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978-1-107-02256-0 - Selected Discourses of Shenoute The Great: Community, Theology, and Social Conflict in Late Antique Egypt

David Brakke and Andrew Crislip

Excerpt

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*Introduction: Shenoute's life, times,  
and Discourses*

Shenoute the Great (ca. 347–465) led one of the largest Christian monastic communities in late ancient Egypt and was the greatest native writer of Coptic in history. As a monastic leader, Shenoute consolidated and directed a federation of three monasteries (two for men and one for women) in and near Atripe (in the vicinity of modern-day Sohag). The village of Atripe lay on the western side of the Nile River, across from the city of Panopolis (in Coptic, Shmin; modern-day Akhmim). Modern scholars usually refer to this community as the “White Monastery Federation” in honor of the white limestone walls of the primary monastery’s church, much of which still survives. Shenoute formalized and systematized a monastic discipline that applied to both male and female monastics, and the monastery that he guided became a primary center for Christian literary culture in Egypt from late antiquity into the Arab period. His importance in the history of Egyptian monasticism rivals that of the better-known Pachomius (d. 346), founder of the famous Koinonia, after which Shenoute’s community was modeled.

At the same time, Shenoute emerged as a significant – and, during his day, probably the most significant – Christian leader in the region of Panopolis. His occasional public sermons attracted crowds of clergy, monks, and lay people; officials in the government and military, and other dignitaries, called upon him and asked for his wisdom; he worked to ensure that Christians in his region would be faithful to orthodox Christian teaching as the Patriarch in Alexandria expounded it; and he vigorously, and at times violently, opposed paganism and oppressive treatment of the poor by the rich. This volume focuses on this public Shenoute by presenting in translation a selection of his sermons and other orations in which he addressed not only monks, but also clergy, lay people, visiting dignitaries, and even his pagan adversaries. Together, these works grant us access to the theology, rhetoric, moral teachings, spirituality, and social agenda of a powerful Christian leader during a period of great religious and social change in the later Roman Empire.

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Figure 1 Shenoute the Great. Red Monastery Church, north lobe of the triconch apse, sixth century. Photograph courtesy Elizabeth Bolman. Copyright American Research Center in Egypt.

### A biographical sketch

A *Life of Shenoute* survives in several versions in Coptic, Arabic, and other languages and is attributed to his successor as leader of the White Monastery, Besa.<sup>1</sup> In fact, however, these diverse texts represent compilations of encomia that span centuries, and the highly hagiographic episodes that they narrate seldom find confirmation in Shenoute's own writings.<sup>2</sup> As difficult as it is to believe, one such confirmation concerns Shenoute's lifespan: careful sifting of the evidence seems to corroborate the *Life's* claim that Shenoute lived nearly 118 years, but his lifespan and chronology remain controversial among scholars.<sup>3</sup> Sources other than the *Life* indicate

<sup>1</sup> Bohairic Coptic text: Leipoldt 1906–13: 41; English translation: Bell 1983. <sup>2</sup> Lubomierski 2007.

<sup>3</sup> *Life of Shenoute* 174–75 (Bell 1983: 89). See Emmel 2004b: 7–12. For doubts see Luisier 2009, López 2013: 131–3.

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that he was born around 347 and had entered the White Monastery as a monk no later than 372. Shenoute could read and write in Greek, and the learned character and rhetorical brilliance of his writings suggest that he received the education in grammar and rhetoric that any young man from a prominent family in Panopolis would have enjoyed. We know nothing of what motivated or inspired Shenoute to take up the monastic life, but family ties may have played a role: it was his uncle Pcol who had founded the White Monastery, and Pcol still led the community when Shenoute joined it. In any event, Shenoute became the leader of the monastery around 386 and guided it until his death on July 1, 465. Coptic Christians today celebrate Shenoute on July 14, with many making a pilgrimage to the remains of the White Monastery Church.

Shenoute's promotion to the leadership of the monastery was dramatic and reveals a great deal about his character and authority. Shenoute was probably never an "ordinary" monk, for even his earliest writings display a knowledge of the Bible and a gift for rhetoric that must have set him apart from his peers; perhaps he worked as a secretary of some kind. However that may be, he held no formal office when he received what he called "revelations and disclosures from the Lord."<sup>4</sup> By this time, Shenoute's uncle Pcol had been succeeded as father of the monastery by a new leader, probably named Ebonh. The revelations that Shenoute received, most likely in one or more dreams, disclosed that a monk in a position of authority had committed a grave sin, probably involving homoerotic activity. A conspiracy of silence involving several monks had concealed the sin from the monastery's father. When Shenoute brought what he had learned to Ebonh, the leader refused to believe him, and Shenoute faced charges of slander and of desiring to lead the monastery himself. In shame, Shenoute wrote a long letter to the community in which he presented his version of the events, announced his intention to live apart from the community as a hermit in the nearby desert, and called on his monastic colleagues to repent and to renew their fidelity to Pcol's rules. This letter and other writings from this period are notable for their detailed mastery of both the Bible and the written rules of the monastic community, their elaborate and mysterious parables, and their combination of emotional vulnerability and moral certainty. Not long after these events, a second instance of sin came to light, and Shenoute received vindication. He then became the leader of the monastery. It is not clear whether Ebonh died or was forced to retire.

<sup>4</sup> Shenoute, *Canon 1*. We rely on Emmel 2004a; see also Schroeder 2007: 24–53.

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The central elements of Shenoute's authority are already visible in his elevation to high office within the monastery in his late thirties, and they would remain characteristic of him as he extended his reach outside the monastery throughout his long career. On the one hand, he claimed direct revelations from God: people should listen to him because his message did not represent his own views, but God's. Not only did Shenoute receive communications from the divine, but he also had immediate experience of the demonic, as *In the night* in Part III illustrates. On the other hand, he displayed a command of authoritative texts, especially the Bible, to which few of his contemporaries could have aspired. Most of his works are saturated with biblical citations and allusions, and even Shenoute's own diction and vocabulary mimic that of the Coptic Bible, so that it is difficult at times to differentiate between the voice of the Bible and that of Shenoute. These two elements – revelations from God and mastery of the Bible – fashioned Shenoute as a prophet, modeled on those of the Old Testament.<sup>5</sup>

Even after decades as its leader, Shenoute continued to address the monastic community as a prophet. By living as a desert hermit in affiliation with the monastery but not actually within its walls, Shenoute fashioned himself as a “voice crying in the wilderness.”<sup>6</sup> For the most part, the monks experienced Shenoute's voice as an intervention from afar – in letters and oral instructions that he sent from his cell via emissaries. Shenoute continually called the monks to repent for their numerous sins, recalled for them passages from the Bible and from the monastery's rules, and pronounced judgment on them as God's spokesman.

One of his most urgent tasks as leader was to integrate fully three originally independent “congregations” – the large monastery for men founded by Pcol (“White Monastery”) about three kilometers north of Atripe, a smaller community for men further to the north founded by Pshoi (“Red Monastery”), and a community of women located in the village – into a single monastic federation under his leadership as “father.”<sup>7</sup> Throughout his career he faced resistance to these efforts: the women in particular attempted to maintain some autonomy within the federation, but both male and female monks at times objected to Shenoute's policies on corporal punishment and expulsion of wayward monks, and on at least

<sup>5</sup> Krawiec 2002: 55–66; Emmel 2004a; Schroeder 2006; Brakke 2007. <sup>6</sup> Emmel 2004a: 171–3.

<sup>7</sup> On the early history of the federation and the origins of its monastic rules, see Layton 2009a, 2009b, and 2014. In addition, there were hermits like Shenoute, who lived in the nearby desert and maintained affiliation with the monastery.

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one occasion a monk tried to challenge Shenoute's leadership directly (ironically with claims to revelations from God).<sup>8</sup> Still, Shenoute managed to create a meticulously ordered plan for the monastic life, one that ideally created an ascetic culture separate from "the world," within which the monk could seek his salvation.<sup>9</sup> His ascetic ideology emphasized purity of the body and soul and characterized sin as defilement or pollution, whether it originated in the outside world or in the monk's own perverse behavior.<sup>10</sup> His success and appeal as someone who could guide Christian monks to salvation is evident in the large number of monks who joined the federation (certainly more than 1,000) and in the construction around 440 of the impressive church that still stands today.<sup>11</sup> Shenoute used the beauty and magnitude of the "great house" of the church, including the effort it took to build it, as an object lesson for how the monk should cultivate his own "house," the body.<sup>12</sup>

But the monumental church building not only epitomized Shenoute's success as a monastic leader, it also broadcasted his importance and leadership to the wider world. The monastic prophet Shenoute was not content to exercise his authority within the monastery alone; rather, he endeavored to bring his message of repentance, moral purity, and fidelity to Christ and his Church to the larger Christian community and the region of Panopolis. The church that he built provided the perfect platform for him both to assert and to celebrate his authority over the surrounding area; in ways both subtle and blatant, it communicated the agenda with which Shenoute the prophet addressed the world.

Consider first the material from which it was made: some of the limestone blocks in its wall, stones in its floor, and decorative elements came from pagan temples both in Atripe and from farther away.<sup>13</sup> Such reuse of old materials, typical in Egypt throughout antiquity, was usually purely practical, with no ideological dimension; moreover, it was likely that plaster covered the reused blocks, concealing their origin from ancient and medieval observers. Still, the remnants of traditional religion now constructed a monument to the triumph of Christianity. Shenoute probably made his first impression on his non-monastic neighbors as a determined opponent of the worship of the old gods and goddesses or, as he called them, "the demons."<sup>14</sup> Most likely in the late 380s (or as late as 392), he led

<sup>8</sup> Krawiec 2002; Leipoldt 1903: 57–8.    <sup>9</sup> Layton 2002, 2007.    <sup>10</sup> Schroeder 2007.

<sup>11</sup> An Arabic version of the *Life of Shenoute* reports that Shenoute led 4,000 monks. That number is surely inflated, but literary and archaeological evidence does suggest a very large community.

<sup>12</sup> Schroeder 2007: 90–125.    <sup>13</sup> Klotz 2010a, 2010b.    <sup>14</sup> Emmel 2008.

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Figure 2 Exterior of the church of Shenoute, east end, looking west towards the valley wall. Copyright Michael Burgoyne.

an attack on the Tripheion, a temple dedicated to Triphis, the Egyptian goddess after whom the village of Atripe was named. In the sermon *A26*, he claimed to have “burned it with fire, along with all the furnishings in it.” Probably the Tripheion had not been the location for ongoing ritual activity for a century, and thus Shenoute’s fiery assault on the primarily stone complex may have been purely symbolic.<sup>15</sup> It seems that some of its stones ended up in the White Monastery Church, probably just as recycled materials, not as prizes from any “destruction,” and that at some point after Shenoute’s death, the White Monastery’s female monks expanded their facilities into renovated space within the ruined temple’s precincts.

In the following decades, Shenoute carried out a relentless campaign to expose a prominent local landowner and former provincial governor, Flavius Aelius Gessius or Gesios, as a secret pagan; Part IV of this book presents much of the evidence for this effort, which included breaking into

<sup>15</sup> El-Sayed 2010.

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Figure 3 Ruinous nave of the church of Shenoute (looking northeast), showing the stone pulpit steps (background, between second and third columns) and Coptic Christian visitors. Copyright Michael Burgoyne.

Gesios' house and removing "idols," which Shenoute then destroyed. Shenoute accused Gesios of worshipping the god Kronos (Cronus), whom he identified with Satan in *Because of you too, O prince of evil* (Part III) and many other works. In Greek mythology, Cronus was the father of Zeus and the other Olympian gods, who eventually overthrew him. Cultic devotion to Cronus was rare, but Egyptians sometimes identified him with gods in their own pantheon, which likewise featured father-child conflict. In *The Lord thundered* (not translated here), Shenoute equated Kronos with Petbe, an Egyptian god worshiped in the region of Panopolis where Shenoute lived.<sup>16</sup> Shenoute considered the worship of any pagan god to be worship of Satan and thus of Kronos.<sup>17</sup> At least once, Shenoute traveled to other cities to defend Christians who attacked pagan temples and who faced legal complaints. Shenoute's own violent actions appear to have been

<sup>16</sup> Timbie and Zaborowski 2006: 116.

<sup>17</sup> Pettazzoni 1949; Frankfurter 1998: 116–19.

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few (the burning of the temple in Atripe and raids on the houses of wealthy pagans in Panopolis), but, coupled with his fierce rhetoric, they gave him such a reputation as an opponent of paganism that Christians called upon him to help in their defense of anti-pagan activities, and pagans charged him with leading a seditious mob.

During his conflict with Gesios, Shenoute expanded his attack to include not only the former governor's alleged paganism, but also his and other wealthy men's oppressive actions against the poor. Like the prophets of the Bible, Shenoute denounced not only worship of false gods, but also social and economic injustice. Here we might notice the great size of his church and its openness to a wide variety of worshipers. The White Monastery Church is extremely large, surpassing most monastery churches and matching episcopal basilicas of its time; it is clearly meant to attract a larger Christian public.<sup>18</sup> The church has multiple entrances, including one that leads to a traditional narthex at the western end of the nave, opposite the triconch apse, and one that leads to a much larger narthex that remarkably runs the length of the nave's south side. Shenoute, who presented himself as the defender of "the poor," noted frequently the large number and diversity of the crowds who came to hear him preach in the church about four times each year. Various sermons mention the presence of both rich and poor, of "heretics" and pagan "philosophers" as well as faithful Christians, of tribal "Blemmyes and Nubians" (who Shenoute hoped would be persuaded by his Christian message), even of animals. As gifts of the faithful, monetary and otherwise, flowed into the monastery, and as benefits both material and spiritual flowed from the monastery to its devotees, Shenoute emerged as a civic leader and patron whose power and wealth troubled traditional lay elites in Panopolis. Moreover, he appears to have exercised his authority without reference to other Christian leaders in the area: a bishop of Panopolis appears nowhere in Shenoute's writings. Rather, he communicated directly with the powerful bishop of Alexandria, the pope of the Egyptian Church.

Indeed, Shenoute's populist appeal to the poor and the oppressed, and his rivalry with certain wealthy men of Panopolis, should not obscure his close ties with other elites, ecclesiastical and otherwise, in Egypt. An ordained priest, he corresponded regularly with the Alexandrian patriarch, and he accompanied Bishop Cyril of Alexandria to the Council of Ephesus

<sup>18</sup> The church of the Pachomian monastery at Pbow was consecrated about a decade later and is about the same size as Shenoute's.

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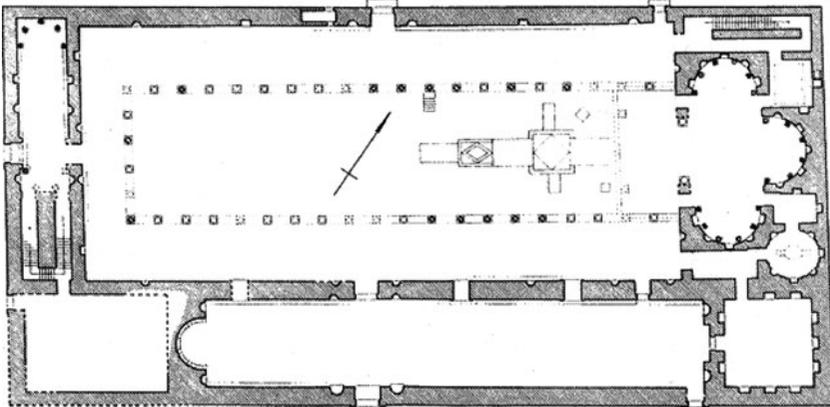


Figure 4 Plan of the church of Shenoute, showing small narthex to the west and large narthex to the south.

in 431; Cyril wanted to make Shenoute a bishop, but the monk refused. Dioscorus I (444–51) wrote to Shenoute asking him to enforce a ban on Elias, a priest and monk condemned as an Origenist heretic.<sup>19</sup> Part I of this book demonstrates how Shenoute advocated and defended orthodox Alexandrian theology as the patriarchs taught it.

Indications of Shenoute's ties to more secular elites are embedded not only in his literary works but also in the church building. An inscription (in Greek) above the interior of the door leading to the larger of the two narthexes identifies Caesarius, the son of Candidianus and the military governor (*comes*) of Egypt, as the one who "built" the church.<sup>20</sup> Shenoute's magnificent church, then, did not arise solely from the labors of the monks or from the gifts of humble believers, but also from the unconcealed generosity of a powerful man. The church was not simple and unadorned: graceful columns and elaborately carved niches decorated its massive nave and smaller chambers. And if the recently conserved interior of the church at the sibling Red Monastery (modeled after that of the White) is any indication, worshipers could admire lavish wall paintings in bright and varied colors.<sup>21</sup> The expensive decoration and an inscription in Greek (not Coptic) honoring a prominent benefactor would have communicated to visitors of every social level that Shenoute was a man to be reckoned with and had prominent and powerful friends.

<sup>19</sup> Thompson 1922; Lundhaug 2011b: 249–52.

<sup>20</sup> Monneret de Villard 1923.

<sup>21</sup> Bolman 2006.

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Figure 5 Founder's inscription (Greek), on interior (northern) side of lintel above south entrance of the church of Shenoute leading to the larger of two narthexes:

"To the eternal memory of the magnificent Count Caesarius, the son of Candidianus, who built (the church)." Copyright Michael Burgoyne.

Shenoute, of course, was not a stranger to elite culture: his evidently high level of education indicates that he came from the higher strata of Panopolitan society. The wealthy, the educated, leaders of government and Church – these were his people, even if he seemed to have renounced his high status when he became a monk. Such prominent people regularly visited the monastery to pay respects to Shenoute and to ask his advice on matters of theology and ethics.<sup>22</sup> In works such as *And after a few days* and *As we began to preach*, Shenoute describes Christian dignitaries, accompanied by their entourages, visiting him and asking him questions. He then repeats his response for the benefit of the gathered congregation or later readers. Presumably he spoke with his elite visitors in Greek, even though he gives his reports in Coptic. The preface to *I see your eagerness* depicts clergy and monks from other communities coming to hear

<sup>22</sup> Behlmer 1998; Hahn 1991.

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Shenoute preach and to ask him to mediate disputes among them. If in the 390s Shenoute made his debut on the local political scene as the purger of a local temple and the nemesis of a former governor, by the middle decades of the fifth century he was clearly a respected and even feared “player.” On more than one occasion, Shenoute got out of legal jams thanks to friends in high places.<sup>23</sup> Accused by some of gathering a mob for seditious purposes, Shenoute could reply (in *God says through those who are his*) that a “God-loving count” had said to him, “You have made the desert a city,” applying to Shenoute the praise that Athanasius of Alexandria had bestowed on the great St. Antony.<sup>24</sup>

Within two years of the completion of his impressive church (in the 440s), Shenoute found his position as a local leader tested by a refugee crisis caused by attacks from Blemmyes and Nubians.<sup>25</sup> He pointedly blamed the success of these incursions on “the powerlessness of some pagan counts.”<sup>26</sup> Thousands of people (20,000, according to Shenoute) gathered at the monastery in need of shelter, food, clothing, and medical care. They stayed for three months, during which time over one hundred people died and required burial and over fifty babies were born. Even if the number of refugees was fewer than Shenoute estimates, his description of the resources that the monastery expended in their support seems to be realistic and reveals the great financial and logistical resources at his disposal. This was Shenoute at the height of his power: he preached *God is blessed*, the final work in this volume, during this crisis, and one can hear in it a confident preacher who displayed pastoral concern for both the spiritual and material needs of his flock. He concluded the sermon with a contrast between the abusive pagan Gesios of Panopolis and the benevolent Christian Athanasius of Alexandria, leaving to his hearers to understand which kind of leader he was.

Sometime during this same period (between 432 and 444) Shenoute suffered a debilitating illness that prevented him from leaving his monastic cell for at least a year.<sup>27</sup> The precise nature of his illness is unknown, but he complained that it severely affected his skin, causing itchiness and making his clothes foul. On the one hand, Shenoute’s sickness and prolonged absence from public view may have enhanced his authority and mystique. In general, Shenoute’s seclusion and only occasional public appearances rendered him a mysterious and larger-than-life figure: his visits to the

<sup>23</sup> López 2013: 29–30.      <sup>24</sup> *Life of Antony* 14.      <sup>25</sup> Emmel 1998; López 2013: 57–63.

<sup>26</sup> Emmel 1998: 85.      <sup>27</sup> Emmel 2004b: 555, 576–9, 593–4; Boud’hors 2008.

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monastery and church, his journeys to other cities, and his forays into Panopolis were notable events. Moreover, Shenoute used the suffering of his illness to present himself as a “suffering servant” of both God and the monastery: he took the sins and misfortunes of the community onto his own body.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, his absence and vulnerability appear to have emboldened monks who resented his policies, to the extent that one even challenged his leadership.<sup>29</sup>

Shenoute recovered from his illness and (according to the chronology followed here) lived to see the defeat of Dioscorus at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and the troubles that followed. The condemnation of Nestorius' theology of Christ's “two natures” at Ephesus in 431 did not conclude debates over Christology. As mentioned earlier, Shenoute had attended that council as part of Cyril of Alexandria's delegation, and he was a strong critic of Nestorius' thought. When the bishops at Chalcedon adopted a compromise formula that spoke of “two natures” and deposed Dioscorus of Alexandria, Shenoute supported his patriarch, Egypt's traditional Christology of “one nature,” and efforts to maintain the Egyptian Church's opposition to Chalcedon. Shenoute may be referring to this crisis in *And after a few days* when he reports that he advised Caesarius, the financial supporter of the church building, and a fellow official that the troubles of the Church would eventually pass, just as passing clouds do not hinder the course of the sun. In 457 he wrote to the newly installed non-Chalcedonian bishop of Alexandria, Timothy II Aelurus, to “take charge” of the troubled Egyptian Church.<sup>30</sup> But by the time he wrote to Timothy, Shenoute was nearing 110 years old, and his days as a vigorous participant in ecclesiastical politics were coming to a close. It must have been shortly after this time that he informed his followers that, “after more than one hundred years” of “living in the desert,” he had decided to give up his desert cell and live full time in the monastery: “I want to remain among my brethren, the children of God and the children of my fathers, for us to profit from each other.”<sup>31</sup> There he died on July 1, 465.

### Shenoute in context

Shenoute's long, eventful career began in the third generation of organized ascetic behavior – monasticism – in Egypt. By the early fourth century, the religious landscape, and indeed the physical landscape of Egypt, came

<sup>28</sup> Krawiec 2002: 66–72.    <sup>29</sup> See *So listen* from *Canon* 8 and Leipoldt 1903: 57–8.

<sup>30</sup> Emmel 1998: 94; Emmel 2004b: 8.    <sup>31</sup> Emmel 2004b: 570–1.