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Early Egyptian Monasticism: Ideals and Reality, or, The Shaping of the Monastic Ideal

Abstract

Egyptian monasticism began and spread as a movement of popular piety, but successive generations of theologians attempted to give it inner theological coherence and consistency. Although we may find some clues in the early monastic terminology and even if we can engage in well-founded speculation, we shall never know what inspired or motivated the many thousands who took up the monastic life in Egypt at the end of the third century and the early fourth century to do so. They did not leave behind any written testimony. Our literary sources such as the *Life of Antony* and the *Lives* of Pachomius and his successors come later and they are clearly aimed at creating an ideal of the monastic life, an ideal that owes much, to be sure, to the earlier philosophical and spiritual tradition concerning the possibility of spiritual progress.

INTRODUCTION

The juxtaposition of "ideals" and "reality" can be understood in different ways. First of all, and perhaps more commonly, as a contrast, in the sense that the reality does not always measure up to the ideals. There are ancient texts that support such a contrast. For example, in the *Bohairic Life of Pachomius*, a story is told of a visit by Theodore to the monastery of Pnoum, where he is met by a brother to whom he is as yet unknown. The brother counsels Theodore not to be scandalized by seeing brothers joking or playing around "because it is inevitable that you will find all sorts of people in such a group."[1] Somewhat later in the early fifth century we find John Cassian lamenting more sharply about monks in general that "there are some—and, more's the pity, they are the majority— who have grown old in the lukewarmness and idleness that they learned in their youth."[2] Such statements presume that there exists an ideal by which the reality can be measured and found wanting.

The literature of the monastic movement in the second half of the fourth and the early fifth century leaves little doubt as to what that ideal consisted in, at least in its main components. The *Lives* of Pachomius no less than the writings of John Cassian bear witness to a goal of spiritual progress that could be achieved through practice, ἄσκησις. Whether in the narratives of the *Lives* of Pachomius and his successors or in the more

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1 *Bohairic Life of Pachomius* 138 (text: Lefort, 1933: 187; translation: Veilleux, 1980: 195). See also *First Greek Life* 121.
2 John Cassian, *Conferences* 2.13.2 (text: Petschenig and Kreuz, 2004: 53; translation: Ramsey, 1997: 94).

systematic treatment by Evagrius and Cassian, this involved a struggle against the vices or passions such as anger, lust, or greed in order to arrive at the joys of the contemplative life. Pachomius is portrayed as battling anger through physical exercises.[3] The spiritual life came to be understood as having two aspects, the practical life and the theoretical life or contemplation, called θεωρία in Greek. To achieve the latter, it was necessary to aim at purity of heart or ἀπάθεια by resisting temptations or "thoughts," called λογισμοί in Greek and *cogitationes* in Latin. The beatitude, "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God," came to serve as a shorthand formula to describe the two aspects of this spiritual ascent. Among the various exercises practiced by the monks of the fourth century, we find fasting and other physical hardships, but also the study of the Scriptures and their interpretation. Prayer in various forms was a central part of the monastic life. Contemplative prayer, the search for and the vision of God was regarded as the summit of perfection. All this can be demonstrated from the literary sources of the second half of the fourth century. Such an ideal existed at least in the texts.[4] The difficulty is that, from the point of view of the historian, these texts were written to propose and promote such an ideal. They cannot be taken as a simple description of the reality. In what follows I shall attempt to trace a few stages in the development of the ideal as it is revealed in some of the terminology.

EARLY "MONASTIC" TERMINOLOGY

We know much less about the beginnings of monasticism in Egypt than we do about the second half of the fourth century. The earliest mention of the word μοναχός is found in a papyrus document that can be dated to June 6, 324 AD (*P.Col.* VII 171).[5] In this document a μοναχός named Isaac is cited along with a deacon named Antoninus as having saved the petitioner, Aurelius Isidorus, from death by assault. This document in Greek comes from the village of Karanis in the Faiyum. Unfortunately the document tells us nothing about what it meant to be designated as a μοναχός, only that the term was sufficiently well known not to need further explanation for those who would read the document. We do not know whether the monk in question lived alone in the nearby desert or was a member of a community. It has been assumed that the term must have been in use already for a few decades in order to have acquired such common usage that it could be used in a legal document without further explanation. The term was being used to designate at least a certain category of persons in the society and/or in the Church, but what was the content of the term? Meaning is not an absolute, as dictionaries might lead us to believe, but is relative to the speaker and the hearer. A word may evoke different connotations in the speaker and the hearer. Did the term μοναχός carry the connotations of continence, self-control, and celibacy found in the Syriac term *ihîdāyā*? In a recent critical analysis of the term, Malcolm Choat suggests that male "ascetics" had made their presence felt in public by the first quarter of the fourth century and Christian communities gave them public prominence and titles to identify them.[6] It is not clear that the word μοναχός had the connotation of "solitary" much less that of desert dweller. From later documents we know that the term was used also by Manichaeans.[7] However, they may have borrowed it from orthodox Christians.

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3 *First Sahidic Life of Pachomius* 9 (text: Lefort, 1933: 1–2; translation: Veilleux, 1980: 429–430 [=S1, 7–9]).

4 For a more extensive description of this ideal, see Sheridan, 2002.

5 Judge, 1977: 72–89, and 1981: 613–620.

6 Choat, 2002: 5–23. It is not clear whether or not Isidore was a Christian. Choat thinks it probable that the term μοναχός did carry forward the "concepts of continence, self-control and celibacy" found in the Syriac term (Choat, 2002: 8, with n. 20).

7 Choat, 2002: 8, and 2006: 139 remarks: "Perspective should not be lost, however. As nothing suggests the Manichaean community in Egypt was any more than a small fraction of the Christian community …"

From about ten years later we have documents from the archive of a Melitian monastic community at Hathor located in the eastern desert of the Upper Cynopolite nome in the Delta.[8] One of these in particular (*P.Lond.* VI 1913) is of great interest for the light it sheds on the existence of organized monastic communities. It consists in a contract that can be dated to March 19, 334 between a priest named Pageus of the village of Hippanon in the Heracleopolite nome and the monastery of Hathor. Pageus, a village priest, who seems to have had authority over this monastery, had been summoned to take part in a synod at Caesarea. In this document he appoints his "full brother" Aurelius Gerontius to "supervise and administer and control all the affairs of the monastery."[9] The document is of interest because of the terminology used, which includes not only the word μοναχός several times in the plural, but also the word for monastery (μονή), the word for "prior" (προεστώς) and "stewards" (οἰκονόμοι). We have no way of knowing how large this monastic community was, but the plural use of the terms for "prior" and "steward" suggests at least several dozen.

Another letter (*P.Lond.* VI 1914) from the same collection mentions "the monks of the Melitians."[10] The Melitian schism began in the period of the Great Persecution several decades earlier. It is tempting to conclude that monasticism as an organized and recognizable phenomenon existed already before the schism began and was therefore common to both parties. However, this is speculation and goes beyond the evidence. What does seem clear is that by the beginning of the fourth century, if not earlier, the term μοναχός was being used both as a self-designation and as a term with recognizable standing in the society to designate certain men in the Christian community. However, one must ask for whom the term had meaning, since meaning is quite relative to speaker and context.

Here I would like to suggest only one aspect of the meaning the word might have had for those who accepted it as a self-designation, that is, those who had freely chosen celibacy in the context of the Christian community.[11] That it designated such people seems likely and to understand the connotations the term had for them, it is reasonable to look to the religious texts with which they were familiar at least from regular readings in the liturgy. Two texts from the New Testament in particular suggest such an ideal, one from Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:8–35 and the other from Matthew 19. Paul offered himself as an example of freely chosen celibacy, saying that it is well to remain single "as I do," and offering the advice: "I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided." The advice is to have undivided interests and "to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord." In the light of this text, it is easy to see how the meaning of "undivided" or "unified" could later be attributed to the word μοναχός.[12]

In the second text from Matthew 19:11–12, the saying is attributed to Jesus:

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8 Bell, 1924: 45–53.

9 Bell, 1924: 50.

10 Bell, 1924: 53–71.

11 For speculation about how the word μοναχός came to be applied to them, see Judge, 1977: 88, who sees it as likely "to appeal to the hearts of those of all persuasions who regretted their sexuality, and sought to alienate themselves from society." This is not exactly a neutral description and is perhaps best explained by Bagnall's (1993: 294) observation: "The renunciation of sexual activity is certainly a subject unlikely to find anyone without an opinion."

12 On this theme, see esp. Guillaumont, 1978.

Not all men can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it.

Eunuchs were hardly held in honor in Jesus' society. They were explicitly banned from the assembly of the Lord in Deuteronomy (23:1). Jesus' creation of a new category of "eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" suggests a counter-cultural identification with the marginalized, to use rather modern terminology. These texts are essential to understanding how celibacy could have acquired a place of honor and become an attractive option in the early Church.[13] Without them it is hard to imagine monasticism ever having developed. Whether or not Isidore of Karanis ever heard of them or not is irrelevant to the development of the phenomenon. With regard to the second of these, Antoine Guillaumont called attention to another important text, which illustrates the "pre-monastic" practice of celibacy in the early Church, the Pseudo-Clementine *De Virginitate*, a text composed perhaps in the early third century in Egypt and also translated into Coptic perhaps as early as the fourth century.[14] The text is an exhortation to "eunuchs" and "virgins" to fidelity and to self-knowledge,[15] appealing to many Scriptural citations including those mentioned above and especially to Matthew 25:1–13, the parable of the wise virgins. Many biblical figures are cited as examples including John the Baptist, Mary, Paul, and even the prophets Elias and Eliseus. Guillaumont also connected this form of celibacy with the Coptic expression *remnuoth* found in Jerome's *Letter 22 to Eustochium*, where it has a negative connotation, but he suggested that originally it may have been simply the Coptic equivalent of μοναχός.[16] Ewa Wipszycka cites and concurs with Guillaumont to the effect that these words, μοναχός and *remnuoth*, were created to designate those who had chosen to live as celibates in order to practice asceticism, asserting that the word μοναχός was accepted from the beginning by the entire monastic movement and became the principal term to designate the new type of ascetics.[17] That may be, but it still leaves us with uncertainty as to just when and why the term came to be applied and also what was new about these ascetics.

It may be worth noting that the "explosion of monasticism," as it has been called,[18] at the beginning of the fourth century coincides with a period of rapid expansion of the Church in Egypt. By the middle of the third century, when Dionysius was bishop of Alexandria (247–264), Christianity was no longer confined to the capital, but extended from the Delta at least to the Faiyum (Arsinoe) and even as far as Antinoopolis further south as well as to the Cyrenaica in the west. Eusebius mentions bishops in the Pentapolis and in Hermopolis.[19] The letter writing activity of Dionysius gives the clear impression that the bishop of Alexandria exercised authority over the other Churches in Egypt. However, we have no information about the development of the Church in

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13 They are not the only texts invoked to justify the choice of a celibate life. For a survey of the texts and their use by a variety of groups, including Gnostics, see the articles contained in Bianchi, 1985.

14 For the texts and versions see Geerard, 1983: 6 (no. 1004). For the Coptic text: Lefort, 1952: 35–43.

15 Pseudo-Clement, *De Virginitate* 1.3.4: τὸ δὲ ἔργον ἑαυτοῦ δοκιμαζέτω ἕκαστος καὶ ἑαυτὸν ἐπιγινωσκέτω, ὅτι θρησκεία ἐστὶν μάταιος· παρθενίαν καὶ ἐγκράτειαν ὁμολογοῦντες ἔχειν, τὴν δὲ δύναμιν αὐτῆς ἠρνημένοι (text: Diekamp and Funk, 1913: 4).

16 See Guillaumont, 1995: 87–92.

17 Wipszycka, 2009: 293–294.

18 Choat, 2002: 8. Athanasius suggests such an "explosion" by his use of the phrase "the desert became a city" (*Life of Antony* 14.7) after Antony emerged from twenty years of seclusion and began to teach.

19 Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.46.2, 7.26; see Martin, 1996: 19.

Egypt during the last part of the third century. By comparing the various lists of bishops from the Council of Nicaea and the list of the bishops sent by Melitius of Lycopolis to Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, in accord with the decision of the Council of Nicaea, it has been possible to arrive at the conclusion that, by the time of Nicaea, there were seventy-three episcopal sees in the four provinces of Egypt proper, the Thebaid, Libya and Pentapolis. For these we have both the names of the bishops and the names of their sees. Of these sixty-eight were bishops of sees with the civil status of cities. This suggests a dramatic expansion of the Church in Egypt in the previous fifty to sixty years.[20] That was also the period in which the Christian Scriptures were being translated into the Egyptian language in the new form of writing later to be known as Coptic, an activity no doubt necessitated by the spread of Christianity to the non-Greek speaking population. Athanasius' portrayal of Antony being inspired to take up a monastic life by hearing the Scriptures read in Coptic during the celebration of the liturgy may in fact be a typical event.[21] The influence of texts and biblical examples should not be underestimated in ancient society.

The word μοναχός, although used to designate the celibate way of life inspired by the Scriptures, was not itself a Scriptural term. In the fourth century two other terms are used that do have a Scriptural flavor, ἀναχωρητής (from the verb ἀναχωρέω "to withdraw" or "to retire")[22] and ἀποτακτικός (from the verb ἀποτάσσομαι "to renounce"). Both terms are used in private correspondence in the mid-fourth century to designate those also referred to as monks, together with the term μοναχός and separately. Those who have studied these documents carefully recently have come to the conclusion that neither term was used to differentiate different kinds of monks, as was earlier thought. Those called ἀποτακτικοί are also members of monastic communities and a monk called an ἀποτακτικός in one letter is called ἀναχωρητής in another. The terminology was obviously fluid and the term ἀναχωρητής seems to have functioned also as an honorific title.[23] It did not necessarily designate the life-style of an "anchorite" as understood later in English.[24]

The term ἀποτακτικός, meaning to withdraw or renounce, is used of Jesus in Mark 6:46: "And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray."[25] It is also found in Luke 14:33 in the saying of Jesus: "So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." The word was also part of the baptismal ritual from an early period. Every candidate was required to renounce Satan, all his works and all his pomps, interpreted by Cyril of Jerusalem to include all public spectacles and idolatrous practices, saying several times, "I renounce" (ἀποτάσσομαι).[26] Although the term never seems to have been

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20 Martin, 1996: 17–115, in part. p. 98 for the conclusion regarding the 73 sees and p. 52 for the Melitian list.

21 Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 3.

22 See e.g. Matt. 4:12, Jesus withdraws to Galilee (both Greek and Sahidic); Mark 3:7, Jesus withdraws with his disciples to the sea. The verb and related terms ἀναχώρησις, ἀναχωρητής are found many times in the Pachomian *Lives* (Greek and Coptic) as well as in the *Life of Antony*.

23 Choat, 2002: 14–15. For additional discussion, see Wipszycka, 2009: 295–297.

24 Choat, 2002: 13–14, who notes the problem of using the English "anchorite" as a translation for ἀναχωρητής, since "the modern word's connotations of complete solitude are misleading." The usage in the papyri and literary sources do not indicate that such solitude was indicated by the term. The word is rare in the literary texts until the end of the fourth century.

25 Mark 6:46: καὶ ἀποταξάμενος αὐτοῖς ἀπῆλθεν εἰς τὸ ὄρος προσεύξασθαι.

26 See e.g. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogiae* 1.4: Ἀποτάσσομαί σοι ἐπιβούλῳ ὄντι, καὶ προσποιήσει φιλίας πράξαντι πᾶσαν ἀνομίαν, καὶ ἐμποιήσαντι τοῖς ἡμετέροις προγόνοις ἀποστασίαν. Ἀποτάσσομαί σοι,

used widely in Greek or Coptic, it does show up in Latin translation as Cassian's *renunciantes*. Cassian devotes considerable attention to the spiritual content of the renunciation, distinguishing between three types or stages of renunciation.[27] This is mentioned here not to suggest that the word had so much content in Egypt in the mid-fourth century, but rather that, as a term with biblical (and ecclesiastical) resonance, it had the capacity to be developed or at least that the idea of renunciation belonged to the original monastic inspiration.

On the basis of numerous occurrences of the word in the Pachomian literature it has been suggested that the term originated in Pachomian circles and spread to other ascetic groups. It would have signified renunciation of the world in general, including marriage, but not necessarily property as some examples in the papyri show.[28] However, the word is found also in Latin transliteration in the *Diary of Egeria*, written about 384. There it seems to be the equivalent of μοναχοί, but it is also used alone to designate both men and women, especially at Jerusalem.[29] Clearly the word had spread beyond Egypt, if it originated there, as a term for celibates in the Church, who no doubt drew their inspiration from the teaching and example of Jesus.

THE LANGUAGE OF ἄσκησις

The attentive reader will have noted my use several times of the word "ascetics" to indicate monks. This I have done in imitation of the writers I have cited and because it is difficult to find another term to substitute for it. However, the use of the word "ascetics" is quite problematic, above all because of its modern connotations, which are primarily negative. It is used as an adjective to signify abstention from all forms of indulgence including what is considered normal.[30] Thus we find also the phrase "ascetic behavior" used to describe the ancient monks. Although the word is etymologically related to the ancient Greek verb ἀσκεῖν and its derivatives, there is no historical continuity between the ancient word and the modern. The ancient word has a quite positive signification, as I have explained at length elsewhere.[31] To equate English "ascetic" with the Greek ἀσκητής runs the same danger as equating English "anchorite" with the Greek ἀναχωρητής. In what follows I would like to concentrate on the usage of this vocabulary in fourth-century monasticism, because the concept involved in the word constitutes a major development in shaping the monastic ideal.

The verb ἀσκεῖν and the noun ἀσκητής have not been treated by those who have examined the monastic vocabulary recently, presumably because they are not found in the documentary evidence, that is, in private correspondence or in legal documents relating to monasticism.[32] In the literary material, however, this vocabulary appears prominently already in the first great literary monument of monasticism, the *Life of Antony* by Athanasius, written about 357, and seems to have spread rapidly. The vocabulary used by Athanasius includes

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Σατανᾶ, τῷ πάσης κακίας δημιουργῷ καὶ συνεργῷ (text: Piédagnel and Paris, 1988: 88–89). Others attribute these catecheses to John of Jerusalem. See Geerard, 1974: 290 (no. 3586).

27 John Cassian, *Conferences* 3 (text: Petschening and Kreuz, 2004: 66–95; translation: Ramsey, 1997: 113–147).

28 Wipszycka, 2009: 315–316.

29 *Diary of Egeria* 23.3, 6, 28.3, 39.3, 40.1, 44.3, 49.1 (text: Natalucci, 1991).

30 See Strathmann, 1950: 749–750.

31 Sheridan, 2013.

32 In private correspondence, Ewa Wipszycka has informed me that she does not know of any instance in the documentary evidence.

the nouns ἄσκησις, ἀσκητής, and ἀσκητήριον. Athanasius relates that Antony, after the death of his parents, was inspired by the words of Jesus in the Gospel, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to (the) poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." (Matthew 19:21), Antony sold his inheritance, distributed the proceeds to the poor, and entrusted his sister to a community of virgins. Then, says Athanasius,

> he devoted himself from then on to the discipline (ἄσκησις) rather than the household, giving heed to himself and patiently training himself. There were not yet many monasteries in Egypt, and no monk knew at all the great desert, but each of those wishing to give attention to his life disciplined himself in isolation, not far from his own village.[33]

Athanasius goes on to provide examples of how Antony disciplined himself. He relates that he used to go to visit the men of zeal living in the area and how he sought to learn from each one and to imitate his zeal and his ἄσκησις.[34] The qualities that he sought to learn and imitate were gentleness, devotion to prayer, love of neighbor, keepings vigils, the reading of the Scriptures, perseverance, fasting and sleeping on the ground, generosity and faith in Christ and reciprocal love. Then, says Athanasius, "he returned to his own place of discipline (ἀσκητήριον), gathering the attributes of each in himself, striving to manifest in himself what was best from all."[35] Athanasius uses the word and the related terminology of ἄσκησις at least thirty-eight times in this work.[36]

Somewhat later in the Pachomian literature we also find extensive use of this terminology.[37] The *Lives* of Pachomius and his successors were written under the influence of Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, as is clear from the allusion to or citation of the latter in both the Greek and Coptic versions.[38] It is, therefore, not surprising

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33 Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 3: αὐτὸς πρὸ τῆς οἰκίας ἐσχόλαζε λοιπὸν τῇ ἀσκήσει, προσέχων ἑαυτῷ καὶ καρτερικῶς ἑαυτὸν ἄγων. Οὔπω γὰρ ἦν οὕτως ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ συνεχῆ μοναστήρια οὐδ᾽ ὅλως ἤδει μοναχὸς τὴν μακρὰν ἔρημον. Ἕκαστος δὲ τῶν βουλομένων ἑαυτῷ προσέχειν οὐ μακρὰν τῆς ἰδίας κώμης καταμόνας ἠσκεῖτο (text: Bᴀʀᴛᴇʟɪɴᴋ, 1994: 136; translation: Gʀᴇɢɢ, 1980: 32).

34 Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 4.1: Οὕτω μὲν οὖν ἑαυτὸν ἄγων ἠγαπᾶτο παρὰ πάντων ὁ Ἀντώνιος. Αὐτὸς δὲ τοῖς σπουδαίοις πρὸς οὓς ἀπήρχετο, γνησίως ὑπετάσσετο καὶ καθ᾽ ἑαυτὸν ἑκάστου τὸ πλεονέκτημα τῆς σπουδῆς καὶ τῆς ἀσκήσεως κατεμάνθανεν (text: Bᴀʀᴛᴇʟɪɴᴋ, 1994: 138).

35 Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 4.2: Καὶ οὕτω πεπληρωμένος ὑπέστρεφεν εἰς τὸν ἴδιον τοῦ ἀσκητηρίου τόπον· λοιπὸν αὐτὸς τὰ παρ᾽ ἑκάστου συνάγων εἰς ἑαυτὸν ἐσπούδαζεν ἐν ἑαυτῷ τὰ πάντα δεικνύναι (text: Bᴀʀᴛᴇʟɪɴᴋ, 1994: 140; translation: Gʀᴇɢɢ, 1980: 33).

36 See Cᴏᴜɪʟʟᴇᴀᴜ, 1977: 29 (n. 52).

37 See the indices of the volumes of the Coptic works in Sahidic and Bohairic published by Lᴇꜰᴏʀᴛ, 1925 and 1933.

38 *First Greek Life* 2: Τοῦ γὰρ ἀσκητικωτάτου καὶ ἀληθῶς ἐναρέτου πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἀντωνίου τοιοῦτος ἦν ὁ βίος ὡς ὁ τοῦ μεγάλου Ἠλιοὺ καὶ Ἐλισσαίου καὶ Ἰωάννου τοῦ Βαπτιστοῦ, καθὰ καὶ ἐγγράφως μαρτυρεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ μετὰ τὴν τελευτὴν αὐτοῦ ὁ ἁγιώτατος ἐπίσκοπος Ἀθανάσιος "The life of our most ascetic (ἀσκητικωτάτου) and truly virtuous father Antony was like that of the great Elijah, of Elisha, and of John the Baptist, as the most holy (arch)bishop Athanasius attests in his writing" (text: Hᴀʟᴋɪɴ, 1982: 11; translation: Vᴇɪʟʟᴇᴜx, 1980: 298). The mention of Athanasius is missing in the parallel Coptic (Bohairic) version (text: Lᴇꜰᴏʀᴛ, 1925: 1; translation: Vᴇɪʟʟᴇᴜx, 1980: 24). For a summary of the relationship between the various Greek and Coptic lives of Pachomius, see Vᴇɪʟʟᴇᴜx, 1980: 1–6. Cʜᴏᴀᴛ (2013: 50–74) has recently shown that there is no direct

that we find the same terminology of ἄσκησις and other Athanasian themes also in these *Lives*. The emergence of "monasteries" and "places of *askesis*" (ἀσκητήρια) is situated in the context of the last persecution and the monks are seen as desiring to imitate the martyrs.[39] New disciples of Pachomius are described as "other ἀσκηταί"[40] and the father of another monastery, who asks Pachomius to receive his community, is called an "old ascetic (ἀσκητής)."[41] At the beginning of his monastic life, Pachomius is said to have given himself up "ever more and more to important exercises, to a great and intensive *ascesis*, and to lengthy recitations of the books of Holy Scripture."[42] Theodore is said to be "second to none in *ascesis* and prayer vigils."[43] It is clear that the word had come to mean also bodily deprivation, for Pachomius has to warn "a brother who used to practice *ascesis*, but was not doing it for God," to refrain from excessive fasting.[44] Another brother is said to have "progressed greatly in the *ascesis*," although he was described as an ἀσκητής when he arrived.[45] In some cases the word ἄσκησις seems to describe monastic practice in general. Pachomius entrusts a young monk, who was negligent, to an older one, saying, "we know that you have labored in *ascesis* for a long time."[46] There seems also to have been a need to correct misunderstandings and to complement the notion of ἄσκησις. A story about a vision of Pachomius recounts that he was transported into the other age and met a young man who had "spent four months living the ascetic life (ⲉϥⲁⲥⲕⲉⲓ) in great gladness and joy" before his early death. He also sees an old ascetic "fastened like a dog to a tree laden with fruit." The old ascetic (ⲡϩⲗⲗⲟ ⲛⲁⲥⲕⲓⲧⲏⲥ) had always worn sackcloth and ate nothing but bread with salt, but he never forgave an offense. The young man explains to Pachomius that the old ascetic had been neither obedient to Pachomius' instructions nor humble.[47]

The *Diary of Egeria* mentioned earlier also provides evidence of widespread use of the ἄσκησις terminology in the years around 382–384 when Egeria travelled to the Sinai, to the Holy Land and Syria and Mesopotamia. She mentions that at Mount Nebo she found truly holy monks who are called ascetics (*monachi … vere sancti et quos hic ascites vocant*).[48] At Tesbe in the Jordan valley she speaks of a monk, an ascetic man (*monachos, vir ascitis*).[49] In Mesopotamia at Charra (Harran) she mentions the monks who live in solitude, who are called ascetics (*omnes monachos in . . . qui in solitudine sedebant, quos ascites vocant*).[50] There she wanted to visit also the well of Jacob and was told that it was six miles distant and that there were many monks truly holy and

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evidence for the Coptic translation of the *Life of Antony* before the sixth century. At the same time he notes that this lack does not preclude the influence of or knowledge of the work in a bilingual monastic culture.

39 *First Greek Life* 1 (text: Halkin, 1982: 11; translation: Veilleux, 1980: 297–298).

40 *First Greek Life* 26 (text: Halkin, 1982: 18: ἄλλοι ἀσκηταὶ; translation: Veilleux, 1980: 313 "others came to practise *ascesis*").

41 *First Greek Life* 54 (text: Halkin, 1982: 31; translation: Veilleux, 1980: 335).

42 *Bohairic Life* 15 (text: Lefort, 1925: 16; translation: Veilleux, 1980: 38).

43 *First Greek Life* 36 (text: Halkin, 1982: 24; translation: Veilleux, 1980: 322–323).

44 *First Greek Life* 69 (text: Halkin, 1982: 36; translation: Veilleux, 1980: 344); *Bohairic Life* 64 (text: Lefort, 1925: 64; translation: Veilleux, 1980: 84).

45 *First Greek Life* 94 (text: Halkin, 1982: 46; translation: Veilleux, 1980: 361).

46 *First Greek Life* 104 (text: Halkin, 1982: 51; translation: Veilleux, 1980: 369).

47 Text: Lefort, 1933: 86–87 = S7; translation: Veilleux, 1980: 170–171 (§ 116). The passage is not found in the *First Greek Life*.

48 *Diary of Egeria* 10.9.61.

49 *Diary of Egeria* 16.5.30.

50 *Diary of Egeria* 20.5.30.

ascetics (*multi monachi ibi sunt valde sancti et ascites*).[51] From this one could conclude that *ascites* was both another name for monks and also a designation for those who lived in greater solitude. Notwithstanding Egeria's transliteration of the word into Latin, it never entered into common use in Latin. However, it continued to make progress in the Greek monastic literature of the late fourth and early fifth century such as the *History of the Monks in Egypt* and the *Lausiac History* of Palladius.

Christian literature both before the development of the monastic movement and after is rich in the use of this "ascetic" terminology in its original meaning of "practice." Philo of Alexandria had applied the terminology, already well developed in the philosophical tradition, extensively in his interpretation of the figure of Jacob as the ἀθλητής and ἀσκητής, who struggles against the vices in order to be rewarded finally with the name "Israel" interpreted as "the one who sees God." Many Christian authors beginning with Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, and Didymus show acquaintance with Philo's interpretation or allude to it.[52] Of course we do not know to what extent those who employed the terminology to designate monks in the latter part of the fourth century really understood the original significance of the term ἄσκησις and its implications. For those acquainted with the exegetical tradition, it could not but evoke a vision of spiritual progress, which came to be plotted out ever more systematically by later monastic writers such as Evagrius and Cassian.[53]

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CENOBITIC IDEOLOGY

In the *Life of Antony* by Athanasius, we find neither the terminology of cenobitism nor the ideal. The ideal presented by Antony is that of withdrawal (ἀναχώρησις), a progressive withdrawal from society that leads to ever greater union with God.[54] Despite his withdrawal, he remains a man of the Church, supporter of the hierarchy, foe of heretics, and teacher of monks.[55] Although Antony's numerous disciples formed a kind of community centered on him and although we hear of early communities of monks such as the Melitian one mentioned earlier, we first hear of a rationale for cenobitism in the Pachomian literature. Actually in the *Life of Pachomius* we hear of several pre-existing communities that ask to be taken into the Pachomian fellowship that was designated both in Greek and Coptic as the holy κοινωνία.

It is easier to describe this ideology in its fully developed form than to trace its beginnings. In a passage from the *Sahidic Life of Pachomius* (S5), Theodore and Zacchaeus visit Antony after the death of Pachomius. Antony addresses them with these words:

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51 *Diary of Egeria* 20.11.85.

52 See Sheridan, 1995.

53 The term "hermit" has been omitted as being insignificant as far as the development of the ideal in the fourth century is concerned. It is not found in fourth-century literary texts and is rare in documentary texts, notwithstanding the role of the desert (ἔρημος) in the *Life of Antony*. See Wipszycka, 2009: 303–305.

54 For the use of the word as verb and noun in the *Life of Antony*, see the index in Bartelink, 1994.

55 It has long been recognized that the *Life of Antony* cannot be read uncritically as a record of the historical origins of monasticism. It is a complex work containing many themes that the author wishes to promote such as Antony's loyalty to the hierarchy, his opposition to heretics and schismatics, etc. Samuel Rubenson (2013) has recently called attention to additional apologetic aspects against the background of Porphyry and neo-Pythagoreanism. Gregory of Nazianzen (*Oration* 21.5) had already noted that Athanasius in his *Life of Antony* had sought to give rules to the monastic life in the form of a narration.

Do not be grieved, brothers, because the righteous man, Apa Pachomius, has died. For actually you have become his body and you have received his spirit. Indeed, I longed very much to see him while he was still in the body, but perhaps I was not worthy. For the fact that he gathered souls about himself in order to present them holy to the Lord reveals that he is superior to us and that it is the path of the apostles he took, that is, the *koinonia.*

Theodore answers Antony saying, "You are more praiseworthy than we, for you are the last of the prophets." Zacchaeus, however, is more abrupt and demands to know why, if what Antony said is true, he did not himself live in a κοινωνία. Antony explains by saying that:

when I became a monk, there was as yet no *koinonia* on earth to make it possible for me to live in a *koinonia.* There were only a few people who used to withdraw a little way outside their village and live alone. This is why I too became an anchorite (ⲁⲓϣⲱⲡⲉ ⲅⲛ̅ⲟⲩⲁⲛⲁⲭⲱⲣⲏⲥⲓⲥ). Then the path of the apostles was revealed on earth. This is the work our able Apa Pachomius undertook. He became the refuge for everyone in danger from the one who has done evil from the beginning.

Antony goes on to explain that later on after Pachomius had established this form of life, he was too old to join such a community, but that he does engage in spiritual direction when he comes from his inner mountain to visit the brothers.[56]

This is a remarkable passage and deserves careful attention because of the rather bold assertions being made. A comparison is being made between, on the one hand, Pachomius and the κοινωνία he founded and, on the other hand, Christ and his body, that is the Church. The κοινωνία is like the Church in that it has the spirit of Pachomius in it. Pachomius' kind of monasticism is said to be superior to the type of monks represented by Antony; his way of life is the "path of the apostles" and the κοινωνία. The response of Theodore, that Antony is the "last of the prophets," though seeming to praise Antony, actually confirms the speech attributed to Antony. The last of the prophets in traditional Christian usage was John the Baptist. This serves to reinforce the comparison between Christ and Pachomius, to whom Antony had then been the precursor. Antony's response to Zacchaeus also reinforces this impression by insisting that the "path of the apostles" had been revealed through the work of Pachomius. The effect of these assertions is to relegate earlier forms of monasticism to a past dispensation. Something new and better had been revealed. This passage then is not merely theology, but rather ideology, for it is designed to assert the superiority of a particular development in the varied Egyptian monastic landscape and to delegitimize the others.[57]

Such a passage and the ideology evident in it must have originated in a period several decades at least after the death of Pachomius in 347. The author clearly knew Athanasius' *Life of Antony* and makes verbatim allusion to it when he has Antony say that when he became a monk, "There were only a few people who used to

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56 Text: Lefort, 1933: 177–178 (= S5); translation: Veilleux, 1980: 183–184 (§126–127).

57 The use of the word ⲙⲉⲧⲙⲟⲩⲛⲁⲭⲟⲥ (text: Lefort, 1925: 9, lines 1, 3, 26; translation: Veilleux, 1980: 30–31) and ⲙⲛ̅ⲧⲁⲡⲟⲧⲁⲕⲧⲓⲕⲟⲥ (text: Lefort, 1933: 103, col. i, lines 8–9; 104, col. ii, lines 17–18 [=S3]); not translated by Veilleux, 1980), as abstract nouns in the Pachomian *Lives*, as well as a direct appeal to tradition ("what we have learned from those who went before us"), suggests that there was a discussion going on about the essence of monasticism, that is, about the ideal. The use of these abstract forms deserves further investigation.

withdraw a little way outside their village and live alone."[58] Antony died in 356 and even if his *Life* was written soon after his death, we should have to allow some time for it to become well known and influence the writing of the *Life of Pachomius*, an influence that is evident at many other points earlier in the account of Pachomius' early "monastic" life.[59] A later passage in the *Sahidic Life* tends to tone down the assertions in this passage by having Theodore relate that Pachomius used to speak of "our holy father Antony, who is the perfect model of the anchoritic life."[60]

However, there is no reason to doubt that the notion of the monastic life as the "way of the apostles" and the terminology of κοινωνία go back to Pachomius himself and were evidently inspired by the New Testament terminology found in Acts 2:42 where it is said of the early Christian community that "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship (κοινωνία), to the breaking of bread and the prayers." The word κοινωνία occurs another sixteen times in the New Testament, but Acts 2:42 is the only occurrence in conjunction with the word "apostles." κοινωνία is in fact a common word in Greek antiquity found frequently in the philosophical literature and in the Greek patristic literature.[61] Pachomius would have been familiar with it at least from hearing the Sahidic readings in the liturgy, for it is one of the many words taken into Coptic from the Greek New Testament and it is found frequently in the Sahidic *Lives* of Pachomius and in the Bohairic one as well, although it is not found in the Bohairic New Testament.[62] In the Pachomian literature the word, with one exception, always refers to the whole assembly of all the brothers from all the communities.[63] Time does not permit us to trace here the development of Pachomius' concept of the monastic κοινωνία but this has been done well by others. On the basis of the obvious inspiration or model of the early Christian community in Jerusalem, it has been suggested that Pachomius had in mind "an asceticism closely bound with a sense of obligation toward other people." He also arrived at his conception of the κοινωνία after "a ten to fifteen year period of more complex experiment, failure and growth."[64] In an earlier stage described in the *First Sahidic Life*, it is said that people came to Pachomius from the surrounding villages and built dwellings where he had retired and gathered there to live the anchoritic life. Pachomius established the rule for them that each should be self-supporting and manage his own affairs, but they would share the expenses of food and hospitality.

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58 The dependence on the *Life of Antony* is especially evident in the *First Greek Life* 120, where several words are taken directly from the *Life of Antony* 3.2: ἕκαστος τῶν ἀρχαίων μοναχῶν μετὰ τὸν διωγμὸν κατὰ μόνας ἠσκεῖτο (text: Halkin, 1980: 58). However, the parallel passage in the *First Greek Life* does not contain the ideological elements or the language of "revelation." The *Sahidic Life* does not correspond exactly to the Sahidic translation of the *Life of Antony*, but contains a clear allusion to this passage: ⲁⲗⲗⲁ ϩⲉⲛⲟⲩⲁ̄ ⲟⲩⲁ̄ ⲛⲉⲧⲉϣⲁⲩⲣ̅ⲡⲃⲟⲗ ⲙ̅ⲡⲉⲩϯⲙⲉ ⲛ̅ⲟⲩⲕⲟⲩⲓ̈, ⲛ̅ⲥⲉⲥϭⲣⲁϩ̅ⲧ̅ ⲉⲣⲟⲟⲩ (Lefort, 1933: 178).

59 See e.g. the *Bohairic Life of Pachomius* 2 (text: Lefort, 1925: 1; translation: Veilleux, 1980: 24), where Antony is mentioned explicitly together with Amoun (known from *Life of Antony* 60; *History of the Monks in Egypt* 29; and *Historia Lausiaca* 8) and the *First Greek Life* 2.

60 ⲁⲡⲁ ⲁⲛⲧⲱⲛⲓⲟⲥ ⲉϥⲟ ⲛ̅ⲟⲩⲥⲙⲟⲧ ⲉϥϫⲏⲕ ⲉⲃⲟⲗ ⲙ̅ⲡⲃⲓⲟⲥ ⲛ̅ⲛ̅ⲁⲛⲁⲭⲱⲣⲏⲧⲏⲥ (text: Lefort, 1933: 185; translation: Veilleux, 1980: 192 [§ 134]).

61 The word is used with the meanings: "communion," "association," "partnership," "joint-ownership," and even "charitable contribution" or "alms." It is found in Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Philo and then in the Greek fathers (also under the influence of the New Testament).

62 The Bohairic version of the New Testament employs consistently ⲙⲉⲧϣⲫⲏⲣ instead of κοινωνία.

63 See Veilleux, 1980: 289, note to SBo 141.

64 Rousseau, 1985: 65.

Pachomius administered the common fund. The text explains that Pachomius laid down this regulation because he saw "that they were not yet ready to bind themselves together in a perfect κοινωνία like that of the believers which Acts describes."[65] There follows the citation of Acts 4:32 and Hebrews 13:16 in both of which the word κοινωνία is found. The "perfect κοινωνία" evidently included not just the sharing of goods but the nonownership of goods, which became characteristic of the Pachomian federation.[66] The passage quoted from Acts states that "not one of them said that anything he possessed was his own." This represents an important shift in the ideal of poverty from that represented in the *Life of Antony*, where it is said that Antony worked in order to support himself and to have enough to give to the poor.[67]

Another aspect of the Pachomian ideal that deserves mention is suggested by the statement from the passage quoted earlier: "He became the refuge for everyone in danger from the one who has done evil from the beginning." The community becomes the locus of or the vehicle of salvation. This idea is present already in the story about Pachomius' vision found in the *First Sahidic Life* in which Pachomius hears that "God's will is to serve men in order to call them to him." Then it is stated that in the vision "it was revealed to him that he should fashion the souls of men so as 'to present them pure to God' (Colossians 1:22)."[68] This leads Pachomius and his brother to build a "small monastery." Here also we can notice the influence of ecclesiology: like the Church, the community is the place of salvation. The large scale of the Pachomian communities and the organization reflected in the rules inevitably led to a greater degree of social control than that of the more loosely organized communities.[69]

At this point it may be useful to clarify the word "cenobitism," often used to characterize the Pachomian communities. The word κοινόβιον never occurs in the Coptic Pachomian literature, which uses only the word κοινωνία. In fact it is rare in Greek literature before the end of the fourth century. It is found several times in the *Greek Life of Pachomius* along with the term κοινωνία, perhaps another indication that the *First Greek Life* is later than the Sahidic Coptic ones. The earliest datable usage of the term occurs in fact in Latin in Jerome's *Letter 22 to Eustochium* written in 384. The occurrences of the word in the Egyptian documentary evidence of the fifth and sixth centuries suggest that the term did not carry the ideological import of the term κοινωνία, but was a synonym for μοναστήριον.[70] The later usage of the term *coenobium* in the early fifth century by John Cassian did carry ideological import but somewhat different from that of κοινωνία in the Pachomian

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65 Veilleux, 1980: 431.

66 Goehring, 1999: 60–63. Choat and Wipszycka do not agree with Goehring that the word ἀποτακτικός represents an older type of monasticism. Goehring makes much of the fact that ἀποτακτικοί appear to own property in the documentary evidence, whereas nonownership is a distinctive feature of the Pachomian form of monasticism. See Goehring, 1999: 63–66. He also cites the *Justinian Code* in support of the thesis of nonownership. However, two centuries lie between the beginning of the Pachomian monasteries and the *Code of Justinian*, during which complex legal developments took place including the attribution of juridical personality to monastic communities and the entry of "monastery" into legal terminology. For this development, see Barone Adesi, 1990.

67 Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 3.6.

68 Text: Lefort, 1933: 1; translation: Veilleux, 1980: 428.

69 Rousseau, 1985: xv insists that this did not lead to conformity alone but that "chief emphasis was placed on the sense of personal responsibility each monk had to acquire for his spiritual progress."

70 Wipszycka, 2009: 284–288.

literature.[71] However, it is beyond the scope of this article to trace the development of cenobitic ideology in the West from Jerome to Cassian.

There is no evidence that the Pachomian ideal of the κοινωνία ever became dominant in Egyptian monasticism even though many preexisting communities asked for admission to the κοινωνία. The apparent widespread existence of monastic communities, however loosely organized, suggests instead that the Pachomian ideal of the κοινωνία was a new inspiration imposed on an already existing social reality. Numerous monastic sites suggest that the more common model was that of a community gathered around a church with outlying cells of solitaries or groups of cells known in Coptic as ма ñϣωпє, a word later taken into Arabic.[72]

CONCLUSION

The ideal of the monastic life that we have attempted to trace or sketch in a synthetic manner, following some of the terminology, consisted first of all in the tradition of celibate life in the Church, which can be traced back to Jesus and some of his disciples. In the course of the fourth century this was enriched through the vision of spiritual progress presented in the *Life of Antony* by Athanasius, which proposed προσοχή and ἄσκησις as the path to union with God in contemplative vision. The Pachomian ideal of the "way of the apostles" and the κοινωνία based on the description of the primitive Christian community in the Acts of the Apostles did not replace the earlier understanding, but was like an overlay on the previous ideal proposed in the *Life of Antony.* However, it was not accepted by all or even by the majority. Underlying the whole development was the exegetical tradition, especially that represented by Philo and Origen in which the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had become types of spiritual progress.

To what extent all this was known to the individual monks of course is impossible to say, but its existence in the literature served as a beacon to later generations. In modern sociological terminology it could be described as contributing to "goal orientation." Works like the *Life of Antony* or the *Lives* of Pachomius cannot be taken at face value as descriptions of the historical reality, but through the ideal they presented and promoted, they contributed to the growth of the historical phenomenon. Egyptian monasticism began and spread as a popular movement, but successive generations of theologians attempted to give it coherence and consistency. Even if we can engage in well-founded speculation, we shall never know what inspired or motivated the many thousands who took up the monastic life in Egypt at the end of the third century and the early fourth century to do so. They did not leave any written testimony. Our literary sources come later and they are clearly aimed at creating an ideal of the monastic life.

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71 For Cassian, the *cenobium* is the place where virtues are practiced and acquired, since it offers greater opportunities for this than the solitary life.

72 See Winlock and Crum, 1926: 125. As they pointed out almost a hundred years ago, diverse forms of monasticism flourished alongside one another down the whole length of the Nile Valley. The numerous excavations and publications of documentary sources in the last hundred years confirm this observation. For a survey of these, see Wipszycka, 2009: *passim.*

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