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978-1-107-16181-8 — The Monastic Landscape of Late Antique Egypt
Darlene L. Brooks Hedstrom
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INTRODUCTION

AN ANONYMOUS BRITISH TRAVELER TO SOUTHERN EGYPT IN 1824 DESCRIBED the Egyptian landscape of the island of Philae as overrun with remnants of the past. It was so much so that "[a]t every step you tread on some fragment of antiquity" (see Fig. 1).[1] Early maps and photographs of the island show the presence of substantial mud brick structures filling the court of the colonnades south of the Birthhouse of the Temple of Isis and elsewhere on the island. Yet, these remains held little interest for later visitors as the "crude-brick ruins which cover the island," according to John Murray's 1888 travel guide, "are mostly of Christian time."[2] It would not be long before all the Christian remains were removed to make the site more enjoyable for tourists who wished to see the Ptolemaic and Roman monuments. Why was Egypt's post-pharaonic, and in particular its Christian, monastic past literally stripped away from the landscape after the nineteenth century?

This book examines the Late Antique and modern perceptions of the monastic built environment. It revises late nineteenth-century notions that the monastic desertscape was empty, poorly constructed, and isolated (the general landscape) into a landscape that was dynamic, extremely diverse in form, and highly engaged with Late Antique communities (the actual landscape). I present evidence for how perceptions of the monastic built environment and its builders transformed the Late Antique landscape. It looks at how monastic authors saw great diversity in what monks built and yet how modern authors and viewers of Egypt's landscape reduced monasticism to

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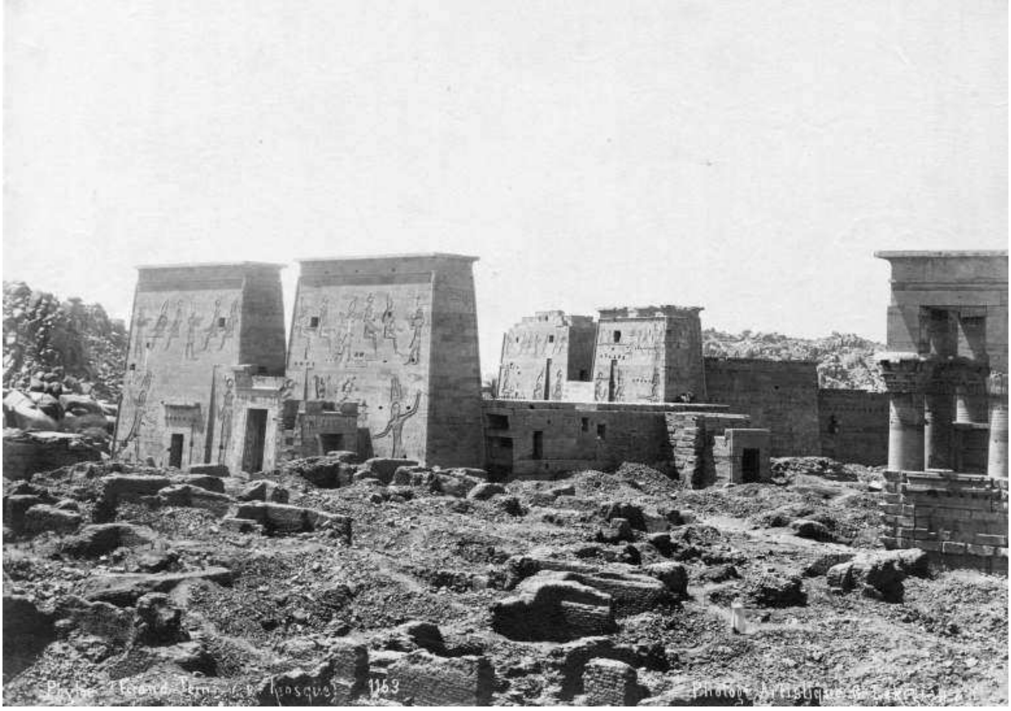

1. Mud brick remains by the Grand Temple of Isis at Philae, c. late nineteenth century.

a simple evolutionary model of occupation. I employ contemporary reading strategies from landscape archaeology, cultural geography, and materiality studies to construct a phenomenological approach that highlights how Late Antique viewers saw the monastic built environment and its landscape. With this foundation I introduce readers to a selection of monastic sites to illustrate the diversity of the archaeological evidence present in Egypt and to provide a heuristic rubric for identifying what makes space monastic in contrast to other domestic settlements.

This book is not intended to be a catalog of current and past archaeological sites, nor does it aim to be comprehensive in its examination of all the archaeological evidence of Egyptian monasticism that currently exists. Excellent and comprehensive volumes on the materials remains of Christian architecture, by Peter Grossmann, and of monastic settlements, by Ewa Wipszycka, already exist.[3] In addition, *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (*CE*), edited by Aziz Atiya in 1991, is now available online as a digital resource updated and housed at Claremont.[4] The *CE* covers both ancient and modern topics associated with Coptic culture, and it also provides extensive sources for lesser-known archaeological sites in Egypt.[5] More regional treatments of sites or areas are appearing with greater frequency to offer close studies of frequently undocumented or understudied monastic sites.[6] An illustration of the rapid growth in comparative treatments

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of monastic archaeology is *La vie quotidienne des moines en Orient et en Occident (IVe–Xe siècle)* (2015).[7] At the 11th Congress for the International Association for Coptic Studies (IACS) in Claremont, California, in 2016, Elisabeth R. O'Connell, assistant keeper for the Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan at the British Museum, offered a stunning compendium of the amount of new work being undertaken since 2012 to demonstrate the importance of Late Antique archaeology and the role of monastic settlements in aiding our knowledge of this period.[8]

This book is therefore not seeking to replace these volumes, but rather to depart from a culture-based study of the archaeological evidence to a more theoretical reading of the archaeological evidence and textual sources. By using a selection of monastic sites I pose the question of how perceptions of the monastic landscape were shaped both in Late Antiquity and in the modern period. As I believe that the papyrological and documentary evidence is equally informative as the various strands of archaeological evidence, I do not privilege texts over archaeology, or vice versa. Instead, my goal is to seek the mutually informative nature of interweaving archaeological, documentary, and literary evidence together to reconstruct a tapestry of the monastic landscape. In the end, this volume offers a new narrative of monastic Egypt that situates physical, archaeological evidence as a corrective to the mythology of the Egyptian desert so frequently extracted from the redacted *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* or the writings of John Cassian and Palladius. In doing so, this work adds to the foundational work of James E. Goehring to move the critical eye toward the historical story found in the physical remains.[9]

In this book I consider the ways Late Antique monastic settlements and monastic values were physically grafted onto the natural environment such as natural caves, pharaonic quarries and tombs, and the edges of the cultivation to create a new Christian topography. In addition to the reuse of ready-made residences, monastic builders also constructed entirely new purpose-built structures.[10] Current excavation projects at the White Monastery (Dayr Anba Shinudah) in Sohag,[11] in the hills of Naqlun behind the Monastery of Archangel Gabriel (Dayr al-Malak Ghubriyal) in the Fayyum, and the Monastery of John the Little (Dayr Yuḥannis al-Qaṣīr) in Wadi al-Natrun,[12] just to name a few, complement numerous site visits I have made over the years to study the placement and extent of monastic settlements. In order to understand the materiality of Egyptian monastic settlements, we must look more broadly at the planning and organization of monastic communities through the occupation of the land. I seek to revise earlier scholarship, which regarded the desertscape as a land not worth inhabiting and one to which monks fled in order to escape the world. My effort is not new, but rather part of a growing paradigm shift in how Egyptian monasticism is understood as scholars examine

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literary accounts, documentary evidence, and new archaeological projects with an eye to seeing the variegated nature of the monastic movement.

Any cursory view of excavation reports on monastic sites will illustrate that a variety of terms are used without much qualification or explanation about why spaces were called an "oratory," "cell," or even "monastery." It is safe to say that the terms do not necessarily reflect an agreed-on definition for monastic archaeological classification, but rather a general sense in which archaeologists convey meanings of how a particular space may relate to other monastic terms. Many of the terms have their origins in Greek (Eastern) and Latin (Western) monastic architecture, such as "oratory," "hermitage," "monastery," "cell," and "laura." Each term evokes a particular characteristic, but not necessarily one that is the same between sites. For example, oratory is often used to describe a space where monastic prayer and associated religious activities took place. It is frequently equated with a room with painted inscriptions, or dipinti, and complex wall painting programs. However, the term is not commonly or frequently found in Coptic or Greek sources in Egypt to describe specifically monastic spaces for prayer, despite the fact that the word is linked directly to "a place for prayer."[13] One component of this book is to look at what monastic residents called their own spaces and to employ that language when talking about monastic space. As we will see, Late Antique monastics used a wide range of terms to discuss their built environments and, in particular, called their residences "dwelling places" (*ma nshōpe*), a term that rarely appears in excavation reports before now. In part, my discussion explores what happens to our own perception of monasticism when we adopt the language and expressions of Late Antique inhabitants in discussing the built environment. When I do discuss the excavation reports and history of a site, I will use the nomenclature that was used by the original excavators and then turn to the epigraphic evidence to trace what monastic residents called the same spaces.

Chapter 1 tells the story of how nineteenth- and early twentieth-century travelers, missionaries, and scholars encountered and assessed the value of archaeological remains of monasticism. Shaped by a variety of imperialist, colonial, and orientalist readings of Egypt's contemporary and ancient Coptic Church, we see how foreign viewers of monastic landscape regarded mud brick architecture as built by ignorant monks lacking basic skills.[14] Foreign viewers were participants in supporting a preferential treatment of Egypt's ancient monuments over its Christian and Islamic past. Even four remarkable excavations of monastic remains at the beginning of the twentieth century could not transform entrenched perceptions of monasticism as a movement born of ignorance, fanaticism, poor building, and isolationism.

Chapter 2 continues the story of the advent of Byzantine archaeology in the twentieth century between 1914 and 1945, when several publications finally came to light after the end of World War II. I highlight how the work of three

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excavations undertaken after 1945 offered substantial evidence to challenge the perception of Egyptian monasticism's development. Interwoven throughout this historical account of the development of the field, I demonstrate the struggle to see Coptic archaeology as a field apart from history or art history. The chapter then turns to the methodological and theoretical changes in the field of archaeology, such as processual archaeology and postprocessual archaeology, which were not adopted by those practicing either Coptic archaeology or monastic archaeology. Since "Coptic" identity ostensibly separated the material from the broader community of Byzantine archaeology, which was also undertheorized, it is not surprising that Coptic archaeology remained a culture-based field that often served the needs of art historians and of historians, but not the broader field of colleagues in Byzantine archaeology. I then propose a selection of contemporary archaeological theories that I use throughout the remaining chapters of the book to frame my reading of the landscape, community, materiality, ecohistory, and cultural geography.

Chapters 3–5 shift the discussion of Egypt's monastic landscape from the modern past to the ancient past. Within these three chapters I analyze Late Antique perceptions of the monastic landscape. The chapters consider an array of textual sources as they relate to the ecohistory of the monastic landscape, its built environments, and the monastic perception of how the two relate. Taken together, the three chapters highlight underutilized written sources for finding Late Antique voices about monastic constructions, communities, and the landscape. Chapter 3 is an ecohistory of the Egyptian landscape to provide a grounding for those unfamiliar with Egypt's topography but also for those who have not considered Egypt's physical landscape previously. Chapter 4 provides a close reading of a wide assortment of Late Antique letters, contracts, and building codes to demonstrate how the sixth to ninth centuries witnessed the transformation of Egypt's landscape. The sources reveal that perceptions of what makes a space a monastery, a cell, or a holy place were quite fluid and variable. With a foundation in the actual landscape of Late Antique Egypt, Chapter 5 takes readers to the best-known hagiographical sources from the *Life of St. Antony* to the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* to the *Life of St. Shenoute*. Reading the hagiography within a wider context of the Late Antique landscape demonstrates how severely circumscribed monastic literature is in presenting a history of the monastic built environment. Additionally, by rereading the hagiographical sources, echoes of the diversity of language about monastic space, the built environment, and the landscape that were once overlooked or given little notice appear as far more pertinent than previously thought, thereby revising the perception of how we might read the hagiography and mythology of Egypt's monastic desert.

Finally, Chapters 6 and 7 focus on the archaeological remains of select monastic settlements to further refine perceptions of the monastic landscape.

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Chapter 6 posits the critical questions related to how archaeologists identify a site as monastic. Recent archaeological work within Western Medieval monasticism and Eastern Byzantine monasticism demonstrates how monastic sites were frequently overlooked or misattributed.[15] In order to establish an analytical framework, I compare the material from the Late Antique settlements at Karanis, Kom el-Dikka, Jeme, and Tebtunis with the monastic material from Bawit. Chapter 7 then introduces readers to the diversity and range of Egyptian monastic sites through seven case studies of monastic settlements. This overview concludes the shifting of perceptions of Late Antique monastic landscapes by demonstrating how little monastic stories tell us about the built environment and Byzantine Egypt. The sites, therefore, bring us full-circle to demonstrate how flawed modern perceptions were of monasticism as they were based more on literary sources than on the actual evidence of the monastic built environments.

The conclusion offers a contemporary guide to redefining the perception of Egyptian monastic communities as a far more diverse, integrated, and integral part of the Late Antique landscape than what the hagiographers described and modern scholars once believed. Throughout this book I raise the question of what it means to discuss Egyptian monasticism as a component of a broader community of Byzantine monasticism or to see it exclusively as an expression of Coptic identity. My hope is that seeing the question centered on the archaeology of monasticism in Late Antiquity will spurn discussion to refine how we approach the material remains from an exciting period in Egypt's history. Woven throughout the earlier chapters, I return to the theoretical strands that shape the analysis outlined in Chapter 2 for demonstrating the richness of the archaeological record for further analysis. Rather than seeing monastic sites as locations inhabited by those who dismissed the importance of the world and the land, I present Egypt's monastic communities as spaces constructed through careful planning, organization, and an acute awareness of the environment, the community's identity, and access to neighbors. The idea that monastics were fleeing the world and finding merely the most convenient spaces to inhabit does not account for the rich diversity of site planning and variation in locations evident in Egypt's archaeological record.