

1 | The Monastic Economies in Late Antique Egypt and Palestine: Past, Present, and Future

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Introduction

In the late 1970s, the American artist, Stanley Roseman, undertook a project entitled *The Monastic Life*, during which he visited sixty monasteries located throughout Europe. He participated in their daily life and ‘made drawings of monks and nuns at prayer, work, and study. He drew them at the communal worship in church and in meditation in the quietude of their cells.’¹ Roseman’s 1979 chalk on paper drawing of Benedictine monks at the Abbaye de Solesmes in France depicts two men with shaven heads who are dressed in long hooded robes. They are bent forward with their faces anchored towards the ground. Their eyes are closed, and their hands are carefully placed on their thighs. The men stand alone: they are the focus of the artist’s composition; they exist in isolation from their background; they are still, serene, frozen in perpetual worship and detached from their contemporary world. This is the essence of monastic life – the ideal – but it is not the full story.²

A decade prior to Roseman’s study, Michel Foucault published a short piece outlining his ideas on heterotopias, which he described as ‘a kind of effectively enacted utopia’.³ According to Foucault, heterotopias operate outside of society with a timeframe that is entirely their own. They assume a system of entry and closure that both set them apart and make them accessible. ‘Their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.’⁴

Roseman’s quietude and the otherness afforded by Foucault’s heterotopias capture an ideal of the monastic life that was carefully constructed in Late Antiquity and has dominated our perception of monasticism to the present day (Fig. 1.1). It was St Athanasius’ hugely influential fourth-century

¹ www.stanleyroseman-monasticlife.com.

² Roseman’s *Two Monks Bowing in Prayer* can be viewed on Washington, DC’s National Gallery of Art’s website www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.60782.html.

³ Foucault and Miskowic, ‘Of Other Spaces’, p. 24.

⁴ Foucault and Miskowic, ‘Of Other Spaces’, p. 27. Foucault’s examples of heterotopias included airports, hospitals, monasteries, prisons, and schools.



Figure 1.1. The solitary hermit has been a common theme in artistic portrayals of monastic life from Late Antiquity until the present day. This sketch shows an early modern imagination of a desert hermit: Hermann Weyer, *Desert Landscape with a Hermit (verso)*, 1615/1620, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (this image is in the public domain).

portrayal of St Antony the monk that first conveyed these ideals to an international audience.⁵ Athanasius painted Antony as the exemplary Christian and advocated for a proper ascetic practice in which ‘dispossession, solitude and personal austerity were paramount and in which the desert became the locus of true religion’.⁶ *The Life of St Antony* gave birth to the ideal of the solitary hermit and the success of Athanasius’ portrayal of Antony led to a literary *imitatio patrum*, where ascetic power was measured against the distance from urban society.⁷ Literary works of fiction such as Jerome’s *Life of St Paul* and the tale of Paphnoutios’ meeting with the hermit Onnophrios were based on this ideal. The latter work reports how Paphnoutios travelled two weeks through the desert before he came across Onnophrios, a man so holy that he ‘had become an angel on earth, and his withdrawn landscape a reflection of heaven’.⁸ In Palestine, in a hagiography that mirrors the *Life of St Antony*, Jerome describes how, in the first half of the fourth century, St Hilarion retreated into the desert and eventually founded the monastic community at Gaza.⁹

Until recently, literary sources and especially hagiographies such as the influential *Apophthegmata Patrum* (for Egypt) and Cyril of Scythopolis’ *Lives of the Monks of Palestine* and John Moscus’ *Spiritual Meadows* (for Palestine) were used by scholars as the principal evidence for monasteries’ economic circumstances. These texts portray ideal Christian lives and the miracles of holy Christian men and women. They were written for the purpose of imitation or to attract pilgrimage to specific sites and were not designed to create an accurate account of the economic lives of the saints and their associated monasteries.¹⁰ Rather than describe work as a revenue-producing activity, the hagiographies describe it as a part of the ascetic lifestyle and as a meditative practice accompanied by prayer.¹¹ In these texts, monastic

⁵ *Vita Antonii*; translation in Vivian and Athanassakis, *The Life of Antony*.

⁶ Dunn, *The Emergence of Monasticism*, p. 3. See Sheridan, ‘The Development of the Concept of Poverty from Athanasius to Cassius’, for a discussion of dispossession in the *Life of St Antony*.

⁷ Goehring, ‘The Dark Side of Landscape’, p. 443. See also Endsjø, *Primordial Landscapes*.

⁸ Goehring, ‘The Dark Side of Landscape’, pp. 443–4.

⁹ Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church*, pp. 245–86. See also Chitty, *The Desert a City*, pp. 13–14.

¹⁰ Papaconstantinou, ‘The Cult of Saints’ and ‘Donation and Negotiation’. See also Blanke, ‘Pricing Salvation’.

¹¹ The *Apophthegmata Patrum* describes, for example, how Abba Lucius responded to a group of monks. He stated that ‘while doing my manual work, I pray without interruption. I sit down with God soaking my reeds and plaiting my ropes . . . So, when I have spent the whole day working and praying, making thirteen pieces of money more or less, I put two pieces of money outside the door and I pay for my food with the rest of the money. He who takes the two pieces of money prays for me when I am eating and when I am sleeping; so, by the grace of God, I fulfil the precept to pray without ceasing.’ Translation from Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, pp. 120–1.

production included goods such as baskets and ropes that could be sold or exchanged, which in combination with charitable donations formed the basis of monastic survival.¹² Past scholarship saw monasteries as a burden on contemporary society and an economic and social drain on society's resources. This scholarly stance is perhaps best demonstrated by A. H. M. Jones in his seminal book from 1964 on the economy and social organisation of *The Later Roman Empire*, in which he described a 'huge army of clergy and monks' as 'idle mouths, living upon offerings, endowments and state subsidies'.¹³ Derwas Chitty's study on the origins of Egyptian and Palestinian monasticism repeats these views, as does the early work of Peter Brown.¹⁴

Research carried out over the last two decades on documentary papyri and archaeological remains has suggested a very different economic reality. Although the wealth of monasteries varied considerably, it is possible to reconstruct a picture of some monasteries as important landowners, producers and consumers of goods, as well as significant contributors to the regional economy. New research into documentary sources has shed light on economic aspects not covered by the literary record, including evidence for landholdings, work-contracts, the role of wine and animal husbandry, as well as travel and communication with external monastic and lay communities. At the same time, new archaeological projects using modern techniques and recording methods have uncovered vast built environments that required a substantial capital investment in terms of both construction and maintenance.

The chapters in this volume come together from new research that argues for a need to approach monasteries not just as religious entities in physical seclusion from society, but as the opposite – as active players in the world of Late Antiquity. The volume brings together scholars working across traditional borders of subject and geography, using both archaeology and text within Egypt and Palestine, the latter of which is defined here in the broadest sense, including chapters on Jordan and Syria (Figs 1.2 and 1.3). Our chronological range covers the period from the golden age of monasticism into and well beyond the Arab conquest (roughly fourth to tenth centuries).

Egypt and Palestine are at the forefront of current research on late antique monasticism. The twenty-first century has seen a vast increase in studies that are re-assessing our knowledge base. Scholars are revisiting the

¹² The stance taken in, e.g., Chitty, *The Desert a City*, but also reproduced in recent scholarship; see, for example, Milewski, 'Money in the Apophthegmata Patrum'.

¹³ Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, p. 993.

¹⁴ Chitty, *The Desert a City*; Brown, 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man', p. 83. Brown has since revised his conclusions; see especially Brown, *Treasure in Heaven*. The concept of the 'penniless' monk is also reproduced by modern scholarship relying on the Apophthegmata Patrum; see, for example, Milewski, 'Money in the Apophthegmata Patrum', p. 605.

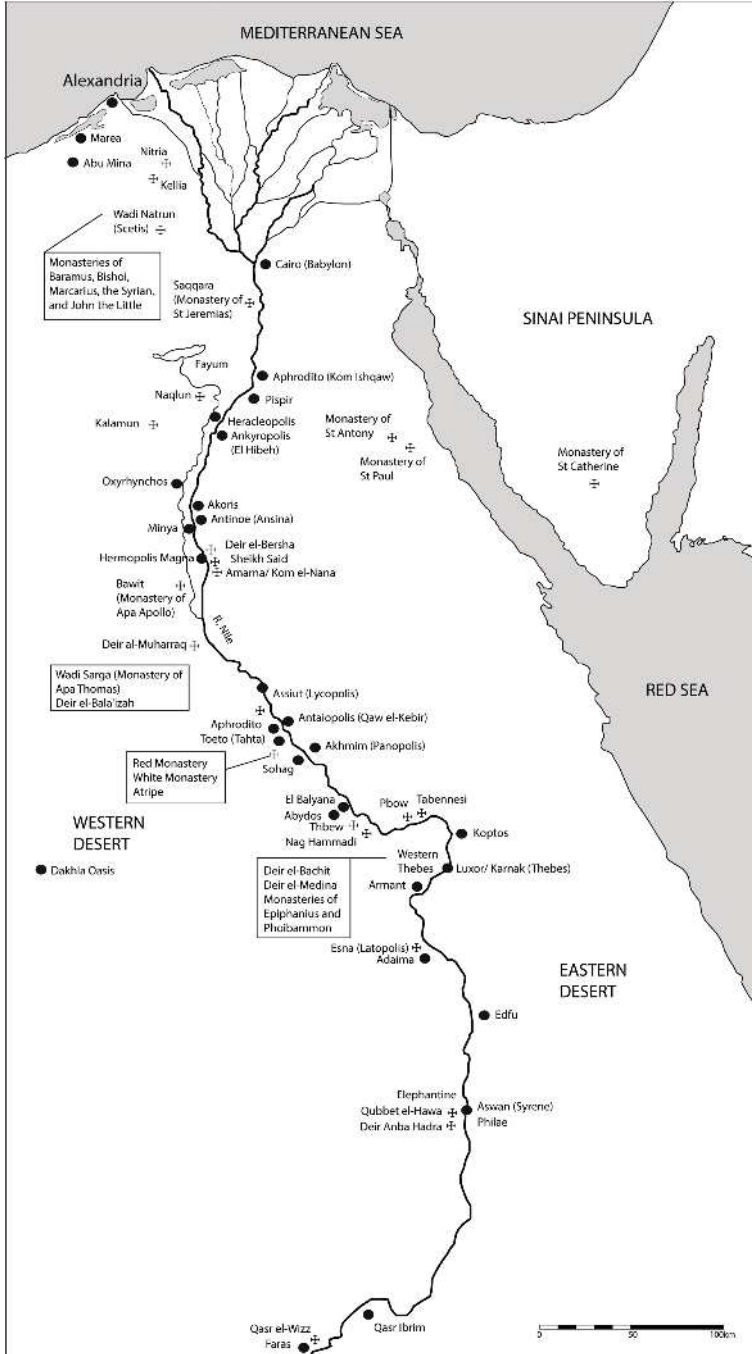


Figure 1.2. Map of Egypt with key sites that are mentioned in the book. Drawn by Louise Blanke.¹⁵

¹⁵ For sites in the Fayum, see Fig. 4.1.

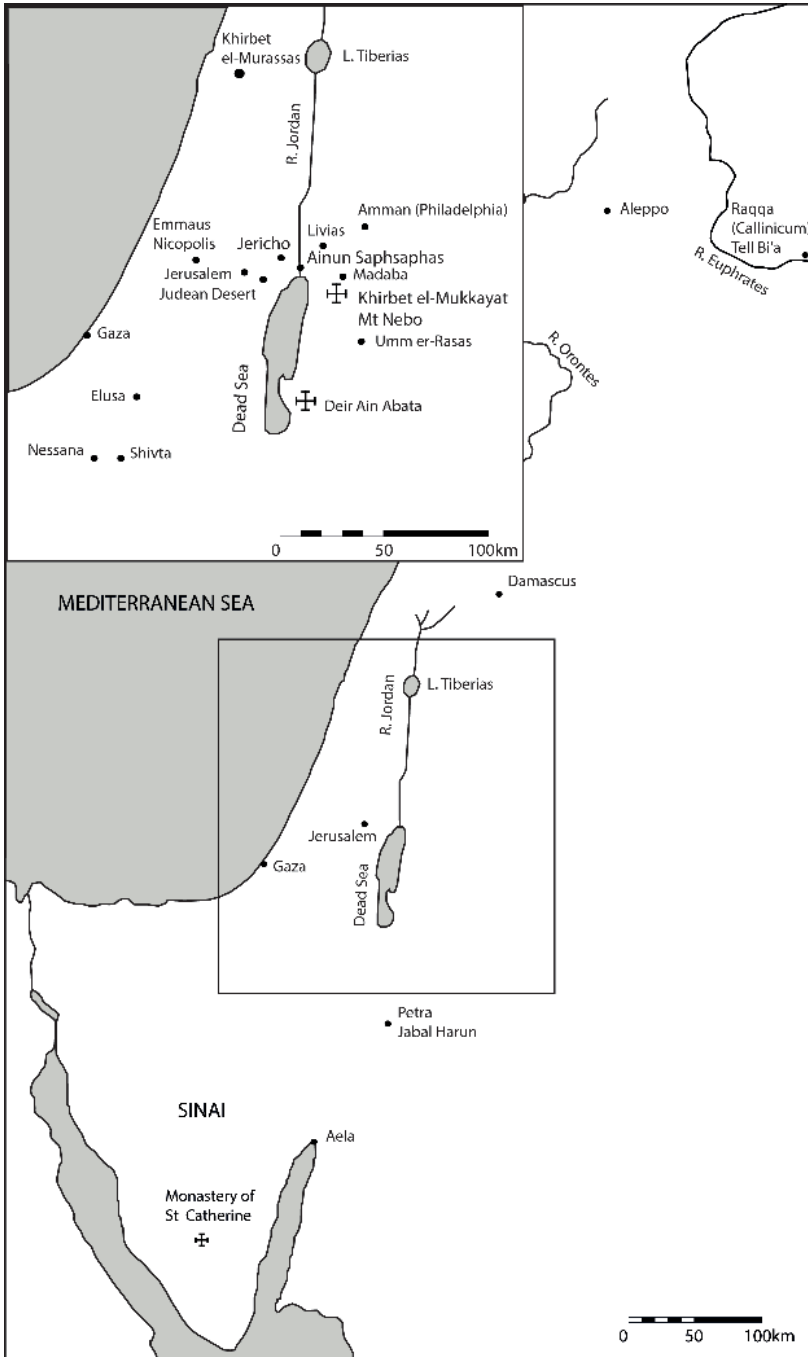


Figure 1.3. Map of Palestine and surrounding area with key sites that are mentioned in the book. Drawn by Louise Blanke.¹⁶

¹⁶ For detailed map of the Jordan Valley, see Fig. 2.1, and for the Mt Nebo area, see Fig. 12.5.

literary sources, asking different questions and extracting new meanings from well-known material, publishing large corpora of documentary papyri, and undertaking archaeological projects that allow us to challenge established ideas and move beyond past biases on monumental church architecture. Egypt and Palestine are unique in this respect, as both regions are unusually rich in historical (textual and material) evidence, which allows us to move beyond stereotypical images derived from the literary sources and to begin to form a more nuanced picture of the complexities of late antique monastic economies. It is our hope that these chapters will inspire scholars of monasticism and help to reshape the agenda for monastic studies in other parts of the late antique world.¹⁷

As well as being excellent locations to study the evidence for monasticism, bringing together Egypt and Palestine allows broader trends in economic practices to be identified. Our comparative approach enables new questions to be asked of the material in each region and permits us to identify similarities and differences in the organisation of monasteries and their interaction with contemporary society. The authors in this volume identify practices that point towards long-distance networks through which traditions and customs were transmitted from one region to another, while also finding monastic organisation that developed in response to specific local conditions.

At first glance, the economic organisation of monasteries in Egypt and Palestine varies enormously. The proximity to Jerusalem and the association with biblical stories greatly influenced the development of monastic communities at sites in the Holy Land. In Syria and northern Jordan, the remains of stylite pillars and towers and the monastic complexes and pilgrimage sites that surround them testify to a type of ascetism that is not found in Egypt. Indeed, the size and wealth of Egypt's coenobitic federations stand in stark contrast to the smaller communities found near villages throughout Palestine; at Kellia in Egypt's Western Desert, the desert was truly transformed into a city on a scale not found elsewhere in the late antique world.

However, a closer reading of the textual and material remains suggests that, although monasteries and their economic organisation differed enormously, there are also many similarities between our two regions. A disproportionate preservation of textual sources in Egypt and a longer

¹⁷ This approach is reflected in recent studies on monasticism in other areas. Notably, chapters in Beach and Cochelin, *Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West*, include both textual and archaeological approaches to the study of monasticism and take a critical view on the portrayal of monastic life that is found in the literary sources.

tradition of archaeological research of late antique Palestine have informed our understanding of the monastic landscape in both regions. As demonstrated by the contributions to this volume, only by bringing all available evidence together can we begin to reconstruct a fuller picture of the monasteries' economic organisation.

This volume is organised into three sections, each of which represents a key area connected to the economic realities of monastic life, with case studies from both Egypt and Palestine. Section I, 'The Monastic Estate', addresses monastic organisation, landownership, and economic engagement with contemporary society. Section II, 'Production and Consumption of Food and Material Goods', examines revenue-producing activities such as book and wine production, while also re-thinking significant, but less well studied, aspects of the monastic household, such as cooking and baking. Section III, 'Monastic Encounters: Travel, Pilgrimage, and Donations', considers the economic importance of engagements with external communities. Common for all chapters is an insistence on drawing on all relevant sources and a desire to understand the ways in which the monastic economies were embedded within local and regional exchange networks. The following sections discuss the individual contributions within the wider context of monastic studies. Afterwards, the conclusion offers some thoughts on future directions in the study of monastic economies.

The Monastic Estate

The study of Egypt's economy in the Roman and late antique periods has flourished over recent decades. The focus has been directed, in particular, on the great estates, such as that of Aurelius Appianus in the third century and the later Apion estate in the fifth to the early seventh centuries.¹⁸ The nature of these estates, their level of economic sophistication, and their relationship with the public sphere have been the topic of numerous studies. The Apion estate, with its associated archive, has always been at the forefront of discussions of the economy, society, and administration of Late Antiquity, and the volume of publications concerning it has been extensive. Since the turn of the century alone, no less than five monographs dedicated to it, exclusively or in part, have been published.¹⁹

¹⁸ For the estate of Aurelius Appianus, see Rathbone, *Economic Rationalism*.

¹⁹ Mazza, *L'archivio degli Apioni*; Sarris, *Economy and Society*; Banaji, *Agrarian Change*; Ruffini, *Social Networks*; Hickey, *Wine, Wealth, and the State*.

This scholarly focus has been driven by the fortuitous discoveries of archives of Greek papyri, including not only those from the great estates but also the impressive volume of material found in Oxyrhynchus.²⁰ However, this has created a somewhat one-sided approach to Egypt's economy. Alongside the great estates existed the church (as an institution) – the economic position of which has been studied extensively by Ewa Wipszycka²¹ – and then we have the monasteries that were scattered throughout Egypt's urban and rural communities, but are best known from the fringes of the desert along the Nile Valley. The (predominantly) Coptic written material associated with these monasteries has traditionally received less attention than the Greek papyrological evidence for the 'Great Estates' (in part due to the frequently inaccessible nature of their text editions and in part due to the lack of translations and commentaries).²² This situation has created an imbalance, in which the many Christian monasteries have not been properly integrated into past scholarly treatment of the wider economic system of late antique Egypt. Although some aspects of their economy have been studied by scholars, their position in relation to the great estates, the church, and late antique society at large remains mostly unstudied.

The study of the monastic economies has been somewhat slower in the outset, mainly because of the rich corpus of literary sources that were copied through the centuries and constituted the bulk of monastic collections. These texts reflect the religious and intellectual interests of the communities, and they have long defined the key concerns of monastic textual scholarship.²³ Meanwhile, the focus on much past archaeological research has been on monumental architecture and especially on churches, with little attention paid to the infrastructure and productive facilities found within the physical remains of the monasteries.²⁴ An additional problem, especially in Egypt, is the focus of nineteenth- and early

²⁰ On Oxyrhynchus, see, for example, the collected papers in Bowman *et al.*, *Oxyrhynchus*.

²¹ Most recently, Wipszycka, *The Alexandrian Church*.

²² Many century-old Coptic text editions have no translations (e.g., *O.CrumVC*) or only partial ones (e.g., *O.Crum*, *P.Lond.Copt.* I).

²³ As a case in point, see the volume of scholarship on the literary production of Shenoute, abbot of the White Monastery federation. While editions of Shenoute's texts have been published since the nineteenth century, the past couple of decades have witnessed considerable activity in this area. For example, see Emmel, *Shenoute's Literary Corpus*; Boud'hors, *Le canon 8 de Chénouté*; Layton, *The Canons of Our Fathers*; Brakke and Crislip, *Selected Discourses of Shenoute the Great*. On the library of the White Monastery, see, for example, Orlandi, 'The Library of the Monastery of Saint Shenoute'.

²⁴ An early exception is the outstanding publication of the monastery of Epiphanius in western Thebes by Winlock and Crum, *The Monastery of Epiphanius*.

twentieth-century scholars working on pre-Christian remains, to the detriment of our understanding of the monasteries' built environment and their estates.

The monastery of Apa Phoibammon (seventh–eighth centuries), built upon the New Kingdom mortuary temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri on the west bank of Thebes in the south of Egypt, is a case in point. The monastery's economic activities were first known from a number of papyri, acquired in the mid-nineteenth century. These legal texts include donations of palm trees and livestock to the monastery, as well as the testaments of its early superiors.²⁵ Despite scholarly interest in this material, when Edouard Naville began working at Deir el-Bahri in 1894, he and his team removed the monasteries' mudbrick architecture without adequate recording in order to expose the remains of the Pharaonic period. Our knowledge of these features therefore relies entirely on photographs taken by Howard Carter, who was part of the team, and earlier drawings by visitors to the site.²⁶ During this clearance, a large body of ostraca, primarily in Coptic, were found, the majority of which are now in the British Museum.²⁷ Subsequent work at the site by the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1920s) and the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology (since the 1960s) has uncovered more material from the monastery.²⁸

This situation is not unique to the monastery of Apa Phoibammon, and similar cases are encountered at monastic sites throughout Egypt.²⁹

²⁵ The earliest publications of this material appeared already in the 1850s and 1860s; see Goodwin, 'Curiosities of Law' and 'Account of Three Coptic Papyri'. For the testaments, see now Garel and Nowak, 'Monastic Wills', and Garel, *Héritage et transmission*.

²⁶ This material is collected in Godlewski, *Le monastère de St. Phoibammon*. For the early history of the monastery under its founder Apa Abraham, see Krause, 'Apa Abraham von Hermonthis' – despite subsequent work at the site, this study remains a core reference work, almost seventy years later. See also Garel, *Héritage et transmission*, chapter 3.

²⁷ The principal publication of the Deir el-Bahri texts is O.Crum (published 1902), but see the list of texts in Godlewski, *Le monastère de St. Phoibammon*, pp. 153–63, for texts from or concerning the monastery. However, this list is increasingly in need of an update, with new editions of texts from the site regularly occurring, as the next note indicates.

²⁸ Many of the ostraca found by the MMA excavations are still unpublished, but see O'Connell, 'Ostraca from Western Thebes' for their archival history, and also sporadic publications of ostraca, including most recently Cromwell, 'Forgive Me, Because I Could Not Find Papyrus', and Dekker, 'Coptic Ostraca Relating to Bishop Abraham'. For texts resulting from the Polish mission, see, for example, Markiewicz, 'Five Coptic Ostraca' and 'New Fragmentary Coptic Texts'.

²⁹ For example, the monastic complex at Wadi Sarga was excavated in a single season in 1913/14, resulting in the discovery of a considerable body of objects and texts. Almost 400 texts were published in 1922 (*O.Sarga*), many of which deal with the administration of food and wine. Yet, despite this material it has largely not been included in studies on monastic economies, except for one study on wine (Bacot, 'La circulation du vin'). Work has resumed recently on the material and excavation records from the site, but no new excavations are possible as the wadi is