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On the Origins of the Alexandrian School: Rhizomes, Episcopal Legitimation, and a Tale of Two Cities

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Abstract: This article revisits an important and much-discussed question: how and why was Christian learning in second- and third-century Alexandria institutionalised, leading to what came to be known as the “Catechetical School”? Its contribution to scholarship lays in that it focuses on cultural, ideological, and ecclesiastical developments under the Antonines and the Severans, placing the Alexandrian case within a broader context. Building on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome, our examination seeks to map the complex web of interactions among the Christians themselves, as well as between Christians and non-Christians, so as to understand more deeply the mechanics behind the institutional establishment of the Alexandrian School. Berger and Luckmann’s theory on the relationship between institutions and knowledge frames our analysis of episcopal legitimation and the reception of the Alexandrian School’s origins by Eusebius of Caesarea. As will be argued, the early history of the School is largely “a tale of two cities”, in the sense that parallel and transverse processes in Alexandria and Rome reflect the plurality of Christian responses to pressing challenges.

Keywords: Alexandria; Rome; rhizomes; legitimation; Severans; Origen; episcopacy; Christian philosophy; Eusebius



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1. Introduction

1.1. Aim and Approach

In his essay on the historian’s profession, written during the dark hours of the Nazi occupation of France, Marc Bloch describes “the obsession of origins” as the “idol of the historian tribe”. If interpreted as the self-explanatory mechanism of a teleologically defined view of history, the concept of “origins” could be proven to be ambiguous, even illusory and dangerous. Bloch argues that all historical phenomena are gradually shaped by particular circumstances within a fixed historical context. “Men resemble their times”, so says an Arab proverb quoted in the essay, “more than they do their fathers” (Bloch 1953, pp. 29, 35).

In this article we explore the question of origins, or to be more precise the historical process leading to the institutionalisation of what came to be known as the “Catechetical School” of Alexandria, during the second and third centuries AD. How and why was Christian learning in Alexandria systematised and controlled by an organised ecclesiastical hierarchy? Our quest focuses on cultural and ecclesiastical developments under the Antonines and the Severans, examining the Alexandrian School as part of a “rhizomatically” interconnected web of Christian communities, in dialogue with their Jewish, Greek, and Roman environment. The beginnings of an institutionalised form of Christian learning in Alexandria are most probably linked to the emergence of a new, more centralised, form of Christian leadership. Legitimation through succession (διαδοχή) in faith and hierarchy is crucial in order to understand how Eusebius of Caesarea (260s–339), our main source, describes the origins of the Alexandrian School, inviting critical re-readings of his *Ecclesiastical History* by modern scholars. Further below we will see that, much like Bloch’s “idol of origins”, Eusebius’ narrative of succession offers a mirrorlike reflection of the bishop’s own reality, perception and aims, projected onto the past (Benson 2002, p. 190).

1.2. State of the Art

Earlier scholarship provides important insights into the history of the Alexandrian School. Nineteenth-century treatments of the subject generally followed Eusebius' view of teacher-pupil succession (Matter 1840, pp. 288–94; Simon 1845, p. 145). In 1932, Gustave Bardy understood the School as a private institution, in which Origen (d. ca. 253) felt free “de faire étudier à ses disciples les sciences profanes”, leading to the intervention of Bishop Demetrius (189–232), which transformed the School into an exclusively catechetical institution (Bardy 1932, p. 28; cf. Bardy 1937; Bardy 1942). Bardy's more critical perspective was adopted and expanded in new directions by later scholars (e.g., Knauber 1951; Hornschuh 1960; Ridolfini 1962). In 1987, Alain Le Boulluec investigated the School's reception by the German and French ecclesiastical historiographies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, commenting on the alleged “liberalism” of the Alexandrian theologians. He also proceeded with an examination of the School's origins, from Pantaenus (d. ca. 200) to Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. 202), drawing a line between Christian teachers, like Clement, and the rising authority of the Alexandrian bishop. In Le Boulluec's words, “Clément ignore toute ‘succession’ épiscopale à Alexandrie [et] avait de la prêtrise une conception plus spirituelle qu'institutionnelle” (Le Boulluec 2006, pp. 13–60, esp. at pp. 41, 43). In 1995, Roelof van den Broek argued that “the whole idea of a Christian school with a *διαδοχή* of teachers handing down a fixed tradition of learning to their pupil successor is completely false, at least until the second decade of the third century”. Academic succession in the School only began, for Broek, due to episcopal centralisation during the first half of the third century (van den Broek 1995, p. 41). In 1990, Annewies van den Hoek offered an alternative reading of the Eusebian concept of succession. Although “there does not seem to be a strong direct line from Clement to Origen”, Hoek wrote, there are indeed some indications for the existence of “an institutional setting for their activities, [involving] a complex of scriptorium, library and centre for instruction” (van den Hoek 1990, p. 191). In 1997, Hoek reconstructed the plausible historical context through which Philo's legacy was received and appropriated by the Christian teachers at the School (van den Hoek 1997). In 2004, Stephen J. Davis' examination of the early Egyptian Church put under the microscope the clash between Demetrius and Origen, rejecting the Eusebian idea of succession (Davis 2005, pp. 21–28). The unifying dimension of Alexandrian high culture for Pagans, Jews, and Christians was explored by Edward J. Watts in 2006 (Watts 2006, pp. 143–68). Recent studies on Origen have stressed his biblical, rather than Platonic background and method, which helps us frame the School's identity in more precise terms (Edwards 2002; Ramelli 2009; Tzamalikos 2022; McGuckin 2022). A 2017 monograph by Maged S. A. Mikhail on Bishop Demetrius of Alexandria and the creation of his hagiographical dossier is instrumental in following the development of Alexandrian episcopate and the way it affected the School (Mikhail 2017). Despite the heavy blows it received, the Eusebian perception of undisturbed institutional succession in Alexandria still survives in scholarship, as evidenced, for example, by the work of Willem H. Oliver (Oliver and Madise 2014; Oliver 2015a, 2015b, 2017).

Quid novum? Our survey has shown that most narratives relating the early history of the School focus on the continuity/appropriation or discontinuity of philosophical and theological ideas within an Alexandrian *milieu*, characterised by increasing episcopal centralisation. But these phenomena were part of a much bigger picture, suggesting that Christian communication, interaction, adaptation to new circumstances, and a plurality of responses to challenges could enrich our perspective on the Alexandrian School's origins. Already in 1979, Colin H. Roberts pointed out the possibility of Roman ecclesiastical influences on Alexandrian Christianity during the period between 117 and ca. 180 (Roberts 1979, p. 59). The parallel rise of centralised episcopate in Rome and Alexandria has been discussed in detail by Francis A. Sullivan and Alistair C. Stewart, opening up new directions for a more “globalised” examination of the Alexandrian case (Sullivan 2001, pp. 550–611; Stewart 2014, pp. 188–99). Studies on Hegesippus, who was active in Rome between ca. 160 and 180, and his early employment of the concepts of succession and orthodox teaching, adopted by Eusebius in the fourth century, point towards the same macroscopic

viewpoint (e.g., Lawlor 1912, pp. 98–107; Le Boulluec 1985, pp. 92–112; Brent 1993; Tropper 2004; Antonelli 2011; Antonelli 2018). Turning now to the broader political and cultural context, scholars have associated the development of episcopacy and the philosophical profile of Christian theologians with the Second Sophistic, especially under Hadrian and his successors (e.g., dal Covolo 1989; Brent 2006; Rizzi 2010; Eshleman 2012; Ramelli 2013; Huttunen 2020; Secord 2020). The origins of the Alexandrian School, therefore, could be sought not only in the activities of historical protagonists in Alexandria, but also in a web of supra-regional tendencies and processes. Such a step invites an interdisciplinary analysis of historical evidence, for which reason we will now focus on two key methodological concepts: rhizomes and legitimation.

2. Methodological Concepts

2.1. Rhizomes

“Rhizome” was introduced as a philosophical and epistemological term in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, initially published in French in 1980 (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 2005). According to Felicity J. Colman, it “describes the connections that occur between the most disparate and the most similar of objects, places and people; the strange chains of events that link people” (Colman 2015, p. 232). “The point is”, write Deleuze and Guattari, “that a rhizome or multiplicity never allows itself to be overcoded, never has available a supplementary dimension over and above its number of lines, that is, over and above the multiplicity of numbers attached to those lines” (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 2005, p. 9). Rhizomes, like the transverse roots of a plant, are decentred, non-linear, non-structural, anti-hierarchical, even anarchical; they cannot be taxonomised or traced, yet they could be mapped and visualised in ways that allow “multiple entryways” to the viewer (Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 2005, pp. 11–12, esp. at p. 12). Employing the rhizome image in history and other fields allows us to study the “process of growth [or expansion], or the manner in which something unfolds, or happens . . . , [privileging a logic] of connection and heterogeneity” (de Beistegui 2018, p. 18). For Brent Adkins, the dualism embodied in the Deleuze-Guattari paradigm (fluidity/anarchy versus stasis/hierarchy) should not be moralised, since there are no purely rhizomatic or non-rhizomatic compositions, but “assemblages in which the rhizomatic tendency is more or less dominant” (Adkins 2015, p. 246).

Despite creating perspectives for better understanding the mobility and communication of historical actors, without imposing preconceived forms of structure and hierarchy, the rhizome concept seems to have been almost entirely absent from studies pursuing a more data-based methodology in the examination of Early Christian networks (e.g., Ekelund and Tollison 2011; Schor 2011; Collar 2013; Cvetković and Gemeinhardt 2019). A rare exception is Cavan W. Concannon’s monograph on Bishop Dionisius of Corinth (ca. 166–74) and his network. As Concannon observes, “early Christianity had no clear command structure, no center from which peripheries might be controlled or managed. Lacking a center, early Christian networks are rhizomatic, with lines of connection shooting out in different directions through nodes and conduits, an ever-shifting web of relations” (Concannon 2017, p. 55). A similar approach has been adopted by Sarah Parkhouse in her literary study of the “Gospel of Mary”, employing a rhizomatic arrangement of Early Christian narratives (Parkhouse 2019, pp. 1–10). So far, the most systematic attempt to frame the expansion of Early Christianity within the Deleuzian-Guattarian model has been the recent book by Bradley H. McLean, *Deleuze, Guattari and the Machine in Early Christianity: Schizoanalysis, Affect and Multiplicity*. Building on the rhizomatic concept, McLean argues that “the task of the theologian and scholar of early Christianity . . . is not to recover Christianity’s prior (transcendental or historical) unity but instead to investigate the rhizomatic relations, in all their specificity, that connected Christ machines [read: Christians and Christian objects] to other machines [read: people and objects] within a vast range of magnitudes of multiplicities” (McLean 2022, p. 61; preceded by McLean 2020). Unlike Concannon’s historical synthesis, McLean is primarily concerned with epistemo-

logically reconciling Deleuze and Guattari with the history/ies and theology/ies of Early Christianity; an experiment dressed in the highly technical language of *A Thousand Plateaus*.

In agreement with scholars advocating for the relevance of the rhizome to the spread of Christianity in the pre-Constantinian era, this article concentrates on the origins of the Alexandrian School as part of a constellation of connectivities, exchanges, and interactions. Our approach is firmly historical, like Concannon's, without proceeding to an extensive discussion or justification of the Deleuzian-Guattarian model, per McLean. Behind our choice of the rhizome image lay two important observations that need to be explained here. First, the origins and early development of the Alexandrian School were not restricted to a single cause but were, rather, the fruit of multiple and often unpredictable historical processes, leading to the gradual blending of episcopal succession and orthodox teaching. Second, the communication of ideas, values and practices through Christian mobility, across the different cities of the Roman Empire, without, however, a fixed centre, reflects an operation that is closely linked to the rhizome: "de-territorialisation", referring to, among other things, the unchaining from territorial boundaries and the establishment of transverse relations. In the context of our examination, "de-territorialisation" is not regarded as an absolute process but seeks to explain how a local theological and institutional identity ("Alexandrian School") was constructed ("re-territorialised"), based on supra-regional and non-local forms of association (Parr 2005).

2.2. Legitimation

In 1966, fourteen years before *A Thousand Plateaus*, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann published *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1991). The significance of their study is confirmed by the fact that their book was later included by the International Sociological Association among the ten most influential sociological books of the twentieth century (International Sociological Association 1997). Berger and Luckmann trace the origins of institutionalisation in the habitualisation of human activity, pointing out that institutions create the image of a shared past for the individuals involved in this process of typification. Activity patternisation, thus, becomes the channel directing and controlling, through a stable routine, human behaviour and interaction (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1991, pp. 70–75). Berger and Luckmann argue that institutions weave the tapestry of an objective perception of the world, "confronting the individual as undeniable facts . . . , [being] external to him, persistent in their reality, whether he likes it or not", although this is a "humanly produced, constructed objectivity" (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1991, p. 78). How, then, are institutions sanctioned? They do so by presenting themselves as permanent solutions to the permanent problems of a community (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1991, p. 87). A key mechanism behind institutional legitimation is the control of knowledge, theoretical or pre-theoretical, embracing "maxims, morals, proverbial nuggets of wisdom, values and beliefs [and] myths", as well as "the awesome [and man-made] paraphernalia that frequently accompany the administration of law" (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1991, p. 93). The degree of validation and the rules guiding knowledge determine the success of legitimation, for which reason institutions tend to treat expressions of disorder as "a departure from reality" (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1991, p. 83). Habitualisation and objectification are linked to the development of reciprocal roles, the cornerstone of acceptable social conduct and the very heart of institutional existence (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1991, pp. 92–93). Knowledge performance in these roles becomes the basis of institutional organisation, without, however, excluding internal tensions and competitions over knowledge/role assignment (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1991, pp. 95–96). Legitimation is, ultimately, embodied in the way institutional roles guarantee participation in a symbolic universe "that transcends *and* includes the institutional order", crafting a "hierarchy of human experience [that] 'puts everything in its right place'" (Berger and Luckmann [1966] 1991, pp. 114, 116).

The rather limited use of Berger and Luckmann's theory in Early Christian studies (e.g., Meeks [1983] 2003; Meeks 1993) does not cover the institutionalisation of Christian

learning. Relevant historical narratives (e.g., by Attila Jakab and James Corke-Webster) could have profited from the legitimation theory, bringing to the fore and analysing less visible details in the internal power struggle within the Christian community of Alexandria (Jakab 2001; Corke-Webster 2019, pp. 89–120; Jakab 2022). An important exception is Alistair Stewart-Sykes' article on Origen, Demetrius, and the Alexandrian presbyters. According to Stewart-Sykes, the clash between Demetrius and Origen could be interpreted as a power game between two experts: the "official" and the "intellectual" (Stewart-Sykes 2004, pp. 416–17, 429). Our article integrates Berger and Luckmann's theory into the quest for the Alexandrian School in a fuller way than Stewart-Sykes. Combining the legitimation theory with the Deleuzian-Guattarian rhizome will shed light onto the tensions created during the shaping of institutional roles and knowledge assignment in Alexandria and elsewhere.

3. Episcopal Succession and Orthodox Teaching in Eusebius

3.1. Eusebius, Origen, and Nicaea: Succession and Orthodoxy

Most of our knowledge concerning the early phase of the Alexandrian School comes from the pen of an author, whose links to Origen, the great Alexandrian master, are manifested throughout his narrative. Eusebius was born in Caesarea Maritima sometime in the early 260s. He received a theological education under Pamphilus, in the Caesarean tradition of Christian learning, and served his compatriots as their bishop, probably from around 313 until his death in 339 (Louth 2004, p. 266; Corke-Webster 2019; Hollerich 2021, pp. 2–5). An admirer and panegyrist of Constantine I (306–37), the first Christian emperor, Eusebius is the most important ecclesiastical historian of the fourth century and one of the most influential Christian writers ever (Barnes 1981). His skill as a historian and his ability to develop an innovative methodology could be seen in his *Chronicle* (probably completed in 325), a treatise that synchronised the sacred history of Jews and Christians with the history of their neighbours, advocating for the antiquity of God's people (Mosshammer 1979, pp. 29–37; Hollerich 2021, pp. 27–28).

The *Ecclesiastical History* was Eusebius' magnum opus. Like the *Chronicle*, it was highlighted by the same providential perception of Christian history, building a narrative from the apostolic period to the reign of Constantine. The date of its composition is contested. It seems that it was largely completed before the Council of Nicaea in 325, although it might have been partly revised shortly afterwards (Louth 2004, pp. 271–73; Corke-Webster 2019, p. 42; cf. Burgess 1997). Corke-Webster argued that Eusebius' targeted audience were primarily the Christian bishops and clergy, and, through them, the broader Christian community (Corke-Webster 2019, p. 55). In his detailed examination of the Eusebian narrative of Origen's life and works, Pierre Nautin sees Eusebius as an honest historian. The *Ecclesiastical History* includes both literary sources and oral testimonies, considered by Eusebius to provide reliable information on Origen. But this synthesis, Nautin cautiously reminds us, should not be viewed as absolutely objective; it is, above all, a process of interpretation that corresponds to the main Eusebian thesis (Nautin 1977, pp. 21, 25–26). Contrary to Nautin, Panayiotis Tzamalikos completely disregards Eusebius' testimony on the life of Origen as "hagiographical mythology", arguing that Origen was not a Christian by birth but a Pagan philosopher who converted to Christianity at a mature age (Tzamalikos 2022, p. xi). Such a bold statement seems to be no more than a working hypothesis that pays little attention to broader historical developments and Eusebius' use of Origen's autobiographical writings in the *Ecclesiastical History*.

Eusebius' aims and argument are clearly stated at the beginning of his *Ecclesiastical History*. Eusebius declares his intention to present: "the lines of succession from the holy apostles" (τὰς τῶν ἱερῶν ἀποστόλων διαδοχάς), "the outstanding leaders and presidents of that story [i.e., the history of the Church] in the most famous Christian house-churches" (ὅσοι τούτης διαπρεπῶς ἐν ταῖς μάλιστα ἐπισημοτάταις παροικίαις ἠγγήσαντό τε καὶ προέστησαν), and "the men of each generation who by preaching or writing were ambassadors of the divine word" (ἐν ταῖς ἀγράφως ἢ καὶ διὰ συγγραμμάτων

τὸν θεῖον ἐπρέσβευσαν λόγον) (Eusebius 1977a, p. 74.1.1.1; tr. Williamson and Louth 1989, pp. 98–99, slightly revised). Eusebius' emphasis on the connection between succession and orthodoxy has been interpreted by Thomas C. Ferguson as an expression of "loyalty to his theological tradition and succession of Caesarean teachers", going back to Origen and the Alexandrian School (Ferguson 2005, p. 17; cf. Verheyden 2011).

As mentioned earlier, the *Ecclesiastical History* is likely to have received its final form after 325 and the Nicene victory of homoousian ("consubstantial") orthodoxy. In the aftermath of Nicaea, Eusebius, suspected of Arian subordinationism, sought vindication through his writings, both in regard to his own position on the relationship between God the Father and the Logos, as well as *vis-à-vis* his Origenian heritage (Ferguson 2005, pp. 47–56; Johnson 2021, pp. 202–22). Like the brute force of a mighty river running downhill and cutting into the soil, Origen's legacy posed questions to both his supporters and opponents, provided the methodological instruments of theological argumentation and interpretation, and instigated growing suspicion concerning his orthodoxy. Hence, Eusebius' concern to prove that his theological genealogy was on the right side of history (Williams 2001, pp. 131–57; Ramelli 2011, pp. 21–49; McGuckin 2022, pp. 34–35).

3.2. Eusebius and Institutionalisation

In his *Commentary on Isaiah*, Eusebius divides the ecclesiastical body into five categories. First come the bishops, followed by the presbyters and deacons; then, there are those who had been enlightened in Christ; lastly come all other Christians (Eusebius 2013, p. 101). We have already noted that the opening lines of the *Ecclesiastical History* declare Eusebius' aim to give an account of apostolic and episcopal succession, which guaranteed the faithful transmission of divine teachings. Yet, as Michael J. Hollerich writes, "a function of his Origenism is his reluctance to conceive the office of bishop without intellectual acumen being an integral part of it" (Hollerich 2021, p. 268n.140). Therefore, while a more centralised and explicitly structured organisation under the bishop is essential in Eusebius' narrative, the need to fight heresy and protect the "simple", uneducated believers requires persuasiveness and literary skills on the bishop's part (Corke-Webster 2019, p. 90).

How did Eusebius, himself the offspring of a theological tradition connecting Caesarea to Alexandria, reconstruct the early history of the Alexandrian School? According to Corke-Webster, "Eusebius' emphasis on both the intelligence of Christian leaders and their capacity to employ it fits firmly in [the] Alexandrian tradition . . . , which represented only one strand of Christian thinking", but was presented in ways suggesting "that this was also the nature of earliest apostolic Christianity" (Corke-Webster 2019, p. 103). To put it simply, not all Christian leaders were teachers, but this is how Eusebius tended to see them. Corke-Webster and others have also argued that Origen's perception of ecclesiastical leadership was quite different; for it was theological virtuosity in Scriptural interpretation, not the episcopal office per se, that legitimised leadership in the Church. What alienated Eusebius from Origen, in Corke-Webster's perspective, was the Caesarean's unwillingness to accept the relative autonomy of the Christian teacher from episcopal authority. Thus, the *Ecclesiastical History* institutionalised Christian learning in Alexandria, placing Pantaeus, Clement, and Origen under the firm control of the city's bishops (Corke-Webster 2019, pp. 106–14; cf. Trigg 1981). The question raised is whether this is simply a rhetorical invention serving Eusebius' fourth-century purposes, or whether the Eusebian narrative contains elements of historicity.

A comprehensive discussion of Origen's views on ecclesiastical hierarchy and the clergy can be found in Sullivan's study on the development of episcopacy. Contrary to the anti-institutional picture of Origen painted by other scholars, Sullivan points out that Origen's implicitly critical view of bishops and the clergy intended "to educate the members of the clergy to a more spiritual conception of their authority and calling and to awaken in them a personal spiritual life and a deeper sense of responsibility. He did not direct his critique at the hierarchical structure as such" (Sullivan 2001, p. 603; cf. Tzamalikos 2022, pp. 402–4). This is an important observation. We understand that Eusebius' narrative of

institutionalised Christian learning, although overstressed when projected onto the past, was more or less compatible with Origen's view of the relationship between bishops and teachers, even if Origen paid particular attention to asceticism and the study of divine word as prerequisites for every ecclesiastical office (Sullivan 2001, pp. 602–3).

Back in the nineteenth century, Ferdinand C. Baur argued that the rise of centralised episcopal authority stemmed from the need to defend orthodoxy against various forms of heresy and to visualise ecclesiastical unity in the person and role of the bishop (Baur 2019, pp. 216–42). A similar line of interpretation has been recently put forth by Stewart, who sees the presbyters of each city as local defenders against heresy, “through policing the boundaries of the federation [of household churches/schools], through the circulation of literature, and the maintenance of tradition”. Although Stewart does not consider the institutionalisation of Christian learning (“scholasticisation”) as a factor leading to episcopal centralisation, he states that “some of the functions of the presbyters, namely, the transmission of literature and the determination of doctrinal limits, are scholastic functions and are taken over by the *monepiskopos* [‘single bishop’]” (Stewart 2014, p. 329). But how does knowledge institutionalisation relate to episcopal succession?

Eusebius did nothing novel in bringing these two concepts together. Hegesippus (ca. 160–180), a Christian historian of probably Jewish origin, whose work survives mostly in quotations by Eusebius, appears to have been the first to have associated episcopal succession to the transmission of orthodox teaching (Zahn 1900, pp. 228–49). In doing so, he adopted the Hellenistic model of authoritative succession in philosophical schools (Meyer 1978, pp. 60–95; Brent 1993, pp. 367–89). Indeed, the view of philosophical Christianity was gaining more and more ground, with some Christian teachers, for example Justin (d. ca. 165) and Origen, even bearing the mantle of Greek philosophers (Urbano 2013, pp. 213–29). Thus, Eusebius' narrative on the early history of the Alexandrian School was intensely coloured by his own times, following second/third-century developments. The end of this process was institutionalisation, in the sense of centralised control over Christian learning by the bishop: “the scholasticized *episkopos* becomes the means by which the authoritative teaching of the church is given and . . . independent Christian schools are brought under the aegis of the *episkopos*” (Stewart 2014, p. 335). We will now trace more closely this development, seeing Alexandria and Rome as parts of the same rhizomatic nexus.

4. Schools and Rhizomes

4.1. “School” and “Philosophy”

In his book on the Greek philosophical concept of σχολή, Kostas Kalimtzis defines the term as “leisure as a political end”. Kalimtzis explains that, for Christian thinkers of the Roman and Byzantine period, scholastic leisure (σχολή) was for contemplation and prayer, contrary to the distraction (ἀσχολία) caused by earthly preoccupations (Kalimtzis 2017, pp. 172–76). According to Samuel Rubenson, Late Antique philosophical schools (Pagan and Christian) should be viewed as simple and informal structures, connected to households and largely dependent on food provision by the students themselves. The sharing of knowledge and food formed a group of people who held communal living as an ideal, but also constituted a community open to visitors and the broader public. Lastly, schools enjoyed the patronage of benefactors and maintained networks of written correspondence. Rubenson then turns to the basic features of scholastic education. These are defined as follows: “a withdrawal from production for a considerable period of time, the transmission of ideals and skills from teacher to student, a system of step-by-step progress through training, and a supportive framework of economy, authority and physical setting, referring to these four characteristics under the headings Leisure [σχολή], Tradition [παράδοσις, διαδοχή], Exercise [ἄσκησις, γύμνασις, μελέτη], and [Collective] Organization” (Rubenson 2018, p. 16; cf. Dillon 2006).

The comparison between the Alexandrian School and the philosophical schools of Antiquity poses the question of boundaries between philosophy and theology in the Christian teachers of Alexandria (e.g., Pantaenus, Clement and Origen). As a historical

phenomenon, philosophy emerges within specific contexts, for which reason “philosophy cannot be said to have a well-defined single essence” (Ierodiakonou 2012, p. 9). Jonathan Barnes is, therefore, correct in arguing that, in Roman times, “imperial citizens who styled themselves philosophers thereby declared a love of wisdom; that is to say, they claimed to study things divine and things human –or more solidly, to study logic, physics, and ethics. And you would recognize them by the congruence between their intellectual interests and those of the great Greek masters. This is the sense”, he concludes, “in which Alexander and Plotinus were philosophers –and Justin, and Origen, and Aedesius and Magnus and Menius and Magnilla” (Barnes 2002, p. 306). Already in Acts 19:9, we find Paul teaching in the school of a certain Tyrannus in Ephesus. Niko Huttunen’s recent study on the way second-century Pagan philosophers perceived Christians as followers or semi-followers of a philosophical way of life supports Barnes’ view (Huttunen 2020, pp. 12–98). Following a discussion of New Testament sources (Colossians 2, Acts 17 and 1 Corinthians 1–2), Huttunen argues that we can “safely assume that there has been an interaction between Jerusalem and Athens from the beginnings of Christianity . . . , [that] the use of philosophy by Christians was not a later innovation and [that] the recognition from the side of non-Christian philosophers was based on the actual reality of the early Christians” (Huttunen 2020, p. 96; cf. van Kooten 2008; Engberg-Pedersen 2020; Dür 2021). Cyril Hovorun introduces the term “theological language” to define more precisely the engagement of theology and philosophy in Late Antiquity and Byzantium. This kind of language included “not only philosophical and theological terms and categories, but also a complex of allusions, pre-, sub-, and con-texts”, namely elements received from various systems of philosophy. What these theologians did, argues Hovorun, was breaking “those systems, primarily Neoplatonism, into pieces and [using] some of those pieces to produce a mosaic of language which would express theological realities”. Although Hovorun considers the fifth century as a key moment in this process, he also mentions earlier attempts to develop varieties of a Christian theological language, beginning with Clement of Alexandria and continuing with Athanasius and the Cappadocians (Hovorun 2013, p. 12).

A detailed presentation of how Early Christian thinkers perceived philosophy is provided by George Karamanolis. Philosophical argumentation, he argues, was employed by Christians not only in order to articulate and justify divine revelation, but also to fight “incorrect”/heretical interpretations of the Scripture and to defend Christianity against its opponents, especially the Sceptics (Karamanolis 2013, p. 12). The same author focuses on three aspects of Christian philosophical methodology. First comes the idea, also traced in Pyrrhonian Scepticism, that all other philosophical traditions had betrayed the mission of philosophy, while Christianity (and Scepticism for the Pyrrhoneans) was praised as the only true philosophy. Second, the Christians argued that their teachings were revealed by the Logos of God, much like the Neoplatonists supported their own view of divine revelation through the Logos. Third, and similarly to the Stoics, the Christians defined philosophy as a journey towards secure knowledge (both practical and theoretical) that could lead human beings to happiness (Karamanolis 2013, pp. 29–59).

The many points of contact between the Greek philosophical and the Christian scholastic traditions seem to justify our choice to examine the School of Alexandria as part of a broader world that gradually became an arena for the Christian philosopher-theologian.

4.2. Rise of the Christian Philosopher-Theologian

Alexandria and Rome could be visualised as opposite nodes sitting at the end of a rhizomatic network: an assemblage with no clear beginning or end. The practicalities of travel in Antiquity meant that any form of communication between these two cities took time and involved travelling from region to region. For example, sailing from Alexandria to Rome and vice-versa took approximately a month or two, passing from a number of ports throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. Such contacts, however, were regular: the annual transport of 150,000 tons of grain from Alexandria to Rome, on the route followed

by other merchant ships, is considered to have been “probably the most ambitious maritime enterprise of the ancient world” (Casson 1971, p. 297; cf. Casson 1950).

In Hellenistic times, notes Kalimtzis, Alexandria “introduced *scholê* for theoretical research under the auspices of the [Ptolemaic] state . . . [unleashing] a remarkable process that created nothing short of a revolution in science” (Kalimtzis 2017, pp. 127–28). It is well-established that the origins of the Alexandrian theological tradition could be traced back to Philo and his allegorical exegesis of the Scriptures in the mid-first century, developed within an upper-class Hellenistic Jewish *milieu*, which was influenced by Homeric scholarship (Runia 1993; Niehoff 2011). Philo, “a religious Jew who identified himself with the Jewish laws and customs . . . , was well acquainted both with Greek authors and philosophers . . . , took part in banquets, frequented the theatre, and heard concerts . . . , watched boxing, wrestling and horseracing” (Borgen 1997, p. 17). As pointed out by Jason M. Zurawski, for Philo “to be Jewish was to share in a common *paideia*, [which] was just that of their elite Greek neighbors, but . . . included the education they received throughout their lives from their laws, [making] the Jews . . . exemplars for the rest of humankind” (Zurawski 2017, p. 505). The suppression of the Jewish revolt of 115–17 and its destructive impact on Alexandrian Jewry must have been a landmark in the formation of a more Gentile-inclusive, rather than exclusively Judeo-Christian, Alexandrian community (Roberts 1979, pp. 58–65). Gregory E. Sterling suggests that “at some point prior to the revolt of 115–17, one of Philo’s successors or a student converted to Christianity”, leading to the Christian reception and reinterpretation of Philonic works (Sterling 1999, p. 164). Around 180, the Stoic Pantaeus, an older contemporary and perhaps also the teacher of Clement, is described in the *Ecclesiastical History* as a Christian philosopher-theologian, who undertook missionary work in “India”, probably a reference to Ethiopia. Pantaeus is also described by Eusebius as head of the Alexandrian School and a predecessor to Origen. A passage from Pamphilus, quoted by Photius in the ninth century, draws a line of authoritative succession from the apostles to Pantaeus, Clement, and Origen (Clement of Alexandria 1909, pp. 152–53.56.2; Photius 1960, pp. 90–91.118; Eusebius 1977b, pp. 157–60.5.9–11; van den Hoek 2013; Andrade 2018, pp. 89–90). Despite Pamphilus and Eusebius’ attempt to present an uninterrupted line of tradition going back to the apostles, the evidence concerning Gnostic teachers like Basilides and Valentinus, to whom we will return below, suggests a greater degree of diversity within the broader Christian community of Alexandria, sometime before Pantaeus. Writing against these heretical groups and wishing to guide his fellow Christians in the way to salvation, Clement, mentioned by Eusebius as a presbyter (Eusebius 1977b, p. 246.6.11.6), created a theological corpus that combined Stoic, Neopythagorean, and Neoplatonic elements with the biblical tradition (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2008). The historicity of the Eusebian reference that Origen had attended the lectures by the Neoplatonist Ammonius Saccas (d. 242), as well as Ammonius’ religious identity, are debated by scholars (Eusebius 1977b, pp. 264–68.6.19.5–14; Langerbeck 1957; Schroeder 1987; Watts 2006, pp. 155–68; Digeser 2012, pp. 23–71).

In Rome, too, philosophical ideas were in dialogue with Christianity since the first century. Beginning with Paul and continuing with the First Letter of Peter and the First Letter of Clement, Runar M. Thorsteinsson concludes his examination, stating that “Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism were fundamentally similar in terms of morality of ethics” (Thorsteinsson 2010, p. 209). It is with Justin Martyr—a second-century Hellenised Samaritan passing from Stoicism to Aristotelianism and then from Pythagoreanism to Platonism, before settling to Christianity—that we firmly observe the rise of the Christian philosopher-theologian in the imperial capital (Ulrich 2014, pp. 51–53). Justin came to Rome around 150 and was executed in 165 or not long after (Barnard 1967, p. 13). Dressed in the philosopher’s mantle, Justin taught for free where he probably lived, namely in a flat above the baths of Myrtilus. His students included mostly men (Chariton, Evelopistus, Hierax, Paion and Liberian), at least one woman (Charito), and perhaps also non-Christians interested in the “philosophy of Christianity” (Tobias 2012; cf. Snyder 2007; Ulrich 2012). Although the historicity of Justin’s intellectual genealogy and audience is debated by

scholars, the overall picture fits well into the broader “scholastic” atmosphere of the Greco-Roman world suggesting the cultivation of a philosophical habitus on the part of educated Christians. As argued by Allen Brent, Justin’s school was an ecclesial house-community similar to Greek philosophical house-communities, a place where Christians met, shared meals, studied, and worshipped God (Brent 1995, pp. 401–5). The same scholar locates the early third-century school-community of the shadowy Hippolytus on the via Tiburtina, where the statue of a mutilated seated figure, probably associated with the school (as indicated by an inscription mentioning the Hippolytan works and the Roman Easter calendar), was discovered in 1551 (Brent 1995, *passim*). The author known as Hippolytus defended his version of orthodoxy against various philosophical and heretical communities, including Christian groups said to have been influenced by Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Plato, and Aristotle (Hippolytus of Rome 1986, pp. 229–39.6.21–29, 280–87.7.14–20, 304–14.7.29–31, 342–49.9.7–10). Around the same period, Callistus, Hippolytus’ rival and later bishop of Rome (ca. 217–22), founded a school considered by Hippolytus’ group as heretical (Hippolytus of Rome 1986, pp. 349–56.9.11–12, 403–4.10.27; Brent 1995, pp. 417–27). For Brent, the organisation and structure of the Roman Church in the second century “resembled a group of conflicting philosophical schools” (Brent 1995, p. 70); it was therefore equally polymorphous to the philosophical-theological mosaic of the Alexandrian Christian community.

By Justin’s time, Roman and Alexandrian Christian links seem to have become more visible. Maren R. Niehoff suggests that, while in Rome, Justin came across Philo’s literal interpretation of the *Timaeus*, which he employed to attack Marcion’s dualist teaching on the creation of the world (Niehoff 2016). Justin also knew an incident concerning a young Alexandrian Christian petitioning Prefect Felix (150–54) to acquire permission for self-castration (Caner 1997; Jakab 2022, pp. 94–95). The mobility of people and the spread of news could be associated with the transfer of manuscripts. Roberts notes that in second-century Egypt, the most popular Christian reading was, apart from the Bible, *The Shepherd* of Hermas. Composed in Rome, *The Shepherd* was studied by prominent Alexandrian theologians, such as Clement and Origen. “Its popularity”, explains Roberts, “is evidence both of the continuing Jewish-Christian strain in Egypt and of the link between Rome and Alexandria” (Roberts 1979, p. 63). Sometime around the 160s or 170s, Celsus composed his famous anti-Christian polemic, *The True Logos*, partly responding to Justin’s Christian apologies (Andersen 1955, pp. 308–400; Paget and Gathercole 2021, pp. 8–10, 21–22). Alexandria has been proposed as one of the places where Celsus’ treatise might have been written (Paget and Gathercole 2021, pp. 10–11) and it is an Alexandrian philosopher-theologian, Origen, who undertook the task to refute Celsus in ca. 248, in agreement with Justin’s arguments (Misiarczyk 2011). Sometime under Hadrian (117–38) and Antoninus Pius (138–61), the Gnostic Basilides, “the first Christian intellectual known in the history of the Egyptian Church” (Dubois 2019, p. 156), was active in Alexandria (Löhr 1996, pp. 17, 20–21, 29–30, 36). Another Gnostic teacher, Valentinus, received a Greek education in Alexandria, where he initially taught. Valentinus later went to Rome during the time of Bishop Hyginus (ca. 136–40). He was particularly successful in attracting members under Bishop Pius (ca. 140–55) and remained in the city until the tenure of Anicetus (ca. 155–66) (Markschies 1992, pp. 294–336; Lampe 2003, p. 294). Much like Justin and his students, the Valentinians were organised in study groups or schools (Linjamaa 2019, pp. 185–226). Origen himself visited Rome in ca. 215, for he had wished, so Eusebius tells us, to know better the ancient Church of the Romans (Eusebius 1977b, p. 256.6.14.10; Nautin 1977, p. 418). It has been suggested that Origen’s visit was an expression of Alexandrian assistance to Bishop Zephyrinus’ (ca. 199–217) struggle against the followers of Theodotus and their Bishop Natalius, who taught that Jesus was a mere human (Eusebius 1977b, pp. 211–16.5.28; Digeser 2012, pp. 62–63; cf. Hippolytus of Rome 1986, p. 401.10.23). The main manuscripts preserving Hippolytus’ anti-heretical *Elenchos* attribute parts of this work to Origen (Hippolytus of Rome 1986, pp. 9–10). Jerome, in the late fourth century, claimed that Hippolytus met Origen in person (Jerome 1992, p. 202.61). In 245, Plotinus

(d. 270/71), who, like Origen in the—debatable concerning this point—Eusebian narrative, was Ammonius Saccas' disciple in Alexandria, founded his Neoplatonist school in Rome (Gertz 2022, p. 41).

Thus, the reign of the Antonines, and more specifically the 150s and 160s, witnessed the intensification of contacts between the Christian communities of Rome and Alexandria. At the heart of this mutual communication, we find the figure of the Christian philosopher-theologian, regardless of orthodoxy. The departure and ending points of these links are quite often unclear, since there were no centralised, supra-regional authorities directing and co-ordinating the movement of people, ideas, and practices. Questions raised concerning the origin of influences should remain open, for the simple reason that there is no adequate evidence to speak of a Christian scholastic tendency first born in Rome and later migrating to Alexandria, or vice-versa. While it is true that the Christians of Rome were mostly Greek-speaking immigrants, a tendency continuing as late as the mid-third century (Lampe 2003, p. 143), their Eastern provenance only sheds light on the nature of two-way contacts and mutual interaction between Rome and Alexandria, in a connected world of parallel and transverse processes. The case of Athenagoras, an apologist who had been influenced by both the Philonic writings and Justin and was active in Athens around 176, is indicative of the transverse nature of Roman-Alexandrian links (Rankin 2009, pp. 9–10, 23–25, 180).

In Adkins' reading of Deleuze and Guattari, anarchical rhizomatic assemblages also leave room for hierarchical elements. In our case, there is little to suggest that top-down processes shaped, directly at least, the Christian scholastic web. To paraphrase Brent's conclusion in respect to Hadrian and the middle recension of Ignatius of Antioch's (d. 115) letters, "both Hadrian and Ignatius may be said to be riding a common cultural wave", without directly and intentionally influencing one another (Brent 2006, p. 318). What appears to be the case is that the reigns of Hadrian and his successors set the scene for a climate of cultural exchange and interaction that gave rise to the Christian philosopher-theologian. The beginnings of Christian apologetics by Quadratus and Aristides in Athens, for example, are dated by Eusebius and later chronographers under Hadrian (117–25/131–32), although there is no scholarly consensus on this (Eusebius 1977b, pp. 10–12.4.3; Galimberti 2010; Pedersen 2014, pp. 35–36, 43–47; Jones 2018; Tolley 2018; Evans 2019). The rather unreliable *Historia Augusta* (fourth century?) claims that Hadrian, perhaps anachronistically modelled after Julian (361–63), intended to include Christ among the deities worshipped by the emperor (?), p. 266.43.6-7 [Severus Alexander B80-religions-2250230; Brent 1995, pp. 94–100; cf. Penella 1977]. Alessandro Galimberti seems to suggest that Hadrian might have encouraged philosophical dialogue with Christian representatives in the context of a more inclusive religious policy (Galimberti 2010, pp. 77–83). Yet, Hadrianic interest in philosophical Christianity, if any, does not imply that the Christian scholastic web was an imperial project.

The "common cultural wave" spread its foam in all directions. The increasing need to defend Christianity against attacks and gain recognition in a society that held philosophical *paideia* in high esteem (Huttunen 2020, pp. 12–98), led people like Quadratus, Aristides, Justin, Pantaenus, Clement of Alexandria, Athenagoras, and Origen to present their teachings and way of life as the only true philosophy. The geographical scope of this process stretched from Rome to Athens and Alexandria, embracing the empire's major cultural centres.

5. Episcopal Legitimation

5.1. Religious Centralisation under the Severans and Roman Christianity

In 212, Caracalla (198–217) issued the *constitutio Antoniniana*. According to this famous edict, the emperor granted "to all [free persons throughout the Roman] world the citizenship of the Romans" (δίδωμι τοίνυν ἅτασι τοῖς κατὰ τὴν Ῥωμαϊκὴν οἰκουμένην πολιτείαν Ῥωμαίων), for he had wished to lead as many Romans as possible to worship the gods (οὕτω μεγαλομερῶς καὶ θεοπρεπῶς δύνασθαι τῇ μεγαλειότητι αὐτῶν τὸ ἱκανὸν ποιεῖν, εἰ τοσάκις μυρίους ὁσάκις ἔαν ὑπεισέλθωσιν εἰς τοὺς ἑμοὺς ἀνθρώπους ὡς Ῥωμαίους

εἰς τὰ ἱερὰ τῶν θεῶν συνεισενέγκοιμι). Caracalla's act was presented as an expression of gratitude for divine protection against the allegedly attempted assault of his murdered brother, Geta (209–11). Although the edict was not directed against the Christians, but aimed, among others, at enhancing the emperor's role in public worship, it provided, in the long-term, an implicit justification for the persecution of Christians unwilling to participate in traditional forms of Roman worship (text and translation in Heichelheim 1941, pp. 10, 12; cf. Keresztes 1970; Buraselis 1989; de Blois 2014). It is beyond the scope of our presentation to interpret Caracalla's motivations. For the purpose of our examination, however, it is useful to mention Brent's reading of Caracalla's edict as an attempt to promote "a universal pagan religious consensus", a policy that was later continued, more radically, by Elagabalus (218–22) (Brent 2009, p. 237).

Cassius Dio (d. 235), a contemporary Roman historian hostile to Elagabalus, relates that the emperor, a priest of the Syrian god Elagab, placed his foreign god "even before Jupiter himself and [caused] himself to be voted his priest" (θεὸν τινα ξενικὸν . . . πρὸ τοῦ Διὸς αὐτοῦ ἤγαγεν αὐτόν, καὶ . . . ἱερέα αὐτοῦ ἑαυτὸν ψηφισθῆναι ἐποίησεν) (text and translation in Cassius Dio 1955, pp. 456–57.80.11.1). The *Historia Augusta* states that Elagabalus built Elagab's temple on the Palatine Hill, intending to unite all cults under that of Elagab. The reference that Elagabalus wished to do the same for Jews, Samaritans, and Christians is perhaps a later addition, but still confirms this new kind of imperial religious centralisation and syncretism (*Historia Augusta*, pp. 110–12.3.3–5 [Antoninus Elagabalus]). Alexander Severus (222–35), who might have been inspired by Hadrian's intention to include Christ among the divinities favoured by the emperor (*Historia Augusta*, p. 266.43.6–7 [Severus Alexander]), worshipped in his *lararium* the statues of deified emperors, Apollo of Tyana, Christ, Abraham, Orpheus and the portraits of Achilles, Alexander the Great, and his ancestors (*Historia Augusta*, pp. 234–35.29.2 [Severus Alexander]). Julia Mamaea (d. 235), Alexander Severus' mother to whom Hippolytus dedicated his treatise *On the Resurrection*, is praised by Eusebius as an "extremely God-fearing woman" (θεοσεβεστάτη γυνή). The *Ecclesiastical History* relates that Mamaea invited Origen to Antioch, providing a military escort for his journey, and was instructed by him in matters of Christian faith (Eusebius 1977b, pp. 272–74.6.21.3–4; Brent 1995, pp. 82–85). The Christian official and scholar Julius Africanus, who was active under Alexander Severus and corresponded with Origen, was entrusted by the emperor with the task of designing the Library of the Pantheon (Eusebius 1977b, p. 290.6.31.1–2; Granger 1933; Blackeney 1934; Brent 1995, pp. 85–89; Adler 2004; Hammerstaedt 2009, p. 57; Secord 2017). Eusebius claims that Origen sent a letter to Philip the Arab (244–49) and another to his wife, Marcia Otacilia Severa (244–49). The Caesarean historian goes so far as to present the emperor as a Christian (Eusebius 1977b, pp. 294.6.34, 296.6.36.3, 300.6.39.1). Jerome mentions Origen's letters to Philip, *qui primus de regibus Romanis Christianus fuit*, and his mother, rather than his wife (Jerome 1992, p. 196.54). Therefore, even if Alexander Severus' syncretism in the *Historia Augusta* is more fictitious than historical, there was indeed an atmosphere of religious exchange and interaction that seems to have favoured the Christians.

"Nell'età dei Severi si può cogliere un 'analogia di circostanze' tra la storia dell'impero e la storia della Chiesa", writes Enrico dal Covolo. Imperial propaganda, he continues, with its emphasis in the connection of monarchy, Roman citizenship and religious practice, should be seen in parallel to the gradual introduction of a more centralised ecclesiastical organisation under Bishop Callistus of Rome (ca. 217–22) (dal Covolo 2013, p. 20). This process was already traceable from the time of the episcopate of Victor (189–99), the African bishop of the largely Greek-speaking Roman community (Book of Pontiffs 2010, p. 6.15; Lampe 2003, p. 336). In 1929, Charles L. Souvay stressed, rather stereotypically, Victor's Latin African origins, associating the bishop's identity with a tendency towards administrative order and legalism (Souvay 1929, p. 52). A few years before Souvay, in 1925, George La Piana suggested that Victor's rise implied "the presence in the community of a Latin group strong enough to hold the balance of power in the choice of the bishop", perhaps consisting "not only of natives, but also, and probably in a larger measure, of

African immigrants or of the descendants of African stock settled in Rome” (La Piana 1925, pp. 222–23). La Piana observed that this development coincided with the rise of another Roman African, Septimius Severus (193–211), the first Severan emperor (La Piana 1925, p. 224). Mark Edwards’ recent study of the concept of *Romanitas* and the Roman Church agrees with La Piana and Souvay: “[Victor] clearly lacked the cosmopolitan sense of his predecessors” and perceived the episcopate as a strictly hierarchic office (Edwards 2006, p. 196). Victor is known to have written *super quaestione paschae et al.ia quaedam opuscula*, but not extensive theological treatises (Jerome 1992, p. 184.34). Of his education we know nothing; he might have been trained, like other prominent Latin Christians of his time (e.g., Tertullian and Minucius Felix), as a jurist (Lampe 2003, pp. 341–43).

Victor became bishop in a community consisting of autonomous house-churches/schools and a culturally diverse population. The coexistence of different Easter traditions in Rome among Western and Eastern Christians had been a matter of discussion before Victor’s time, but the new bishop decided to seek a permanent resolution. Christians in Asia Minor and Syria celebrated Easter on 14 Nissan (Quartodecimans), the same day as the Jewish Passover. For Quartodeciman Christians, the fast was extended to the dawn of 15 Nissan, and was followed by baptisms of catechumens, a shared meal, and the Eucharist. On the contrary, Christians in the western part of the empire, Palestine and Alexandria celebrated Easter on a Sunday (Dominical tradition), following the celebration of the Jewish Passover. Ritual diversity, once tolerated in Rome, was no longer permissible for Victor, especially due to the activities of the presbyter Blastus, leader of the Roman Quartodecimans. The two men broke communion with each other, which culminated in Victor’s excommunication of the Quartodeciman house-churches (παροικίαι) of Asia Minor. The affair was soon “internationalised”. Local synods in Gaul, Rome, Palestine, Pontus, Corinth, Osroene, and other areas, accepted the validity of the Dominical celebration but did not support Victor’s aggressive line of excommunication (Eusebius 1977b, pp. 196–206.5.23–25; La Piana 1925; Souvay 1929; Brent 1995, pp. 64–69; Panagiotopoulos 2013; Buchinger 2017). Why did Victor insist so much in ritual uniformity? As noted by La Piana, “the root of the question was always the internal problem of his own church” and by imposing uniformity “he could secure the recognition of his episcopal authority as the supreme law of his own church and order among those entrusted to his pastoral care” (La Piana 1925, p. 234). Ultimately, as Peter Lampe explains, “the Quartodecimans were more attached to their native bishop in Asia Minor than to Bishop Victor in Rome” (Lampe 2003, p. 382). Victor’s struggle brought together the principles of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, joining them to his episcopal office in an ecumenical display of ecclesiastical centralisation.

Under Victor and during Commodus’ reign (177–92) there is evidence of Christian penetration into the elites (Eusebius 1977b, p. 192.5.21.1), and more specifically the imperial household or *familia Caesaris*. Hippolytus, in his anti-heretical *Elenchos*, mentions Marcia, the Christian concubine of Commodus, who is said to have helped condemned Christians. Marcia had been brought up by the eunuch Hyacinthus, a presbyter and most likely a member of the *familia Caesaris*. Callistus, enfranchised by Marcia after his arrest, had been a slave of Carpophorus, another Christian belonging to the *familia Caesaris* (Hippolytus of Rome 1986, pp. 350–52.9.12.1–13; Lampe 2003, p. 336; Strong 2014; Flexsenhar 2016, 2019, pp. 178–204). The fortunes of Roman Christianity were changing. Victor’s successor, Zephyrinus, became the first bishop of Rome to have owned a private cemetery (Catacombe di San Callisto), the creation and administration of which were entrusted to Callistus, who was now a deacon (Hippolytus of Rome 1986, pp. 352–53.9.12.14; Book of Pontiffs 2010, p. 7.17; Lampe 2003, pp. 27–28). Owning and managing a cemetery was an important step towards the consolidation of episcopal authority within the Christian community of Rome. The institutional perpetuation of the bishop’s office meant that the cemetery would remain in Christian hands and that the bishop was in control of some of Rome’s sacred burial sites. Moreover, the cemetery could cover the burial needs of the poorer members of the Christian community, thus enhancing the social basis of episcopal influence (Book of Pontiffs 2010, p. 7.17; La Piana 1925, pp. 269–72; Lampe 2003, p. 384; Edwards 2006, p. 198;

Brent 2009, pp. 243–44). By ca. 235, around 800 people had been buried in the cemetery, reflecting the success of the Zephyrinus-Callistus project (Lampe 2003, p. 33). Callistus was also accused by his rival Hippolytus for permitting the practice of concubinage between Christian noblewomen and slaves or freedmen, and even tolerating abortions. Lampe interprets this as an attempt to preserve the Christian element among members of the elite, without causing status degradation (Hippolytus of Rome 1986, pp. 355–56.9.12.24–26; Lampe 2003, pp. 119–21). At any rate, Callistus emerges as a dynamic bishop with important connections to high society.

Victor, Zephyrinus, and especially Callistus must have been exposed to the tendencies of Severan religious ideology, based on earlier Hellenistic and Roman precedents. Roman imperial ideology had been always linked to religion, but the link was now highlighted more intensely and in novel ways. A focal point in the public image of the emperor promoted by Septimius Severus, Caracalla, Elagabalus, and Alexander Severus was the representation (e.g., through rituals, titles, statues and coinage imagery) of the close connection between the emperor and the divine, as a means of imperial legitimation (Rowan 2012). In his recent study on the Severan *Ludi Saeculares*, Jussi Rantala has argued that the Severans, beginning with Septimius Severus, might have intended to symbolically reincorporate the provinces into a *communitas* forged by the imperial cult and modelled after an idealised perception of the imperial family (Rantala 2017, p. 169). While in provincial cities, like Alexandria, the reception of imperial ideology “was negotiated within private and local cultural contexts for different purposes” (Rowan 2012, p. 250), it is quite likely that the Christians of Rome shared with all other communities in the city a direct experience of the visual language of divine sanction. The most extreme application of this concept was by Elagabalus, Callistus’ contemporary, who “in publicly representing himself as high priest of the god, in addition to his role as pontifex maximus, Elagabalus . . . created a new and modified image of a Roman ruler”, through the “unusual and extreme implementation of Elagabalus’ tutelary deity” (Rowan 2012, p. 218). Thus, for Elagabalus, and his circle, imperial legitimation went hand in hand with religious centralisation, in the sense of merging cults and offices (Rüpke 2014, p. 248). It should be mentioned that the functional dimension of *pontifex maximus* included guarding, performing, and interpreting Rome’s *sacra* (e.g., sacred objects, scriptures, rites, and sacrifices) (van Haepelen 2003). Tertullian (d. 225) accused an anonymous bishop, ironically labelled *pontifex maximus* and *episcopus episcoporum*, for having issued an “edict” regarding the absolution of adultery and fornication (Tertullian 1993, p. 146.1.6–8). According to some scholars, the bishop in question was Callistus (perhaps in relation to his tolerance of Christian concubinage), which suggests an imitation on his part of the Severan, particularly Elagabalian, imperial ideology (Kajanto 1981, pp. 44–45; Brent 2009, pp. 240–41). The administrative centralisation echoed in Tertullian’s statement seems to be reflected in Callistus’ Monarchian theology, as presented by Hippolytus: the Trinity was said to have only one person divided only in name (Hippolytus of Rome 1986, pp. 403–4.10.26.3–4; Haine 1998; Brent 2009, pp. 229–30).

In sum, it is plausible that the tendency towards centralisation in Severan religious ideology facilitated (if not inspired) the centralisation of Roman episcopate at the end of the second and the early decades of the third century.

5.2. Alexandria in Light of Roman Developments

The Latin version of the *Apostolic Tradition*, attributed to Hippolytus and his circle, stands in sharp contrast to the centralised role of Roman bishops after Victor. According to this document, the presbyters as a collective body had an important role in performing episcopal ordinations by imposing their hands on the elect (Hippolytus of Rome 1946, pp. 26–27.2; Brent 1995, pp. 466–70; Bradshaw et al. 2002, p. 27; Stewart 2014, pp. 342–43). Eusebius, quoting Irenaeus’ (d. ca. 202) letter to Victor, mentions “the presbyters before Soter (ca. 166–175), who were in charge of the church of which you are the present leader” (οἱ πρὸ Σωτῆρος πρεσβύτεροι, οἱ προστάντες τῆς ἐκκλησίας ἧς σὺ νῦν ἀφηγῆ) and who exercised some control over the *παροικίαι* (“house-churches”) (Eusebius 1977b,

p. 204.5.24.14-16; tr. [Williamson and Louth 1989](#), p. 548). This suggests that the bishop had been, up until Victor's time the latest, *primus inter pares* in a system of "presbyterial governance", mainly entrusted with the duty of collective representation and external communication with other local Churches ([Lampe 2003](#), p. 403).

A similarly polycentric organisation must have existed in Alexandria. Eusebius describes the beginning of Demetrius' tenure in 189, which coincided with Victor's rise, as follows: "Demetrius took over the service of the house-churches in Alexandria" (τῶν κατ'Ἀλεξάνδρειαν παροικιῶν τὴν λειτουργίαν ἐγχειρίζεται) ([Eusebius 1977b](#), pp. 194–96.5.22.1). Likewise, his predecessor, Julian (178–189), is said to have "taken over the supervision of churches in Alexandria" (τῶν κατ'Ἀλεξάνδρειαν ἐκκλησιῶν Ἰουλιανὸς ἐγχειρίζεται τὴν ἐπισκοπήν) ([Eusebius 1977b](#), p. 156.5.9.1). Stewart-Sykes argues that the presbyterial structure of the Alexandrian community was modelled after the city's synagogues: "the presbyters of the Alexandrian church were, like those of the synagogue, both fundamentally patronal and scholastically oriented in their origin" ([Stewart-Sykes 2004](#), p. 423). So far, we possess no archaeological testimonies on how these parishes or house-churches looked like in ca. 200. An Alexandrian rabbinical document dating around the same period and describing a wealthy Jewish synagogue (*Tosefta Sukka* 4.6) could provide a parallel to the structure of Christian house-churches. The synagogue was a large basilica with two colonnades, thrones for the presbyters, a wooden platform for ritual reading, and space allocated to different occupational guilds ([Kloppenborg 2019](#), pp. 315–16). Origen, quoted by Eusebius, describes Bishop Heraclas (232–248), his former student, as a Christian teacher dressed in the philosopher's mantle (φιλόσοφον ἀναλαβὼν σχῆμα), who sat in the presbytery of the Alexandrians (ἐν τῷ πρεσβυτερίῳ καθεζόμενον Ἀλεξανδρέων) ([Eusebius 1977b](#), p. 268.6.19.13-14; [Stewart 2014](#), p. 193). Therefore, in both Rome and Alexandria "the primary unit" ([Addleshaw 1953](#), p. 4) of ecclesiastical organisation was the house-assembly or house-church, quite often including a school directed by the philosopher-theologian, who might have been also a presbyter ([Lampe 2003](#), pp. 121–22).

We have seen that the Christian community frequenting the house-churches/schools of Rome included both elite and poorer members, the former being perhaps closer to the ideal of the Christian philosopher-theologian. During and after the reign of Commodus, Christianity began to conquer the elites, coinciding with a shift towards centralisation under Victor, Zephyrinus, and Callistus. Investing in the creation of a private cemetery and tolerating concubinage regardless of social status might have enabled Callistus to consolidate his authority among the economically modest.

Episcopal centralisation in Alexandria presents both differences and similarities to the Roman paradigm. One significant similarity is that, despite Eusebius' effort to fit everything within a single line of institutional succession, Alexandrian Christianity in the second century formed a "federation" of autonomous house-churches and schools, like that existing in Rome. But contrary to Roman Christians, who were largely immigrants, their Alexandrian brethren were more culturally uniform as a group ([Stewart 2014](#), pp. 194–95). Elite Christians appear to have been initially more prominent in Alexandria than in Rome. Roger S. Bagnall points out that the earliest dated papyrus containing a Christian letter (250s–60s) comes from the elite society of Fayyum, which could be considered as evidence that not all Christians in Egypt were poor ([Bagnall 2021](#), p. 154). The auditors and readers of Clement of Alexandria "were rich, cultivated people from the upper Alexandrian society, [who had] a refined lifestyle shielded from any material deprivation, for whom the classic quotations (from tragedies and comedies) must have been familiar" ([Jakab 2022](#), p. 102). Clement's circle probably included high-society women ([Jakab 2022](#), pp. 105–6). But "the simple", low-status Christians, who lacked or remained indifferent to the cultural and spiritual orientation of the elites pursuing a deeper and superior approach to faith, were also present. Gunnar af Hällström's monograph on the Alexandrian *simpliciores* reveals a group in opposition to Origen's philosophical method of scriptural exegesis ([Hällström 1984](#); [Castagno 2000](#)). These people probably advocated for an anthropomorphic understanding

of the Bible, which was closer to Second Temple traditions (Giulea 2015; cf. Patterson 2012). Clement's frequent references or allusions to "the simple" indicate their upgraded role within the Christian community sometime before the turn of the third century (Kovacs 2014, pp. 333–36; Edsall 2019, pp. 165–68; Jakab 2022, pp. 111–13). As shown by Aline Rousselle and Jakab, Septimius Severus' anti-Christian persecution in 202, which was neither systematic nor ecumenical, but most probably affected Alexandria (Kinzig 2021, pp. 67–72; Bagnall 2021, p. 152), threatened first and foremost the socially elevated, forcing many elite Christians to flee. The social basis of Alexandrian Christianity was gradually changing, in favour of the literalist *simpliciores* (Rousselle 1974; Jakab 2022, pp. 113–15).

According to Eusebius, Demetrius became bishop of Alexandria in 189, the year marked by Victor's rise in Rome. The exact dates of the Easter Controversy are unclear, but Demetrius was certainly in office when it began. The *Ecclesiastical History* notes that Alexandrian Christians observed the Dominical tradition, in agreement with Rome and having first exchanged letters with the synod of Palestinian bishops (Eusebius 1977b, p. 206.5.25). It is reasonable to assume that Demetrius, like other bishops throughout the empire, held a synod reaffirming the official position of the Alexandrian Church, before contacting the Palestinians. Demetrius was, thus, a witness to Victor's display of episcopal authority. He must have sensed that, despite Victor acting as *primus inter pares* among his fellow presbyters, he was more than a representative of the Roman synod. Jerome's reference that Demetrius sent (*mitteretur*) Pantaenus to preach Christianity in "India", reflects, perhaps, the bishop's decision to collaborate with Christian *literati*, in order to expand the influence of the Alexandrian Church and his own episcopal authority (Jerome 1992, p. 186.36).

5.3. Enter Origen: The Bishop and the Master

Origen's father, Leonides, was a victim of the 202 persecution. Paternal property was confiscated by the imperial treasury, leaving seventeen-year-old Origen, his mother, and six brothers in poverty. Origen was adopted by a Christian noblewoman, whose house functioned as a school under the direction of Paul the Antiochene, whom Eusebius considers a heretic, but was said to have attracted in his lectures both orthodox and heterodox Christians. Origen's engagement with the Scriptures and Greek learning had begun under Leonides and was intensified after his father's martyrdom. The young man's profile enabled him to work as a grammar teacher, but his career was soon about to change (Eusebius 1977b, pp. 218–24.6.1–2). Eusebius, based on Origen's own writings, states: "at Alexandria there was no one dedicated to elementary Christian teaching (as they had all fled the threatened persecution)" (μηδενός τε ἐπὶ τῆς Ἀλεξανδρείας τῷ κατηχεῖν ἀνακειμένου, πάντων δ' ἀπεληλαμένων ὑπὸ τῆς ἀπειλῆς τοῦ διωγμοῦ), for which reason the Pagan brothers Plutarch and Heraclas, Demetrius' future successor, approached Origen for catechetical instruction. Origen was nearly eighteen when "he became principal of the school of elementary instruction" (τοῦ τῆς κατηχήσεως πρόσθη διδασκαλείου) (Eusebius 1977b, pp. 224–26.6.3.1–3; tr. Williamson and Louth 1989, pp. 568–69).

The sporadic Severan persecution of 202 emerges as a decisive moment in the institutionalisation of Alexandrian Christianity, shifting from multiple house-schools into a single school, controlled by the bishop. When Eusebius, following Origen and without wishing to imply institutional discontinuity, writes that the persecution and fear of additional anti-Christian measures had completely disorganised catechetical teaching, he reveals a critical gap in the house-church/school structure of Alexandrian Christianity. At the time, Demetrius had been bishop for around thirteen years and had most probably participated in the Easter Controversy. Similar to Victor and his involvement in the Quartodeciman affair, the events of 202/3 provided Demetrius with an opportunity to deal with an important pastoral problem in a way that would strengthen his episcopal authority. The choice to appoint young Origen as principal of what seems to have been the only catechetical school in the city, or at least the only school in communion with Demetrius and his presbyters, might be explained not only due to Origen's education and

family connections (van den Broek 1995, p. 44; Jakab 2022, pp. 118–19), but also due to the lack of more experienced teachers. According to Eusebius, “responsibility for elementary instruction had been entrusted by Demetrius, prelate of the church, to Origen alone” (ἀὐτῷ μόνῳ τῆς τοῦ κατηχεῖν διατριβῆς ὑπὸ Δημητρίου τοῦ τῆς ἐκκλησίας προεστῶτος ἐπιτετραμμένης) (Eusebius 1977b, p. 228.6.3.8; tr. Williamson and Louth 1989, p. 572). Although later hagiographical sources claim that Demetrius had been an illiterate peasant before becoming bishop, this is most likely a *topos* that does not seem to correspond to Demetrius’ vision of re-establishing the Alexandrian house-school tradition, through a single teacher under the bishop (Mikhail 2017, pp. 64, 76–80, 88–89, 95, 108, 111, 137, 160, 169, 171, 176).

In 206–7, Prefect Aquila initiated a new anti-Christian persecution. Origen encouraged Christian confessors and martyrs-to-be, attracting a great number of students and infuriating the enemies of Christianity. His house-school was put under military supervision, and he was even forced to transfer his teaching from one place to another. He was not terrorised but saw this challenge as an opportunity to dedicate himself fully to his catechetical ministry. He stopped teaching as a grammarian, sold the profane books he had copied, and was satisfied with a daily income of four obols from the books’ buyer. Like a true philosopher, he began what would become his way of life for very many years. Eusebius describes Origen pursuing manual labour and vigil, studying the Scriptures, fasting with austerity, sleeping on the ground, and enduring nakedness and the cold (Eusebius 1977b, pp. 228–30.6.3.9–13). Jakab, who considers Origen an intermediary between the poorer *simpliciores* and the elite, suggests that his self-castration took place around this period, following the literal interpretation of Matthew 19:12. This regrettable experience, argues Jakab, might have led Origen to embrace a less literal and allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures, in the Philonic and Clementine tradition. Eusebius explains Origen’s action by pointing out that, because the young master also taught to women, he wished to prevent suspicions concerning himself and his female students. The self-castration accusation was later used by Demetrius against Origen, despite the fact that the bishop had initially approved his daring act (Eusebius 1977b, pp. 236–38.6.8.1–6; Hanson 1966; Caner 1997; Tzamalikos 2022, pp. 401–4; Jakab 2022, pp. 122–23).

Origen’s circle of students was indeed mixed in terms of gender, social status and spiritual categorisation, including men and women, *honestiores* and *humiliores*, baptised Christians and catechumens. Potamiaena and her mother Marcella, Plutarch, Serenus, Heraclides, Hero, Herais, and Basilides appear in the *Ecclesiastical History* as martyrs of faith during Aquila’s persecution (Eusebius 1977b, pp. 230–34.6.4–5; Jakab 2022, pp. 120–21). A woman named Julian gave Origen the heretical writings of Symmachus the Ebionite, but she is not mentioned as one of his students (Eusebius 1977b, p. 260.6.17). Heraclas, Plutarch’s brother and a promising philosopher-theologian, was appointed by Origen as his co-instructor in catechetical teaching, allowing Origen to focus more on his private studies. The students were divided into two groups: the more advanced continued to be taught by Origen, while the beginners came under Heraclas’ instruction. This internal restructuring seems to have been tacitly accepted by Demetrius, for Eusebius says nothing about his reaction and the School’s operation appears to have become more efficient (Eusebius 1977b, pp. 256–58.6.15; Jakab 2022, p. 123). The wealthy Ambrose, a former Valentinian Gnostic converted by Origen, became his patron and sponsored his production of theological works. Apart from material supplies, Ambrose provided Origen with more than seven shorthand-writers, to whom the master dictated his teachings, as well as copyists and female calligraphers (Eusebius 1977b, pp. 260.6.18.1, 274–76.6.23.1–2). Ambrose’s case was not a *unicum*: “innumerable heretics and a considerable number of the most eminent philosophers” (μύριοι δὲ τῶν αἰρετικῶν φιλοσόφων τε τῶν μάλιστα ἐπιφανῶν οὐκ ὀλίγοι) attended Origen’s lectures, as did many “simple believers” (τῶν ἰδιωτικωτέρων), who were introduced to encyclical education (ἐπὶ τὰ ἐγκύκλια γράμματα) as a preliminary stage before Scriptural study. Beginning with geometry, arithmetic and the other “preparatory subjects” (προπαιδεύματα), Origen’s programme of studies continued with a

presentation and commentary of the different philosophical currents and schools (Eusebius 1977b, pp. 260–62.6.18.2–4; tr. Williamson and Louth 1989, pp. 604–6).

In portraying Origen, Eusebius presents his hero as the ideal Christian *litteratus*: a philosopher-theologian deconstructing and reinterpreting non-Christian philosophical elements to navigate the semantic ocean of biblical revelation against rival forms of heterodoxy. In the Christian camp, the Gnostic schools, opponents to both Clement and Origen, were constructing their own rafts with the same purpose, standing on the timber of philosophical and theological eclecticism and promising initiation into the mysteries of deeper truth (Edwards 2002, pp. 28–29). Despite his engagement with Greek philosophy, Origen would not be accepted by non-Christian philosophers of his time as one of their fold. He was, in the words of John A. McGuckin, “too invested in the particularity of God, the material significance of a divine incarnation, and the specificity of divine revelation as the source of truth” (McGuckin 2022, p. 9). As noted by Edwards, “Origen’s is an autonomous philosophy, designed to answer, not to flatter, the teaching of the schools. . . . Often it is those who are most conversant with the fashions of the age who are least enslaved to them, and if Platonism was such an epidemic in Alexandria as scholars have supposed, the surest vaccine was to read Plato” (Edwards 2002, p. 161).

What, then, initially caused the rift between Demetrius and Origen? Origen’s division of the School’s students into beginners receiving an elementary learning (τῶν ἀρτιστοιχειουμένων) and advanced members, who had been trained in the habit of Christian life (τῶν ἐν ἔξει), might have broadened the pre-existing socio-cultural gap between “simple” and educated believers. The creation of a closed circle of advanced students similar to the practices of the Gnostic Christians is likely to have raised suspicions concerning Origen’s orthodoxy (Eusebius 1977b, p. 258.6.15; Nautin 1977, p. 48; Jakab 2022, pp. 125–26). McGuckin argues that “it was Origen’s decision to publish the first chapters of his *On First Principles*” that caused tension with Demetrius, because the bishop “was alarmed by many aspects of the speculative metaphysics Origen discussed there” (McGuckin 2022, p. 9). Henri Crouzel, who co-edited Origen’s treatise with Manlio Simonetti, is rather sceptical, but leaves room for such a possibility (Crouzel 1978, p. 9).

Let us go back to Eusebius’ narrative, using Nautin’s detailed biography of Origen as a chronological guide. Origen’s travels spread his reputation outside Egypt. As already mentioned, in ca. 215 he visited Rome, perhaps sent by Demetrius to assist Zephyrinus against Theodotus and Natalius. Towards the late 220s Demetrius sent Origen to a missionary journey in Arabia, before returning to Alexandria (Eusebius 1977b, p. 268.6.19.15; Nautin 1977, pp. 365–66, 410). Origen’s first journey to Caesarea, in the circle of Bishops Alexander of Jerusalem (d. 251) and Theoctistus of Caesarea, is dated by Nautin in 230, sometime before his meeting with Julia Mamaea in Antioch (231). Nautin suggests that the publication of *On First Principles* in 229–30 provoked what Eusebius describes as “a great war striking the city” (οὐ μικροῦ κατὰ τὴν πόλιν ἀναρριπισθέντος πολέμου), although other scholars link this enigmatic reference to Caracalla’s massacre of the Alexandrians in 215–16. Nautin’s interpretation seems plausible: Origen must have been facing opposition from the *simpliciores*. The least we can say about Demetrius is that he did not support him. This seems to have been the reason behind his journey to Palestine. The master had no intention of returning to his city (Eusebius 1977b, p. 268.6.19.16; Nautin 1977, pp. 366–70).

During his stay in Palestine, Origen interpreted the Scriptures before the Christian “federation” or “association of the assembly” (τάς τε θείας ἐρμηνεύειν γραφὰς ἐπὶ τοῦ κοινοῦ τῆς ἐκκλησίας), denoting an audience of Christians from many house-churches (cf. Kloppenborg 2019, p. 351). Being still a layman, he was pressed by the local bishops to be ordained presbyter. Demetrius, perhaps instigated by Origen’s patron Ambrosius (cf. Nautin 1977, pp. 366–68), sent his deacons to Palestine, recalling him back to Alexandria. In a letter to the Palestinian bishops, partly preserved by Eusebius, Demetrius raised complaints against Origen: “it was an unheard-of, unprecedented thing that where bishops were present laymen should preach” (ὅτι τοῦτο οὐδέποτε ἠκούσθη οὐδὲ νῦν γεγένηται, τὸ παρόντων ἐπισκόπων λαϊκοὺς ὁμιλεῖν). Alexander of Jerusalem and Theoctistus of

Caesarea replied that this was untrue, for other laymen were called by the bishops to preach to the people (τῶ λαῷ προσομιλεῖν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀγίων ἐπισκόπων), mentioning the cases of Evelpius in Laranda, Paulinus in Iconium, and Theodore in Synnada, who were entrusted to do so by Bishops Neon, Celsus, and Atticus, respectively. If Demetrius included theological accusations in his letter, we cannot tell with certainty. Eusebius' statement that Demetrius "added" (προσέθηκε) in his letter the complaint that Origen was a lay preacher could suggest that theological issues were also raised, but Eusebius chose to not to present them (Corke-Webster 2019, pp. 112–13). Eusebius' picture of a united Christian Church that gradually came to be divided by internal conflict, inspired by Hegesippus' model of succession and orthodox teaching, would only be served if past elements of tension were to be minimised. Ultimately, Origen returned to Alexandria, accompanied by Demetrius' deacons carrying the bishop's correspondence to the Palestinians (Eusebius 1977b, pp. 268–70.6.19.16–19). What needs to be stressed, is that "this letter records the earliest accusation levelled at Origen by Demetrius, [lacking] any charge of heresy or heterodoxy" (Mikhail 2017, p. 121n.2), either because theology was not an issue at all in the letter, or because Eusebius decided to omit these charges, minimising the importance of the clash (Corke-Webster 2019, p. 113).

Peace did not last. Nautin dates Origen's Antiochene meeting with Mamaea in winter 231–32, having Origen back in Alexandria for a short period, before leaving again for Greece this time (Nautin 1977, p. 368). Demetrius, whose episcopate was in its forty-third year, must have been alarmed by Origen's increasing reputation and connections. The master was not yet in his fifties, and he had already achieved so much, even attracting the attention of the imperial family (Stewart-Sykes 2004, pp. 427–28). It is likely that Demetrius did not wish his presence in Alexandria, for the *Ecclesiastical History* states that Origen was "sent to Greece due to the urgent necessity of ecclesiastical affairs" (ἐπειγούσης χρείας ἐκκλησιαστικῶν ἔνεκα πραγμάτων ἐπὶ τὴν Ἑλλάδα στείλαμενος). Passing through Palestine, he was ordained presbyter in Caesarea by Alexander of Jerusalem and Theoctistus of Caesarea (232), without receiving Demetrius' permission beforehand. This, according to Eusebius, was the main cause behind Origen's later persecution and accusations (Eusebius 1977b, pp. 238.6.8.4–5, 276.6.23.4). Stewart-Sykes is possibly right when he writes that "the danger with Origen as a presbyter was simply that as such he had become a candidate for the episcopate, and a member of the college that would in turn elect the new bishop, at a time when the bishop was aged" (Stewart-Sykes 2004, p. 428). Photius, based on Pamphilus' defence of Origen, writes that Demetrius convened a synod of bishops and certain presbyters. The synod exiled Origen from Alexandria, prohibited his teaching activities in the city, and declared him deposed. Theoctistus of Caesarea took Origen under his wings and hosted the re-establishment of Origen's school in the city (Photius 1960, pp. 91–92.118).

A letter by Jerome, addressing the Roman noblewoman Paula, implies that Demetrius had sent letters of condemnation to other bishops, requesting a universal condemnation of Origen. The bishops of Palestine, Arabia, Phoenicia, and Achaia did not follow Demetrius. Rome, however, was an exception: *ipsa contra hunc cogit senatum, non propter dogmatum novitatem, non propter haeresim, ut nunc adversus eum rabidi canes simulant, sed quia gloriam eloquentiae ejus, et scientiae ferre non poterant, et illo dicente, omnes muti putabantur* (Jerome 1845, col. 447). Davis observes that "the significance of Demetrius' correspondence, along with his earlier letter to the bishops of Jerusalem and Caesarea, should not be underestimated, as they represent the earliest documented attempts by an Alexandrian bishop to coordinate canonical policy and to raise ecumenical support for his local episcopal authority" (Davis 2005, p. 26). We may add that, in doing so, Demetrius was repeating Victor's earlier strategy against the Quartodecimans, through the internationalisation of a local affair and the consolidation of episcopal authority. Perhaps not surprisingly, Eusebius, a firm supporter of Origen, says nothing about the Roman condemnation mentioned by Jerome. Pontian, who was bishop of Rome at the time (230–35) (Nautin 1977, pp. 60–69), presided over the synod against Origen, which Jerome describes as *senatus*, probably expressing

similar irony to Tertullian's *pontifex maximus* and *episcopus episcoporum*. Andrew Cain argues that Jerome's negative depiction of the Roman Church had to do with his unfavourable treatment by Roman ecclesiastical circles in the 380s, even leading him to label the Roman synod, in another context, *Pharisaeorum senatus* (Cain 2006).

Heraclas, who succeeded Demetrius soon after Origen's condemnation, had been the very man in charge of the Alexandrian School during Origen's repeated absences and after his exile (Eusebius 1977b, p. 284.6.26). "Heraclas", notes Jakab, "personified marvellously the compromise that was necessary for the cohesion of any fast-changing group" (Jakab 2022, p. 129), since he was both a bishop and a scholar, bridging the gap between the *simpliciores* and the *litterati*, and placing the Alexandrian School under the centralised control of the bishop. Heraclas turned against his old master, accusing Origen of heresy to the new bishop of Rome, Fabian (236–50), whom Origen also addressed in defence of his orthodoxy (Eusebius 1977b, p. 296.6.36.4; Nautin 1977, pp. 386–87). A detailed exposition of Origen's later life and legacy in the Origenist crises of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries is beyond the scope of this article. For the purpose of our examination, it is noteworthy that both Demetrius and Heraclas felt the need to seek support from other bishops, including those of Rome, to consolidate their authority and control over the Alexandrian School. The role of bishops was changing, beginning with Victor, Zephyrinus, and Callistus in Rome, and continuing with Demetrius and Heraclas in Alexandria. In Davis' words, Heraclas "set an important, new precedent for the selection and promotion of episcopal candidates. For the rest of the third century, the Alexandrian bishopric would be filled exclusively by candidates who had previously served as heads of the catechetical school" (Davis 2005, p. 27; cf. Eusebius 1977b, p. 288.6.29.4). The Alexandrian School now functioned as a vehicle for the institutional legitimation of episcopal authority.

5.4. Episcopal Legitimation and the Alexandrian School

How can Berger and Luckmann's theory of institutionalisation helps us interpret, in a more meaningful way, the complex historical processes described in this article? Let us repeat in brief the main points in regard to institutional legitimation:

- (a) Institutionalisation begins with the habitualisation of human activity and interaction.
- (b) A central aspect in institutional development is knowledge control in its broader sense, including systems of belief and proper behaviour.
- (c) Institutional hierarchies pay significant attention to role functions and knowledge performance.
- (d) Competitions over knowledge/role assignment tend to be resolved through the exclusion of institutional actors perceived by institutional elites as a threat.
- (e) This kind of internal suppression is justified as a corrective measure against the disorder caused by the excluded party, re-establishing harmony.
- (f) Institutional authority and hierarchy are, therefore, sanctioned as the permanent representatives and defenders of a much bigger symbolic universe.
- (g) Institutions promote the image of a shared past as a common narrative shaping identity.

In the case of the Alexandrian School we have seen that:

- (a) Probably in the 130s, Christian teaching began to be institutionalised in the form of habitualised philosophical-theological training. Polyphony seems to have been the main characteristic of this early stage, including both "orthodox" and "heterodox" teachers, such as Basilides and Valentinus, Pantaenus, Clement, Paul the Antiochene, and perhaps also Ammonius Saccas.
- (b) Knowledge control was a slow process, de facto accelerated only after the Severan persecution of 202 and the appointment of Origen by Demetrius as the sole orthodox catechist in Alexandria. Origen's division of the Alexandrian School's students into two groups and his collaboration with Heraclas, presumably with Demetrius' agreement, was another step towards the establishment of a stable routine for the cultivation of Christian *gnosis*.

- (c) The founding of a single Christian school under Demetrius' supervision should be seen as part of broader developments concerning the role and public image of Christian bishops, which can be better understood in the context of Roman-Alexandrian contacts and relations. This coincided with the greater influence exercised by the *simpliciores* within the Alexandrian community, some of whom challenged Origen's role as a teacher.
- (d) Demetrius' argument that Origen, being still a layman, was unauthorised to preach, claiming Christian teaching for the bishop and clergy, is a clear indication of institutional role conflict. Following Stewart-Sykes, we may interpret Demetrius' hostility to Origen's ordination as a threat to internal peace in the Alexandrian Christian community, leading to Origen's condemnation and Heraclas' rise to the episcopate.
- (e) The defaming of Origen by Demetrius and Heraclas as canonically disobedient and heretical was an effective mechanism of institutional suppression and hierarchy legitimation.
- (f) The centralised powers of third-century Alexandrian bishops after Heraclas indicate episcopal guardianship over the Christian scholastic teaching, aiming at the preservation of orthodoxy.
- (g) Eusebius, being himself a bishop and writing at a time when episcopal authority was firmly established, created a historical narrative of orthodox episcopal and scholastic succession that hides the reality of a more complex past. As argued earlier in this article, however, Origen's own perception of asceticism and the study of theology as vital elements in the life and formation of all ecclesiastical officials was not in conflict with episcopal institution as such, but rather expressed the point defended by Eusebius in a Constantinian age.

6. Conclusions: Rhizomes, Episcopal Legitimation and "A Tale of Two Cities"

This article began with Marc Bloch's statement that, if we forget that history is crafted by particular circumstances taking place within a broader context, "the obsession of origins" could become an idol. And idols, even those belonging to the past, demand to be worshipped. Several scholars have argued that the Eusebian presentation of the early history of the Alexandrian School could be interpreted as a mirror of Eusebius' own concerns, expectations, and role in an increasingly Christianised society. His narrative is an "idol" or mirror (*εἰδωλον*) of the growing importance of episcopal succession and orthodoxy in the fourth century, leaving its imprint on the narrative of events taking place in the second and third centuries. The contribution of this article has been to re-address an old question, showing how interdisciplinarity and a methodology integrating local and global perspectives could bring forth less-examined details, leading to a fresh re-evaluation of the Alexandrian School's origins. Revisiting the systematisation and episcopal control of Christian learning in Alexandria, we have focused on a variety of interconnected processes. Our findings are summarised as follows:

- (a) The development of a Christian scholastic tradition, centred around the philosopher-theologian during and after Hadrian's reign, originated in the cities of the Roman Empire, particularly Alexandria, Athens, and Rome. The density of contacts and exchanges between Alexandria and Rome during the 150s and 160s shows a significant degree of personal connections and mobility in ideas and practices. This interaction becomes even more impressive, if we consider that the surviving evidence is only a fragment of a richer *holon* of contacts between Christian groups and individuals adopting similar ideas and practices. Therefore, rather than seeing the Christian scholastic tradition as a mosaic of isolated local phenomena, we have placed the Alexandrian paradigm in a broader rhizomatic network of mutual influences and interactions, with no fixed point directing this process (pace Roberts; cf. Bagnall 2009, pp. 70–90). Such a polycentric perspective stresses the lack of centralisation and the co-existence of autonomous house-churches/schools forging ecclesiastical federations under their presbyters and bishops. The rhizome metaphor has the advantage of capturing the chaotic, non-linear, and non-teleological history of Christian communities of the first

- three centuries, underlining local particularities, the dynamism of mobility, and the unexpected nature of network development.
- (b) Severan centralisation appears to have provided an administrative and ecclesiological model for late second and early third century Christian bishops in Rome. This is not to argue, however, that individual emperors influenced Christian ecclesiology in a consistent and direct way, but rather that the wider landscape was orchestrated through their policies and actions encouraging religious groups to perceive themselves and act in similar (though not completely identical) ways. The Easter Controversy under Victor could be understood as the manifestation of the Roman bishop's ambitious attempt to impose uniformity over his culturally diverse flock, calling for widespread acceptance throughout the Christian world. In Alexandria, Demetrius and Heraclas followed a similar line against Origen, who had organised Christian learning in a systematic way and in a single school under episcopal supervision. Controlling the Alexandrian School, thus, served the upgraded role of third-century Alexandrian bishops, in line with Berger and Luckmann's theory of knowledge institutionalisation.
- (c) The early history of the Alexandrian School was more than a local phenomenon. The Alexandrian case cannot be comprehensively understood without taking Rome into consideration. The many points of contact between the two cities embrace not only similar structures in church organisation and Christian scholastic interaction, but also similar social dynamics and pastoral challenges. Despite their multiple identities and lack of complete socio-cultural homogeneity, the groups and individuals discussed in this article behaved and acted as members of the same Greco-Roman *ecumene*. Using the language of Deleuze and Guattari, the "de-territorialisation" of the travelling Christian philosopher-theologian of the autonomous house-church/school in the Roman Empire of the second and early third century was followed in Alexandria by a gradual process of "re-territorialisation", which established episcopal control over Christian teaching and excluded potential threats creating a strong local institution and identity.

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