

# The Era of the Martyrs

## Remembering the Great Persecution in Late Antique Egypt

Aaltje Hidding

Ludwig Maximilian University Munich

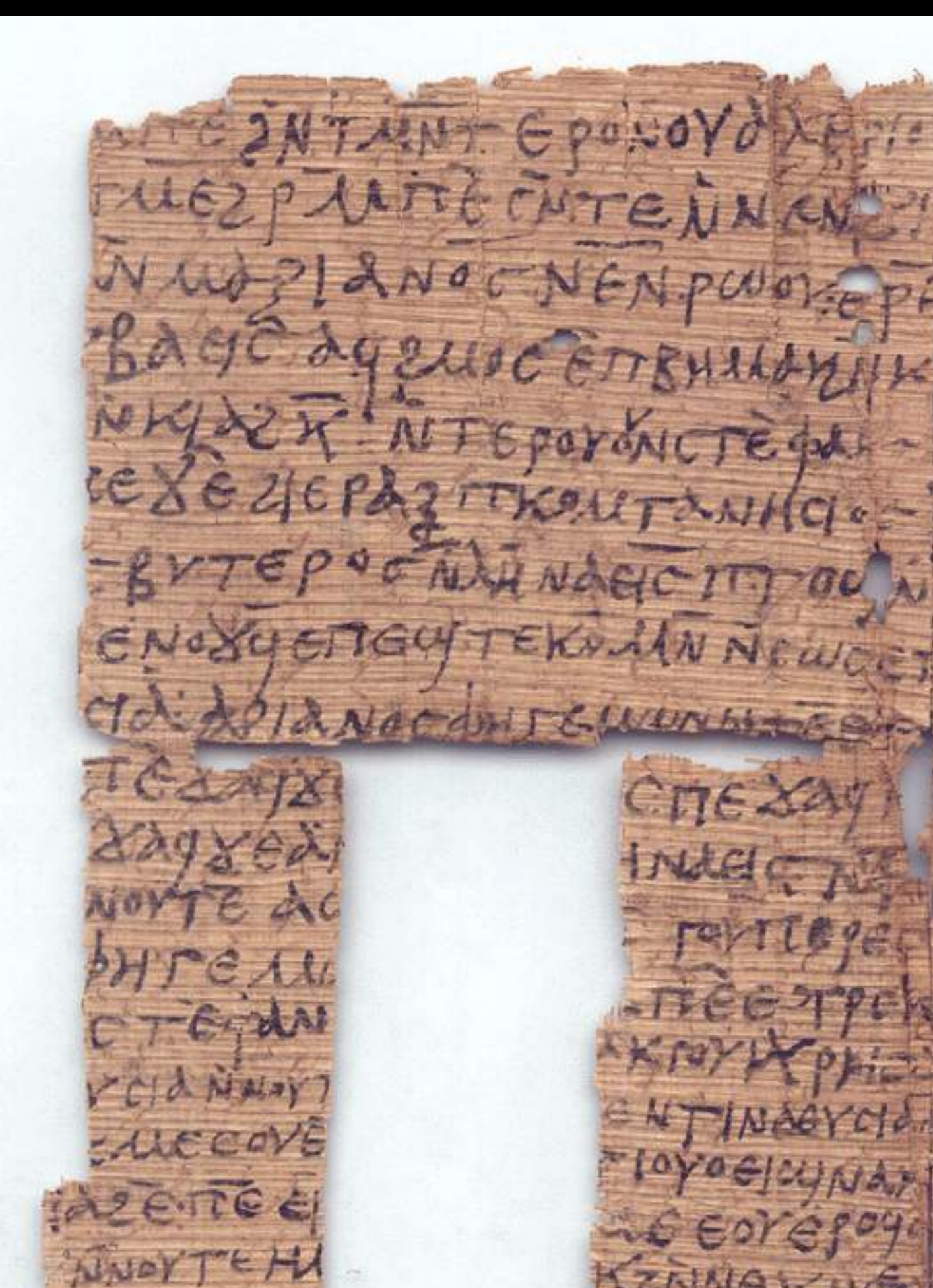
### Introduction

#### The Great Persecution

The Great Persecution began by Emperor Diocletian and his Tetrarchic colleagues in 303 CE ranks as one of the most traumatic experiences of the early Christians. In hagiographical literature, Christian writers memorized heroic Christians who had defied capture, torture, and eventually even death in front of evil emperors. In canons of church councils, church fathers decided about celebrations of these martyrs and about what to do with those who had lapsed from faith. And finally, theologians tried to explain why the Christian god had let this horrible period happen.

#### Remembering the Persecution

Today, our main sources for the Great Persecution constitute the writings of these church fathers, theologians, and hagiographers. What they have remembered and forgotten – or have chosen to or not to record - has shaped our image of the Great Persecution. As a result the history of this period has become blurred, with hindsight, by their perceptions. And yet, these very same sources connote the significance of the persecution for later generations of Christians. The shared remembrance – or social and cultural memories – of the persecution provided them with an image of the past, an understanding of the present, and a design for the future.



### Previous Research

#### Who Remembers What...

Scholars have done fascinating and insightful research focusing on famous Christian writers. But whereas these accounts have illuminated us concerning Christian memories of the Great Persecution from a top-down perspective, the reverberations and memories of the congregations themselves have remained in the dark. In my thesis, I will attempt to reconstruct the constant dialogue between priests and flock, men and women, the rich and “the barely visible but ever-present figures of pilgrims and the poor” (Brown 1981: xxiii).

#### ... in Egypt

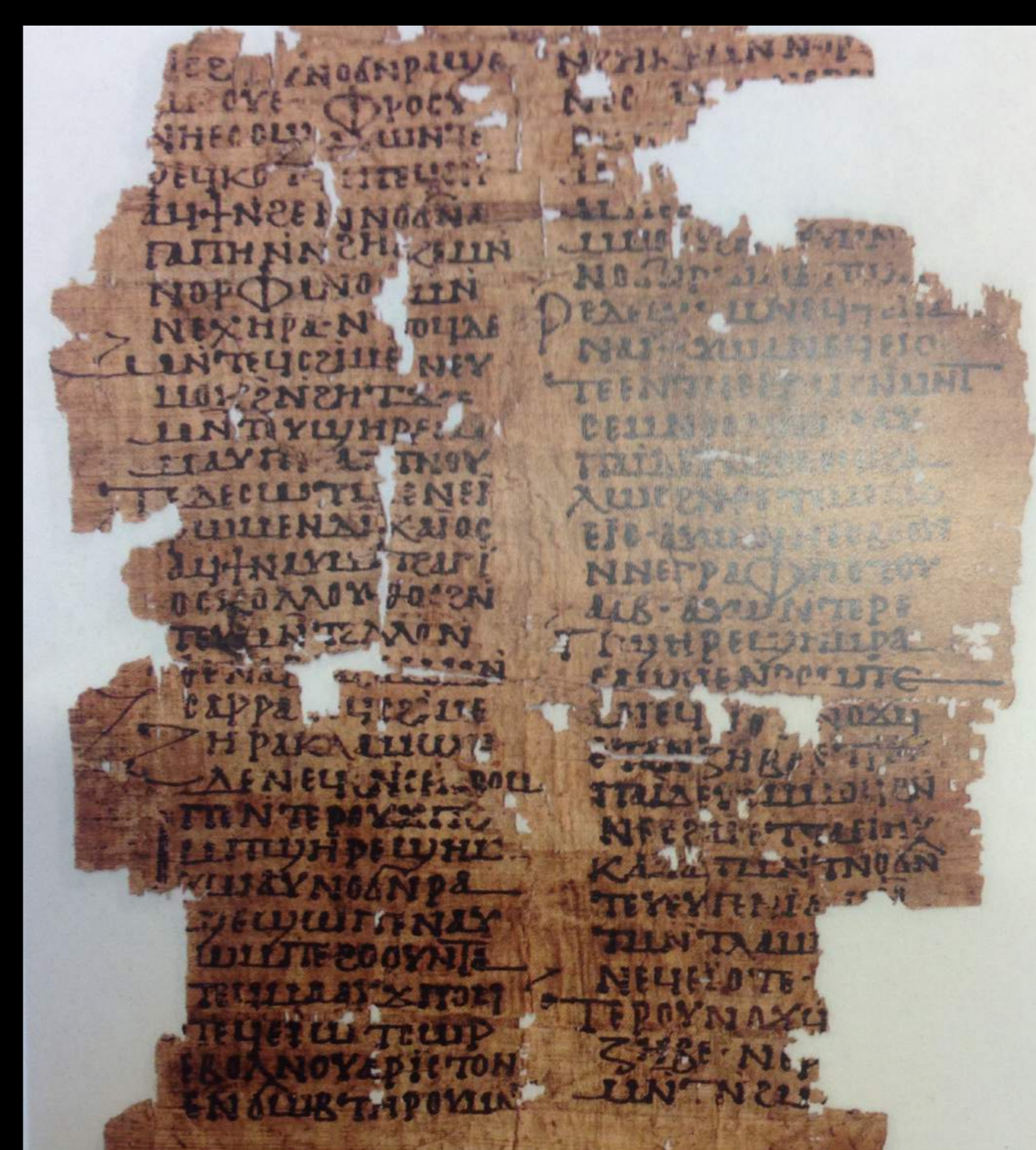
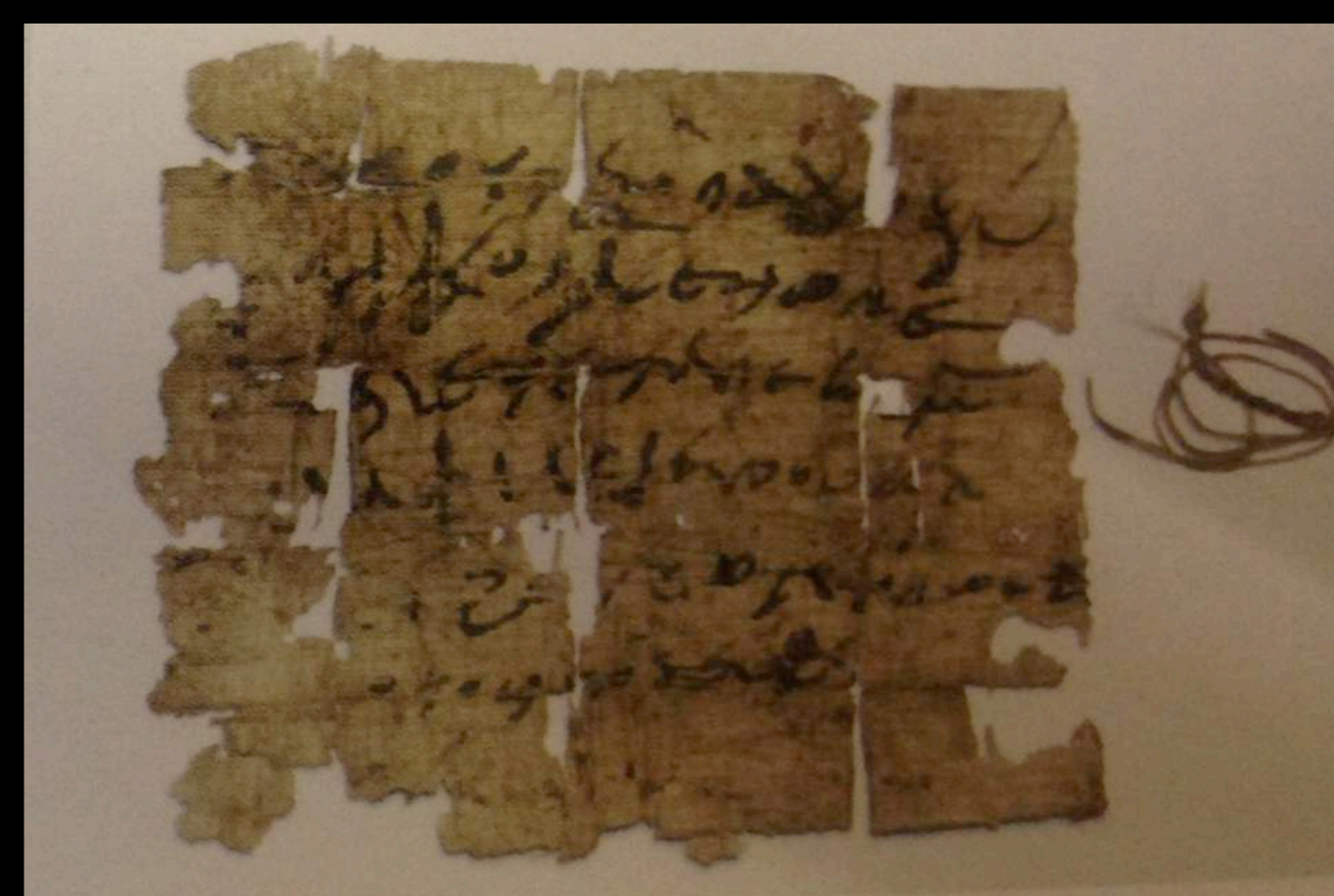
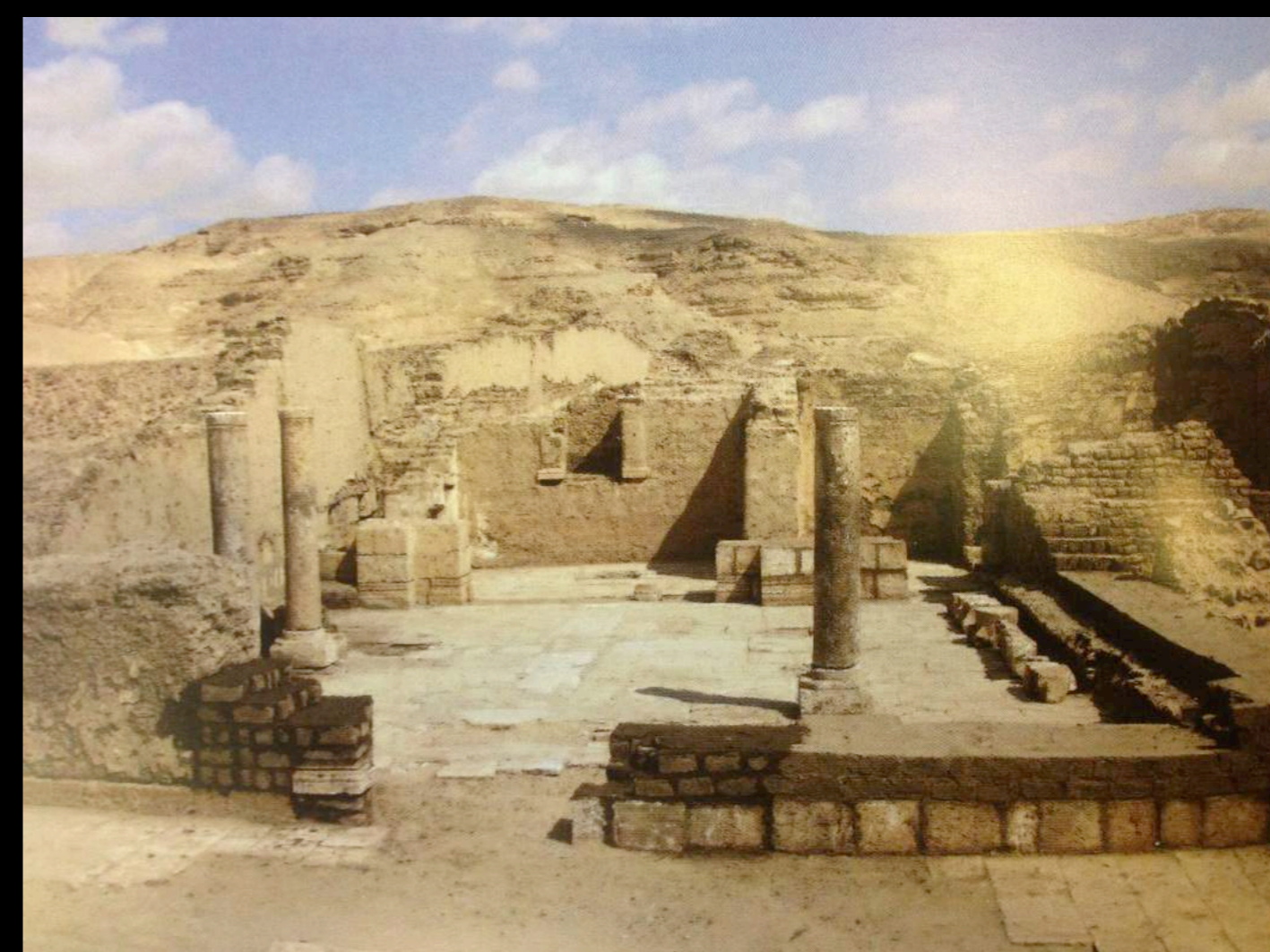
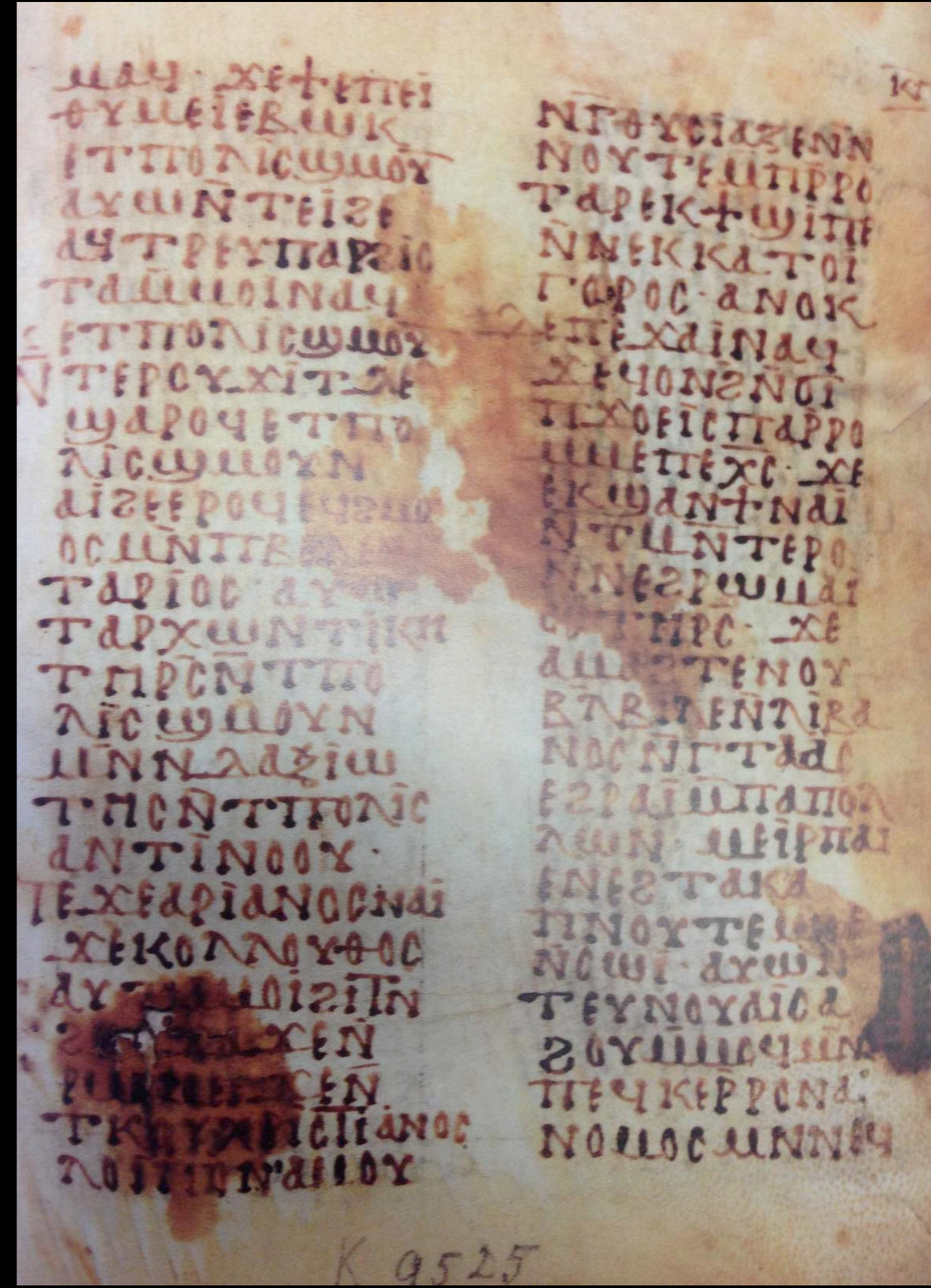
This brings me to the province where the persecution is said to have been prosecuted most vigorously. The dry sands of Egypt have not only preserved inscriptions and archaeological remains from antiquity, but also numerous papyri mentioning martyr shrines and festival days in honour of martyr’s anniversaries.

#### Papyrology and Epigraphy

Much of this material has been collected by Arietta Papaconstantinou in her ground-breaking 2001-monograph (Papaconstantinou: 2001). However, an analysis about what this source material says about how the Great Persecution was represented and remembered has not yet been made.

#### Hagiography

Furthermore, hagiographical literature - in earlier times dismissed as unreliable historical evidence and, speaking about Coptic hagiography, “miserable literature” – has during the last decades come to be seen as representing its own reality (Delehaye 1922). But whereas scholars have now acknowledged the literary themes of the genre and how they fit in a regional or local context, a synthesis about what these themes say about the perceptions of the Great Persecution has not yet been written.



### PhD-Project

#### A New Approach

This thesis attempts to fill that lacuna in scholarship. The regional and local character of the voices of ancient Egyptian men and women enable us to see the reverberations and, later, the memories of the Great Persecution from nearby. Listening to the localized responses to the Great Persecution I hope to be able to reconstruct a more complete image of how the people who numbered the years according to the ‘Era of Diocletian’ - later also called the ‘Era of the Martyrs’ - remembered this period.

#### Cognitive Ecology

Using modern memory studies – extended mind theory, distributed cognition, cognitive ecologies - I argue that although the representation of martyrs in Late Antique Egypt was far removed from historical reality, the Great Persecution was still very relevant for Egyptian Christians.

### Case Studies

Colluthus, physician from Antinoopolis

Paphnoute, monk from Dendera

Phoibammon, soldier from Lycopolis

### References

H. Delehaye, ‘Les martyrs d’Égypte’, *Analecta Bollandiana* 40 (1922) 5–154; 299–364.

P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981).

A. Papaconstantinou, *Le culte des saints en Égypte des Byzantins aux Abbassides: l’Apport des inscriptions et des papyrus Grecs et Coptes* (Paris, 2001).

A. Papaconstantinou, ‘The Cult of Saints: A Haven of Continuity in a Changing World?’ in: R. S. Bagnall (ed.), *Egypt in the Byzantine world, 300-700* (Cambridge, 2007) 350-367.

D. V. Twomey and M. Humphries, ‘Editors’ Preface: The Great Persecution, AD 303: A Commemoration’, in: D.V. Twomey and M. Humphries (eds.), *The Great Persecution, AD 303: the Proceedings of the Patristic Conference* (Dublin, 2003) 7-9.