SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGINS OF MONASTICISM IN EGYPT⁽¹⁾

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Christian monasticism, which appeared in Late Antiquity, is worthy of attention by historians not only because of its importance for the subsequent history, but also because the appearance and development of this ascetical movement can be said to characterize the period.

Here, however, some preliminary reflections seem necessary: what, for example, should we imagine when we use the term 'monasticism' or 'monk', and when did monasticism thus defined appear in history? Such a reflection on terms, which was for a long time neglected, appears to have emerged in recent scholarship.

The aim of this paper is to present the author's view about the problems.

1. Earlier view

Among earlier scholars, K. Heussi offers the most noteworthy discussion of the terms. Working exclusively with ecclesiastical and monastic sources, Heussi divides the forms of Christian asceticism into the following four types: 1. asceticism inside the community, 2. the earliest form of monasticism, or reclusion (a. individual hermits who live outside the village, b. groups of hermits outside the village), 3. intensified form of reclusion, or reclusion in the desert, 4. cenobitism or monasteries. Heussi then applied the term 'monk' to those whose modes of life belong to types 2, 3, or 4.⁽²⁾

Heussi's definition of the earliest monks (type 2) is supported by the description in chapter 3 of the *Vita Antonii*: it says that, when Antony began his life of seclusion, "there were not yet many monasteries in Egypt, and no monk (μοναχός) 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

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village.”⁽³⁾ According to this description, before Antony there were hermits practicing asceticism not far from their own villages.

According to Heussi, then, monasticism was a phenomenon which first appeared outside the village, or outside inhabited areas (although traffic between hermits and neighboring villages or towns was possible). Also it follows that monasticism was practiced first by hermits; in other words, first there were experiments by hermits, and then monasteries came into being.

2. Recent studies

The earlier interpretation, of which Heussi’s work is representative, has been criticized by recent scholars who contend that monasticism was originally an urban phenomenon.

This argument was first proposed in 1977 by E.A.Judge.⁽⁴⁾ One of the crucial points in Judge’s article is that Isaac, who is mentioned as monk in a papyrus document which can be dated 324 A.D., is neither a hermit, because “he can be identified by the public authorities,” nor a cenobite, because “he is in some way church-related.” The monk Isaac is then classified into a third type of monks, called *remnuoth* by Jerome,⁽⁵⁾ “living still within his village, participating actively in its civil and church affairs,” and mentioned in other papyrological texts as *ἀποτακτικοί*.⁽⁶⁾

Second, Judge suggests that the term *μοναχός* was applied first to the *ἀποτακτικοί* perhaps because of their “distinctive style of dress,” and only later “carried forward to the more drastic types” such as Antony, because it is unlikely that the ascetics within a village would have won the name if it had been “the special property of Anthony and his kind.”⁽⁷⁾

S.Elm has presented a more surprising hypothesis concerning the earliest form of Egyptian monasticism. She suggests that “monasticism originated as an urban phenomenon and consisted largely of men and women living together,” and that “the symbiosis of male and female ascetics was the rule rather than the exception at the outset of the ascetic movement during the late third and early fourth century.”⁽⁸⁾

Elm supports her hypothesis with evidence gathered from the papyrological texts. For example, P.Iand.100, a letter from the latter half of the fourth century, contains a passage in which the sender greets “Aron, Maria and Tamunis, and all the brothers in the monastery.”⁽⁹⁾ Elm then regards Maria and Tamunis as the

members of the monastic community.⁽¹⁰⁾

In P.Lond.VI 1926, a letter from a certain Valeria to the anchorite Paphnutius, the text reconstructed by the editor reads “I [scil.Valeria] salute my daughters, and do you remember them in your holy supplication, I mean Bassana and Theoclia.”⁽¹¹⁾ According to Elm, this text shows that the daughters of the sender were physically nearer to the anchorite than to their mother.⁽¹²⁾

In SB VIII 9882, a letter dated from the second to the third century, we find the words ‘ὀμμός’ and ‘ὀππας’, the terms which were later applied to the superiors of monastery, and Elm suggests that here also the words are used in a similar sense.⁽¹³⁾

Elm also offers evidence from literary sources. Of particular interest is the case of Amoun, which is described in different ways by ecclesiastical and monastic authors. For example, Socrates says that Amoun and his virgin bride began their life of seclusion in the same hut, and then reports that they separated.⁽¹⁴⁾ According to the Greek *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, Amoun’s wife, after he had departed toward the desert by himself, “exhorted all her servants to adopt the celibate life, and indeed converted her house into a monastery.”⁽¹⁵⁾ From this description Elm argues that “thus men and women continue to live together.”⁽¹⁶⁾

The *Historia Lausiaca*, another literary source, mentions Ammonius who, with his brothers and sisters, “went down to the desert, each living separately and keeping a distance from the others.”⁽¹⁷⁾ Although Rousseau considers these ascetics as real brothers and sisters,⁽¹⁸⁾ Elm thinks that his interpretation is not “compelling”.⁽¹⁹⁾

Elm argues, furthermore, that both the *letter to virgins who went and prayed in Jerusalem and returned* ascribed to Athanasius and the description of Hieracas and his followers by Epiphanius demonstrate the existence of virgins living with male ascetics.⁽²⁰⁾

Although Elm’s writing style is at times difficult to understand, her hypothesis and the evidence she presents merit careful consideration.

3. Was the symbiosis of male and female ascetics the rule?

Before treating Elm’s work in detail, I should venture some general remarks. In fact, it is self-evident that the symbiosis or cohabitation of both sexes is dangerous for those who aim at practicing asceticism, including sexual

continence. And what is important is that this danger was not unknown to the people of the period in question (at least, to those inclined to ascetic practices); they seem to have regarded the opposite sex as simply a source of temptation. This interpretation is supported by several sources. For example, in the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, John of Lycopolis is said to have “not seen a woman throughout the forty years..., neither going out himself nor allowing a woman to come into his sight.”⁽²¹⁾ In the *Vita Hilarionis* by Jerome, a woman who dared to enter Hilarion’s cell without his permission says, “Forgive my boldness, forgive my importunity. Why do you turn away your eyes? Why do you shun your supplicant? Do not look upon me as a woman, but as a creature to be pitied.”⁽²²⁾ The clearest and harshest passage can be found in the *Apophthegmata Patrum*: a rich virgin came from Rome and was able to meet the monk Arsenius, but she was shocked because he said in the interview that he would pray God in order to be able to forget her. Then the archbishop Theophilus said to her, “Do you not realize that you are a women, and that it is through women that the enemy wars against the saints?”⁽²³⁾ Furthermore, female ascetics for their part also seem to have regarded the opposite sex as a source of temptation. According to the *Historia Lausiaca* of Palladius, when the author met amma Talis, “a woman eighty years old in the ascetic life,” it was because she had attained a high degree of self-control that she could place her hands on his shoulders “in a burst of frankness(!).”⁽²⁴⁾

Taking into consideration the sense of danger which is clearly seen in these passages, I think that one should speak of the “symbiosis of male and female ascetics” only when the evidence shows clearly the existence of such a mode of life. And from this point of view, it can be said that most of the evidence Elm presents does not constitute a solid basis for such an argument.

As for P.Iand.100, for example, there is no phrase which shows clearly that Maria and Tamunis are the members of the monastery.⁽²⁵⁾

As for P.Lond.VI 1926, there is a problem about the reconstruction of the very passage in question. Although Bell says that the reading ‘προσαγορεύουσί σε’ does not seem a possible one,⁽²⁶⁾ in my view the reading Bell excluded (or something like it) is still possible. In fact, the text runs as follows: “I [scil.Valeria] pray to God , I pray also to you [scil.Paphnutius], remember me in your holy supplication. Even though in body I have not come to your feet, yet in spirit I have come to your feet.” Then comes the passage in question, “I salute my daughters, and do you remember them in your holy supplication, I

mean Bassiana and Theoclia". The text continues: "My husband too greets you many times, and do you pray on his behalf. My whole household too greet you."⁽²⁷⁾ It is evident that the reading reconstructed by Bell fits badly in this context. Also it should be noted that the phrase "remember ... in your holy supplication" occurs also in the very passage in question. Therefore, although the problem of how to read the text on the papyrus remains unresolved, it seems quite possible that the text does not show the existence of female ascetics near male ones.

As for SB VIII 9882, there is no evidence which suggests the Christian origin of the papyrus, according to the criteria given by Bell.⁽²⁸⁾ Thus it is better to regard the terms 'ἄμμάς' and 'ἄππας' as unusual designations for 'mother' and 'father' respectively, as the editor suggests.⁽²⁹⁾

As for the story of Amoun, it is very difficult, or perhaps impossible, to determine which version of the story is historically correct, but it seems that the description of Socrates is secondary in this case.⁽³⁰⁾ And the Greek version of the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* does not contain any explicit mention of the existence of men (either servants or ascetics).

As for the story about Ammonius with his brothers and sisters, I suggest that Elm's interpretation is in fact less convincing than Rousseau's.

In my view, only the description in the letter ascribed to Athanasius and that of Epiphanius can be regarded as arguments for Elm's hypothesis concerning Egypt.⁽³¹⁾ Therefore, we cannot say that the symbiosis of male and female ascetics was the rule at the earliest stage of monasticism in Egypt, although that mode of life was practiced by some ascetics.⁽³²⁾

4. Was monasticism originally an urban phenomenon?

Next I will examine Judge's argument concerning the urban origins of monasticism. Although Judge asserts that the monk Isaac is neither a hermit nor a cenobite, I would suggest that Antony, the famous monk, could be exactly like Isaac. In fact, Antony himself is "in some way church-related," because it is certain that, when he came to Alexandria to deny his alleged approval of the Arian view, he was with Athanasius or some other clerics.⁽³³⁾ And also Antony "can be identified by the public authorities," if only with the aid of the church. Therefore, Judge's classification of Isaac into the type of 'ascetics within towns or villages' is not decisive at all; Isaac could in fact be a hermit.

Judge's argument concerning how the term μοναχός was applied to different types of ascetics is also somewhat misleading. In the *Vita Antonii*, Athanasius did not refrain from using the term until chapter 14, as Judge suggests, but in fact used it in chapter 3, in the passage cited above, to refer to the monks before Antony.⁽³⁴⁾ Since, on the one hand, the very passage of the *Vita Antonii* can be considered to refer to the earliest stage of monasticism, and on the other hand, there is now no certain evidence for the existence in the third century of the type of those ascetics who are called ἄποτακτικοί or remnuoth, I would imagine the appearance and development of monasticism in Egypt as follows. First, there were recluses who were called monks (μοναχοί) and lived their ascetic lives outside, but not far from, their own villages (Isaac maybe of this type). Later some ascetics such as Antony dared to go into the desert, and some others came to lead their ascetic lives inside the civil community. As for the interpretation of the term μοναχός, one needs not refer to its meaning in relation to clothing: the term can be interpreted as designating the 'solitary' person, the usage already seen in the translation of Ps.67(68), 7 by Symmachus.⁽³⁵⁾

Codex Theodosianus contains several edicts which mention monks, and which suggest that the proper place for monks is outside cities, or outside inhabited areas. For example, an edict issued in 370 (or 373?) says: "Certain devotees of idleness have deserted the compulsory services of the municipalities, have betaken themselves to *solitudes and secluded places*, and under the pretext of religion have joined with bands of monks. We command, therefore, by Our well considered precept, that such persons and others of this kind who have been apprehended within Egypt shall be routed out from their hiding places by the Count of the Orient and shall be recalled to the performance of the compulsory public services of their municipalities."⁽³⁶⁾

Another edict in 390 says: "If any persons should be found in the profession of monks, they shall be ordered to seek out and to inhabit desert places and desolate solitudes."⁽³⁷⁾ In reality this edict was repealed two year later by another edict which says, "the monks to whom the municipalities had been forbidden...shall be restored to their original status, and the aforesaid law shall be repealed. Thus indeed, We revoke such a decree of Our Clemency, and We grant them free *ingress into the towns*."⁽³⁸⁾ As these edicts demonstrate, monks were not "banished to solitudes" but ordered to seek out such places; and were permitted to enter towns freely. These edicts, designed to regulate

problems caused by the presence of monks in the towns, show that even the imperial government authorities considered desert places and solitudes to be the proper place for monks.

Thus, despite the appearance of several new interpretations, earlier analyses continue to offer more convincing explanations of the appearance and development of early monasticism in Egypt.

5. When did monasticism appear in Egypt?

It is often said that monasticism appeared in Egypt from the latter half of the third century to the early fourth century, but evidence which shows the existence of monasticism in the third century is extremely rare. For example, the papyrus on which Judge based his argument shows that by the time when it was written, monks had become so common that no special explanation about their profession was necessary, but his petition says nothing about the existence of monks in the third century. As for the aforementioned Amoun, founder of monasticism in Nitria, it is certain that he, like Antony, belongs to an early generation of the monks, but there is no evidence which puts the beginning of his monastic life in the third century. It is possible that the anchorite Palamon, preceptor of Pachomius, began his ascetic life in the third century, but there is no definite evidence for this.⁽³⁹⁾ And as for Paphnutius, who, according to Socrates, was raised in an 'ἀσκητήριον', was deprived of one eye, and attended the Council of Nicaea, Winkelmann has demonstrated in detail that no such Paphnutius existed.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Since Heussi based his assertion that an ascetic community existed in upper Egypt in the third century on this text of Socrates,⁽⁴¹⁾ this argument is no longer tenable. It thus seems that the only valid reference to the existence of monasticism in the third century is the aforementioned chapter 3 of the *Vita Antonii*.

6. Concluding remarks

This paper has touched on a number of problems in the history of early monasticism in Egypt. More important problems, however, need to be examined. What, for example, were the cultural conditions which enabled such a movement to appear in Late Antique Egyptian society, and how did the people of the time regard monks? By focusing our attention on such questions, we will

develop a better understanding of the role and significance of this phenomenon.

Notes

- (1) This essay is the revised version of my article in Japanese (戸田聡「エジプトにおける修道制の成立をめぐる覚書」『一橋論叢』第116巻第4号(1996年)185-199頁).
- (2) K. Heussi, *Der Ursprung des Mönchtums*, Tübingen, 1936, p.53 n.l.
- (3) Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, ch.3. I use Gregg's translation (Athanasius, *The life of Antony and the Letter to Marcellinus*, transl. R. C. Gregg, New York, 1980, p.32), as far as the Migne's Greek text (which is the basis of his translation) does not differ from that of a recent critical edition (Athanasie d'Alexandrie, *Vie d'Antoine*, ed. G.J.M. Bartelink, SC 400, Paris, 1994).
- (4) E.A. Judge, "The Earliest Use of Monachos for >Monk< (P. Coll. Youtie 77) and the Origins of Monasticism," *JAC20* (1977), pp. 72-89, cited with approval by, for example, J.E. Goehring, "The Encroaching Desert: Literary Production and Ascetic Space in Early Christian Egypt," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1 (1993), p.286; E. Wipszycka, "Le monachisme égyptien et les villes," *Travaux et Mémoires* 12 (1994), p.1.
- (5) Hieronymus, *ep.* 22, 34 (*Saint Jérôme, Lettres*, ed. J. Labourt, Paris, pp. 149-150).
- (6) Judge, *art. cit.*, pp. 73, 78-83.
- (7) *Ibid.*, pp. 85f.
- (8) S. Elm, 'Virgins of God.' *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford, 1994, pp. ix, 378. It should be noted that, in the present paper, her hypothesis will be treated as far as the case of Egypt is concerned.
- (9) *Papyri Iandanae*, fasc. VI: *Griechische Privatbriefe*, ed. G. Rosenberger, Leipzig/Berlin, 1934, pp. 100f.: ἀσπάζομαι Ἀρων καὶ Μαριὰμ καὶ Ταμοῦνι καὶ τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς πάντας τοὺς ἐν τῷ μοναστηρίῳ.
- (10) Elm, *op. cit.*, pp. 244f.
- (11) H. I. Bell (ed.), *Jews and Christians in Egypt: The Jewish Troubles in Alexandria and the Athanasian Controversy*, Westport, 1972 (repr.), pp. 108f.: Προσαγορεύω τὰς θυγατέρας μου καὶ μνησθητι αὐτῶν ἐν τῇ ἀγίᾳ σου προσευχῇ, Βασισιανῆς καὶ Θεοκλίας. Various signs attached to the text are by the editor.
- (12) Elm, *op. cit.*, p. 245.
- (13) *Ibid.*, p. 246.
- (14) Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia ecclesiastica*, IV, 23, 8-11 (*Sokrates, Kirchengeschichte*, ed. G.C. Hansen, GCS N.F.1, Berlin, 1995, pp. 249-250).
- (15) *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* 22, 2 (*The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, transl. N. Russell, CistSS 34, Kalamazoo, 1980, p. 111).
- (16) Elm, *op. cit.*, p. 326.
- (17) Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, 11, 1 (*Palladius: The Lausiaca History*, transl. R.T. Meyer, ACW 34, London, 1965, p. 46).
- (18) P. Rousseau, "Blood-Relationships among Early Eastern Ascetics," *JThS* 23 (1972), pp. 136-137.
- (19) Elm, *op. cit.*, p. 327 n. 39.
- (20) *Ibid.*, pp. 335 and 339-341. The expression 'female partners' (συνεισάκτους γυναικας) is found in Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 67, 8, 3 (*Epiphanius III, Panarion haer. 65-80/De fide*, ed. K. Holl, 2 Aufl. J. Dummer, GCS 37, Berlin, 1985, p. 140).
- (21) *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, 1, 4 (transl. Russell, p. 52).
- (22) Hieronymus, *Vita Hilarionis*, 13 (transl. M. L. Ewald, in *Early Christian Biographies, FaCh* 15, Washington, D. C., 1952, p. 252). I have modified the translation partly, in accordance with the original text (*Vita de Martino, Vita di Ilarione, In memoria di Paola*, ed. A.A.R. Bastiaensen et al, Roma, 1975, p. 86).

- (23) *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, transl. B. Ward, *CistSS* 59, Kalamazoo, 1975, pp. 13-14.
- (24) *Historia Lausiaca*, 59 (transl. Meyer, p. 140).
- (25) I think that the same criticism can be applied to the case of Didyme and others (P. Oxy. XIV 1774 and SB VIII 9746).
- (26) Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 110.
- (27) *Ibid.*, p. 109: Δέομε[Ι.Δέομαι] τῷ θεῷ δέομε κέ [Ι.καί] σοι μνήσθητί μου ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ σου προσευχῇ. Εἰ κὲ ἐν σώματι οὐκ ἴκα [Ι.ἦκα] παρὰ τοὺς πόδας σου ἐν πνεύματι εἴκα [Ι.ἦκα] πρὸς τοὺς πόδας σου..... Ἀσπάζετέ [Ι.Ἀσπάζεται] σε πολλὰ καὶ ὁ σύνβιός μου, καὶ εὐχου ἐπάνω αὐτῷ [Ι.αὐτοῦ]. Ἀσπάζετέ σε δὲ καὶ ὅλος ὁ οἶκός μου. That the reading suggested here is possible is evident from the signs attached to the text cited above (n.11).
- (28) H. I. Bell, "Evidences of Christianity in Egypt during Roman Period," *HTHR* 37(1944), pp. 192-195.
- (29) A. Świderek, "Two Michigan Papyri," *JJP* 15(1965), p. 136.
- (30) Cf. F. Geppert, *Die Quellen des Kirchenhistorikers Socrates Scholasticus*, Aalen, 1972 (repr. of 1898), p. 125.
- (31) As for the letter ascribed to Athanasius, although D. Brakke, "The Authenticity of the Ascetic Athanasiana," *Or.* 63 (1994), pp. 25-27 tries to defend its Athanasian authorship, it still seems to me that doubts about its authenticity remain.
- (32) In this connection, P. de Labriolle, "Le «mariage spirituel» dans l'antiquité chrétienne," *RH* 137 (1921), p.222 n.1 presents a list of the synodal decisions against the spiritual marriage. Here it is worth remarking that the list contains no synodal decision issued in Egypt. Although I am not sure whether the list is complete or not, this absence makes me doubt the popularity of spiritual marriage in Egypt.
- (33) *Vita Antonii*, ch. 71 (transl. Gregg, p.83) reads: "When he was departing, and we were escorting him, as we came to the gate: etc. This passage shows that Antony was accompanied by Athanasius or some other clerics on this occasion.
- (34) The passage "each of those wishing to give attention to his life" can be interpreted as just a paraphrase of the term μοναχός.
- (35) F. Field (ed.), *Origenis Hexaplorum quae supersunt*, II. Oxford, 1875, p.200. The literary (and Gnostic) origin of the term as monk, a hypothesis proposed by Françoise Morard, "Encore quelques réflexions sur monachos," *Vigiliae Christianae* 34 (1980), pp.395-401, seems to me hardly convincing, because the term was used, at the early period of Egyptian monasticism, in the papyrus document Judge cites in his article (above n.4), by Aurelios Isidoros who was possibly a pagan, and who was certainly not a cultivated Christian who could have read a Gnostic writing.
- (36) *Codex Theodosianus* (abbreviated hereafter as *CTh*), XII, 1, 63 (*The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmundian Constitutions*, transl. C. Pharr, Princeton, 1952, p. 351). The translation is used with partial modification; italics mine.
- (37) *CTh* XVI, 3,1 (*ibid.*, p.449).
- (38) *CTh* XVI, 3,2 (*loc.cit.*); italics mine.
- (39) According to the Bohairic life of Pachomius, Palamon said to Pachomius: "The rule of monastic life, according to what we have learned from those who went before us, is as follows" (*Pachomian Koinonia*, I, transl. A. Veilleux, *CistSS* 45, Kalamazoo, 1980, p. 31). From this description Veilleux argues in the note that "this shows that there was already a monastic tradition" (italic by Veilleux), but his argument is not immediately acceptable, since the Greek life of Pachomius does not contain any description of this sort.
- (40) F. Winkelmann, "Paphnutios, der Bekenner und Bischof," in P. Nagel (ed.), *Probleme der koptischen Literatur*, Halle, 1968, pp. 145-153.
- (41) Heussi, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66.