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panel: Recent Discoveries (or, as an alternative: Religion in Society)

Title: A New Reading of the Letter of Ammonius to Apollonius and the Dangers of Early Christian Communities in Egypt

Length: 20 minutes

Outline of the content:

The letter of Ammonius to Apollonius, preserved in an Oxyrhynchus papyrus and datable to the end of the first or the beginning of the second century AD, contains a superlinear stroke over the X of the initial XAIPE, which is the sign of a nomen sacrum that, together with many other clues in this *epistolê kekhiasmenê*, points to the Christianity of both the writer and the addressee. In this new framework, many details of the letter become intelligible and the whole document, with an emphasis on the necessity of a cautious and circumspect behaviour and the use of a cryptic communication code, attests to the critical situation of the Christian communities in those days, when Christianity was a *superstitio illicita* and Christians had to try not to be denounced. I shall propose a full analysis of the letter in this light: many aspects in its language, lexical choices, and rhetoric are telling. The new Christian reading of this letter allows us to recover one of the earliest Christian letters known and provides precious documentation of the birth of Christianity in Egypt (perhaps even in Alexandria itself, where Christianity in fact entered very early).