THE “META-DATA” OF EARLIEST CHRISTIAN MANUSCRIPTS

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The earliest extant physical artefacts of Christianity are manuscripts, and scholars concerned with the origins of Christianity should feel more obliged to familiarize themselves with these artefacts as a matter of some priority. This obligation is not, however, sufficiently widely recognized in the field, largely because many scholars do not realize what these items have to offer. So, the aim in this short discussion is to illustrate what sorts of data early Christian manuscripts present to students of Christian origins. Within the space available, I shall merely offer some selective illustrations of the sorts of features of early Christian manuscripts that may be of significance for larger historical issues, including Jewish and Christian relations in the first three centuries. I have offered a more extended discussion of these matters in the form of a modest-sized book.2

It will help if I clarify a few introductory matters before we look at actual cases. First, by “meta-data” I refer to the data given in manuscripts beyond the readings of the texts that they convey. More commonly, in so far as early Christian manuscripts are noted at all, they tend to be seen almost solely as early copies of texts. So, e.g., textual critics take account of them in tracing textual variation and the textual history of these texts. But in this essay, I point to other data. These phenomena are the physical and visual features of manuscripts, such as how they are laid out, and the various scribal practices involved.


Second, by “earliest Christian manuscripts” I mean those manuscripts, whatever the text that they contain, that can be judged with some confidence to have been produced for Christian usage, and probably by Christian scribes. NT scholars, for example, have tended to focus heavily on our earliest manuscripts of NT texts, and mainly with a concern for the readings that they attest, as is proper if the main aims are tracing the history of these texts and establishing a modern critical edition of them. But for other/wider questions about Christian origins, it is important to take account of all texts of Christian provenance. I shall support this by giving some illustrations.

There are, however, disagreements among the experts over how confidently we can ascribe a Christian provenance to some manuscripts. Of course, in the case of copies of unquestionably Christian texts, such as those that came to make up our NT or other Christian writings, it is most likely that we are dealing with manuscripts produced for, and probably by, Christians. But how do we tell if particular copies of other texts that were not originally composed by Christians, such as the OT writings, are to be regarded as Christian artefacts? In general, three factors are widely (but not universally or without quibble) accepted as bases for deciding: use of a codex format, use of nomina sacra, and if a given manuscript was found among others that are more obviously Christian productions. I shall have more to say about the first two of these matters later.

Third, by “earliest” Christian manuscripts, I mean here items that are dated to the second and/or early third centuries CE. As to precise dating, here too there are disagreements among the experts. A manuscript dated to the early or middle second century by one palaeographer may be dated to the late second or even early third century by another expert. Unlike ancient manuscripts containing some “documentary” texts, such as marriage documents or some letters, all our early Christian copies of literary texts are undated. So, the dating of all our putatively earliest Christian manuscripts is entirely a palaeographical judgment.

To be able to offer a judgment worthy of the attention of others requires a considerable amount of time spent in developing a wide and detailed familiarity with many, many specimens of Greek writing across at least a few centuries. In short, it is a demanding specialization of its own, upon which the rest of us have to depend, and for which we ought to be particularly grateful. I can follow intelligently the observations of palaeographers, and sometimes have my own, somewhat hesitant and
cautious view of this or that case, but in the main I shall depend here upon the judgments of experts in Greek palaeography. Where the experts differ, I shall note that and try to qualify my use of the evidence accordingly. With these introductory comments as sufficing, I now turn to specifics.

The Codex Format

The first matter to note is the Christian preference for the codex over the roll, a phenomenon evident already in our earliest identifiably Christian manuscripts. This preference is all the more striking in comparison to the wider general preference for the roll-format in the second and third centuries CE, particularly for “literary” texts, that is, writings of literary, philosophical, or religious significance. Outside of Christian circles, this wider preference for the roll only began to shift to a preponderance of codex manuscripts in the fourth century CE and later.

We may use some data helpfully compiled in the Leuven Database of Ancient Books (LDAB) to illustrate this. Taking into account the catalogued “literary” manuscripts dated from the third century BCE through the eighth century CE, identifiably Christian rolls amount to 2.7% of the total number of rolls (3,033), whereas Christian codices amount to 73% of all the total number of codices (3,188). Codices (of all provenances) amount to about 5% of second-century manuscripts and about 15% of third-century manuscripts. But when we turn to manuscripts of Christian provenance, the codex is clearly the favourite book-form. For example, in the Leuven database overall, at least 91.6% of copies of New Testament writings are identified as codex form, and only 1.1% are rolls (and of the latter, it seems likely that all, or nearly all, are actually opisthographs, re-used rolls, the copies likely prepared

3 The key study on the topic is Colin H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex* (London: Oxford University Press, 1983). In the following paragraphs, I draw upon the fuller discussion in *The Earliest Christian Artifacts*, chap. 2.

4 Ibid., 37, who provide figures of rolls and codices to show “it is clear that the codex scarcely counted for Greek literature before about A.D. 200. It was not until about A.D. 300 that it achieved parity with the roll.”

5 This valuable catalogue is accessible via the Internet: [http://ldab.arts.kuleuven.ac.be/](http://ldab.arts.kuleuven.ac.be/). In the following discussion, I use figures and percentages at the time of my consultation of the LDAB. As manuscripts are continually being published and catalogued, precise figures and percentages will change across time, of course, but the figures given here suffice to give the general picture, and this general picture is not changed by such further accretions of catalogued items.
for personal study). Among all second and third-century NT manuscripts (our earliest), the percentage of codices is at least as high.

By contrast, of all manuscripts of Homer (third century BCE through seventh century CE), 62.8% are rolls, and only 18.5% identified as codices. For manuscripts of Euripides (third century BCE through eighth century CE), 65.9% are rolls and 17.9% are codices. If we were to confine our attention to copies of these texts dated no later than the third century CD, the preponderance of rolls over codices would be even greater. All the data support the commonly-accepted conclusion held among scholars acquainted with ancient book-production that the roll was overwhelmingly the preferred format for any text considered of literary, philosophical, or religious significance, the codex generally reserved for “documentary” texts (e.g., account-books, notebooks).

It is, therefore, all the more noteworthy that early Christian circles particularly preferred the codex for those writings that they regarded the most highly and treated as “scripture”. Though all pre-Christian (i.e., unquestionably Jewish) copies of “Old Testament” writings are rolls, the copies that are of uncontested Christian provenance are all (or nearly all) codices. So, this suggests that the equally strong Christian preference of the codex for writings that became part of the New Testament certainly does not indicate a lack of esteem for these texts. Indeed, it probably reflects their emerging scriptural status, with a strong preference for the codex format for these writings that matches the equally strong Christian preference for the codex for Old Testament writings, which unquestionably functioned as scriptures for at least the main body of Christians of the time.

This Christian preference for the codex was exercised particularly in copying their scriptural texts, but was by no means restricted to such texts. That is, the codex

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6 About 5.6% of mss of NT writings are classified in the Leuven database as “sheet” (i.e., a single page, the editor unable or unwilling to classify as from a roll or codex), and another 1.8% as “fragment” (which usually means pieces of a ms so small that it is very difficult to say what form the parent ms may have been). The Leuven database simply records the expressed judgments of editors of manuscripts, and the introduction to the database indicates that some editors seem somewhat reluctant to identify single sheets as to the original ms form. This means that the percentages for codex and roll forms (particularly the former) are modest calculations. Moreover, the database does not distinguish between texts copied on the “recto” side of rolls and “opisthographs” (re-used rolls).

7 The codices of these authors tend to come from the later centuries covered, when, for whatever reason, the codex was gaining ground in general book production. If we restrict our coverage to copies dated no later than the third century CE, there are very few if any codex copies.

8 The Leuven database classifies 71.4% (434) of catalogued copies of Old Testament writings dated from the second century BCE through the eighth century CE as codices, 5.1% (31) as rolls, 21.5% (131) as “sheet”, and 2% (12) as “fragment”. The overwhelming mass of catalogued Greek Old Testament manuscripts are of Christian provenance and from fourth century CE and later.
format does not by itself indicate that the text copied was treated by its user(s) as scripture. But it does seem that the codex was particularly strongly preferred by early Christians for their scriptures. So, copies of Christian text in a roll format are noteworthy (and the later the manuscript, the more noteworthy), for it probably means that the text was not regarded (at least by the copyist who produced the manuscripts, or the party for whom the manuscript was copied) as having scriptural significance.

Early Christians certainly did use the roll format for some texts, such as religious treatises, and some liturgical and magical texts. In their indispensable study of the origins of the codex, Roberts and Skeat cited 118 Christian copies of writings other than OT texts and those that became the NT, 83 of which were codices and 35 rolls (three of these opisthographs). For instance, the sole two manuscripts of Irenaeus from the second to fourth centuries are rolls. Of the earliest catalogued manuscripts of Clement of Alexandria, one is a roll, one a codex, and one a fragment of unidentified book-form. Of the LDAB catalogued manuscripts for Shepherd of Hermas, twenty-two are codices (mainly third to sixth centuries CE), and four (among the earliest copies) are rolls. Of the three Oxyrhynchus fragmentary copies of Gospel of Thomas (early/mid-third century CE), one is a codex, and two are rolls (one a reused roll or opisthograph).

Christians certainly did not invent the codex, and, to be sure, we even have a few examples of the codex used for “pagan” literary works (but parchment codices, often of small size, whereas Christians appear to have preferred papyrus codices). But Christians do seem to have been particularly active in experimenting with, and developing, this book-form. Among earliest Christian codices, we have examples of the single-gathering (or single-quire) book (all the sheets arranged in a single stack and then all folded in half, e.g., the Chester Beatty Pauline codex, 46, originally comprising 52 papyrus sheets, and the Bodmer Gospels codex 75, originally comprising 36 folded sheets), and multiple-gathering constructions with quires of various numbers of sheets (e.g., 45, made up entirely of folded single-sheet quires, or 66, made up of quires of varying numbers of sheets). This suggests to me that in this period (late second and early third centuries CE) Christians were themselves

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9 Roberts and Skeat, 43.
10 The technical term is “opisthograph,” which designates a roll originally used for one text, written on the inner surface, and then turned over and re-used for another text, written on the outer surface.
pioneering in the more serious use of the codex book-form. Their experimentation with these various modes of codex construction would not have been necessary had the codex already been well developed for book copying.

It is easier, however, to demonstrate that early Christians preferred the codex-format than it is to provide a convincing explanation for how and why they came to do so. Proposals tend to fall into one of two types, which we may label as “pragmatic” or “semiotic”. I am not persuaded, however, that any of the several proposals about the supposed practical advantage of the codex is successful in accounting for the wholesale Christian preference for this format.11 “Pragmatic” proposals include suggestions that Christians may have been attracted to the codex because it allowed use of both sides of the writing material, thereby saving on the cost of copies. But careful attempts to calculate costs of copying texts suggest that any actual savings that might have been gained by use of codex format were not significant.12 Furthermore, to anticipate other data discussed later in this presentation, the rather wide margins and line-spacing in many earliest Christian manuscripts suggest that the copyists were not particularly concerned to save the amount of papyrus used. The Australian scholar G. H. R. Horsley has proposed that Christians preferred the codex because they were from lower-educated circles more accustomed to dealing with documentary texts than literary ones, the codex thus seeming to them a more familiar book-form.13 But this seems to me unconvincing. To cite one reason, I fear that it presupposes a somewhat over-simplified view of the socio-economic level of early Christianity in the first two centuries CE.

What will seem initially a more plausible suggestion is that the codex was favoured because it may have been more easily transportable (perhaps carried in a pouch across one’s shoulder), something perhaps attractive to a religious movement that obviously devoted a lot of effort and resources to networking trans-locally among various Christian circles. Was Christianity the only movement in which trans-local use of texts was a feature? And, in any case, were Christians somehow uniquely able

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11 For further discussion, see now Hurtado, The Earliest Christian Artifacts, 63-82.
12 T. C. Skeat, “The Length of the Standard Papyrus Roll and the Cost-advantage of the Codex,” in The Collected Biblical Writings of T. C. Skeat, ed. J. K. Elliott (NovTSup 113; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 65-70, the original essay appeared in ZPE 45 (1982) 169-76. Skeat judged perhaps a 26% savings on the cost of the papyrus, but when we note the additional time, labour and skills involved in constructing a codex, the putative cost-advantage is narrowed further considerably.
to perceive such advantages of the codex that seem so obvious to some moderns but somehow escaped others in the second and third centuries CE? Anything is possible, but I confess that this seems to me a counter-intuitive.

What I have called the “semiotic” proposals include the suggestion that the Christian preference for the codex represented a move to identify and distinguish Christian copies of texts. That is, the preference for the codex may exhibit part of what we may think of as an emergent Christian “material culture” in the second century CE.\textsuperscript{14} I recognize that this goes against some current views that it is inappropriate to distinguish “Christianity” in that early period, but those who have argued such views seem to me not to have taken account of the evidence to which I point here.\textsuperscript{15} Certainly, the preference for the codex seems to be a convention among Christians already in the second century, one of a few phenomena (others of which I discuss shortly) pointing toward emergent Christian conventionalizations at a time when we generally assume nothing but diversity. My purpose here, however, is not to engage fully this larger historical issue, but merely to point out that the sort of data that I highlight here need to be considered in dealing with the larger question of when and how “Christianity” may have emerged as an identifiable entity, and how it may have expressed itself (verbally, visually, and physically) in the earliest period.

\textit{Nomina Sacra}

A second feature of earliest Christian manuscripts that is well known among papyrologists and palaeographers, but insufficiently taken account of by scholars in Christian origins, is the curious scribal practice referred to as the “\textit{nomina sacra}”.\textsuperscript{16} Essentially, a number of key words in early Christian religious discourse are characteristically written in special abbreviated forms (commonly, first and last letters, in some cases with a medial letter too) with a distinctive supralinear horizontal stroke placed over the abbreviated form. The words most consistently treated in this

\textsuperscript{14} For the proposal that we can identify an emergent Christian material and visual culture in the second century, I refer readers to my earlier essay, “The Earliest Evidence.”

\textsuperscript{15} Cf., e.g., Judith M. Lieu, \textit{Neither Jew nor Greek? Constructing Early Christianity} (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 171, whose judgment that for the first two centuries CE “material remains are not available as markers of Christian Identity, or/and, if available, they would not be or perhaps are not distinguishable” appears to neglect the artifactual import of earliest Christian manuscripts.

\textsuperscript{16} The key discussion of the matter is in Colin H. Roberts, \textit{Manuscript, Society and Belief in Christian Egypt} (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 26-48.. I have attempted to contribute further in an article published several years ago: Larry W. Hurtado, “The Origin of the \textit{Nomina Sacra}: A Proposal.” \textit{JBL} 117 (1998): 655-73. Also see now my discussion in \textit{The Earliest Christian Artifacts}, chap. 3.
manner in the earliest extant evidence are the four terms Θεός, Κύριος, Ἰησοῦς, and Χριστός. That is, the most characteristic examples, and probably the words that first were given this scribal treatment, are key designations of God and Jesus, which Schuyler Brown termed “nomina divina.”17 But already in manuscripts that are dated to the late second or early third century CE (e.g., the Egerton “Unknown Gospel,” P.Egerton 2), we see other words treated as nomina sacra (e.g., “Son,” “Father,” “Spirit,” and also “David,” “Moses,” “heaven,” and “Jerusalem”). So, clearly, from whatever beginning point, the practice spread to include additional terms.

There are controversies over the origin of this scribal practice and also over its function or significance. Roberts concluded that the particular scribal device in question was a novel Christian development, though likely motivated by religious concerns similar to those reflected in the treatment of the Tetragrammaton in pre-Christian Jewish manuscripts of biblical writings (a view to which I have lent my support).18 But Kurt Treu and Robert Kraft have contended that Christians appropriated a scribal practice that had already developed in Jewish circles, and that the only significant Christian innovation was in extending the practice to certain terms directly expressive of early Christian faith, especially, of course, Ἰησοῦς.19

Admittedly, the extant evidence is frustratingly spotty, and so educated guesses are unavoidably all that we can offer. Also, it is not feasible here to set out an adequate argument on the issue, which I have attempted in another publication.20 I content myself here with emphasizing that the issue is not merely a palaeographical one. If the scribal practice of nomina sacra was adopted from prior Jewish scribal practice, then this further indicates a remarkably direct indebtedness of earliest Christian circles to their Jewish matrix, and also shows another feature of shared “material culture” between “Judaism” and “Christianity” in the second century. If, on the other hand, the nomina sacra represent in some real sense a distinctively Christian innovation, then, as appears to be the case with the preference for the codex, this scribal practice may be another emergent convention by which Christians marked

their manuscripts. And this would be a notable finding relevant to larger questions about how and how early “Christianity” began to emerge as an identifiable social phenomenon. That is, there are larger issues, larger questions, involved in, or related to, the specific question of the origin of the *nomina sacra*. It will be important, however, not to allow preferred dispositions (or declared positions) on these larger issues (e.g., whether and when we can speak of “Judaism” and “Christianity” in the early second century) to skew our leanings on what must finally be a matter to be judged on the basis of the available manuscript evidence. My plea is that the sort of evidence that I point to here is taken into account.

The other issue about the *nomina sacra* currently (and more recently) debated is what the scribal practice really signifies. Probably, most scholars who have considered the phenomenon have judged that the *nomina sacra* reflect early Christian piety (whatever the historical relationship of this scribal practices to Jewish scribal practice), the words in question given this special treatment to set them off from the surrounding text out of reverence for what the words represent/designate. On this view, the *nomina sacra* are prime evidence of earliest Christian faith and religious devotion. Indeed, I have emphasized that the four earliest and most consistently treated words (“God,” “Lord,” “Jesus,” and “Christ”) vividly reflect the “binitarian” shape of earliest Christian piety, particularly as the key words for Jesus are given the same scribal treatment as key words for God.21

Moreover, it is important to note that the scribal phenomenon in question was purely a visual one. Although it seems likely that ancient Jewish scribal practices with reference to the Tetragrammaton were intended to signal readers to pronounce a reverential substitute-word (typically, *Adonay* in Hebrew, or *Kyrios* in Greek), there is no indication that the use of the *nomina sacra* in Christian manuscripts functioned to signal any equivalent action by readers. So far as we can tell, lectors of these early Christian manuscripts pronounced fully and explicitly the words written as *nomina sacra*, including the key words for God and Jesus. This is why, therefore, I emphasize that the *nomina sacra* registered solely as visual phenomena and could be experienced solely by those who read (or otherwise viewed?) the manuscripts in which they were written.

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Accordingly, echoing an observation by Erich Dinkler several decades ago, I have emphasized that the *nomina sacra* are to be taken as textual/scribal phenomena with an “iconographic” significance. As such, they form perhaps our earliest extant expressions of an emergent Christian “visual culture,” and should be taken account of more in efforts to chart the emergence of early Christian efforts to express their faith visually. Indeed, perhaps the *nomina sacra* should be included in our efforts to explore the origins of Christian art and iconography! Furthermore, given that the practice in question may have originated as early as the late first century, and certainly not very long thereafter, it is all the more important to take account of it in our larger analysis of Christian origins.

However, Christopher Tuckett has contended recently that the scribal device functioned simply as abbreviation of certain frequently-used words in early Christian vocabulary, and that the *nomina sacra* are not particularly expressive of early Christian devotion. In by recent book referred to earlier in this essay, I have engaged Tuckett’s view at some length, and there is neither space nor necessity to do so here. Suffice it to say that I find his argument flawed and his conclusion highly implausible. But my main point here is that the issue is sufficiently important to deserve the attention of all scholars concerned with the origins of Christianity. For, whether the *nomina sacra* represent an interesting expression of early Christian faith or merely a Christian scribal convenience-device, in either case, if they were a Christian innovation, they comprise a noteworthy phenomenon.

**The “Staurogram”**

There is another curious, and even more widely overlooked, item that makes its first appearance in a few early Christian manuscripts: the monogram-like combination of the letters *tau* and *rho* that sometimes forms part of an abbreviated *nomina sacra* treatment of the Greek words σταυρόω and σταυρός. It is one of several monogram devices referring to Jesus, including the more well known *chi-rho*, the *iota-chi*, and

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the iota-eta.\textsuperscript{25} Although they all were adapted from pre/non-Christian usage, in Christian usage these scribal devices reflect Christological convictions. The chi-rho is, of course, the first two letters of Χριστός, the iota-chi the initial letters of Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, and the iota-eta the initial two letters of Ἰησοῦς.

But it is important to note that the tau-rho makes no such reference to Christological terms/titles. As already indicated, the earliest Christian use, in NT manuscripts dated variously from the late second to early/mid third centuries (𝔓75, 𝔅66, and 𝔅45), is entirely in direct or indirect references to Jesus’ cross/crucifixion. If the other monogram-devices can be termed “christograms” (references broadly to Jesus and his significance), the tau-rho is more correctly designated the early “staurogram.”\textsuperscript{26} Moreover, the tau-rho device seems more truly and purely a visual phenomenon, perhaps intended, as several scholars have suggested, as an early pictographic representation of the crucified Jesus. From other early texts, particularly the Epistle of Barnabas (12:8), we know that the Greek letter ταῦ was used by Christians as a visual reference to Jesus’ cross. The appropriation of the tau-rho, involving the superimposition of the rho upon a tau, thus, may have been intended (in Christian usage) as a simple, stylized depiction of the head of a figure on a cross.

If this is correct, then it means that historians of early Christian art must revise commonly-held notions of when we can date earliest visual references to the crucified Jesus. This usage of the tau-rho is some two hundred years or earlier than what is otherwise usually regarded as the earliest extant Christian depiction. I am pleased to note that in her valuable recent survey of early Christian art, Robin Margaret Jensen acknowledges this.\textsuperscript{27}

\textit{Other Features of Christian Manuscripts}

In the remaining pages, I will simply mention more briefly a number of other features of earliest Christian manuscripts, all of them potentially relevant for wider historical issues.

Most of the scribal “hands” in earliest Christian manuscripts, including copies of the NT writings, represent what is often called a “semi-documentary” type, noticeably less elegant than the more calligraphic hands typical of formal copies of Greek literary texts of the time. Also, the Christian scribal hands seem less elegant than those that are often found in early Jewish copies of biblical texts in Greek. Any suggestion that the less sophisticated hands in Christian copies of NT writings reflects a lack of high esteem for these texts, however, is undermined by the fact that Christian copies of Old Testament writings (whose scriptural status for most early Christians is clear) display equivalent scribal hands. Moreover, though the scribal hands in earliest Christian manuscripts are often noticeably less elegant than high literary book-products of the time, it is usually clear that the scribes in question were aiming to produce as good a product as they could, and that they seem often to have been scribes well-practiced in copying, if not in formal book-trade calligraphy. In short, the lack of elegance probably does not connote a lack of esteem for the texts copied.

So, instead, might these Christian “semi-documentary” scribal hands reflect the socio-economic levels of earliest Christianity? That is, were there simply very few Christian scribes with the specific calligraphic training to produce the more elegant writing preferred in the formal book trade of the time? This may be worth considering. But we also have to be careful about over-generalizing. For, already in the Christian manuscript fragments of the second and third centuries CE we also have a few examples of somewhat more sophisticated scribal hands. ²⁸ That is, although they may have been a minority among copyists of Christian texts, by the late second century (and perhaps earlier) there were some copyists with a certain calligraphic ability (and/or some Christians financially able to pay for copyists with calligraphic ability).

²⁸ E.g., POxy 4403 (𝔓103, a single sheet of a copy of Matthew dated to the late second or early third century CE), the scribal hand of which is described as “quite elegant” by the editors. E. W. Handley, U. Wartenberg, R. A. Coles, et al., The Oxyrhynchus Papyri, Volume LXIV (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1997), 6.
To turn now to other data, it is worth noting that Christian manuscripts often have very wide margins, generous line spacing, and also writing that, though often less than elegant, is clear, carefully formed, and with generous-size letters. As noted by the master of Greek papyrology, Eric Turner, Christian manuscripts (especially copies of biblical texts) often have fewer lines per page than typical of Greek literary works with equivalent column height.\textsuperscript{29} To repeat a point made briefly earlier in this presentation, it is rather clear that copyists of earliest Christian texts were not usually concerned about saving writing material. Instead, these features probably reflect a concern to produce copies that were \textit{easy to read}. More specifically, it seems likely that we have early manuscripts prepared for \textit{public/liturgical} reading, the manuscripts serving as actual artefacts of this use of the texts in question.

This conclusion is strengthened by other phenomena that appear to represent an emerging constellation of devices that may be thought of as readers’ aids intended to facilitate the reading of the texts in question. Already in our earliest fragmentary materials (e.g., P52, the Rylands fragment of John dated sometime in the second century), we have emergent use of the \textit{dieresis} over an initial \textit{iota} of a word following a word that ends in another vowel. As well, from about the same period we begin to see use of some punctuation and occasional breathing marks. Another striking feature is the use of enlarged spaces within lines, violating the more strict \textit{scripta continuo} characteristic of Greek literary copies, and apparently intended to mark sense-units that may be early paragraph-divisions (e.g. the second-century Yale Genesis fragment, P.Yale 1). Likewise, page-numbering appears as early as the Chester Beatty codex of Numbers-Deuteronomy (late second or early third century CE).

These scribal features all amount to an interesting pattern of book-production. Formal copies of Greek literary works do not usually have these sorts of phenomena. But it is important to note that early Jewish copies of biblical writings have a number of scribal features that are similar and that seem to reflect a corresponding concern for ease of reading.\textsuperscript{30} So, whatever may be the case with the \textit{nomina sacra}, it seems

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rather clear that at least some features of early Christian scribal practice reflect the influence and appropriation of Jewish scribal practice.

More precisely, I emphasize that these features in Jewish and early Christian manuscripts seem to indicate the preparation of copies intended for public/liturgical reading. One question for further investigation is whether these scribal features are in fact more characteristic of Christian texts generally or are more specifically characteristic of copies of certain texts prepared for public reading. If the latter is the case, then in the presence or absence of these scribal phenomena we might have indications of how individual Christian texts were regarded in the second and third centuries by the scribal devices deployed in the copies of them.

I mention one final feature that will seem at first pedestrian, but which I suggest may have real significance. Our earliest Christian manuscripts also include corrections. In some cases, the corrections seem to have been made by the copyist, but in other cases by another hand. Both kinds of corrections are worth noting.

The first and most obvious thing to observe is that corrections probably indicate an interesting concern for care in what the text says, and may well even reflect a concern for care in copying. In the case of corrections by the original copyist or by another contemporary hand, we may presume that often they were made by comparing the new copy against an exemplar-copy. This makes an interesting and somewhat contrasting phenomenon in comparison with other undeniable indications that Christians could also engage in a certain freedom and flexibility in citing and in copying their texts. In short, in the second and third centuries CE Christian textual transmission may have been characterized by more than one trend or type of practice: interesting flexibility and an equally interesting concern for care in copying.

Moreover, corrections may also reflect a setting that may amount to a scriptorium. Corrections in another contemporary scribal hand may be especially significant as evidence of this. That is, the latter type of corrections seems to indicate one copyist preparing a manuscript, and another person, perhaps someone in a kind of supervisory role, reviewing the work. These corrections certainly seem to comprise an interesting suggestion of a concern for “quality control”. I repeat that these corrections are evident already in Christian copies of biblical texts as early as the late second century, and the extant examples are unlikely to be the first manuscripts that received this kind of care. So, although it will go against the contentions of some
scholars, perhaps the idea of second-century Christian scriptoria, or at least some scriptoria-like care in copying texts in some circles, is not so implausible after all.

Conclusion

Although brief and introductory, I hope that my remarks have been sufficient to flag up the importance of early Christian manuscripts as historical artefacts crucial for historical analysis of the origins of Christianity. The kinds of issues on which these artefacts may cast some useful light include the formation of a Christian canon, especially the formation of what came to be the NT, the emergent group-identity of Christianity in the second century (and perhaps even earlier), and the historical relationship and indebtedness of emergent Christianity to Jewish tradition. I hope that a growing number of specialists in Christian origins and ancient Judaism will come to take account of manuscripts as artefacts central to the concern for as full a historical understanding of relevant matters as we can obtain.