

Description for the general public

My goal in the project *Clergy in a Society: Presbyters, Deacons and the Lower Clergy within the Social and Economic Structures of Late Antique and Early Arab Egypt (4th–8th c.)* is to understand how clerics functioned as part of the society in an important region of the Mediterranean East, which also happens to abound in sources. I trace presbyters, deacons, and their lower ranking colleagues from the moment when they start to appear in texts produced in already Christianised Egypt until the time c. 100 years after the Arab conquest in the 640s—as it is only then that a breach occurs, disrupting the cultural and administrative *continuum* which allows us to regard late Roman, Byzantine, and early Arab Egypt as a particular historical unity. In the project, I investigate the degree of integration of clerics with the society, define the areas of their extra-ecclesiastical activity, observe how members of clergy gained authority and influence in their communities, how this process unfolded over time, and what factors had an impact on its course.

In my research, I combine two perspectives: on one hand, I see the clergy as functionaries of an influential and omnipresent institution; on the other, I treat them as members of professional groups (late antique clergy did not derive means of sustenance only from their ministry!), family groups, rural communities, or employees of lay administration. In this way, I try to determine how social and economic factors shaped the performance of the people of the Church—and, as a result, of the Church as an institution—but also how the Church shaped the lives of local communities through people who were its “face” in the cities, towns, and villages of Egypt. Some of the particular issues I investigate are the involvement of the clergy in the administration of ecclesiastical and lay estates, family connections of the clergy, private managerial strategies adopted by clerics, the connections of clerics with state administration (the fiscal apparatus in particular), and the role of the clergy as people of confidence—persons whose authority gave added weight to legal deeds, who guaranteed weights and measures, helped conflicted parties to achieve a settlement, or reinforced the voices of rural communities, often represented by their presbyters and deacons.

My research is based on numerous and diverse sources. They include legal texts through which the emperors attempted to regulate the life of the Church and its functionaries, canons formulated during episcopal gatherings or written by particular hierarchs to instruct their subordinates and colleagues in office, sometimes in response to particular problems, as well as historical and hagiographic narratives. Thanks to them, we can reconstruct a model, an ideal image of the clergy as it should have been in the eyes of the legislators, hierarchs, and ecclesiastical writers. First and foremost, however, my project relies on documents written on papyrus sheets and ostraca (potsherds utilised as writing material) and preserved in the sands of Egypt. Among them, there are contracts, accounts, petitions, private and official letters, etc., thanks to which we can get very close—in fact, as close as possible for the ancient world—to everyday activities of the inhabitants of Egypt. Papyri and ostraca bear testimony to the activities of clerics in many spheres of socio-economic life; their contents frequently contradict the models of conduct expounded in canons, law, and literature, but sometimes confirm them. The source base is also supplemented with inscriptions, which allow us insights into the practices of commemoration and self-presentation. Thanks to a juxtaposition of data from diverse types of sources, it is possible to reconstruct a multi-faceted image of life and activity of clerics during four centuries crucial for the history of Eastern Christendom.

I chose the subject of the clergy in society in order to fill an important gap in the research of late antique Egypt. Despite the fact that clerics were an organic part of one the cornerstones of the society and culture that was the Church, were present in many spheres of life from the 4th c. onwards, played a part in the organisation of local communities, and left so many traces in the sources, they have not yet been researched in a systematic and exhaustive manner. Studies devoted to Egyptian clergy produced so far were limited chronologically and thematically, and assumed the perspective of the institutional Church. My research is not only broader in its scope, but is also conducted from an external perspective, in which the key points of reference are the family, the village, the city, or the office of the pagarch (a late antique fiscal officer). While focusing on one particular social group, my research remains in dialogue with the current scholarly discussions of social networks, formation of rural communities, or the phenomenon of patronage—mainly in Egypt, but also in other regions of the Mediterranean world. Through an investigation of the role of the clergy I strive toward a better understanding of the social dynamics of Egypt in the Byzantine period, and the processes that took place after the country had fallen under control of the caliphs; in this way, my conclusions will add to the vivid discussion of continuity and change in the first 100 years of Arab rule in Egypt. By connecting documents with normative discourses, I will be able to understand the practical conditioning of the legislation, canons, or hagiographical models. From the point of view of ecclesiastical history, the key effect of the project will be a well-contextualised definition of the place occupied by the Church institution in socio-economic landscape of Egypt, as well as a diagnosis of opportunities and threats created for the Church by the entanglement of the clergy in a variety of extra-ecclesiastical relations of dependence and power.