



[Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 471](#) [1]

Language Undefined

The trial of the prefect Maximus

Typology: Papyrus

Original Location/Place: Oxyrhynchus

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Bodleian Library, Oxford

Physical Characteristics:

This papyrus is written on the recto of the sheet, in “an upright, oval literary hand, and is elaborately punctuated” (Andrew Harker, *Loyalty and Dissidence*, p. 199). The text is lengthy, and is written in six columns, although the first column bears only the ends of a few lines. The other columns have several lacunae, and the papyrus features revisions and emendations in another scribal hand at the bottoms of columns ii-v, with some occasional critical marks signalling where to insert them (see Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri, Volume III*, p. 147-148).

Date: 3d CE

Measurements: 30.5 x 46.5 cm

Language: Greek

Publications: P.Oxy. III 471

Commentary:

This papyrus is often classified (although see the discussion below) among the *Acts of the Alexandrian* (or *Pagan*) *Martyrs*, a collection of texts which narrate (largely fictional) confrontations between the Roman imperial government and various Alexandrian representatives. Contrary to what the name might suggest (bringing to mind the *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*), the trials that are narrated in these papyri, spanning a time period of one-hundred and fifty years (the earliest associated with the emperor Caligula, who reigned between 37 and 41 CE, and the latest thought to be associated with Commodus, who reigned between 180 and 192 CE), are not centred around the religious convictions of the Alexandrians in question. Religion is nonetheless a major theme in the *Acts*, however, as the collection is extremely anti-Jewish. However, scholars disagree as to just how central the role of this feature is; some argue that it is of paramount importance, while others believe it to be more of a tool in a wider aim to criticise the Roman emperors whose perceived affable relationships with the Jews were despised by the Alexandrian authors of the texts. The text on the present papyrus, however, does not engage at all in anti-Jewish rhetoric.

This text is sometimes known as the *Acta Maximi*, and contains part of a speech of an advocate against a certain Maximus, who is accused of bribery and money-lending, in addition to some hinted-at misconduct in relation to the holding of the position of gymnasiarch. However, the biggest issue seems to be Maximus’s relationship with a seventeen-year-old boy, whom it is claimed flaunts his relationship with Maximus, and accompanies him on official visits to Egypt. Firstly, it must be noted that Maximus is the only Roman to feature as the central character in the *Acts* (if indeed the text is understood as part of this corpus), and the significance of this will be discussed in the course of the commentary. Likely, however, it has been included due to the role of the Alexandrians in the trial. As Musurillo argues, the discovery in Germany in 1949 of a second papyrus witnessing this trial, dated to the same period as the papyrus from Oxyrhynchus, indicates that it was viewed with a certain amount of significance (*Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*, p. 155). Harker argues that the different recensions of the trial of Maximus show that there was no “canonical version” of the story, meaning that it could be revised as necessary for making particular rhetorical points (*Loyalty and Dissidence*, p. 78).

The identity of Maximus has been the source of some debate. It seems clear from the text that he was a high-ranking official, as he has a large client base, the power to confiscate property, and travels through Egypt of business, visiting the judgement seat (????). Grenfell and Hunt argued in their introduction to the papyrus that his position fits well that of a prefect, which is supported by line 22, where the term ???????? (*eparcheia*, referring to the office of the prefect) is used (*The Oxyrhynchus Papyri, Volume III*, p. 147). Consequently, Grenfell and Hunt argue that the Lord (?????, *kurios*) being testified before, and whose ???? (*tuch?*), translated by Musurillo as “*genius*” is appealed to, is the Roman emperor. The issues with identifying Maximus precisely, however, stem from the fact that the style of the letters in the present papyrus suggest that it might have been written in the Hadrianic or Antonine period. However, the only known second-century prefect with the name Maximus was Vibius Maximus



(103-107 CE). This said, various more recent commentators are happy to accept Vibius Maximus as the individual portrayed by the author, putting the style down to the individual scribe, and consequently assume the text to reflect an actual trial, unlike the majority of the other texts grouped within the *Acts*, which occurred in around 107/9 CE (among these are Musurillo, *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*, p. 152; Caroline Vout, *Power and Eroticism*, p. 141; Harker, *Loyalty and Dissidence*, p. 74).

In any case, if there is an anti-Roman intent behind this text, then it is different to the angles typically taken in the *Acts* (such as the anti-Jewish stance). Vout reads this text in the context of debates about 'Greekness,' particularly among the Hellenised elite of Alexandria, which was "the leading 'Greek' city of Egypt," and had tax-breaks and other privileges which its 'Greekness' afforded it. There was tension in the city due to certain elites believing that some groups (e.g. the Jews) were not 'Greek enough,' and acted more like Egyptians (see Vout, *Power and Eroticism*, p. 141; Roger Bagnall, "The Fayum and its People," p. 19). For Vout, the text is essentially an example of how the Greek literary elite used "male-male desire to defend their 'Greek' identity," while at the same time criticising Rome through Maximus's exploitation of a young Greek boy and his neglectful handling of his official duties.

Maximus's clients are described as having to wait outside his door while he entertains his teenage lover, and the boy is said to be seen at the ????????? (symposion) "symposium" (translated as "drinking party" by Musurillo) sometimes with his father and sometimes on his own. In Classical Athens, relationships between men and boys were viewed as part of the entry into manhood, and so for Vout, this episode both brings this culture to mind while showing how Maximus's behaviour demeans it. She refers to Xenophon's *Symposium* I.8-12, where the young Autolycus is admired by Callias, but unlike in the case of Maximus, the attraction is not described as shameful or dishonourable, but rather under divine influence. Even though the teenager in our text is described as behaving extremely shamefully himself, and flaunting his relationship with Maximus, Vout argues that this is due to Maximus's grooming of him, including his prevention of the boy getting an education as he should. His affection for the boy is purely carnal and debasing, and gets in the way of his duties as prefect. This can be read, therefore, as a comment on Roman appropriation, and subsequent degradation and abuse of Greek culture (Vout, *Power and Eroticism*, p. 148). Moreover, Vout argues that Maximus can be interpreted through the lens of a bad Caesar; he exploits his subjects, takes property, and undertakes unnecessary acts of cruelty. Furthermore, the way that the boy is said to be "bearing the signs of his familiarity with [Maximus]" could be seen to recall the way in which Suetonius describes Nero as showing signs on his clothing of having had intercourse with his mother while travelling in a litter with her (*Nero* XXVIII.2) (Vout, *Power and Eroticism*, p. 149).

For those who argue that the Maximus of our text should be identified with Vibius Maximus, a possible explanation for the apparently later dating on the papyrus to the Hadrianic or Antonine period could be that the author was inspired to write about the trial in light of the actions of a contemporary emperor, Hadrian himself, who also travelled Egypt with his young male lover, Antinous. There are many uncertainties which remain, but what is relatively clear from the present papyrus, is that for the author, the Roman authority figure at the centre of this trial is abusive, neglectful, and incapable of maintaining appropriate relationships; as such, he is heavily judged by his 'morally superior' Alexandrian accusers.

Image available at: <http://ipap.csad.ox.ac.uk/POxy-bw/300dpi/P.Oxy.III.471.jpg> [2]

Keywords in the original language:

- ????? [3]
- ??? [4]
- ????? [5]
- ????????? [6]
- ????? [7]
- ??? [8]
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Thematic keywords in English:

- [Roman prefect](#) [15]
- [Egypt](#) [16]
- [homosexuality](#) [17]
- [trial](#) [18]
- [bribery](#) [19]
- [Roman administration](#) [20]
- [gymnasiarch](#) [21]
- [Roman emperor](#) [22]
- [Greek culture](#) [23]

Bibliographical references: Harker, Andrew, [Loyalty and Dissidence in Roman Egypt: The Case of the Acta Alexandrinorum](#) [24] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Vout, Caroline, [Power and Eroticism in Imperial Rome](#) [25] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

Bagnall, Roger, ["The Fayum and its People"](#) [26], in *Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt* (ed. Susan Walker, Morris Bierbrier; London: British Museum Press, 1997), 17-20

Musurillo, Herbert A., [Acts of the Pagan Martyrs: Acta Alexandrinorum](#) [27] (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954)

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