen-Collingridge, ‘The Egyptian Hermas: The Shepherd in Egypt before Constantine’, *Early Christian Manuscripts: Examples of Applied Method and Approach* (ed. T. J. Kraus and T. Nicklas; TENT 5; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010) 191–212, at 199 n. 53: ‘To our mind, the association between Christian miniatures and “private use” is as insecure as the “public/private use” dichotomy is unhelpful.’ Just like reused copies, miniature codices have been regarded as ‘private’ products, due to their presumed limited facility for public reading. On miniature codices in general, see the recent article by T. J. Kraus, ‘Miniature Codices in Late Antiquity: Preliminary Remarks and Tendencies about a Specific Book Format’, *EC* 7 (2016) 134–52.