



## [Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 2177](#) [1]

Language English

Embassy before Hadrian?

**Typology:** Papyrus

**Original Location/Place:**

Oxyrhynchus

**Actual Location (Collection/Museum):**

Papyrology Rooms, Sackler Library, Oxford

**Physical Characteristics:**

The writing, on the recto of this fragment, is in a clear, narrow and regular form, leading to the dating of the papyrus to the third century CE (see Herbert Musurillo, *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*, p. 196).

**Date:** 3d CE

**Measurements:** 13.2 x 16.7 cm

**Language:** Greek

**Category:** Greek

**Publications:**

P.Oxy. XVIII 2177

**Commentary:**

<http://163.1.169.40/gsd/collect/POxy/index/assoc/HASH0169/e18121cb.dir/POxy.v0018.n2177.a.02.hires.jpg> [2]

This papyrus is classified 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 in anti-Jewish rhetoric. Our text is also different from others in the corpus in that the central spokesmen (Athamas and his companion) are Athenians, rather than Alexandrians (see the discussion below).

The focus of the text is the common cause of Athens and Alexandria, with a statement placed on the lips of the Roman emperor (albeit in the form of a question) that the two cities' laws are the same (Edgar Lobel, Colin Roberts, and E. Wegener, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, p. 96). Indeed, as Sandra Gambetti points out, some scholars have used Athenodorus's affirmation in this papyrus for evidence that Athens and Alexandria had compatible political institutions, especially in terms of the division of territory into demes, and "the organisation of the body-politic" (*The Alexandrian Riots*, p. 9-10, for the quotation, p. 10; see also, for example, Diana Delia, *Alexandrian Citizenship*, p. 5). There might also be a reference here to the idea that Athens and Sparta were understood in the ancient world to be antagonistic models of political organisation, with Hellenistic cities like Alexandria claiming to be closer to Athens than Sparta. It is difficult to determine both the exact nature of what is at issue in this text, and initially, the nationalities of the individuals involved. We are informed that Athamas and his companion are "aliens/foreigners" (????????, *alotrios*) of the city which they represent (line 4). Generally speaking, the *Acts* corpus would seem unlikely to feature a case where an Athenian is answering to the Roman emperor. From this basis, Athamas might be understood as an Athenian, with Athenodorus (whom we are told is the one answering a charge) therefore being an Alexandrian. After all, it makes sense that the emperor would ask an Alexandrian, rather than an Athenian, to confirm for him the relationship between the two cities (which he does when he asks about their laws in lines 13-15). Moreover, we also read of an Alexandrian named Athenodorus in



another of the *Acts* (see Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 1242). However, Musurillo argues that if both Athamas and Athenodorus are taken to be Athenians, then this makes sense of the emperor's request to know who sent the petition (?????????, *biblidion*, line 66) asking for the disciples of Heraeus, who were presumably imprisoned at Rome, to be returned. Musurillo therefore envisages the following scenario: Alexandria has called upon Athenian ambassadors to take a petition to Rome and use their good relationship with the emperor (see the discussion below) in order to ensure the release of Alexandrian prisoners. The Athenians bring with them a letter addressed to Athens, probably from the emperor Trajan, in order to support their plea, but the plan does not work as smoothly as had been envisioned, as the emperor questions their legal right to act on behalf of a city which is not their own (*Acts of Pagan Martyrs*, p. 197).

The name of the emperor before which the trial is being conducted has unfortunately not been preserved, but it has been argued to be either Trajan or Hadrian. The arguments for both emperors are based on the fact that the papyrus at one point quotes an imperial letter thought to be from an emperor not present at the trial (not given in the transcription and translation above owing to its fragmentary state, but found at line 29-49) which bears the name "???????" (*Dacicus*), which was common to both Trajan and Hadrian. Musurillo argues that Trajan is the more likely author of the letter, as there appears to be an omission of the name "Nerva," which was more commonly left out before "Trajan" in other papyri; moreover, Trajan used "Dacicus" more frequently than Hadrian did, who only did so at the beginning of his reign in order to emphasise his connection with the preceding emperor (see *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, p. 96, 100, n. 28; *The Alexandrian Riots*, p. 9; *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*, p. 196-7). Indeed, if the theory of Musurillo, outlined above, as to the nature of the envoy is to be believed, then the emperor presiding over the trial may be Hadrian utilising a letter of Trajan as a precedent for the case that has been brought before him, as his positive relationship with Athens grew over the course of his reign. Musurillo does point out, however, that the emperor treats the Athenian spokesmen with some harshness in our text, questioning their rights to petition him. Moreover, he seems somewhat ignorant of their laws, making it unlikely that the events could have taken place after 128/129 CE, when Hadrian stayed in Athens and consecrated the Temple of Zeus Olympius (Musurillo, *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*, p. 198; on Hadrian's relationship with Athens, see Mary Boatwright, *Hadrian and the Cities of the Roman Empire*, p. 144-171). However, I do not believe that Musurillo takes adequate account here of the rhetoric employed by the author of our text. The emperor's questioning of the envoys' rights to petition him despite not being Alexandrians themselves arguably just adds to the dramatic effect of the story, heightening the peril of the Alexandrians who are apparently reliant on their Athenian ambassadors. Moreover, the emphasis on the fact that they are of an "alien" city reinforces the implied difference between Athens (which the emperor supposedly is on good terms with) and Alexandria, and therefore more strongly emphasises the point which the author is trying to make; i.e. that Alexandria is treated as inferior in the eyes of Rome. Like the other *Acts* in the corpus, the central insinuation is that Roman authorities take more notice of others (be they the Athenians, or as in many of the texts, the Jews) than the Alexandrians.

Of course, if the Athenodorus in our text is indeed the same as the individual mentioned in P. Oxy. 1242, then this would date the narrative to before 114 CE. It is also possible that the imperial letter discussed above was inserted by a later redactor, potentially making it more difficult to use for dating purposes (Musurillo, *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs*, p. 196, n. 2). Despite the uncertainties, however, the argument that the author of the text wished to highlight the suffering of Alexandrians at the hands of Rome, thereby narrating the necessity of calling upon Athens for assistance, makes sense. Indeed, the assertion that Athens and Alexandria share the same laws can be understood in this line of rhetoric as an affirmation of the latter's legitimacy, highlighting the unjust attitude of the Roman emperor towards Alexandria.

Keywords in the original language:

- [??????????](#) [3]
- [???????](#) [4]
- [???????????](#) [5]
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- [?????????](#) [13]

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Roman emperor](#) [14]
- [Trajan](#) [15]
- [Hadrian](#) [16]
- [ambassador](#) [17]
- [Greek law](#) [18]
- [petition](#) [19]
- [Athens](#) [20]
- [Alexandria](#) [21]
- [city](#) [22]

**Bibliographical references:** Boatwright, Mary T., [Hadrian and the Cities of the Roman Empire](#) [23] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000)

Delia, Diana, [Alexandrian Citizenship during the Roman Principate](#) [24] (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991)

Gambetti, Sandra, [The Alexandrian Riots of 38 C.E. and the Persecution of the Jews: A Historical Reconstruction](#) [25] (Leiden: Brill, 2009)

Lobel, Edgar, Roberts, Colin H., Wegener, E. P., [The Oxyrhynchus Papyri. Volume XVIII](#) [26] (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1941)

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

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[Kimberley Fowler](#) [28]



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