



## DRESSING THE PART: EARLY CHRISTIAN IDENTITY, NORTH AFRICA 100-200 CE

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The study of early Christian identity in the second-third centuries is problematic. This is because there is a paucity of material evidence and assigning a religious affiliation to that evidence is highly contested. For this reason, early Christian identity is often viewed by scholars in a distinct, binary opposition to non-Christian identity based on their reading of limited, largely clerical, historical texts. Recent scholars, particularly Eric Rebillard, have started to challenge these discursive structures regarding Christian markers in this era. My thesis explores clothing as one of those identity markers by examining, in Part I, the role of dress in late antiquity. By using Roger Brubaker's theory from *Ethnicity without groups* and Rebillard's "identity theory," I analyze the difficulties that arise from using sharply divided groups as the basic units of social analysis when attempting to construct an early Christian identity. I also argue that the emergence of a Christian rhetoric on dress and burial in the second-third century is an attempt by early church fathers to construct a Christian identity that is not otherwise evident. In Part II, I analyze religious identity in burials by examining the material evidence from the al-Fayoum, Egypt area. Particular attention is given to the Brigham Young University Egypt Excavation Project el-Gamous site and their claims to have exhumed the earliest Christian burials. My examination of the material evidence from these excavations prompts me to claim that clothing is not an identity marker for Christians in the second-third centuries. My intervention challenges archaeologists who assume that Christians wore clothing that identified them and that this distinctive clothing can be seen in the grave. Furthermore, by looking specifically at clothing, my research proposes that oft-cited Christian writings from the second-third centuries are rhetorical attempts to construct a Christian identity and cannot be shown to have significant material evidence. Therefore, my claim that clothing is not an identifier for Christian identity also challenges the notion that Christians were always distinct from their surrounding cultures.

