

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-108-48102-1 — An Introduction to the Desert Fathers  
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## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE DESERT FATHERS

Christian monasticism emerged in the Egyptian deserts in the fourth century AD. This introduction explores its origins and subsequent development and what it aimed to achieve, including the obstacles that it encountered, for the most part making use of the monks' own words as they are preserved (in Greek) primarily in the so-called Sayings of the Desert Fathers. Mainly focusing on monastic settlements in the Nitrian Desert (especially at Scêtê), it asks how the monks prayed, ate, drank and slept, as well as how they discharged their obligations both to earn their own living by handiwork and to exercise hospitality. It also discusses the monks' degree of literacy, as well as women in the desert and Pachomius and his monasteries in Upper Egypt. Written in straightforward language, the book is accessible to all students and scholars, and anyone with a general interest in this important and fascinating phenomenon.

JOHN WORTLEY is Professor Emeritus of Medieval History at the University of Manitoba. His publications include *The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Cambridge, 2013) and *More Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Cambridge, 2019).

AN INTRODUCTION TO  
THE DESERT FATHERS

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB 8BS, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India  
79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108481021](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108481021)  
DOI: 10.1017/9781108646116

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First published 2019

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd., Padstow, Cornwall

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Wortley, John, author.

Title: An introduction to the Desert Fathers / John Wortley.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY:

Cambridge University Press, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019000694 | ISBN 9781108481021 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108703727 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Desert Fathers. | Monasticism and religious orders – Egypt – History – Early church, ca. 30–600.

Classification: LCC BR190.w675 2019 | DDC 271.009/015–dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019000694>

ISBN 978-1-108-48102-1 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-70372-7 Paperback

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## *Preface*

This little book is mainly intended for anybody who knows next-to-nothing about the Desert Fathers and would like to know more. Insofar as it is possible to do so, the Fathers' own tales and sayings (apothegms) have been used to illustrate what those elders believed, how they behaved and what motivated them. References have been provided throughout to English translations of the tales and sayings in order to permit the reader to do further searching on his or her own behalf, for to do the material adequate justice is more than a book of this size could accomplish.

It is well to keep in mind that by far the greater part of this book is of a legendary nature. That is to say that, for the most part, it is based on second-hand, third-hand and even remoter reports. It is pointless to ask whether this or that statement is true. What is true is that everything in this book was believed by some people (mostly monks) living at some time (mostly in the fourth to seventh century AD). What is also true is that most of the sources quoted here are the words of folk whose primary concern was to inspire others to live what they conceived to be virtuous lives. For the most part they were at pains solely to create models for emulation, with occasional examples of what was to be avoided. Insofar as this book qualifies to be called history, it is a history of how men's minds were working at the end of ancient times and the beginning of the Middle Ages. Times they certainly were a-changing: old values were collapsing and a new set of guidelines was only just emerging. That was indeed a dark age in which the lights that remained were burning rather low. The Desert Fathers were, in their way, the bearers of those lights – lights that might not be altogether useless for us as we seem to be entering another dark age.

All the evidence suggests that Christian monasticism (monachism) first arose in Egypt in the fourth century of our era. It is not impossible that it was also a spontaneous growth elsewhere, especially in Syria, though this has yet to be proved. But no matter how it began, over the course of the



next millennium or so, Christian monachism was destined to become a great power in both church and state. Almost from its inception it spread throughout and even beyond the Roman Empire with remarkable alacrity. Monks being monks precisely because they withdraw from 'the world' to be alone (*monos*), for some considerable time the disassociation of monastery and world was carefully maintained. But gradually and perhaps inevitably that disassociation began to disintegrate, partly as a result of the establishment of monasteries in urban centres, partly because some monasteries attracted emigrants who peopled the surrounding countryside. As some monasteries evolved into immense powerhouses of great wealth and influence, a growing number of monks became persons of considerable importance, first in church, by assuming positions of responsibility and power, subsequently (especially in the west) in secular society, where they were often the only persons with any education. It is no exaggeration to say that by the end of the Middle Ages the monastic movement had entirely taken over the church in the west and almost completely in the east. One interpretation of the Protestant Reformation sees it as an attempt to rid the western church of its monastic elements. A similar aim has been attributed to the revolutionary movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and even to the Second Vatican Council. Yet the insistence on celibacy for most clergy in the Roman church and for the higher clergy in the east is one of the more obvious relics of monastic influence persisting to this day, even though the institution of monachism itself appears to be in decline. Appearances, however, can be deceiving. Undoubtedly fewer men and women are professing themselves in religious orders now than a century ago, but it may be (as Jesus said of Jairus' daughter) that 'the damsel is not dead but sleepeth' [Mk 5.39]. There is a surprising amount of interest these days in the Desert Fathers' and others' 'mystical' writings; more people than ever are now living (at least some of the time) alone. This writer hopes that readers of his book are able to discern something of the fire at the heart of the monastic movement in the elders' tales and sayings; also, that they find them as richly rewarding in as many ways as (or even more than) he continues to find them himself.

## *Acknowledgements*

The author wishes gratefully to acknowledge the unstinting support and generosity of his good friends Robert Kitchen and Michael Montcombroux, *a fortiori* of Janice Roberts, to whom he has the good fortune of being married.

## Glossary

### Non-English Words Retained in the Translations

<i>Abba</i>	Father; a senior monk but not necessarily an <i>old</i> one.
<i>Accidie</i>	[ <i>akêdia</i> ] ‘Sloth, torpor, especially as a condition leading to listlessness and want of interest in life’ [ <i>OED</i> ], probably akin to depression. See Chapter 4.
<i>Agapê</i>	literally ‘love’, used to designate a common meal shared by monks on special occasions (hence ‘love-feast’), possibly originally made possible by some freewill offering [ <i>agapê</i> ]; also a charitable donation, alms.
<i>Amma</i>	Mother.
<i>Anchorite</i>	[ <i>anachorêtês</i> ] one who withdraws: one who has abandoned ‘the world’ for the desert or has left a community to live alone.
<i>Anthropomorphism</i>	the attribution of human qualities to the Deity.
<i>Apatheia</i>	literally, ‘unfeeling’; indifference to physical conditions, a term often found conjoined with <i>anorexia</i> , terms found rarely in the apothegms but common in later monastic writing.
<i>Apothegm</i>	[ <i>apophthegma</i> ] a concise saying or maxim, usually delivered by an elder.
<i>Archimandrite</i>	originally the same as <i>higoumen</i> but eventually one with superior authority. Nowadays an honorific title granted to a monastic priest.
<i>Askêsis</i>	literally, a formation or training, usually meaning the practice of asceticism: the discipline associated with the monastic way of life, often translated as ‘spiritual discipline’.

<i>Askêtês</i>	ascetic one who practises spiritual discipline.
<i>Coenobion</i>	[ <i>koinobion</i> ] literally, ‘common life’. A place or an institution where monks live together with shared worship, meals and responsibilities under the supervision of a <i>koinobiarch</i> , here translated as ‘superior’ or <i>higoumen</i> , q.v.
<i>Dynamis</i>	the healing ‘power’ believed to be given off by holy persons and their relics, etc. [cf. Mark 5.30].
<i>Embrimion</i>	‘A bundle of coarse papyrus stalks bound at intervals of a foot so as to form long, slender fascines which were also used as seats for the brethren at the time of the office [Daniel 7 / 18.4, line 36] and on other occasions’ [Cassian, <i>Conf</i> 1.23.4].
<i>Hesychia</i>	[ <i>hêsuchia</i> ] not merely (or necessarily) silence [ <i>siôpê</i> ], but an interior silence characterised by a tranquil acquiescence in the will of God, producing a profound calm and great peace within. See Chapter 5.
<i>Higoumen</i>	[ <i>hêgoumenos</i> ] the head of a monastic community.
<i>Lavra</i>	a grouping of monks’ cells, i.e. ‘of monasteries’.
<i>Leviton</i>	(i.e. ‘Levites’) the monk’s garment for prayer, usually white.
<i>Logismos</i> , pl. <i>logismoi</i>	a word of many meanings: it can simply mean one’s thinking process, but it can also mean everything that goes on in that process, good, bad and indifferent, from a mere whim to a serious temptation.
<i>Monachism</i>	the monastic way of life.
<i>Porneia</i>	any illicit sexual or erotic activity in thought, word or deed. See Chapter 4.
<i>Semantron</i>	a wooden plank struck with a mallet to summon monks for services or for other assemblies.
<i>Synaxis</i> , pl. <i>synaxeis</i>	literally, ‘a gathering together’, this word means an act of worship, by either one or a very few monks (the ‘little synaxis’, also called <i>liturgy</i> ) or an entire community (e.g. at weekends and festivals) at a central location. The Holy Eucharist (‘Offering’) is often called <i>synaxis</i> .

### English Words Used with Specific Meanings

<i>Alienation</i>	(also <i>voluntary exile</i> and <i>expatriation</i> ) translates <i>xeniteia</i> , Latin <i>perigrinatio</i> ; making oneself a ‘stranger and sojourner’ [1 Pet 2.11] usually in an uninhabited place or in a foreign land.
<i>Ascetic, -ism askêtês,</i>	<i>askêsis</i> , the practitioner and practice of spiritual discipline, perceived as a training or formation in travelling the way to perfection.
<i>Burnt-faced-one</i>	[ <i>aithiops</i> , from which ‘Ethiopian’] a devil or demon.
<i>Dried loaf</i>	[ <i>paxamas</i> , named after the baker Paxamos] a small loaf of bread that has been sun-dried or baked hard (cf. <i>bis-cuit</i> , ‘twice baked’).
<i>Elder</i>	this word translates <i>gerôn</i> , often misleadingly rendered ‘old man’, but age is not necessarily implied (cf. ‘elder’ among Native Americans). An elder is one advanced, not so much in age, as in experience and in spiritual growth; hence a senior monk, as opposed to a junior (brother).
<i>Eremitic</i>	pertaining to the desert [ <i>erêmos</i> ].
<i>Expatriation</i>	see <i>Alienation</i> .
<i>Loose-talk</i>	[ <i>parrhêsia</i> ] ‘outspokenness’, ‘familiarity’, also in a good sense: ‘freedom of access’, e.g. to the Deity: cf. 1 Jn 2.28, etc.
<i>Lord-and-master</i>	translates <i>despotês</i> .
<i>Monastery</i>	‘is the name of a dwelling and means nothing more than a place, a lodging that is, for monks’ (even for only one monk) [Cassian, <i>Conf</i> 18.10].
<i>Poverty</i>	here inadequately translates <i>aktêmosynê</i> , literally ‘without possessions’. In the apothegms the word means not only the voluntary abandonment of material possessions but, <i>a fortiori</i> , indifference to possessions even when they are accessible.
<i>Sorrow for sin</i>	here translates <i>katanyxis</i> , sometimes rendered ‘compunction’.
<i>Spiritual discipline</i>	here indicates some ascetic practice, e.g. fasting, keeping vigil, etc., tending to spiritual growth and progress.
<i>Spiritual gift</i>	here translates <i>charisma</i> .

*Worldling*

‘One who is devoted to the interests and pleasures of the world’ [*OED*]. This obsolescent English word has been resurrected to represent the Greek *kosmikos*, a person ‘of the world’ as opposed to one ‘of the desert’, i.e. a person who is not a monk. *Kosmikos* is sometimes translated ‘layman’, which means ‘non-clergyman’ (but very few monks were clerics); sometimes ‘secular’, but that usually means a cleric who is not a monk; not many worldlings were clerics.

## *Notes on the Text*

### **Proper Names**

Where there is an English equivalent, this has been used, e.g. John, Peter, James, Theodore, Elijah (for *Ēlias*) and so forth.

The usual Latin forms have been used where there is an accepted transliteration (e.g. Macarius, Synclitica); otherwise the Greek names have been transliterated directly.

Where words are found in square brackets in the text, these are words that are not found in the Greek, but have been inserted to make the meaning clear.

Except for quotations from John Cassian's works, the author is responsible for all translations from Greek and Latin in this book.

### **References**

Name + number	refers to <i>APalp</i> , e.g. Antony 17
Number only	refers to <i>APanon</i> , e.g. 475
Number with decimal	refers to <i>APsys</i> , e.g. 18.21
Letter + number	refers to <i>MSDF</i> , e.g. L4 = Latin 4

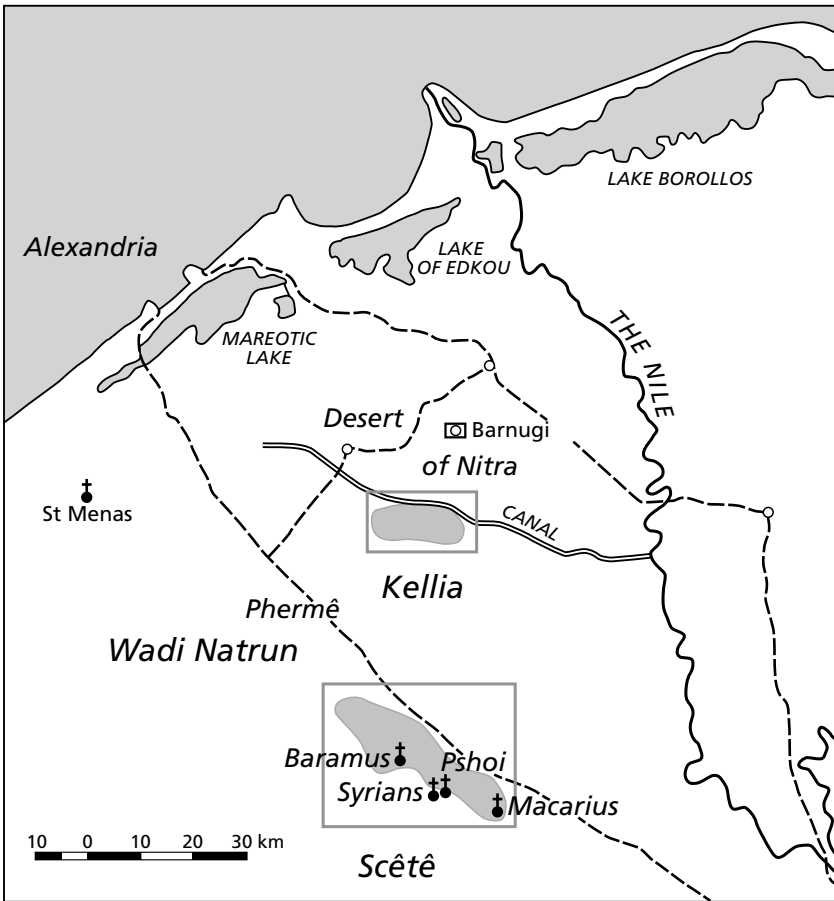
NB Some higher numbers in *APanon* have decimals and parts.

## *Abbreviations*

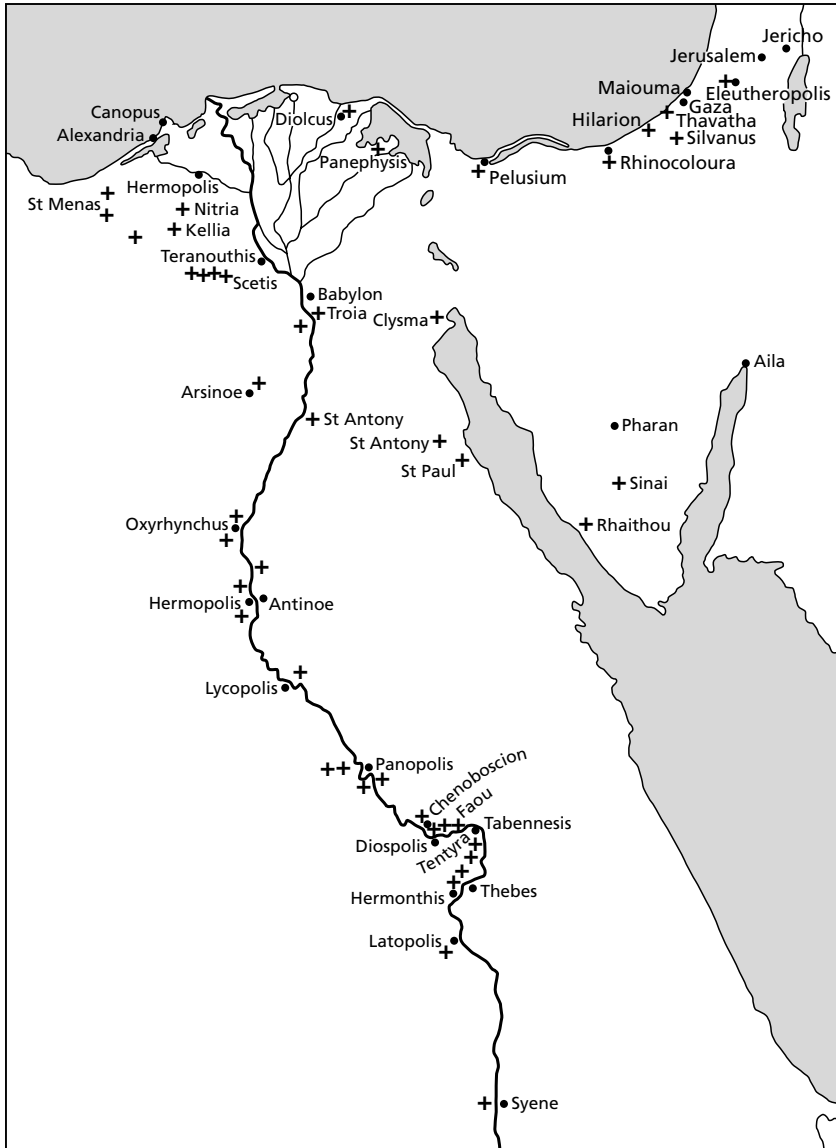
<i>AB</i>	<i>Analecta Bollandiana</i>
<i>AP</i>	Sayings (apothegms) of the Desert Fathers
<i>APalph</i>	<i>The Alphabetic Sayings of the Desert Fathers</i>
<i>APanon</i>	<i>The Anonymous Sayings of the Desert Fathers</i>
<i>APsys</i>	<i>The Systematic Sayings of the Desert Fathers</i>
<i>Asceticon</i>	Isaac of Scêtê, <i>Ascetic Discourses</i>
<i>BHG</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca</i>
<i>Catechism</i>	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> 1992
<i>Conf</i>	John Cassian, <i>Conferences</i>
<i>HE</i>	Ecclesiastical (i.e. church) history
<i>HL</i>	Palladius, <i>Lausiac History</i>
<i>HME</i>	Anon., <i>History of the Monks in Egypt</i>
<i>Inst</i>	John Cassian, <i>Institutes</i>
<i>Instructions</i>	Dorotheos of Gaza, <i>Instructions</i>
<i>LXX</i>	Septuagint (Greek Old Testament)
<i>MSDF</i>	<i>More Sayings of the Desert Fathers</i>
<i>ODB</i>	<i>The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium</i>
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i>
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Latina</i>
<i>Pr</i>	<i>Precepts of Pachomius</i>
<i>PS</i>	John Moschos, <i>The Spiritual Meadow</i> [ <i>Pratum spirituale</i> ]
<i>Ps</i>	Psalm
<i>Synag</i>	Paul Evergetinos, <i>Synagogê</i>
<i>SynaxCP</i>	<i>Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae</i> (Brussels 1902)
tr	translated by
<i>VA</i>	Athanasius, <i>Life of Antony</i> [ <i>Vita Antonii</i> ]
<i>Vie</i>	Lucien Regnault, <i>Vie Quotidienne</i>
<i>VP</i>	Jerome, <i>Life of Paul of Thebes</i> [ <i>Vita Pauli</i> ]



*Maps*



Map 1 The Nitrian Desert



Map 2 Monastic Egypt