‘In Defiance of his Cloth’: Monastic (Im)Piety in Late Antique Egypt

Paula Tutty*

Liverpool

Hagiographical writing promotes a vision of Egyptian monasticism in which pious ascetic figures are isolated from the world. Peter Brown highlighted the role of the holy man as patron, but nonetheless reinforced a traditional view of Egyptian monasticism based on his readings of works such as the sixth-century Aphothegmata Patrum. *Surviving monastic correspondence, in contrast, demonstrates that there was a highly individualized approach to the monastic vocation. In this article, I turn to documentary material to consider the complexities of the early development of the movement. As a case study, I use the Greek and Coptic correspondence of a fourth-century monk called Apa John. My conclusion is that activities and behaviours described in the texts do not always accord with any known typology or ideal, but they are invaluable for exploring aspects of the early monastic impulse and the role played by the movement in wider society.*

Introduction

Over the centuries, literary descriptions of the lives of the earliest Egyptian monks have acted as an inspiration to Christian thinkers, who tended to perceive the monks’ ascetic lifestyle as standing in stark contrast to the excesses of their own generations. During the Middle Ages, the inclusion of tales of the desert fathers in Jacobus de Varagine’s very popular *Golden Legend* (composed in Genoa *c*.1260) boosted this reputation.[1] In addition, the inception of the medieval Observant Reform Movement (*observantia regulae*), with its burning desire to return to the simplicity of the earliest days, owed much to the reading of the monastic biographies found in

* E-mail: paula.tutty@gmail.com.

[1] See Pia Palladino, ‘Pilgrims and the Desert Fathers: Dominican Spirituality and the Holy Land’, in Laurence Kanter and Pia Palladino, eds, *Fra Angelico* (New Haven, CT, 2005), 27–39, at 32–4.

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the works of St Jerome, Cassian and Augustine.[2] Renaissance writers and artists were similarly moved to create a new vision of the early monastic landscape.[3] Later audiences, imbued with the teachings of the Enlightenment, were less well disposed: some, upon encountering descriptions of ascetic excess, considered the behaviours of the monks as frankly fanatical and abhorrent. Edward Gibbon, the famed eighteenth-century historian, put in writing a commonly felt sentiment of the period when he wrote: 'These unhappy exiles from social life were impelled by the dark and implacable genius of superstition.'[4]

The reputation of early ascetics was not entirely lost, however, and they continued to attract many admirers, but there was an increasing tendency to regard their renunciative practices, at least as described in hagiographical literature, as unhealthily extreme. Peter Brown's 1971 article, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man', did much to mediate against this when he placed the ascetic ideal centre stage in his discussion of the growth of early Christianity.[5] Using evidence largely collated from Syrian hagiographical writing, Brown presented the relationships between the monks and the rural populations in which they resided as following a patron-client pattern. He considered the holy man to be a liminal figure, who operated outside the social structure and who had the capability to effect great change due to his charisma and strong mindedness. At the time that Brown wrote his seminal work, contemporary Egyptian documentary materials, particularly those written in Coptic, were relatively inaccessible to non-specialists, and Brown was thus heavily reliant on literary descriptions of Egyptian monasticism that emphasized the ascetic impulse as it was imagined within a harsh desert landscape.

[2] Bert Roest, 'Observant Reform in Religious Orders', in Miri Rubin and Walter Simons, eds, *Christianity in Western Europe* c.*1100*–c.*1500*, 7: *Reform and Renewal* (Cambridge, 2010), 446–57.

[3] Ann Leader, 'The Church and Desert Fathers in Early Renaissance Florence: Further Thoughts on a "New" Thebaid', in John Garton and Diane Wolfthal, eds, *New Studies on Old Masters: Essays in Renaissance Art in Honour of Colin Eisler*, Essays and Studies 26 (Toronto, 2011), 221–34.

[4] Edward Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols (London, 1846), 3: 346. On Gibbon and monasticism, see Mark Sheridan, 'The Modern Historiography of Early Egyptian Monasticism', in Mark Sheridan, ed., *From the Nile to the Rhone and Beyond: Studies in Early Monastic Literature and Scriptural Interpretation*, Studia Anselmiana 12 (Rome, 2012), 159–62.

[5] Peter Brown, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', *JRS* 61 (1971), 80–101.

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This gave rise to his suggestion that, due to geographical limitations, Egyptian holy men were unable to interact with local society in the way that the monks of Syria, Asia Minor and Palestine did:

> The links between the holy man and society constantly yielded to the pressure of this great fact. To survive at all in the hostile environment of such a desert, the Egyptian had to transplant into it the tenacious and all-absorbing routines of the villages of the οἰκουμένη. To live at all, a man had to remain in one place, earning his living from manual labour, from pottery and reed-weaving.[6]

In 1988, Brown returned to this theme in *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, in which Egyptian ascetics were described as surviving on a meagre diet gained by way of the manual labour they performed as hired hands in the local villages.[7]

Brown's writings may have radically changed perceptions of ascetic holy men and their place in history, but they did little to enhance the reputation of Egyptian monks. Brown himself, when reflecting on his earlier work, wrote: 'Looking back at what I would now have to abandon and modify in my previous picture of the holy man, I think that the greatest single feature of my portrayal of the holy man in need of revision would be his "splendid isolation".'[8] Averil Cameron took this a step further by arguing that the concept of the holy man as described by Brown was a literary construction rather than a social reality.[9] Such conclusions accord with Jacob Ashkenazi's 2014 article on monasticism in the late antique Levant.[10] He revises Brown's model by arguing that we need to distinguish between 'the Holy Man' as a product of hagiographic literature, and the socially established role of monk which was an integral feature of the local countryside. He concludes that many monks, rather than being revered as

[6] Ibid. 83.

[7] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988), 218–20.

[8] Peter Brown, 'The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity', *Representations* 2 (1983), 1–25, at 11.

[9] Averil Cameron, 'On Defining the Holy Man', in James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward, eds, *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown* (Oxford, 1999), 27–44.

[10] Jacob Ashkenazi, 'Holy Man versus Monk—Village and Monastery in the Late Antique Levant: Between Hagiography and Archaeology', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 57 (2014), 745–65.

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patrons, were established members of local communities, living and working alongside their fellow villagers.[11] The monks of the Levant may have ideologically renounced the world, but they retained familial, economic and social ties that bound them to the society in which they dwelt.

In recent times, Brown's theories regarding Egyptian monks have undergone further modification. Claudia Rapp, in her use of monastic letter collections, was able to demonstrate that Egyptian monks, rather than focusing inwards, were often called upon to act as intercessory figures for the local community through the use of prayer as intervention.[12] In particular, she made use of letters written to the fourth-century hermit Paphnutius, whose petitions were deemed particularly potent by his correspondents.[13] The model of monk as a form of spiritual patron is well evidenced in the letters of Paphnutius, who was clearly venerated by the writers of these surviving letters. However, monks were not just 'patrons' in the sense described by Brown: other letters quoted by Rapp, such as the fourth-century Nepheros collection, provide evidence for involvement in very different activities, as Rapp herself acknowledges. The letters of Nepheros are those of a person fulfilling a difficult managerial role within a busy monastic federation, and a significant portion of his correspondence describes the problems faced by his secular agent Paul in the sale of monastic produce and the procurement of scarce items. There are few demands for prayers of the type that fill the letters of Paphnutius.[14] This preoccupation with financial and practical matters is a common theme in other surviving monastic letters of the period, such as those discovered inside the binding of the Nag Hammadi Codices.[15] Additionally, recent research by scholars such as Eva Wipszycka and James Goehring has demonstrated that fourth- and fifth-century monasticism was a phenomenon that

[11] Ibid. 764–5.

[12] Claudia Rapp, '"For next to God, you are my salvation": Reflections on the Rise of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', in Howard-Johnston and Hayward, eds, *The Cult of Saints*, 63–82.

[13] Rapp, '"For next to God, you are my salvation"', 69–71. See also Tim Vivian, 'Holy Men and Businessmen: Monks as Intercessors in Fourth-Century Egypt as Illustrated by the Papyri and Ostraca', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 39 (2004), 235–69.

[14] Rapp, '"For next to God, you are my salvation"', 71–2.

[15] Published in John W. B. Barns, Gerald M. Browne and John C. Shelton, eds, *Nag Hammadi Codices: Greek and Coptic Papyri from the Cartonnage of the Covers*, Nag Hammadi Series 16 (Leiden, 1981).

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developed as much within the towns and villages of Egypt as it did in the barren regions that lay alongside the river Nile.[16]

Whilst the ideal of Egyptian monasticism promoted by Brown has been revised, its underlying message, with its emphasis on the holy man living in solitude safe from the temptations of the secular world, continues to dominate descriptions of Egyptian monastic life. In this article, I turn to contemporary documentation in order to discuss the extent to which the activities related therein compare with the monastic ideal as promoted by hagiographical literature. As we shall see, when the behaviours and activities described in the documentation are placed alongside the accounts of early Egyptian monasticism found in works such as *The Life of Antony* as described by Athanasius, or Jerome's *Life of Paul of Thebes*, the situations and attitudes prove so very different it can create a marked sense of dissonance within the reader. An individual case study, here using the letters of a fourth-century monk from Middle Egypt called Apa John, further emphasizes this point. The segment of John's correspondence that has survived gives us a lively first-hand account of aspects of his involvement in local affairs and his interactions with a wide range of petitioners. The result is that, rather than acting as archetypal 'holy men' living far removed from society, the surviving evidence suggests that many Egyptian monks were heavily engaged in the world, with all its demands and vicissitudes. Not all monks were models of piety but, rather, displayed their human frailties in a way that finds its echo throughout history.

The Development of a Monastic Code in Late Antique Egypt

The origins of monasticism in Egypt are obscure, but the terms 'monks' and 'nuns' appear in the papyrological record from around 324 CE, a time when St Antony was still active in his mission.[17] The evidence for the development of a monastic code is sparse and

[16] Ewa Wipszycka, 'Le monachisme égyptien et les villes', *Travaux et mémoires* 12 (1994), 1–10; James E. Goehring, 'The World Engaged: The Social and Economic World of Early Egyptian Monasticism', in James E. Goehring et al., eds, *Gnosticism and the Early Christian World: Essays in Honor of James M. Robinson* (Sonoma, CA, 1990), 134–44.

[17] The first datable example of the term 'monk' is found in a petition to the Praepositus Pagi for Karanis: *P.Col.* VII 171. See Edwin A. Judge, 'The Earliest Use of Monachos for "Monk" (P.Coll. Youtie 77) and the Origins of Monasticism', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 20 (1977), 72–89.

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difficult to determine, since widely accepted ground rules did not initially exist for the regulation of the movement we now call monasticism. The most popular, and still commonly quoted, descriptions of early Egyptian monastic ideals are those found in the sixth-century *Apophthegmata Patrum.* Here we discover a multitude of pithy stories in which older monks guide novices towards an understanding of the proper way to conduct an ascetic lifestyle. These vignettes have an immediate appeal, but they have proven themselves to be highly problematic as a source material. One major issue is their disputed origin for, as Columba Stewart reminds us, the sayings found within the *Apophthegmata Patrum* 'are not time capsules from fourth-century and early fifth-century Egypt, but carefully curated selections chosen in Palestine at least a century after they were supposedly uttered.'[18] Valuable as paideia (the educational training that was deemed necessary for the inculcation of cultural ideals) to be used in the formation of novices, they cannot be considered reliable sources for the period they claim to represent, although it is possible that they do contain some distilled essence of historical detail in regard to certain aspects of ascetic life.

More reliable are the contemporary eyewitness accounts that evolved from religious tourism. Men and women from across the Roman empire eagerly made their way to Egypt in search of the ascetic experience. Their output includes the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto* (*Enquiry about the Monks in Egypt*), which contains the recollections of a Christian traveller in the winter of 395/6 CE, Palladius's *Historia Lausiaca* (*Lausiac Histories*) and Egeria's *Itinerarium Egeriae* (*Travels of Egeria*). These writings also have their limitations: the motivation for their creation was to inspire fellow Christians, rather than act as accurate portrayals of all aspects of monastic life. Even so, they contain invaluable information about the living situation of the hermits who dwelt in the barren terrain of Scetis and Nitria, far from the settled communities located along the banks of the Nile, and about the organization of the early *coenobia* (formalized monastic communities), such as those founded by Pachomius in Upper Egypt. Other literary sources of note include

[18] Columba Stewart, 'Rethinking the History of Monasticism East and West: A Modest Tour d'Horizon', in Santha Bhattacharji, Rowan Williams and Dominic Mattos, eds, *Prayer and Thought in Monastic Tradition: Essays in Honour of Benedicta Ward SLG* (New York, 2014), 3–16, at 6.

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biographies of the foremost holy men and women, such as the universally popular *Life of Antony*, reputedly written by Bishop Athanasius in around 360 CE and generally considered the ultimate exemplar of its genre, establishing the idealized prototype of the ascetic monk.[19] Athanasius's careful construction creates a vision of an obedient and unworldly ascetic who lives in a way that conforms to standards laid out by Athanasius himself.[20] Gregory of Nazianzus was even moved to suggest that the *Life of Antony* had been composed as a rule for the monastic life in narrative form.[21] Such writings enable us to understand the type of characteristics considered worthy of emulation by the mainstream church. What they cannot tell us is how monasticism was experienced as an everyday phenomenon and how it positioned itself within local communities and secular society in general.

In the papyrological records, monks and nuns start to appear with increasing frequency from the mid-fourth century. The evidence demonstrates that would-be monks dressed distinctively, thus creating a conscious badge of identity which soon became associated with an embryonic moral code. In a mid-fourth-century letter from the archive of Nepheros (*P.Neph.* 7), for example, a monk accused of deceitfulness and of failure to pay his debts is said to have had no shame for his 'cloth' (σχῆμα), suggesting that, even at this early date, wearing a monastic habit already carried with it certain social obligations.[22] The letters of St Antony make several references to those who knowingly donned the habit, yet continued to act sinfully.[23] A petition from a woman called Aurelia Nonna living in Spania, a village close to Oxyrhynchus, provides contemporary evidence on this matter. Her nephew, whom she describes as a monk, had physically attacked her over a disputed marriage proposal for her daughter.[24] Furthermore, he had torn her clothes in the process, adding a hint of sexual scandal to his impropriety. As Aurelia Nonna

[19] William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford, 2004), 57–114.
[20] David Brakke, *Athanasius and Asceticism* (Baltimore, MD, 1995), 205.
[21] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes theologicae* 21.5.
[22] Bärbel Kramer, John C. Shelton and Gerald M. Browne, *Das Archiv des Nepheros und verwandte Texte*, Aegyptiaca Treverensia 4 (Mainz, 1987), 54–6.
[23] Anthony the Great, *Epistolae* 2.34; 3.33; 5.29; 7.47.
[24] London, BL, Papyrus 2217. Harold Idris Bell, 'Episcopalis Audientia in Byzantine Egypt', *Byzantion* 1 (1924), 139–44.

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pointedly remarks, the nephew's behaviour was 'in defiance of his cloth.'[25] Hostile witnesses, such as the pagan Libanius, complain about those 'that accompany their drinking with the singing of hymns, who hide these excesses under an artificially contrived pallor'.[26] Libanius may stand accused of bias, but state authorities clearly had concerns. The Roman emperor Valens took action and Jerome, writing in 375, records: 'Valens made a law that monks must do military service, and ordered that any who did not want to should be beaten to death with their own staves [*fustis*].'[27] Jerome further reports that: 'many of the monks at Nitria were slaughtered by the tribunes and the soldiers.'[28] Other accounts would seem to accord with this: the monk Piamun, for example, wrote to John Cassian recounting that he had travelled with monks from Egypt and the Thebaid who had been exiled to the mines of Pontus and Armenia under Valens in the 370s.[29] The Roman emperor Marcian wrote in 452 CE, telling Alexandrian monks to 'keep your own selves also from unspeakable canons and contrary assemblies, lest in addition to the loss of your souls you should be subjected to legal punishments.'[30] This was closely followed by another prescript against heretical assemblies only three years later.[31] Even as late as the sixth century, non-aligned monks remained a problem in Egypt, as two sixth-century Coptic letters concerning an imprisoned саρακωτε (sarabaites) monk demonstrate.[32] Such wandering monks not only

[25] 'συνάπτεσθαι, π[αρὰ] τ̣ὸ σχῆμ[α]': BL, Papyrus 2217.9–10.

[26] Libanius, *Orationes* 30, 'pro Templis' (*c.*385–7 CE), written in protest at the actions of monks in the city of Antioch. *Libanius: Selected Orations*, transl. Albert F. Norman, 3 vols, LCL 451–2 (Cambridge, MA, 1969), 2: 113.

[27] 'Valens lege data ut monachi militarent, nolentes fustibus iussit interfici': transl. Noel Lenski, 'Valens and the Monks: Cudgeling and Conscription as a Means of Social Control', *DOP* 58 (2004), 93–117, at 93. See Rudolf Helm and Ursula Treu, *Eusebius Werke,* 7: *Die Chronik des Hieronymus. Hieronymi Chronicon*, GCS 47 (Berlin, 1984), 248. It should be noted, however, that Jerome is the only witness for this allegation.

[28] 'Multi monachorum Nitriae per tribunos et milites caesi': transl. Lenski, 'Valens and the Monks', 97.

[29] Cassian, *Collationes* 18.7; transl. Lenski, 'Valens and the Monks', 98.

[30] *Marcian* 7.481–4; transl. Paul R. Coleman-Norton, *Roman State and Christian Church: A Collection of Legal Documents to A.D. 535*, 2 vols (London, 1966), 2: 827–8.

[31] Andrea Sterk, *Renouncing the World yet Leading the Church: The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 166.

[32] *P.Cair.S.R.* 3733.5bis and 6bis. Loreleï Vanderheyden, 'Les lettres coptes des archives de Dioscore d'Aphrodité', in Paul Schubert, ed., *Actes du 26e Congrès international de papyrologie. Genève 16-21 août 2010* (Geneva, 2012), 793–800.

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flouted societal norms, but were seen as a direct threat to public order. They were repeatedly condemned by church authorities, including Augustine who referred to them as hypocrites and pseudo-monks.[33] Instead, monks were urged to remain secluded, submissive to their elders and engaged in spiritual reflection and honest manual labour.

In the late fourth century, Cassian and Jerome outlined neat, threefold typologies of different kinds of monk. Alongside the anchorites, who lived out their lives in solitary spaces, and coenobites, dwelling in organized communities, there was a third group: Cassian's 'Sarabaites' and Jerome's 'Remnuoth'. According to Cassian, this category of monk could be found living in various situations, including secluded within their own homes or in loosely governed communities, but their main hallmark was their lack of obedience to authority.[34] The documentary evidence for the period is less clear-cut and definitive labels are hard to ascribe. For example, we read of two nuns, Theodora and Tauris, who lived in their own home, but rented out a portion of their dwelling place to a Jew.[35] Also, unusually, a Pachomian monk, a member of a community that demanded its members to forfeit all possessions, is recorded as paying tax on privately owned lands.[36] Such evidence would indicate that, in the fourth century, even in what might be considered highly regulated coenobitic communities, the rules for permitted activities had yet to be firmly established.[37] In the monastic letters, there is a

[33] Daniel Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 33 (Berkeley, CA, 2002), 158–62.

[34] Cassian, *Collations* 18.7 and 18.10. In *Theodosian Code* 16.3.1, 'de monachis' (390 CE), wandering monks were banned from the towns and cities. Clyde Pharr, *The Theodosian Code and Novels, and the Sirmondian Constitutions*, Corpus of Roman Law 1 (Princeton, NJ, 1952), 449. See also Lenski, 'Valens and the Monks', 93–117.

[35] Michael W. Haslam, 'P.Oxy. 3203', *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 44 (1976), 182–4. See also James E. Goehring, 'Through a Glass Darkly: Diverse Images of the "apotaktikoi(ai)" of Early Egyptian Monasticism', *Semeia* 58 (1992), 25–45.

[36] Ewa Wipszycka, 'Les terres de la congrégation pachômienne dans une liste des payements pour les apora', in Jean Bingen, Guy Cambier and Georges Nachtergael, eds, *Le monde grec. Pensée, littérature, histoire, documents. Hommages à Claire Préaux* (Brussels, 1975), 625–36. For the suggestion that the tax was paid on behalf of the local villagers, see Malcolm Choat, 'Property Ownership and Tax Payment', in Anne Boud'hors and Petra Sijpesteijn, eds, *Monastic Estates in Late Antique and Early Islamic Egypt: Ostraca, Papyri, and Essays in Memory of Sarah Clackson*, American Society of Papyrologists 46 (Cincinnati, OH, 2009), 129–40, at 130–3.

[37] On the establishment of authority and tradition in the Pachomian Federations, see James E. Goehring, 'New Frontiers in Pachomian Studies', in Birger A. Pearson and

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similar lack of exactitude. Apa John is variously named as an ἀποτακτικός (village ascetic)[38] and ἀναχώρητης (anchorite).[39] Despite the use of these titles, it is clear that Apa John did not live as a lone hermit, but dwelt in some form of community, as attested by letters addressed to him and 'all the (monastic) brothers', with lists of their names.[40] These small glimpses into everyday life remind us that the fourth century was a time of innovation and change as people who called themselves by the term 'monk' could draw together in a variety of permutations.

Andrea Sterk notes how the establishment of monasteries closely aligned to church and state powers played a large part in taming Egyptian monasticism and improving its reputation for waywardness.[41] In itself, however, this did not dampen down accusations of impiety against monks. Instead, the issue was focused within the confines of the *coenobium*, rather than appearing in the guise of a wider urban problem. The problem and challenge of deviant behaviour is a constant theme in the writing of the foremost Egyptian monastic leader of the late fourth to mid-fifth century, Apa Shenoute of the White Monastery Federation in Atripe, Upper Egypt. A large proportion of his flock consisted of families who had joined en masse as an escape from grinding poverty. Shenoute's letters are filled with descriptions of the resultant problems, including accusations of food theft, favouritism and attempts to thwart clandestine family meetings. Shenoute struggled to maintain control over his flock and his letters detail the frequent interpersonal conflicts that took place within the confines of the monastery walls.[42] Sexual pollution was an obvious area of concern, but other accusations include

James E. Goehring, eds, *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA, 1986), 236–57, at 240–7.

38 *P.Herm.* 9.

39 *P.Herm.* 7.10 (Greek) and *P.Lond. Copt.* I 1123 (Coptic). The term is relatively rare in the records. See Wipszycka, 'ἀναχώρητης, ἐρημίτης, ἔγκλειστος, ἀποτακτικός: sur la terminologie monastique en Égypte', *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* 31 (2001), 147–68, at 11–12.

40 *P.Herm.* 8, ll. 21–2; *P.Ryl. Copt.* 269, 273, 276.

41 Sterk, *Renouncing the World*, 164–5.

42 Bentley Layton, 'Rules, Patterns, and the Exercise of Power in Shenoute's Monastery: The Problem of World Replacement and Identity Maintenance', *JECS* 15 (2007), 45–73. For further examples, see Caroline T. Schroeder, *Monastic Bodies: Discipline and Salvation in Shenoute of Atripe* (Philadelphia, PA, 2013), 1–24.

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deceitful or defiant behaviours that are taken by Shenoute to indicate a lack of respect for his position as leader of the monastery.[43] The consequence was that monks and nuns were regularly punished, including beatings on the soles of the feet for women.[44] Shenoute himself faced accusations of impiety, and in one instance a monk died at his hands as the result of a severe flogging.[45] Shenoute defended himself vigorously, calling it an act of God, but he is clearly aware that his actions were not universally viewed in a favourable light. In the fourth- to fifth-century Pachomian literature, monks are also repeatedly depicted as rejecting the required standards of monastic behaviour, or of failing to live up to them. Pachomius and his senior monks responded by using public humiliation as an organic form of social control. The Pachomian annals describe how one 'bad' monk who had recently died was ritually dishonoured when his garments were burnt in the centre of the monastic compound before the entire community.[46] As might be expected, some people opted out of the system entirely, such as the 'former monk Proous' mentioned in a letter of Apa Paieous dated to 334.[47]

A common theme in works such as the *Aphothegmata Patrum* is that of the errant monk who succumbs to temptation in a whole range of ways. Such tales may have acted as a warning to young novices but, for all their focus on the sinful temptations of the flesh, they do not really engage with the harsh realities of life as they were experienced by the vast majority of Egypt's inhabitants. Ensuring personal survival in the late Roman Empire was never easy, particularly for those who lacked wealth or status. The ideal of the monk making a living through weaving reeds into baskets, as proposed by Brown and many others, was scarcely feasible in a society in which most families possessed the capacity to weave their own items for free.[48] Monks without personal wealth needed a regular income, no matter how

[43] David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Harvard, MA, 2006) 100–13.

[44] Schroeder, *Monastic Bodies*, 24–53; Rebecca Krawiec, *Shenoute and the Women of the White Monastery* (Oxford, 2004), 40–6.

[45] Krawiec, *Shenoute and the Women of the White Monastery*, 43–64.

[46] *First Greek Life of Pachomius* G^1, 103; transl. Armand Veilleux, *Pachomian Koinonia*, 1: *The Life of Saint Pachomius*, Cistercian Studies Series 45 (Kalamzoo, MI, 1980), 368.

[47] For example, the 'former monk Proous' in *P.Lond.* 1913.10.

[48] Ewa Wipszycka, *Moines et communautés monastiques en Égypte (IVe–VIIIe siècles)*, Journal of Juristic Papyrology Supplements 11 (Warsaw, 2009), 472–9, 532–45.

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ascetic their practices, and they would work on the land if necessity commanded. The monk who renounces his inheritance may be lauded in saintly literature, but this type of behaviour clashed with societal norms to such a degree that it was commonly accepted that only the most extraordinary saint could or would perform such an act.[49] Surviving records reveal that monks and nuns retained property and other forms of personal wealth.[50] One famous example is that of Melania the Elder who, whilst having officially renounced her wealth, was evidently still in control of sizable resources, which she spent in pursuit of her religious ideals.[51] In the documentation, the monk Ammonius is recorded as inheriting property from a certain Gemellus.[52] Another, Macarius, is described as owning sixteen arouras of land in the Hermopolite nome.[53] The continued appearance in documentation of monks and monasteries as landowners throughout the following centuries acts as further confirmation that it was considered an acceptable social norm for monks, not merely to own property, but also to benefit from that ownership through the collection of rents and other incomes.[54] Evidence from later centuries further demonstrates that monks and clergy regularly performed work for pay, with the copying and illustrating of books being a popular source of revenue.[55] Some monks, and monasteries, even lent out money at interest.[56] Banding together was one way to gain economic

[49] Jaclyn L. Maxwell, *Simplicity and Humility in Late Antique Christian Thought: Elites and the Challenge of Apostolic Life* (Cambridge, 2021), 1–12.

[50] Roger S. Bagnall, 'Monks and Property: Rhetoric, Law, and Patronage in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and the Papyri', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 42 (2001), 7–24.

[51] Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton, NJ, 2012), 291–300.

[52] *P.Oxy*. XL VI 3311; Bagnall, 'Monks and Property', 12.

[53] *P.Herm. Landl.* G505/F722; Judge, 'The Earliest Use of Monachos for "Monk"', 169.

[54] James E. Goehring, '"Through a Glass Darkly": Diverse Images of the ἀποτακτικόι(αι) in Early Egyptian Monasticism', in James E. Goehring, ed., *Ascetics, Society, and the Desert: Studies in Early Egyptian Monastici*sm (Harrisburg, PA, 1999), 60–8; Jean Gascou, 'Monasteries, Economic Activities of', in Aziz S. Atiya, ed., *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (New York, 1991), 1639–40.

[55] Anastasia Maravela, 'Monastic Book Production in Christian Egypt', in Harald Froschauer and Cornelia Römer, eds, *Spätantike Bibliotheken. Leben und Lesen in den frühen Klöstern Ägyptens* (Vienna, 2008), 25–37.

[56] Tomasz Markiewicz, 'The Church, Clerics, Monks and Credit in the Papyri', in Anne Boud'hors, ed., *Monastic Estates in Late Antique and Early Islamic Egypt: Ostraca, Papyri, and Studies in Honour of Sarah Clackson* (Cincinnati, OH, 2008), 178–204; Amin

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security, perhaps by forming a semi-eremitical laura – a community consisting of a cluster of cells based around communal facilities – or as members of a coenobitic community. Hermits could be connected to more formalized monastic communities, perhaps withdrawing on a temporary basis before returning to the monastery. It is against this diverse, and sometimes contradictory, background that we turn to look at the letters of Apa John.

An Individual Case History – Apa John

It is unfortunate that a comprehensive edition of the Apa John archive has yet to be published, as the contents are highly illuminating of the daily activities of this well-connected monk. The total number of letters belonging to the archive is still in doubt, but the main core consists of four letters in Greek and nine in Coptic.[57] Their origin is obscure: the collection was discovered early in the twentieth century by persons unknown, before being sold off to a dealer in Cairo. Several museums and private collectors then competed to buy the individual letters and information about their place of origin was lost.[58] Palaeographical and internal features indicate that the letters were written sometime in the mid- to late fourth century, perhaps in or near the city of Hermopolis in Middle Egypt.[59] The Apa John of the letters was evidently well connected socially, leading many scholars to speculate that this is none other than the famous John of Lycopolis, a notable holy man, active at the time these letters were presumed to have been dictated, who was particularly famed for his gift of clairvoyance and the ability to effect healings from

Benaissa, 'A Usurious Monk from the Apa Apollo Monastery in Bawit', *Chronique d'Égypte* 85 (2010), 374–81.

[57] Malcolm Choat, 'Monastic Letters on Papyrus from Late Antique Egypt', in idem and Mariachiara Giorda, eds, *Writing and Communication in Early Egyptian Monasticism*, Texts and Studies in Early Christianity 9 (Leiden, 2017), 37–40.

[58] Malcolm Choat, 'The Archive of Apa Johannes: Notes on a Proposed New Edition', in Jaakko Frösén and Suomen Tiedeseura, eds, *Proceedings of the 24th International Congress of Papyrologists: Helsinki, 1–7 August 2004*, Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum 122 (Helsinki, 2007), 175–83.

[59] A reference to military recruitment practices in *P.Herm.* 7 suggests a post-381 CE date. See Constantine Zuckerman, 'The Hapless Recruit Psois and the Mighty Anchorite, Apa John', *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 32 (1995), 183–94, at 183–8.

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afar.[60] Palladius's vivid description portrays John as an uneducated Egyptian monoglot, dwelling in a cell on the mountain of Lyco and communicating with his illustrious visitors through a small window at the weekend.[61] John of Lycopolis features prominently in the work of several authors, including John Cassian, Jerome and Augustine of Hippo.[62] The John of the letters is certainly addressed with a fulsome civility, as would become any respected holy man. One example begins:

> Therefore I greet your reverence by this letter, begging you to remember myself who greets you, and my entire house, in the prayers which you send up every day to the Lord our Saviour. For I trust that through your most pious prayers, I may be relieved also from the trouble in which we are and return to you. Therefore master, truly a man of God, be so good as to hold us in your memory.[63]

There is sparse remaining evidence for identifying the author of this small collection of letters, and the surviving clues do not always align with John's known characteristics. The social engagements and hints at communal living seem at odds with the traditional descriptions of the immured hermit. The letters never contain requests for healing, John of Lycopolis's forte; instead, they beg for practical help in cases of dire need. Furthermore, the letters of Apa John are written in both Coptic and Greek, an unlikely choice for those corresponding with a man who famously did not speak a word of the latter language.

The petitioners usually live in wretched circumstances: some have fallen foul of the military authorities or other secular powers, and several are widows. Some of the letters mention threatened or actual

[60] Zuckerman, 'The Hapless Recruit Psois and the Mighty Anchorite, Apa John', 191–4. See also Wipszycka, *Moines et communautés monastiques en Égypte*, 83–5.
[61] Mark Sheridan, 'John of Lycopolis', in Gawdat Gabra and Hany Takla, eds, *Christianity and Monasticism in Middle Egypt: Al-Minya and Asyut* (Cairo, 2015), 123–32.
[62] Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 35.
[63] 'προσαγορεύω σου τοιγαροῦν τὴν εὐλάβειάν{σου} δ̣ι̣ὰ τούτων μου τ̣[ῶν γ]ραμμάτων, παρᾳκ̣ᾳλῶν ὅπω̣ς μνημονεύῃς καὶ καμοῦ τοῦ σε προσκυνοῦντος καὶ π̣αντὸς τοῦ οἴκου μου ἐ̣ν̣ α̣ἷ̣ ἀναπέμπεις [ἀεὶ] πέποιθα γὰρ ὡς διὰ τῶν ἁγιοτάτων καὶ μεθ' ἡμέραν εὐχαῖς τῷ κυρίῳ σωτῆρει ἡμῶν. πέποιθα γὰρ ὡς διὰ τῶν ἁγιοτάτων σου εὐχῶν καὶ τ̣ο̣ῦ κ̣[α]μάτου τούτου ἐν ᾧ ἐσμὲ̣ν̣ ἐλ̣ε̣υ̣θ̣ερωθῆναι καὶ ἐπανελθεῖν πρὸς [ὑ]μᾶς. λ̣οιπόν, δ̣έ̣σποτα, ἀληθῶς Θεο̣ῦ ἄνθρωπε, καταξίωσον ἐ̣[ν] μνήμαι̣ς ἔχειν ἡμᾶς': *P.Herm.* 8.12–20. Author's translation.

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prison sentences.[64] For example, we find a letter written in Greek sent by an unknown person asking that Apa John write to his gaoler, a certain Apollonius, commanding him to release him.[65] Similarly, in a badly damaged Coptic letter, surviving details include the mention of an imprisoned old man whose affairs are connected in some way with the local magistrate, (Ni?)lammon.[66] The economic affairs of the local community also receive a mention. In one letter, John is asked to help resolve a land dispute that has relevance to the tax collector.[67] The correspondent writes: 'Now then, the matter is about some fields where the water has carried off the returns (?) of the tax collector … They said, "appeal to the Hegemon".'[68] It could be considered quite significant that the local dux is mentioned here, a point often used to support an identification with John of Lycopolis. Scribbled above one of the lines in this letter, however, is the insertion, 'make haste and write to Apa John the priest', which might seem an odd appellation for a solitary hermit.[69]

Whether this John should be identified with John of Lycopolis or not, these examples demonstrate how monks such as John were viewed by their fellow citizens as potential ombudsmen.[70] The letters from widows are particularly poignant. One widow of twelve years' standing writes that she has a male relative who is in debt.[71] Her letter implies that her children have been seized as sureties. Faced with problems of this immensity, it is hardly surprising that the widow in question writes: 'I have neither eaten nor

[64] *P.Ryl. Copt.* 272, 310, 311; and *P.Herm.* 7, in James G. Keenan, Joseph G. Manning and Uri Yiftach-Firanko, eds, *Law and Legal Practice in Egypt from Alexander to the Arab Conquest: A Selection of Papyrological Sources in Translation, with Introductions and Commentary* (Cambridge, 2014), 536–8.
[65] *P.Misc. inv.* II 70.
[66] *P.Ryl. Copt.* 272.
[67] *P.Ryl. Copt.* 273.
[68] 'ⲁⲉⲓⲧⲛⲟⲟⲩϥ̣ ϣⲁⲣⲟⲕ ϫⲉⲁⲛⲁ̣ⲣⲭⲱⲛ ϫⲟⲟⲥ ⲛⲁⲓ ϫⲉϥϩⲏϣ̣ ⲉⲧⲃⲉⲟⲩ ⲡⲣⲁⲕⲙⲁ ⲟⲩ̣ⲁⲛⲁⲅⲅⲉⲟⲛ̣ ⲛ̄ⲣⲱⲙⲉⲡⲉ ⲕⲁⲧⲁ ⲧⲥⲩⲛⲧⲉⲥⲓⲥ ⲁⲗ̣ⲗⲁ ⲟⲩϭⲱⲃ ⲕⲁⲧⲁ ⲯⲱⲙⲁ ⲧⲉⲛⲟⲩϭⲉ ⲡ̇ⲉⲡⲣⲁⲅⲙⲁ ⲛ̄ϩⲉⲛⲉⲓⲱϩⲉⲡⲉ ⲉⲁⲡⲙⲟⲟⲩ ϥⲓⲧⲟⲩ ⲉⲛⲁⲯⲁ ⲛⲉⲕⲥⲁⲕⲧⲱⲣⲛⲉ . . . ⲁⲩϫⲟⲟⲥ ⲛⲁϥ ϫⲉⲥⲙⲙⲉ ⲛ̄ⲫⲏⲅⲉⲙⲟⲛ': *P.Ryl. Copt.* 272.14–15. Author's translation.
[69] 'ϫⲉⲁⲣⲓ ⲟⲩⲥⲡⲟⲩⲇⲏ ⲛⲅⲥ̣ϩⲁ̣ⲓ ⲛⲁ[ⲡ]ⲁ ⲓⲟⲁⲛⲏⲥ ⲡ̣ⲡⲣⲉ̣ⲥ̣…': *P.Ryl. Copt.* 273.12. Author's translation.
[70] On the role of monks as ombudsmen, see Peter Van Minnen, 'The Roots of Egyptian Christianity', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 40 [hereafter: *ZPE*] (1996), 71–86, at 80.
[71] *P.Ryl. Copt.* 310.

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drunk'.[72] She also reports that she had been sent to the *hypographeus* (public notary) of Antinoe.[73] This is significant, as such an official would be expected to act as an amanuensis, rather than merely as a scribe.[74] Another widow, Leuchis, implores John's assistance in helping her to rid the house of certain unwanted people. She notes that a particular tribune, a man called 'Gunthus', is the person who has the power to remove them. It has been hypothesized that the 'them' in question are soldiers, although the form here is feminine and may possibly refer to women who had some association with the activities of the local military. Leuchis's desperation in this case is clear: she, or at least the scribe she had commissioned, finished her letter in a plaintive tone, beseeching: 'My Lord, do it for God's sake!'[75] Unfortunately, Apa John's reply, if there ever was one, has not survived and we cannot know what aid, if any, he may have provided in this case, or what his relationship was with the tribune in question. Other letters written in a similar vein include cases such as a young man in trouble and a sick woman in need of help.[76]

On reading these missives, one is impressed by the extent to which John appears to be at the heart of the social mission of the church. However, John's clients sometimes expressed an impatience that suggests a lack of satisfaction with his efforts. A fragmentary letter written in Coptic from a certain Porphyra is a case in point.[77] The letter begins with Porphyra offering fulsome praise and pleading with John to help him. He then mentions an ongoing dispute between himself and some men, who he claims were involved in taking items stored in sacks, perhaps foodstuffs. Porphyra is ostensibly seeking help, but he then becomes accusatory towards John, complaining: 'You did not give account of me about … that the men have ta(ken) … sacks. You did not give account of me before

[72] 'ⲟⲩⲇⲉ ⲙⲡⲓⲟⲩⲱⲙ ⲛ[ϩⲏ]ⲧⲟⲩ ⲙⲡⲓⲥⲱ ⲛϩⲏⲧⲟⲩ': *P.Ryl. Copt*. 310.20–2. Author's translation.
[73] 'ⲁϥⲧⲁⲁϥ ⲛⲧⲛⲡϩ̣ⲩⲡⲁⲣⲏⲥ ⲛⲁⲛⲧⲓⲛⲟⲟⲩ': *P.Ryl. Copt*. 310.15–16. Author's translation.
[74] Herbert C. Youtie, 'ὑπογραφεύς: The Social Impact of Illiteracy in Graeco-Roman Egypt', *ZPE* 17 (1975), 201–21.
[75] 'κύριέ μου, διὰ των Θεὼν πύει': *P.Herm*. 17.6. Author's translation.
[76] *P.Ryl. Copt*. 268 and 313.
[77] *P.Ryl. Copt*. 270.

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the military unit(?).'[78] Why does Porphyra take this tone with someone whose help he apparently needs desperately? Did he feel that John had an obligation to act based on some form of transactional arrangement, perhaps one involving payment? Porphyra then moves on to request that John write yet another letter but, unfortunately, there is a lacuna at this point, and we cannot know to whom John was supposed to write or why.

A second letter is similarly interesting in that it could be interpreted in a way that puts John in a rather poor light.[79] The letter, written in wildly ungrammatical Greek, has been sent by a man called Psois, who, rather confusingly, comments on the actions of another man by the same name. This second Psois, a former military tribune, has promised to aid the release of the first Psois from military service. In the fourth century, conscription was common but unpopular, as evidenced by references to draft dodgers and deserters in the *Codex Theodosianus* (7.18).[80] It is worth quoting the letter in some detail for what it reveals about the case. Psois says:

> Write a letter to Psois from Taeto, the ex-tribune, to have me released, if I haven't yet been released. Psios' son already has seven gold solidi and his assistant has another gold solidi. Because you took money from me for my release but I have not been released. I ask God that you either release me or hand over the eight gold solidi. I am Psois son of Kyllos from the village of Pocheos in the Antaeopolite nome. Do not neglect this master, for God's sake, for you have already given my children as security to the moneylender because of the gold.[81]

The Greek is very confused here and the main sense of the letter has possibly been lost, but what does seem clear is that, despite having laid out money, Psois is still being held captive. It also rather

[78] '[м]пръ ωп neмaι кa[т]a n[. . . .] ϫentanpωme ta [. . .]cook мпеъ ωп neмaι ϩnвoλ nпapṃạṭạγ': *P.Ryl. Copt.* 270.5–9. Author's translation.

[79] *P.Herm.* 7.

[80] John Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ, 1993), 178.

[81] 'γράψοṿ εις ἐπιστολη πρὸς Ψοις ἀπὸ Ταετῷ ἀπὸ τριβουνου, ἵνα ἀπολύομαι ἐαν μὴ ἀπ̣ο̣-λυ̣θήσο̣μαι. ἤδη γὰρ ὁ υἱὸς Ψοῖς ἀπαίτησέ̣ μαι χρυσ(οῦ) νομ(ισμάτια) ζ καὶ τοῦ βοηθὸς ἄλλα̣ χρυ̣σ̣(οῦ) νομ(ισμάτιον) α̣· ἔλαβες γὰρ παρ' ἐμοῦ ἵνα ἀπολ̣ύ̣ω̣μαι καὶ οὐκ ἀπόλυσόν μαι. ἀξιῶ τὸν Θεὸν ἵνα ἢ ἀπόλυσόν μαι ἢ παραδοτε μ̣οι το χρυσ (οῦ) νομ(ισμάτια) η. ἐγὼ γάρ εἰμι Ψόϊς Κυλλός ἀπὸ κώμης [Π]ώ̣χεως το̣ῦ̣ Ἀνταιουπολείτου ν̣ο̣μοῦ. νῦν οὖν μὴ ἀ̣μελήση̣ς, δέσ̣πο̣τα̣, διὰ̣ τὸ̣ν̣ [Θ]εό̣[ν]. ἤδη γὰρ τὰ τ̣έκνα μου ἔδωκας ὑποθήκ̣α̣ς̣ [τ]ῷ̣ δανι̣[στ]η̣ς διὰ τὸ̣ χ̣ρ̣υσάφι̣ν̣': *P.Herm.* 7. Author's translation.

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remarkably implies that John has put Psois's children into bondage with a moneylender to act as a form of surety, the type of situation previously mentioned in relation to the widow in letter *P.Ryl. Copt.* 310.[82] Whilst there is much evidence to show that parents did place their children into servitude in the fourth century, such an act was illegal according to Roman law and it was generally considered to be morally reprehensible for a moneylender to accept children as pledges.[83] Faced with the contents of this letter, scholars who support John's identification with John of Lycopolis are in a conundrum: how could a renowned saint willingly collude in the seizure of children as a payment for debt? One suggestion is to amend the term ἔδωκας, 'you gave', to ἔδωκα, 'I gave', on the grounds of the poor syntax, to produce the reading: 'I have already given my children as security.'[84] This is certainly plausible, but some caution is needed here as we are in danger of accepting an emendation of the text merely on the grounds that it is essential to preserve the sanctity of the saint, leaving the hapless Psois to stand condemned for his poor parenting as a consequence. If the letter is taken at face value, then we are faced with needing to acknowledge that John was an accessory to a deed that was considered repugnant, even by the standards of the Roman authorities. Another possibility is that the 'you' in question here is not John, but Psois the ex-tribune. Alas, no further evidence is available to assist us in our choice of meaning.

Another fourth-century letter describing a similar situation is that written to Apa Paieous (*P.Lond.* VI 1915), a predecessor of the monk Nepheros who dwelt in the monastery of Hathor. He was asked to intervene on behalf of an indebted wine salesman called Pamonthis who had had all his possessions seized, including his two children. Paieous was required to act as an intermediary in this instance, indicating that such situations were not uncommon in the caseloads of monks who acted as ombusdmen.

[82] See also the letters to Apa Paieous on the same topic: *P.Lond.* VI 1915 and *P.Lond.* VI 1916.

[83] Ville Vuolanto, 'Selling a Freeborn Child: Rhetoric and Social Realities in the Late Roman World', *Ancient Society* 33 (2003), 178–97.

[84] Erwin Seidl, 'Juristische Papyruskunde. 16. Bericht (Neuerscheinungen vom September 1964 bis September 1967)', *Studia et documenta historiae et iuris* 33 (1967), 503–79, at 513; Luc Fournet, *The Rise of Coptic: Egyptian Versus Greek in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ, 2020), 50–7. Cf. Zuckerman, 'The Hapless Recruit Psois and the Mighty Anchorite, Apa John', 183.

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The letters of John, like those of his fellow monks, certainly indicate that monks who had the abilities and prestige regularly became enmeshed in the social and political life of their local communities. There are surviving examples of this type of engagement in Egyptian religious literature. The *vita* of the fourth- or fifth-century Aaron for example, a famously ascetic figure, also praises the work he regularly undertook as a legal adviser for people in the locality.[85] This Coptic text, like so many, has only recently been edited and translated, meaning that his biography has been relatively unknown to earlier religious historians.[86] This type of work adds support to the evidence found in the letters written to Apa John for the close social engagement by monks. What is particularly interesting in the case of the Apa John letters is the tone taken by some of his supplicants. Of course, the seeming impatience of the writers may be taken as a form of rhetoric. It is not unusual to find accusations of neglect or of a failure to act in letters of the period, particularly in those sent to close family members and friends, including monastic brethren. However, such accusations are unusual in a client-patron context. It might be imagined that John lacked the time necessary for performing all the tasks demanded of him by his spiritual flock. The lack of legal services prompted many church figures to take on the roles of public officials. Augustine, for example, begged his congregation not to expect him, as their bishop, to have the ability to carry out all the functions of the local magistrate.[87] Part of the puzzle is that we do not know how these letters to John survived: are these the last cases John was working on at the time of his death, or did these letters form part of an archive that covers decades of activity? If these were indeed remnants of a collection treasured by John, and perhaps even members of a community who preserved them after his death, then it would infer that John, or his followers, thought they contained nothing that was unexceptional. If so, then they indicate that relationships between influential monks like John and his clients might be expected to be fraught at times as not all their problems were negotiable or easy to untangle.

[85] Nicholas Browder Venable, 'Legal Authority and Monastic Institutions in Late Monastic Egypt' (PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 2018), 32–5.

[86] Jacques van der Vliet and Jitse Dijkstra, *The Coptic Life of Aaron: Critical Edition, Translation and Commentary*, Vigiliae Christianae Suppl. 155 (Leiden, 2019).

[87] Leonard A. Curchin, 'The End of Local Magistrates in the Roman Empire', *Gerión* 32 (2014), 271–87, at 282.

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Conclusion

For many centuries, the reliance on literary accounts of early Egyptian monasticism led to the creation of an idealized image of eremitic monasticism. Monks were popularly viewed as pious, often illiterate ascetics and their descriptions were invoked to encourage the Christian reader to engage in a form of religious *aemulatio*. This has tended to overshadow the historical reality and an exploration of surviving documentation from the period acts as a welcome counterbalance, revealing, as it does, that the lives of the earliest monks and nuns were as complex and entangled with the everyday as that of their present-day counterparts. What becomes clear from examining the contemporary sources is that those who, in the first few decades after its inception, sought to self-designate using the term 'monk' had a variety of expectations about what constituted the monastic vocation and their motivations for taking on the habit differed considerably. As a result, their lifestyles reflected their circumstances and opportunities, with the result that a sizable proportion of monks remained within an urban setting, taking up occupations that suited their vocation. The Christian community very quickly engaged with the concept of 'monasticism' and the role of monk, and all that it entailed, and it rapidly became an established and regulated part of the Christian movement. One consequence was the promotion of the coenobitic movement by the church authorities. Alexandrian patriarchs such as Athanasius and Cyril actively promoted an ideal in which monks were held in check through rigorous discipline and religious education. Their descriptions of movements such as the Pachomians for example, provided inspiration to newly formed monastic communities who emulated their predecessors in their structure and formation. In reality, the early coenobitic movement went through a complex and sometimes difficult foundational period, as evidenced by the writings of Shenoute of Atripe, for example, where personal conflict and power struggles are highly evident.

The letters of Apa John are noteworthy in that they were written during the formative period of the monastic movement, and he can rightfully be considered a model 'patron' in that his correspondents considered him a useful intermediary. However, when examined in more detail, John's lifestyle seems very different from that of the famous John of Lycopolis, with whom he is often associated, or the

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liminal figures described in Brown's 1971 article. The saintly monks of the hagiographies may wield an almost limitless authority in their dealings with the ruling elite but, in real life, monks such as John were quite evidently constrained in what they could do and the time it took to do it. Other letters, such as those of Nepheros, further demonstrate that holy men faced much more mundane daily challenges than those of their literary counterparts. Lower down the social scale were the large majority of monks and nuns, often subject to superiors and regularly participating in manual labour. Although closely bound by society's rules, there were those who created scandal through their misdemeanours or scandalous lifestyles – a point even the hagiographies acknowledge with their tales of sinful and remorseful monks. An acknowledgement of the pragmatic entanglement of monks within society takes us away from the static image of the eremitic saint, as painted in the hagiographies, towards an acknowledgment that monasticism was a dynamic and fluid movement. From its inception, far from being merely a movement of saintly ascetics, it remained entangled with the world in a manner that elicited a very human response from its practitioners and the society in which they lived.

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